

Radiance and Symbolism in Modern Stained Glass

Radiance and Symbolism in Modern Stained Glass:

*European and American
Innovations and Aesthetic
Interrelations in Material
Culture*

Edited by

Liana De Girolami Cheney

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“I have always striven to fix beauty in wood, stone, glass or pottery, in oil or watercolor by using whatever seemed fittest to the expression on beauty, that has been my creed.”

—Louis Comfort Tiffany, in Charles De Kay, *The Art Work of Louis C. Tiffany* (Doubleday & Co, 1916)

This book examines the visual beauty and symbolism of stained-glass windows in Europe and American cultures during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the modern era. Discussions center on how stained glass became an art form during this time and how the narrative for the figurative design drew from the Bible, mythology, history, literature, and the symbolism of the time, including themes on popular culture.

This book focuses on three main themes: 1) aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural concepts of radiance and beauty in stained glass in modern art; 2) interrelations of visual representations of stained glass from Europe (England, France, and Italy) to America (USA and Mexico); and 3) innovations and transformations of stained glass from religious decorations to secular material culture.

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INTRODUCTION

LIANA DE GIROLAMI CHENEY

The essays in this book examine the visual beauty and symbolism of stained-glass windows in Europe and American cultures during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the modern era. Discussions center on how stained glass became an art form during this time and how the narrative for the figurative design drew from the Bible, mythology, history, literature, and the symbolism of the time, including themes on popular culture such as ecology and materiality.

One of its unique features is that it deals with the important function of stained-glass art in material culture in the modern period. It discusses the artistic exchanges between the glassmakers of Europe and America. The book also notes the importance of American female glassmakers in the creation of this new medium in modern art, for example Violet Oakley (1874–1961) and Sarah Wyman Whitman (1842–1904). It also introduces the contribution of Mexican artists, such as Leopoldo Flores, in the formation of environmental beautification. In Toluca, Mexico, Flores used stained glass to transform a neglected large warehouse into an exhibition hall with a horticultural garden.

The impact of Pre-Raphaelite stained glass is assimilated in America, in particular in Boston, with the commissions given by the Rectory of the Trinity Church of Boston to the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones. The influences and exchanges in art and poetry between the Americans John La Farge and Louis Comfort Tiffany, with the French Eugène Grasset and Maurcie Denis, and the Italians Antonio Salviati of Murano and Gabriele D'Annunzio are discussed, thus demonstrating their artistic and business interactions. The international exhibitions in Milan and Turin on decorative arts and symbolism reveal the new appreciation for stained-glass art.

Stained glass was a significant artistic form during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This new artistic medium expanded to religious and secular buildings. Religious edifices, chapels, churches, cloisters, and cathedrals were embellished by beautiful colored glass. Religious imagery populated these architectural structures with new innovative designs and

subject matters. The imagery and iconography were based on biblical stories, saints, and historical religious devotions.

Secular buildings, palaces, city halls, and the private residences of noble rulers were also embellished with stained glass. The iconography of the imagery in these secular buildings honored rulers and councils with civic moral virtues such as justice, honor, and goodness, as well as individuals and families from the nobility with heraldic imagery.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a hiatus in employing stained glass as an art form. By contrast, in the nineteenth century, a renewed interest in this medium occurred in religious and secular structures. The aim of architectural creations was to improve on the natural light through the coloration of stained glass and to reveal metaphorically spiritual blessings through the heavenly light. Metaphysically, this reflected light embodied the colored glass imagery with mystical powers. Beauty was created with the stained glass, and spiritual delight was achieved for the onlooker when viewing the glass decoration.

The physical and metaphysical transformation of an artistic form to create beauty for the beholder continued into the modern era, not only in Europe (England, France, and Italy) but also in the New World (America and Mexico). When Louis Comfort Tiffany (American 1848–1933) visited Paris in 1889, he was struck by the effects of light and reflections in Emile Gallé's (French 1846–1904) glass, declaring that “form is clearly a secondary consideration, after colour” in the material.

In the modern era, the desire to embellish buildings continued, but the emphasis was focused on secular edifices rather than religious structures. In Europe, unfortunately, the impact of wars destroyed many religious and secular edifices. Before their destruction, some of them were recorded in photographs, journals, and exhibition catalogues. Also, physical samples of these stained-glass imageries survived in museums, galleries, and historical collections. These visual records assist in reconstructing some of these lost stained-glass decorations. Three examples are Otto Wagner's house in Vienna of 1900, designed by Adolf Böhn; Umberto Bottazzi's *La Casa* (The House) of 1908; and Giovanni Torlonia's *Casina delle Civette* (House of Owls) of 1915, both in Rome.

This book provides modern art students, both undergraduate and graduate, in the humanities, literature, history, art history—and artists of new media and popular culture as well as enlightened readers—with an exciting view and insight on stained glass as part of material culture. It also offers for the reader a new consideration and re-evaluation of stained glass as a significant artistic form, an art form that not only reveals beauty and reflects visual and spiritual joy but also reveals the cultural

manifestations of modern art, such as transformation of a decayed structure into a new environment and the collection and preservation of stained glass. The artistic, promotional, and global exchanges between Europe and America transformed the using of a traditional religious artistic form into a new medium for the embellishment of secular architecture, providing decoration with new symbolic meaning for material culture.

The essays in this book focus on three main themes: 1) aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural concepts of radiance and beauty in stained glass in modern art; 2) interrelations of visual representations of stained glass from Europe (England, France, and Italy) to America (USA and Mexico); and 3) innovations and transformations of stained glass from religious decorations to secular material culture.

Part One. American and European Religious Radiance and Symbolism in Stained Glass

In “A Retrospective of Fine American Stained Glass: The Windows of Trinity Church, Staunton, Virginia,” Sara Nair James examines Louis Comfort Tiffany’s stained-glass windows in Trinity Church. Founded in 1746 as Augusta Parish, Trinity Church is the oldest church in Staunton, Virginia, and is one of the first Episcopal congregations west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The present 1855 church building has undergone various modifications in the architectural configuration; with those alterations came changes in the windows. Today the structure contains five distinct styles of window glass installed between 1855 and the 1970s. These windows not only constitute a retrospective of stained-glass traditions in American Protestant churches but also trace the development of stained-glass methods in the United States. Several of these techniques were developed in America and remained distinctive to American stained glass. Louis Comfort Tiffany’s dozen windows are the greatest treasure among the windows of Trinity Church. Dating from 1897 to 1936, this unusually wide variety of Tiffany windows not only offers a glimpse into his subjects, innovative techniques, and stylistic changes but also presents a retrospective of his career in the larger context of American stained glass. The changes in styles and subjects of the windows pay tribute to a long and rich heritage and also reflect modifications in the worship practices and evolution of the liturgy in the Episcopal Church in America, revealing how this particular parish responded to the changes.

In “A Fondness for Gothic Design: A Comparison of the Stained-Glass Windows and Book Cover Designs of Sarah Wyman Whitman,” Jennifer

Bates Ehlert compares how stained-glass windows and book covers, although different art forms, held many of the same design challenges for Sarah Wyman Whitman (1842–1904) and how she used similar techniques and influences to create artworks that exemplify the Arts and Crafts Movement in America. In the nineteenth century, Boston artist Whitman once praised Edward Burne-Jones' window *David's Charge to Solomon* of 1882, in Trinity Church in Boston, Mass., for its Gothic tracery and medieval influence. Whitman much preferred this approach to stained-glass design over heavily ornamented windows. Whitman's own windows, specifically those done for Trinity Church in Boston and the Berwick Academy in Maine, reflect her design aesthetic that combines medieval or Gothic tracery with simple, clean lines that elevate and enhance the function of the space.

Within this same framework of design, Whitman changed the course of book design in America. Whitman designed primarily for Houghton Mifflin and started a new trend in "cheap" book design. Her cloth covers utilized the flatness of the plane and the texture of the cloth to produce book covers that were elegant, simple, and inexpensive to reproduce. As with her stained glass, Whitman fought against the overwrought tastes of the time, and as a result her book covers retain many of the same design elements as her windows.

Whitman designed and created stained-glass windows and book covers concurrently in her career. Both endeavors began in the mid-1880s and continued until her death in 1904. Both contain similar design elements, yet each art form allowed Whitman to explore her artistic vision for American interior designs.

In "Edward Burne-Jones' Virtues in Radiant Light and Glory: The Stained-Glass Windows at Harris Manchester College in Oxford, UK," Liana De Girolami Cheney studies Burne-Jones' (1833–1898) career as an undergraduate at Exeter College in Oxford and his associations with William Morris there. The two students became lifelong friends. Morris went on to establish the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., and Burne-Jones designed images for windows, and Morris' firm made them.

During the mid-nineteenth century, Burne-Jones was involved in the rejuvenation of the tradition of stained-glass art in England. This enterprise reflected the Anglo-Catholic movement of decorating with stained glass the windows of Neo-Romanesque and Neo-Gothic churches in England. Some of his stained-glass works include the windows of St. Philip's Cathedral in Birmingham; St. Martin's Church in Brampton, Cumbria; All Saints and Jesus Lane in Cambridge; Christ Church in Oxford; and the Chapel of Harris Manchester College, also in Oxford. For

this last chapel, Burne-Jones beautifully depicted the virtues of Faith, Justice, Humility, Generosity, Courage, Charity, Mercy, and Devotion, reflecting the radiance of the Unitarian Christian faith. In this chapel, Burne-Jones composed a celestial utopia with color and light, recalling the medieval and Renaissance decorative traditions. The imagery of Pre-Raphaelite stained-glass windows influenced many American religious and secular edifices.

Part Two: European Secular Radiance and Symbolism in Stained Glass

In “Artistry and Craftsmanship: Art Nouveau Stained Glass in Theory and Practice,” Sarah Lippert notes that the medium of stained glass, traditionally considered a decorative art, enjoyed a somewhat unexpected resurgence at the end of the nineteenth century. With the rise of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the subsequent focus on the production of goods that could stimulate the senses, stained glass was among the decorative arts that fell in line with the new desires of nineteenth-century viewers.

At odds with the traditional purpose of stained glass, which had been to advance the most eminent and austere of sacred objectives, stained glass of the Belle Époque marked a decided shift in the medium’s objectives and use. Art Nouveau artists such as Eugène Grasset (1845–1917) began to produce examples of stained glass that heralded a new secular cause and style for this historic medium.

This essay explores how stained glass fit into the hierarchy of the arts at the end of the nineteenth century and how shifts in its status as an art form, relative to traditional media such as painting and sculpture, opened up new opportunities for artists to exploit the medium for its potential role in a cult-like worship of beauty over morals. Through an examination of works such as Grasset’s *Springtime* (1894), the essay also considers which principles of aesthetic theory nineteenth-century stained-glass artists retained from their medieval precedents and how these were adapted to the new hierarchy of the arts and the senses in late nineteenth-century France. It demonstrates how the tradition of French medieval stained glass is a major influence for the modern era decoration of material culture.

In “Between Art and Literature: The Fortunes of Glass and Stained Glass in the Symbolist Period,” Anna Mazzanti considers how glass plays a special role among the Symbolists of the late nineteenth century. From vases and lamps to windows, stained glass is a significant part of the furniture providing special light effects imbued with colors in an otherwise shaded environment. In these stained glasses, with the assistance of similar

imagery in painting, it is not difficult to trace how the literary, artistic, and literary sources of the time assisted in the symbolic interpretation of the stained-glass imagery. Although forms and subjects of these windows have hidden meanings, pictorial representations can unveil their symbolism. Italian and international Symbolist art provide good examples for the iconographic and literary study of stained-glass decorations.

In “After the Nabis: Louis Comfort Tiffany’s Stained-Glass Windows for L’Art Nouveau of Siegfried Bing in Paris,” Davide Lacagnina investigates Siegfried Bing’s (1838–1905) connections with Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933). After traveling to America in 1894, Bing succeeded in obtaining exclusive rights to Tiffany’s works in Europe. On that occasion, the German-born, Paris-based art merchant convinced Tiffany to make eleven stained-glass windows for Bing’s showroom after the cartoons designed by some of the most outstanding painters of the Nabis group: Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Henri-Gabriel Ibels, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Paul Sérusier, Félix Vallotton, Edouard Vuillard, Albert Besnard, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and the designers P.A. Isaac-Dathis and Eugène Grasset. This essay reconsiders contents and contexts of such commissions: the role of Bing as patron and dealer, not only in terms of marketing strategies and opportunities but also in the broadest analysis of his promotion of modern style in Europe. Artists’ ideas and iconographies are discussed as a coherent attempt of œuvre *d’art totale* and related to poetics and politics proper of French symbolism, thus connecting visual and iconographical imagery in stained glass.

Part Three: American Religious and Secular Radiance and Symbolism in Stained Glass

In “Luca della Robbia Goes To Harvard: A Look at the Influence of della Robbia on Sarah Wyman Whitman’s Windows,” Jennifer Bates Ehler analyzes the New England artistic scene, focusing on the Bostonian artist Sarah Wyman Whitman (1842–1904), who admired the sculptures of Luca della Robbia and his family and studied their works throughout her life.

The mid- to late 1800s in Boston was a time when everything Italian was essential to Boston’s cultural growth. Artist Sarah Wyman Whitman was no different. Her Italianate style stained-glass windows brought the Renaissance to Boston. Writers have commented on the influence of Raphael and Michelangelo in her work, but not that of Luca della Robbia. Yet Whitman wrote about della Robbia and included copies of his art in her sketch book. The focus of this essay is della Robbia’s influence on three of Whitman’s commissions: *The Brimmer Memorial Window* of

1896, at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass.; All Saints' Episcopal Church of 1891, presently in Reisterstown, Maryland; and the Fogg Memorial Library at Berwick Academy of 1894, in South Berwick, Maine. The essay specifically addresses the importance of della Robbia's *Cantoria* as a springboard for Whitman's own desire for the Renaissance ideals of humanism, civic pride, and devotion to God.

Though Whitman's cultural and social achievements are fascinating, the focus of this essay is her stained-glass windows. Ehlert proposes that through Whitman's travels, studies, and the influence of her teachers, specifically William M. Hunt and John La Farge, Whitman formed her own symbolism. While anchored in the classical and Renaissance pasts, her stained-glass imagery reveals the assimilation of Scripture, literature, and the newer art movements, and it demonstrates her devotion to American culture.

In "Violet Oakley's Stained Glass *Epiphany*: Aesthetics, Belief, and Idealism" (1899, now unlocated), Bailey Van Hook discusses the earliest stained-glass windows by Oakley. The simplicity of this window inspires the devotee. The window illustrates a wonderful transition between her illustrations, which she had been doing for four years, and her murals: both display much the same heavy contours, flat color, and lack of depth. Oakley had studied in Europe and was influenced by the Nabis among others. Caryl Coleman of the Church Decorating Company, who was a pioneering advocate of quality and high standards in stained glass, commissioned the window.

In "Leopoldo Flores' *Cosmovitral*: Radiance of Beauty and Creativity," Liana De Girolami Cheney explains the signification of the Mexican cosmic utopia created by this Mexican muralist and sculptor, who transformed an abandoned mercantile building in Toluca, México, into a botanical garden surrounded by stained glass. The artist's quests were to transform decayed buildings into functional and beautiful public art; to incorporate nature into architectural forms; and to employ stained glass to narrate a story about the formation of heaven and earth. Flores (1936–) hoped that stained-glass light would not only accentuate the natural environment but also provide, with its imagery, a spiritual lift to ennoble the individual.

His art is an example of the embodiment of new artistic approaches, incorporating a European medium into a contemporary edifice, dealing with the contemporary issues of ecological design, manifestation of color, and natural composition. The new stained glass has a new function, which is to reveal the positive aspects of material culture, to preserve beauty in a

natural environment, and to create an aesthetical lift for the spectator, thus inventing a cosmic utopia through stained glass.

Part Four: International Radiance and Symbolism in Stained Glass

In “Symbolist Stimuli and International Influences on Some Early Twentieth-Century Italian Stained Glass by the Giovanni Beltrami Firm at the 1902 Turin Exhibition,” Lucia Mannini examines the decades straddling the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Stained-glass windows in Italy were used in churches. Private settings allowed artist-designers more freedom of expression, which, in these windows, meant a formal synthetic language and a technique that, above all, exploited the potential of colored glass. Thanks to an enlightened and progressive clientele, some Italian artists designed windows for domestic interiors or private chapels, availing themselves of the most up-to-date international examples and, at the same time, reflecting and representing the vibrant local cultural milieu.

The examples presented are an expression of Florence in the early twentieth century, one of the most vibrant centers for the development of Symbolist poetics in Italy, in all of its different facets. The stained-glass windows were designed by sophisticated and cultured artists who devoted themselves to various decorative arts and who demonstrated the inherent value of a coherently designed space, sometimes also working closely with the windows’ manufacturers. Some important examples of stained-glass windows are presented, whose elevated formal rendering was made possible not only by the quality of the concept but also by the outstanding collaboration with the manufacturer, who was able to interpret the designs through the use of techniques and glass materials that exalted the characteristics of the designs themselves.

In “Turin 1902: Louis Comfort Tiffany at the First Exhibition of Modern Decorative Arts,” Davide Lacagnina analyzes the geopolitical significance of the First International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in Turin in 1902. He pays special attention to the Italian role in relation to European nations, commenting on the Italian desire to achieve a new centrality in the Old Continent by embracing the most modern cultural and artistic movement, focusing on the union of art and industry, and projecting a powerful image of economic growth and social development. Lacagnina elaborates on the history of the function of stained-glass windows in Italy in secular architecture, in particular private dwellings during the modern era, primarily the early twentieth century. The renewed culture of glass populated apartments and private homes with decorations

and art objects sponsored by Louis Comfort Tiffany in Turin, popularized by Vittorio Pica, and later produced by Giovanni Beltrami in Milan. Lacagnina further discusses the cultural and political transformations in the early twentieth century as small and medium-sized stained-glass enterprises run by families evolved into commercial firms competing in a national market, e.g., Galileo Chini in Florence and Cesare Picchiarini in collaboration with Duilio Cambellotti in Rome. These stained-glass firms paved the way for the production of decorative art with a new artistic quality.

In “Italian Stained Glass in the 1920s and 1930s: Standing the Test of Modernity,” Lucia Mannini examines the international exhibitions on glass during the twentieth century. The most important were organized in Italy, especially Turin in 1902 and Milan in 1906. A modern style in stained glass at that time meant a formal synthetic language and a technique that, above all, exploited the potential of colored glass. For the designs of these windows, Italian artists availed themselves of the most up-to-date international examples (European and American), at the same time reflecting and representing the vibrant local cultural milieu.

