

The Light Without: Stained Glass Icons

Benjamin Pascal Finn

Historically, the use of the medium of stained glass in the Eastern Orthodox Church has been very little explored. One likely reason is the late discovery of stained glass and its flowering in the context of the church architecture of the Roman Catholic Church from the twelfth century in northern Europe, postdating the Great Schism of 1054. The Wissembourg Head (1060) is the earliest surviving painted

head of Christ on glass, and marks the beginning of the architectural revolution in France, to which the development of stained glass was inextricably linked. The cathedrals and churches built at this time, beginning with the abbey of Saint Denis in Paris, lent themselves to more extensive use of glass since the pointed arch and buttressing allowed for bigger windows. These developments, exclusive to the Roman Church, were not adopted by Eastern Orthodoxy.



I joined the Orthodox Church in 1992, after completing my training in stained glass. Most commissions since then have been for Anglican or Catholic churches, but I have looked for opportunities to apply what I learned from studying Orthodox icons for many years. I based a window on an icon (Christ in Glory) for the first time in the Anglican church of Saint Nicholas, South Ockendon, Essex, in 1998. I also made a trial panel of Saint Basil on a single sheet of glass, and the window for All Saint's Church, Broughton, Cambridgeshire (2014) borrows heavily from the Byzantine style.

It wasn't until windows were commissioned by the Friends of Friendless Churches in 2015 and for the church of Saint Peter's, Wickham Bishops, Essex, in 2018 that I had could explore fully the technical and stylistic possibilities of making icons in stained



glass. The subjects of these windows were Jacob's Dream, Saint Helen, Saint Cedd, Saint Bartholemew, and Saint Peter. How to transpose the icon style into glass, from a technical point of view, was pioneering work in the field, as there is no current practice in the United Kingdom. Thus, it was necessary to do much testing, some of which led, for instance, to the invention of new techniques, such as the resists necessary to achieve the effect of the *psimythies* (white highlights) on both drapery and background mountains. Because of the nature of stained glass and stained glass painting, the painting has to be a reverse process in terms of paint tonality. The color of the glass used for a particular area, such as a face, has to represent the lightest

areas, and the layers of paint progress to gradually darker tones. This is the opposite of the method used in icon painting of first painting the *proplasmos* (the darkest layer), followed by layers of *lama* (lighter), finishing off with the *psimythies* (final highlights). The *psimythies*, in glass, were achieved either by acid etching for flashed glass (a thin layer of coloured glass on clear glass), or by applying a resist so the paint would not stick to those areas during firing.

The variability in icon painting methods means that there are icons in which the painting of drapery is more monochrome, or doesn't have *psimythies*, or icons painted on tile or other surfaces treated in a more linear



fashion. It is arguable, thus, that there are other valid ways of mimicking a tempera icon on board, and that adaptation to different media allows for the development of new methods and styles.



In 2018, I was approached by Father Chrysostom Tympas to make the first in a series of stained glass icons for the Greek Orthodox church of Saints Cosmas and Damian the Anargyre, Gospel Oak, London. For the first window, the Transfiguration was chosen. The technical challenges of replicating the style of this icon as if it were a wall painting or icon on board became apparent. Stained glass windows, traditionally conceived, are mosaic-like assemblages of glass pieces mounted and held in place by strips of channeled lead called *comes*. These strips appear as black lines usually five or six millimeters wide when the window is installed. Practically, they serve to divide up the design, allowing for different colours of glass to be used. Glass only has a certain tolerance for being shaped, beyond which it breaks unpredictably while being cut, so the shapes possible are to some extent limited.

It became clear that using lead to follow the outlines of the design elements (figures, hands and feet, mountains) would lose the delicacy and finesse of the profiles, resulting in a clunky visual effect. I therefore decided to use single sheets of clear glass divided up into nine sections. The technique of silver stain is used for the mountains, background (*fon*) and the drapery of Christ and Saint Peter, combined with



glass paint of various colours. Silver stain is a method discovered in the fourteenth century in which glass is painted with silver nitrate powder



mixed with water and fired to produce a bright transparent yellow or orange. This way of using glass in

larger sheets has a history beginning in the eighteenth century in churches in Britain, often with the use of transparent colored enamels (which are different from the opaque glass paints used here). With this amount of detail and number of techniques on single sheets of clear glass, successive firings were needed. Because glass paint is effectively a finely ground powder mixed with water, it brushes off when dry. It needs to be fixed by firing so that other layers can be added without disturbing the preceding ones.

Inside the church at night, the colors of the glass paint harmonize very well with the wall-mounted icons alongside. ✽



Benjamin Pascal Finn is a stained-glass artist based in Essex in the UK, and has been working in stained-glass for thirty years. He's been commissioned to make over twenty new church windows (two in cathedrals) and carried out dozens of repairs of 19th century church stained-glass. He also makes stained glass for houses and schools as well as for exhibitions.