



Art history: early modern
Stained Glass

Dr Kim Woods:

If we want to understand the functions of stained glass we need not just to look at the windows themselves, but we need to find out as much as we can about the people who paid for them, and the institutions in which they're placed.

Sarah Brown:

There must certainly have been a degree of self-interest involved in giving a window and ensuring that you were represented somewhere in it. To coin a rather hackneyed phrase, people were anxious to purchase their place in paradise.

Dr Kim Woods:

I think the more you look into the circumstances of the commissioning of stained glass, the more complicated their functions seem to become. So, to say that their primary function was to serve as substitute books for ordinary people is almost without question a simplification.

Dr Kim Woods:

The windows in All Saints, North Street, fall into different categories. The St Anne window, for example is suffused with references to reading. You have the main light which is St Anne teaching the Virgin to read, and then the two female donors below are shown reading books, and there are lots of inscriptions as well, all in Latin, so it's certainly not designed for ordinary people who would neither be able to read nor speak Latin. I think it's mainly about commemoration of particular individuals and the saints to whom they were devoted.

Dr Kim Woods:

The window representing the Acts of Mercy, I think, is very easy to decipher by almost anybody. The particular individual that appears in each of the scenes is visiting people in the stocks, he's visiting prisoners, in other words; he's giving something to drink to people who are thirsty. You almost don't need to know the biblical passage that it's based on to actually see what's happening in those windows and it serves very well, I think, as a kind of a moral exemplar of the behaviour.

Sarah Brown

The window was probably the gift of Nicholas Blackburn, Senior, who gave at least two windows in this church, and we see probably the same person doing each one of these acts in a kind of comic strip telling of the tale, and I think probably we're supposed to assume that the person giving the food, the drink, the money, visiting the prisoner, etcetera, is actually Nicholas Blackburn himself. And it would seem that the donors of these images identified themselves quite deliberately in these windows, in such a way that the viewer would recognise the donor in those generous acts. So Blackburn is identifying himself with Christ in these Christ-like acts of generosity.

Dr Kim Woods:

The Pricke of Conscience window is a unique window. There isn't another one like it, and it's actually quite hard to understand who the audience was and what the motive was for that particular commission, but it certainly doesn't seem to have been ordinary people.

Sarah Brown:

It was given by, amongst others, members of the Hesse family. We assume that, like the Blackburns, they must have been wealthy, probably merchants in the city, and they wanted to be commemorated in their parish church. The window is about effectively the end of the world, but it's drawn from a particular source. It's from a late C14th poem called the Pricke of Conscience, and one of the things that's so interesting about this window is that it's clearly

designed to be “read”, in inverted commas, in a particular kind of order. So that you have each of the fifteen days with the events that will accompany that day, so that the sea rises up and at one point these wonderful, awful creatures from the depths of the sea rise up and they make so much noise that they deafen the people who hear them. And then of course the scene eventually culminates in all that are living dying, so at the very top of the window we see this couple lying in bed with mourners all around them and a skeleton kind of creeping in at the corner, about to take away the surviving people. And then, of course, on the final day the world is consumed in fire.

Dr Kim Woods:

Deciphering a stained glass window depends not just on subject matter, but also on where the window is, and the kind of design principles that are being used. For example, the Great East window of York Minster is notoriously hard to decipher because it's so high up and the individual panes are quite small, so you need extremely good eyesight or binoculars, which of course medieval people didn't have, to be able to see clearly what's going on there.

Sarah Brown:

The window is about the beginning and end of all things. At the very apex of the window is an image of God the Father and he holds a book with the words, 'I am the alpha and the omega. I am the beginning and the end' and, in a sense that tells us what the window is about.

Sarah Brown:

It is quite literally about the creation and the end of the world and the second coming taken from the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation, the beginning and the end.

Sarah Brown:

The subject was chosen because it was a way of showing the way in which the Minster and York and, indeed, the archdiocese, was woven into the history of all things. It's very difficult to know who the audience for the window was intended to be. It's a subject that would have been, I think, familiar to a relatively limited audience of literate, university-educated clerics. In other words, it was a window conceived by churchmen, primarily to be seen by churchmen. And in some respects it's also a kind of piece of propaganda for York because it is stating York's claim, particularly in connection with its, its many centuries old disputes with Canterbury.

Sarah Brown:

The man responsible was called John Thornton and he came from Coventry, so he is not a home-grown talent. He was clearly a glass painter, not just the manager of a team of craftsmen, because the contract does say that he might be required to paint, with his own hand, some aspects of the window as the Dean and Chapter decreed was necessary. But he was also required to draw out the design for the window, so he was actually the man who did the cartooning, the one-to-one size drawing on which the window was made.

Keith Barley

Every window was designed complete with a support structure before the designer got his hands on it so, in other words, he had to work within the width of the opening, by the divisions formed by the mullions and by the tracery shapes.

Keith Barley

The Selby East window is a large expanse for an abbey church. It's a very, very large window, the largest in the abbey itself. The window dates from the first half of the C14th, roughly about 1340, and it depicts the Tree of Jesse which, effectively, is the family tree of Christ. So at the base of the window you have laid out Jesse and from his groin grow these branches, and then you've got people like King David right the way up to the Virgin Mary.

Keith Barley:

The two panels here are both St Johns. We've got Johannes Baptista, John the Baptist, and St John the Evangelist from this Tree of Jesse, and you can see in the panel here the actual branches that go into each panel and link each of these particular depictions from the family tree of Christ. In the C14th period they kept the lines to the most simplistic form so that with a

minimum amount of line they were able to create the maximum amount of expression. If we look at the head of St John in detail we can appreciate the different painting techniques that they've used to create the effect of these faces at this period. Around the perimeter you'll see this dark, painted line that allows no light through at all. These are the trace lines and they're also used for around the nose, the eyeballs and, indeed, the split between the lips. And then we have what we call the sort of semi-transparent flicks, like a watered-down version of the main opaque lines which had been flicked over the top to create the effects of hair, and some have overlapped so you're getting three sort of densities, three different shades. And then we have yet another more subtle, really transparent wash where they've washed over the whole of the glass and flicked around down the nose, and underneath, and around the neck, and then this is in various intensities which then can be sort of lightly brushed away with a dry brush to expose highlight down the nose, on the cheek, and on the forehead. And then the last technique of all, where they've actually pricked out with a stick to expose the raw brilliance of the glass and allowing all that light through, so it creates these highlights on the cheek, and underneath the eyes and across the lips.

Sarah Brown:

By the end of the C15th native styles of English glass painting were beginning to look very old-fashioned, and from the 1480's and '90's onwards immigrant glass painters from the low countries were coming to England in increasing numbers, so much so that the native glaziers' guild, particularly in London, petitioned the king to prevent them snaffling all the best commissions and, of course, those Englishmen who travelled abroad were buying tapestries and manuscripts, and panel paintings in these exciting new styles, and at home, of course, they wanted this kind of work in their stained glass windows in their parish churches, and in their cathedrals.

Keith Barley:

What we have here is a panel from the C16th which originated from a church in Antwerp. The scene is the Death of the Virgin and, if we have a look in detail at the painting style, you can see, for example, that they're still using the opaque trace lines for around the shapes and around the collar and, indeed, for parts of the hair, and they're still using the transparent washes and little flicks, and the semi-transparent ones for the hair. The modeling is almost portraiture-like, and also the use of fine needles scratching through to expose the raw brilliance, and create these very, very fine lines, and very, very delicate shading which would have been done with oils, and little flicks on the neck. It's distinctively different. One obvious thing is that we don't have the borders, and the reason for that is these people in the C16th were designing the windows to be huge canvasses, like massive panel paintings. You've got this huge depiction as if you're almost seeing the picture on the other side and it's just got this grid, the stonework in front of it.

Dr Kim Woods:

The so-called Herkenrode windows at Lichfield Cathedral originally come from a Cistercian convent in the eastern part of what is now Belgium. It was patronised by some very wealthy individuals who commissioned stained glass for it for very much the same motives that we see individuals commissioning stained glass windows elsewhere, that is for commemoration, prestige, for the sake of their souls and also, I think, for the desire to embellish a building within their territories. They are basically biblical narratives that could be deciphered by anybody who knew the biblical narratives. I think they were commissioned as a well thought-out scheme that was intended to enhance the liturgical ceremonies that took place within the building. It's quite hard to be sure what it would have been like walking into Herkenrode Abbey, because it doesn't survive, but I think it would probably have impressed as a kind of treasure house of Renaissance art, and the windows would have played the most important part in that. I think it is possible to see stained glass in terms of what one art historian has called "a liturgical theatre", a visualisation of the story of Redemption, just as the Mass is a liturgical version of the story of Redemption, so the one complements the other, and both appeal to the senses as well as the mind.