THE CONSERVATION OF TWO SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENAMELLED STAINED GLASS WINDOWS BY JAN DE CAUMONT IN THE ABBEY 'T PARK IN LEUVEN, BELGIUM (FLANDERS)

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In January 1993, the ‘Friends of the Norbertine Abbey ‘t Park’ were able to purchase two stained-glass windows at Sotheby’s, New York (Caviness and Cothren 1989, 268–9). The two windows (COLOUR PLATES 108A, 109A), each originally consisting of three panels, were part of a series of 41 much larger windows that had been fitted in the clerestory of the abbey between 1636 and 1644. All the windows were sold by the monks in 1828, forced as they were to sell off much of their property in order to be able to re-establish their monastic life after the tribulations of the French Revolution and occupation. The windows were subsequently sold on, and eventually became dispersed in private and public collections in England and the US in the course of the 19th and 20th century.

In 1937, an important fragment was given back to the abbey and, in 1971, three complete windows were returned and placed in the clerestory.

HISTORY

According to the accounts of the cloister, all the windows were produced by the glass painter Jan de Caumont at the request of Abbot Jan Maes. Jan de Caumont was born in Doullens in Picardy, France, around 1580. He became a citizen of the City of Leuven in 1607, probably through his marriage with Anna Boels. He started working in the glass workshop of his wife’s uncle, Simon Boels, a well known glass painter in Leuven. Around 1626, he took over Boels’s workshop and became the city’s official glass painter. He was particularly productive between 1635 and 1645, producing windows not only for the Abbey ‘t Park, but also for other churches in Leuven and elsewhere, including Mechelen. Jan de Caumont died in 1659. Production in the workshop was however continued by members of his family until the beginning of the 18th century (Swyngeudouw and Steppe 1979).

The windows depict scenes from the life of Norbertus, founder of the order. Every scene is accompanied by a descriptive text in Latin. Jan de Caumont based most of his windows on prints by Theodoor Galle of drawings by Maarten Pepijn. These appeared as illustrations in a book by Johannes Chrysostomes vander Sterre, entitled Vita Sancti Norberti, which was printed in Antwerp in 1622.

Each window was composed of two central panels depicting a scene from the life of Saint Norbertus. Two panels on either side featured a saint or a blessed one, and one panel above each of these scenes had embellishments and a coat of arms, with the one below having the text.

The two windows purchased in 1993 both consist of three panels. The two upper panels show a scene from the life of Saint Norbertus, and the third has a text in Latin. One of the windows depicts the Adoration of Saint Norbertus after his Death (COLOUR PLATE 108), the other features the The Transportation of the Remains of Saint Norbertus from Magdebourg to Prague in 1627 (COLOUR PLATE 109).

TECHNIQUE

These six panels, and indeed the other windows as well, are exquisite examples of the elaborate glass-painting techniques used by glass painters in the Low Countries in the late 16th and early 17th century. According to the style of the era, glass painters should ‘paint on the glass’ rather than ‘paint with glass’ (COLOUR PLATE 110).

Jan de Caumont employed all the glass-painting techniques that were available at the time. He used grisaille paint on both sides of the glass, silver stain of various tints on the exterior side, blue and purple vitreous enamel, opaque red paint (opaque sanguine) on the interior, and translucent flesh tone (translucent sanguine) on the exterior. Tints of green were obtained by applying blue enamel to the interior side and silver stain to the exterior side. Most of the glass is highly transparent and slightly greenish in colour, but besides this clear glass he also used pot-metal glass and red flashed glass.

The technique of applying enamel to stained glass windows had its origins in the first half of the 16th century in the Southern Low Countries (Van der Snickt et al. 2003, 29). It allowed the glass painter to apply colour to larger pieces of white glass, unimpeded by the lines of the lead came. As well as grisaille paint (the earliest type of glass paint), silver stain had been used since the early 14th century, while sanguine (the flesh tone red) is found on stained glass dating back to the second half of the 15th century. The style evolved increasingly towards more transparent paintings with a rectangular lead came pattern, especially towards the end of the 16th century.

There was, most likely, a connection between the use of enamels in Flemish stained glass windows and the fact that many Italian (Venetian) glass blowers were working in Antwerp at that time, as they were familiar with the techniques of enamelling on vessel glass.

In the archives and literature, we find little information about the use of enamels in 16th-century stained glass. The first author to write extensively about these techniques is
Antonio Neri in his book *L’Arte Vetraria* (Neri 1612). Neri arrived in Antwerp in 1609, and probably came into contact with Johannes Isaac Hollandius or Anselmus de Boot, either of whom might have informed him about various enamelling techniques. Obviously the use of enamels was already quite widespread, as we find blue enamel in much of the stained glass production from the Low Countries dating from after 1550, especially in roundels and unipartite panels. Neri’s work was of great importance, as his text would become the source for many subsequent books and recipes.

The first half of the 17th century was a very important period in the history of stained glass production in the Low Countries. Unfortunately, this period has not been closely studied. Clearly, though, it was an era during which elaborate techniques culminated in magnificent glass paintings. At the same time, however, these paintings may be regarded as an expression of the decadence that already heralded the decline of the craft of glass painting on the European continent.

**Conservation**

The conservation of the two windows (six panels combined into two frames) started with a very close examination and documentation of the objects.

It was quite obvious that there were several broken glass pieces and gaps, as well as many repair leads. The leading was of a relatively recent date as the cameas had a modern profile. At many places, the cameas were broken, and the joints were badly soldered. Furthermore, the lead was in bad condition and very brittle. Subsequent research revealed that several glass pieces had been affected by corrosion (especially near the lead cameas due to the ‘cold bridge’ the lead was causing) (COLOUR PLATE 111), and that the condition of the enamels was quite poor, as is often the case in such windows.

The results of the preliminary examination were discussed with Monuments and Sites administrators, representatives of the Royal Commission on Monuments and Sites and the owners of the abbey (the Norbertine Order). All of them quickly agreed that the poor repairs of the 19th and 20th century had to be removed in order to regain the legibility of these magnificent works of stained glass art. The actual condition of the windows was also a real danger and in need of further conservation, as many broken glass pieces were ready to fall out, and some leads were no longer giving enough support.

It was decided that the lead cameas should be dismantled. The pieces of glass were carefully cleaned with a mixture of water and ethanol (50/50). Superficial spots of paint, that might have been the result of, for example, the painting of the room where the panels were kept, were removed with acetone. Putty was removed with a scalpel, although a thin layer was left on the glass in order to avoid damage to the glass surface.

After all the broken glass pieces had been cleaned, they were bonded with an epoxy resin (Ciba Geigy – Araldite 2020). No pieces were back-plated as this technique causes a dangerous microclimate for the glass and its conservation products. Large gaps (normally ones of more than 10 by 10mm) were filled with newly constructed glass. These glass pieces were made with glass and glass paints using traditional stained glass techniques and the intention was to re-establish an ‘integrated legibility’ at approximately 2m distance. When you examine the windows from a closer distance, it is clear that these pieces are reconstructions. Furthermore all these infills were signed with the conservator’s monogram. At one place this monogram is accompanied with the conservator’s full name and the date of the conservation. The reconstruction of these gaps was quite easy as all of them could be made according to the surrounding design. Small gaps were filled with tinted epoxy resin.

The next step was the re-leading of each panel with lead cameas of the same section as the ‘original’. These original dimensions could be determined on the basis of corrosion traces at the edges of the glass pieces.

When the windows were purchased in the US, the three panels of each window were leaded and soldered together to form one panel. It was now decided to separate the three panels of each window to return them to their original form, and to construct two new steel frames to exhibit the three conserved panels of each in the clerestory of the abbey. Although the clerestory is the original place of this glazing, the windows were not placed at their exact original spots. They will probably be returned to their correct position when the clerestory building is restored in the near future.

The panels have not been cemented again as they were all strong enough with the new lead and the new copper profiles around them. There was no need to make the panels wind and water tight as they were not exposed to the exterior climate because there was a protective outer glazing.

After the windows had been re-ledged, all the bondings and small gap fillings were retouched (COLOUR PLATES 108B, 109B) with light-proof pigments and an acrylic resin (Rohm and Haas – Paraloid B72) dissolved in di-acetone alcohol as a binder.

The corrosion of the glass has not been treated, as normally the corrosion products are ‘protecting’ the healthy glass against further corrosion, as long as the glass is kept in a stable climate. The actual setting of the windows with protective glazing and interior air ventilation guarantees this stability. Nor have the deteriorated enamels been consolidated as their condition is not so bad that an irreversible consolidation treatment was needed.

The conservation of these panels certainly aroused my interest in the evolution of glass-painting techniques in the 16th and 17th century. Since then, we have, in collaboration with natural scientists at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and at the University of Antwerp, conducted some intensive research on grisaille paints, opaque and translucent sanguine paint, silver stain and enamel. Much work remains to be done, in archival and historical research as well as in analysing glass samples and glass paints. Although late 16th and 17th-century stained glass is not particularly ‘popular’ among scientists, I, for one, sincerely hope that more research will follow and that international collaboration in this field will be intensified.

**References**


Neri, A., 1612. L'arte vetraria distinta in libri VII ne quali si scoprono maravigliosi effetti e s'insegnano segreti bellissimi del vetro nel fuoco e altre cose curiose. Firenze.


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