

And though I suffer darkness
In this mortal life,
That is not so hard a thing,
For even if I have no light
I have the life of heaven.

John of the Cross

*Searle
2011*

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

Peter Coffman

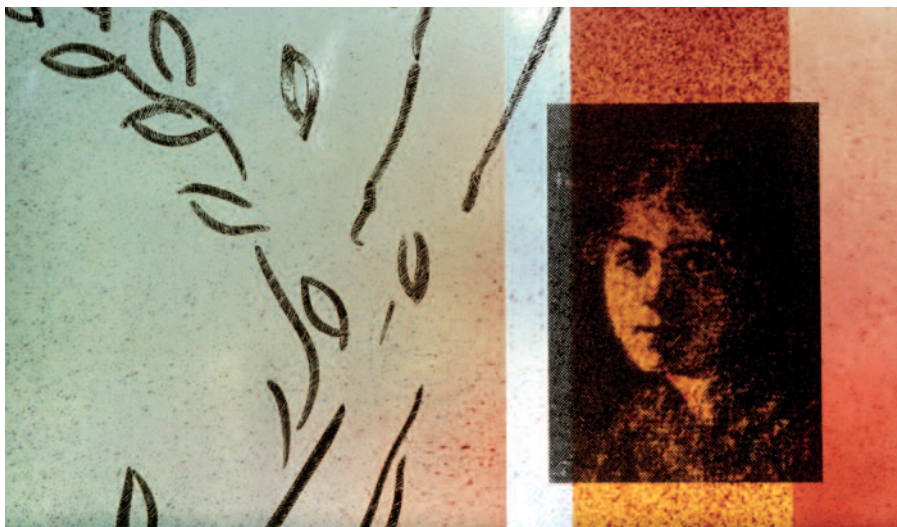
Mystical Light: Ten Windows at St. John of the Cross

Peter Coffman

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SPACE is the great glory of the art of stained glass. The Gathering Space of St. John of the Cross Catholic Community in Mississauga, Ontario, is a 30-foot circular room, with ten rectangular openings for light. For Toronto stained glass artist Sarah Hall and Glasmalerei Peters of Paderborn, Germany, the challenge was to make the mystical, contemplative spirit of the Carmelites present in this coolly elegant space.

Rising to the challenge, Sarah Hall has created ten glowing, light-filled evocations of the brilliant spiritual vision first codified by St. Albert of Jerusalem. Eight of the windows relate to important figures in Carmelite history, including Teresa of Avila, Simon Stock and St. Albert himself. The other two, which are dedicated to St. Elizabeth Seton and St. Richard, are created in the same aesthetic spirit. One can hardly imagine a more fitting memorial, since no order emphasizes the creative, imaginative side of spiritual life more than the Carmelites.

The Christian mystical tradition was already deeply entrenched by the time of the founding of the Discalced Carmelites in 1568. Significantly, this long mystical tradition is filled with images of light, which was seen as a profound manifestation of God. In the early twelfth century, Hildegard von Bingen experienced the sacred as a brilliant light in her extraordinary visions:



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Top: Detail, *St. Elizabeth Seton*, narthex window, St. John of the Cross Catholic Community, Mississauga, ON ✦ 2001c

Overleaf: *St. John of the Cross*, narthex window, St. John of the Cross Catholic Community, Mississauga, ON ✦ 2001c

“And the words I see and hear from this vision are not like the words that come from human lips, but like a sparkling flame, or a cloud floating in pure air. And in that same brightness, I see sometimes, not often, another light, which I call the Living Light.”

It was during Hildegard’s lifetime that the Carmelites were founded, initiating a tradition that would lead to the ecstatic visions and poetry of John of the Cross. This great Carmelite mystic and poet considered beauty to be an expression of God’s love. The idea that beauty brings one closer to God was not new in the sixteenth century, but nowhere is it manifested more vividly than in John’s mystical poetry, where the desire for union with God is expressed through the ecstatic imagery of a love poem:



“Quench Thou my troubles, For no one else can soothe them; And let mine eyes behold Thee, For Thou art their light, And I will keep them for Thee alone.”

Such ecstasy is a spiritual state, and for it to be given concrete formal expression, an artist is required. John of the Cross used words and images; Sarah Hall’s palette consisted of light and colour and the extraordinary transformative effect these have on space and on the mind. Unlike the poet, however, the stained glass artist must harmonize her vision with the architectural framework. The Gathering Space at St. John of the Cross is used for a wide variety of purposes, from education to personal reflection. It is a sparse, white circle, intimate in scale and composed of austere, thin planes. It quickly became clear to Hall



Top: *Canticle*, narthex window, St. John of the Cross Catholic Community, Mississauga, ON ✦ 2001 c

Left: *Mystical Light*, St. John of the Cross, 10 narthex (gathering space) windows, St. John of the Cross Catholic Community, Mississauga, ON ✦ 2001 c

Matthew Lavoie

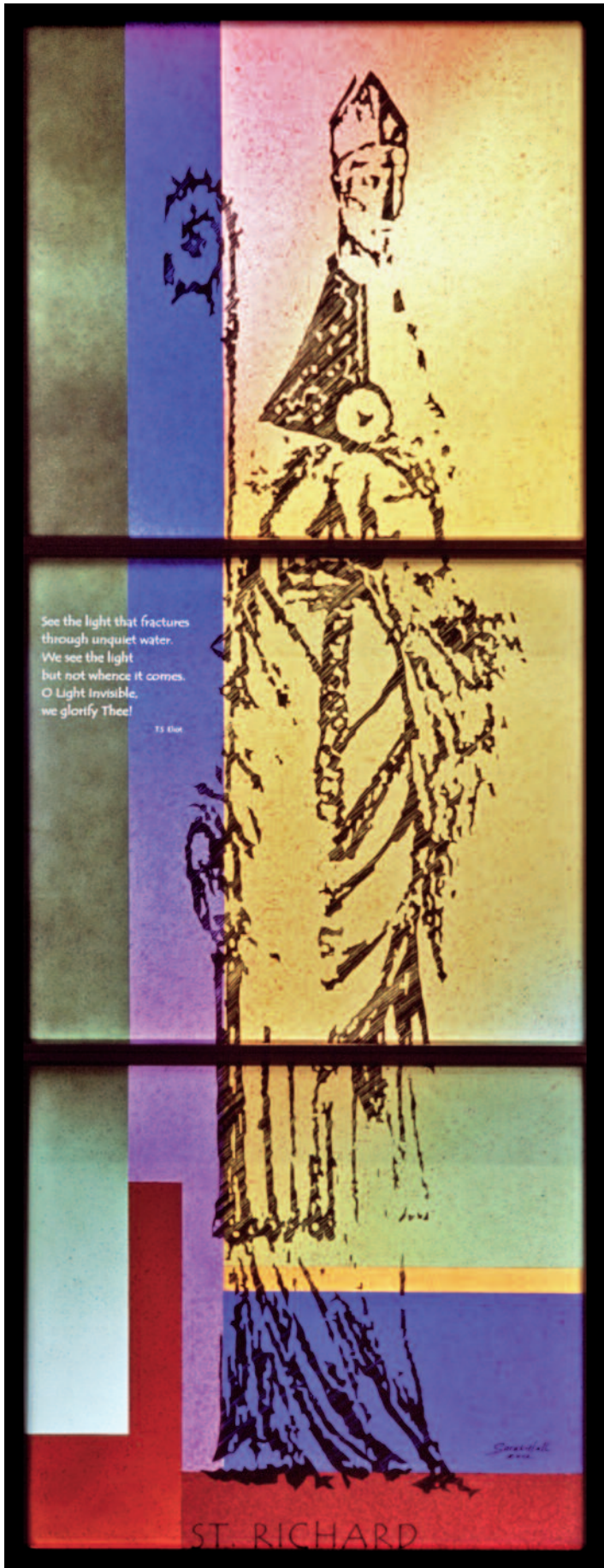


Our Lady of Mount Carmel, narthex window, St. John of the Cross Catholic Community, Mississauga, ON ↻ 2001c



St. Albert of Jerusalem, narthex window, St. John of the Cross Catholic Community, Mississauga, ON ↻ 2001c

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St. Richard, narthex window, St. John of the Cross Catholic Community, Mississauga, ON ♦ 2001c



St. Edith Stein, narthex window, St. John of the Cross Catholic Community, Mississauga, ON ♦ 2001c

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St. Elizabeth Seton,
narthex window,
St. John of the Cross Catholic Community,
Mississauga, ON ✦ 2001c



that conventional leaded glass possessed a visual weight that this gentle space could not bear. Moreover, the lyrical, mystical tradition of the Carmelites required something freer, more delicate, more serene than conventional glass. Influenced by the innovative work of Glasmalerei Peters Studios, Sarah began thinking about air-brushed enamels as an alternative to leaded work.

With John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila as her muses, Sarah Hall created the artwork. As she worked, her research led her to other Carmelite saints, writers and mystics; and across the decades and centuries the artists met, sharing joyful ideas of love, spirit and beauty. Sarah was struck by the rich insights in the writings of the various saints, and she decided that they should become part of each window (along with some guest appearances by the likes of T.S. Eliot).

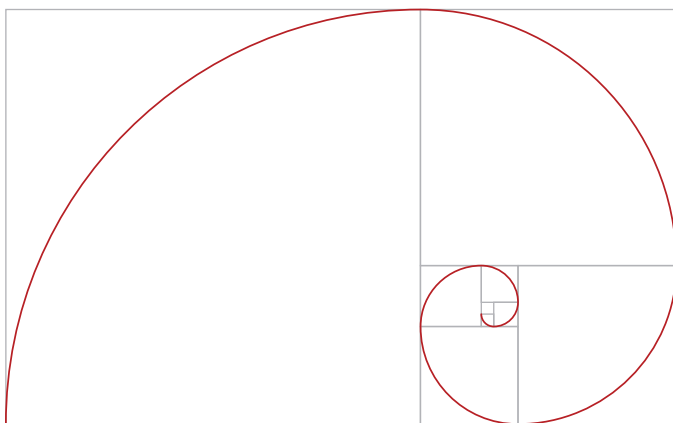
After selecting a text for each window, Hall composed a series of geometric colour fields to form the basis of each piece. These geometric grounds tell stories in and of themselves; each one is a complete, resolved composition that responds emotionally and artistically to the selected text, using the tools of the stained glass artist: colour, light, gradation, texture, translucency, opacity – everything but figures. Images were then superimposed on the colour fields; four were figural, the other six were symbolic evocations of the saints. The figures are highly expressive in the way they are rendered, with a loose, sketch-like style that is more like a spiritual gesture drawing than portraiture. These sparkling, immaterial entities leave one in no doubt: these are spirits, not bodies.

The techniques required to create such light, shimmering images were, naturally, hugely labour intensive and complex. Each panel of glass consists of two layers of 4mm float glass. The first panel combines air-brushed and hand-painted enamels fired in successive layers onto the front surface. Four-stage sandblasting on the back surface gives varying layers of translucency and depth. The second glass panel is hand painted with traditional glass paint. Before firing, the paintwork was “highlighted” to allow the coloured enamels to shine softly through the paint. Photo screens were used in three of the windows; twice for texture and once for an image. Traditional glass paint was applied through the screens

and fired onto the glass. The text in each window was sandblasted into the fired enamels.

Out of the fire and blasting of the studio emerged windows of singular quiet, lightness and delicacy. Their exceptionally serene, contemplative sensibility would have been impossible with traditional stained glass techniques. There is an unavoidable structural quality to leaded glass; everywhere, it speaks of its construction and assembly. Here, all that seems to have vanished; these windows are apparitional, floating in space, seeming to have formed spontaneously, without such earthly considerations as gravity and lead lines. Glasmalerei Peters would be quick to point out that nothing could be further from the truth, but the illusion is a deeply satisfying and uplifting one.

These windows at St. John of the Cross demonstrate sensitivity to the Carmelite tradition, technical innovation and artistic virtuosity. Most importantly, the mystical, ecstatic spirit of St. John of the Cross lives, breathes and speaks to us through them; the love and compassion of St. Teresa of Avila reach out and embrace us. Through the intervention of the artist and the gifts of light, colour and words, eight centuries of Carmelite spirituality converge inside a simple, white circle.



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