



André Beneteau

# A Fine Line — Rekindling the Fires of Stained Glass

*Gail Crawford*

THE SEVENTIES MARKED a renewed interest in stained glass. More than anything, the North American revival of stained glass — essentially a spiritual and material medium — mirrored the Age of Aquarius with its curious mix of pseudo-religious spirituality and secular worldliness. Even so, stained glass remained a most perilous craft medium within which to function as a professional. Large-scale ecclesiastical commissions were fewer in number by this time and generally monopolized by religious-trade studios whose ultra-conservative clientele was uneasy with change. The opposite was true in post-war Germany where artists designed striking non-traditional windows in an aesthetic that was to profoundly influence North American work. The Germans were prepared to make a fresh start and break with the past after World War II, whereas our culture had not undergone the same experience, was not as ready to give up the past, and was assuredly not as oriented to expressions in art as Europeans.

Architects, designers, and stained-glass artists viewed Canadian commercial stained-glass studios as moribund and standoffish. “They had never maintained an interest in, or sought to establish a relationship with, the directions and developments in fine art or architecture,” Sarah Hall wrote in 1978 while completing her overseas studies in





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Left: Sarah Hall

Right: *Flight*,  
Braden residence,  
Toronto, ON ♦ 1982



Sarah Hall

stained glass. Because trade studios employed production-line techniques and regarded their windows as products rather than art, Hall said they usually avoided relationships with the outside world of art and new trends in design, colour, and architecture. "Their contribution to the design of modern windows," she went on, "consisted of little more than an alteration of the backgrounds of their standard Victorian designs into meaningless assemblages of coloured glass." By contrast, the German work, which was and is funded from public taxes, was refreshingly modern and abstract, dynamic and stirring.

By 1975 a dozen or so restive Canadian artist-designers had had enough and counterattacked by forming a lobby group, Artists In Stained Glass. The catalyst that transformed them from informal salon to formal guild was their commitment to politick for establishment of national competitions for important federal commissions, such as proposed windows for the Senate chambers. Through AISG, the group also hoped to weaken the stranglehold of the trade studios, restore the mediaeval values of art and good design and to promote independent pieces, accessories, and installations for residential settings. They regarded their work in the same light as contemporary painting, sculpture, printing, or photography. Just as the world of clay has been transformed by abstract expressionism and highly coloured, patterned fine art, so stained-glass designs now reflected a move from the figurative to the abstract. This work can be displayed, like paintings, in a number of settings.

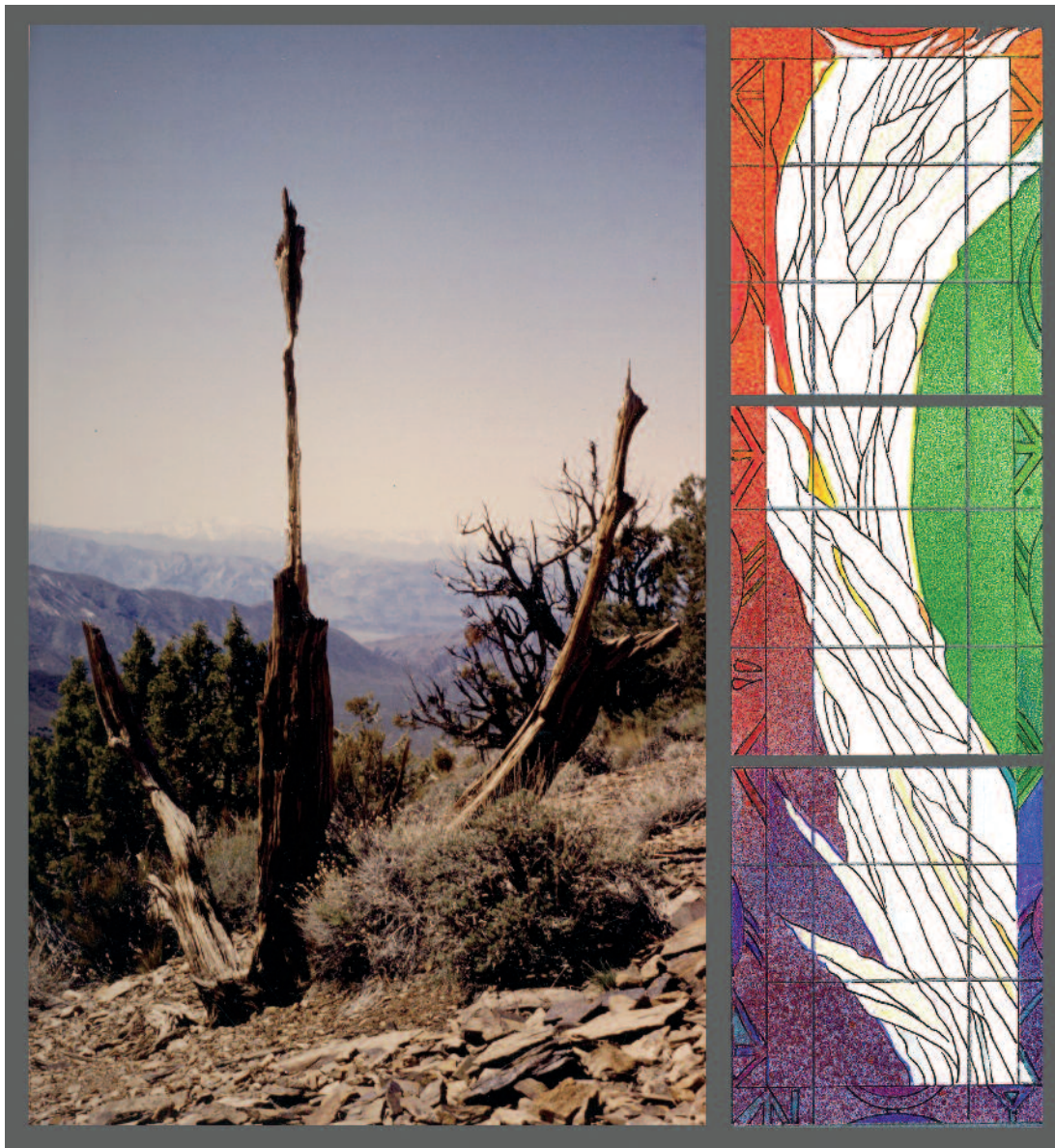
From its modest beginnings, AISG staged yearly displays of members' work and, in 1978, organized a two-week Master Stained Glass Workshop at Harbourfront, conducted by English

modern master Lawrence Lee. At the same time, the Art Gallery at Harbourfront whetted the public appetite with the first exhibition of architectural-scale stained glass in more than a decade, *The Magic of Glass*. AISG and its provincial affiliates today collectively represent a membership of some three hundred and its programs include exhibitions, conferences on contemporary issues, and newsletters.

Since the American craft movement of the sixties, with its California base, also encouraged a do-it-yourself ethic, small glass-supply stores sprang up throughout Ontario in the seventies to provide glass, lead, tools, books, and lessons to hobbyists and independents. Previously, supplies had to be brought in from overseas and only sizeable studio operations could afford the expense. Most of us have seen enough mock Tiffany lamps and sun catchers to last a lifetime, but the advent of this change recast a once highly structured medium into an accessible, affordable, and intimate activity. By the late seventies,

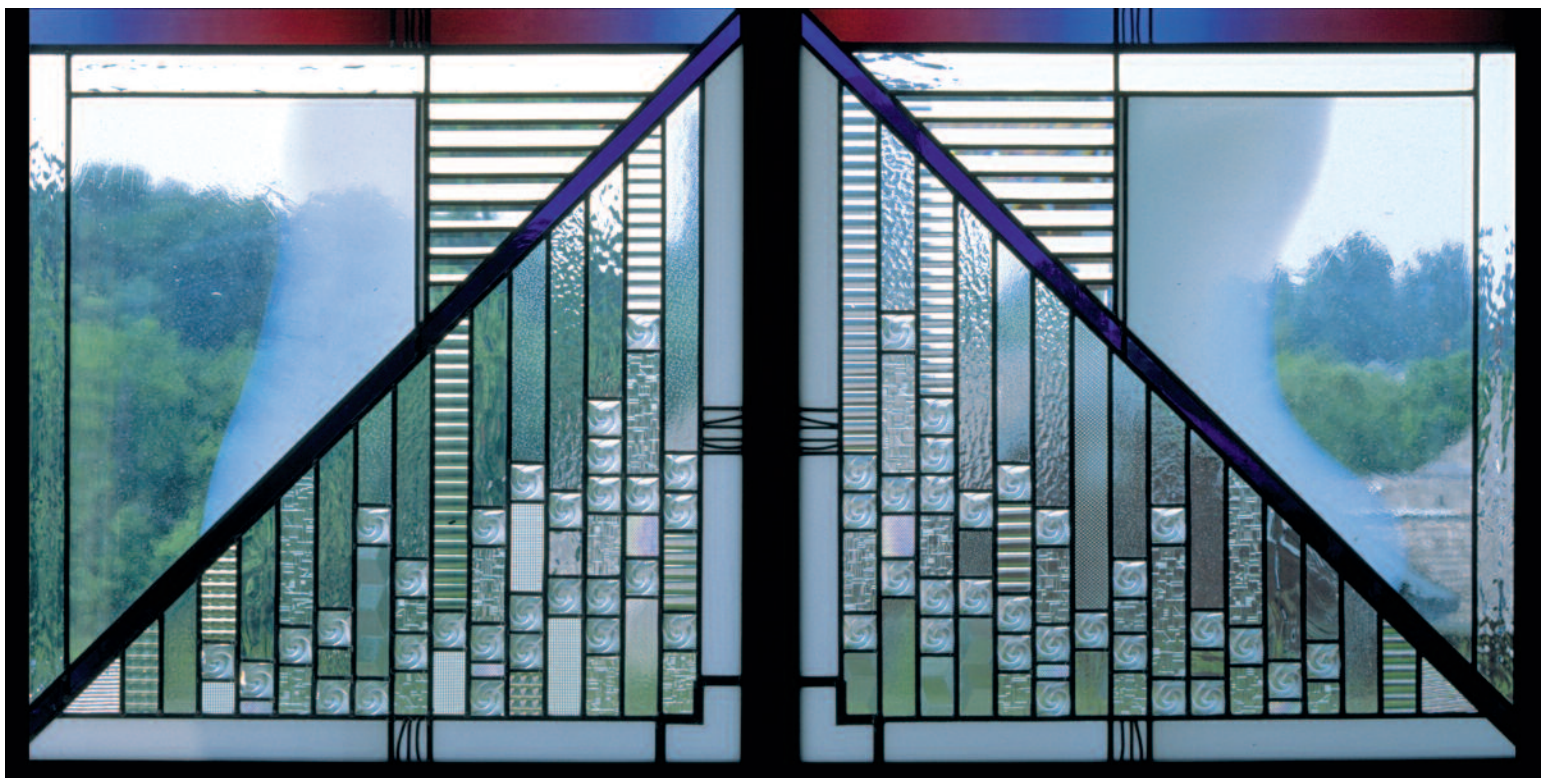
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*Descent of the  
Spirit*, chapel,  
St. Peter's  
Secondary School,  
Barrie, ON ♦ 1997a





Left: Sarah's designs are often inspired by the surrounding landscape — sketch for Hesperia Methodist Church, CA ♦ 1995b

Bottom: *Wind's Eye*, exhibited at Ontario Association of Architects, Toronto, ON ♦ 1997f



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Details, *Holy Spirit and Fisherman on the Shore*, chapel, St. Peter's Secondary School, Barrie, ON  
Top: detail of Holy Spirit; Bottom: detail of the fisherman ↻ 1997a



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*Holy Spirit and Fisherman on the Shore*, chapel, St. Peter's Secondary School, Barrie, ON ✦ 1997a

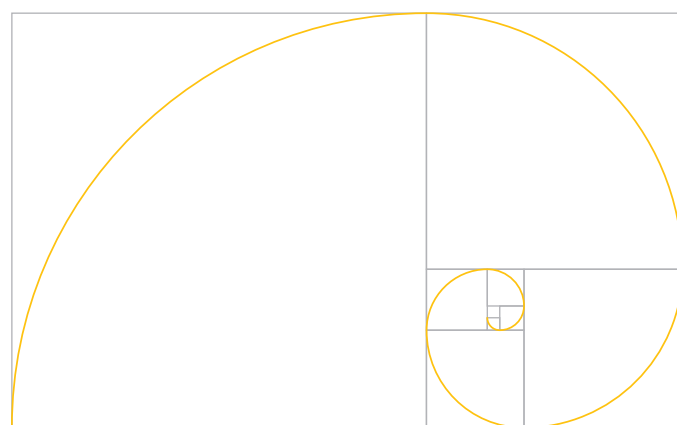
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it was estimated that there were more than a hundred thousand devotees in the United States, whereas a decade earlier there had been fewer than a hundred. We can be sure a good number of stained-glass converts also lived in Ontario.

There are no yardsticks for measuring hopes and dreams and whether AISG achieved what it set out to do. It did at least succeed in introducing new design concepts, in wresting a share of commissions from the trade studios, and in promoting commissions for autonomous stained-glass panels, although this last had inherent limitations. "A two-dimensional piece that hangs in a window is not as powerful as something built into a site," Hall explains. "There is a relationship between the mass of a building and that interpretative light, which is what we design for." Since 1980 Hall has operated her own highly successful studio in downtown Toronto. Having trained in the United Kingdom and apprenticed with Lawrence Lee, she learned to work on massive pieces and still prefers king-sized commissions. On her return to Canada, she "was fired with a tremendous need to educate and to help change the ideas of people in what they put in their churches. I wanted to do liturgical work and I wanted to do things that I felt were real. I found our churches full of gloomy saints, sentimental stereotypes, and commercial products. I don't like to see these windows in churches. Churches deserve better."

Selling modern design ideas to cautious clients is intimidating, however, the outcome unpredictable and often stifling to budding careers. "You can do all sorts of great art work, but if you cannot present it and have people feel confident and comfortable, it won't get made and you won't survive," Hall relates. "When I go into a presentation, I know every single time it is going to be hard work to help people understand what I am presenting and why I have designed it this way, the fact that it

looks different from what they thought, from what they know. I don't think it's ever going to be an easy sell." She once asked Yvonne Williams if she ever got to the point where she never worried when she was presenting a design and the answer was, of course not. "Presenting something new that people have never seen which looks nothing like glass — that's a big part of our problem — our sketches don't look anything like glass." And yet, when Hall looks back over some "financially excruciating" years, she sees what she has accomplished as a designer-craftsperson — more than one hundred and fifty commissions in Canada, the United States, and overseas. It's clear she has made stained-glass history in a notoriously difficult field, just as Williams had managed to do in the fifties and sixties.



Gail Crawford, while with the OCC, travelled widely to record the voices of Ontario's craftspeople and chronicle their lives and times. *A Fine Line* is her first book and a major contribution to the history of craft in Canada.

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