

Andre Beneteau

# Sarah Hall's Sanctuaries of Glass

*Through her monumental stained glass pieces, Sarah Hall transforms spaces into enchanting, mystical places*

Marie Caloz

THE CATHEDRAL IN CHARTRES, France, houses some of the world's oldest and best-preserved examples of medieval stained glass. In the minds of its devotees — students of stained glass — the dark spires and massive ramparts loom as some great towering mecca of glass. It comes as no surprise that Toronto stained glass artist Sarah Hall experienced an epiphany while on a pilgrimage to Chartres in 1977. "As soon as I walked into that light, it was like a ship pulled out of a harbour into a completely new world," she says. "The contrast of the great mass and the dark made the coloured glass glow so that I lost all sense of time. The whole place seemed to flow through time."

After that revelation, there was no turning back. As one of Canada's leading stained glass artists, Hall has made it her life's work to re-create the magic of Chartres in the buildings that house her work. She calls these settings sacred spaces. "Many places hold you down," she explains. "We need buildings where we can feel restored and discover how we fit in the big picture."

Hall's commissioned pieces have enhanced sacred spaces in a constellation of churches, schools and hospitals, and in various secular settings. Her work, which incorporates a variety of traditional techniques, including leaded glass, acid etching, sandblasting, appliqué,

Top:  
*Trinity*, St. Matthias  
 Anglican Church,  
 Toronto, ON  
 ✦ 1985a

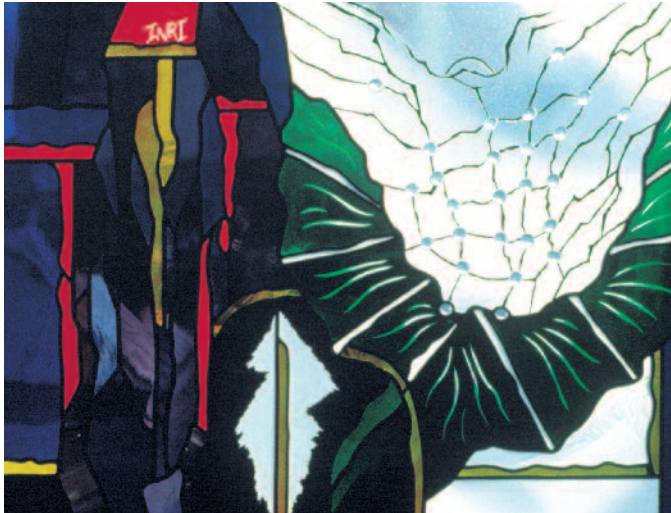
Centre:  
*Crucifixion /  
 Resurrection*,  
 exhibited at  
 Regis College,  
 Toronto, ON  
 ✦ 1990c

Bottom:  
*Ascension*,  
 Catholic  
 Education Centre,  
 Mississauga, ON  
 ✦ 1984a

Overleaf:  
 Detail, *Mother  
 and Child*,  
 Queensway  
 General Hospital,  
 Toronto, ON  
 ✦ 1992a



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lamination, silver stain painting, gold leafing and reverse painting, is well represented in prestigious buildings. Sarah has mounted numerous exhibitions both at home and in Europe. “Unlike many other artists who simply look at the glass itself,” says art collector and author John MacAdam, “Sarah focuses on the whole environment, the quality and movement of light. Hers is a deeply spiritual voyage. There are always layers and layers of different ideas and glass contours. Hundreds of different experiences each time you see the window. I would call what she does sculpting with light.”

Hall stands out in the stained glass community for her particular brand of artistic spirituality. She has a personal commitment to the spirit that runs through all her work. She is a Quaker. She prefers austerity and professes a personal abhorrence of religious art reproductions and commercialism. Favouring the sound of her family’s own music making, she once tried to ban recorded music from her home. But her two sons and her husband, who makes musical instruments, eventually won that battle. Having no television in the house is a given. As her former Sheridan College teacher Robert Jekyll says, “She has strongly held convictions that she amalgamates with her work. Unlike many other strictly secular artists, she has been able to tap into that traditional connection between stained glass and the church and make it work for her.”

But Hall’s veneration of traditional liturgical themes, such as the Trinity, Crucifixion/Resurrection and the Ascension are not religious stereotyping. Her church commissions may evolve from exhaustive research of the relevant liturgy, but the representations and symbols in her work are all her own. “We’re all used to seeing literal, heavy-handed iconography,” says Toronto architect Winston Bridgeman: “But when Sarah does a Christ, he’s not the suffering emaciated Christ we all know. He’s a welcoming one, sitting down comfortably. Sarah researches history and her spirit for the right solution.”

A typical example of Hall’s unique style is her window, *Kyrie Eleison*, in the chapel of the Mother Teresa Catholic Secondary School. In a mixture of figurative and abstract, the two-and-a-half-metre-high window conveys the suffering of the poor of Calcutta and contains symbols of Mother Teresa’s order. Using a series of slides, models and drawings, Hall convinced the client committee to accept a more creative scenario instead of the usual figurative, traditional Mother Teresa. The result, as project designer Bak Hemniti-Wong puts it, interprets the school’s need to achieve “the best fit within the theme and space of the chapel.”

Like many of her projects, *Kyrie Eleison* exemplifies not only Hall’s never-erring optimistic spiritual outlook, but also her ability to anticipate, educate and translate the needs of her clients. “She has the rare ability to listen to clients and make

the most of the artist-client relationship,” says art consultant Ann Mortimer. “Many very talented artists are unable to understand how to work within that framework and still produce a piece that is artistically adventurous.”

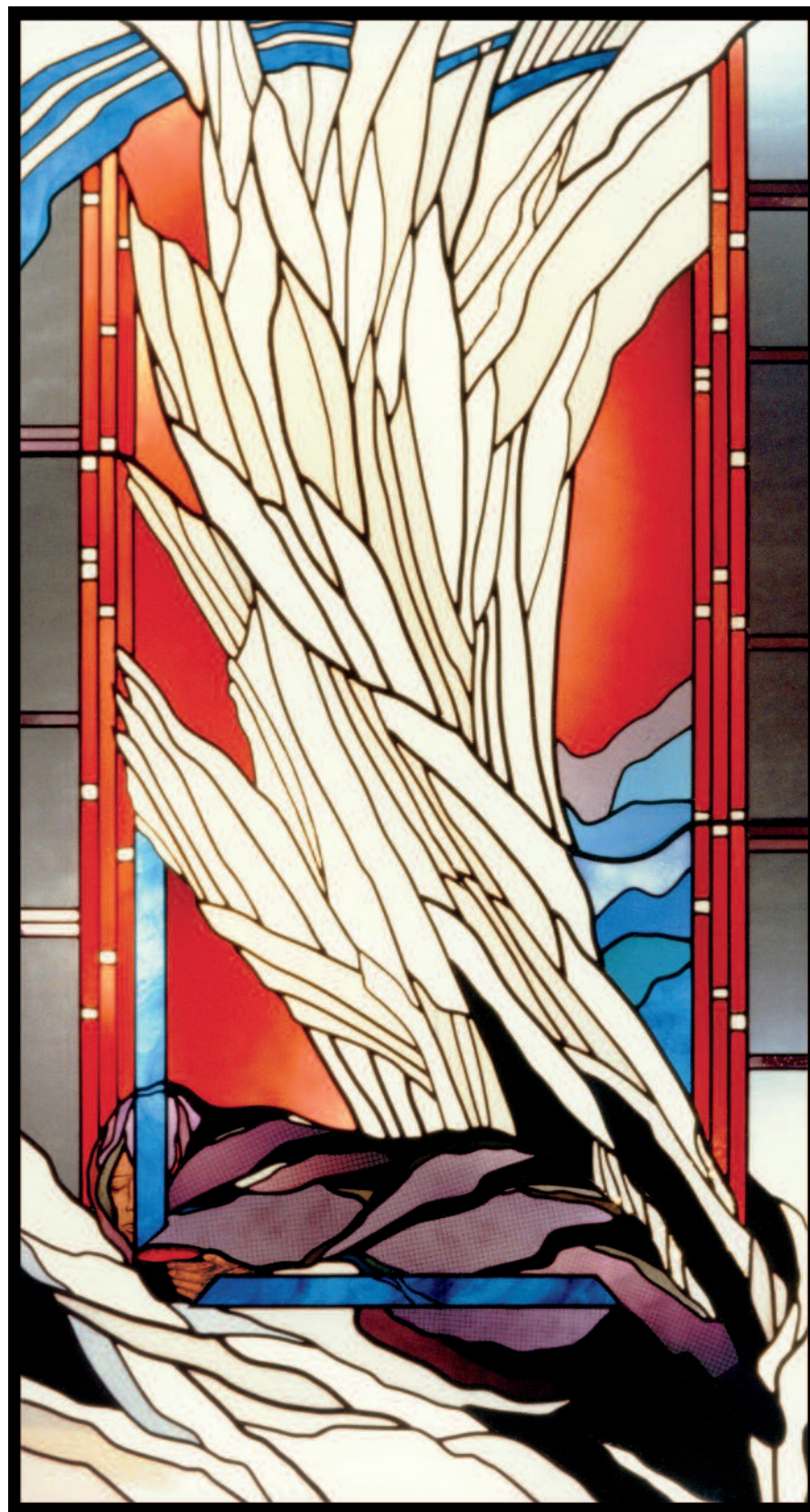
For Hall, this process is the only one that makes sense. “If you have a strong spiritual life, it is important to create work for sacred spaces. But I’m not offering religious stereotypes. Here in Canada we’ve filled our sacred spaces with commercial, colonial products — it is a tragedy. We have to reach beyond that into making things that really mean something in our own time and place.” In a contemporary art world that tends to eschew traditional religious spaces, Hall has pushed her sacred space into the present time and made it her home.

Truth be told — it was her very first home. Hall admits that even as a child she often thought she’d been accidentally placed in the wrong country. “I never felt quite like I was in the right place,” she says in her usual quiet voice, although the memory produces a characteristic wry expression in her eyes. “I used to look at those pictures of England with old stone fences, castles and cathedrals and think ‘What am I doing *here?*’” But the closest place to England she could find within the boundary of her child-sized world was under the living-room table. Its old lace table cloth broke the light into mesmerizing patterns that fascinated her. “I experienced how the patterns of light could transform and enliven an atmosphere,” she says.

By the time Hall was nine, she found solace inside the serene churches and chapels she visited with her father. As the chairman of a church building committee, he often took Sarah along on his architectural fact-finding missions. “From the first moment I saw stained glass,” Hall notes with her trademark certainty, “I decided that’s what I wanted to do.”

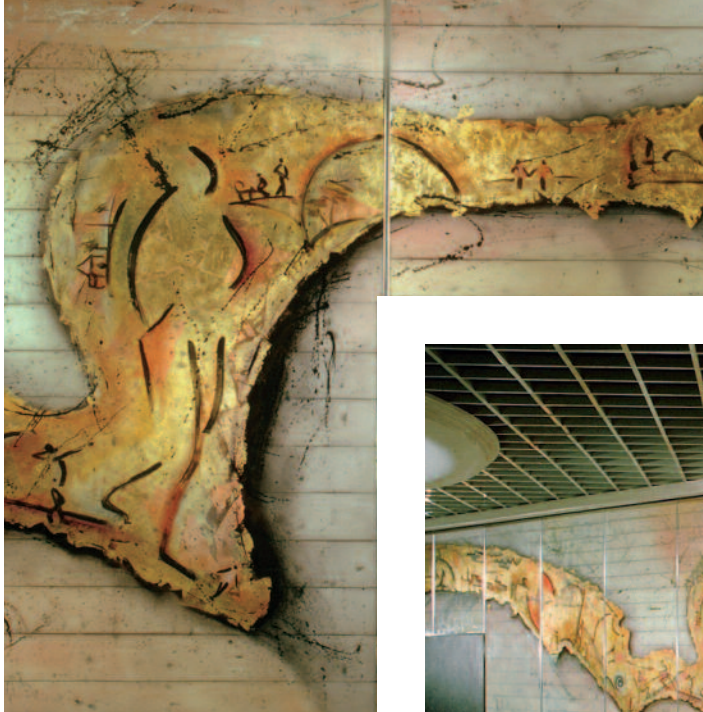
It didn’t prove a simple matter of will. In the early 1960s the accent in glass was on openness and transparency. Most people were installing clear-glass windows in churches. And almost no stained glass courses existed in Canada. Hall could find nowhere to work on her art. “I was shown the door at numerous stained glass studios by crusty old men who didn’t want to share their craft.”

Hall also suffered from a mild case of the 1960s bohemian travelling itch. And the road she chose to follow fulfilled her need for the space between the shadows. In 1969 she landed in Alberta where weekend trips sparked a curiosity about ghost towns. For five years, she bushwhacked through old coal-mining villages in the mountains and the badlands searching for abandoned spaces. When she found them she photographed them and eventually landed a contract to document the sites for museums. “I photographed how the light flowed through the windows in those abandoned buildings and ghost towns. You could feel history everywhere.”



*Kyrie Eleison*,  
Mother Teresa Catholic Secondary School,  
Scarborough, ON ✦ 1988

Sarah Hall



*All That Glitters,*  
Scotia Plaza, Toronto, ON ✦ 1990b



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By the mid-1970s Hall had pocketed enough savings to bankroll her first one-year stained glass course at Sheridan College. She then set her sights on the architectural glass program at the Swansea College of Art in Wales. "It was the right place for me," Hall says. "The little seaside village of Mumbles where I lived, the Welsh choirs, the beautiful Gower Peninsula, twelfth century churches, medieval windows, the clouds, the drama, the light, the pubs where Dylan Thomas used to drink ... it was the best classroom."

By the time she received the coveted diploma in Architectural Glass from Swansea in 1977, Hall was already looking for another teacher. She took the shortest path right to the front of the class, to the United Kingdom's glass master at the Royal College of Art, the designer of the windows at Coventry Cathedral — Lawrence Lee. "He went out looking for a place for me to live and turned up a traditional gypsy caravan. Lee had the most wonderful sense of integrity in everything he did," Hall says. "Besides his honesty,

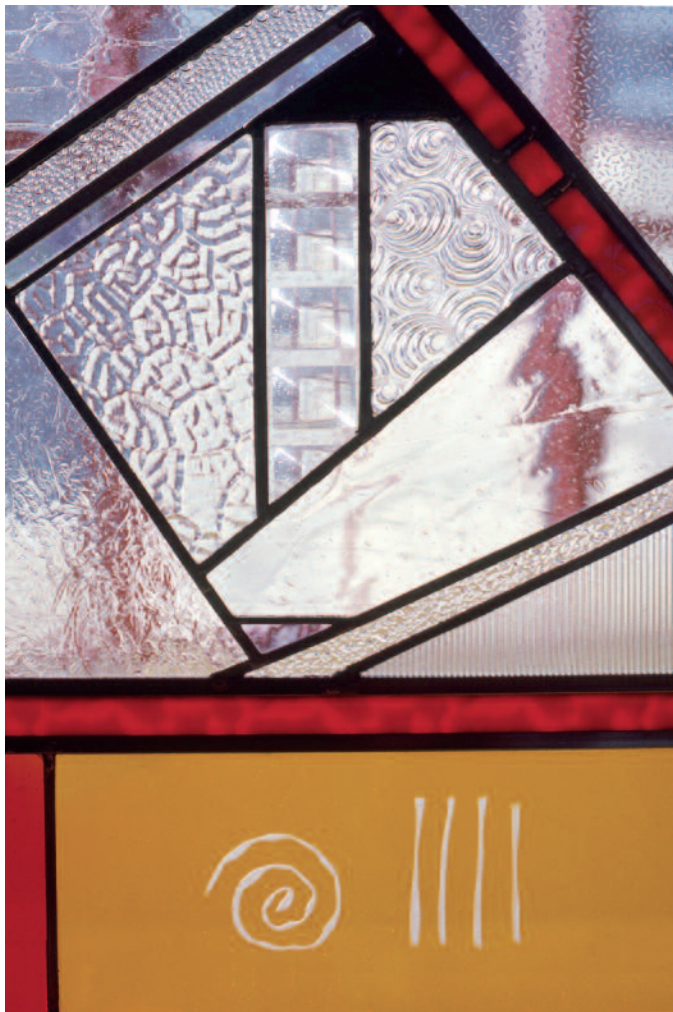
I learned from him all the technical skills needed to work on a large scale."

Learning the art of large-scale glasswork has allowed Hall to tackle immense projects such as *All That Glitters*, a reverse-painted gold-leaf mural that she completed in 1990 for Scotia Plaza. The piece connects 112 square metres of subterranean walkway and an elevator with a spectacular golden ribbon of scintillating scenes. The effect can best be described as the sun peering through a crack in reality. Hardly your usual corporate *joue-joue*. Lee may have imparted his skill with scale, but it was legacies of ancient Islamic glassmakers that first introduced Hall to the technique of reverse painting on glass.

After her challenging one-year apprenticeship with Lee, Hall embarked on an eight-month stay in Jerusalem. Her interest in Islamic glass and Middle Eastern techniques inspired the trip. "The Middle East and Eastern Orthodox Church makes extensive



Sarah Hall in Wales and Penshurst, Kent, UK



Sarah Hall

use of reverse painting on glass with gold leaf," she says. "It animates the glass with a whole new dimension."

The trip through Jerusalem's glass temples also prompted ideas for mosaic work that Hall is now considering incorporating into her work. However inspirational, the whole crusade left her in a state she likens to cultural exhaustion. She came back to Canada in 1979 looking for three simple psychic elixirs — personal physical space, a feeling of being at home in language and a chance to do her own work. She was 28 and ready to carve out her own artistic space.

And hers weren't just pie-in-the-sky dreams. While many glassmakers find it difficult to eke out more than a slim living, Hall has built her reverie into a reality that could only be described as sumptuous. There are a number of factors that helped put flesh on the fantasy, most of them propelled by remarkable determination.

Following her return to Toronto in the late 1970s, Hall developed an ultra-organized working process that has rarely missed its mark. She surrounded herself with a group of supportive and dedicated glass artisans. She's a serious businesswoman. This potent mixture has prompted her husband to remark that she's "a great wife, a great mother and a great artist, but never all at the same time." More important than all of this is her indomitable will to make it all work.



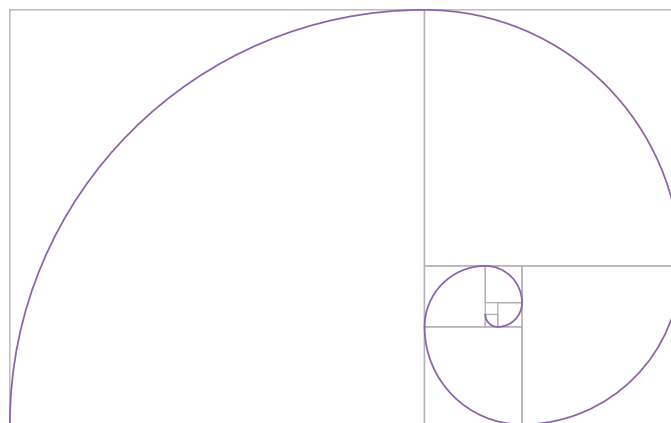
Left: Detail, *Nursery Windows, Jessie's – The June Callwood Centre for Young Women, Toronto, ON* ♦ 1991a

Right: Sarah Hall with June Callwood

Hall's work for Jessie's Centre incorporates all of these ingredients. She spent months working with June Callwood and the collective — hours of research, dozens of photographs, slides, models and blueprints — to come up with a stained glass piece for the nursery. She simply transformed the nursery room into a rainbow. The windows are covered in large Crayola-coloured geometric shapes embedded with iridescent glass, eyeglass lenses and playful pictures that project candied light all over the room. "The work is clearly a women's world. Enchanting. Full of dignity and respect. Imaginative. Spiritually sensitive," said organizer and writer June Callwood.

Hall admits the project is one of her favourites. She particularly likes the way everything seemed to just fit into place — and her world view. "We are all part of this world," she says. "I see us all as part of a continuum. I ponder what I'm doing as an artist and hope to make a contribution within my time here."

Like stained glass, Hall's life has always been about finding the right pieces and putting them into the places they belong. She has found her home in a house of sacred glass.



Marie Caloz is a leading investigative journalist. She began her career in the CBC newsroom as a writer for *The National*. A graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism Masters program in New York, her work has garnered numerous awards including the Governor General's Michener Award, and the Canadian Association of Journalists.

***Sarah Hall's Sanctuaries of Glass*** by Marie Caloz, reprinted with permission from *Ontario Craft Magazine* — originally published Fall 1992.