

Sarah Hall

Contemporary Stained Glass Profile: Sarah Hall

Joel Russ and Lou Lynn

IN THE EARLY 1960s, when Sarah Hall was about nine, her father was the chairman of a church committee charged with the responsibility for overseeing the design of a new church building. He took her with him on tours of churches, during which she often had to sit patiently in the pews and wait. She became fascinated with the stained glass that she saw in these buildings. It was not long before she decided that what she wanted to do in life was to design stained glass.

That youthful aspiration abided through the years. However, as Hall reached the age where she might actually pursue this interest, she found that there were not many opportunities for apprenticeship in Canada. In the mid-seventies she studied for a year at Sheridan College's School of Crafts and Design, taking courses in painting, photography, and metal work, as well as stained glass. Feeling that there were few possibilities for learning more about stained glass in Canada, she enrolled in 1975 at the Swansea College of Art, in Wales, where she would study under Tim Lewis and the renowned Lawrence Lee (who designed stained glass in the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral). Here at Swansea she continued to study art history and went on numerous tours of medieval churches. During 1976-77, after her studies at Swansea, she stayed in Britain as an apprentice to



Martin Lee

Left: Glass Master Lawrence Lee and assistant Sarah Hall at Stable Cottage Studio, Smart's Hill, Penshurst, Kent, 1977

Right: Stained glass window by Lawrence Lee, ARCA with abstracted birds at St. John the Baptist, Whiteley, UK, circa 1976



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Lawrence Lee, who had a studio in Penshurst, Kent. Hall's assiduous efforts ultimately resulted in a diploma in Architectural Stained Glass from the Guilds of London Institute.

While in Europe, Hall travelled to see numerous examples of historical and modern stained glass, including the work of the great contemporary German artists. She found the work of Georg Meistermann very engaging. However, it was a window by her master Lawrence Lee, with slightly abstracted bird shapes, that proved to be a powerful, abiding influence. During 1977-78, Hall spent time in Jerusalem studying Middle Eastern glass, gold leaf techniques and mosaics. Upon returning to Canada, she worked as an assistant to stained-glass artist Stephen Taylor, who ran a studio in Toronto at the time. Stephen had studied under Lawrence Lee at the Royal College of Art in London.

When Hall set up her own studio in Toronto in 1980, she was a well-travelled, well-trained artist ready to begin her own very personal path of exploration in the medium. In a very short time she began to receive commissions for windows.

Hall does not feel that the design for a window need always be strictly determined by the architecture of the place where it will be installed. "Sometimes you want a piece to fit in with the architecture so that your work becomes an extension of it, and at other times you may want the work to be a counterpoint. You don't always have to reflect the building in the window." This contradicts a tenet commonly held in stained-glass circles. But, clearly, Hall is not one to shrink from heresy.

"When I initially look at a client's space, I spend quite a while there," she says. "And what I'm looking for is what the light is like. I talk to the client about what kind of mood they want to create, because I think light is very powerful in that way. The window has to be right for that room, and that person, and the activities that will take place there. I find bringing all of those things together really exciting."

In designing with recognizable forms, natural imagery, and a generous use of organic line, Hall bucks current Canadian stained-glass trends. "There is certainly peer pressure to steer away from natural forms," she admits. "But I really feel that it's the way I should be working, so I have to go that way. There's a real fascination with using the images of technology in art right now. But I think it's impersonal, and it isn't me." Although a good deal of amateurish or banal design is done using natural imagery,

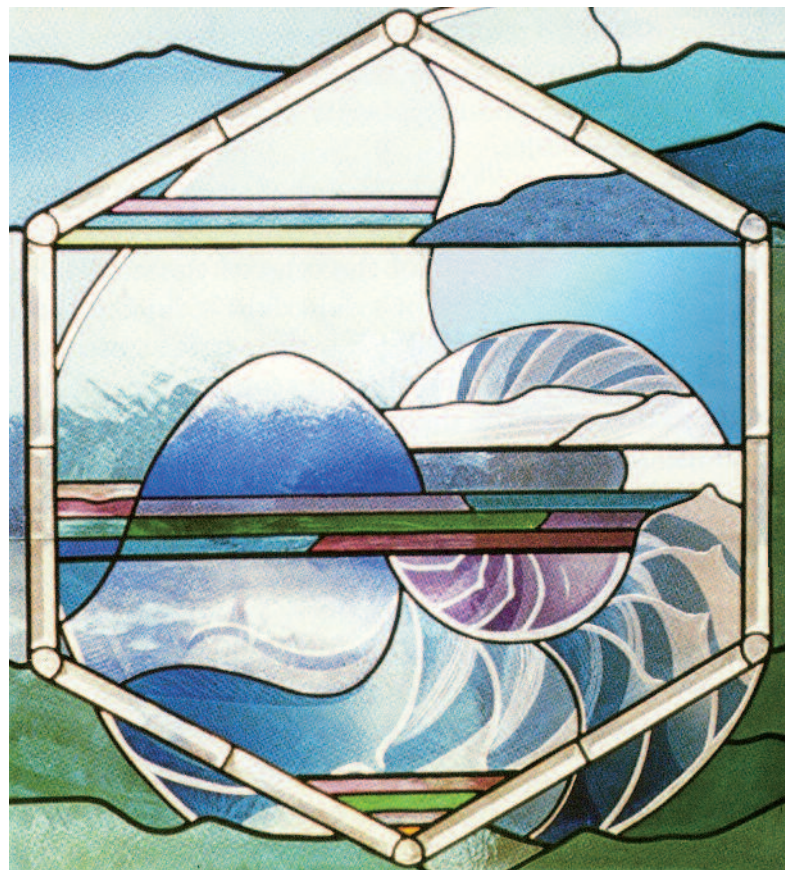
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Healing Forms,
chapel, Parkwood
Hospital, London,
ON ↪ 1985c

Sarah Hall's work proves that an artist can work with such imagery in a manner that's both fresh and sophisticated.

The window, titled *Conception*, that sits above the stairwell of the Kelley residence in Richmond Hill is an interesting work. It provides light for the stairwell and for the house's second floor. The window's delicate, subtly complex design blends organic and geometric elements, the focal image being a nautilus shell in cross-section. To delineate the chambers of the shell, Hall utilized the acid-etching technique quite expertly, eroding away some of the coloured surface of the blue flashed glass that she used. The manner in which she has interwoven the shell form with the background and the coloured horizontal bands is quite intriguing. Virtually all the colours in the window are in the green-blue-purple range, giving the window a soothing quality difficult to obtain with a greater variety of hues. The use of transparent glass allows the window to admit a considerable amount of light.

Hall's accomplishment in acid etching is praised by other stained-glass workers. In fact, she is experienced with quite a range of glass-working techniques, including silver staining, sandblasting, and *dalle de verre*. "I find the exploration of technical frontiers provides quite a challenge," she says. "I think any technique that you want to use is fair enough. What you want to say is the important thing." Of course, what is "said" is said visually; any attempt to translate that into verbal terms can meet with only limited success. It is this matter of saying something visually that is the chief aim of stained-glass artists who, like Sarah Hall, take an intimate, extremely personal approach to glass design. And in order to "say" meaningful things in new ways, it is important to understand what has been said in the art of the past. Hall has seen a lot of historical and contemporary stained glass in Europe and North America at first hand, and she has also studied the available literature in considerable depth. She is especially interested in European stained glass dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. But like many serious stained-glass artists, she has a keen interest in artistic media besides glass. She named English religious and landscape painter Stanley Spencer as one of her favourite artists, along with Munch, Klee, Modigliani, Chagall, and the colour-field painter Barnett Newman.

All of this amounts to a background Hall can draw upon in her own work. Even so, each commission is its own challenge. "When I first start designing a piece, I have a difficult time getting down to it. I spend about two weeks pacing," Hall jokes. She often does a lot of research, including looking at books of paintings for ideas. But inspiration often comes from non-visual sources, as well. "I'll be reading and I'll start seeing a lot of mental pictures," Hall says. The forms of the natural world constitute a reservoir of images for her to draw on in the challenging process of designing.



Top: *Conception*, Kelley residence, Richmond Hill, ON ♦ 1981

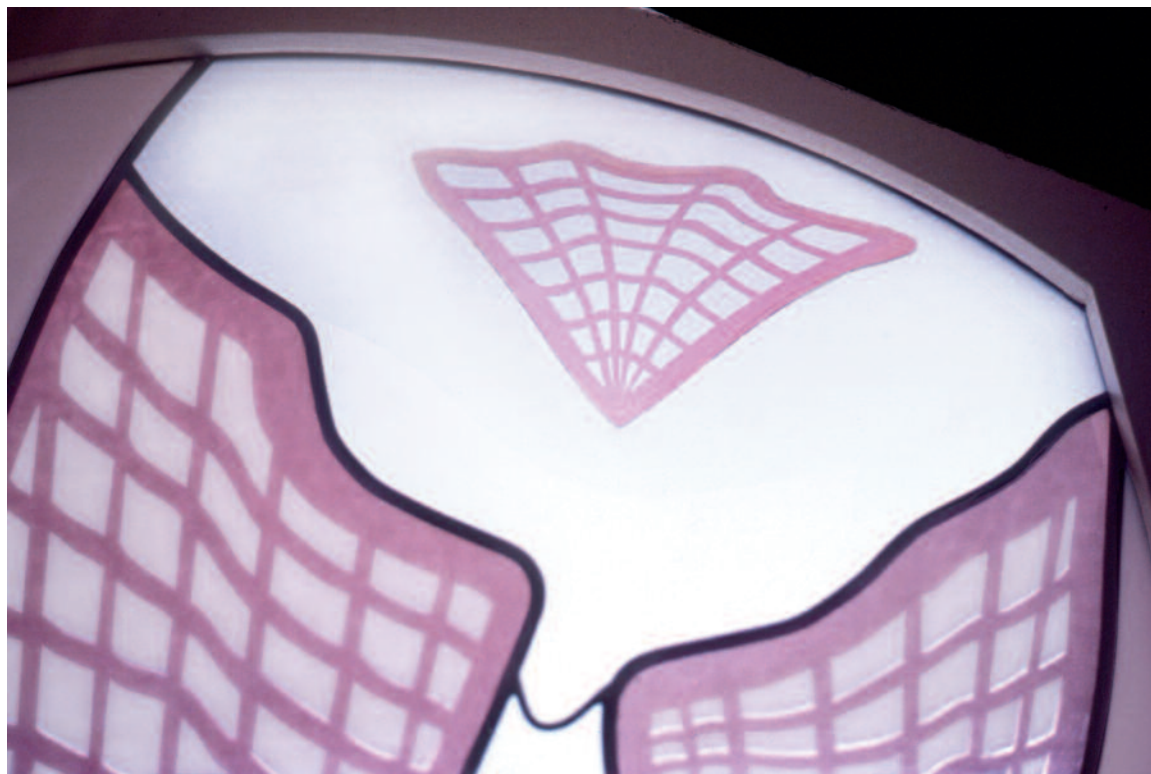
Bottom: *Lightly Go Round*, Ann Mortimer residence, King, ON ♦ 1985d



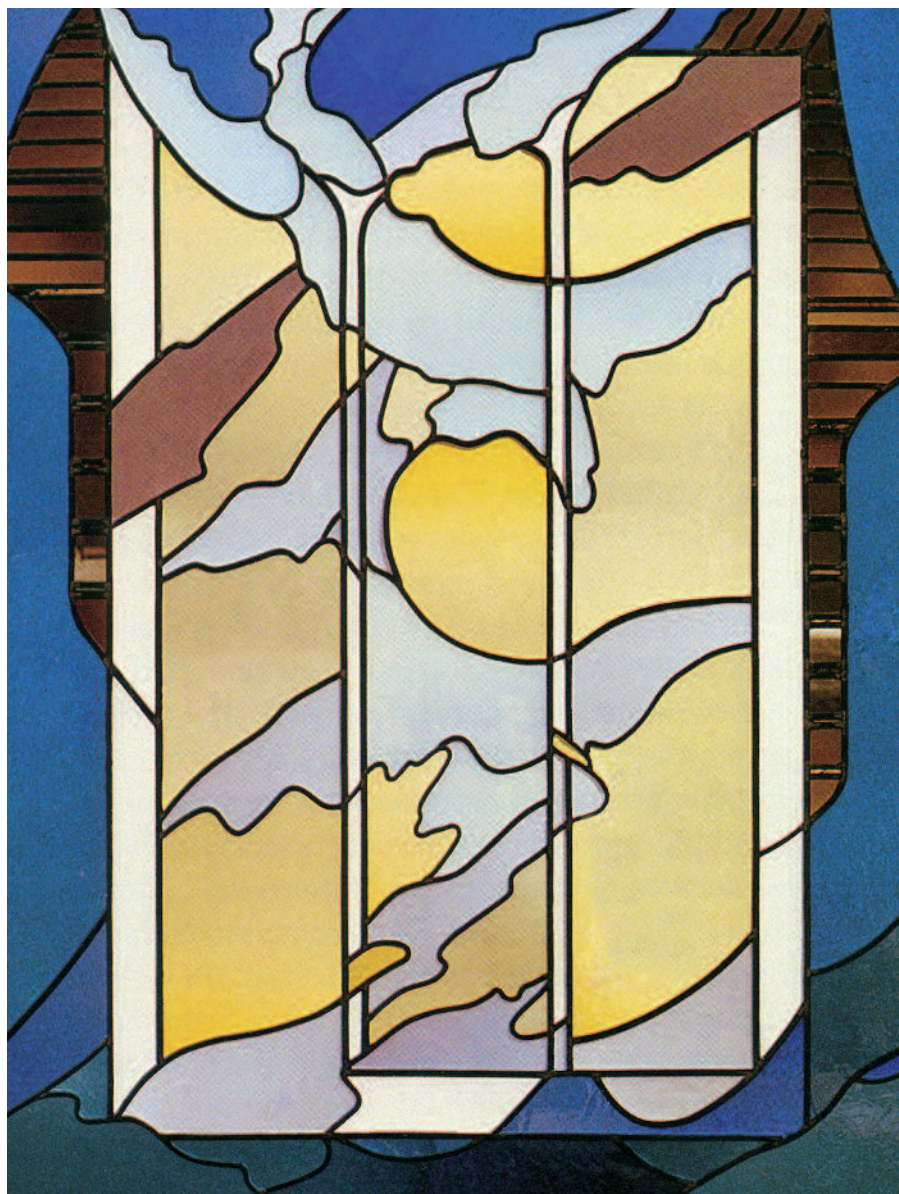
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Right: Detail, *Healing Forms*, chapel, Parkwood Hospital, London, ON ✦ 1985c

Bottom: *Towards Canaan*, Bosworth residence, Toronto, ON ✦ 1984b



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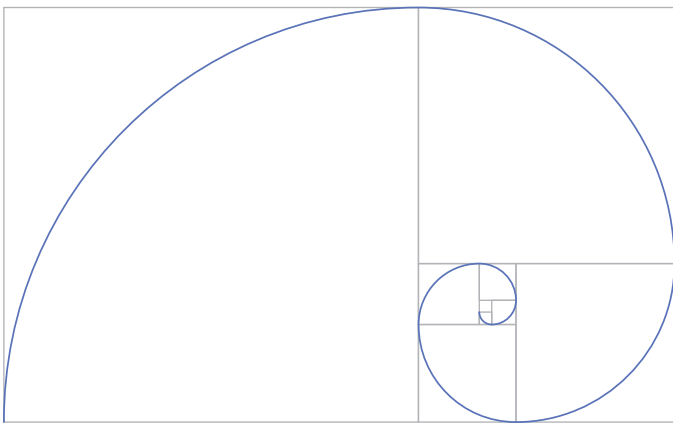
“Finally, once I get settled into the work, the design takes anywhere from a couple of days to a couple of weeks. Sometimes I have to get onto a new track if something really isn’t working.”

Hall sees sketching as an intrinsically valuable activity that can feed into the design process indirectly. Because of the central importance of sketching in the design process, Hall feels that the artist who cannot draw well is sadly limited in the ability to design. Consequently, she devotes time to sketching outside of the process of preparing a piece, as well as within it.

In the window she designed for the 1984 Koffler Gallery stained-glass exhibition, Hall contemplated the biblical Exodus story that explores a theme of freedom versus restriction; the theme was prompted by the fact that the gallery is located in Toronto’s Jewish Community Centre, and that the exhibition coincided with Passover. Titled *Towards Canaan*, the window pits graceful organic shapes against a simple geometric structure. Hall did a lot of background research for this design and brought in an Egyptian reference; the contrasting horizontal stripes on either side of the outer vertical elements bear some resemblance to the famous headdress on the beaten gold mask of Tutankhamen’s coffin. While shapes resembling clouds, or even birds in flight, seem to be escaping from the geometric frame, the structure is still essentially intact. It seems that, for Hall, the symbolism has a general philosophical meaning. “I don’t know if I believe in absolute freedom,” she comments. She used a variety of different glasses in the window, which was assembled with standard leading technique. Her tasteful restraint in colour gives this piece a strong but tempered feeling. Appropriately enough, the panel was bought by a man working toward a Ph.D. in theology, and is now installed as a window in his home.

In its graphic quality, Hall's work seems thoroughly North American. Yet, because of the years she spent studying in Britain and travelling in Europe, her sense of connection with the world of contemporary stained glass is vividly international. Besides the artists she knows and sees from time to time in Canada, she keeps in touch with some from her art-school days in England. This background, coupled with the fact that she has done a little teaching, has given her an interesting perspective on how novices approach the medium here, now that training opportunities have expanded somewhat, as opposed to how they approach it in Europe. "The students here have no preconceptions — they'll try anything! And sometimes it works. There's a kind of lightness here that Europe will never be able to equal because of its thousand-year tradition. I love tradition, but there is something about North America that I find lighter, more adventurous, and exciting."

There is something in a genuine artist besides knowledge of the materials and processes of the medium, besides even technical accomplishment, that separates him or her from the dilettante. Is that "something more" an earnestness, or, perhaps, a sense of commitment to an adventure? It is hard to say. Asked why stained glass continues to engage her, Hall replies, "There is a lot for me to explore. For me, it's all a process, you feel very open, and when you close up, you know it inside yourself. When I look at a finished piece, I see aspects where I didn't take a risk." And who is the audience before which the artist takes those risks? Clients? Fellow artists? "Most importantly it's myself. It's a matter of whether I've pushed myself as far as I can go."



Joel Russ, a journalist and photographer, and Lou Lynn, an acclaimed glass artist, travelled across the country in 1984 interviewing artists and photographing their work in situ, compiling the first book on contemporary stained glass in Canada.

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