

ON JOHANNES SCHREITER

Johannes Schreiter (b. 1930) has been incredibly influential in the world of contemporary architectural glass. Not only has he lectured worldwide at seminars and master classes, but also publications in English have brought his ideas to a considerable public. Schreiter studied drawing and painting first at Münster, then Mainz and Berlin. Between 1960 and 1963 he taught at the Bremen Academy of Art before becoming Professor at the School of Decorative Arts in Frankfurt, where he taught until 1988. He won numerous prizes for his work in painting and engraving and had established a reputation as a major graphic artist before designing glass for architecture. His pictures were the source for his earliest works in glass.

During the 1960s, he produced a collage series that included the use of smoke in the creation of new shapes and tones. The subtlety of these works influenced the way in which he came to perceive the possibilities of colour in architecture. The same sombre colour, torn edges and fractured sense of movement can be observed in the glass composition made for the stained glass in one of his first churches, St Margaret's, Bürgstadt/Main.

However, in 1966 Schreiter created an enormously influential window for the Chapel of the Brotherhood of Saint John in Leutesdorf/Rhein. The design reveals an entirely blue composition enfolding three sides of the Chapel. Blue was deliberately chosen to create an atmosphere of tranquillity, an aid to contemplation. Schreiter's innovative use of lead was also immensely important. Here every lead line has been integrated in such a way that it cannot be interpreted anywhere as a 'service' lead with a supportive task.

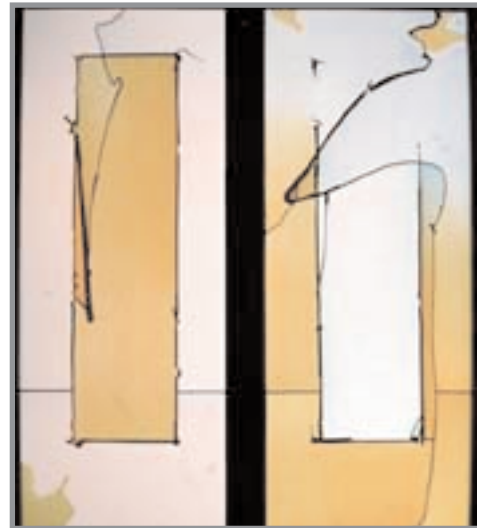
Almost all lines crossing others shortly afterwards end freely in the glass, unattached to the frame. 'I often recall the wonderful vault of St Anne's Church at Annaberg in the Erzgebirge,' wrote Schreiter, 'every time I entered that church as a child, I particularly marvelled at the vaulting ribs of the New Vestry breaking off abruptly. We all know how impressive childhood experiences can be. Perhaps this is the starting point for my passion towards destabilisation.'

The concept of the lead line as a vibrant 'graphic' line was not unknown, but Schreiter took its use much further through his enthusiasm for drawing, which he feels enlarges his graphic repertoire. Indeed, his windows are miracles of construction. The lead itself must be shaved to the correct thickness in accordance with the cartoon – the full size drawing for each window. The glass is always specially ordered and carefully tempered to enable the cutting of the requisite shapes.

The fame of the Leutesdorf project brought many commissions during the 1970s and 1980s. These included the series of windows for St John's Church, Troisdorf-Sieglar that occupied Schreiter from 1979 to 1985. The idea for the design arose from the desire of the church community to retain the existing diamond panes. Schreiter took the rhomboid shape and fashioned it into a subtle composition that gently alluded to the image of a fishing net, as well as the more sombre reference to a torn veil. This theme was explored by Schreiter in other windows, including those made in 1981 for St Mary's Church, Lübeck. A related image comes from the scrolls that appear either at the base of medieval windows or around the figures depicted. Schreiter sometimes uses these ribbons to suggest the unravelling of the grave cloth to indicate Christ's Resurrection as in the window designed for Limburg Cathedral in 1976, while an important example of wood carving in the Hessisches Landesmuseum at Darmstadt has been enhanced by three windows which use the binding cloth as a reference to the empty tomb and focus attention on the medieval masterpiece below.

More than any other artist of the Post-war period, Schreiter has directly confronted the challenge of the past and has attempted to suggest ways of healing. His appeal for the importance of quiet, for the need to find meaning in life is expressed in the rationale of the work itself. For windows in the Juvenile Centre at Schifferstadt, he chose a simple linear design

'Farbtafel', free-standing panel



and calming colours. Schreiter has always been fascinated by the effect of colour on an interior, suggesting that those who experience the space become emotionally altered, for better or worse, through the influence of 'coloured air'. For this reason he reduced the colour range in the Meditation Room of the EKD in Berlin to a quiet monochrome, preventing the intrusion of the busy, brightly coloured world outside. In the Franciscan Church at Rothenburg, Schreiter has filled all the openings with soothing colours in opaque glass.

The project that brought Schreiter to the attention of thoughtful artists all over the world was the series of designs for the Church of the Holy Ghost at Heidelberg. In honour of the famous collection of books, the 'Biblioteca Palatina' once housed in the church, Schreiter took as his theme nothing less than the entire scope of Western civilisation. Some of the subjects selected for the series, such as Music, Literature and Philosophy, were to be expected, but others were unusual and some entirely new including the subjects Chemistry, Biology, Medicine, Physics, Economics, Media and Traffic. For the first time in contemporary stained glass design, maps, graphs, newspaper and television images were used as source material.

Regrettably, the designs were too radical for the church authorities and the scheme was rejected in favour of an open competition, won by the artist Hella Santarossa.

One important commission did emerge from this groundbreaking scheme – a series of windows on scientific themes for the Library of the Medical Colleges of St Bartholomew and the Royal London Hospitals at Whitechapel, London. Here, subtle pink glass warms the interior while the designs for the windows address important subjects in medical education. The 'AIDS' window contains a diagram that shows the spread of the disease from Zaire in 1959 to different parts of the world. Schreiter suggests the healing process through the image of a red arrow halting the continuum of infection.

The broken chain of brackets indicates the destructive power of AIDS and the resulting dislocation of young lives. The 'Molecular Biology' window contains three diagrams that suggest genetic varieties. Diagrams A and B, which shimmer on a dark red background, refer to combinations of genes that produce abnormality, while Diagram C shows the normal recombinant. Schreiter has placed these against a white background supported by a purple column to indicate calm and stability. These information-bearing areas of colour are linked to each other with playful graphic lines that form a linear dialogue with the kite-shaped traceries of the window itself.

Text based on the BSMGP Summer lecture given by Caroline Swash at the Art Worker's Guild, 17 June, later reworked into the chapter 'Innovation in Germany' prepared for the book 'The Intelligent Layman's Guide to Stained and Art Glass' due out in December 2005.

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