

'Spirit of man' by Leifur Breidfjord FMGP



The final BSMGP lecture of 2009 at the Art Workers' Guild was a truly European event, in which Leifur Breidfjord, Overseas Fellow visiting the UK from Iceland, gave a breath-taking tour of his past and recent commissions in ecclesiastical, public and private buildings and elaborated on his motifs, themes, sources of inspiration and artistic vision.

He began with a summary of his artistic education and early commissions. Studying at Icelandic college of Art from 1962 to 1966, and making his first window in the latter year, he then moved base to study from 1966 to 1968 at Edinburgh College of Art under Sax Shaw, who emphasized the architectural aspect of stained glass. Afterwards, on his return to Iceland in 1968, he set up his own studio, and obtained his first commission entitled 'The Wave' for a private house. Others followed, but in 1973 he was drawn back to the UK to learn acid etching (minus gloves!) with Patrick Reyntiens at Burleighfield House.

Following this, and once more living in Iceland, Leifur established a second studio in Reykjavik, where he developed his idea of using life-sized preliminary drawings and cartoons. At this time also he married Sigridur Johansdottir, a tapestry designer, and they have subsequently worked together on ecclesiastical commissions designing the stained glass and fabric hangings, altar cloths and garments as an integrated whole. In many interiors, motifs appearing in his windows are repeated elsewhere, for example in Hallgrims Church in Reykjavik, the largest in Iceland, motifs from his west window, based on the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection, appear in the bronze door beneath. We were shown a several examples of this integration of design between glass, fabric and metalwork from Iceland and elsewhere in Europe.

Leifur moved on to his work in St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh – the Robert Burns memorial window (1982–5) design with at the top a golden-orange flower glowing against a blue and white background of horizontal geometric form, its line work painted very heavily to contain the tendency of the light glass to expand. This earlier work has very recently (2007–9) been followed by a design for a metal screen underneath the west window, with, as above, the motifs paralleling those in the glass.



Other examples of ecclesiastical work in Iceland and Germany used float glass painted with tiny blue dots of enamel paint counterpointed by dots of sandblasting to achieve the gradation from light to dark, or opaque glass is employed in a wide tonal range to the same end. In a 1998 Reykjavik church commission is one of Leifur's 'stained glass kites' – free-hanging structures using layers of leaded glass with etched mirror glass – here in a blue, yellow and white colour palette mirroring the vetements designed concurrently by his wife; variations on the kite theme appear in a number of public building projects such as 'Yearning for flight' in yellow and white at the Leifur Eriksson International Airport and 'Blue Dragon' at the Reykjavik Munciple Theatre (below left).

We were then treated to a visual tour of his body of work in public buildings and private houses. Memorable was the recent (2007) series 'Voluspa' for the Grand Hotel, Reykjavik based on a famous 1000-year-old Icelandic saga and incorporating pieces of its text written both forwards and as a 'mirror image' so it can be read from both inside and outside the building. It makes use of opaque glass, enamels and float glass, and dispenses with a border so the painting appears to 'float like a carpet'. Enamels are applied with thick paintbrushes to beat the colour onto the glass. A further work that used the writing motif was that for the National and University Library of Iceland (below). Entitled 'The human spirit: past–present–future', it depicts three heads: the left one with the text of an old Icelandic manuscript, the centre with contemporary poetry under computer signs, and the future shown on the right as an unwritten sheet.



As impressive as the imaginative subject matter was his exploration of ways to break free of the constraints of the flat window plane and create a sculptural effect. In one commission for Supreme Court of Iceland (1996), the work (with legal text sandblasted onto its surface) ascends one wall until it meets the ceiling, then bends to continue horizontally overhead, curving in harmony with the lines of the architecture. In 'Silver from the sea', a fish-shaped wallhung design for Engeberings Savings Bank, an inner opaque layer is overlapped by leaded mirrored and transparent layers so that the former is seen through the others.

The window 'Flags' for the shared British and German Embassy in Reykjavik (below), its motifs based on the British and German



flags with the Icelandic flag tying them together, demonstrates another concern of Leifur's work: the four sides or 'faces of a winow' – inside and outside, daytime and night-time. Here he juxtaposes opaque and opalescent white glass shading into clear glass so the glass can be viewed equally from either inside, in daylight, or outside, when the building is lit up at night.

To my mind, though – in an evening brimming with inspiring and inventive works – the zenith of Leifur's exploration is reached by his kiteworks, which appear on the verge of soaring skyward, rendered almost weightless by a joyful lightness of spirit that defies utterly the material of their composition. *Chris Wyard*

Photo top left by Ginger Ferrell; 'Blue Dragon' Leifur Breidfjord; others by Leifur Porsteinsson.