

Review: Diana Coulter IHBC 'Zen and the stained glass art of Keith New'

The lecture was introduced by Diana Coulter's co-author Robert Smith, who described the genesis of the project. Both had known Keith New personally when he taught at Kingston University (then a polytechnic) and in 2012 they visited the exhibition at Coventry Cathedral 'Journey into the Light', held at Coventry Cathedral to mark its 50th anniversary since consecration, with Keith's designs for the glass. In the train home they had agreed his work was in danger of being forgotten, and so the idea of celebrating his work in stained glass was born. They visited his



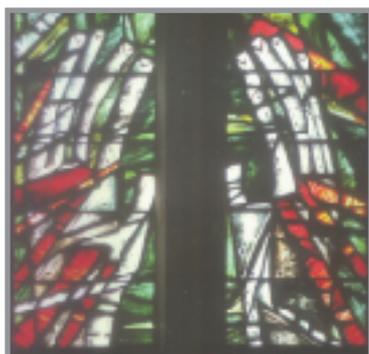
daughter, who generously supplied them with Keith's designs and other archive material. While researching the project they also contacted the late Neil Moat, who expressed excitement at New's understanding of glass, also Caroline Benyon and Caroline Swash.

Keith New had graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1951, when one of his designs was on show at South Bank, London during the Festival of Britain, which was held to showcase the best in science, technology, arts and industrial design in post-War Britain. New subsequently worked with some of the foremost architects of this post-War period.

Diana's talk began with Keith New's lecture 25 years ago in the Art Workers' Guild titled 'A view from the tightrope'. In this, he had described his approach to design in terms of a tightrope balancing act between the contrasts: abstraction versus figuration, Classicism versus Romanticism, and precision versus serendipity. Diana explained also that the use of 'Zen' in her title referred to the 70s book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* through which New sought to understand the roots of his own creativity. New had an innovative and experimental approach to stained glass design, but partly due to this several of his works had been partly or wholly lost. An early (1955) window at St Stephen Walbrook had been removed in 1980 during an urgent building underpinning. Other windows at Sacred Heart School in Tunbridge Wells, at St John Meads in Eastbourne and Sheffield Cathedral lantern had been removed owing to breakdown of the early epoxy resins used in his experimental appliqué glass.

Chronologically, New's work could be grouped into three periods: the Coventry phase (1953–80), as a Fellow at the Digswell Arts Trust (1958–63) – an artists' community where potter Hans Coper and weaver Peter Collingwood also had workshops, and his post-63 independent workshop in Wimbledon. In the late 60s commissions had slowed down, he sold his kiln and turned to painting, particularly landscapes.

At the RCA the stained glass department was led by Laurence Lee, and his fellow student was Geoffrey Clarke. In 1952, whilst on a scholarship in New York, New was called back to the UK to work with the two on the nave windows of Basil Spence's new Coventry Cathedral. Keith designed three windows, which Diana used to demonstrate his usage of rich colour in many of his designs, his imagery, and his innovative design approach. Two green windows represent youth to adolescence: in one the theme is Creation with God's hands stretching down, the Earth, Sun and crescent Moon, the Tree of Knowledge forming a chalice, and



flower-like forms at the base; in the other it is human youth, from the pains of birth (symbolized by arrows), the shelter of family as a fir tree, to adolescent striking out alone, shown by hands clutching a scroll. His third window in red–gold–green shows the spiritual mid-life struggle, with the supplicating hands of St

John (below left), an arid landscape and the Lamb of God triumphant at the top.

At this time, New also completed smaller designs, including two at Bucklers Mead School, a secondary modern in Yeovil (1957). It is not known whether these were commissioned or bought at an exhibition. During a refurbishment they had been removed into storage, but Diana explained their importance to the school and the panels were then conserved by Holywell Glass. The panels show a Chagall influence (New may have seen his work in New York) in both their design and dominant colours:

in 'Dance', in rich blue–green–red, a person on the left flies above buildings 'dancing' on a red ground, while in the blue–yellow 'Seascape' a bird dives down with strong diagonal movement to a landscape containing a tree, animals and boat (above left).

Diana then traced New's ideas and imagery through a series of later windows – starting with his depictions of the seven 'Gifts of the Holy Spirit' first as doves and hands at All Saints Isleworth, then seven lamps at Christchurch, Calgary; at St Nicholas Cole Abbey, London the lamps are like seedheads, at St John Meads they become lollipop-like, at Bristol they are reduced into the tracing, and at St Mary's Reigate and All Saints, Branston they are abstract, like planets against a deep-blue sky. Another motif he used was hands: from Coventry, to St Paul's hands at Stephen Walbrook (now in Norwich), to St Mary's, Reigate where they are very simplified. A third motif was ships: at Eastbourne, a sturdy St Nicholas' ship in Cole Abbey, ships at Gallipoli in Sheffield Cathedral, and a 1969 pointillist version reminiscent of Seurat.

Diana then moved on to New's innovation in design and technique. His early work was mainly leaded; later windows were appliqué glass bonded by epoxy resins, though failure of the glue some decades were a factor in the loss of some of his abstract 1960s windows. Others were lost from change of building use. These include one at a Highgate school chapel, now a furniture store. Another was at the Church Missionary Society HQ in Waterloo Road, which was demolished when the society moved from London, though the window's design board survived. Its theme was 'Regeneration' rendered in abstract, based on a quote 'without divine water nothing exists' of a 20C Italian philosopher. The central motif was a division between 'upper' and 'lower' water as a precondition for life, against a background of light and warmth, as also necessary for new life. In a report of this, his 'most important work to date', in the 1967 *BSMGP Journal*, New had described how he had placed the central circular image in blue mosaic floating in front of a red fretted-leading background layer, to 'break with the single plane'; it was held in a sandwich of plate glass with zig-zag metal mullions. Helen Robinson had seen the window in storage in Hertfordshire, where the Missionary Society had hoped to re-install it, but it was then moved to Derbyshire. However, when Helen and Diana tracked it down in 2016, in pieces, the central circular portion had disappeared.

Diana ended her talk with a work at St John, Ermine, Lincs, built on a council estate. Here New used no paint, instead obtaining tonal variation with flashed glass and also greatly varying lead thickness. The abstract shapes follow the church's shape. The theme of the design is the revelation of God's plan for mankind, the central red section representing the Holy Trinity (detail right), and smaller shapes respectively the eyes of God, Nativity and Baptism. This work effectively 'reconciles the Romantic and the Classic'. *Chris Wyard*

