

Reviews: Walk & Talk 'Stained glass artists of Southwark Cathedral' with Caroline Swash



Caroline Swash, in her tireless promotion of stained glass, planned a day of celebration of this extraordinary medium, on 20th July, starting at her home, with her personal collection of works in glass and other media, and from thence walking to view three nearby city churches. Then crossing the Thames to Southwark Cathedral to hear Benjamin Finn speak about his beautiful windows for the Millennium Library, and finally a scholarly and illuminating talk by Caroline herself, on the varied and fascinating stained glass in Southwark Cathedral.

Caroline imagined that only about eight or so people would be attracted to such an enticing programme, and to her (but no one else's) amazement 35 glass enthusiasts responded. Unfazed, the logistics of the programme were modified to accommodate the crowd, which resulted in a most dynamic and enjoyable afternoon, surely a jewel in the crown of this year's BSMGP programme.

Firstly arriving at Caroline's lovely flat, in the Barbican – spacious, and warmly welcoming, full of light. The very varied works of art there include glass by Johannes Schreiter, for whom Caroline and her husband Michael, a renowned Consultant Neurologist at the Royal London Hospital, organized a commission for an impressive series of windows, with a medical theme, for the Library there. Also there was a limpid blue panel by the Icelandic artist Leifur Breiddfjord, tiny, jewelled panels by Peter Young, whose quirky images I always admired from my glass student days, and panels by Caroline herself, on themes inspired by Iceland, with its strange volcanic rock formations, and remote, unique culture. Other works on the walls include a lithograph by Zadkine, and designs by Evie Hone, on which, Caroline told us, she spent her entire first year's earnings as a secondary school teacher. There was also her powerful portrait of her mother, painted in a crisp, sculptural style, reminiscent of Stanley Spencer, and a sensitive watercolour by David Gluck, an ex-colleague at Central St Martin's. I am sure there are works which I have forgotten to mention, but there was no time to linger as a new batch of visitors waited to enjoy these.



work of Christopher Webb (1886–1966). The medallions, depicting saints and historical personages, are surrounded by the swirling, decorative detail reminiscent of Wren's time, and harmoniously framed within broad windows of clear glass. Two small roundels are the work of Lawrence Lee.

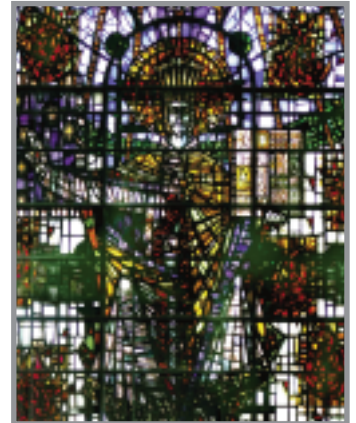
With the help of a map and instructions, thoughtfully provided by Andrew Taylor, we wended our way to St Lawrence Jewry. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren to replace the original medieval church destroyed in the Great Fire, it has survived subsequent destruction by bombing in both World Wars. It arose like a phoenix, in its post WW2 reconstruction by the architect Cecil Brown, with the light-flooded spaciousness of Wren's vision.

The stained glass was the

Next was St Mary-Le-Bow, another church rebuilt by Wren after the Great Fire, then devastated during the Blitz. Post WW2, the rebuilding programme was entrusted to an Anglo-Catholic architect Laurence King, who, during his association with the firm Faithcraft, manufacturers of church furniture, met the 30-year-old John Hayward, to whom he then entrusted designing the entire interior of the chancel including the stained glass. In striking contrast to the previous church, the interior seems sombre, and Hayward's windows glow with jewel-like intensity.

The West window, predominantly a blazing red, celebrates the government of the city, its important historic buildings and institutions with their 'pomp and ceremony', including a decorative interpretation of the insignia of the twelve principal Livery Companies. In contrast, the East windows have the archaic character of a Byzantine mosaic, both in their imagery and in

Hayward's technique: small fragments of colour, like tesserae, piercing the dense mesh of lead lines. The central panel shows Christ in Glory (right), surrounded by mystic symbols described in the Book of Revelations – the Seven Spirits of God, and the Seven Churches of Asia, which appear as stars at his right hand. In the window to its left, the Virgin Mary holds an image of the reconstructed church, her expression sorrowful at its devastation and the suffering of the people of London in times of War (below right). In the panel to its right is St Paul in profile, facing Christ with an intense, severe expression, a book in one hand, and an enormous sword in the other. In the backgrounds to both figures are references to the old city churches – in preparation for this commission, Hayward took photographs of the towers of those left standing after the Blitz. There is a powerful feeling that their Patron Saints are guarding them. These windows were considered dramatic and innovative for their time – but are so, for all times.



Our next 'port-of-call' was St Aldermay, which features an early window by Lawrence Lee (photo right), and where we were offered welcome refreshments.

From there, we crossed the Thames over London Bridge – always a joy – the varied buildings, old and new, piercing the London skyline, the water beneath us glittering in the sunshine. To the Library at Southwark Cathedral, where Benjamin Finn described his vision for this commission awarded to him by the Gulbenkian Foundation, in conjunction with the Museum of Stained Glass. In the upper windows, the silhouette of Old London Bridge spans the River Thames. In the central windows, a cavalcade of people, rich and poor, who in past ages may have crossed the Bridge, are interspersed with sacred references. The lower windows celebrate the river itself, and the boatmen who plied back and forth in the days before there was a bridge. The basic colours of the glass are limited to 'flashed' red and blue, skilfully acid-etched and plated to give nuances of colour, from the deep blue of night to the delicate shades of the dawn. The painting is subtle and sensitive.



Central to the design is the figure of Bishop Lancelot Andrews (left), Queen Elizabeth I's favourite preacher, and one of the scholars involved in the translation of King James I's Bible. An eloquent poet, he was inspiration to another, much later poet. Quotations from T. S. Elliot's 'The Waste Land' are incorporated in the design. Finn's technique and vision are personal and unique.

Caroline Swash's lecture encompassed the many and varied styles and windows in Southwark Cathedral, from Sir William Comper's majestic, youthful Christ, depicted in his characteristic austere style, to the inventive opulence of La Farge's windows for the John Harvard Chapel. (After the lecture, wending our way to 'The Mudlark', Caroline pointed out the swirling patterns of the lead lines of these windows, which could be clearly seen from the exterior of the Cathedral.) Caroline described with great enthusiasm and sympathy not only the qualities of the glass itself, but also the host of people involved in the creation of these magnificent places of worship. Among them was Kempe, not himself a glass artist, and whose characteristic style is alien to modern taste and sensibility, but he was imbued with love of the medium and determined to seek out talented artists to carry out his projects. There are windows by artists whose work we have already seen: Lawrence Lee's windows, which describe and celebrate the builders of the Cathedral, and Christopher Webb, who was commissioned in 1954 to create a Shakespeare window to celebrate the Bard's long association with Southwark. Imaginatively, this is in the form of a Jesse Tree – the characters in his plays being his 'children'. Other works in a more contemporary idiom include a semi-abstract window by Alan Younger and most recently, to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, a window commissioned from Leifur Breidfjord, whose panel we admired in Caroline's home.

After this 'feast' of stained glass, several of us made our way 'next door' to the clamorously noisy, lively pub 'The Mudlark', to meet fellow alumnae from Central St Martin's, and other stained glass colleagues and friends to catch up on each other's latest news. There was a real feeling of the camaraderie of a stained glass community with a living tradition, a fitting end to a memorable day.

Ruth Taylor Jacobson

Sissinghurst in the City

Caroline's proposed walk and talk for the BSMGP immediately caught one's attention with its very generous and gracious offer to view some of the artist's personal art collection, always a great privilege in its own right, the promise of sharing such a candid and open approach combined with the certainty of her own knowledge and enthusiasm made for a very appealing event; several tickets for myself and friends were duly booked.

I'd somehow imagined that in its original form the gathering might have resembled tea on the lawn at Sissinghurst Castle with an intimate coterie of artists and interested members chatting away and sampling refreshments before a gentle walk out in the afternoon's summer sun; as it turned out the unsurprising appeal of the event led to a larger than expected audience where we all crammed into the upper bastions of the Barbican; Caroline's down to earth welcome and enthusiasm soon calmed the heady frisson of the equally surprised and enthusiastic melee.

Each turn and level of the house revealed stained glass panels and other artworks of equal interest and intrigue, the hubbub and general buzz of the occasion excitedly burbling away in the background. Particular highlights for me were the panels by

Sachiko Yamamoto and two of Caroline's, although the latter were perhaps a little too modestly displayed on the day, with the compelling Schreiter and Breidfjord on the middle level. Caroline's husband, ensconced there as guide and ambassador, was also a delight with his charming manner, friendly knowledge and anecdotes of wresting some of the works from the artists' clutches, he completing that part of the day as convivial master of the artists' chapter house.

The summer walk itself started properly shortly thereafter with a short jaunt to St Lawrence Jewry, a church that I must admit to having bypassed both physically and in artistic consideration somewhat in the past; it was a further delight in fact, and also a surprise in thinking about it in terms of it as an example of an original and complete scheme of art and architecture, a fairly rare occurrence in church architecture of any period here in the UK. Caroline's assured hand of experience in allowing just the right amount of time and guidance was also immediately evident.

St Mary Le Bow and the John Hayward windows therein were, although of some known content, still, a complete sensation if not more after seeing them several times in the last thirty years or so, his work always capable of moving the senses, emotions and gaze of wonder at each turn. An artist/painter friend who accompanied us and who I have gradually introduced to stained glass in the last few years was equally bowled over with his work; he was astounded by it in fact and it was easy to share that with him. I hadn't seen John's work in the crypt there before and it only added to the pleasure and wonder; his all too rarely seen float glass decoration was particularly sensitive and very well executed I thought.

St Aldermarys Crawford and Lawrence Lee windows made a rich accompaniment to tea and cakes, the imagined lawn at last, or perhaps more accurately a rich tapestry on which to rest and enjoy both windows and refreshments, and also a chance to chat with friends old and new, with Caroline once again stepping up to the mark with her guidance and very generous provision of the refreshments. Looking at Lawrence Lee's work there (detail right), his unique vision, hand and eye for composition made one think again how such a talented and relatively prolific artist, teacher and master of liturgy remains so unknown to many outside our own group of specialist interest.



An interesting talk by the artist Benjamin Finn, his work as the immediate backdrop in the Gary Weston Library in Southwark Cathedral, was extremely generous in his sharing of knowledge and technique of his glass-painting tour de force there.

Caroline followed swiftly on, with a new audience filling the ranks further, with her own fascinating and in-depth talk of the important windows in Southwark Cathedral, possibly a little frustrating at first perhaps as we learnt that we would not be able to access the building itself, although her informative and expansive talk really served quite well to displace much of that frustration as perhaps we might all have been a little art glass jaded by then anyway.

Far better and far richer and beyond any initial imagination then than any gathering at the fabled castle, we made our own, we were all kings and queens for the day and were heavily laden with the joys and pleasures of our domain that day. A thoroughly deserved and big thank you, Caroline, for facilitating it all.

Simon Knight