

**REVIEW:** 'Leading and light boxes: conserving the stained glass in the V&A's Medieval and Renaissance galleries'

Glyn Davies, a curator at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, gave the Society's summer lecture in June, in which he took the audience behind the scenes at the newly redesigned Medieval and Renaissance galleries. Filling in the background, he explained that the decision to overhaul these galleries completely had been taken back in 2000, when it was felt they were looking rather 'tired' – particularly the Renaissance section, which dated back to the 1950s-60s. Although the Medieval Treasury had been revamped in the 1980s, its space was limited so much of the stained glass was displayed high up, details could not easily be viewed, sculpture took centre stage in displays, and tapestries and stained glass had been treated as 'window dressing'. Objects from different countries had also been kept apart.

In the redesign it was decided to adopt a similar approach to the British galleries, which had just reopened featuring juxtaposed displays of, for example, costumes and paintings showing dress of the period, and to treat each historical period as an integrated whole. As another gallery was being planned to showing sacred church objects, the museum took the opportunity to plan the two galleries that were to feature the glass together. The V&A's glass collection was large and varied, but much was in store because of lack of space and the poor condition of panels. Prominent among these were several large 16C glazing schemes from the dissolved abbeys at Mariawald and Steinfeld near Cologne (the latter probably from Gerhard Remisch's workshop), brought to England after the French Revolution and rehomed at Ashridge Park, Herts until its sale in 1928, as well as glass from the Chapel of the Holy Blood in Bruges with portraits of Maximilian I, Archduke of Austria and Holy Roman Emperor, and his family including his son 'Philip the Fair' (below).



In the new museum plan, stained glass was to occupy a double-height roof-lit top gallery of the building, and the Medieval and Renaissance galleries would contain the larger window schemes, whereas smaller panels and fragments such as those from Fairford as an example of 15C glasspainting would feature in the 'sacred art' gallery focusing more on church study. The planners also wanted to display the exhibits so as to refer to the original contextual meaning and atmosphere. For instance, the Sainte-Chapelle was effectively a huge reliquary in stone, built (1241-1248) to house a relic of the Crown of Thorns and a part of the Cross. Often considered an exemplar High Gothic building, its architecture, sculpture and stained glass interwove to produce a richly intense emotional effect. Similarly the Holy Blood chapel had housed a precious relic of Christ's blood, the windows probably commissioned by the Archduke both to honour his wife's devotion to the Holy Blood and to publicize his legitimate claim to the Duchy of Burgundy – the glass depicts his dynasty. The new arrangements of the windows, now displayed at eye level, aim to create a 'dialogue' with related displays in front.

The galleries were also planned so as to be punctuated with dramatic displays – such as 'The Rise of Gothic' with a massed display of French glass including part of an early 13C Tree of Jesse window from the Champagne-Ardenne region (possibly Troyes Cathedral), panels from the Sainte-Chapelle, and others.

The speaker then moved on to examples of the conservation done by the team including Sherrie Eatman, head conservator at the V&A, and Ann Marsh, a freelance glasspainter brought in for this project, and he discussed the rationale behind the various decisions they made, that is: to save early / original leading where possible, removing old repair leads only if excessive (as in the 14C glass from Winchester College chapel), or visually disruptive so as to improve the appearance (e.g. in Philip the Fair's head) or make its 'story' easier to read (e.g. the 'Adam and Eve' panel from Steinfeld Abbey), to repair multiple breaks in central design features using edgebonding (e.g. a French 15C St Peter roundel), or to correct errors in glass/lead replacement with repainting in the same style – as in a 15C Norwich school roundel 'August' from the Labours of the Months, which contained a piece of opaque glass and a 16C painted piece from another panel:



In the Steinfeld panel the 'Fall of the Rebel Angels', skilful foreshortening on the devils (below) had been obscured by clumsy repair leads, which was solved by edgebonding, while the painting around St Michael's head at the top left had been lost when the original silver-stained angel behind him was replaced by one in red and green; this detail was revealed once more by releading with a narrower lead. In contrast, repair leads in the background, sides or in less-important features (e.g. architecture) might be left, and some panels were merely cleaned and reframed. Also, earlier restorations were retained if of historical merit (e.g. a Betton & Evans pedestal placed in an Ezekiel panel).

