

ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVES

HELEN WHITTAKER

I come from a long line of craftsmen, five generations of cabinet makers and blacksmiths, and am naturally drawn to the creative process of making. I have always been passionate about fine art and sculpture; I am drawn to narrative, to the possibilities of composition and the play of light. The artists to whose work I return most often are Giotto, Caravaggio and Vermeer, and the 20th century artists Brangwyn, Modigliani, Sonia Delaunay and Mark Rothko. I am interested in sculpture, especially the work of Rodin, and the ever evolving work of Grayson Perry. In stained glass, I admire the figurative work of Wilhelmina Geddes, and the bold symbolism and dramatic textures of Piper and Reyntiens.

I have been fortunate enough to have been creating contemporary stained glass for over 25 years. Each project presents new challenges and offers new possibilities to engage the viewer through good design and craftsmanship, and by creating energy and movement bringing together contemporary and traditional elements. The building and the qualities of each particular space inspire the 'feel' of the artwork, be it figurative, abstract or sculptural.

For every new commission, I examine:

- the history of the building;
- the architectural space surrounding the window;
- the purpose of the window within the building (for example, the East Window of a church being the devotional point);
- the light coming through the window (especially the aspect of the window);
- the relationship of the window to other works of art in the building;
- the relationship of the window to the people who use the building; and
- any structural limitations of the window opening.

In my figurative and representational work, I aim to create narrative and dialogue which engages people with new ways of telling traditional or contemporary stories. I use abstraction to create layers of movement and meaning, underpinned by geometric principles that integrate the window into its surroundings. I feel that my work is rooted in ancient craft, but not bound to one particular tradition or style.

I am passionate about extending my work beyond the two dimensions in which stained glass usually operates, by incorporating sculpture that emphasises the human scale of the artworks and acts as an intermediary between the viewer and the glass. I have had invaluable advice and assistance with my three-dimensional work in copper from the artist and sculptor Harold Gosney.

Text also plays an important role within my designs, often becoming an integral part of the work. I design the placement for the lettering, with Charles Smith FRSA and Phil Thomas RSAW creating styles of lettering for several of my windows.

I enjoy collaborative work, especially with the conservators and glaziers of the Barley Studio team, as well as with other artists. In recent years I have had the privilege of working with Royal Academy painters David Hockney and Hughie O'Donoghue, translating their artworks into glass. These collaborations have greatly enriched my own practice.

I believe that new stained glass windows should be in harmony with their surroundings but should also speak of today; engaging, even challenging, the viewer and guiding them on an emotional and artistic journey.

A brief outline of my career in stained glass

I joined Barley Studio in 1998, having completed my MA in Visual, Islamic and Traditional Arts at the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, awarded by the University of Wales. Studying with Professor Keith Critchlow, an international expert in sacred geometry and sacred architecture, gave me an appreciation of geometry as a reflection of universal order, and its influence on the traditional arts, which has informed my work ever since. My BA, specialising in three-dimensional design using glass and ceramics under tutor Mike Davis FMGP, is from the University of Sunderland, a Centre of Excellence and the largest glass and ceramics department in Europe.

Whilst reading for both degrees I undertook work experience with stained glass artists and various studios, such as Canterbury Cathedral and Barley Studio. Since obtaining my MA I have taught stained glass annually at the Prince's School of Traditional Arts and in 2006 I received the Hancock Award for High Achievement in the art and craft of stained glass from the Prince of Wales.

When I started at Barley Studio, I undertook conservation work and restoration painting alongside new artworks commissioned through my degree show. Managing Director Keith Barley FMGP supported my vocation, emphasising that restoration and new work can learn from each other, as shown by his career in conservation and his previous collaboration with Patrick Reyntiens at Southwell Minster.

Through my restoration and conservation work, including the wonderful glass at St Mary's Church, Fairford and elsewhere, I learned a great deal about composition, colour and context in stained glass design, forming the foundation of my own work. I trained with master glasspainters including Harry Harvey FMGP, Jonathan Cooke ACR and Léonie Seliger ACR. I also studied modern techniques and large-scale commissions through a Craft Scholarship (2002-3) from the Prince's Foundation, travelling to Germany to visit the Derix, Peters and Oidtmanns studios.

I became Creative Director of Barley Studio in 2012, having undertaken a Foundation Degree in Business Management awarded by Leeds Metropolitan University. This gave me the skills to understand and develop our business, ensuring that I deliver the best professional service to our clients.

Since 2013 I have been on the Court of Assistants of the Worshipful Company of Glaziers and Painters of Glass. Having won several prizes in the Stevens Competition (run by the Glaziers Company) including a commission, I have been privileged to be a judge for the competition, becoming Chair of the Judges in 2016.

In 2001 I achieved Associateship of the British Society of Master Glass Painters, and in 2017 I was pleased to be elected a Fellow of the BSMGP.

In 2019 I was selected to help promote the United Kingdom Government's international 'GREAT Britain' campaign to showcase British talent in the creative sector.