



Thomas Denny, triple window, Gloucester Cathedral, 1992

A PAINTER'S STAINED GLASS

Patrick Reyntiens looks at Thomas Denny's painterly triple window, installed last year in a fourteenth-century chapel in Gloucester Cathedral.

Stained glass seldom escapes mediocrity. The occasional rescue operation – always referred to as a 'revival' – is usually connected to interest taken in the medium by painters. The ratio of success to failure is always higher when painters, as opposed to non-painters, design the windows – and very rarely does the craft of stained glass rise to fine art standards unless the thinking behind it is by a painter.

Nevertheless, the medium requires careful craft and experience whoever does it. Painters can ask too much of the medium, or the impossible, or something running contra to the intrinsic nature of glass even though technically possible. But in one or two cases where painters design stained glass there is marked success. Thomas Denny's triple window-range in a fourteenth-century chapel in Gloucester Cathedral is a case in point; made and installed in 1992, they are excellent.

The Dean and Chapter of Gloucester Cathedral were perspicacious enough to commission Denny, primarily known for his landscapes, to design and execute the glass. The three windows were installed by Bell and Son, the Bristol-based stained glass craftsmen (Mr G.A.K Robinson) who also took measurements, cut glass and leaded-up the windows.

The theme of the lights is 'praise' (Psalm 148), which gives the designer as wide a term of reference as possible. The general colour of the windows is of a warm, slightly purplish periwinkle blue, varying in intensity, area to area, – the kind of simple unificatory device occurring only to a painter. Denny takes the periwinkle blue and, by means of acidifying (much as in an etching), succeeds in a monochrome statement involving tonal change and contrast. Into this blue continuum he inserts varieties of green, green-blue, white, green-yellow and deeper tones of the basic blue,

but all these variations and introductions are only in relatively minor areas, on a small scale.

An 'emotional envelope', i.e. a unified field of expressive statement throughout a picture, is essential if the work of art is not to seem divided against itself. Beyond this one can effect change, contrast and rhythm, but this secondary activity may not be at the expense of contradicting the first simple statement. We see this principle at work in every great achievement in painting, from the line of Poussin to the colour of Matisse. Variety is there but unity remains unbroken. Being a painter, Denny subscribes to the categorisation of Heinrich Wölfflin in being '*mahlerisch*', not '*linear*': that is, his mind thinks in blots of colour and tone rather than in arabesques of line. Wölfflin's distinction is important, since in stained glass it is always too easy an option to make an expressive flat-pattern of the leadlines which divide the colours. Even

when expertly done this harsh linear treatment leaves the areas of colour between the leads as mere 'infills' playing second fiddle to the expressiveness of line. In this case the medium runs the risk of becoming mannered and dull by ignoring its greatest potential. Not so in Denny's treatment. His cutline (the tracing over the cartoon that determines where to cut the glass – and thus effecting a change of colour – is always subservient to the feeling of the areas of colour which are the key to the windows' expression. Denny's cutline is slack in character; the subtle web of meandering lead, not without its own, partially hidden, structure, is distinct from the crass, taut, mindless quality of most cutlines in contemporary glass. The leads become an incantatory, pulsating, persuasive rhythm, lost and found, being enmeshed in, and occasionally overpowered by, the depth of the colouring of the glass.

Thomas Denny's use of paint is every bit as hesitant as his use of the cutline. Painting on glass is much misunderstood. It is in fact merely a means, by use of a brush and semi-transparent pigment, of stopping-out or letting-in light through the window. The degree and character of the light filtering through the glass can be modified by paint, but in itself painting is not a means of colouring the glass. Under Denny's hand the eye is encouraged to wander over the whole area of the three windows with ease and enjoyment, since

there are no impediments to upset the flow and organisation of the general composition. It is a case of, paradoxically, the weakness of the individual parts contributing to the strength of the whole.

The paint-handling is much as you might expect a painter of canvases to adopt. There are paint-brush marks, hesitations, rubbings, scratchings out, scabbings. All the minutes touches and dabs, graffiti-esque nervousness, clots, ticks, nests of small marks, connected areas of partial *sfumato* and subtle *velatura*, combine to make just the effect the painter intends. Our eye is entertained, tricked, encouraged and thwarted, led this way and that, in precisely the rhythm that is appropriate, and which the painter, and he alone, knows instinctively how to manage and present.

Denny has made use of other techniques in modifying the colour in his glass, too involved to be described here. Acidizing, plating (the superimposition of two or more pieces of glass leaded together) and staining (the use of silver nitrate to effect a primrose-to-amber range of colour) have all been brought into play. The result is a subtly organised, unified work of art.

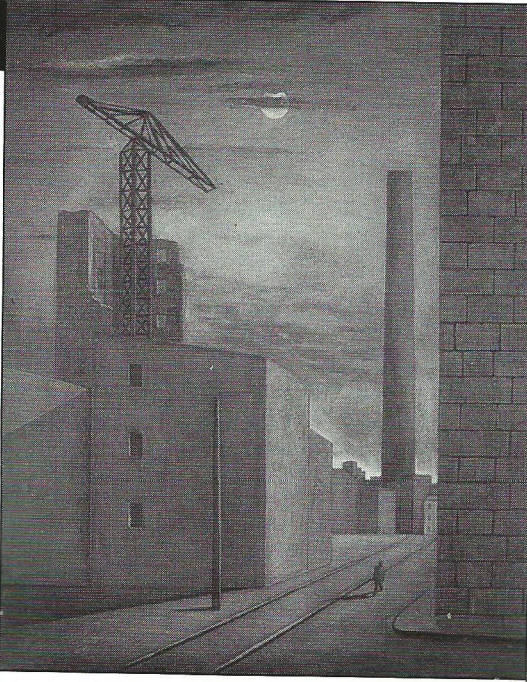
The three windows and their little top tracery-lights are all further unified by the theme of a central representation of the incredulity of St Thomas – in an original rural setting as opposed to the upper room of the Gospel. *Christus* in deepest purple-blue looms out of the half-darkness of the

background in a form exactly expressing the dawning, questioning realisation of the St Thomas figure to the right. This is smaller but of a greater discernability, as if lit from behind by natural light. The contrast between the two figures (Our Lord's figure similar in its silhouette, if not its features, to the *Christus* figure of Jacob Epstein in Llandaff Cathedral) is handled to suggest the relationship between the two. One, a half-palpable vision, involving interior realisation, the other a human being. All around the central theme there is a variation of English landscape, with half-defined trees, cattle, farm-buildings and vistas. These do not call particular attention to themselves but they are not so vague as not to register. The eye freely wanders all over the closely associated triptych of windows, and the pace of its wandering is controlled by the interval between the sharpened accents in the glass. The result is both a highly traditional window and at the same time a refreshingly original one.

Thomas Denny has succeeded in turning the little fourteen-century chapel from a pleasant place (as it was under the general schema of Burlinson and Grylls) into a holy one. This ability to conjure up a noumenal atmosphere, impregnated with the divine presence as it were, is a rare feat for a painter to be able to accomplish in the aesthetic and cultural melée of late twentieth-century England. □

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