

ENGLISCH |

La redécouverte de la couleur



Temporary Exhibition
21st June 2020 – 28th February 2021

Colour Rediscovered

As the French glass-painter Édouard Didron (1836–1902) noted in his account of the history of stained glass in Europe, written on the occasion of the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1889, artists in the twelfth century had ‘an admirable understanding of colour harmony’ – a knowledge that was lost over the course of the centuries. The rediscovery in the 19th century of colour as an intrinsic aspect of the glass arts constitutes a pivotal moment in its history. This revived fascination for coloured glass went hand in hand with a growing interest in the science and art of colour, as is witnessed by theoretical treatises and the works of art produced in all media. Medieval production processes for coloured glass were rediscovered in the 19th century as a result of the restorations being undertaken to stained glass of the Middle Ages across the whole of Europe. This renewal of interest in old production techniques opens up a path to new understandings both of colour in the glass arts in the 18th and 19th centuries, and of the technical processes for manufacturing coloured glass.

Bibliography

DIDRON 1889–1890

Édouard Didron, *Le vitrail depuis cent ans et à l'exposition de 1889*, *Revue des arts décoratifs* X, 1889–1890, pag. 39-48.

1

The Theory of Colour: between art and science

In the 19th century, scientists and artists alike were fascinated by the issues of colour harmony and colour symbolism. Already at the start of the century, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) and Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) were investigating subjective perception of colour. In 1828, the French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul (1786–1889), director of the Gobelins factory, formulated the laws of complementarity, which were popularized by the works of Charles Blanc (1813–1882) for non-specialists. Chevreul's colour laws were taken up towards the middle of the century by the British architect and colour theoretician Owen Jones (1809–1874), who promoted the use of primary colours in his interior designs and notably used coloured glass to create fairy-tale atmospheres. Jones's preoccupations with universal principles came to be explored at the start of the 20th century by Johannes Itten (1888–1967), for whom the theory of colour harmony was associated with metaphysical considerations.

2 The Techniques of Coloured Glass: between craft, industry, and art

Glass is composed principally of silica, which is melted at around 1,400°C with soda and chalk. Behind the closed doors of glass manufactories, formulas for exploiting the multiple possibilities offered by this material were developed and this secret knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation. Colours can be painted (in the form of glass-paint and enamels) onto the surface of the glass and fired, or introduced (in the form of metallic oxides) into the mass of the glass during fusion. During the Industrial Revolution, we see a number of innovations, thanks to new, mechanized processes for working glass during fusion, and for manufacturing sheet and vessel glass. We also see the appearance of new types of glass that are very varied in structure. Some artists, dissatisfied with the quality of industrial glass, set about producing their own material. One such was the Englishman Clement Heaton (1861–1940), who lived in Neuchâtel canton from 1883 to 1914. Charles Wasem (1875–1961), who visited Heaton's studio, also embarked on the same venture, with Marcel Poncet (1894–1953). Together they set up a factory producing antique glass at Bossey-Veyrier.

3

Colours of the Orient

'... the magic light that falls through the coloured panels ...' It was with these words that the architect Theodor Zeerleder (1820–1868) described his impressions in the traditional houses of Cairo. Star-shaped stained-glass windows are one of the distinctive features of his orientalizing smoking room of 1854 in the castle of Oberhofen. Similarly, the Moorish Kiosk by Carl von Diebitsch (1819–1869), purchased by Ludwig II (1845–1886), king of Bavaria, testifies to the contemporary fascination with the Islamic architecture and its intense colours. Ludwig's court architect Georg von Dollmann (1830–1895) employed decorative motifs from the Alhambra when he remade the Kiosk's stained glass, rendering the windows radiant. The Islamic palaces of Granada also provided models for the window designs of Wilhelm Megerle (b.1863), who was employed at the Röttinger family studio in Zurich. With its light, this stained glass increased the colourfulness of already colourful neo-Islamic interiors.

4

'shades of colour': new nuances in the coloration of American glass

AI In his search for new colour effects in stained glass in the late 19th century, the artist and decorator John La Farge (1835–1910) introduced opalescent glass, which had previously been used as a substitute for porcelain, to the world of American stained glass, thereby creating new nuances of coloration. His discovery, patented in 1880, marked the beginning of the opalescent era of American stained glass, which lasted until 1920 and was dominated by La Farge and his New York competitor Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933). Through their unconventional approach to stained glass and the use of folded, structured, and layered opalescent and coloured glass, they succeeded in expanding the colour palette of stained glass and enlivening its surface structure with relief. These innovations were also taken up in Europe, where important works in this technique were created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the impressive works in stained glass by Jakob Adolf Holzer (1858–1938) and Jacques Galland (d.1922/1923).

5

Colour and Glass Art at the Bauhaus (1919–1933)

The teaching of colour was of great importance in the Bauhaus educational programme. Johannes Itten (1888–1967), Paul Klee (1879–1940), and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) are the principal artists to treat colour as a conceptual element. They developed their thinking from the colour theories of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810), Michel Eugène Chevreul (1786–1889), and Adolf Hölzel (1853–1934). Their teaching had an impact on production in workshops, particularly for stained glass. Indeed, colour was considered not only an essential aspect in the abstract visual grammar of the Bauhaus painters, but also a basic element of every single work of art. Several artists, such as Josef Albers (1888–1976), Georg Muche (1895–1987), and Ida Kerkovius (1879–1970), were seduced by the aesthetic and technical characteristics of glass, its transparency and reflectiveness, into according a central role to colour and experimentation in their stained-glass windows and reverse glass-paintings.

6

Stained Glass in the First Half of the 20th Century: Colour Triumphant

During the first half of the 20th century, colour was a central focus for many glass artists. This is particularly true for a whole generation of figures, such as Alexandre Cingria (1879–1945), Jean-Edouard de Castella (1881–1966), Willy Jordan (1902–1971), and many others. They were members of or loosely attached to the Groupe de Saint-Luc, a society active during the inter-war period whose aim was to reinvent Catholic sacred art. With a sensibility peculiar to them, these artists created works of art that not only blended with architecture, but also interacted with the often very colourful church interiors. The group's main architect, Fernand Dumas (1892–1956), had his office in Romont. The entire interior decoration of each church was usually entrusted to one artist, and he or she decided on the general colour scheme, which encompassed the polychromy of the walls and ceiling, the stained-glass windows, and other works of art in the church.