



Geoffrey

Clarke

1924-2014

A New Spirit in Stained Glass

The Stained Glass Museum

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Front cover: detail of *Fragment* (c.1956) by Geoffrey Clarke, sheet lead and glass, 730 x 945 x 140mm, The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM:2014.2).

Back cover: detail of *Saint Anthony* (1949) by Geoffrey Clarke, sheet lead and glass, 730 x 945 x 140mm, The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM:2014.1) .

Through the Eyes of the Conservator

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Visit our blog to read about the specialist conservation of these stained glass panels and explore their history.

‘A New Spirit in Stained Glass’

Geoffrey Clarke (1924-2014)

Geoffrey Clarke RA (1924-2014) was a pioneering British artist who represented a ‘new spirit in stained glass’ in the late-twentieth century (Harrod, 1999: 324). His experimentation with modern materials and processes breathed new life into the traditional artistic media in which he worked, which encompassed stained glass, sculpture and printmaking. This exhibition focuses on four stained glass artworks made by Geoffrey Clarke in the early phase of his career, and places them in the wider context of Clarke’s artistic career. All four stained glass works: (1) *Saint Anthony*; (2) *Priest*; (3) *Saint Sebastian* (all dated 1949); and (4) *Fragment* (dated circa 1956), are unique and demonstrate Clarke’s modern experimental approach to this ancient art form.

The Stained Glass Museum purchased these four artworks from the artist’s studio in January 2014 with help from the Art Fund, Arts Council England / V&A Purchase Grant Scheme and other generous donors. Between 2014 and 2015 the Clarke panels were conserved at York Glaziers Trust by trainee conservators from the MA in Stained Glass and Heritage Management course at the University of York. Sadly, Geoffrey Clarke did not live to see his stained glass on display at the Museum, as he passed away in October 2014 while the works were undergoing specialist conservation.

All four panels have now been placed on permanent display in specially-made frames in the Stained Glass Museum gallery, where the unique sculptural qualities, abstracted forms, and experimental techniques of Clarke’s stained glass can be appreciated for the first time in over 50 years. The acquisition forms a major addition to The Stained Glass Museum’s collection of modern British stained glass, and demonstrates its commitment to collecting, preserving and displaying significant stained glass of all periods for the benefit and enjoyment of a wider public.

Geoffrey Clarke

Geoffrey Clarke RA (1924-2014) was born in Derbyshire and came from a creative family - his father was an architect and an etcher with his own press. As a young man Clarke studied at both Preston School of Art and Manchester School of Art, before serving with the RAF in the Second World War. Following the war, Clarke returned to his artistic studies at Lancaster and Morecambe School of Arts and Crafts before enrolling at the Royal College of Art (RCA), London, in 1948 to study Graphic Arts. Very shortly after joining the Graphic Arts department, Clarke transferred to the department of Stained Glass, under the newly appointed Head of Stained Glass Lawrence Lee (1909-2011). Lee led the RCA Stained Glass department into a new progressive phase and encouraged his students to experiment with contemporary materials and concepts. One of the stained glass panels produced by Clarke in his first year at the RCA gained a silver medal, a distinction rarely bestowed upon first-year students. Clarke's work soon caught the attention of the Principal of the RCA, Robin Darwin (1910-74), who encouraged Clarke to begin making iron sculpture in addition to his glass and graphic work.

Thanks to the encouragement of both Lee and Darwin, Clarke was one of two young RCA graduates chosen to contribute to the pioneering modern glazing project at Coventry Cathedral which was rebuilt to the designs of Sir Basil Spence (1907-76) between 1957 and 1962. The new Coventry Cathedral building was furnished by some of the most prominent British artists and designers of the period, including Graham Sutherland (1903-80) and John Piper (1903-92). Clarke worked alongside his former tutor Lawrence Lee and fellow RCA student Keith New (1926-2012), to produce the 25m-high floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows which dominate the Cathedral's nave. In her seminal book, *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century* (1999), Tanya Harrod acknowledged that these two young artists 'represented a new spirit in stained glass' (Harrod, 1999: 324). Although both artists are today better known for their work in other media, (Clarke for his sculpture and New for his painting), it was their early creations in stained glass at Coventry Cathedral with Lee that helped establish their reputation as modern artists.

Clarke contributed more artwork than any other artist for Coventry Cathedral. As well as designing and making three of the ten semi-abstract nave windows (two of the purple windows representing wisdom, and one of the multi-coloured windows representing middle age), he was given responsibility for a number of sculptures - the 26m-high flèche, or hollow spire, on top of the Cathedral roof, the High Altar Cross and Crown of Thorns. The first sculptural piece that Clarke made for Coventry Cathedral was a cross (1958) for the Undercroft Chapel (Chapel of the Cross). This cross combined glass with nickel bronze and revealed his interest in working with metal and glass. These commissioned works marked the start of a successful career producing monumental public artworks, and the windows at Coventry are amongst the finest examples of modern religious stained glass in the world.

Clarke completed around 16 commissions for stained glass between 1951 and 1977, the context and themes of which are described and interpreted by Judith LeGrove in her thorough exploration of Clarke's artistic output (see LeGrove, 2007 and LeGrove, 2008). Windows were made for cathedrals, churches, crematoriums, University colleges and Art Schools, mostly in the north-west of England, but also in East Anglia (Clarke had relocated from London to Suffolk in 1954) and Lincolnshire. In 1968 Clarke was appointed as Lee's successor at the Royal College of Art. Reflecting the evolving role of stained glass at the time, the Stained Glass department changed its name to 'Light, Transmission and Projection' in 1970. Clarke left the RCA in 1973 and from this period he was more concerned with sculpture than stained glass.

In sculpture, Clarke made a number of important developments and examples of his sculptural works can be seen in many prestigious public and private collections around the world. In the 1950s he successfully experimented with making models of his sculptures in the then-relatively new material of polystyrene, and direct casting in aluminium. This process was relatively inexpensive in comparison to casting in bronze, and produced sculptures of lighter weight. Public commissions came in thick and fast. Clarke's dual success in both stained glass and sculpture was marked by a series of significant

exhibitions and commissions in the 1950s and 60s, including four stained glass windows for the Treasury at Lincoln Cathedral. When Clarke was selected to represent the RCA at the Festival of Britain in 1951, his piece *Icarus* was part iron-relief sculpture and part stained glass. The following year Clarke had his first solo show at Gimpel Fils Gallery, London.

This exhibition at a prominent London art gallery prompted the art critic Herbert Read's (1893-1968) inclusion of Clarke's work in the 'Geometry of Fear' display in the British Pavilion at the International Venice Biennale in 1952. In this ground-breaking display of post-war British art Clarke's prints and sculptures were exhibited alongside paintings by Sutherland and sculptures by Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005) and Henry Moore (1898-1986). Read wrote that these works demonstrated 'the iconography of despair, or defiance' (Read, 1952). They were seen to characterise the artistic works of a young generation of post-war sculptors. Clarke also contributed artworks to the British Pavilion at this major annual contemporary art exhibition in Venice in 1954 and 1960. In 1965 he had a major show of new work at the Redfern Gallery, London, where his sculptures cast in aluminium from polystyrene were showcased. Clarke's work was also included in the 'British Sculpture in the 1960s' exhibition at the Tate Gallery, 'British Sculptors '72' curated by Bryan Kneale at the Royal Academy of Arts, and 'British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century', held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1981. The Victoria & Albert Museum purchased a stained glass panel made by Clarke for a private house, *Transcendental* (c.1950) for their collection in 1970.

More recently, Clarke has been the object of increasing public and academic interest, although publications have focused on his prints and sculpture. Examples of Clarke's stained glass and sculptural work have been featured in a series of exhibitions held at Pangolin Gallery, London in 2013 and 2015. The Stained Glass Museum's recent acquisition of four stained glass panels by Geoffrey Clarke and their subsequent conservation, as documented in this exhibition, brings Clarke's output in stained glass to the fore and encourages a reappraisal of his stained glass art.

The Clarke panels in focus: Style and Technique

All four of the stained glass panels acquired by The Stained Glass Museum represent Clarke's early work in stained glass, and demonstrate the strong abstract sculptural nature of his designs in the years leading up to his work at Coventry Cathedral. The stained glass panels reveal Clarke's experimental techniques, and demonstrate how he combined the skill of blacksmith, welder, stained glass artist and pattern maker to produce unique artworks in glass. Clarke was one of the main innovators of the period; he made his own dabbing tools for painting glass, and experimented with painting techniques, as well as a variety of materials. Clarke's experimentation with techniques, form, and symbolism draw attention to the relationship between stained glass and other artistic media, thus transforming our perceptions of stained glass as an art form. They are unique examples of a modern movement in stained glass, from which evolved not only new styles and techniques, but a new visual language.



Clarke at work in 1955 welding his sculpture *Symbol*

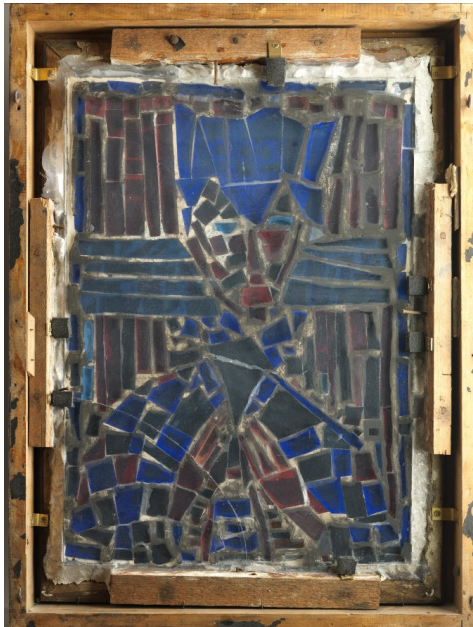
Photograph: © Pangolin London and the artist's estate.

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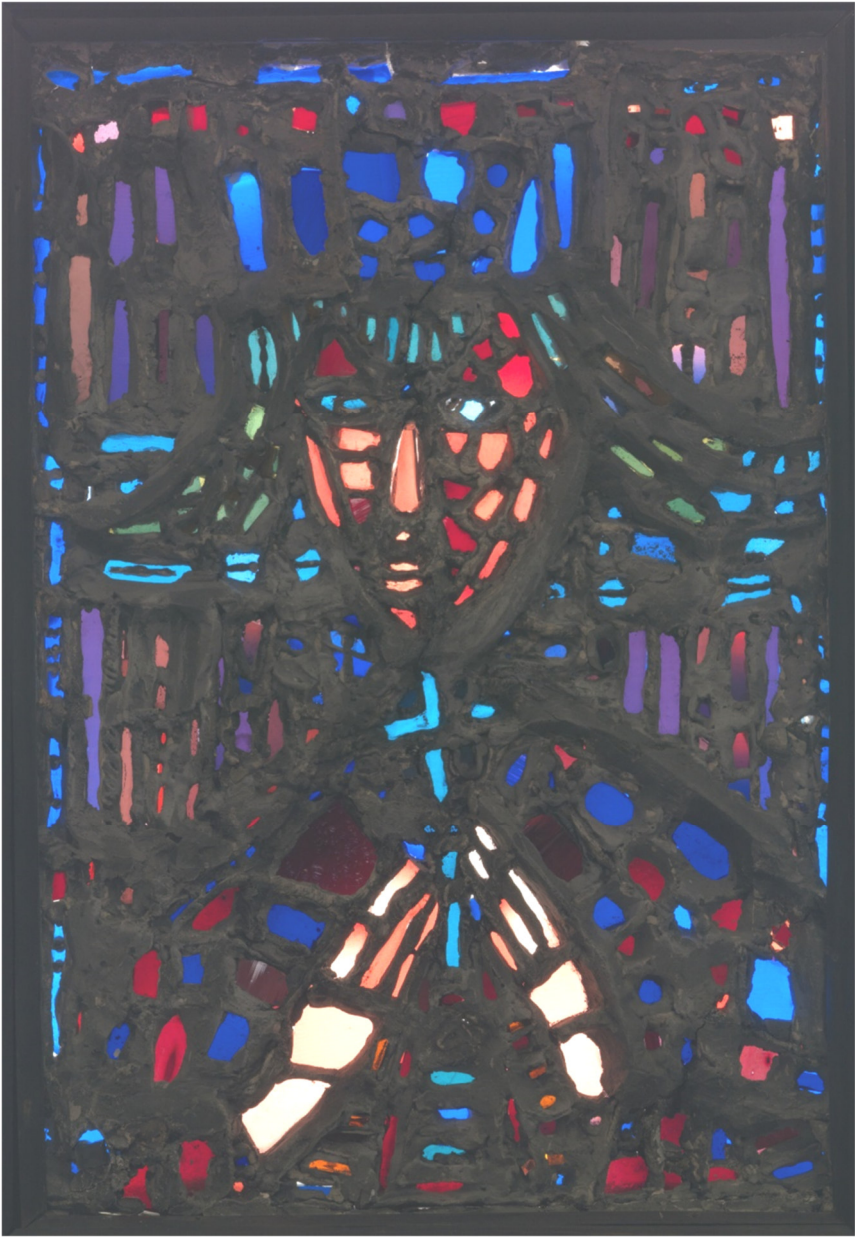
Priest (1949) demonstrates how Clarke combined stained glass, mosaic and sculptural techniques to produce unique artworks. Clarke referred to such artworks, created by embedding pieces of glass in layers of plaster, as 'relief sculpture'. *Priest* is a semi-abstract design that depicts the bust of a male figure with blond hair and piercing blue eyes. The figure appears to wear a blue hat and holds a cross in his hands, which are clasped together in prayer. Along with *Saint Anthony*, *Priest* was exhibited together at the RCA Exhibition of 1950. It was described by Lawrence Lee, as:

a form of glass mosaic with many decorative possibilities [...] being small, deeply coloured pieces of glass set in a fretted pattern of plaster. (Lee, 1951: 144)

This 'relief sculpture', mosaic or stucco panel was also shown at Clarke's first solo exhibition at the London gallery Gimpel Fils in 1952, together with a number of his glass mosaics, monotypes, etchings, and sculptures in iron.



The reverse of *Priest* by Geoffrey Clarke (1949), glass and plaster mosaic in a wooden frame, 515 x 690 x 130mm, The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.3).



***Priest* by Geoffrey Clarke (1949), glass and plaster mosaic, 515 x 690 x 130mm,
The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.3).**



***Saint Anthony* by Geoffrey Clarke (1949), leaded stained glass panel,**

***Saint Anthony* (1949)** is the largest surviving example of stained glass from Clarke's student years at the RCA, and was exhibited together with *Priest* (1949) at the RCA Exhibition of 1950, held in the galleries of the Royal Society of British Artists, where it attracted the attention of both critics and the public. Lawrence Lee drew attention to this innovative panel in an article published in *Architectural Design* (May 1951) following the exhibition:

A hint of the future may be seen in [Clarke's] panel. Shape and content are unusual; the rhythmic pattern of smallish pieces of deeply coloured, stained and enamelled glass (mostly in blues) must be unique in modern decorative art. (Lee, 1951:144)

Saint Anthony (d.356) was a Christian monk from Egypt, who lived much of his life as a hermit in the desert, with wild animals as his companions. One has to look carefully to see the figure of Saint Anthony lying horizontally in the desert landscape, surrounded by birds and animals. This is a fine example of Clarke's slender abstracted figures, created by the rhythmic patterning of small pieces of glass and lead. The deep blue and purple glasses show Clarke's preference for these colours, which would later be used on a monumental scale at Coventry.



2310 x 645 x 70mm, The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.1).



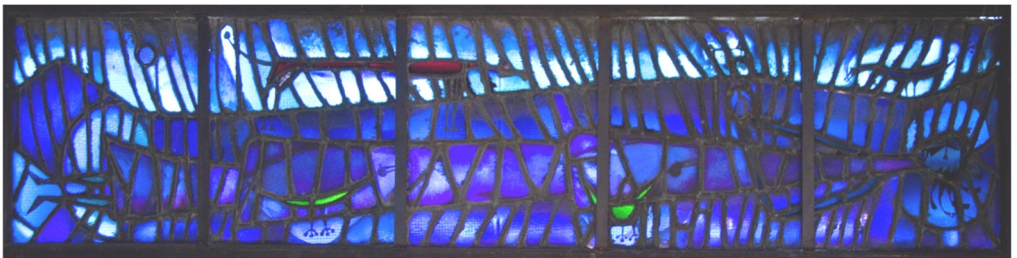
**The Royal College of Art (RCA) Exhibition of 1950,
held in the galleries of the Royal Society of British Artists, London.**

Photograph: © Royal College of Art.

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Three preparatory sketches for *Saint Anthony* by Geoffrey Clarke (1949), The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.5; 2014.6; 2014.7).



Saint Anthony by Geoffrey Clarke (1949), leaded stained glass panel, 2310 x 645 x 70mm, The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.1).

Three surviving preparatory sketches for *Saint Anthony*, in pen and ink, reveal Clarke's evolving design for this unusual panel. At first glance all three are very similar, but there are subtle changes that occur in each version of the drawing, even though the main compositional elements remain the same.

In the final design the figure of Saint Anthony is a much more geometric and abstracted figure. The curves of his body, visible in the first sketch, are absent in the later design and final piece, having been replaced by triangular shapes. The blue and purple colouring is dominant in all the designs, although in the final stained glass panel, Clarke has used some red and green glass to colour the animals that surround the saint. The green birds and the red dog are gathered around Saint Anthony, and turn to face his head at the far right of the composition.

Clarke's designs for the figure of *Saint Anthony* appear to have influenced his 1951 iron sculpture entitled *Effigy*. Both feature an abstracted reclining figure bearing a cross, although the geometric forms are more defined in Clarke's sculpture. The resemblance indicates the interrelatedness of themes and forms to be found in Clarke's work across various media.



***Effigy* by Geoffrey Clarke (1951) Iron, 150 x 810 x 280 mm, Pangolin London.**

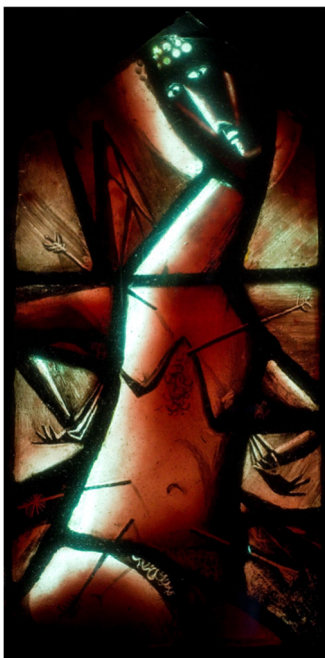
Photograph: © Pangolin Gallery and Steve Russell Studios.

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***Saint Sebastian* by Geoffrey Clarke (1949), leaded stained glass panel in wooden frame, 255 x 400 x 250mm, The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.4).**

Saint Sebastian (1949) demonstrates both Clarke's semi-abstract approach to figurative work and his interest in experimenting with different materials. Saint Sebastian (d.288) was an early Christian martyr who is thought to have been killed during the Roman emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians. As common in art and literature, Clarke has depicted Saint Sebastian tied to a post or tree and shot with arrows. The small glass panel is set within a wooden frame with apex, and appears like a Byzantine icon. Clarke had much interest in subjects engaging with issues of faith and religion. The contorted figure of Saint Sebastian represents an existential anxiety around the human figure present in much of Clarke's sculpture and stained glass, as also seen in *Saint Anthony* (1949). *Saint Sebastian* also demonstrates Clarke's skilled glass-painting techniques. The glass panel is heavily painted with layers of matt paint to impart a dark, aged effect, through which colour glows in the polished areas. Clarke has plated the traditional leaded and painted stained glass panel with sheets of glass on either side. This layering effect contributes to the appearance of the panel as an icon or relic.



***Saint Sebastian* by Geoffrey Clarke (1949), leaded stained glass panel in wooden frame, 255 x 400 x 250mm, The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.4).**

Fragment (circa 1956) is a sculptural piece in glass and lead sheet, which experiments with surface texture and three-dimensional abstract forms. Together with a companion panel entitled *Embryo* (also 1956, now lost), *Fragment* was included in the highly publicised 'British Artist Craftsmen' exhibition organised by the Smithsonian Institution that toured the USA in 1959-60. In the upper part of the piece, a cylindrical form of lead sheet penetrates the panel, projecting into both the space in front and behind the panel. *Fragment* represents one of the earliest appearances of Clarke's swirling symbolic form, which held both a spiritual and symbolic importance for the artist. The sculptural panel is also contemporary with Clarke's designs for the multi-coloured window *Man in Maturity* for the nave of Coventry Cathedral. In the context of the development of Clarke's glass, *Fragment* represents an important stage between his mosaics (1949-55) and the fully three-dimensional works in aluminium and glass for Ipswich Civic College (1961), Crownhill Parish Church (1961), Taunton Crematorium (1963) and Manchester College of Art (1969). Following damage to *Embryo* and its subsequent disappearance, *Fragment* now constitutes the sole surviving example of Clarke's early sculptural work in lead and glass.



Detail of *Fragment* by Geoffrey Clarke (c.1956), sheet lead and glass, 730 x 945 x 140mm, The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.2).



***Fragment* by Geoffrey Clarke (c.1956), sheet lead and glass, 730 x 945 x 140mm,
The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM: 2014.2).**

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