Joseph’s Dream In The Thomson Collection: Reconsidering The Reconstruction Of The Infancy Of Christ Window From Suger’s Saint-Denis

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The stained-glass windows incorporated into Abbot Suger’s reconstruction of the choir of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis during the 1140s are among the most important monuments of the genesis of Gothic architecture in the Île-de-France. The desire to showcase stained glass was a critical factor in the skeletalization of structural systems that streamlined stonemasonry around the perimeter and opened up the interior spaces not only of Saint-Denis, but also of the spectacular series of buildings constructed in its wake that established Gothic as a trans-European style by the end of the twelfth century. But whereas the architecture of Suger’s spacious ambulatory (Figure 6.1), though restored, survives well enough to bear witness to the new style of stone construction, only meager fragments of the glowing expanses of colored glass that formed its walls remain, many of them alienated from the building and dispersed among museums, churches, and collections around the world. Fortunately, the glazing is unusually well documented.

Abbot Suger himself includes a discussion of stained-glass windows within the report on church reconstruction highlighted in his written account of his administration. He cites some—but not all—of the windows specifically, recording complicated inscriptions that are still visible. The thirteenth-century reconstruction of the abbey church preserved the windows of the ambulatory.
and they escaped destruction in the French Revolution when Alexandre Lenoir, in 1799, obtained permission to appropriate them for his Musée des monuments français. A contemporary account claims that some of the glass rescued by Lenoir was destroyed by an accident in transit, and we know that some panels he chose not to exhibit found their way into the art market and are now distributed widely.

The panels he used in the museum, however, seem for the most part to have been returned to the church in 1817–18 and were subjected to two heavy-handed nineteenth-century restorations. The second of these, supervised by Henri and Alfred Gérente beginning in the late 1840s, created the windows now installed in the church. But more and better preserved panels from Suger’s glazing are conserved elsewhere.

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It was French scholar Louis Grodecki (1910–82)—a founder of modern stained-glass studies, and Anne Prache’s teacher—who discovered or identified many of these dispersed panels from Saint-Denis and laid the groundwork for coordinating them with existing documentation to expand our understanding of Suger’s glazing. This is especially the case with the Infancy of Christ window, where Grodecki not only assessed the primary artistic and documentary evidence, but also proposed during the 1960s and 1970s a series of reconstructions of the window’s original appearance, subjecting the evolving ensemble to developing stylistic and iconographic investigations.

Suger does not mention the Infancy of Christ window, although he does cite the Jesse Tree installed adjacent to it to form a stained-glass diptych in the axial Virgin Chapel. But the donor portrait of Suger, prostrate at the bottom of the lancet as he witnesses the Annunciation (Figure 6.2), seems to document the place of the Infancy window within the original program. Grodecki determined that only three panels in the lower two registers of the current window contain medieval stained glass: the Annunciation (lower center), the Dream of Joseph (lower right), and the Birth of Christ (upper center). In these three panels, original fragments were incorporated within nineteenth-century pastiche, but the window as a whole was designed by Henri Gérente and his workshop.

Fortunately, Grodecki discovered a drawing in a sketchbook of architect Charles Percier (1764–1838) that documents portions of the twelfth-century glazing in 1794 or 1795, including the bottom left corner of the Infancy window before it was dismantled by Lenoir. By using this drawing, in conjunction with the remains within the current window, Grodecki was able to establish the basic parameters of the original design (Figure 6.3). Within this format, extended upwards, he arranged the surviving panels, discovered primarily in Great Britain, where the burgeoning Gothic revival had created a ready market for them very early in the nineteenth century.


9 Suger, Saint-Denis, ed. Panofsky, 72–3.

10 Percier’s sketchbook is now in the Bibliothèque Municipale of Compiègne. For his trip to Saint-Denis, on a mission to draw the tomb of Dagobert, see Grodecki, Les vitraux de Saint-Denis, 40–41, pls. 10, 66; and Georges Huard, “Percier et l’abbaye de Saint-Denis,” Les monuments historiques de la France 1 (1936): 134–4, 173–82.

11 Grodecki’s reconstructions evolved as new panels were discovered: Grodecki, Études sur les vitraux de Suger, 43, Figure 15 (1961); and 26, Figure C (1976).
Since Grodecki’s pioneering work, a series of important discoveries have been made, and they have brought greater focus to our understanding of the design and meaning of the twelfth-century window. Using the evidence provided by three new panels—(1) the Flight into Egypt from the Raymond Pitcairn collection, now in the Glencairn Museum;¹² (2) the Dream of the Magi in the collection of Lord

Barnard at Raby Castle, near Durham; and (3) a photograph of a still-missing panel portraying three women marching in procession at the Presentation in the Temple—I proposed a revised reconstruction of the window in 1986. But, as with Grodecki’s work, my own must be revised and reworked in the light of new discoveries, and the recent appearance of a previously unknown panel related to the window has reopened the question.

The new panel—depicting the Dream of Joseph (Figure 6.4 = Pl. 13)—appeared on the art market in 2007, at that time in the possession of Sam Fogg in London, who made it available to me for examination before it was acquired for the Thomson Collection and placed on view in the Art Gallery of Ontario. It is an unusual panel in several respects.


14 This panel was part of the Savadjian sale at the Hôtel Drouot on June 10, 1932. Dealer Lucien Demotte acquired it, reportedly bidding for an unknown client. Fortunately, Demotte took excellent photographs of the front and back of the panel, copies of which were in the files of collector Raymond Pitcairn, who had himself been interested in the panel. See Cothren, “Infancy of Christ Window,” 408–9, and notes 47–9.


16 I am grateful to Sam Fogg, who allowed me to examine the Dream of Joseph in a New York gallery in August 2007, while it was still in his possession; and to Paul Williamson of the Victoria and Albert Museum, who suggested to Fogg that I be invited to study it. I was only able to spend a few hours with the panel on this one occasion,
First, there is already a partially medieval panel of this subject within the current window at Saint-Denis, at the far right on the lowest register (Figure 6.5). Grodecki evaluated this panel as a product of Gérente’s restoration, although he maintained that the restorers incorporated within it significant twelfth-century fragments, concentrated in the figure of the standing angel. He expressed doubts, but during that time I examined both interior and exterior surfaces in detail, using both transmitted and reflected light.
however, concerning whether these fragments actually originated from a scene of the Dream of Joseph, since the authentic angel could have been a part of another scene from Christ's Infancy, and he believed the figure of Joseph to be totally modern.  

From the moment I saw a photograph of the Thomson panel, its strong relationship with the panel in the current window (Figure 6.5) was obvious. The figures are almost identical in pose, costume, and painted articulation. The format, however, is significantly different. In the window, the panel is rectangular, and the scene is set under an architectural canopy, whereas in the Thomson panel—whose irregular shape suggests that it is a substantial fragment of a larger whole—the figures almost completely fill a semicircular compositional field. The tapering ends of the semicircle have been cut off or reserved, presumably for the quadrants of an ornamental boss. The color scheme of the two panels is also distinct in significant ways. At Saint-Denis the background is red; in the Thomson panel it is blue. The mantle of Joseph is brownish purple against the blue ground of the Thomson panel, but it is blue against the red ground in the panel in the window.

The relationship is clear, but which panel, if either, is “authentic,” and how might we explain the nature of the relationship? Is one a copy based on the other? Or were the medieval fragments of the original panel partitioned into two separate panels during the mid-nineteenth-century Gérente restoration, each partially medieval and partially modern? What do we learn from the combined evidence they contain about the original appearance of this seminal window in the history of medieval stained glass?

My examination of the Thomson panel itself began with an assessment of its relationship—in terms of style, design, and size—to the other surviving panels from the Infancy of Christ window, and most especially to the arrangement and design of the reconstruction I had proposed for the window in 1986, well before the Thompson panel had come to light. One of the things I had uncovered in my earlier work was the clear division within the window of two, easily distinguishable, artists or hands, who had collaborated in its production.  

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18 Cothren, “Infancy of Christ Window,” 416-47; Cothren, “Suger’s Stained Glass Masters and Their Workshop at Saint-Denis,” in *Paris: Center of Artistic Enlightenment*, ed. George L. Maunier (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 48–51. For the extension of the collaborative work of these two painters in the Crusading window,
pattern had emerged: one artist—whom I named the Jeremiah master (after a panel now in the Burrell Collection)—had taken responsibility for the lower four registers of the window, and the other—my Simeon master (named after a figure in a panel now in Twyercross)—painted the upper three. Since the iconography of the Thomson panel—like the related panel now in the window—situates it in the upper three registers of my reconstruction of the window, I first sought to determine if its painting style was that of the Simeon master.

It is. The face of the sleeping Joseph (Figure 6.6 = Pl. 14) is stylistically comparable to faces of older men in the other scenes in the upper part of the window. Notable and distinctive features of the Simeon master’s style are the configuration of the brows over the eyes, which dip down and curl up over the bridge of the sturdy, substantial nose; the flowing arrangement of the beard, which always includes a set of three alternating curves making up the mouth within the hair and the dimple in the upper lip just under the bulbous termination of the nose. Each of this painter’s long-haired males has ropes of hair, swinging around the head, perpendicular to the downward cascade of the tresses, lending a strong sense of contour to the bold three-dimensionality of the forms. Much more than his colleague who painted the lower part of the window, this painter thought in three-dimensional terms rather than concentrating on the creation of crisp surface patterns; and this predilection is evident not only in Joseph’s head but also in the complex twist of his pose (Figure 6.4), the way the described form of his lower body is set off against the straight flatness of the strip of two-dimensional ornament forming the side of his bed, the way he overlaps the position of the angel messenger, and the way the angel reaches out to cradle the contour of Joseph’s shoulder. The head of this angel (Figure 6.7 = Pl. 15) also conforms to a facial formula employed by this artist—spiked brow, bulging eyes, solid chin, bold nose.

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19 Three dreams of Joseph, stepfather of Jesus, are cited in the Bible, all three in Matthew’s gospel: (1) Joseph is reassured that he can marry the Virgin Mary because her child is conceived by the Holy Spirit (1:20–21); (2) he is directed to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt to avoid the massacre of boy babies ordered by Herod (2:13); (3) he is informed of Herod’s death and directed to take his family home from Egypt (2:19–20). Gérente, and those who advised him in the restitution of fragments of the twelfth-century Infancy window within his nineteenth-century pastiche window, chose to place the fragments of Joseph’s dream early in the story as Joseph’s first dream; but during the twelfth century, it is Joseph’s dreams associated with the Flight into Egypt that are most popular, notably in the west window at the cathedral of Chartres, which has a strong iconographic and stylistic relationship with the Saint-Denis window. Finally, a dream of Joseph in the lower register of the window at Saint-Denis is not a possibility, since the Percier drawing documents a prophet on the left side of the Annunciation, and another prophet from the window survives in the Burrell Collection. See Cothren, “Infancy of Christ Window,” 413–16, which cites the earlier literature.

20 Especially close are the heads of Simeon from the Presentation in the Temple (Twyercross) and Joseph himself from the Flight into Egypt (Glencairn): Cothren, “Infancy of Christ Window,” fig. 8.

21 Cothren, “Infancy of Christ,” fig. 7.
But the medieval portions of the Dream of Joseph from the Saint-Denis window are also painted in the style of the Simeon master (Figure 6.8 = Pl. 16 and Figure 6.9). Stylistic assessment, therefore, confirms the logical placement of the scene within the upper three registers of the reconstructed window, as part of the extended interlude around the Flight into and Arrival in Egypt, but it does not help sort out the questions of authenticity posed by the relationship of the two panels. Those must be decided on the basis of material factors involving the quality of glass and paint.

Parts of the Thomson panel are composed of modern painted glass. The entire upper torso and wings of the angel are modern, and obvious interventions are the strip of red glass at the curving top edge, the strip of blue under Joseph’s bed, and several of the blues in the background. But there are perplexing problems with physical properties throughout the panel. The materials—both glass and paint—comprising the surviving twelfth-century stained glass from Saint-Denis are very distinctive. Some features of the Thomson panel relate it to surviving glass from Saint-Denis—marks of iridescence and characteristic straw marks on the blues, small surface bubbles that pockmark the surface of other colors. As in panels of stained glass from Saint-Denis, the painted articulation uses two tones of vitreous enamel—one reddish, the other a duller and darker sepia brown, and most of the toning washes are in the reddish paint, not the dull paint.
6.8 Abbey Church of Saint-Denis: Dream of Joseph, from the Infancy of Christ window, detail of the head of Joseph (photo: Isabelle Baudoin-Louw). See also Plate 16

6.9 Abbey Church of Saint-Denis: Dream of Joseph, from the Infancy of Christ window, detail of the head of an angel (photo: author)
But the painting of the Thomson panel lacks the three-dimensional, relief-like, “fried” quality characterizing authentic panels from Saint-Denis, especially those painted by this particular artist. And the appearance of the corrosion on interior and exterior surfaces is not only inconsistent with what is seen on other surviving panels; the entire panel seems to have been overzealously cleaned or intentionally textured by aggressive intervention, perhaps through the use of acid or through re-firing or over-firing repainted or scrubbed pieces of glass in the kiln. Also odd is a white deposit or crust that covers paint and glass in areas spread across the panel. No piece of painted glass in this panel is unambiguously twelfth century in character.

With the gracious assistance of a group of French colleagues, in September 2012 I was able to examine the Dream of Joseph from the window at Saint-Denis in close detail, under laboratory conditions. As with the other twelfth-century panels from the abbey church, this one was relatively recently removed from the building and placed into storage in a controlled environment because of the alarmingly rapid deterioration of glass and paint. Scientists and restorers are currently studying these precious works to develop a conservation plan. As part of this process, restorer Isabelle Baudoin-Louw has reevaluated Grodecki’s restoration chart of 1976 and expanded the core of authentic, twelfth-century glass to include almost all of the figure of the standing angel (only the yellow halo is modern) and the entire upper body of Joseph, including his head, which Grodecki had believed was modern. My examination of the panel completely confirmed the validity of her conclusions. Since the nature of the glass, the quality of the paint, and the character of the style argue that these portions of the Saint-Denis panel are original to the twelfth-century scene of the Dream of Joseph, the corresponding portions of the Thomson panel seem to be copies of these originals, created to scale (that is, at exactly the same size) and with an unusually scrupulous attention, both to reproducing every detail of the original painting and to simulating the irregular quality of medieval glass.

Based on the available evidence, therefore, the Thomson panel is most likely a nineteenth-century copy of the original twelfth-century panel from Saint-Denis,

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22 The conservator who cleaned and consolidated this panel for Sam Fogg noted signs of what he called “over-firing” that softened the grozed edges of some pieces of glass that he considered medieval. This may, I believe, be the result of modern repainting and re-firing instead.

23 I am deeply grateful to Claudine Lautier and Isabelle Pallot-Frossard, who arranged permission and coordinated schedules so that I could examine the panel with them; and to Claudine Loisel and Isabelle Baudoin-Louw, who brought their expertise to the conversation that developed around the examination itself.

24 I believe that the only piece of glass within the Thomson panel that could be original to the twelfth-century panel is the mantle that covers the lower part of Joseph’s body. The color, and in certain respects the physical quality, of this glass is related to that used in authentic panels from the glazing of Saint-Denis; but, if original, it has clearly been over-painted, re-fired, and reworked significantly. The possibility remains that this is a modern attempt to simulate the appearance of medieval glass rather than medieval glass subjected to a series of modern interventions.
probably produced in the late 1840s by glass painters in the Gérente atelier before the original panel was dismantled and parts of the angel and Joseph reused within the nineteenth-century panel of pastiche created for the lower register of the current window. But even if not medieval in date, for an understanding of the Infancy of Christ window from Saint-Denis, this workshop copy of the now-dismantled medieval original is extraordinarily important evidence for understanding the window’s design. It both expands and confirms the current reconstruction.

As already mentioned, the style of both the Thomson copy and the original fragments at Saint-Denis match that of the Simeon master who has been identified in the surviving panels from the upper three registers of the window, which recount the Presentation in the Temple and both the Flight into and the Arrival in Egypt (panels now at Twycross, Wilton, and the Glencairn Museum). In the reconstruction of this part of the window that I published in 1986, I proposed that the Dream of Joseph was originally in a small, squarish panel, just to the right of the Presentation. Given the information in the Thomson copy, however, it would be more logically positioned as the semicircular compartment to the left of the Flight into Egypt (Figure 6.10). The shape of the Thomson panel—a semicircle
bulging out to the left—fits precisely the format available in that location within my reconstruction of the overall window design. And since the backgrounds in the Infancy window appear to alternate regularly between red and blue, in this location the background should be blue, as it is in the Thomson panel, not red, as in Gérente’s pastiche panel. Thus the authorship, chronological positioning, compositional format, and background color of the Thomson panel accord with expectations built from the evolving reconstruction of the Infancy window’s design. And the dimensions of the Thomson copy coordinate precisely with the adjacent Flight into Egypt from the Glencairn Museum, as well as with the Dream of the Magi from Raby Castle that occupied a comparable compartment within the window (though at the right rather than the left of a central panel).27

Because of such a confluence of conformities, the Thomson panel proves to be the right shape, the right size, and the right color to fit comfortably into the previously developed reconstructions of the Infancy window at the precise place where it belongs in the chronological unfolding of the narrative. It is also painted in the right style. The panel may be modern, but it is not a forgery. It is a precious and faithful copy of a dismantled original, our only evidence of the design and format of this scene, both confirming and revising our understanding of the window’s design.

27 When I examined the Thomson Dream of Joseph in 2007, I had full-scale rubbings of the lead lines of these two panels so as to confirm that all three were consistent with the window reconstruction, and with each other, in terms of both scale and format.