"The Recollection Of The Past Is The Promise Of The Future": The Medieval Heritage Of Philadelphia's Sacred Windows

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"The Recollection of the Past is the Promise of the Future"

The Medieval Heritage of Philadelphia’s Sacred Windows

Michael W. Cothren

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isaiah 60:1-3

And nowhere in our civilized world could we be more splendidly made aware of this light than in buildings where worshipers are surrounded by stained glass. In Philadelphia’s Catholic churches we are accustomed to gathering beneath constellations of glowing pictures projected from brilliantly filtered colored light. We take for granted the stained-glass windows highlighted in this book because we associate them with the past and present of our own devotional lives. But even if we tend not to question why stained glass is such a prominent feature of Christian architecture today, a time traveler arriving in Philadelphia from eleventh-century Europe would be surprised to see so much colored glass picturing stories and doctrine within broad openings in the walls of our spacious churches. Most visitors from the eighth century would be shocked to encounter the medium at all. Stained glass has not always been the preferred pictorial medium of Christian places of worship. Opaque wall paintings in fresco or mosaic were much more common before the late twelfth century. Had it not been for one visionary abbot, situated in an extraordinarily wealthy monastery at a singularly important moment in its history, another artistic medium might have received the attention of Christian patrons and worshipers. And this book would be celebrating another kind of Christian art.

Fully exploring the reasons why stained glass became so popular would involve many monuments, many places, and many stories, distributed across centuries of artistic and devotional development. It would be impossible to do real justice to such a rich and nuanced history in the space of this short essay. But an appreciation of the modern windows celebrated in this book will be enhanced by some familiarity with the history behind the use of stained glass.

Figure 1 (Facing Page)
The Flight into Egypt (detail)
c. 1140-1144
From the Infancy of Christ window of Saint-Denis, now in the Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: 03.SG.114.
Photo: Lee Cook, Corpus Vitrearum USA
glass in Christian churches. What follows, then, does not pretend to be a comprehensive narrative account of the medium, but rather a loosely connected series of important and relevant vignettes drawn from the larger history of stained glass, vignettes chosen for their relevance to the subject of this book, vignettes which, in forming a contextual backdrop, help answer the question of why stained glass fills the windows of so many Catholic churches in Philadelphia.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

Exodus 20:4

Before discussing the development of stained glass as a major medium of Christian art, it is worth recalling how extraordinary it is that Christians ever decided to use the visual arts at all to convey important doctrines, teach moral lessons, or encourage proper devotion. There were actually some rather compelling reasons for early Christians to avoid putting pictures in places of worship. In the first place, images in such a context could be mistaken for a concession to idolatry. The pagan religions from which early Christians sought to distinguish themselves relied heavily on images to create their appeal. Early Christian authors often reminded members of their audience that they worshiped spiritual beings whereas pagans worshiped physical beings, suggesting that physical manifestations of the deity in worshiping contexts were inappropriate. Around the year 200, Tertullian argued that material things such as art could actually lead the faithful away from Christianity and toward idolatry. Art could be more than suspect; it might actually introduce dangerous temptation. These anxieties of some early Christian writers are underlined by the venerable Jewish tradition out of which they grew. Mosaic law unambiguously prohibited the making of idols. The spiritualized worship implied by this commandment finds strong support in the recorded words of Jesus: “The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23).

In such a context, we might expect early Christian churches to be spare, plain, chaste environments, void of any distracting decoration, especially problematic images of the deity. But the very first Christian place of worship about which we have any extensive information—a baptismal room within the Christian meeting house of the Syrian border town of Dura Europus, dating from around the year 230—is elaborately decorated with wall paintings in a complex collection of modes and messages centering on themes of sin and forgiveness, death and resurrection, all of them most appropriate for the function of the ritual space they surround. We are still not sure why Christians decided to head upstream in this pictorial direction, but we do know that wall painting—principally in the form of mosaic—soon became a standard feature of elaborate Christian churches, and that these visual programs were used not to educate the illiterate but to elucidate Christian theology or occasionally teach moral lessons. One of the most persistent bits of foolishness in the history of art is the widely-held notion that medieval churches contained pictures so that poor, uneducated parishioners might have access to information they could not consult in books. Setting aside for the moment the question of whether illiterate worshipers could in fact read and gain narrative information from pictures in the way their literate counterparts could read stories in
texts, medieval pictorial programs did not actually "tell" straightforward stories. They frequently embodied enormously complicated theological, moral, or political arguments. Instead of direct visualizations of bible stories, they were carefully crafted interpretations of bible stories. They used, rather than reproduced, the scripture, and reformed it tendentiously to teach moral lessons or make theological points. They were visualized sermons rather than visualized scriptures.

O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.

Psalm 26:8

Yet even if pictorialized doctrine and preaching in paint and sculpture on church walls did become pervasive in the Christian architectural tradition, questions about the appropriateness of images in such contexts did not completely disappear after the early Christian period. Perhaps the most famous interludes of anxiety are moments of iconoclastic fervor, such as those sweeping the Byzantine world in the eighth and ninth centuries or moving in the wake of European Protestantism in the sixteenth. In fact, though it could hardly be characterized as iconoclastic, a controversy concerning the appropriateness of certain kinds of art in monastic contexts at the middle of the twelfth century may have been one catalytic factor in the establishment of stained glass as a prominent feature of some Christian churches. The most famous, and certainly the most eloquent, voice in the debate over monastic art was Bernard of Clairvaux, whose well-known Apologia to William of Saint-Thierry claims the inappropriateness of artistic distraction within the cloister, challenging the orthodox place of the visual arts in traditional Benedictine contexts. Those within the monastic world who firmly believed in the important role of art within the abbey did not sit still and watch their views being challenged without responding. The famous treatise on artistic technique written at this time by Theophilus Presbyter has been interpreted as an attempt to justify artistic production by stressing its place within the Benedictine tradition of monastic labor, essentially claiming that the production of art was itself a devotional act. For our purposes here, however, the position taken by Suger, abbot of Saint-Denis (Figure 2), as a champion of orthodox Benedictine attitudes about art are by far the most important. He, more than anyone else, seems to have been responsible for establishing the stained-glass window as a prominent—at times the most prominent—feature of Christian architecture.
This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.

1 John 1:5-7a

Soon after Suger became abbot of Saint-Denis in 1122, he began a program of local reform, restitution, and refurbishment that sought to establish his royal abbey as the undisputed center of both sacred and secular power in France. By the 1130s Saint-Denis was a relatively pious and considerably rich establishment, and Suger initiated plans to reconstruct the abbey church so that its renewed splendor would be commensurate with the abbey's revitalized prestige. A new western entrance complex was dedicated in 1140, and a new liturgical choir was inaugurated in 1144. This rebuilding project is extraordinarily important in the history of stained glass. Most scholars agree that it was during the rebuilding of the choir of Saint-Denis during the early 1140s that the Gothic architectural style was invented. Only the lower story of Suger's new choir has survived (Figure 3), but it preserves key elements of the stylistic revolution. There is a notable attempt to use as little stone as possible to support the stone covering of this space, which is itself disguised by a linear network of tubular rib moldings. In the undulating envelope wall separating inside from outside and defining the separate liturgical spaces of radiating chapels, supporting masonry has been concentrated on structural points so that the wall itself can be realized as a luminous, stained-glass membrane. Slender monolithic columns that unobtrusively punctuate ambulatory and chapels, since they are
considerably more delicate than the stone masses above them, allowing viewers within the choir to enjoy clear vistas of the luminous walls. Everywhere obstructions are kept to a minimum. Even walls between chapels are eliminated to facilitate the flow of uninterrupted space. Substitution of a stained-glass skin for a massive stone barrier in the enclosure walls of the lower choir and unification of interior space are key factors in the Gothic stylistic revolution initiated at Saint-Denis. These architectural features required technological advances in the mechanics of stone structure. The showcased painted windows were enormously expensive in terms of both labor and materials; they had never before been used on this scale. This breathtaking change of architectural direction not only redirected the course of medieval church construction but also initiated the vogue of stained glass and led eventually to the magnificent windows highlighted in this book.

Interpretation of this landmark moment in the history of Christian architecture is greatly facilitated by a singularly important set of texts written by Suger himself to explain his motivations for making the reconstruction of the abbey church one of the foci of his administration. It would be virtually impossible to overemphasize the importance of these precious written documents. Few people in the Middle Ages stopped to write down how and what they felt and thought when commissioning and experiencing works of art. To have such a recorded testimony from the middle of the twelfth century is spectacular good fortune, but to have such a text in association with a building as revolutionary as Saint-Denis, written by so powerful and influential a patron as Suger, is truly astounding. Central to his explanation is a neoplatonic theory in which the intersection of light and art facilitates monastic devotion. Suger rooted his aesthetics in the illustrious history of Saint-Denis, both the monastery and, most especially, the saint himself, since much that Suger says is appropriated from the writings of Dionysus the Pseudo Areopagite, a sixth-century Syrian neoplatonist whom Suger and his monks believed to be the same individual as the titular saint over whose relics the abbey was originally built. In this system, God is considered the one superessential light; Christ is the first radiance, revealing divine light to humans in human form. The Pseudo Areopagite believed that since the incarnation diffused divine light throughout the material world, Christians can come to an understanding of the essential radiance of God aided by earthly radiance. In other words, by contemplating light, worshipers can overcome its physicality and ascend to the spiritual.

Suger’s own words record his personal devotional experience in the church:

> When out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many colored stones has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.

Light is clearly a main factor in this earthly setting for heavenly transport. He describes the new choir as “that elegant and praiseworthy extension, in the form of a circular string of chapels, by virtue of which the whole would shine with the wonderful and uninterrupted
Light of most sacred windows, pervading the interior beauty." He composed this inscription for the bronze doors: "Bright is the noble work; but being nobly bright, the work should brighten the minds so that they may travel, through the true lights, to the True Light where Christ is the true door." It should be clear that the contemplation of light and its reflection in the material world is central to Suger's aesthetics of devotion. Logically, it is also central to our own experience while standing in his glazed choir. It is not surprising that stained-glass windows loom large in the Gothic architectural revolution, since this revolution began at Saint-Denis. But what is equally clear is that these stained-glass windows were multivalent then, just as they are today. On one hand they were an embodiment of the monastic way of life. The goal of the monk was to seek and achieve close communion with God, to unite with God, to live in God's light. Stained glass lived in God's light, was brought to life by it, and was able to capture and maintain it for display. At the same time as they were material symbols of the monastic ideal of union with God, the windows were also tools that could be used by the monk in the meditation central to achieving that union. Suger must have believed that by contemplating the windows, monks might come closer to God, and as he had said, might be able to use windows as means of transport to that "strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven."

Significantly, the twelfth-century stained-glass windows we know about were not installed in the public parts of the monastic church at Saint-Denis but were within the monks' choir, the special domain of the resident congregation. Perhaps at certain times during the year, a broader public might have been allowed to circulate through this space, but during significant portions of each day, only the monks lived within it. In fact, even within the choir itself only one individual could see all of the windows at the same time. Columns, piers, and supports for the building were carefully arranged to line up from the vantage point of the priest standing at the main altar celebrating the Eucharist on behalf of the monastic congregation so that he alone could see the entire set of windows simultaneously. Thus, although the windows were made for the monastic congregation as a whole, Suger accorded the celebrant—sometimes himself—a special position from which to view them at the moment of the reenactment of Christ's sacrifice in the Mass.

Suger's stained-glass windows, then, held a special symbolic meaning and devotional function in general terms, no matter what specific form they took and which iconographic message they proclaimed. But that does not mean form and subject matter are insignificant elements of the glazing. The windows Suger had his artists create for viewing by monks and priests within the abbey were extraordinarily beautiful ones. When discussing all the works of art in the abbey Suger emphasized over and over in his text how the workmanship surpassed the materials (Figure 4); the value of the artistic labor exceeded the considerable value of the materials the artisans used, even when those materials included gold and gems. In the case of the stained-glass windows, Suger mentions not only the exceptionally diverse and distinguished labor force, but also the enormous material costs for this program, singling...
out the blue glass as especially costly. Only wealthy churches had stained glass during this period, and only especially wealthy churches had this much stained glass.

But this is not abstract art. We should be aware not only of its artistic quality and sumptuous materials, but also of the unusual subject matter of these windows. Like most medieval church art these pictures are decidedly not made to educate a rude, poor, illiterate mass of peasants. They are rooted in esoteric textual sources, structured in conformity with a heady philosophical position on the way art can relate to devotion, and demonstrative of a special, scholarly method for interpretation of the scriptures. Even a story as common as the Infancy of Christ (Figure 5), the subject of one of the windows in the axial Virgin chapel, follows a specific, uncanonical narrative source which emphasizes its correlation with an adjacent Tree of Jesse window, a schematic portrayal of the royal and spiritual genealogy of Christ in the Old Testament. Only a scholar could decipher the connections. The subjects of a diptych of windows in a neighboring chapel is so esoteric that Suger composed inscriptions to aid the viewer in reading the complicated meaning of the visual image. In one window, dubbed by scholars the “Anagogical” or “Allegories of Saint Paul” window, Suger outlines a hermeneutic method which urges “us onward from the material to the immaterial” through scriptural interpretation. The companion window demonstrates this interpretive method at work in

Figure 5
The Flight into Egypt
c. 1140-1144
From the Infancy of Christ window of Saint-Denis, now in the Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: 03.SG.114.
This is the best-preserved remaining panel from Suger’s Infancy of Christ window, and it portrays an unusual motif that allows us to know the textual source used by the artists when designing this pictorial narrative of the early events in the life of Jesus. Highlighted at the upper middle of the scene is the Virgin’s gesture of plucking a date from an elegantly reclining palm tree. In Pseudo-Matthew’s apocryphal account of Christ’s infancy, which was very popular during the twelfth century, Jesus’ mother becomes hungry during the long journey to Egypt and begs Joseph to stop and pick her something to eat. His complaint that the dates were too high to reach inspires the Christ Child to command the tree to lower its branches and accommodate the grasp of his mother. This is but one detail of the window which betrays reliance on Pseudo-Matthew. Such faithful coordination of the visual portrayal of a well-known story with a specific textual source strengthens the relationship of these windows to the literate resident audience of monks.

Photo: Lee Cook, Corpus Vitrearum USA
Malchus is Led before the Bishop and the Prefect of Ephesus
1200-1202

A panel from the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus window in the Cathedral of Rouen, now in the collection of the Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: 03.SG.51. This dramatically charged moment of confrontation portrays the climax of a rare bit of hagiography. The Seven Sleepers were a faithful group of Christian courtiers of the Roman emperor Dacius who hid in a cave near Ephesus to escape the persecution of their angry ruler, and while there, they fell into a deep, protective sleep of almost two centuries. Awakening one morning as if from a single night’s rest, their leader, Malchus (identified by his halo at the far left), ventures into the now Christian city to seek provisions. While trying to buy bread with “antique” money, he is arrested and, in the scene portrayed in this panel, accused before the secular and sacred authorities. Of course, the story has a happy ending. The tension of this encounter is resolved when the bishop and the prefect hear Malchus’s story, and the Christian emperor Theodocius II travels to Ephesus to venerate the seven saints whose survival he interprets as a sign of the resurrection of the body. It is probably the rarity of this story that inspired the artists to identify this scene, as well as others from this window, with an inscription: hic antepresulem ducitur (“here he is led before the proconsul”). This window was the work of one of the greatest painters of the period c. 1200, when artists were experimenting with the corporeality of human form revealed by the way drapery falls over bodies, as well as with the creation of recognizable spatial relationships in the overlapping of figures and props. There was also an interest in evoking the human dimension of narrative interaction through facial expressions, dramatic gestures, and the theatrical arrangement of figures. The stained-glass windows of Saint-Denis were conceived to guide monastic meditation, signify the ideals of monastic life, and embody Suger’s special understanding of scriptural interpretation and the metaphysics of light. Without the confluence of these factors in this place at this time, we would probably not have stained glass in the thousands of churches that were built in the wake of Saint-Denis, including those in temporally and geographically distant Philadelphia which are highlighted in this book. But few stained-glass programs which followed the reconstruction of Saint-Denis were motivated by these same monastic ideals. In other words, even if monastic meditation seems to stand behind the origin of the vogue for stained glass in Christian churches, and seems to have initiated the enduring artistic movement, monastic meditation is not necessarily associated with all of the many stained-glass windows that were produced after Suger’s abbey was complete. Each subsequent program embodies special local concerns and addresses special local needs.

Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

What is truly amazing is the speed with which the idea of using stained glass to embody the concerns and messages of Christians in various types of churches traveled through the Ile-de-France and eventually throughout Europe. In the century following the completion of Saint-Denis, the idea of making glowing colored windows a central feature of Gothic architectural interiors spread like a wild fire throughout France and beyond. The development is most prominent in a series of important cathedral projects of the first half of the thirteenth century at places like Chartres and Bourges, Rouen and Reims, Amiens and Beauvais. As might
be expected, since these are not monasteries but grandiose embodiments of ecclesiastical administrative power, where services and rituals are more open to the general audience than those of the monastic choir, the subjects in the windows and the agendas of the narratives change. And this is where things become especially interesting for those of us interested in the later history of stained glass.

The impact of Saint-Denis was primarily in the realm of design. What Suger's reconstructed choir initiated was a trend or fashion for employing one particular medium of painting in close relationship to a new form of architecture. It was the idea of showcasing stained glass, not Suger's programmatic use of stained glass to guide monastic devotion by forming neoplatonic evocations of the deity and hermeneutic icons of anagogy, that traveled across Europe; the medium, not the message, was what caught on and remains fashionable even today. Each time stained glass was created, messages were localized, depending on the aspirations of the resident clergy who conceived the programs and the indigenous audiences they sought to address. In large cathedral glazings like those at Chartres or Bourges, for example, as well as in more modestly scaled parish churches, the lower windows usually told tales of Christian heroes in such a way that they were transformed into sermons that could address contemporary viewers with topical moral teachings (Figures 6-8). Although actually set in the distant past, the lives of these saints and biblical protagonists are acted out in cathedral windows as if they are taking place in the thirteenth-century present so as to underline their relevance to contemporary viewers. It is no accident that narrative windows such as these were placed downstairs in the aisles of these vast churches, within openings that were relatively close to the viewers. Visual sermons need public access; these moral stories need to be followed in detail.

Figure 7

Three Clerics Murdered by an Innkeeper and His Wife
c. 1235—1240
From the St. Nicholas Window of Santeny, Val-de-Marne, France, now in the Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: 03.SG.14.
This gruesome scene is part of one of the most famous episodes from the life of St. Nicholas. An innkeeper was in the habit of killing selected young men while they slept (the nighttime setting of the scene is signified by the candle in the hand of the innkeeper's wife) and later serving their pickled bodies as meat to unsuspecting guests. In this instance, St. Nicholas learned of the tragic fate of these three men, and traveling to the inn, he retrieved their bodies from a barrel of brine and restored them to life, a scene which was portrayed in an adjacent panel joined to this panel to form the pointed top of a lancet window. This unusually well-preserved piece of thirteenth-century stained glass is a good example of the way ornament and narrative presentation were combined within Gothic windows.
Photo: Lee Cook, Corpus Vitrearum USA

Figure 8
Salome Dancing at the Feast of Herod and Herodias
c. 1235
From the John the Baptist Window of the Church of Saint-Martin in Breuil-le-Vert, Oise, France, now in the Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: 03.SG.109. In this stylized composition, frozen in poses of rectilinear regularity, Herod and Herodias are locked in conversation at the dinner table, while beneath them, and thus in front of the buffet, a svelte Salome performs an acrobatic maneuver while holding a sword in her upraised hands. The lavishness of the affair is emphasized by servants who flank the royal couple, one balancing new delicacies in both hands. The beheading of John the Baptist, which is the outcome of this scene, is prefigured both by Salome's prop and the knife held by Herod. Only three panels remain from the John the Baptist window of Breuil-le-Vert, and all three are now in the Glencairn Museum. The companion medallions portray the Baptism of Christ and the martyrdom of the Baptist. The folksiness of style and scene here, especially in comparison with the dramatic grandeur of Figure 5, may betray the origin of this panel in the more humble setting of a parish church, rather than a cathedral.
Photo: Lee Cook, Corpus Vitrearum USA
High above the lower-story narrative windows, installed in the clerestory openings just under the stone vaulted ceiling, were windows of a different order, evocative rather than narrative in conception. Occasionally, monumental depictions of ritualized scenes of human action evoke sacred history (Figure 9); their distance from the viewer precludes the detail necessary for narrative engagement. At times there are huge iconic embodiments of doctrinal ideas, such as the Apocalyptic visions and Last Judgements so popular as subjects in rose windows, or a huge genealogical Tree of Jesse (Figure 10). Usually, however, the upper reaches of grand churches were glazed with extensive congregations of monumental holy figures (Figure 11), clouds of witnesses to use the Pauline formulation, rather than scenes from biblical or hagiographic history. Standing in poses of monumental grandeur under architectural canopies, often sandwiched between vast expanses of the ornamental and essentially colorless grisaille glass (i.e., French for "greyish") that became an increasingly fashionable part of glazing programs at the middle of the thirteenth century (Figure 12), these glassy saints seem to stand as representative members of a heavenly church who hover as a celestial congregation in attendance at the Mass celebrated below for local worshipers. Often the window on the axis signifies either the Incarnation, with a monumental picture of the Virgin holding the Christ, or the redemptive sacrifice in the form of a sparkling crucifix. In either case the relationship between the Eucharistic sacrifice and the axial image is as salient as that formed between earthly communicants and their saintly forebears of the celestial congregation of stained-glass saints. Whether monastic or episcopal, parish or private, these churches were built primarily for the reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass. In many cases stained-glass programs acknowledge and enhance the outfitting of these buildings as liturgical theatres.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Matthew 5:14-16

The combination of sermonizing stories downstairs and clouds of sainted witnesses upstairs—initiated in the monastic glazings of the twelfth century and codified in the great cathedral
St. Julian Resuscitating a Corpse

c. 1320

From the clerestory windows of the Abbey Church of Evron, Mayenne, France, now in the Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: 03.SG.28. This monumental standing figure is a popular regional saint, and the image portrays a single important event in his life—the resurrection of the son of Anastasius—to represent Julian within a series of saints standing under architectural canopies in the upper choir windows of a powerful and important Norman monastic church. Extracted and isolated from its narrative context, the miracle becomes an attribute of his power rather than a part of his life history; there is not sufficient room in the clerestory to tell the whole story. Notable here are the spontaneous painting and wildly expressionistic stylistic conception of the figure and his canopy, characteristic features of Western French glazings of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Also significant here is the use (on the miter and hair of the saint) of silver oxide stain to tint the white glass yellow. This innovative technique was rediscovered or developed early in the fourteenth century as the first instance of the ability to add color to glass in the painting, as opposed to the manufacturing process. Silver oxide stain is still used by glass painters today.

Photo: Lee Cook, Corpus Vitrearum USA

A King from a Tree of Jesse Window (detail)
c. 1210-1225.

The upper part of an enthroned king from the Tree of Jesse Window of the choir clerestory of Soissons Cathedral, now in the Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: 03.SG.229. The monumental rendering of this rigidly regal figure allowed it to be seen by viewers who looked up from the floor to its privileged lofty location in the axial window of the upper choir of this High Gothic cathedral church. The idea of including Trees of Jesse—a schematic representation of the royal and spiritual lineage of Jesus within the kings and prophets of the Old Testament—in Gothic glazings can be traced to Suger’s choir at Saint-Denis, where a window of this theme serves as the pendant to the Infancy of Christ in the axial Virgin Chapel, but this particular window at Soissons is associated with the patronage of King Philip Augustus (1165-1223).^56 Photo: Lee Cook, Corpus Vitrearum USA

Standing Apostles flanking the Virgin and the Crucified Christ within expanses of grisaille in the clerestory glazing of the Cathedral of Beauvais
c. 1260

This view into the upper choir of the tallest French Gothic cathedral shows a glazing formula that originated in the middle of the thirteenth century and remained popular throughout the fourteenth. Called band windows because of the strip of colored glass created by the coordinated placement of figures within expanses of largely colorless and ornamental grisaille glass, the design allowed the viewer to focus on a row of monumental standing apostles who seem to have assembled from above to watch the celebration of the Mass by those gathered below. At Beauvais the Eucharistic association of the celestial group is underlined by the monumental crucifix which appears on axis and includes the iconographic motif of the chalice at the foot of the cross collecting the sacrificial blood of Christ. The adjacent representation of the Virgin would, to medieval viewers, have served not only as a reminder of her sorrow at his death, but even more as a personification of the Church which commemorates that death in the Mass.
projects of the thirteenth—becomes a pervasive system, one which is still in use in Christian churches to this day. But this is not the only enduring feature of pioneering glazing programs of the Ile-de-France. Another is the idea of identifying, within the windows themselves, the patrons and donors whose generosity of mind and money made this complex and expensive art possible. Suger, as usual, initiates the series, appearing in the lowest panel of one of the windows in the axial chapel at Saint-Denis, prostrate as a penitent at the feet of the Virgin during the very moment of the Incarnation (Figure 2). His portrait is identified by inscription to assure his recognition. Some of the best known scenes in the lower-story narrative windows of cathedral glazings portray merchants and artisans trading or producing their wares. These engaging vignettes have traditionally been interpreted as donor "signatures," intended to advertise or certify cheerful pious participation in communal religious architecture, though it has recently been suggested that they may instead bear witness to a less appealing situation where the populace is reminded of their economic subjugation to the overwhelming control of a powerful institutional church. More clearly involved in financial benefaction are the members of the secular and ecclesiastical nobility who frequently kneel within discrete panels, holding miniature depictions of "their" windows (Figure 13), as if soliciting the prayers and recognition of present and future worshipers. In modern churches, we are likely to identify donorship of stained glass windows with written texts, where attention is directed more to memorial commemorations than to personal piety and glorification. This tendency to acknowledge those whose generosity allows such an expensive art form is, however, as much an inheritance of medieval glazing programs as the iconographic design or distribution of color and subject that dominate the windows themselves.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

Revelation 21:1-4
This essay on the medieval background of Philadelphia’s rich heritage of sacred windows has been brief and episodic. I do hope, however, that it has demonstrated that many features—perhaps even most features—we associate with the stained-glass windows so often surrounding us as we worship today, actually descend directly, with little fundamental change, from the pioneering glazing programs of twelfth- and thirteenth-century France. Abbot Suger would clearly be pleased. But after congratulating us on this splendid volume, he would also encourage us, poised at this propitious moment on the edge of a new millennium, to consider the ways in which windows—from the past, present, and future—may be better integrated into the heart of our present devotional practices. Retrospection is the starting point, not the destination. Informed by the past but refusing to cling to it uncritically, perhaps we can better envision our future. Or as Suger might put it, the recollection of the stained-glass past can really be the promise of renewed radiance in our future.

Figure 13

The Donor Petrus

C. 1185-1200
Perhaps from a chapel window at the Abbey Church of Saint-Remi in Reims, now in the Glencairn Museum, Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: 03.SG.11.
This diminutive secular figure (he is neither tonsured nor dressed in liturgical vestments) kneels within a small medallion (slightly over nine inches in diameter) offering in his upraised arms a tiny replica of the window he presumably funded. It is not unusual to see inscribed portraits of medieval donors incorporated within the windows they sponsored, though not all are captured holding the windows themselves in their hands. Although the inscription of this panel may have been reinforced by modern repainting, there is every reason to assume that Petrus was originally this benefactor’s name. Imagine how surprised he would be to see himself highlighted in this book.

Photo: Lee Cook, Corpus Vitrearum USA
Most of the medieval stained glass illustrated in this essay is drawn from the rich collections of the Glencairn Museum of the Academy of the New Church in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania. This little-known Philadelphia area treasure contains the largest collection of French medieval stained glass in the United States, comprised of almost 300 panels with provenances as impressive as Saint-Denis, Chartres, Rouen, Soissons, and the Parisian Sainte-Chapelle. The medieval stained glass of Glencairn was collected by Raymond Pitcairn (1885-1966) as a teaching resource for artists who were working on building a neo-Gothic cathedral for the Swedenborgian New Church community in Bryn Athyn. This ambitious architectural project was initiated in 1912 by Pitcairn’s father, John, under the supervision of renowned Boston architect, Ralph Adams Cram, but by 1917 Raymond Pitcairn had become so disappointed in Cram’s work that he dismissed the architect and abandoned his own law practice to devote his full attention to supervising the cathedral project himself.

To prepare himself for this new job, he traveled to Europe to study medieval architecture and also to New York to see examples of medieval architectural arts in private and public collections. Soon he conceived the notion of collecting medieval sculpture and stained glass himself, so that the artistic community he had established to build the cathedral might derive inspiration from the medieval works of art whose style was being emulated in the neo-Gothic edifice. Pitcairn’s first acquisition of stained glass was a panel of grisaille from Salisbury Cathedral, purchased in 1916. He acquired most of the collection during the 1920s, then bought sporadically into the mid 1930s. During the period of intense collecting, it became clear that Pitcairn needed a larger space for his growing collection. Between 1928 and 1940, therefore, he moved the architectural workshops from the largely completed cathedral project to the construction of Glencain, a new home for his family and at the same time what he referred to as “a little castle for the collection,” part of which was actually incorporated into its walls. It is this building, which, at the death of Raymond Pitcairn’s wife, Mildred, in 1979, was given with the collection to the Academy of the New Church to become the Glencain Museum.39 Further information on its collections and programs can be found at the museum’s web site: www.glencairnmuseum.org.
Notes


2. Quotations from Holy Scripture throughout this essay are from New Revised Standard Version Reference Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993).

3. There is scattered archaeological evidence of painted glass from the ninth to the eleventh centuries in northern Europe and in Italy, and even a fascinating morsel of painted glass from Ravenna dating from as early as the sixth century, but there is no evidence of anything as extensive as the programs that emerge in French churches of the second half of the twelfth century. For this early archaeological material, see Madeline H. Caviness, Stained Glass Windows, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, fasc. 76 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1996), 39-41.


5. In addition to the well-known commandment of Moses in Exodus 20:4, already cited above, see also the more forceful formulations of the same doctrine in Deuteronomy 4:15-18, and 27:15.


7. This seems to be a consistent development rather than a sudden change of direction. See Murray, "Art and the Early Church."

8. On the history of this notion, which can be traced to comments made by Gregory the Great around the year 600, as well as a critique of its validity, see Lawrence G. Duggan, "Was art really the 'book of the illiterate'?" Word & Image 5/3 (1989): 227-51. For its lack of applicability to public church art of the Middle Ages, see, for example, Madeline H. Caviness, "Bible Stories in Windows: Were They Bibles for the Poor?" in The Bible in the Middle Ages: Its Influence on Literature and Art, ed. Bernard S. Levy, (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, vol. 89, 1992), 103-47; and Kathleen Nolan, "Ritual and Visual Experience in the Capital Frieze at Chartres," Gazette des Beaux-Arts (February 1994): esp. 63-66.


10. For the most thorough discussion of the Cistercian viewpoint in this twelfth-century debate, see Conrad Rudolph, The "Things of Greater Importance": Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), which also includes an English translation of Bernard's crucial text.


13. Scholarly literature on Suger is vast, addressing his importance for twelfth-century political, ecclesiastical, and architectural history. See especially Erwin Panofsky, "Introduction," Abbot...


16. For English translations of sections of this text relevant to a study of the building, see *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church*.

17. It was Erwin Panofsky who developed and championed this Pseudo-Dionysian explanation for the revolutionary character of the architecture of Saint-Denis and who credited Suger for its implementation: *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church*, 18-26. Although I remain persuaded that the Dionysian connection is at least part of the explanation for the appearance of Suger's Gothic choir, Panofsky's domineering viewpoint has recently been challenged by Peter Kidson, "Panofsky, Suger, and St Denis," *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 128 (1996): 179-94.

18. Suger is sharing his reaction to the jewels in the metalwork of the abbey: *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church*, 62-65.

19. Ibid., 100-101.

20. Ibid., 46-49.


23. Ibid., 72-74.


26. Although Panofsky makes no mention of the Infancy window which accompanies it, he cites the Tree of Jesse window specifically in his text: *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church*, 72-73. This iconic construction, which became a very popular subject for stained-glass windows in the wake of Saint-Denis (most famously in a near copy installed in the west façade of the Cathedral of Chartres), is rooted in Isaiah 11:1. For its history, see Arthur Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934).


29. This is not to say that monastic churches ceased using stained glass nor that these creative centers did not continue to motivate developments in this medium. See Lillich, "Monastic Stained Glass."


33. For a general study of the character of these lower story narrative windows, specifically how they told their stories, see Caviness, "Bible Stories in Windows"; and the denser and more problematic Wolfgang Kemp, *The Narratives of Gothic Stained Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).


35. For the development and history of band windows which combine full color and grisaille glass, see Meredith Parsons Lillich, "The Band Window: A Theory of Origin and Development," *Gesta* 9 (1970): 26-33, and *The Armor of Light: Stained Glass in Western France 1250-1325* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 6-8, 63-69. The increasing use of grisaille in French glazings after the middle of the thirteenth century has been explained in various ways. It has frequently been evaluated as an attempt to economize or as the result of a change in artistic fashion. Recently, however, Lillich has evaluated it in relation to changing interpretations of the Pseudo-Dionysian text in monastic theological circles. In addition to the studies cited above, see eadem, "Monastic Stained Glass."

36. Although we are not certain what sorts of stained-glass windows, if any, were installed in the clerestory of Suger's choir at Saint-Denis because it was replaced in the thirteenth century with the glorious Rayonnant superstructure that survives to this day, we do know that other twelfth-century monastic buildings, such as those at Canterbury and Saint-Remi at Reims, had "narrative" windows downstairs and monumental figures upstairs. For them, see Madeline H. Caviness, *The Early Stained Glass of Canterbury Cathedral, Circa 1175-1220* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), and *Sumptuous Arts at the Royal Abbeys in Reims and Braine: Ornatus Elegantiae, Varietate Stupendes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

37. E.g., Grodecki and Brisac, *Gothic Stained Glass*, 33.

38. For this provocative alternative reading of these scenes as visual documentation of "the required offerings by the faithful and the obligatory presentation of work or its product by tradesmen employed by the cathedral canons and bishop," see Jane Welch Williams, *Bread, Wine & Money. The Windows of the Truces at Chartres Cathedral* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), esp. 3, 17-18, 29-30, 139-45.


41. For this panel, its window, and its iconographic sources, see Cothren, "The Infancy of Christ Window."

42. For this fascinating window and its artist, see Cothren, "The Seven Sleepers and the Seven Kneelers: Prolegomena to a Study of the 'Belle Verrières' of the Cathedral of Rouen," *Gesta* 25/2 (1986): 203-26.

43. For an identification of this panel with the church of Santeny, see Brisac and Marie-Agnès Féraud, "La verrière gothique de Santeny (Val-de-Marne) et son panneau de Glencairn Museum (Pens.)," *Revue de l'art* (1988): 42-46.


46. For this panel, see Hayward in *Radiance and Reflection*, 140-42.

47. For the spectacular glazing of the Cathedral of Sézé, see Lillich, *Armor of Light*, 168-220. For the grisailles in the Glencairn Museum—this is but one panel among many—see Helen Jackson Zakin, "Grisailles in the Pictairn Collection," in *Studies on Medieval Stained Glass*, 82-92.

48. For an argument associating this panel with the original glazing of Saint-Remi at Reims, see Caviness, *Sumptuous Arts*, 355-56.