Some Personal Reflections On American Modern And Postmodern Historiographies Of Gothic Stained Glass

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Almost everyone loves stained glass, especially Gothic stained glass. There is the scintillating color, the consummate craft, the mysterious glow. Most introductory art history survey courses in American colleges and universities must devote at least a few minutes to the subject when characterizing the “Gothic period,” showing at least a few seductive images. But what do the art historians who teach these foundational, introductory classes to American undergraduates actually say about Gothic stained glass? What are the things that need to be conveyed from the outset about the significance of painted windows for the history of art? What did they actually mean for those who funded them, for those who made them, and for those who initially viewed them?

Recently, these have become especially compelling questions for me. Since becoming co-author of Marilyn Stokstad’s introductory art history textbook, I have been reflecting on the Gothic passages in the text books of an earlier generation, associated with giant historical forebears like Helen Gardner, H. W. Janson, and Frederick Hartt. Stained glass is present in these venerable books, as well as in the more recent books that have followed them, but it does not figure large. For Gothic architectural arts, structure and sculpture occupy much more space and attention; for painting, the emphasis is on the small-scale, intimate art of the book. Little, if any attention is directed to the subject matter and meaning of stained-glass windows, aspects quite prominent in the discussion of Gothic portals and manuscripts.

Two themes predominate in the brief attention to stained glass: abstract symbolic meaning and multi-colored atmospheric lighting. Here is an example of the broad claims for symbolism: “the formal qualities of light had been associated with Christ and divinity since the early Christian period” or “to express the relationship between light and God’s presence in a distinctive way.” Stained-glass windows are also credited with turning “solid architecture into a floating vision of

1. This personal reflection, based on almost four decades of research on French medieval stained glass, does not pretend to be a comprehensive state of the question on 20th- and 21st-century medieval stained-glass studies. For a more expansive sense of recent scholarship in the field, see the spectacular critical overview of B. Kurmann-Schwarz and C. Lautier, “Recherches récente sur le vitrail médiéval 1998–2009,” Künstchronik 63 (2010), 261–304, 313–356. Many colleagues and friends have advised and listened as I gathered these reflections, or have aided in finding published sources and publishable images. I owe special gratitude to Stacy Bomento, Painton Cowen, Colum Hourihane, Timothy Husband, Alyce Jordan, Meredith Lillich, Susan Lowry, Gordon Plumb, Helen Ronan, Stewart H. Rosenberg, Mary Shepard, Sarah Touborg, and Paul Williamson.


5. Ibid.
the celestial heavens.” In other words, the medium is the message. What is portrayed in these windows is incidental; their primary significance is as embodiments of traditional Christian light symbolism.

The second theme in art history survey books is atmospheric architectural illumination. With stained-glass windows “Light and color were diffused throughout the interior of the cathedral” or “The entire cathedral in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries became a framework to hold stained glass, which inevitably darkened the interior but had its own indescribable beauty of color and pattern.” This idea of darkness continues in another text that perceptively combines “the wonderfully warm and vibrant effect” of interior decoration with abstract symbolism: “In reality, the windows admit far less light than one might expect; they act mainly as huge, multicolored diffusing filters that change the quality of ordinary daylight, endowing it with the poetic and symbolic values so highly praised by Abbot Suger.”

This concentration on light-saturated Gothic spirituality may explain why so few stained-glass windows appear in these books, as well as why they are folded into discussions of architecture. In my own efforts to bring a few more windows into Marilyn Stokstad’s book, I have been warned that there is an awful lot of stained glass in the Gothic chapter. But can we imagine a world where the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican would be discussed primarily as a work of architecture, its ceiling paintings characterized by the way they opened up the top of the building, projecting pictorial space illusionistically upward into a colorful, fictive world, with no discussion of Michelangelo’s complex compendium of biblical narrative and theological juxtaposition? That is the sort of world in which survey discussions of Gothic stained glass seem to be stuck.

To put it another way, most survey text books—and I can only assume most of the courses that use them—still cling to a limited, Modernist approach to understanding Gothic stained glass, while the specialists who study this major medium of Gothic painting have progressed to a Postmodern, complex, and certainly more nuanced understanding of the significance as well as the meaning of these works. I will begin by exploring the context of this perhaps overly broad and generalized assessment.

Before the mid-twentieth century, the study of European stained glass—except for a few acknowledged “masterpieces,” such as Chartres and the Sainte-Chapelle—was largely the domain of local antiquarians writing with great pride, and often with great sensitivity and insight, about the art treasures of their towns and their regions. World War II altered this landscape, and introduced the richness of Gothic and Renaissance stained glass into a broader art-historical enterprise. During the late 1930s across Europe, precious works of art from public and religious monuments, including many stained-glass windows, were taken out of their original buildings and hidden in storage to protect them from destruction. After the war, before they were returned to their buildings, many of these works were restored in consultation with art historians.

It is difficult to overemphasize the impact of this situation for stained-glass studies. Divorced from the architectural context that had kept them at an intimidating remove from those who would examine them, the now-isolated windows were available for close scrutiny. These proximate, out-of-context investigations focused quite naturally on the fine details of painting style and the process of production, aspects of this art that were difficult—often impossible—to evaluate when the windows were installed. In France, the post-war restoration of stained glass was complemented by a vast project to photograph every window, panel by panel, making them available to scholars in the future as well as the present.

11. International cooperation in this work eventually blossomed into the Corpus Vitrearum Medi Aevii project. See Kurmann-
From this situation, a whole new history of stained glass emerged, and since isolated looks emphasize certain things about works of art, the nature of this availability formed, to a certain extent, the art-historical project. Close access privileged iconographic study (that is, the identification of subject matter in individual windows) and formal assessments that revealed relationships among windows and provided evidence of the means of production. Stylistic study became the raw material to reconstruct the nature of medieval artistic workshops.

I will refer to this as the "Modernist approach" to the study of Gothic stained glass, and it was established and codified principally—especially for American specialists—by Louis Grodecki (1910–1982), a Polish, expatriat in France who established close ties to scholars in the United States, with whom he collaborated to create a new, scientifically rigorous form of stained-glass studies. This mid-twentieth-century Modernist approach focused on four interpretive threads, two old and two new. Modernist Scholars continued two intertwined traditional assessments—still reified, as we have seen, in art history survey textbooks—by stressing first that the medium here was part of the message, that traditional Christian light symbolism was behind the popularity of stained glass, and second that these windows functioned, at least in part, as interior decoration within the larger project of Gothic architecture.

In short, they transformed sunlight into a multicolored haze that dematerialized architecture and stressed its relationship to visions of the heavenly Jerusalem. But the closer examinations of individual windows guided Grodecki and his Modernist followers to supplement these chestnut generalizations with more specific interpretive projects. Two, I think, are most significant.

I would label the first "window as idea," and it generated from German trends in art-historical thought that were brought to the United States in the 1930s, most notably by Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), who was Grodecki's colleague at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, during 1950–1951. After this experience, Grodecki moved beyond the identification of subject matter to probe its rationale, its relation to particular local and theological contexts. He focused this inquiry on the unusually learned and obtuse windows from Abbot Suger's reconstruction of the abbey church at Saint-Denis, especially a diptych in one choir chapel (Fig. 1) where in the window on our right, an "anagogical" method of Biblical interpretation, mined from the Pauline epistles, is symbolically outlined, while in the pendent window, on our left, this method is put into practice to find Christian meaning in a series of events from the life of Moses.

But in this and other Modernist studies of individual windows, exquisitely crafted by Grodecki and his followers, little attention was given to the way these


13. E.g., Grodecki, Le vitrail gothique (as in note 12), 22. More recently, however, our understanding of the complexity of light and color symbolism and meaning has been expanded: e.g., J. Gage, "Gothic Glass: Two Aspects of a Dionysian Aesthetic," Art History 5 (1982), 36–58; and M. F. Lillich, "Monastic Stained Glass: Patronage and Style," in Monasticism and the Arts, ed. Timothy G. Verdon (Syracuse, 1984), 207–254. See also the more recent studies cited in Kurmann-Schwarz and Lautier, "Recherches récentes" (as in note 1), 326–327.

14. Grodecki's classic article set the stage here: "Le vitrail et l'architecture au xiiie et au xiiiie siècle," Gazette des Beaux-Arts 36 (1949), 5–24. See also Grodecki, Le vitrail gothique (as in note 12), 17–22. This remains a concern of contemporary stained-glass studies: Kurmann-Schwarz and Lautier, "Recherches récentes" (as in note 1), 325–326.

15. The bibliography on this father-figure of modern American art history is vast and rich. See his entry in the online Dictionary of Art Historians: http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/panofsky.html.

16. Grodecki's fundamental work on the glazing of Saint-Denis is contained in two volumes of the French Corpus Vitrearum
FIGURE 1. Saint-Denis, Abbey Church, diptych of windows in a choir chapel: Anagogical (or Allegories of Saint Paul) window on the right and Moses window on the left, early 1140s (photo: author).
windows were used by worshipers in buildings constructed for Christian liturgy, not scholarly research. Production of meaning rather than its reception was the focus, and the search was for the textual sources used by designers rather than the impact of this art on viewers—in other words, Panofskian iconography and iconology.\footnote{17} Gothic windows were seen as visualized ideas, rooted in an intellectual and theological culture of texts, not the rituals of religious life.

The second of the new trends that emerged from a close scrutiny of windows became more central to the work of Grodecki, his students, and his contemporaries. It could be called “production management,” and used the scrutiny of style—both the minute details of painted execution and overall window design—to sort extant windows into workshops associated with regional tendencies.\footnote{18} As with iconography and iconology, the emphasis here was on evaluating works in relation to their production rather than their reception. In the process Gothic stained glass was confined to a relatively closed art world, dominated by the personal styles of masters and the regional trends of artistic formation—windows were products of influence, tradition, and innovation, operating within a situation similar to the Modern art world that was flourishing around these Modernist scholars. Like the emerging narrative about Modern art, this Modernist account of Gothic stained glass was rooted in the energy of artists more than the expectations of patrons or the experiences of a larger public, was more about facture than function.

Most current American specialists in Gothic stained glass, myself included, learned from Modernist practitioners, most of whom trace lineage to Grodecki through his own students.\footnote{19} And our work rests on an assumption that light-filled architecture carried theological meaning—that the medium may have delivered some of the message—although few of us would consign these works, even in part, to the realm of interior decoration, meant to dissolve the solidity of stone architecture with filtered light and essentially illegible in terms of subject matter or content.\footnote{20} Most of us still believe that windows were produced in inter-active

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\footnote{18} Grodecki’s influential method of determining workshop identification based on stylistic assessment was most clearly outlined in “A Stained Glass Atelier of the Thirteenth Century: A Study of the Windows in the Cathedrals of Bourges, Chartres, and Poitiers,” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 11 (1948), 87–111.

\footnote{19} I owe my own formation as a specialist in the study of stained glass to the generous and insistant guidance of Jane Hayward (1918–1994), Curator at The Cloisters and, during the 1970s and 1980s, adjunct professor at Columbia University, who was sent, soon after the end of World War II, by Sumner Crosby to work in France with Louis Grodecki on a stained-glass dissertation topic. See M. Stokstad, “Jane Hayward (1918–1994): ‘Radiance and Reflection,’” Women Medievalists and the Academy, ed. Jane Chance (Madison, Wis., 2005), 781–788.

\footnote{20} The ultimate extension of this still-popular explanation of Gothic stained-glass as interior decoration is a lingering and widespread assumption that when installed in their architectural context, windows were unreadable, that the subjects, symbols, and stories represented within them could not be seen well enough by medieval viewers to be identified, much less understood. This is straightforwardly false. Even in a program as dizzyingly complex as the Parisian Sainte-Chapelle, where the individual scenes within narrative windows are relatively small, the artists who designed them took viewer vantage point into consideration in devising spare compositions populated by strongly silhouetted figures. Painted articulation is bold and forceful. Even in the tracery lights at the top, the identities and actions of the figures are clear, narratives are legible, and meaningful associations are discernible by viewers well-informed or well-directed enough to grasp them. Similarly, windows installed in the vast spaces of cathedrals such as Bourges and Chartres, were designed specifically to take their lofty locations in the high clerestory windows into account, specifically so that they could be seen and “read.” Gothic stained glass was not an abstract art, even if some current viewers who find the subjects unfamiliar and the messages obtuse or unsavory choose to see it that way. We must keep in mind that we are not the intended audience for these windows.
artistic communities, within workshops, reflecting traditions and absorbing influences, and that stained-glass windows frequently embody ideas, especially those aimed at learned audiences.

But most of us have moved beyond such Modernist concerns to explore now more nourishing Postmodern questions and broader Postmodern understandings. I am probably using this word "Postmodern" in a personal, perhaps Postmodern way. What I mean is that we are envisioning these works within a less tidy and more human-centered context of production, and most especially reception. Instead of confining them to an insular art world, we seek to conjure up how they functioned within Gothic social systems, ritual communities, and ideological frameworks. They are now allowed more than one context of meaning, as reflections of the deepest values and concerns of worshipers and patrons, rulers and bishops, women and men across the social order.

This humanizing and pluralizing Postmodern approach has revisited the production management concerns of Modernist interpreters, attempting to turn the artists within workshops or large cathedral projects into distinctive human beings, whose styles transcended regional or workshop definition. Meredith Parsons Lillich has been a pioneer here. Assessing two artists who worked side by side in the glazing of the Norman Cathedral of Séé (c. 1270–1285), she characterizes the Jean de Bernières Master's style in a representation of Saint Peter (Fig. 2a) through the "truncated, squirrel-like arms and hands, small knoblike heads on real necks; a torsion between the angled upper body and straight legs, and a careful silhouetting of the contained form against the ground." She contrasts the style of this painter with another, her Magdalen Master, who used the same design but gave it his own stamp (Fig. 2b). She says, "The Magdalen Master is an expressionist of flair and power, whose art, while related in its distortion to the Jean de Bernières Master, has thrown care to the winds." By allowing the painters of Gothic windows to have personalities—divergent and distinctive personalities—Postmodern interpreters like Lillich have brought Modernist production management concerns to a deeper level of human interest. Her work may seem speculative, but the rarified air needed freshening.

Other Postmodern explorers have gone elsewhere, opening up the possibility that style might not always be the personal marker of artist or workshop, suggesting it may have been tailor made to a certain extent from window to window, project to project, depending on the message that was being presented or the audience being addressed, sorted by modality not just rooted in individual artists' personality or training. Others have attempted to personalize donors as well.

21. For examples of impressive recent scholarship in the Panofskian mode of iconography and iconology, see Kurmann-Schwarz and Lautier, "Recherches récente" (as in note 1), 318–321.

22. These reflections began as a tribute to Meredith Parsons Lillich, presented as part of a symposium in November 2010—"Medieval Glass Illuminates What Art and Reason Reveal"—organized at the Corning Museum of Glass by Florian Knoth and Eric Ramirez-Weaver on the occasion of her retirement. This written version is affectionately dedicated to her as well, in acknowledgment of and in gratitude for her lasting impact on my life in art history. Meredith not only supported me—I am not sure I would have completed my dissertation without her—but challenged me to ever greater precision of thought and expression. For her own assessment of her life in art history, see "Ars Longa, Vita Brevis (1936–)," in Women Medievalists (as in note 19), 933–944.

23. Much as I admire Lillich's characterization of these artists' windows, and those of their colleagues, in her brilliant book, The Armor of Light: Stained Glass in Western France, 1250–1325 (Berkeley, 1994), it was an earlier exploratory article that was most influential for me: "A Stained-Glass Apostle from Séé Cathedral (Normandy) in the Victoria and Albert Museum," Burlington Magazine 119 (1977), 496–501. Although Grodecki became the central figure in the formation of the Modernist school of stained-glass studies in France and its extension into the United States—because of his academic posts, his international contacts, and his forceful personality—it was his older contemporary, Jean Lafond (1888–1975), who stood behind this aspect of Lillich's scholarship, and thus prefigures this line of Postmodern inquiry. Lafond wrote poetically, perceptively, and profoundly of the art of the masters whose work captivated him—extraordinary artists like sixteenth-century master Engrand Le Prince, perhaps the greatest French painter of the Renaissance. See, e.g., J. Lafond, "La Renaissance," in Le vitrail français (as in note 7), 213–256. Lillich has walked proudly in Lafond's footsteps, and in doing so, inspired many of her own followers, including me, to probe the human dimensions of the staggering stylistic diversity among Gothic stained-glass windows.

24. I have explored this possible interpretation of stylistic diversity in the Virgin Chapel windows from the 1240s at Beauvais...
as artists, exploring how stained glass windows could embody the individual concerns of wealthy nobles, or the ideology of rulers like French King Louis IX who built the Sainte-Chapelle to embody and proclaim the underpinnings of his right to rule, even situating himself, as Alyce Jordan has demonstrated, within a window that recounts his own life.25

Here, however, I want to focus on two other Post-


modern concerns, involving reception more than production, the way thirteenth-century viewers encountered and interacted with these windows more than the way thirteenth-century artists and patrons created them. First, I will stake a claim for some windows as visualized sermons, and then I will try to recreate the way others served as backdrops to set the stage for the performance of the liturgy.

Perhaps the most prevalent generalization about the interaction between stained-glass windows and their medieval audiences is a pervasive claim that these tableaux served as Bibles for the Illiterate, that folks who could not read words were able to gain access to scripture through works of visual art. Of course this is a ridiculous idea. Medieval audiences learned their Bible stories by listening to them, part of a rich oral culture that we cannot recover and usually assume was equivalent to surviving texts. The observers of the stories in stained-glass windows already knew the plots, or they could depend on hearing the plots on site. Madeline Harrison Caviness was a pioneer here. Her powerful article of 1992 argued convincingly for stained glass as an art of strategic story-telling, judicious juxtaposition, and multiple messages. Windows cast familiar stories in a special light, so to speak, interpreted them, used them to teach a focused lesson to a target audience. In this sense, they were similar to moralizing sermons. How the stories are told may be more important than the stories themselves. Clear examples are the Thelphilus windows that are common in thirteenth-century French cathedral glazing programs.

The story of Thelphilus the penitent may have been the most popular miracle of the Virgin Mary during this period because it was a powerful narrative evocation of her ability to intercede in the lives of repentant sinners and because it could be told in a way that would engage those who needed to know its lesson. Thelphilus was a heinous sinner; he entered into an alliance with the Devil himself. But the power of the Virgin—most significantly, in the context of the institutional church and its leaders—was still capable of orchestrating his rescue.

What is particularly stunning about thirteenth-century Thelphilus windows is the immediacy with which the story unfolds. Not only does it take place in the present—that is standard practice in thirteenth-century hagiographic and Biblical narrative—but many scenes are staged as contemporary social or political rituals that would have been familiar to mid-thirteenth-century observers. For example, Thelphilus’s pact with the devil is portrayed as a medieval ceremony in which fealty was signified through the grasping of hands (Fig. 3a). One way the reinstated Thelphilus displays power is through the ceremonial receipt of a fish, presented to the enthroned vidame by a kneeling suitor (Fig. 3b). Certain contemporary viewers would have recognized this as another feudal ritual: obligations were frequently paid in fish, and fish were popular good-will offerings from dependents to superiors. In yet another scene—following his repentance and salvation—Thelphilus is stripped to the waist, kneeling before his bishop for penitential scourging (Fig. 3c). Like


31. Ibid., 324–325.

32. Ibid., 325–327.
the sealing of the pact and the donation of the fish, this scene is rooted in actual thirteenth-century ceremony.\textsuperscript{33}

The sense of immediacy gained through such references to the rituals of contemporary life, in the widely accessible monumental art of a stained-glass window, prominently located in a prominent building, capitalized on the ability of the Theophilus legend to teach its moral lesson in a direct manner to a particular class of thirteenth-century observers. Those who wielded power and amassed wealth were reminded that they were especially vulnerable to the temptations of earthly reward that led to Theophilus's downfall. But they were also assured that even if confused priorities had already compromised their position within the Christian order, repentance could mobilize a powerful ally, the Virgin Ecclesia, who would reroute their lives to the path of virtue. You can come home again.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{33} For example, Robert de Lisle, bailiff of Gerberoy in the diocese of Beauvais, was found guilty in 1247 of usurping power from the local church. His penitential sentence required him to walk from the marketplace to the church with bared feet and shoulders, carrying a switch in his hand. When he arrived he was directed to humble himself before the assembled clergy, promise never again to violate the rights of the church, and receive whatever punishment the clerics wished to inflict on him. After his performance in Gerberoy, he was to repeat the entire spectacle at the Cathedral of Beauvais, where the scene of penitential scourging in the Theophilus window of its Virgin Chapel had probably only recently been installed. \textit{Ibid.}, 328–329.

\textsuperscript{34} For more recent examples of studies of narrative strategies that relate the stories in windows to contemporary or local concerns, see Kurmann-Schwarz and Lautier, "Recherches récente" (as in note 1), 316.
In her already cited, narratological study of the windows of the Sainte-Chapelle, Alyce Jordan has shown that the way stories are constructed in the royal chapel—both the scenes that are chosen and the way they are presented—is equally critical to their ability to “fuse biblical past and historical present in the figure of Louis IX.” Here the idea is not teaching a moral lesson but proclaiming an ideological manifesto. Jordan cites not only the well-known scenes of coronation, but also a conspicuous emphasis on the performance, in the lives of his sacred precursors, of royal duties such as fighting infidels and dispensing justice. She concludes, “Collectively, these themes compose a virtual essay on the topic of kingship that posits Old Testament leaders and exempla for Louis IX and, by implication, identifies Louis—the literal and metaphorical heir to the Crown of Christ—as the virtuous descendent of his biblical forebears.” Identifying the subject matter of these windows is not enough; we need to understand how the stories are told.

But not all Gothic windows used focused narrative strategies to preach sermons or embody political ideology. Some pictured theology. In the Virgin Chapel at the Cathedral of Beauvais—where a Theophilus window appears to the viewer’s right—a central window combines three themes focusing on the relationship of Jesus and his Virgin Mother (Fig. 4). The left lancet contains a Jesse Tree, diagramming Jesus’ descent, through his mother, from the kings of Judah. The flanking lancet on the right outlines Jesus’ early life, celebrating the Virgin’s role as vehicle of the Incarnation. Finally at the summit of the ensemble, in an iconic Crucifixion, the Virgin symbolizes the Church witnessing its institution, while underneath the cross, the original sinner Adam rises from his tomb to gather the blood of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice.

I have argued that the position of this window at the center of the chapel ensemble, visible to worshipers in the main choir as well as within the chapel itself, is important (Fig. 5, lower arrow). The top of the window hovers directly over the head of the celebrant while he re-enacts Christ’s sacrifice by performing the Mass at the main, high altar, just as the whole window hovers above the priest when the same performance takes place within the more restricted space of the chapel itself. In the upper part of the lancets (Fig. 4), visible from the main choir, an enthroned Christ surrounded by doves at the top of the Jesse Tree sits as the culmination of a venerable, sacred, Jewish tradition, while the flanking Fall of the Idols at the top of the adjacent lancet signifies Christ’s acceptance by gentiles, whose pagan deities tumble uselessly at the Holy Family’s arrival in Egypt. Floating above these portrayals of Christ culminating one tradition and supplanting another, is a circular Crucifixion in which he institutes a third.

But such ensembles were not commentaries for scholars—either those who may have conceived them or those, like Panofsky and Grodecki, who labored to interpret their sources and significance. These were stage sets constructed for the performance of the Eucharist. The juxtaposition at Beauvais of this liturgical ceremony and a circular window that portrayed the event this ceremony is meant to commemorate had particular resonance toward the middle of the thirteenth century. At the climax of the Mass, when the celebrant elevated the conspicuously circular consecrated host, and with it the eyes of all present, these relationships—both symbolic and formal—would have been especially clear. After all, the sacramental significance of the Crucifixion is underlined in the window by the portrayal of Adam under the cross, whose elevation of the chalice makes a direct connection between Christ’s sacrifice and the celebration of the Eucharist, both liturgically and gesturally. Full-page depictions of the Crucifixion incorporating Adam, often chalice in hand, at the foot of the cross, were common in thirteenth-century French Missals (Fig. 6), the books that outlined the liturgy of the Mass for priests, so the associations are documented concretely in service books.

For most who viewed the window in the context of thirteenth-century ceremony, however, books were not part of everyday life. The context was more visual than verbal. When these stained-glass windows were

35. Jordan, Visualizing Kingship (as in note 25), 73.
36. Ibid., 28.
37. Cothren, Picturing the Celestial City (as in note 24), 17–24.
FIGURE 4. Cathedral of Beauvais, axial Virgin Chapel, upper registers and rose of axial Infancy and Jesse Tree window, 1240s (photomontage: author).
installed in the Virgin Chapel during the 1240s, the elevation of Eucharistic bread during the Mass was a moment of real consequence. The proper gesture is outlined in the rubric of a Franciscan missal of 1243: as the priest recites the words *Hoc est corpus meum*—"This is my body"—he is given the following instructions: "as the Lord’s body is adored, he raises it reverently with a moderate inclination so that all those surrounding can see it." 38 Such elevations of the host were accompanied by the ringing of bells to assure the attention of the faithful. Special provisions were made for illuminating the host to intensify its visibility. Indeed, seeing was a vital part of lay piety at Mass. Taking communion was mandated only once a year and generally recommended for the laity on no more than three occasions, but viewing the host at its elevation during the Mass

38. As cited in M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991), 56; see also p. 97.
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was a more frequent devotional experience. As Paul Binski has put it, “For the most part Mass was experienced not corporeally, by the consumption by the laity of the Body and Blood, but visually, by the ingestion of the elements of the Mass by the organs of sight ... the elevation of the Host after its consecration and transformation became the central moment of the Mass.”

In thirteenth-century manuscripts—such as in the scene from the life of Edward the Confessor in Figure 7—this moment is often highlighted to represent Christian devotion and priestly activity, becoming a visual sign for the Mass itself. As is clear in this picture, visions were not uncommon at the sight of the elevated host.

At Beauvais, it would seem, whether celebrated at the main choir altar or within the liturgical space of the Virgin Chapel, a vision at and of the elevation of the host was built into the glazing program, a circular illuminated apparition that perpetuated the moment of elevation. Representing the Eucharistic host by both shape and subject, the axial rose in the axial chapel was a continual reminder of the meaning of the Mass, a gargantuan blazing host, stamped with a vision of its roots in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

This is not the end of the story as far as the Cathedral of Beauvais is concerned. The windows of the Virgin Chapel were installed sometime during the

40. For this and other visions of Edward the Confessor during Mass, see Binski, Westminster Abbey (as in note 39), 146 (and for the manuscript itself, 57–63).
41. Rubin, Corpus Christi (as in note 38), 108–129.
1240s, before the upper part of the choir had been constructed. That happened in the 1250s and 1260s, and the stained-glass windows installed there contain not stories, but rows of standing figures, more legible at such a lofty distance from viewers on the floor below. The axial diptych window, situated above the Virgin Chapel, however, certainly evokes a story (Fig. 8). The Crucified Christ hangs from the cross in the right lancet, his arms bent and raised in order to fit this lateral subject into a vertical format, and his mother stands in the lancet next to him, adoring him and at the same time mourning his fate. Underneath the cross, a huge chalice, highlighted in white against the densely colored ground, collects Christ’s blood in an obvious reference to the Mass. Therefore, on axis at Beauvais, in windows upstairs and downstairs, separated in date by several decades, the same theme appears, a theme that takes its meaning in relationship to the Mass celebrated below (Fig. 5). Clearly this is conceived as a setting for a sacred performance in a building that was much more like a theater than the art museum or sacred encyclopaedia that art historians so frequently make it.

I have concentrated here on Beauvais because it is the church whose windows I know best, but I suspect that using stained glass as a backdrop for the Mass was a widespread Gothic phenomenon. At the nearby Cathedral of Laon, there are no chapels surrounding the main altar, which is backed by an entire wall of windows—a gigantic wheel of a rose hovering over three tall lancets (Fig. 9). Consequently, as the priest stood at the main altar reciting the script of the liturgy, these windows appeared directly behind him (or, more strictly speaking, in front of him, since he would have faced them and the altar when saying Mass). In other words, they serve as a huge altarpiece backdrop. The program is not unlike that which we have just examined in the Virgin Chapel at Beauvais. The lancet to the viewers’ right contains an account of the early life of Christ juxtaposed with scenes from the Hebrew Bible that prefigure him, functioning very much like the juxtaposition of Jesse Tree and early life in the central chapel window at Beauvais, only here typology rather than genealogy pictures Christ’s fulfillment of Jewish heritage. In the central lancet, the story of Christ’s passion is told as a sequential narrative rather than condensed into the iconic Redemptive Crucifixion as at Beauvais, but the significance is the same in relation to the Mass, and the scenes are contained in forms that also recall the shape of the Eucharistic host that would be elevated in front of them. The window to the left is divided between the legend of Theophilus and the martyrdom of Saint de Laon. Première approche,” Österreichische Zeitschrift für Kunst und Denkmalpflege 54 (2000), 257–264.
Stephen, commentaries on sin, redemption, and sacrifice, all themes associated with the Mass. And at Laon the elevated host is evoked not in a small rose over paired lancets as at Beauvais, but in the monumental Apocalyptic glorification of the Virgin in the massive rose elevated above all three lancets. The program would have been completed only when the priest was under the windows saying Mass, and specifically when he was elevating the circular host, so it could resonate with the meanings, and also rhyme with the pervasive circular shapes, of the stained-glass ensemble.

As I hope to have shown, the foundational, Modernist, impersonal focus on abstract symbolism, architectural transformation, theological commentary, and production practice, has given way to—or at least been joined by—a new Postmodern attention to viewers as much as the newly humanized makers, to juxtaposed liturgical performance as much as to learned subject matter. These new explorations deserve acknowledgement beyond the insular world of stained-glass studies, even beyond the somewhat broader world of medieval art history. The place to begin is with beginners. We must rewrite pertinent passages in our textbooks and rethink our lectures in art history surveys, making sure to acknowledge that this major medium of Gothic painting conveyed messages to diverse audiences, significant not only in moralizing and theological content, but centrally in relation to their performative context.
