

# BEAUTIFUL BLUE

*Windows by Chagall and Schreiter*

by David Wilde



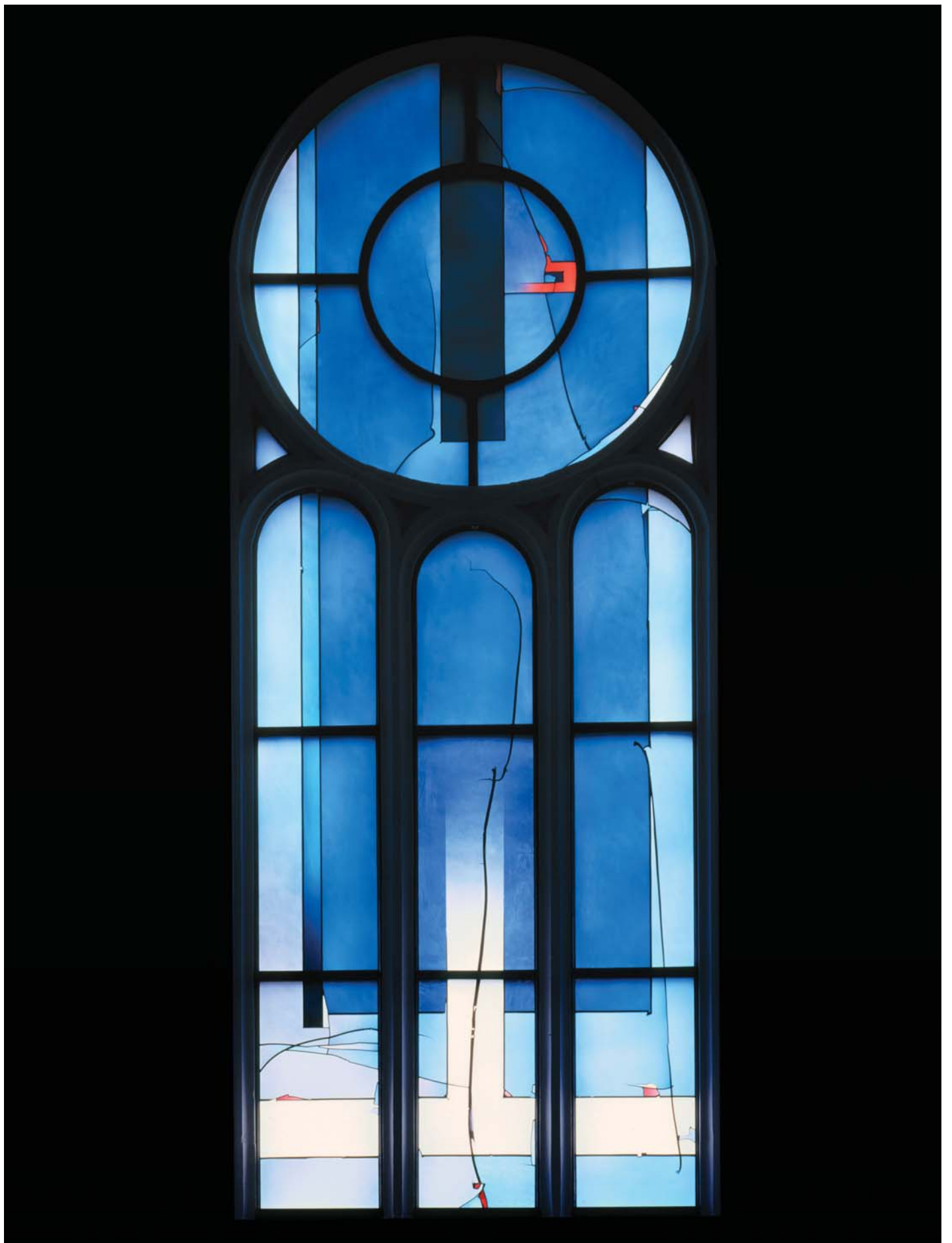
In 2003 and 2004, I had a unique opportunity to see two very stunning examples of stained glass art. One was by the German master designer Johannes Schreiter, the other by master painter Marc Chagall. The color blue figures prominently in both of the commissions presented here, and both artists have a common philosophy on the sym-

bolism of blue. That is, *blue takes the viewer to the beyond*, as Schreiter put it.

*Beyond* is one of the places where a dialogue with the Creator can take place. It sets the “scene” as well as the “tone” of the scene as soon as it is experienced. There is an actual physical phenomenon that takes place with the color blue in stained glass: it recedes. This

*Above: Windows from Chagall’s installation at St. Stephan’s Church, Mainz. Photograph by David Wilde.*

*Opposite page: A window from Schreiter’s installation in the Evangel Church of Mainz/Gonsenheim. Photograph courtesy of Dieter Klenk, the patron of the Schreiter windows.*





*Chagall window at St. Stephan's Church  
Photograph by David Wilde.*

aspect of blue and to a lesser extent, some greens, puts the plane of the blue portions of the windows behind the actual window opening. The depth results in the perception that the message from the blue, representative of the dwelling place of God, comes as close as is symbolically possible (and permissible) of depicting the Deity.

In Mainz, a city near Frankfurt, and just across the river from Wiesbaden, are two churches with blue windows. Johannes Schreiter has six large windows in the Evangel Church of Mainz/Gonsenheim, which, oddly

enough, sits on an island between two rivers of asphalt pavement. There are no buildings crowded around it, and Schreiter's works can be appreciated from both outside and in.

The windows were the perfect commission for him because there were no limitations or impositions on what Schreiter had to do. What he wanted, then, was to create a surround for the congregation to feel the presence of God, and the color blue was chosen as the main vehicle for this intellectual communication. Schreiter is very serious about this aspect of his work, and he

states that everything that he does — not just designing windows — has to serve his Creator. He uses opaque glass, selected from a special palette of glass reserved for his use only, at Derix Glas Studio, in Taunusstein, just a few kilometers away.

His choice of a predominantly blue motif is to make use of the receding properties of the color, to encircle us in an embrace that is *beyond*. Opaque glass has the tendency to stop the visual access to the exterior, and that is what Schreiter usually wants. It has the tendency, also, to stop much of the halation



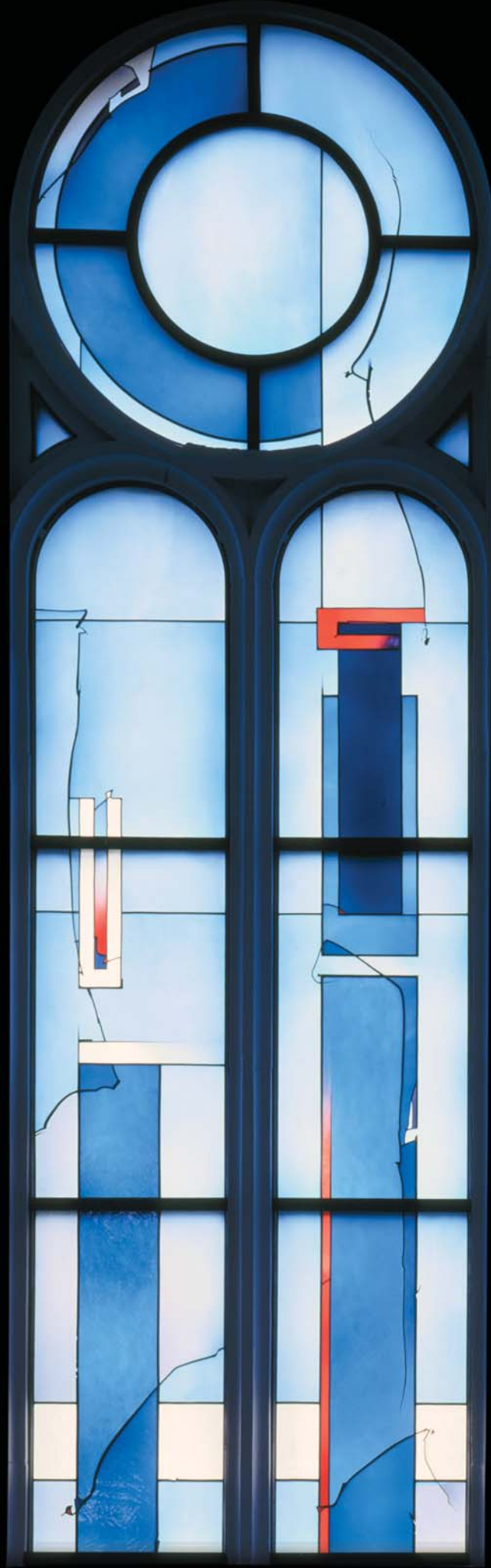
*Schreiter window in the Evangel Church of Mainz/Gonsenheim.  
Photograph by David Wilde.*

aspects of light, which softens the effect of the penetration of the color, maybe just a little too much. Instead, Schreiter has made use of the blue expanses in this commission as a celestial canvas for his graphics, which include red and white colors, and his trademark gestural painted or structural linework. The result is more of an intellectual challenge than a directly informative story. I have seen many of this artist's works in this area of Germany, and I would conclude that this approach is his most definitive characteristic: leaving the story for us.

In the same city of Mainz, is St. Stephan's Church, which is in a small square, surrounded by buildings, and even though it is on a hill, it is not visible until reaching the square on foot. Marc Chagall was asked to design the windows of the apse in the mid 1970s, and they were completed in 1981, when Chagall was 91. From the outside, you could make out the lead lines that characterize the Simon Studio's interpretation of Chagall's work, and this does not excite the viewer particularly. But once inside, all is forgiven. Chagall uses his beautiful cobalt blues as a backdrop for

his painted Biblical scenes. Here, Chagall and Schreiter are in physical agreement about the blue phenomenon. Simon carefully etches away some of the blue to surround the etched and painted scenes by Chagall. The blues recede, and the scenes come toward the viewer. Chagall also shares the symbolism of blue representing the Deity.

This church was destroyed by fire in 1945 during the war. Its reconstruction was carefully accomplished through a massive effort, culminating in the invitation to Chagall to design the apse windows. Illustrations from both the Old



and New Testaments share an equal amount of space. Reconciliation between Jew and Christian, and between French and German, was approached with a guided hand and heart by Chagall, a French Jew. The aisle windows, by Charles Marc, completed in the 1990s, follow the lead of Chagall's cobalt blues and, to a certain extent, unintrusive glass painting. The effect is much more pronounced than the blue surround by Schreiter, mainly because of the use of clear, antique glasses that have been etched and painted, and are not opaque.

This allows for much more penetration of light, especially the blues, even on a darkish day when I was there in 2003. The use of figures to tell some of the stories of the Bible are pure Chagall, but they are secondary to the effects. The viewer can almost swim in this pool of light; it is stunning.

Some of the technical aspects of the works by these two artists in these churches might help to explain how their different approaches have accomplished such similar and yet dramatically different effects. Johannes Schreiter does full-size cartoons of his design sketches. His colors are then selected from the glass at Derix's, or ordered to be made especially for this (and each) commission. Where the blues are not intense enough, they are spray enameled and fired to the desired level. If that is too much, an acetic acid (vinegar) bath removes some of this enamel.

The windows were installed in 2002, exactly 50 years after windows behind the altar, donated by the father of this commission's patron, Herr Dieter Klenk, an industrialist in the paper business. But when Schreiter revisited the church, he noticed that in certain light situations, some of the blues appeared to have been contaminated with some red enamels, giving an undesirable purple effect. These panels were removed in 2003, and I was able to see them being reworked in the

studio. In 2004, I returned to Derix Studio, with a grant to experiment with plate glass, and was able to see the reworked panels installed. Now the blues were exactly as planned. As an aside, my experiments did not survive the annealing process, and I am not the millionaire I was hoping to be. Sigh.

Schreiter's graphic lines are either painted on the glass or are done by intricate leading. A length of line of 10 cm might contain a dozen pieces of lead, carved just so. The studio leads up the panels for viewing on the huge easel at Derix, and these panels are soldered on one side only. When approved, they are completed, but the border leads are not soldered on the back, nor are the backs cemented. This is to allow for such adjustments that might, and did, occur when the windows are installed. Some of the "impossible" cuts result in breakage with time, and this permits repairing with ease. A special border lead is used around the panels that slot into the openings and have breathing holes drilled into them and their support bars.

There is a movie of Chagall's painting methods circulating somewhere; I think it might be about his windows in Chicago. At any rate, Simon Studio prepared all the glass, applied etching, and loosely assembled the glass in panels that were shipped to Chagall for painting. Chagall gave the panels life; this overcomes the tedious and much maligned lead work of Simon.

Chagall applies the paint with brushes and uses his fingers, cloths, and sticks to adjust the painted surfaces. He bangs away at the floppy panels, and, in the movie, you would think they would crack, but they don't, and Simon Studio in Rheims, France, takes them apart, fires them, reassembles them, and installs them.

Schreiter, in his use of blues, wants us to breathe "colored air" without the distractions of the exterior's "tattered" conditions. In such isolation, he wants

the soul to find peace in the blues because blue does not "contain," it enhances an inner dialogue.

There is no "story" depicted, the colors just "are." Chagall gets the same opacity even with clear antique glass, because the sky is usually the background for most windows when the viewer is seated or standing while at worship. More color comes through, however, and the physical effect is more palpable than the intellectual effect desired by Schreiter.

Both of these churches are ideally located in Mainz and are close to Frankfurt, the city with the busiest airport in Europe. You can take the train from Frankfurt airport directly to Wiesbaden, and Wiesbaden is just across the river from Mainz. Derix Glas Studio is just a few minutes by car in Wehen, Taunusstein. The wonderful Derix family and studio workers will welcome you warmly, but do not drop in unannounced. There is accommodation nearby, and the studio always has international artists working on huge commissions all over the world. The Gallery has samples of technical and artistic accomplishments, so when you're there, be sure to ask where mine is.



*David Wilde has a small studio in rural Ontario and likes to experiment with etching and sandblasting. He travelled to Germany in 2003*

*and 2004 to work at Derix Studio, met with Johannes and Edith Schreiter both times, and was able to meet Herr Dieter Klenk, the patron of the Schreiter windows. Mr. Klenk has graciously consented to the use of some of his images of the windows in Evangel Church.*