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How Landscape Has Inspired My Stained Glass

by Ellen Mandelbaum

Direct Glass Painting From Nature

I have always enjoyed the beauty of light falling on landscape but usually have been traveling too quickly in a car to take the time to paint it. It has been my desire to bring paints with me and stop to paint whatever beautiful scene I saw when I saw it. Sometimes I actually was able to stop and paint the scene, so I made many watercolors over the years.

Soon after I learned to paint on glass, I planned to paint these epiphanies of landscape and light on glass. So when we were going to Martinique in 1994, I took along several squares of antique and opal glass and glass paints and gum. Toward the end of our stay, I gathered the glass, the paints and a palette and sat on the beach to paint. I felt like a French Impressionist. I concentrated and blissfully merged with the beautiful scene and so painted three glass pieces of Diamond Rock Mountain. Increasingly, I was able to understand what I was painting, and so I simplified each rendition as I painted. I incorporated scratching and brushing away the paint in a glass painterly way. The glass was propped on my knees, and I couldn't see the glass very well as I worked. I wrapped the panels carefully and packed them in the middle of soft clothing in our suitcase for our return home. Miraculously, they survived the trip, and one became the centerpiece of "Martinique," which was a seminal work for me. Two went into "Golden Martinique," a larger panel.

Painting Like an Impressionist

Every now and then I tried this *pleine air* painting again. In 2005 I made a special trip, hiking over a small ridge toward Audubon Marsh on the Hudson River with several cut glass pieces in my backpack. My husband helped me carry my supplies and also gave me a hand on

the rickety path to the marsh. This time I included silver stain, as well as black paint. I leaned the small glass panels on a wooden fence and looked out over the marsh toward West Point. Some of the trees beyond the marsh had foliage that was golden in the light. I was able to interpret this as silver stain. When I returned to my studio, I fired the painting and made some additions to clarify the form and space. I think this is the way many of the earlier Hudson River Landscape artists had worked. I was happy to be in that tradition. This small panel is called "Constitution Marsh."

Incorporating Nature on a Grand Scale

Minnesota has many lakes. The Morning Chapel at Adath Jeshurun in Minnesota surrounded a lake that my clients described as "an ordinary lake." It became my task to distract or hide several houses at one side, which seemed ugly. I understood that this was also an opportunity to bring in views off the rest of the lake. The theme of this chapel was "God creates the world anew every day." So using clear and reamy glass, I began to look for opportunities to incorporate beautiful real landscape along with my painting. This was very successful, and I loved the particular effect of how the painting looked. This project won the AIA Interfaith Forum on Religious Art and Architecture Award of Excellence.

It was pointed out, however, that uncontrolled building development in the future might bring in ugly buildings as part of the design. It has been more than 10 years and this has not happened to Adath Synagogue in Minnetonka.

An Expanded Context

When I was commissioned to make glass for Marian Woods, a retirement



Top: Martinique and detail (middle).

Bottom: Constitution Marsh

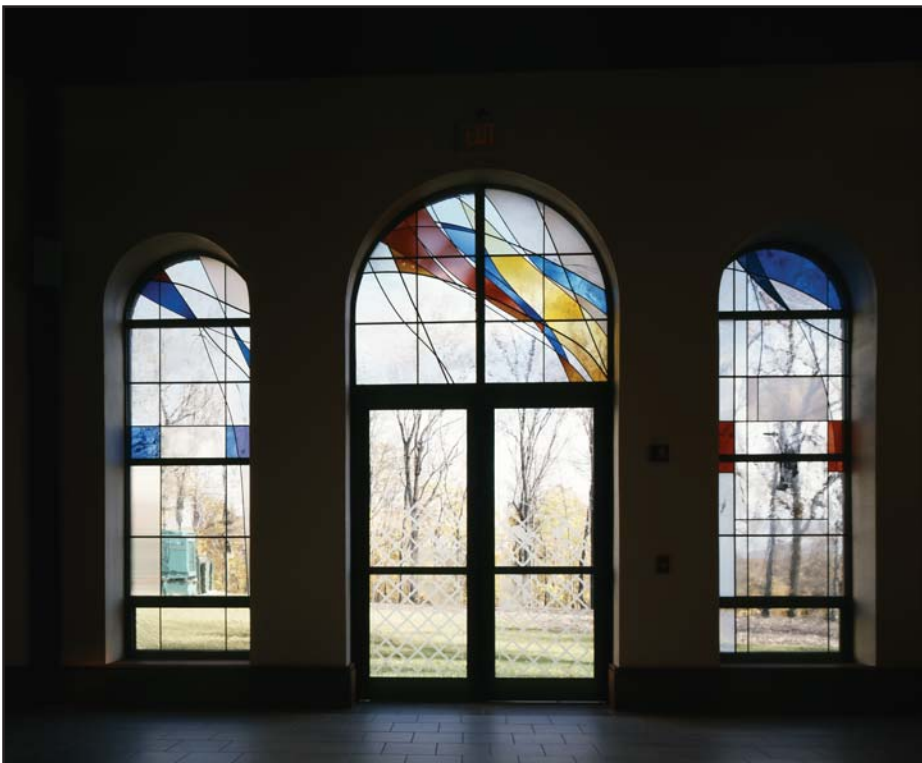
Opposite Page: Marian Woods
Seasonal Chapel Window.

(Photograph by Stephen Ostrow)





Colors of the Sky



Above: Marian Woods Convent,
Resurrection Windows

Left: Marian Woods Convent,
Wind of the Spirit

Photographs by Stephen Ostrow



Temple Adath Jeshurun synagogue windows.

Photograph by Saari Forrai

home for five orders of nuns on the beautiful old Gillette estate in Hartsdale, north of New York City, I was asked, “The landscape is beautiful here. Won’t you look for a way to incorporate it into your stained glass design?”

I realized I could accomplish this by leaving areas of clear reamy, and clear antique, and clear window glass. The antique glass distorted the view a little, reamy distorted it more, and the clear window glass didn’t distort the view at

all but brought the landscape into sharp focus as part of the design. The only place I used clear glass was part of the *Resurrection* window, the highlight of the chapel. Typical of stained glass, the changes of the light at different times of day became part of the design. When the sun was low in the sky, the stained glass projected glass across the floor and onto the altar. These views and the changed colors of the seasons also became part of the design.

The Firmament Beyond the Glass

The theme of Marian Woods is Creation. So the space beyond the window becomes part of the art. This space is associated with light. Stained glass is at the perimeter of an interior sacred space and the last thing that we see before we are plummeted into the infinite, and that is a special religious connection for stained glass art.