

# Building Bridges of Glass

## *How Stained Glass Windows Are Furthering Peace in the Middle East*

by Paul-Gordon Chandler

The renowned seventeenth-century English poet and priest George Herbert writes in one of his poems these profound words:

*A man that looks on glass  
On it may stay his eye;  
Of if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heaven espy.*

Herbert was writing about the ability to see “through the glass” to a deeper dimension of reality. Perhaps nowhere is this truth more clearly displayed and more relevant than in an extraordinary stained glass window project in the heart of the Middle East: in Cairo, Egypt, the “capital of the Middle East,” and also in Israel, where Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs have been clashing for many decades.

This is most apropos, as the Middle East is known for its deserts of sand, which serves as the foundation of glass. For the first stage of glassmaking is the melting of sand into a liquid. Hence another great seventeenth-century English poet and artist, William Blake, wrote about “seeing the World in a grain of sand.”

The origins of stained glass art are assumed to be in the Middle East, where alabaster ornamental window openings would sometimes have pieces of colored glass mounted onto them. Today one may visit Yemen’s ancient city of Sana’a, which has been declared a World Heritage Site, and, within most of the tall, slender buildings with their ornate white plasterwork, one will find elaborate stained glass windows, vibrantly colored with red, yellow, green, or blue glass. This ancient Arab art entails cutting the colored glass into small panes, or mullions, and constructing an abstract pattern separated by strips of gypsum.

However, the ancients of the Middle East used the art exclusively for ornamental and decorative purposes. It was only when the art traveled to Europe that tenth-century pictorial stained glass began to be used in churches to tell a Biblical story, while at the same time creating an atmosphere that sought to catch the viewer up into a world of contemplation where the stained glass melts away like a mist, opening out, or opening up, into a deeper dimension.

In the Middle East, there can be no deeper dimension more critically needed than that of building peaceful coexistence. Knowing the historical background of stained glass in the Middle East and with a goal of using this medium to help address the critical need of peacemaking and reconciliation, an unprecedented intercultural and inter-religious stained glass artistic initiative was launched in Cairo, and then continued on in Israel, with the goal of building bridges of peace between East and West, Muslims and Christians, and Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Foundational to the entire project is the belief that the visual arts can serve as one of the most effective mediums of building bridges of friendship, respect, understanding, and sharing. In the ongoing chasm of misunderstanding and discord between the Middle East and West, it is clear that our day calls for a whole new kind of movement: one that builds on what the two hold in common, and that is an all-out effort to help the “other,” with goodwill,



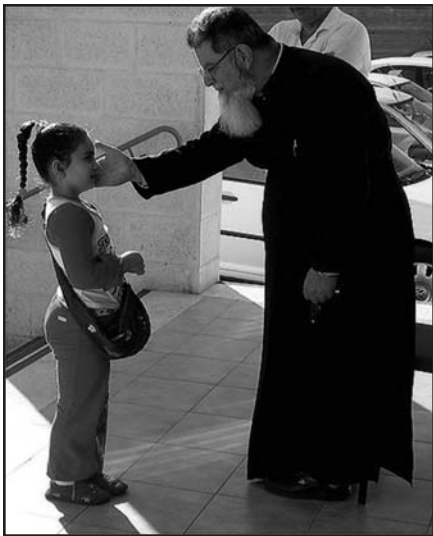
*Church of the Sermon on the Mount.*



*Church of Sermon on the Mount with students from Elias Chacour's schools.*

appreciation, and sympathy. And art, a wellspring of the spiritual journey, can assist in building this much-needed bridge, toward learning to understand, respect, and love those different from us. The challenge is to see art as Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist, saw it, when he said, “The task of art is enormous... Art should cause violence to be set aside. And it is only art that can accomplish this.”

The project in Cairo was sponsored by the historic Church of St. John the Baptist/Maadi (a.k.a. St. John’s Church), the Episcopal church in Cairo that serves the international diplomatic, business,



*Archbishop Elias Chacour with  
Palestinian girl.*

educational, and NGO communities (see [www.maadichurchstjohn.org](http://www.maadichurchstjohn.org)). St. John's Church, founded in 1931, is the last church designed by the eminent architect Sir Herbert Baker, who built churches from Cape Town to Cairo; this church serves as a unique catalyst for Christian/Muslim relations due to the local respect it has developed over the last 80 years with the Islamic authorities and, more recently, due to the post 9/11 Dialogue Agreement between the Episcopal/Anglican Church and Al Azhar, the intellectual and spiritual heart of Sunni Islam (the majority of Muslims around the world), that is headquartered in Cairo. St. John's has also long been committed to exploring and nurturing the relationship between faith and the arts, and specifically in regard to Muslim and Christian relations. This has led to creating an informal initiative called Caravan that serves as a catalyst to build bridges of understanding and respect between Muslims and Christians, East and West, through the arts (see [www.oncaravan.org](http://www.oncaravan.org)).

To celebrate the church's 75th anniversary, St. John's decided to install nine new stained glass windows in the church that would focus on the role of

Egypt in the Bible and Qur'an. The church wanted to create an opportunity to illustrate how East and West, Muslims and Christians, can work together, respect one another, and even enhance each other's spiritual journeys. Nine scenes were selected that would depict Biblical stories of Egypt that were also found in the Qur'an: related to Abraham, Moses, Joseph, and the Holy Family's visit to Egypt. One exception to this theme was an image chosen to honor the indigenous historic Coptic Christians of Egypt, which depicts the evangelist St. Mark in Alexandria, who is their patron saint.

American artist Debra Balchen, who at the time was a Cairo resident but who had lived and worked previously in Italy, South Africa, and Kenya, was approached by St. John's Church to both paint oil paintings of these nine scenes and then to direct and guide their fabrication into stained glass windows with the assistance of Egyptian Muslim artists Dr. Ahmed Nabil, a professor at Cairo University's Faculty of Fine Arts, and his son Amr.

Debra had always been interested in glasswork and has taken courses at Corning Glass in New York. As a Westerner and a Muslim Arab in a joint venture, Balchen and Nabil together fabricated nine colorful leaded stained-glass windows. Overseeing the project, Debra created windows that blend traditional and Tiffany-styles to let in beautiful colors that flood the interior of the church. Thankfully, all the glass and glass paints, albeit imported, were able to be purchased in Egypt at Universal Arts & Crafts in Cairo, owned and delightfully managed by Alia Youssef.

About this project, Debra says, "As an artist, I have always secretly longed to do public spaces to take people's minds away from the everyday preoccupations of life, and what better place to do this than in a church. I have always loved the contemplative beauty of the

interior of churches. And with my love for drawing faces and figures, for glass and storytelling, the opportunity to design these stained glass windows was a special gift."

Debra Balchen's completed stained glass windows were installed at St. John's Church in January 2006 and unveiled at an exhibition of both the windows and their foundational oil paintings that was widely attended by those from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds (see [www.maadichurchstjohn.org/arts.html](http://www.maadichurchstjohn.org/arts.html)).

During the year following the completion of the windows, Elias Chacour, the renowned Palestinian Archbishop of Galilee and the Holy Land, and Nobel Peace Prize finalist who is known as a global ambassador for peace for his outstanding work of reconciliation between Palestinians, Israeli Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze within Israel and the Palestinian territories, came to Cairo to deliver *The Cairo Lectures* at St. John's Church. A former Palestinian refugee himself, his story is powerfully told in his best-selling book *Blood Brothers*. Archbishop Chacour was deeply moved by both the windows in the church and the message of reconciliation that they symbolized and invited Debra Balchen to create stained glass windows for his beautiful church in Israel called The Church of the Sermon on the Mount.

This church is the heart of Archbishop Chacour's peace-building work, which entails the Mar Elias Educational Institutions, schools for "all the children of Israel," with more than 4,000 students from kindergarten through to university, serving Palestinians, Christians, Muslims, and Israelis Jews and Druze, who learn together with the goal of building peace in the Middle East. The Church of the Sermon on the Mount, in the village of Ibillin in the Galilee district, is also the largest basilica church in Israel.



*Debra Balchen with Ayman Abdel Hamid, and other workers, fabricating windows in studio.*

Debra was commissioned by Archbishop Chacour to create windows that communicate the message of peace-building, reconciliation, and the all-embracing inclusive character of God around the image of Jesus (whom Muslims call Isa and respect as a prophet). And he challenged Debra to draw inspiration from such ideas as peace, harmony, compassion, goodwill, forgiveness, understanding, and love.

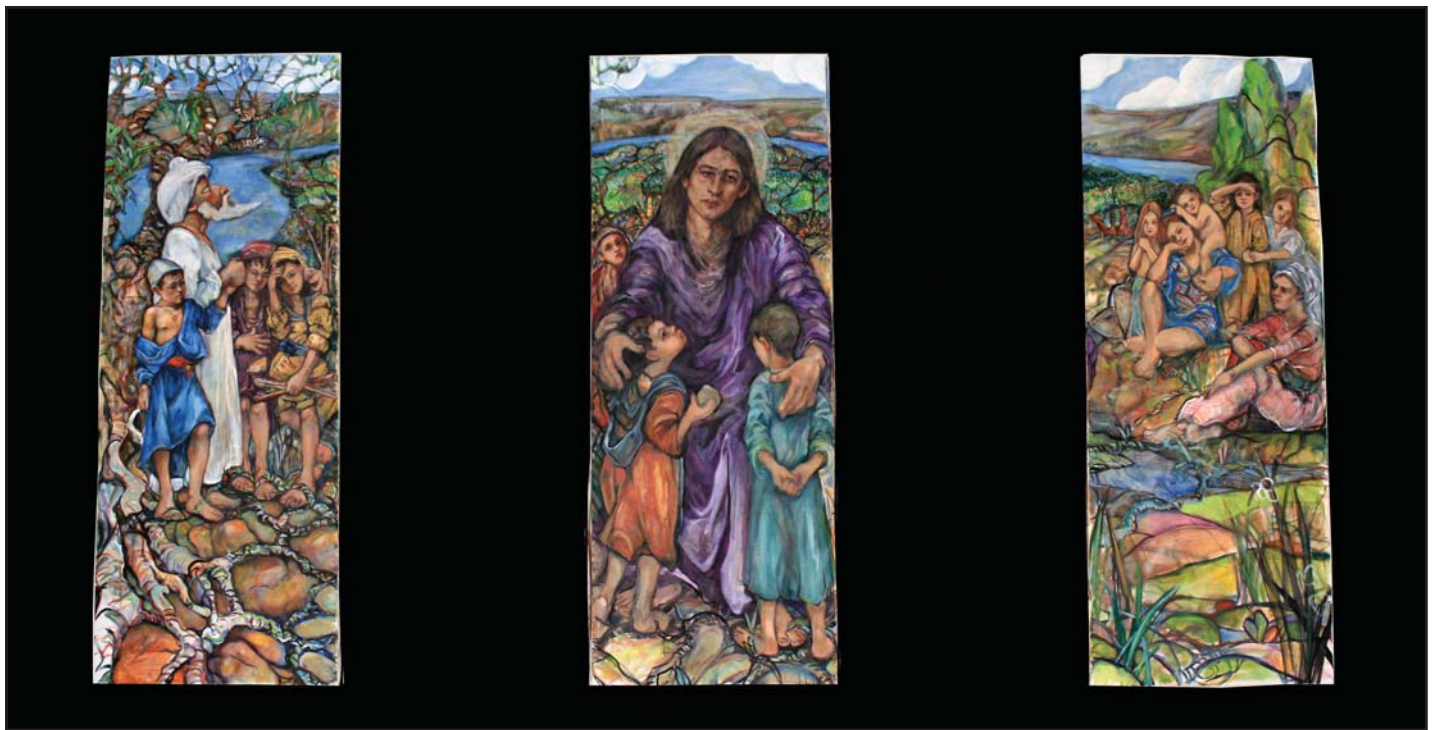
The windows in this expansive Galilee church are larger (approximately 5'6" x 2'8") than those in St. John's Church in Cairo, and so, this time, Debra selected as her project partner a well-known Egyptian Muslim stained glass designer, Ayman Abdel Hamid of Ayman Atelier, known for both his excellent copper foil work and his fabrication of large decorative glass domes.

Together they began in earnest working on this symbolic artistic project of a bridge of peace and reconciliation. Her desire this time was to push the window fabrication beyond where she had gone for the windows at the church in Cairo and, therefore, felt that copper foil, as opposed to lead, would allow for flexibility of shapes and the flow of movement she desired within the windows.

At the same time, Debra went about researching Middle Eastern symbols of peace, and prominent among those she discovered was the olive tree. Interestingly, the olive tree is integral to Archbishop Chacour's peace-making work as well, and not just because his late father had been an olive tree farmer in Galilee, known for its ancient olive trees. One of the Archbishop's primary themes is that "all of our roots are

entwined," and, therefore, he puts a lot of emphasis on the olive tree found in Galilee and their deep intertwining roots as a symbol of the relationship between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews, and between East and West. As he frequently says, because of this entwinement, "together we are stronger than any storm." This image of olive trees, with an emphasis on children (due to Chacour's priority of educating youth), together with a welcoming, compassionate, and forgiving representation of Jesus, served as the foundation for Debra's triptych windows.

Once again, Debra first created oil paintings to serve as the foundation from which the cartoons for the windows were made. The actual fabrication of these larger windows used a special technique of reinforcement that designer



*These three oil paintings by Debra Balchen served as the designs for the windows.*

Ayman Abdel Hamid has developed over the years in the Middle East. Often windows these sizes are thought to need lead reinforcement strips, in order to be able to handle the structural stress and wind load. However, these lead reinforcements often tend to aesthetically obstruct the window's image and hinder the viewer's perspective. As Debra wished to have the entire window done in copper foil and not have the normal, and, all too often, intrusive, reinforcement bars, Ayman's technique enabled the windows to both have the necessary reinforcement and also give the appearance that the window was only copper foiled. At strategic places throughout the windows, Ayman added reinforcement and then covered it with copper foil, giving the visual impression that the windows are only copper foiled. When looking at the windows at very close range, one can observe that the copper foil is more raised in certain areas over others, which indicates that these are

places that have reinforcement underneath.

The glass selected for these windows is of deep, rich, and vibrant colors, reflecting the joy, happiness, and the sense of elation that occurs when enemies become friends and estranged brothers reconcile. The windows entail a whole range of bright and lively colors that, as Archbishop Chacour said when he first saw them, "delight the celestial eye." Debra was attempting to do in glass as Van Gogh strove to do on canvas when he wrote of how his goal was "to paint the high yellow note."

All stained glass image-based windows tell a story, and artists themselves always best tell the stories of their work. Debra recounts; "As I start to paint, stories begin to form in my mind, like a writer. I love to follow those stories and see where they take me.

"Jesus is walking through a field of young and ancient olive trees. This land has been very stormy as of late. As he glances up through the heavily inter-

twined trees, he pauses to notice that beyond the terraced hills, the clouds are finally separating, and crystal-clear blue sky can be seen. He is being drawn to a nearby town, where it is said, 'the naughty boys live.' It is said that, even though these boys are all related, they are constantly fighting. They don't know why, or how this fight started, but it seems as if this has always been so. Jesus is walking, in peace, under clear skies, between the olive trees beside the river Jordan. As he comes nearer, a feeling of lightness blankets the whole area. An old man in the village, a very wise old man, who remembers a different time, starts to grab some of the naughty boys in the midst of their fighting and pulls them forward, to where he senses this newfound peace is coming from. Then more boys follow, carrying their sticks, stones, slingshots... intrigued by what is happening. Finally, in the presence of Jesus, there is a newfound clarity.

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ty... they drop their weapons...they are embraced by total love...they look down at their feet and realize they have roots! Roots that are attached! They are all rooted together...they are brothers...and together with such newfound love, they are rooted strongly against any storm! The girls have also sensed something wondrous is happening...

butterflies are leading them away from the great river Jordan to see what is going on in the olive groves... miracles are happening, they watch shyly from afar enraptured by the scene before them. As they look down, they notice they are also rooted! The humble olive tree has great worth and is the symbol of wealth, protection, security, and

rebirth...and, of course, peace... hope and peace.”

While fabricating the windows in Egypt was in itself a significant challenge, the major challenge was yet to come: finding a way to ship them from Egypt to Israel, two countries that while officially at peace ever since the Camp David accords, do not look kindly on



*The finished stained glass windows.*

each other. After considerable research, it was determined that air freighting them would be too problematic, as Israel would most probably not facilitate their entrance into the country when coming from Egypt. Then came word that Archbishop Chacour was leading a pil-

grimage of Palestinian Christian young men and women by bus to Egypt and that he would plan to take them back himself over land across the Israeli border. The windows were wrapped and crated for their send-off day, which entailed them being laid in the lower hold of a tourist bus full of Palestinians as they headed off toward the infamous Sinai Desert, led by none other than the Archbishop himself.

Journeying through the numerous Egyptian police road-blocks throughout the Sinai due to recent Bedouin uprisings was harrowing enough. Yet all went smoothly until they reached the border between Egypt and Israel on Friday evening. The windows were scanned by the Israeli customs police, who promptly halted their entry into the country, since the officer whom they reported to had already departed to begin the Shabbat. Just then, like Moses of old in the Sinai, there was a miracle-like occurrence. While sitting there confused at the border, wondering what to do, Archbishop Chacour received a call on his cell phone from none other than the Israeli Minister of Home Security. The government official was calling to confirm a meeting they had previously scheduled at the Archbishop's office in Haifa for the coming Tuesday. Knowing the potential to benefit from this telephone call, the Archbishop responded that their meeting during the coming week would depend on if the stained glass windows were "liberated from the customs police" at the border.

The Israeli Minister was told the story of the windows, and he responded by saying that he would arrange a fax to be sent to the border customs department authorizing their release. Then he

humorously said, "You will get your windows, and you will be ready to welcome me this coming Tuesday morning in your office!" Within days the windows were removed from the crates in which they were enshrined and installed in their permanent place at The Church of the Sermon on the Mount in Ibillin, Galilee, where Archbishop Chacour says, "Many are touched by these very beautiful and meaningful windows."

The vision that has arisen from this extraordinary initiative is that this will simply be the beginning of new artistic initiatives of using the arts to build bridges between the Middle East and West, so that all can live without division and respect and love the "other." Perhaps the last words are best left to a Middle Easterner, the early twentieth-century Lebanese Arab artist and poet Kahlil Gibran, who wrote, "A work of art is a mist carved into an image."

This unique project serves to remind all that the ultimate image created is always one of peace.

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*For information on Archbishop Elias Chacour's outstanding work of peace and reconciliation in Israel, visit [www.pilgrimsofibilin.org](http://www.pilgrimsofibilin.org).*