On a quest for medieval stained glass

Jim Bugslag is a detective of an unusual kind. As an associate professor in the Faculty of Art, he's leading the Canadian arm of an international effort to hunt down and study displaced panels of Medieval and Renaissance stained glass.

If asked to recite the names of great artists, you could likely name many who dabbled on canvas, but the name Valentin Bousch would probably not fall from your lips. He was a stained glass virtuoso in the 1500s, and one of his creations recently sold for $300,000 in an auction in British Columbia.

Sure, it's not the millions a Degas would fetch, but it was the most expensive stained glass work ever sold, and its purchase signals a worrying trend in the realm of private collections. “The pieces in museums are stable, they're not going anywhere and we can study them,” he said. “But this one is easily the most spectacular piece of an international effort to find and study displaced panels of Medieval and Renaissance stained glass. These were the magical arts of the Middle Ages. Fast-forward to Paris, 1970's. Where the Musée du Quebec bought exquisite Swiss secular panels obtained the original medieval cartoon (the window's blueprint, so to speak) that turned out to be created by a master on Norwich based on a border and some English words. Bugslag discovered this when he saw the same face on a tomb brass. On a recent trip to England he showed this finding to the world's expert on Norwich glass who agreed with him and has also managed to make use of tomb brasses to attribute work to this artist. Bugslag tracks down pieces which are often, he said, left languishing in museum basements, but many are in private collections. Once he catches up to a piece and interviews its holder, he begins studying the characteristics of the glass, paint, colours, brush strokes and overall style and craftsmanship to see if it’s genuine and to learn its story.

But even after determining its period, certain intractable problems remain. Many images are simply out of context and can’t be deciphered. One perplexing work shows a bald man with a beard in a Franciscan garment. In the coteries concerned with such matters the figure is agreed to be a saint but no one, Bugslag said, knows who he is. By cataloguing all these works, however, future researchers may solve these and other riddles. But sometimes secrets are cracked in this age. The Musée des beaux-arts de Montreal has a piece that shows a beautiful woman’s face surrounded by a border and some English words. “It was clearly English glass, but we had no idea where it came from or when it dated from,” Bugslag said. “But I have recently made an attribution to a glazier in Norwich based on a rather unusual comparison – not with stained glass where we had struck out time and time again, but with tomb brass.”

It turns out this glazier also inscribed tomb brasses for burial monuments. Bugslag discovered this when he saw the same face on a tomb brass. On a recent trip to England he showed this finding to the world’s expert on Norwich glass who agreed with him and has also managed to make use of tomb brasses to attribute work to this artist.

The detective work, Bugslag concedes, is his favourite part of this research. But the wondrous art propels him to do it. “I have this nostalgic longing for something beyond: you go to the movies to have special effects take you to another world, and they’re filled with wizards and magic and creatures beyond nature. The Middle Ages, for me, is a magical period that took, very seriously, this supernatural dimension to life. As much as anything, stained glass embodies this attitude that sees bridges between the visible and invisible worlds. Stained glass really was special effects in the Middle Ages. These were the magical arts of the Middle Ages and they’re remarkable.”

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