

Research News

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On a quest for medieval stained glass

BY SEAN MOORE
Research Promotion

Jim Bugslag is a detective of an unusual kind.

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 instability to Bugslag, who wants to study it before it again vanishes into 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 stained glass in Canada, and it came up for auction because both its owners died. It's been bought by a dealer, and we're still waiting to hear what its

eventual fate will be."

An estimated 200 Medieval and Renaissance panels of stained glass currently reside in 16 public and private collections identified across Canada.

"When we began working on this Canadian material we were starting from scratch. Typically, these works are not well documented, and we had virtually no information on where they came from or what they were. So there is an awful lot of research needing to be done on a number of fronts," he said.

Much of this study is helped by an international network of researchers dedicated to cataloguing these rare and previously ignored works.

In 1949 the Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi, an international organization charged with creating a scholarly foundation to study pre-modern stained glass, was formed and later subdivided into national divisions with researchers dedicated to studying



In 1535 Valentin Bousch, a renowned stained glass artist, created this image of God. Part of a piece known as the Creation Window, this pane was recently auctioned for \$300,000 in British Columbia, the highest recorded price for stained glass.

Submitted photo

works in their own countries. The Canadian branch was formed in the 1970s.

"As more and more stained glass becomes known through the Corpus Vitrearum, we've got an expanded window into the past and a better idea of these splendid works of art," Bugslag said. "There is a much more holistic approach to studying art these days, and we're trying to reintegrate all the arts that were practiced into a more global treatment."

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.

It's a difficult task. Even the National Gallery in Ottawa mistakenly bought a modern window in the 1920s from an otherwise reputable dealer who told them it was from the Middle Ages. Fast-forward to Paris, 1958, where the Musée du Quebec bought exquisite Swiss secular panels that turned out to be created by a 19th century glazier who somehow obtained the original medieval cartoon (the window's blueprint, so to speak) and copied it.

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 was 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 Montréal 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 a tomb brass."

It turns out this glazier also inscribed brass plaques 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.

"We 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."



Photo by Sean Moore

Jim Bugslag, Art, leads the Canadian arm of an international effort to find and study displaced panels of pre-modern stained glass.

Bringing Research To Life

Research News is Published
by the Office of the Vice-President (Research)
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