

MEDIEVAL STAINED GLASS

Burrell Collection Panel depicting the Marriage at Cana



The most fascinating of all ancient treatises on the arts is, surely, the 'Diversarum Artium Schedula'. Written by the monk Theophilus, probably in the first half of the eleventh century, it is the strangest combination of superstition, erudition and shining devotion. It is the spirit of devotion in it, the sense of dedication, which makes it such an intensely beautiful and moving book. Perhaps nowhere else is there set down in words so clearly the attitude of dedicated craftsmanship which gave us the great medieval cathedrals and the rich stores of masterpieces which filled their treasuries.

We are caught up in it from the very first sentence: "I, Theophilus, an humble priest, servant of the servants of God, unworthy of the name and profession of a monk, to all wishing to overcome or avoid sloth of the mind or wandering of the soul, by useful manual occupation and the delightful contemplation of novelties, send a recompense of heavenly price!" And where else in a technical manual will one find such sentences as "I have approached the porch of holy Sophia, and beheld the church filled with divers colours..... from which I filled up the storehouse of my art"?

Glorious colours

The second book of Theophilus's treatise is given to the arts of glass-making, especially stained glass. Here we find ourselves plunged suddenly into the primitive workshop from which emerged, after centuries of trial and error, the splendours of Chartres. We see the boards whitened with chalk on which cartoons of the windows were drawn with lead; we see the pot-glass, molten and glowing in the shadows, we learn of the ingredients which could lend it the hues of a summer meadow or a harvest field or of a

midnight sky, and of how precious gold was needed to concoct the deep ruby colour which was the chief glory of the greatest of the old windows.

And at the end of it, alas, we realise how pathetically inadequate are the windows of our old churches here in Scotland. Did St. Giles' and Glasgow Cathedral, did Dunblane and St. Machar's in Aberdeen once glow with shafts of coloured sunshine like the great churches abroad? Have neglect and iconoclasm destroyed this part of our heritage?

Certainly Scotland possessed nothing worthy of the name of a national treasure in stained glass until the late Sir William Burrell began to collect such things, but he has assuredly made amends for past neglect. Something like 500 pieces of stained glass are included in the great art collection which he presented to Glasgow. Nearly all of this is stored away. Work on a catalogue is proceeding, and in a few years perhaps the outcome will be a worthy publication; but in the meantime the public has to be content with a selection of a few of the more notable items, which are excellently displayed on the first floor of the Art Gallery at Kelvingrove.

From this selection I have picked out a panel representing the Marriage at Cana. There are more arresting pieces on view, but I think that anyone wanting to illustrate here in Scotland the ideals preached by Theophilus would almost inevitably turn to this example of thirteenth-century French work. Made within

about 200 years of the monkish craftsman's lifetime, its beauty accords with the simple precepts which he taught.

Its pattern is uncomplicated. There is a minimum of that drawing on the glass which strives to borrow effects more proper to painting and is common in later work. Only the features of the faces and some of the folds of drapery are drawn. The picture is built up of jewel-like fragments of glass - green, gold, blue, ruby and a violet or, as it is called on Chinese ceramic wares, aubergine - gripped in a setting of massive leads. The finest old stained glass is almost as much a matter of lead as of glass; it is the broad lead outlines which give punch to the general effect and brilliance to the glass itself. Indeed, such glass is only one stage removed from being a translucent mosaic. The dark leads, like a web across the brightness of the window, relate it to the stone traceries of the church itself.

France led Christendom in the art of stained-glass making, and the Marriage at Cana panel in Glasgow is typical of the best period. It consists of three roundels, set vertically, the largest in the centre. It is small-scale work compared with some later achievements, for the pieces of glass available were small. Instead of filling the window with heroic figures of saints, the artist used his roundels as frames for pictures of episodes, surrounding each with a 'pearl border' of white glass.

From the latter half of the twelfth century gothic windows grew much larger but, as the mullions on these great windows were massive, the high narrow vertical lights between were virtually completely separated from one another so far as subject matter was concerned, and to depict single figures sometimes led to absurdities such as Isaiah carrying St. Mark on his shoulders at Chartres. The vertical series of roundels were a much happier device. Characteristically, the dominant colours in the 'Marriage' panel are red and blue, the latter a background colour since it is recessive. White glass is sparingly used, as light patches in the pattern make for unevenness of tone.

There is a nice balance in this panel between pure pattern - Theophilus's 'sumptuous feast for the eye' - and pictorialisation. As to this last, there is no obvious reason for titling the panel the 'Marriage at Cana' at all. Mr William Wells, the Keeper of the Burrell Collection, has published a study of the panel's iconography, and he points out that none of the chief persons present at the Feast at Cana are represented. The central figure of the middle roundel is assuredly not Christ, if only because no nimbus is shown behind the head. There is at Chartres, however, a window partially devoted to the subject of the Marriage at Cana, illustrated in a series of roundels, and by comparison with this it would seem that the Burrell panel shows the ruler of the feast seated at table, either before the miracle has been enacted at all, or after he has been brought a cup of the miraculous wine. If this is so, then the actual miracle must have been shown in an adjacent roundel, as at Chartres.

The upper and lower roundels depict cooks at work. They may be connected with the feast itself, but it is believed they may signify that the cooks' craft or guild donated the window, or contributed to its cost. The appearance of the Lilies of France alternating with the Castle of Castile in the running border is even more intriguing, for the same emblems occur in windows in Chartres, where they are believed to signify the regency of Blanche of Castile, thus perhaps dating the windows between 1223 and 1234.