

Collectors' Focus

Stained glass

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The market for medieval and Renaissance stained glass has surged in the last year. There are opportunities for collectors in this under-researched category, with the highest prices secured for the earliest pieces and those with clearly identified origins.

Over the last year, the salerooms have seen a flurry of excitement in the small – but usually stable – market for medieval and Renaissance stained glass. In June 2014, Sotheby's Paris offered a polychrome stained-glass roundel depicting an angel holding an incense burner of around 1250–55 sell for €111,000 (estimate €40,000–€60,000). Originating in the Île de France and most likely taken down from Notre Dame Cathedral in the 19th century during Viollet-le Duc's unsympathetic restoration programme, the piece reflects the style, technique, and dazzling palette of red, blue, green, and yellow glass favoured by the Parisian ateliers of Sainte-Chapelle in the middle of the 13th century. Its partner, representing an angel holding a candlestick, achieved €123,000.

A month later, at Christie's London, three panels soared over their estimates. The most valuable piece, a graceful image of St Christina by the Masters of the Waassenkirche Windows (c. 1400–20), a workshop in Styria, southeast Austria, was bought for £30,000, twice its high estimate. In the same sale, a panel enclosing two roundels of seated apostles, from the same area but by a slightly later hand (c. 1420–50) and estimated more cautiously at £3,000–£5,000, achieved £27,000. Finally, in November, Bonhams oversaw the sale of a pair of English stained-glass panels from the second half of the 15th century, depicting two orders of angels, the Virtues and the Principalities, for £7,500 (estimate £7,000–£10,000; Fig. 3). Acquired by the Stained Glass Museum in Ely, their original location is unknown, but they were most recently installed at Ulvercroft Manor, Leicestershire, built in the early 19th century.

'Medieval glass of this rarity and quality comes to market only very occasionally,'



1. Gothic stained-glass window with the Crucifixion, c. 1260, French, Strasbourg, glass and lead, 51 × 53cm. Sotheby's Paris, €228,750

says Michael Lake, a specialist in European sculpture and works of art at Bonhams. The high prices achieved at Christie's in July were partly owing to the panels being attributable to a particular workshop. 'The more you can tie a panel to a person or a building, the better,' says Donald Johnston, head of sculpture at Christie's. 'Over the last few years stained glass has become a nice little area – whenever we have had a decent piece, it has sold well.' Erik Bijzet, head of European sculpture and works of art at Sotheby's, concurs. 'For collectors up to speed on the scholarship, there are many opportunities,' he says. He points to 2012 as a starting point, when an iridescent gothic stained-glass window from Strasbourg depicting the Crucifixion (c. 1260) soared to an astonishing €228,750 at Sotheby's Paris – more than three times the top estimate of €70,000 (Fig. 1).

These price differentials offer a barometer of current collector interest. It is the earliest works – Romanesque pieces of the 12th and 13th century – that attract the highest prices. Vivid points of contact with an almost vanished world, these are the chance survivors of Protestant iconoclasm, misguided restoration, and the systematic replacement of medieval windows in the 19th century. Many bear marks of earlier restorations.

Collectors are almost exclusively European or North American. London dealer Sam Fogg is widely credited with reviving collector interest. 'The best Romanesque glass is from the early 12th century,' his colleague Matthew

Reeves tells me. 'It was in this period that many of the biggest and most important glass programmes in the newly finished cathedrals were commissioned. But fine glass was also made later throughout Europe; Norfolk glaziers were at their best in the 15th century, and the Renaissance style of Jean Chastellain in Paris in the early 16th century was also a zenith in glass production.' He divides today's market broadly in two: those collectors who focus on 'fragments of religious art from the 13th to 15th centuries' and those who specialise in stained-glass roundels, which began to appear in the late 15th century, catering to a new middle class, and which can often be of purely secular subjects. 'These have a very different aesthetic,' Reeves says. 'They are more restricted in their use of colour but often brighter and with a greater emphasis on drawing, which almost invariably comes from engraved models.' Among Fogg's current stock is an exquisitely drawn early 16th-century Netherlandish roundel depicting Saint Bavo of Ghent, with a falcon and perhaps a donor (£10,000; Fig. 2).

Critical to the latest phase of the market, according to Reeves, has been the advent of new technology. The taste for gothic in the 19th century saw British collectors put together large collections of medieval and Renaissance stained glass, often setting their pieces into new windows. Today, the lightbox offers an alternative method of display.

George Wigley, a specialist dealer from the Midlands, prefers late 15th-century or

early 16th-century glass for his own collection – 'as often as not French or German' – while confirming that the market 'seems to be slanted towards medieval glass, the earlier the better'. He has fragments of 15th-century stained glass, some reconfigured with glass from different periods. He warns that the huge industry in stained glass in Europe across the 19th and early 20th century, with some studios faithfully imitating the medieval style, even to the point of simulating age corrosion, can make sorting genuine pieces from later imitations difficult for the non-specialist.

Barbara Giesicke, an art historian and dealer based in Badenweiler, Germany, reiterates the warning about fakes. She rarely comes across pieces from the 15th century or earlier, specialising instead in Swiss production of the 16th century, when Switzerland became an important centre of production. She says what makes a difference to collectors is research, and that while you can sometimes recognise the workshop or identify the donor, 'It is a bit of luck if you can trace the piece back to its original location.' She has a fine panel of stained and painted glass from Lucerne of around 1592, attributed to Franz Fallenter, a leading Swiss artist in stained glass (€12,000). By this date, it is a different market, but an upswing of interest is noticeable even with later pieces. At Donnington Priory in December, two windows incorporating fragments of 18th- and 19th-century glass, possibly from Louvain in Belgium and quietly estimated at £400–£600, achieved £38,000. **A**



2. *St Bavo and a kneeling donor*, c.1525, Netherlandish, clear glass, silver stain, and black vitreous paint, diam. 21.5cm (Sam Fogg, £10,000)

3. One of a pair of panels depicting two orders of angels, the Virtues and the Principalities, second half 15th century, English, painted in yellow and black on clear glass, 18 x 15cm. Bonhams, £7,500



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