



Raising the Glass

Amber Droste breaks through a stained-glass ceiling between craft and fine art.

BY Allison Malafronte



Amber Droste has a vision to elevate the traditional art of stained glass to new creative heights. By combining her classical training with innovative techniques for designing compositions, Droste carries on the lineage of this age-old art form while also pushing it forward. “I greatly respect the skills and history of my craft, but little has changed in this discipline in more than 900 years,” the artist says. “I have far too many ideas to be content with what has been done before.” Through experimentation with different approaches, she hopes to lift the perception of stained glass from craft to fine art. “I strive to produce creative and expressive works that rise above simple window decoration,” she says.

In a 1,500-square-foot former masonic lodge in Chattanooga, Tenn., Droste and her team design, fabricate, restore, paint and install leaded stained glass for a variety of commission-based clients: traditional and modern, sacred

OPPOSITE
Installation of Rose Window
(detail of window at bottom)
Robinson First United Methodist Church, Robinson, Ill.; leaded stained glass, 144-inches diameter
PHOTO AT TOP BY SEAN HOISINGTON

and secular. The studio is aptly named Soda Ash & Sand—as soda ash and sand are two of the main ingredients in glass—and the artists specialize in traditional kiln-fired painting techniques.

Droste notes that most of her commissions lately have come from those viewing her work on Instagram, and she has clients in both the United States and Europe. “We live in such a global society right now that as long as you can manage shipping logistics, your market audience is unlimited,” she says.

THE HANDS-ON ATTRACTION

Before Droste set out to learn the craft of stained-glass construction, she learned the fine art of painting through years of formal training. She received her BFA in drawing from Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn; an MFA in painting from Washington University, in Saint Louis; and studied painting and fresco restoration in Florence, Italy, during a year abroad. “After graduating, I attempted to support myself as a practicing studio artist, but it wasn’t feasible,” she admits. “I had to take many jobs in those first years out of graduate school, and eventually I found a part-time position at a small stained-glass studio in Boston, where I was just doing grunt-work cleaning and taking apart old windows to be restored. I knew right away that this was the type of art I wanted to pursue professionally. I eventually was able to get an eight-year, full-time position at a woodworking and stained-glass shop in Fort Collins, Colo., where I was able to train with first-rate artisans and makers who taught me so much of what I know today.”

What resonated with Droste most of all in the stained-glass field was the fact that she came home from the studio exhausted and covered in construction dust every day—which, from the beginning, was all she ever asked from her profession. She shares a story of her post-graduate struggles to find her place as an artist. “I always loved making fine art, but I knew enough about good art to know I wasn’t

TOP TO BOTTOM
New Blue Construction sign window (detail)
leaded stained glass, 42x72

Sketch for the Yagan Residence
watercolor pencil on paper,
7½x4½ inches (1:12 scale)



producing it,” she says. “I was excited about abstract and conceptual work, but everything I was making was feeling forced and insincere. Right after graduate school, when I was really struggling, I had a studio visit with Sheila Pepe. She said that for her, producing art was just an excuse to make things with her hands, and that really resonated with me. It was very eye-opening to hear an artist that I respected say that out loud and without shame. I really

just love making things with my hands, and I think that for that reason, more than anything else, I've latched onto stained glass."

DRAW, CUT, CONSTRUCT

Once Droste has secured a commission, her artistic process begins. Her approach varies, depending on the type of project, but in general, her first step is research. For liturgical commissions she'll gather as much information and reference as possible to ensure that she's providing the best representation of the requested subject matter and iconography. For secular commissions she has a little more

creative freedom, although still not as much as she would like. "I listen to the client's requests and then do several sketches based on those specifications," she says. "I'll also often throw in a sketch or two of what I personally envision in their space, but unfortunately, the client and I are rarely on the same page. Once we agree on a design—which often takes a dozen or more iterations and sketches—we pick out the glass." (See Sketch for the Yagan Residence, page 15.)

There are several variables that need to be addressed when selecting the glass: color, texture and opacity, as well as the location and intensity of the light source, since this will affect the appearance of the each color's hue and chroma. Once the glass is chosen, Droste begins arranging the puzzle pieces, mosaic style, to create the design. "I make a life-size drawing of the pieces and multiple exact duplicates," she says. "I cut up one of the duplicates into pattern pieces that I then use to cut the glass, and I lay each piece of glass on a table. At this point, the client can make small changes and alterations, but once I start the actual construction of the window, there's little room for improvisation or changes. I build directly onto my drawing, and I don't deviate from it at all. Stained-glass windows usually have to be made to specific dimensions, so staying within the lines is important (see photo, Before Construction, left).

"I almost always construct my pieces using the traditional leaded-glass method rather than the copper-foil technique," the artist continues. "I've worked in both media and greatly prefer lead, as I can achieve sharper, more exact lines, and the final product feels much stronger and substantial (see photo, Leading the Glass, left). When the pieces have been fully leaded, I solder each joint and then carefully flip the window over and solder the back. I cement or putty both sides to make it even sturdier, and the whole piece then gets a good cleaning with calcium carbonate powder. This entire process from start to finish is often dirty, sweaty and bloody—and I love every step of it."



LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM
Before Construction
in-process leaded stained glass for Robinson First United Methodist Church, Robinson, Ill., 48x144
ROGER FORD PHOTOGRAPHY

Leading the Glass
in-process leaded stained glass for Robinson First United Methodist Church, Robinson, Ill., 144x120
PHOTO BY SEAN HOISINGTON



Owl Girl
leaded stained glass with painting, 46-inches diameter

THAT EXTRA SOMETHING

Although the glass Droste uses is already colored, she sometimes adds paint, usually when the design calls for faces, hands or clothes on a figure, as in *Owl Girl* (above). Other projects she has worked on include larger areas of paint and more nuanced color. Paint applications occur after the glass shapes have been cut but before they're leaded in place.

As Droste explains, painting on glass is quite different from painting on canvas or paper. For one thing, because stained glass is often exposed to direct light and environmental elements, the paint must be vitreous (glasslike)—a quality attained when intense metallic oxide pigments are mixed with finely ground glass and then fired onto the glass substrate in a kiln. Second, stained-glass painting is a time-consuming process that takes several rounds of firing to achieve the correct shades and intensities of the colors. Droste bakes each layer in a kiln between five and 10 times until she achieves the desired outcome. "Firing glass is a several-hour process similar to the firing of ceramics, and there's a set schedule to follow with proper soaking and annealing [heating and then cooling]," she explains. "It can take days to see any significant progress."



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Plating Experiment No. 2
plated leaded stained glass
with painting, 60x24

Plating Experiment No. 2 (above) is another example. It includes paint markings that give the piece visual texture. As the name indicates, this work is also plated, meaning that it consists of more than one layer of glass with the plates stacked on top of each other. The design of one plate shows through the other, adding an element of depth.

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

Droste envisions a bright future for stained-glass art. “I’m at a very exciting time in my work when my skill set as a stained-glass artisan has caught up with my ambition and innovative ideas as a fine artist,” Droste says. “I’d love for people to see the potential I see in glass. To me, elevating stained glass doesn’t mean that we have to discard the past and start new. I just want to add to the visual vocabulary. There are many stained-glass artisans doing amazing, progressive, experimental work. I hope that I number among them. There’s room for an enormous amount of creativity and innovation in this field, and I’m looking forward to what we will achieve as a community.”

Allison Malafronte is a fine arts and design writer and editor based in the greater New York area.



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