Conservation of Historic Stained Glass: Towards a Code of Practice

As a practitioner running a full-time studio, I regularly face the options thrown up by a stained-glass restoration job offer, especially in our unregulated industry. From time to time my studio has been asked to quote for repairing and rectifying damaged windows of historical interest, generally in churches. The first client contact is often very revealing, requiring both a quote for costs and advice on the correct procedure. This type of inquiry poses questions that do not usually arise from requests for a new stained-glass window. For example: What is known about these windows? Are there any archival details? What is the value of the window in dollar terms, and the value of its cultural significance? At what point does 'conservation' become the imperative over the less demanding and less costly 'repair' process? Is it acceptable that the owner's budget influence the decision to repair, restore or conserve the window? The overriding question in a competitive situation: Will the quotes from other studios assess the work from a similar viewpoint? The dreaded 'level playing field'.

The solutions to these questions (and many others) are often complex and confusing to the consultants, specifiers, suppliers, practitioners and most particularly, the uninformed clients. The long-term aim of reaching a basic but flexible code of practice, which is user friendly for all those involved in the process of conservation, is what this seminar is all about. It will require a concerted contribution from all parties to achieve a consensus view.

The key issues are:
- The urgent need for a register of practitioners and associated skilled artisans, be they conservators or consultants, painters and putters, engineers or historians. The second stage of this register could address the more complicated issue of accreditation.
- An authoritative body, without self-interest, to which owners/custodians of historic stained glass can refer for advice and information.
- A centre for education, including practical skills acquisition, which may be project oriented and could include intensive summer school curricula.
- A code of practice developed in conjunction with, and accepted by the industry. Firstly, a draft needs to be circulated for comment and amendment.
- A comprehensive survey and listing of historic and valuable stained glass in each state.

In looking at a code of practice, the critical issue is the context in which we position Australia's historic stained glass. Can we compare the European model to the American experience to gain insight into the demanding nature of the debate? It is inevitable that the overwhelming emphasis of stained-glass conservation has been on medieval windows; the oldest and in many cases most vulnerable. In Australia we can not place our stained glass in the same category and must be wary of accepting this as a conservation imperative.

I noted with interest the publication of the Corpus Vitrearum Guidelines to Stained Glass Conservation in Stained Glass Quarterly, Spring 1991, the journal of the Stained Glass Association of America. These guidelines are primarily...
concerned with the philosophy and principles of conservation of medieval glass. Although interesting and useful, they are ultimately only of academic interest. That is, the practicalities of dealing with ancient glass are vastly different to those applied to stained glass produced within the past 200 years.

The American experience indicates that serious damage or loss can easily occur if no system is in place. This should be a salutary lesson. From my understanding, attempts are under way in both Britain and the USA to establish some uniformity of practice and accreditation. Their success should encourage us to increase our endeavours towards this goal.

Uniformity of Practice: Recommendations

• Documentation, including comprehensive before and after photographic records: black and white prints, colour prints and slides, a condition report, a suggested course of action, a uniform guide for charting the window and symbols to be used, a final report in triplicate.
• Methods of cleaning historic stained glass, materials and solutions: benevolent chemicals and those to be avoided, prescribed techniques.
• Preservation of painted work and practices to be avoided: it seems there is no successful process established that is satisfactorily reversible. The use of plating to restore lost detail may be the best option.
• Cracked or broken glass: particularly the case for retaining original pieces, adhesives, mending leads, replacement glass.
• The lead matrix, a much debated issue: specifically what to retain, and with what to replace lost or damaged lead. Re-using old lead cameys. Re-milling or replacing.
• Installation procedures: specifically weatherproofing compounds, sand/cement mixtures, alteration of the original mullions.
• Re-inforcing: specifically, the case for saddle bars or fins, the appropriateness of bars, the detrimental effects of some materials on the masonry, galvanic corrosion.
• Protective glazing: another contentious issue with too many opinions to be detailed here.
• Isothermal glazing: the debate for and against requires many other considerations to be assessed.

Although this is an incomplete resume of considerations, I hope they are adequate for this short paper. I urge a move away from under-regulation but recognise the danger of over-regulation and the red tape that could result from protracted discussion on how to achieve a ‘correct’ code of practice. I also encourage a grass-roots movement to locate and document our stained glass, and the simultaneous development of a database and infrastructure.

A code of practice plus a broad understanding of the extent, quality and condition of our stained glass would provide a strong platform on which to develop comprehensive and cohesive solutions to the current problems of conserving Australia’s cultural and historic stained-glass heritage.