Practicalities: The Re-Creation and Restoration of Lost Stained Glass and Leadlight at the Gothic Bank

Victorian Leadlights’ brief was to re-create the lost stained glass and leadlight windows of the ANZ Gothic Bank: three in the Cathedral Room, and 67 panels in the basement. The only references were from architects’ specifications and old black and white photographs. After the tender was let, the heritage architect also found 12 of the original basement stained-glass windows in a Melbourne residence, and I purchased these windows from the owner. They proved to be of great value and assistance in establishing the exact painting, toning and silver-staining techniques of the original windows along with identifying the type and texture of the glass and the design of the glass jewels.

More than 500 jewels had to be re-created and a thousand pieces of glass painted and leaded into the panels. My studio of three staff painted, stained, fired and leaded this work. Martin Van de Thorn of Sydney, an expert in the art of enamelling, created the lunettes and Symbol of Labour in the Cathedral Room window. Melbourne glass artists, Dick Stumbles of Stadfire Glass and Peter Seale of Seale Stained Glass Pty Ltd re-created the glass jewels.

It was suggested that the thousand pieces of glass could have been stencilled. I disagreed, as it was evident in the original 12 windows that three different hands had painted these windows. My wish was to re-create these windows as closely as possible to the original. Therefore stencilling was out of the question, they had to be hand painted.

This project has taught me the value of collaboration as there are many people who work in the art/craft of stained glass who have different skills and levels of experience. One of the current concerns within the stained glass and leadlight industry is the lack of formal training for artisans. In the future, I hope there will be an accredited apprenticeship which may open a pathway for those with sensitivity and motivation to became stained-glass artists of excellence.

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As the prime contractor for all leadlight and stained-glass restoration works on the ANZ Gothic Bank, Turner Leadlights Pty Ltd co-ordinated all works within the builder’s restoration schedule, including organising architect’s approval for all works prior to commencement and installation. Works were scheduled between May 1991 and September 1993 – a time frame which gives a clear indication of the scale of work involved in the project.

Turner Leadlights subcontracted Victorian Leadlights to supply all the stained glass to specification, while Turner Leadlights supplied and installed clear leadlight to the Banking Chamber and Lower Chamber windows. They were also responsible for the removal and restoration of the copper light skylight above the Banking Chamber.

Approximately 80 coloured leadlights were installed throughout the entire project in various locations. All existing leadlights were meticulously cleaned by two full-time leadlight conservators. As required by the specifications, all stained glass and leadlight was re-installed into the stonework with great care and attention.

One of the difficulties of a conservation project such as this is the almost inevitable, though always unexpected, delays. It is worth noting that financial re-arrangements were required to overcome the cash-flow problems which resulted from delays in progress payments and caused significant re-organisation of the workflow.