

Telling a richer story by combining techniques

JAN SIMPSON describes her creative journey as a stained glass artist which included technical skills to express her ideas more clearly.

Thirty years ago, if someone had told me I would spend my life creating stained glass windows, I would have laughed. At the time I was living in Adelaide, Australia, searching for direction rather than a career. My sister handed me a voucher for a stained glass course. I protested that I couldn't even use a screwdriver, but she is quite bossy, so I did what I was told.

I remember the nervousness of cutting my first piece of glass, but by the end of that first evening I was hooked. Holding my finished panel up to the Australian sunshine, I realised I had discovered a medium that combined craftsmanship, creativity and storytelling in a way that immediately felt right.

Before leaving Australia, I bought every tool my tutor recommended and returned to England. I still use many of them today. My tiny one-bedroom flat became my first studio. I worked full-time as a secretary and spent every spare evening making stained glass. Looking back, I wasn't simply learning a craft; I was learning a language.

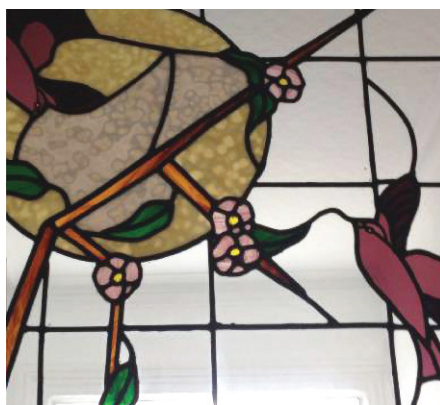
Having grown up between New Zealand, Hong Kong, Australia and the UK, I have always been drawn to themes of memory, place and belonging. Those experiences have increasingly become the stories I want to tell through glass. It remains the only medium



Since beginning her journey in glass in 1995, Jan Simpson's practice has evolved from traditional stained glass to encompass painting, kiln-forming and casting.



Early leaded panel (2001). One of Jan Simpson's earliest independent commissions, demonstrating the traditional stained glass techniques that formed the foundation of her later work.



Cherry Blossom (2002). This commission became a turning point for Jan's practice. Frustrated by the limitations of traditional leaded construction in achieving the level of detail she wanted, it sparked her exploration of kiln-forming and other techniques that would allow greater freedom of expression.



St Francis tester piece. Kingfisher, frog and dragonfly study created during the design development for the St Francis of Assisi window, Ascot. This experimental panel allowed Jan to explore kiln-forming, colour, texture and painted detail before adapting successful elements into the traditionally leaded finished commission.



Kingfisher detail. From the St Francis tester piece, illustrating how kiln-formed glass and vitreous painting were used to achieve greater depth, colour and naturalistic detail before being translated into the final commission.

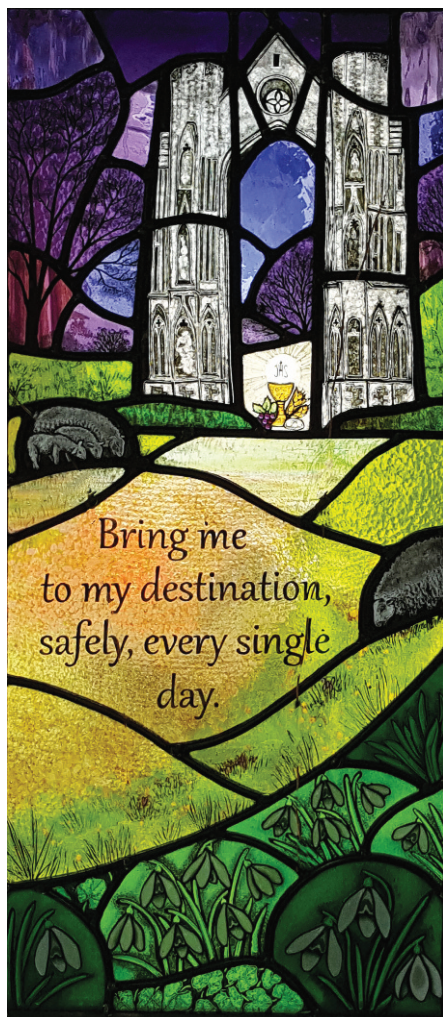
that allows me to express them quite as I imagine them.

Fundamentally changed

Life inevitably intervened. Relationships, children and work meant my tools were packed away for a time, but my fascination with stained glass never disappeared. When I later decided to teach adult education, I enrolled on a City & Guilds course, where one exercise fundamentally changed the way I thought about design.

We were asked to create a panel using only clear glass, relying entirely on the leadlines to produce the composition. It taught me that lead is far more than a structural necessity; it is part of the drawing itself. The rhythm and movement of the leadlines can be every bit as expressive as the glass they hold.

Towards the end of the course our tutor briefly demonstrated kiln-forming by slumping a sheet of glass over a form. That simple demonstration stayed with me. Soon



Our Lady of Walsingham. Detail from the Our Lady of Walsingham window at St Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church, Ascot. This photograph shows only a small section of the completed commission, which forms one of a series of three major windows created for the church between 2014 and 2018.

afterwards I inherited enough money from my grandmother to buy my first kiln. I bought Brad Walker's Contemporary Fusing and began experimenting whenever I could. At that stage I had no clear direction; I was simply fascinated by the possibilities that warm glass offered and curious to see where they might lead.

Turning point

An early commission, *Cherry Blossom*, became the first real turning point. Working with traditional lead and copper foil, I became increasingly frustrated by the limitations of the techniques available to me and the lack of detail I could achieve. I found myself asking a different question: rather than painting the detail onto the surface – a skill I had yet to learn – could I somehow create it within the glass itself? At the time I had no idea how to achieve it, but that single question changed the direction of my work.

My curiosity was never about replacing traditional stained glass. Instead, I wanted to discover whether kiln-forming, and later casting, could work alongside centuries-old craftsmanship, allowing the narrative to exist within the glass itself while freeing the leadlines to become part of the composition.



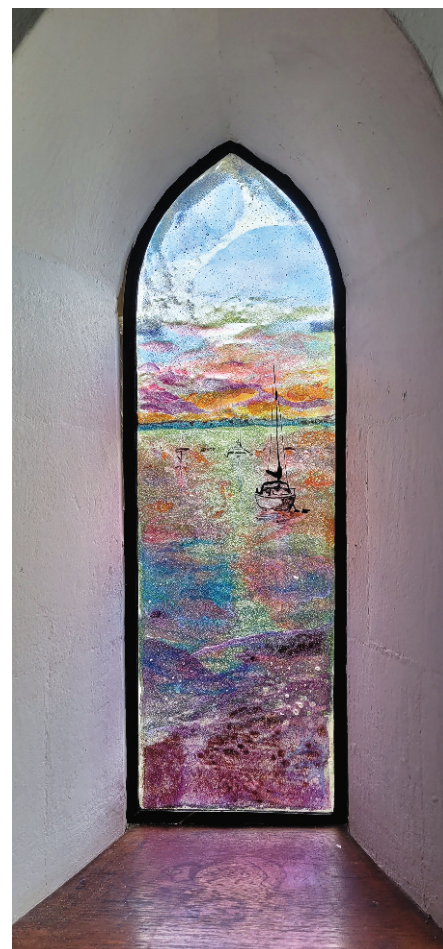
Our Lady of Walsingham under construction. Painted and fired glass being assembled over the full-size cartoon before leading, illustrating the making process behind a completed stained glass window.

Finding answers took time. Every new technique brought more testing, more failures and, inevitably, more questions. Kiln-forming behaves very differently from traditionally



She – The Serpent Year (2025). Jan writes: "Created during my final year at university, *She – The Serpent Year* marked a significant milestone in my technical development.

"It was the first leaded panel in which I integrated traditional hand-painted stained glass, kiln-fused glass and a three-dimensional kiln-cast element into a single narrative composition. Submitted as part of my final degree portfolio, it established an approach that continues to evolve within my contemporary architectural glass practice."



St Nicholas' Chapel, Langstone Harbour (2024). A contemporary memorial window that combines kiln-formed glass and traditional vitreous painting within a simple leaded border, reflecting Jan's continuing exploration of how traditional stained glass techniques can evolve within ecclesiastical and contemporary architectural settings.

leaded glass, and understanding how the two might coexist demanded patience as much as creativity. Gradually, I realised that experimentation itself had become central to my practice.

Three major commissions for St Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church, Ascot, between 2014 and 2018 gave me the opportunity to put these ideas into practice. I began integrating kiln-formed elements into traditionally leaded windows not as decorative additions, but as part of the narrative itself.

Collaborative discipline

Working closely with my then apprentice, Alison Smith, reinforced my belief that stained glass has always been a collaborative discipline. Sitting side by side, we developed ideas together, testing and refining designs as the commissions evolved. Those years reminded me that the craft has always grown through shared knowledge and collaboration.

Rather than trying to reproduce painted detail in glass, I began asking what each process could contribute in its own right. Kiln-forming introduced depth, texture, detail and subtle variations in light, while traditional stained glass continued to provide the architectural framework, rhythm and permanence that have defined the craft for ►



Where the Seahorse Waits (2025). Inspired by memories of Hong Kong and the South China Sea, this university piece represents a significant step in Jan's technical development. Unlike traditional stained glass, every glass element was individually handmade, kiln-fused and then cut to fit within a conventional leaded framework.

Building on concepts first explored in *She*, this work paved the way for Jan's continuing research into combining kiln-formed and kiln-cast glass within architectural stained glass.

centuries. I was no longer choosing between techniques; I was learning how they could work together to tell a richer story.

The Ascot commissions marked an important milestone in my development,

but they also made me aware of how much more there was to learn. Although years of independent practice and self-teaching had given me a strong foundation, I wanted a deeper understanding of contemporary glass processes and how they could be integrated into stained glass without compromising the integrity of the traditional craft.

Natural continuation

Returning to university in 2023 to study for a BA (Hons) in Glass and Ceramics at the University for the Creative Arts was not a change of direction, but the natural continuation of the journey that had begun in Adelaide three decades earlier.

The course gave me the time, facilities and expert tuition to investigate kiln-forming, casting and architectural glass in greater depth, reinforcing my belief that research and experimentation can preserve the narrative integrity of traditional stained glass whilst embracing contemporary techniques. I think we're only just beginning to understand what these processes might contribute to the future of stained glass.

The technical skills I developed in mould-making, kiln-casting and architectural glass have become invaluable, not because they replace traditional stained glass, but because they expand the ways we can use it. Above all, the degree gave me the confidence to keep asking questions and



St Hugh of Lincoln (2018). Created for the St Hugh Education Centre, Holy Cross Hospital, Haslemere, this contemporary interpretation of an ecclesiastical subject combines traditional painted stained glass with kiln-formed glass.

Jan Simpson comments: "Rather than being leaded, the panel was designed to fit within a bespoke handmade maple lightbox frame crafted by Martin Simons, a skilled carpenter with whom I have collaborated on a number of projects. Looking back, the relatively simple kiln-formed background reminds me how much my understanding of fused and cast glass has developed since then, making this piece an important milestone in my creative journey."

to trust that curiosity remains one of an artist's most valuable tools.

Looking back, I think my lack of formal training forced me to solve problems for myself. Not knowing – or feeling constrained by – the traditional rules encouraged me to improvise and question accepted practice.

For me, story has always come before technique. Whether I use painting, leading, kiln-forming or casting is ultimately secondary. Each process is simply another way of helping the glass communicate its narrative. I don't experiment for the sake of innovation; I experiment because every new technique offers another opportunity to express an idea more clearly. ■



Private commission inspired by Princed Harbour, West Sussex (2023). Traditional leaded construction combined with fused details to create a contemporary interpretation of the local landscape.