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ALISON MANNS' STAINED GLASS

The loose squares of coloured glass glow like jewels, backlit on stained glass artist Alison Mann's studio light table. On the floor are stacked larger pieces, as yet uncut or waiting for an inspirational moment. One is as green as sunlit sea breaking on a white sand beach, another blue with shadows you see in a moonlit wood, and an infinite, endless, variety of others.

"For me," remarks Alison, eyes thoughtfully narrowed and then laughing, "going in to buy at a stained glass shop is like going into a grocery store when you're hungry."

Alison began working with stained glass in 1999, a sideways slide into an artisan lifestyle very far removed from her original career as a registered nurse specializing in kidney and dialysis care. Back then she'd accompanied her husband Braden on a one-year sabbatical while he studied for a masters degree, at the historical city of York in northern England.

"We didn't," she remarks dryly, "have much money, three young boys [and the youngest only eight months], and when my birthday came around, Braden surprised me with gift of a weekend stained glass workshop being held at Knaresborough by Judy Dickinson, who had an accredited art and glass studio."

"I had," she remembers, "the whole weekend all for myself; it was heaven. I learned the basics and made one little piece that weekend." She gestures towards the kitchen window where a palm-sized suncatcher, hanging from a thread, magically refracts winter lightshine from outside.

Braden, she gratefully acknowledges, has encouraged her every step forward as an artist. "He'd say to me," she thinks out loud, "you really ought to do this. He still does."

"And," she follows on, "stained glass is a craft, a kind of word of mouth, where you can read a book, go to a workshop and do it, or serve an apprenticeship. When we first came back [to Canada] we lived in Calgary, and Braden built me a workbench and a light table [a glass topped table underlit with fluorescent] in the garage. I'm a bit of a night owl and besides, there's glass and toxic fumes from the lead and soldering, it's not a child friendly occupation. That's not," she grins, "necessarily a bad thing."

She works three days a week, her workshop (soon to be upsized as the size of her commissions is increasing) a few strides away from the stone flagged front door. "With children and their schedules I need to be structured," she

comments, “mind, if I get into something – and that’s terribly easy to do - the dishes pile up, the clothes aren’t ironed....” Her voice trails off, remembering, then she laughs and hits stride again.

“The boys are so proud. They like that I’m working at home, here for them. When I stopped working as a nurse they were so excited, I really had no idea it was a huge deal for them,” she adds, “Daegan, he’s seven, he’ll say, “My mum, she’s a stained glasser.” Her voice holds a proud emphasis exclamation mark. She mentions her family, her boys, often in the morning I am at the Bragg Creek acreage where their renovated log house snuggles into aspen and black poplar.

SIDEBAR>>Uniquely, Alison Mann has a gift of knowing her life right now is very good and wholeheartedly acknowledging her blessings; these are golden years.

“Stained glass,” she believes, “should be imperfect. When I design commissions I want them to be individual pieces, not something you see mass produced.” She began with small pieces for relatives and friends who uninhibitedly began spreading the word. “My first commissioned piece, oh, I was scared!” she exclaims, “it was a Christmas present for a wife, of her favourite flowers, tulips. Her husband came in on December 18th and I finished on the 23rd, I guess it’s lucky that deadlines don’t faze me.” She pauses, considering. “Sometimes people have an idea of what they want, sometimes they don’t.” She nods her head, thoughtful.

SIDEBAR>>We pile on layers by the front door before stepping outside into razor sharp temperatures, then negotiate the mad enthusiasm of her four large dogs and step into the workshop. “Stained glass is beautiful, each piece is unique, it adds character, it adds warmth,” she considers slowly then adds, “with the Alberta light it’s...dynamite. People like looking at it, the different lights or that hard sunlight coming in and then, at night, you have your light against the window and it’s different again.”

When Alison is designing for a client, she works from dimensions of the designated window, or door, or for a kitchen cabinet, tables, furniture; mathematical accuracy is a big factor. “There has,” she says firmly, “to be a perfect fit, there’s almost no leeway.” Face-to-face they’ll work through colours, whether to go abstract or straight or curved lines, opaque glass or diffused, contemporary or traditional. Personally she prefers outlining the outside ‘frame’ in zinc, with the traditional lead around the glass pieces (“It’s cleaner and smoother, less fussy,” she believes, “less time consuming.” Copper, though, she admits, is far more forgiving as a medium “although it needs a steady hand and a light touch.”

Each piece of glass is cut individually, then the edges ground for smoothness. Working with gloves is not for everyone, she remarks, sweeping up a mound of

band aid stickers from the work bench with a wry grin. “I love the technical aspect,” she gestures, “love cutting each piece perfectly. The start-up [equipment] costs are totally reasonable; pliers, mask, an exhaust system, a light table, the grinder and a hand-held glass cutter, a soldering iron.....going into Lee Valley or reading through their catalogue,” she admits happily, can be very nearly addictive.

More recently she’s also sometimes working with Tom Clark, who incorporates reclaimed wood into his heritage furniture from his Olds workshop. “We met in a stained glass workshop,” Alison recalls, “our working relationship is kind of like peanut butter and jelly, a natural fit.” Tom designs individual pieces he calls whispers-of-the-past, each with their own history of storytelling; in keeping Alison then designs a stained glass window to fit in with its character – two talented artists for the price of one.

SIDEBAR>>In her Calgary days Alison dialed up a Yellow Pages number and connected up with Rhonda Gee, who both offers studio space and individual lessons that flexibly fit in with each person’s lifestyle. Rhonda herself is well known for her work with renovators, producing one-off pieces for doors and windows. “People,” she explains, “will come in with a photograph that may have special memories, a cabin where someone was married, that kind of thing.” She loves teaching and is a passionate advocate. “It’s interesting,” she remarks, “if you give students one single idea, everyone will do it differently, and for me that’s always the fascination.”

SIDEBAR>>Without glass civilization as we know it would be far different – the Vikings, for example, were known to scrape hides razor thin before using them as windows. Stained glass, though, was first used by wealthy Romans in their villas and palaces, probably around the first century AD, and would have been considered a domestic luxury rather than an artistic medium.

By the 10th century AD stained glass windows began being documented when substantial church building began, with biblical scenes in French and German buildings, and more decorative designs found in English counterparts.

Techniques of stained glass window construction were described by the monk Theophilus who wrote a how-to for craftsmen about 1100 AD and where he describes methods little changed even today. “If you want to assemble simple windows, first mark out the dimensions of their length and breadth on a wooden board, then draw scroll work on anything else that pleases you, and select colours that are to be put in. Cut the glass and fit the pieces together with the grozing iron. Enclose them with the lead

panes...and solder on both sides. Surround it with a wooden frame strengthened with nails and set it up in the place where you wish.”

The Gothic age (around the 1500s) produced the great cathedrals of Europe; churches too became taller and lighter, walls thinned and stained glass was used to fill the increasingly larger openings in them. Craftsmen were at their zenith of skills; it was believed that the presence of beautiful light would lift men’s souls closer to God. Medieval man experienced a window more than he read it – the creators of these windows were more interested in illustrating an idea rather than creating natural or realistic images. Rich jewel colours played off milky, dull neutrals.

And, today stained glass is all around us. Over the last 30 years the individual artist, (and earlier architects such as the American Frank Lloyd Wright or Glaswegian Rennie Mackintosh), new technologies and the growing interest in stained glass as a hobby craft have all lead to a new Golden Age. New homes are often embellished with beveled glass entrances, stained glass bathroom windows and Tiffany style kitchen fittings.

SIDEBAR>> About the year 1300 AD, yellow stain was discovered. This had the ability to turn white glass yellow, or blue glass green, and was extremely useful in the highlighting of hair, haloes and crowns. Earlier civilizations had learned to make glass and then colour it by adding metallic salts and oxides. These minerals within the glass capture specific portions from the white light spectrum, thus allowing the human eye to see different colours. Gold produces cranberry, cobalt goes into blues, and silver creates yellows, while copper makes greens and brilliant hard reds.

Resources:

1. Alison Manns at Free Spirit Glass ([tel@403-270-2368](tel:403-270-2368))
2. Lee Valley Woodworking and Garden Tools ([tel@253-2066](tel:253-2066) or www.leevalley.com)
3. Rhonda Gee ([tel@403-283-1862](tel:403-283-1862) or www.rhondasstainedglass.com)
4. Tom Clark ([tel@403-556-8010](tel:403-556-8010) or www.heritageartisanfurniture.com)
5. Fusion Stained Glass Unlimited, 509-16th Avenue NW, Calgary.
[Tel@250-9381](tel:250-9381)
6. information also at www.stainedglasscanada.com