The Importance of Stained Glass

Stained glass told the messages of the Bible and the lives of saints to the illiterate masses. However, the power of stained glass extends even deeper into the beliefs of the Medieval Church. Theologians such as Abbot Suger of the Abbey Church of St. Denis declared that “the light filtering through stained glass provided a divine luminosity” (Stokstad 498-499). Indeed, stained glass took on an importance equal to that enjoyed by icons in the Eastern Church.

Donor Panels Explained

To finance the production and installation of stained glass windows, individuals and organizations both inside and outside the church paid for at least part of the costs. In kind, artists included likenesses of these patrons as a donor’s “signature.”

Many of the signature panels exist in “Trade Windows,” which blend images of people at work with the story told by the glass. The cathedrals of Bourges and Chartres contain some of the earliest known trade windows, which date to approximately 1200 CE, though Chartres contains more trade windows than any other cathedral in France, with 42 total (Williams 151).

The Transformation of Bread

Bread can be found in five of the windows of trade, although the most prominent window of these is The Lives of the Apostles. The lower-left panel of the window (Fig. 1) depicts bakers preparing dough in a large, golden trough. The deeply religious nature of the scene emerges when one spots the face of Jesus Christ in the dough. The trough represents an altar and the transformation of bread into Christ’s body during Eucharist (Williams 64).

A similar transformation occurs in the scene (Fig. 2) depicting the preparation of loaves of bread. Eleven white loaves sit beneath a bench, where a brown loaf will soon join them. This represents the Twelve Apostles.

Christmas

Christmas was, and still is, an important Christian holiday. The image shown at right (Fig. 3) comes from a window representing the Signs of the Zodiac and the Labors of the Months. This image for December depicts a noble in the midst of a Christmas feast of wine, bread, and fish. Typical Christmas meals included elaborate items such as the heads of boars (Eden, 78). The meal showed here, however, is deceptively simple. These three foods represent a “royal” feast, as each item represents Christ.

Wine’s Dual Roles

Wine, just as bread, was widely produced in the vicinity of Chartres. In Figure 4, wine is paralleled directly with the life of St. Lubin, who served as Bishop of Chartres in the sixth century. The Saint’s journey from shepherd to Bishop is compared to the journey of wine to the Cathedral for Mass. In three circular clusters, four images of St. Lubin’s life surround an image of wine on this journey.

The donor panels, located at the bottom of the window, depict a wine crier and tavern keeper at work beneath the distinctive hoop sign of a tavern (Williams 82-83). Both the Church and the nobility owned many of the taverns in Chartres. Therefore, it is likely that the donor panels’ wine criers and tavern keepers worked for Church authorities (Guest 137).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


