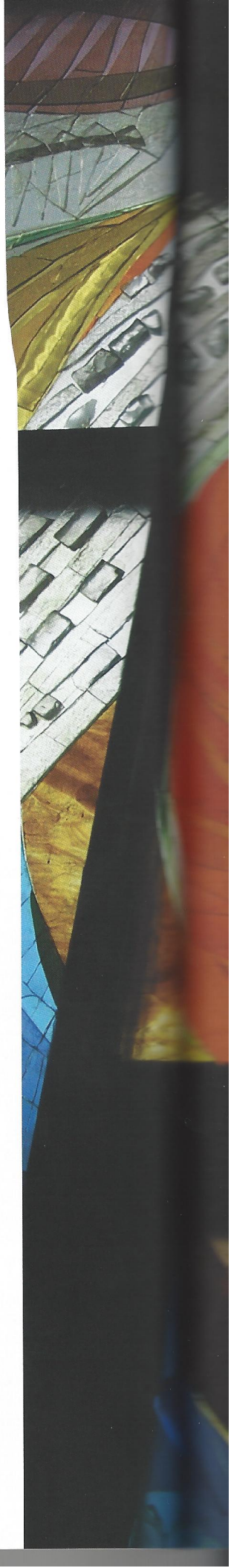


Craft and Design: Canadian Architectural Stained Glass after World War Two

BY KATHY KRANIAS

ARCHITECTURAL STAINED GLASS in Canada was established largely as an ecclesiastical art form during the nineteenth century. In the post-World War Two era however, aesthetics and studio practices changed radically with new innovations, transforming the craft and design traditions of the art form. The Canadian artists Marcelle Ferron (1924-2001) and Eric Wesselow (1911-1998) produced significant stained glass projects for public architecture during this time. While both artists introduced abstract stained glass to sacred and secular spaces, they did so using very different approaches: the industrially fabricated and the handmade. Working as a designer, Ferron collaborated with industry to design monumental windows for secular public architecture in the province of Quebec, such as metro stations, courthouses, and hospitals. As a craftsman, Wesselow designed and personally crafted smaller scale windows for synagogues and churches in Montreal and Toronto.

RIGHT: Eric Wesselow, *A Glance into the Heavens*, Window 8 (detail), North Facing Windows, 1980, Humber Valley United Church, Toronto. Antique glass, slab glass, glass jewels. 478 cm h x 213 cm w x 4 cm d. PHOTO: KATHY KRANIAS







French-Canadian, Montreal-based Marcelle Ferron was an abstract painter of international stature when, in the 1960s, she expanded her practice in mid-career to design stained glass for public architecture. As a former member of *Les Automatistes* and signatory of *Refus global*,¹ Ferron held strong convictions about the social role of art. She had been searching for a new material to adapt her explorations of colour, transparency, and light; stained glass was best suited to transfer these interests to a public art.²

When architectural stained glass had emerged as an art form in the Middle Ages, designer and craftsman worked side by side in the same workshop. The designer, known as the master glazier, had a sound knowledge of the craft which enabled the creation of effective designs and quality craftsmanship in the elaborate processes of cutting, painting, firing, leading, and glazing. Ferron possessed working knowledge of both traditional and contemporary materials and processes which empowered her practice as a modern stained glass designer.

In order to inspire modern architects, Ferron believed she must partner with industry to design original stained glass for architectural contexts.³ In 1966 she received a grant from Quebec's Ministry of Cultural Affairs to work with an industrial company in Quebec. Collaborating with the manufacturer Superseal Corporation, Ferron worked with a team of

technicians in the factory to adapt a contemporary technique that could withstand the Canadian climate. This strategy enabled her to produce monumental projects that she designed herself but were fabricated and installed by the factory technicians under her close supervision.

Antique coloured glass imported from France was the primary craft material Ferron used for her work as a designer. Originally developed by chemists in France, Germany and England in the 19th century, Antique glass is a handmade flat glass that has many of the qualities of medieval glass but with a richer spectrum of hues and variety of textures. Ferron's choice to use handmade glass for her designs was significant, as the material has a depth of intensity and colour that runs through the thickness of the glass due to the metallic oxides used in its formation. The inequalities of tiny bubbles and striations that result from the mouth-blown process of forming antique glass contribute to the action of light in the glass. These attributes impart the rich luminous colour to the designs and architectural spaces, a quality which Ferron believed was important to communicate in her public projects. She claimed, "If I need colour in my life, I think that millions of others also need it."⁴

The technology Ferron developed enabled her to use vast areas of antique glass to form the massive shapes that are a hallmark of her abstract designs. This can be seen in all of her public commissions such



ABOVE: Marcelle Ferron, *Les grandes formes qui dansent*, West Wall, 1968, Champ-de-Mars Metro Station, Montreal. Antique glass, plate-glass. 7.62 m h x 60.96 m w. PHOTO: KATHY KRANIAS

OPPOSITE PAGE: Marcelle Ferron, *Les grandes formes qui dansent*, Southwest Corner, 1968, Champ-de-Mars Metro Station, Montreal. Antique glass, plate-glass. 7.62 m h x 60.96 m w. PHOTO: KATHY KRANIAS

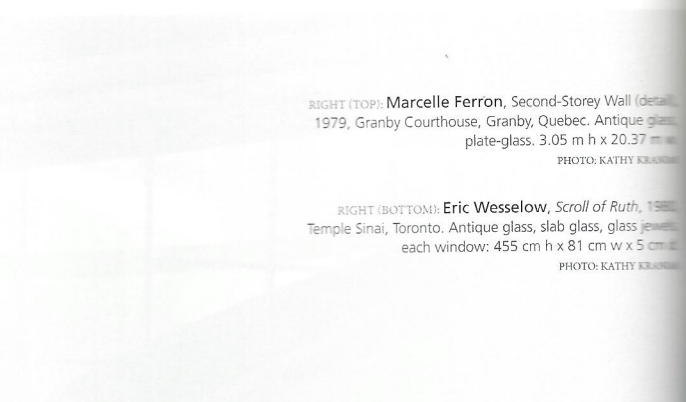
Les grandes formes qui dansent at Champ-de-Mars Metro Station (1968) and Vendôme Metro Station (1981) in Montreal and at the Granby Courthouse (1979) in Granby, Quebec. The sweeping curvilinear shapes, including ellipses, arcs and ribbon-like bands, are composed of groupings of coloured antique glass held together by transparent vinyl joints. Plate-glass panels are placed on either side to form a sandwich, which is cut to fit between the window mullions and vacuum sealed. By replacing traditional leaded joints with transparent vinyl ones, Ferron solved climate related joint issues and opened up new possibilities for her work as a designer.

Combinations of translucent and opaque antique glass, and clear plate-glass are juxtaposed in Ferron's designs to create screen-like effects that allow the shapes and textures of the city to be seen through the glass in clear view or altered by colour. Ferron produced different moods and effects by varying the proportions of these different types of glass. In the first storey design for the Granby Courthouse for example, the predominant use of translucent coloured glass and minimal use of clear plate-glass results in designs that flood the spaces with intensely coloured filtered light. In her design of *Les grandes formes qui dansent* at the Champ-de-Mars Metro Station, Ferron's large colourful shapes appear to soar across the city skyline, seen through the many areas of

clear plate-glass. In the midst of the train station in the heart of Montreal, Ferron imagines a world of dynamic shapes and light, creating a joyful urban interior.

There is no question that Ferron's technical innovation enabled her to create the monumentality that defined her abstract designs, often with glass that stretched from floor to ceiling in buildings where she collaborated in the initial architectural design phase. Each of the three adjacent glass walls that make up *Les grandes formes qui dansent* at Champ-de-Mars Metro Station for example, rise over 7 metres high and 20 metres wide, creating monumental walls of glass with a total area of 186 square metres. Even larger are the three-storey glass walls at the Granby Courthouse that have a total area of 260 square metres, with the largest third-storey wall measuring 4.5 metres high by 20 metres wide.

To develop her plans for the design phase of a building, Ferron worked within architectural and physical constraints. Design decisions



RIGHT (TOP): Marcelle Ferron, Second-Storey Wall (detail), 1979, Granby Courthouse, Granby, Quebec. Antique glass, plate-glass. 3.05 m h x 20.37 m w.
PHOTO: KATHY KRANICH



RIGHT (BOTTOM): Eric Wesselow, *Scroll of Ruth*, 1980, Temple Sinai, Toronto. Antique glass, slab glass, glass jewels. each window: 455 cm h x 81 cm w x 5 cm d.
PHOTO: KATHY KRANICH

about light, colour, and technology in relationship to architecture involved a deliberate, methodical process that was distinctly different from the immediacy of her painting practice.⁵ Painting involved the work of her skilled hands, with practiced, gestural movements to arrive at a final design. Ferron's contemporary Eric Wesselow also worked by hand to design, yet with the material of glass.

A highly educated polymath, German born,⁶ Montreal-based Eric Wesselow was an accomplished watercolourist and internationally recognized portraitist when he expanded his practice in mid-career to craft stained glass windows for churches and synagogues. Wesselow believed that beautifying sacred buildings with stained glass works greatly enriched a congregation, and he felt this brought him greater personal rewards than commercial or public exhibitions.⁷

Wesselow approached stained glass as a craftsman, working skillfully by hand. Rather than collaborate with industry to fabricate massive glass walls as did Ferron, Wesselow worked alone to craft windows of a much smaller scale for pre-existing buildings. He used European antique glass which, like Ferron, he chose for its depth and intensity of colour, as well as its wide range of prismatic hues. In addition, Wesselow used dalle de verre imported from Europe, a type of handmade glass that is cast in flat blocks, which he faceted himself with a dalle hammer to create varied planes and textures. Highly skilled with handling these materials, he invented several different lamination techniques from 1960 onward.

Wesselow freely assembled by hand layers of shattered antique glass on a sheet of clear plate-glass, attaching the layers with transparent epoxy resin, a new material at the time. In a later invention, he laminated several layers of antique glass with dalle de verre, increasing the colour intensity, and the refractive and reflective properties of the windows. This can be seen in his works such as *Scroll of Ruth* (1980) at Temple Sinai, Toronto, *A Glance into the Heavens* (1978-80) at Humber Valley United Church, Toronto, and the Baptistery Window at Church of the Resurrection, Montreal (1987).

Wesselow's skill and fluency with his material is evident in poetic designs that integrate glass in its various physical states: shattered, broken, carved and cast. In *the Scroll of Ruth* for example, the King David panel depicts the area above King David's head with shattered yellow glass, evoking rays of sunlight without being overly descriptive. As well, the small blue and yellow molded glass jewels attached to David's harp and sword suggest his kingly wealth in a subtle way. Other material choices that exemplify this poetic approach to materials can be seen in the centre panel of the Baptistery Window, where the central dove is depicted with a heavily chiseled dalle. The forms and textures of the bird's torso and beak are sensitively carved without being too detailed, allowing the refraction of light from its torso to become the emphasis of the panel.

Wesselow's working method allowed him to spontaneously respond to his material during the design process. Unlike the medieval stained glass workshop in which the designer and craftsman performed separate tasks, Wesselow worked autonomously in his studio, merging the work of craft and design. This allowed him spontaneity in the execution

of his windows. Wesselow believed, while relying on an original and accepted design, that the actual work of making the window must evolve with the greatest possible freedom. At every stage the artist must have a vision of the whole which is best achieved by working alone without an assistant. He once commented that this allowed for the subconscious, symbiotic functioning between hand, heart and mind, which goes beyond technical mastery of the medium.⁸ In the execution of his multi-window masterpiece *The Scroll of Ruth*, Wesselow recounted how the abstract panels loosely evolved from his scale maquette in glass but did not exactly adhere to it. This allowed him to respond to the mood and material presence of the moment of making.⁹

The varied stained glass practices of Ferron and Wesselow exemplify radically different approaches to making in the modern era. Ferron's practice as a designer enabled her to collaborate with industry to fabricate monumental glass walls for the new architecture of reinforced concrete. Constrained by specifications, she developed a methodical approach to the design and fabrication of stained glass. Practicing as a studio craftsman, Wesselow worked skillfully and spontaneously by hand to craft and design windows for sacred architecture, with poetic glass designs that embody the gestures of their maker. Ferron and Wesselow made vital contributions to the Canadian built environment, and their discriminating use of handcrafted Antique glass enhanced the sensorial experience of public architecture. Both artists played a critical role in uniting craft and design to produce monumental works of art, bringing Canadian architectural stained glass into the modern era. ■

(Endnotes)

1. A Montreal-based, multidisciplinary group of artists who formed the first avant-garde art movement in Canada. Led by Paul-Émile Borduas, and inspired by the Surrealists, the group believed artmaking was a spontaneous process connected to individual and social liberty. In 1948 the group published the Manifesto, *Refus global*.
2. Josée Drouin-Brisebois, "L'Héritage de Marcelle Ferron," in *Marcelle Ferron: Monographie*, (Montreal: Éditions Simon Blais, 2008) p. 39.
3. Gunda Lambton, *Stealing the Show: Seven Women Artists in Canadian Public Art*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994) p. 24.
4. Robert Millet, "Une verrière de Marcelle Ferron pour le Métro," *Maclean*, vol. 8, no. 6, 1968 p. 13, cited in English in Lambton: 36.
5. Joel Russ and Lou Lynn, *Contemporary Stained Glass: Portfolio of Canadian Work*, (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1985) p.26.
6. Eric Wesselow was born in Marienburg, now Malbork, Poland, of Russian-Polish parentage. He immigrated to Canada in 1954.
7. Letter from Eric Wesselow to the Congregation of the Church of the Resurrection (Archive of Church of the Resurrection, Montreal)
8. Letter from Eric Wesselow to the Congregation of the Church of the Resurrection (Archive of Church of the Resurrection, Montreal)
9. Scott Eastham ed., *The Way of the Maker: Eric Wesselow's 'Life Through Art'*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002) p. 16.

