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The New York Times

The Divine Resurrection of Stained Glass

Nancy Hass

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Once the language of devotion and prayer, the medium finds a new place in the modern world



Clockwise from bottom: on the ground, an SGL1 pendant light from Project Room LA; Meg Myers's copper mobile; and Brian Clarke's stained-glass panels "Cherry Blossom," panel 6, "Flowers for Zaha," panel 6, "Orchids and the Void of Lust," panel 5, and "Flowers for Zaha," panel 4. Credit Photo by David Chow. Styled by Todd Knopke. Clarke's works courtesy of the artist

IT WAS THE 19TH-CENTURY designer-cum-social-activist William Morris who first brought stained glass back from the dead. Dismayed by the mass production of the Industrial Revolution, he intended his Arts and Crafts movement to encourage a return to traditional techniques and materials. Stained glass — made then and now with sand, potash (mined potassium salts) and metallic oxides for color, heated to 3,000 degrees to create sheets, then sliced into shapes and soldered together with lead, zinc, copper or iron — was primed for resurrection. Though ubiquitous in churches since the High Middle Ages, when stained-glass windows taught the congregation Bible stories through imagery, it waned with the rise of unadorned Protestantism in the late 17th century. Morris made panes fashionable in the houses of the Victorian era, in shades of aquamarine, Kelly green and tangerine, to filter whatever sun could be found — a literal and figurative embodiment of enlightenment and, too, a canvas for his medieval motifs.

By the end of the century, when Louis Comfort Tiffany, the son of the founder of the [jewelry empire](#), pioneered a new technique to make luminescent, opaque glass for vases and domed lamps with cast-bronze bases, the rebirth of stained glass as a secular material seemed complete. Even the [Modernists](#) came to embrace its chromatic vitality: [Josef Albers](#), the German-born American abstractionist and poet, who helmed the [Bauhaus](#)'s stained-glass studio, turned out gridlike screens resembling patchworks of colorful chessboards. The Midwestern architect [Frank Lloyd Wright](#), inspired by the angles and colors of the Vienna Secession and the milky light of Japanese shoji screens, began using ribbons of glass punctuated by small geometric details in

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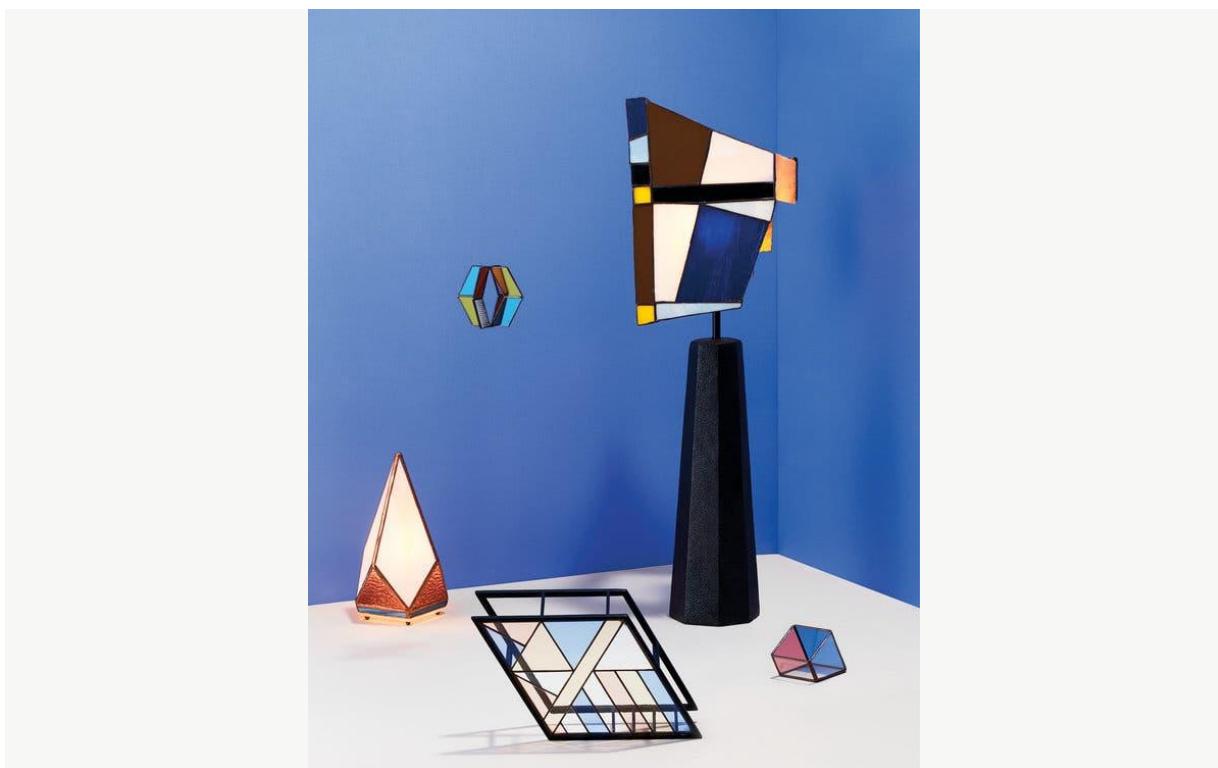
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autumnal tones of pumpkin and wheat for his doors and windows. He referred to them as “light screens,” a means, he noted, for “opening up space.”



Clockwise from top left: Starlight planter by Janel Foo Glassworks; a Sabrina De Sousa stained glass lamp; 60 Degrees planter by Janel Foo Glassworks; a Serena Confalonieri Santissimi I tray; and a Friend of All Greta rose quartz lamp. Credit Photo by David Chow. Styled by Todd Knopke

Alas, this stained-glass renaissance was short-lived. By the end of the 1920s, Wright abandoned it for reasons he never revealed; the material was relegated to lowly craft status in the decades that followed. Midcentury architects occasionally used it for abstract motifs in churches — as [Le Corbusier](#) did in the billowing 1955 Notre Dame du Haut chapel at Ronchamp — but by the next decade, stained glass came to be regarded as nostalgic Victoriana or hippie-ish kitsch. Contemporary art and architecture, wary of ornament and beguiled by monochromatic minimalism, had no use for it.

NOW, A NEW GENERATION of artists and designers is turning again to stained glass, choosing it not merely for windows and screens, but for objects. The medium, they say, satisfies both a need for warm, vivid illumination in an era that can feel shadowy, and the desire to see, amid the machine-polished surfaces of contemporary life, the mark of the human hand.

“There is nothing cool about stained glass, which is part of its appeal,” says Isaac Resnikoff, 39, a partner in [Project Room](#), a Los Angeles-based design studio that makes a series of bespoke pendant lights with 1-inch-wide, 3.5-foot-tall dappled stained-glass panels in colors such as ruby, fuchsia, sunshine yellow and sapphire. “The idea is to take something with those old-fashioned associations, to acknowledge them, while creating something that doesn’t reference that at all,” he says. [Sabrina De Sousa](#), 35, a designer who also co-owns the New York restaurant and market [Dimes](#), makes table lamps from found bases in concrete, ceramic, metal or

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wood, topping them with an irregular-shaped plane of stained glass — a jigsaw in shades of, say, midnight, pearl and marigold, lit from behind by a chandelier bulb. They echo the intense hues of [Mark Rothko](#), a master of luster and glow. “I know intellectually the history of stained glass,” De Sousa says, “but I was more influenced by the radical way colors can interact in an abstract sense.”



Serena Confalonieri's Mojo wall amulets in (from left) silver, copper and brass. Credit Photo by David Chow. Styled by Todd Knopke

Still others are turning stained glass into furniture, which creates an additional challenge: harnessing ambient light. The Spanish-born, Milan-based architect and designer [Patricia Urquiola](#), 58, who has made a career of blending the industrial with craft, solved the conundrum by using stained glass for both the front and back of the sideboard she made with the Italian art director and gallerist [Federico Pepe](#). It is meant to be the centerpiece in a room; the effect of light flooding through it, casting jagged primary-color forms on the floor, is both luminous and futuristic. The designer and art director [Serena Confalonieri](#), 39, who also works in Milan, makes small objects, including vases, trays and bowls, using a palette of cool gray-blues, lavender and peach; a recent tray was inspired by the colors and geometry of [Gio Ponti](#)'s San Francesco d'Assisi al Fopponino church in Porta Magenta, finished in 1964.

As the material has become resurgent, visual artists are now circling back to the figurative narratives that once defined the form, twisting traditional allusions to faith and power with their own critical reinterpretations. As part of his 2017 solo show at the Hollywood gallery [Shulamit Nazarian](#), the painter [Amir H. Fallah](#), 39, who was born in Iran and works in Los Angeles, created a small, darkened chapel in which he hung an illuminated 32-inch-by-42-inch [stained-glass self-portrait](#); in it, he is wrapped entirely in a violet shroud, his face unseen, cradling a sock monkey as a stand-in for his infant son. [Kehinde Wiley](#), the New York-based portraitist whose paintings focus on recasting young black men in settings that recall the old masters and French court paintings,

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also recently turned to gigantic, ornate stained-glass panels. In them, the subjects, in street clothes, are transformed into saints.

Then there's [Brian Clarke](#), the 66-year-old English artist who for over four decades has more or less been the lone voice for stained glass in the art world — he has worked on public buildings with the architects [Norman Foster](#) and [Zaha Hadid](#), and [his most recent solo show](#), at Norwich's [Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts](#), included huge screens with Warhol-like grids of mushroom clouds and flora. He sees the medium's new acceptance as part of the ongoing collapse of borders between high art and craft. Just as painting was liberated from the church in the early 19th century, and artists took on secular subjects, eventually sliding toward abstraction, so, too, is stained glass having its own breakout moment. "What could be more modern than a medium that has a celluloid quality," Clarke says, "a cinematic drama that changes constantly?"