

LAWRENCE STANLEY LEE

Lawrence was one of the most distinguished and remarkable stained glass artists of the twentieth century whose contemporaries included Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, John Piper and Ceri Richards. He believed that stained glass was a spiritual and civilising medium which depended on God's mysterious light to "transform fragile curtains of colour and imagery" into the alchemy of glass.

Lawrence Stanley Lee was born on 18th September 1909. His father William H. Lee was chauffeur to a wealthy gentleman, Mr Barclay Walker, who spent a life of indulgence and travel. His mother, Rose Embleton, was a cobbler's daughter. It was not a happy childhood as his parents fought constantly and eventually divorced. His mother suffered from religious mania and believed that her son was predestined to damnation. His childhood was spent listening to long sermons and hymns. His solace was drawing and reading. Protracted hours spent with the Bible and his church schooling provided a rich foundation for future ecclesiastical windows. After elementary school he secured a scholarship to Kingston Art School where he was regarded as extremely gifted. After three years he won a further scholarship to the Royal College of Art where he entered the Design School rather than the mainstream "Fine Art" faculty. Martin Travers, an architect, stained glass designer, was his tutor and mentor and a profound influence on the young artist. After graduating in 1930 he joined Travers in his studio and was briefly a member of an artistic co-operative with James and Lilian Dring, producing stained glass and murals.

The religious thread in his life led him to explore different versions of Christianity and in 1938 he enrolled as a novice at the Franciscan Friary near Cerne Abbas, enjoying the contemplative life and a visionary experience. At the end of a year the novice master/guardian recognised Lawrence's close attention to and horror at the developing Fascist political situation, and so his life path turned as he joined the Armed Forces, serving as a gunner in north Africa and Italy. Several of his desert water colours are in the Imperial War Museum. He married his sweetheart, Dorothy, on leave, in 1940 with a one day honeymoon. He was promoted to captain and transferred to the Educational Corps in Italy towards the end of the War. He conceived and organised an art school in Florence creating courses to occupy the troops. He assisted in the protection and preservation of many valuable works of art which had been in storage during the War.

After the war Lawrence returned to Travers's studio as his chief stained assistant restoring the bomb-damaged churches. When Travers died suddenly in 1948 Lawrence took over all his commissions. He set up a studio in Sutton, Surrey, later in New Malden, and finally at Penshurst, Kent. Here he was surrounded by a beautiful garden. His assistants acid etched the glass among the fruit and vegetables! In 1948 he was invited back to the RCA to head an innovative stained glass department which finally closed in the re-structure of 1968.

His most illustrious achievement was masterminding the ten nave windows in the new Coventry Cathedral, designed by Sir Basil Spence in the early fifties to stand next to the remains of the old cathedral which has been destroyed by a second world war bombing raid. The technical problems of producing 70ft high windows were massive. The designers were Lawrence and two students, Geoffrey Clarke and Keith New, both, later eminent artists in their own right. They each designed three lights and collaborated for the tenth.

Coventry established Lawrence's reputation and he found himself with a new freedom of expression. In the early sixties his distinctive style began to emerge – a combination of the alchemy and skills of the medieval craftsman and his own highly individual sense and colour. He never sought to shock,

always paying homage to the architecture, but believing that the experience of looking at a window was to conduct the energy of light to the retina.

Lawrence was a prolific artist, working mostly in ecclesiastical settings in churches all over Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. His abstracted figures and jewel-like colour far-removed from the rigid Victorian influences of his training and moving on from the Arts and Crafts Movement.

He employed and mentored a dozen assistants over the years and was generous in passing on his knowledge and wisdom. He was possibly the only artist to include his assistant's initials in his signature glassmark.

In 1967 Lawrence wrote *Stained Glass, Handbook for Artist* and in 1976 he co-wrote *Stained Glass* an illustrated guide. He regarded his last book *The Appreciation of Stained Glass* (1977) as encapsulating his stained glass philosophy. In 1974 he was Master of the Worshipful Company of Glaziers. He was Chairman and Fellow of the British Society of Master Glass Painters.

Having retired in his eighties he died at 101 and 7 months.