

The Stevens Competition

A short history

By Liveryman Clive Osborne

From its inception, one of the main objects of the Glaziers' Company (earlier the Glaziers' Guild) was the regulation of apprenticeships for young people (women were enrolled as members of Guilds as well as men) wishing to learn the craft - in medieval times "the mystery" - of stained glass. The general practice was to be apprenticed to a Master for seven years, after which the apprentice was qualified to become a Master too.

The Company no longer has the responsibility of regulating apprenticeships, but the tradition of training, supporting, and encouraging young people in following the craft has continued. At the end of the First World War, the Minister for Reconstruction appealed to Livery Companies to re-establish close contact with the crafts or trades with which they were originally identified. The Glaziers were among the first to respond to this appeal. The first step was to institute practical classes for craftsmen in stained glass and other glazing at the Trades Training Schools of the Carpenters' Company. Among the objects was the provision of "Medals and prizes for the best examples of Stained Glass and Leaded Lights". One of the first benefactors was George Paget Walford, Master in 1909 and 1917 – 1919, who established the Walford Fund for the furtherance of the craft.

From 1918 there are references to a Reconstruction Committee, an Education Committee and a Technical Education Committee. This last Committee recommended to the Court that a scholarship scheme be established. The first scholarship of £50 from the Walford Fund was awarded to Henry John Hunt of the Central School of Arts and Crafts. In 1933 the Scheme was approved by the London County Council and the Ministry of Education. Candidates had to be aged from 17 to 21 and were required to spend a minimum of 14 hours a week in glass painting, glazing design and life drawing classes. In 1937 the rules were revised to provide for two scholarships of £50 and two of £25 to be awarded annually to students or artists in stained glass aged between 16 and 35. A half-yearly "proof piece" demonstrating progress was to be submitted by the scholars.

To celebrate King George V's Silver Jubilee in 1935, Sigismund Goetze, Upper Warden in 1938, offered 100 guineas for the Master and Court to select a student or young artist to make a window for a church or public building. No scholarships were awarded during the Second World War. When they were resumed it was decided that future entries be put on display to the Livery. In 1949 the Walford Fund was renamed the Glaziers Scholarship and Educational Fund, and the Livery were requested to make donations and bequests. From 1960 the Sir Arthur Evans (Past Master) Travelling Scholarship added to the Company's support for the careers of young artists. Lady Evans sponsored a competition for young artists to design a memorial window to her husband in Mayfield Parish Church.

50 years ago, in 1972, the Stevens Competition was established with a bequest of £1,000 from the estate of Lt Col T H G Stevens, who had been Master in 1938, when he presented the fine carved wooden lanterns designed by Past Master Frank Salisbury, which display symbols of the Liveries. The new competition was to be “not restricted to stained glass but to embrace all forms of decorative glass.”

From 1987 the Competition has been sponsored by those seeking to commission a window for a particular building or institution. The first Competition winner to gain a commission was Penny Winton, whose abstract design, “Creation”, was chosen by St Thomas’s Hospital. It was installed in the main corridor of the hospital in 1990. Other notable commissions over the last 25 years are profiled on the Visit Stained Glass website.

Also featured on the Visit Stained Glass website are some of the other artists who have received awards from the Company and gone on to have important careers in stained glass.

Competition Prizes

The main prize is the Brian Thomas Memorial Prize, named in honour of Brian Thomas OBE, who was Master in 1976. He had been Principal of the Byam Shaw School of Art and Master of the Art Workers Guild. A renowned stained-glass artist, his work can be seen in many English churches as well as St George’s Chapel, Windsor, St Paul’s Cathedral and Westminster Abbey.

Over the years other prizes have been added by gift and bequest –

The Evelyn and George Gee Prize for Craftsmanship

The John Corkill Prize for Presentation

The Elaine Brown Memorial Prize for an entry from outside the UK

Although not part of the Stevens Competition, the Company also makes Ashton Hill Awards to recent graduates for ten-week training placements in practising studios. There is also an Award for Excellence and a biennial Travelling Scholarship, now named after Arthur Davis (a Liveryman who left £10,000 for it) and his wife, Helen.

During the pandemic the Competition continued, but the submission of entries and judging took place remotely and was followed by a virtual prize giving. Because of the restrictions, it had not been possible to award travelling scholarships until this year. This has led to the introduction of a Design Only Prize, which has proved successful, and will be continued now that matters have returned to normal.

It has been the practice from the outset for entries to be submitted under a pseudonym. Judging is by a panel of distinguished stained-glass practitioners, with a representative of the sponsor body. For a number of years, the judges have been chaired by the prominent glass artist, Helen Whittaker, Creative Director at Barley Studio in York, and herself a winner of the Competition Commission in 2002.

The Stevens Competition is now recognised as the leading competition for stained glass in the United Kingdom. It has provided a springboard for many young glass

artists who have gone on to forge successful careers in this wonderful medium. We look forward to the next 50 years.