

by Eric Belanger

Switzerland's Stained Glass Arts College

A haven for foreign students



With the advent of winter, it is not a great stretch to thoughts of snow-covered mountains, and as long as you've gone that far, imagine one in Switzerland. Now that that image is firmly planted, turn your mind's eye to a school dedicated to stained glass; located in Monthey, Switzerland.

Monthey is a small city located in the canton of Valais, nestled next to France to the East, with Lake Geneva to the North and Mt. Blanc to the South. The original hamlet of Monthey can trace its existence back to 1352. This sense of history, along with the theaters and carnivals draw international visitors to this regional business and cultural hub city; but the Stained Glass Arts and Fine Arts College is an excellent reason to stick around for three years.

STUDENT BODY

Based on the past five years' registrations, foreign students account for 17% of students at Switzerland's Stained Glass Arts and Fine Arts College. College administrators attribute this trend to the universal appeal of the ancient art of stained glass as well as to the quality and diversity of courses provided by both the college and internationally renowned lecturers.

Master Glass Craftsman, and college director, Guy Christina says, "In recent years, we have had students from as far as the United States and Japan enrolled in our three-year program. This reflects very positively on our curriculum as well as the growing interest in the art of stained glass. We also invite guest lecturers from throughout Europe, who specialize in certain techniques, for students to advance their knowledge of stained glass."

Says Christina, "While foreign students come to learn about the art of stained glass, they also benefit from a rich cultural experience that can be found here in the immediate region around Monthey. Students coming from afar are continually impressed with the diversity of the region between Lake Geneva and the Swiss Alps. For instance, while most have some general knowledge of the Swiss Alps, very few people outside the area know of the vast vineyards and extensive wine production which takes place in this region."

Each student is given individual attention and taught all phases of traditional stained glass techniques. Rows of light tables can be seen in the background, used in painting and staining.



they, Switzerland, lies in a valley famous for
and is the regional hub for culture and busi-

Being in the heart of Europe, there are also many living examples of stained glass works as well as restoration projects in the region, which are studied as part of the school curriculum. As Christina comments, "Historically, the Swiss have been highly regarded for their craftsmanship. Today we go to great lengths to ensure that such traditions are not only passed on from one generation to the next, but that they flourish and regain their place in contemporary settings."

Speaking of settings, the Stained Glass Arts and Fine Arts College recently moved from Sion, Switzerland to Monthey. The physical location chosen for the workshops is a former industrial site, so it's vast and open to allow plenty of room. Students enjoy large working stations in a setting where there are many south facing windows, thus, the space is flooded with natural light.

Many students come to the school after completing other formal educational programs. Such is the case of Noemie Hollaard, of Villeneuve-sur-Lot, France, a university graduate with a degree in economics.

Noemie recalls, "For two years, I had been researching formal opportunities in France to study stained glass. What I found were institutions that had a cumbersome application process and required a rather accomplished portfolio and previous experience of some sort. I had neither of these, so my search continued until I heard of the college in Monthey. I went to the school and knew immediately that I had found the right place.

The people were most welcoming and the fact that I had neither experience nor previous training was not a problem as they knew I was highly motivated."

Noemie discovered a non-traditional approach in arts education. "At 23 years of age, I was the youngest in the program. Many are in mid-career and/or exploring creative outlets. It's very much a family atmosphere but serious nonetheless. There are students of all ages and backgrounds yet we all share an immense interest in the stained glass arts."

NORTH AMERICAN STUDENTS

Michel Poirier, from Montreal, Canada, is a computer programmer who came to Switzerland to work in his current profession, but discovered a creative outlet upon arriving. He recalls, "My wife and I relocated to Monthey in 2001. One day, while strolling along the Vieze River, we came across the college with its many works displayed in workshop windows. I had always



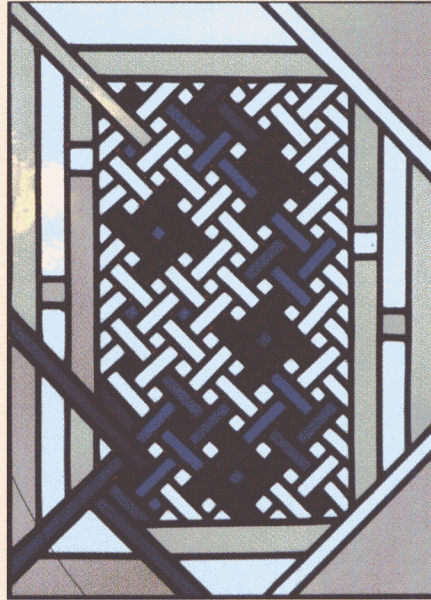
Students work in a cavernous space with abundant light and individual workspaces. You can see some of the kilns and blasting booths in the background, as well as samples of stained glass work over the high southern-exposure windows.



The Stained Glass Arts College is located in an industrial building in Monthey, surrounded by the Alps, seen in the background.

been fascinated by stained glass, its intricacies and the way it plays with natural light, but had never found such a school in Montreal, so I felt it was a 'now-or-never' kind of opportunity." Michel made an official visit to the school and was immediately impressed by the personnel and their offer to customize a program to his personal needs. "As I work full-time, I am only available on weekends. This presented no problem and [the school] was pleased to accommodate my needs and design a personal program."

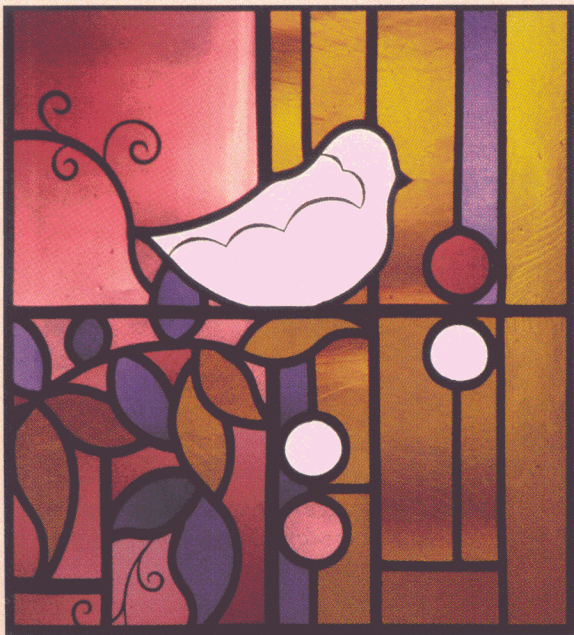
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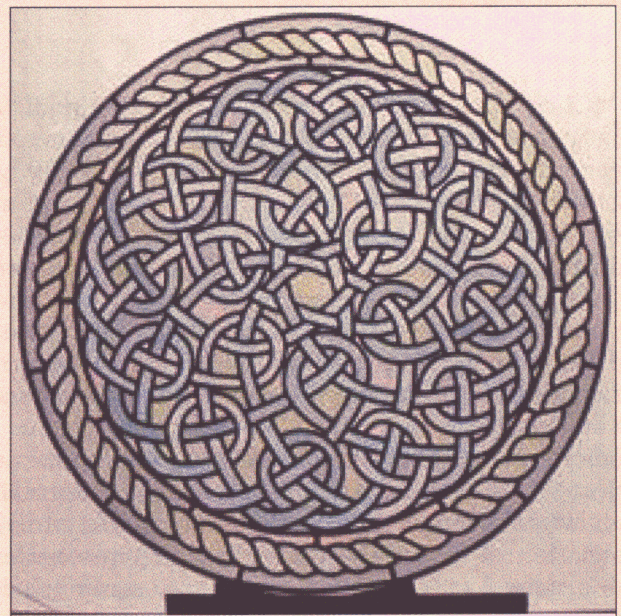
"...could not have found a better education. Europeans regard stained glass as a true art form and take its learning very seriously."





Students' works

"I find it such a gift to have studied at the college in Switzerland and, now, to have the opportunity to apply what I learned."





Noemie Hollard of France, a recent graduate, is shown doing a detailed cleaning of a panel of her own design.

Michel, already an accomplished professional, is not a typical student looking to make stained glass his career, but what was typical was the school's willingness to adapt to the needs of an individual. "I had no ambition to become a professional in the stained glass trade, nor did I have any training in the arts, but none the less I had a great interest to pursue this art form. I've been made to feel an equal among the others and I've never been compromised in terms of attention and quality of instruction. This shows that I'm valued as a student."

Michel particularly likes the school's apprentice, or project-based approach, of 'learning by doing'. He says, "We cover the theory and move quickly to its application. I definitely feel as though I'm learning from a stained glass Master. The faculty continuously provides constructive criticism, never compromises and is always encouraging me to try new things and push my skill level. This gives me confidence to take on projects that I never would have thought myself capable of doing. I'm impressed with myself and proud of what I've accomplished."

On the other hand, as most students do, Lisa Maywood, graduated to take her place amongst the world's Stained Glass professionals. Lisa, originally from Grosse Point, Michigan, worked with an advertising agency in Boston, Massachusetts before attending the school, and, as a graduate, now resides in San Diego, California.

As Lisa describes it, "I had taken stained glass cours-

es in high school and then continued with adult education courses, but these eventually proved to be limiting with respect to my interests to learn more about this art form. The only other opportunities I found in the U.S. were with artists in their workshops, as I knew of no actual schools for stained glass. While working in Boston, I had come across college's internet site. In 1998, I decided to travel to Europe and visit the school." To take herself out of her normal life and attend a school so far from home was a real adventure, "As for the region, it's immensely beautiful and its awe striking just to be in the Swiss Alps. Going to and from the college every day, through all this beautiful scenery, was like living in my fantasies."

Lisa had also taken herself away from something else she was comfortable with: language. "At first the program was overwhelming as I didn't know French! Despite that, the faculty and students were very nice and super supportive, and everyone encouraged me and helped me out. In spite of that difficult start, I persevered and [studied] French at night. This was an opportunity of a lifetime that I was determined not to pass up."

Lisa found her early struggles worth the challenge, "I could not have found a better education. The classes are small so you're guaranteed individual attention. The instructors are constantly hovering - but in a good sense! They ensure we learn the different techniques properly. It was tough, but now I'm so thankful! Europeans regard stained glass as a true art form and

Michel Poirier: Canadian Michel Poirier, a professional in another field, has developed a personal curriculum with the cooperation of the faculty. Here he is shown working on a traditional painted panel.



take its learning very seriously. They have a different vision, greater attention to detail and appreciation for quality and caliber of work. For example, at the school we worked with hand-made glass every day."

Because of her education, Lisa reflects, "Prospective students should be aware of the language hurdle, but it was one of the best things I've ever done in my whole life and it was an inspiration for my career. I can now consider myself unique in the States and this is a great advantage. It wasn't an easy thing to do. You have to be serious, but I'm so pleased with the results of this experience. I consider it such a gift!"

Today Lisa has established a studio in San Diego, California where she develops custom-made pieces, mostly for private residences. "My website, www.verredesigns.com, shows what I learned to do and one of the links recounts the story of my time in

Switzerland! I love what I do. I find it such a gift to have studied at the college in Switzerland and, now, to have the opportunity to apply what I learned. As well, this fall, I'll be giving stained glass courses at the San Diego Art Academy. I constantly remind myself to be thankful everyday!"

MAKING CONTACT FOR YOURSELF

Founded in 1984, the Stained Glass Arts and Fine Arts College, in the wine producing region of the Chablais, has, since its creation, educated hobbyists, professionals and master craftsmen. If you are interested in an educational experience in a non-traditional academic setting, here is how to get more information, please visit www.ecolevitrail.com, and see a sampling of the work produced by students, and consider the opportunity of becoming one yourself! ❖



Eric G. Belanger, originally from Montreal, Canada, is a business communications coach helping both companies, organizations and communities to better communicate and market themselves internationally. He has worked with private sector start-ups, Non-Government Organizations, tourism bureaus and international cultural and sports events. As founder and director of Peak to Sea Consulting, he has lived and worked throughout Europe for over seven years. He can be reached at eric@peak2sea.com.

American, Lisa Maywood, is a 2002 graduate who now has her own studio in San Diego, California.