Stained Glass: Representing Fairy Tale Themes with Glass

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An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract:
For my honors creative project I have created a stained glass window depicting a familiar fairy tale. In order to create this window, I had to complete a six week course in stained glass at Merry-Go-Round Stained Glass in Castleton, Indiana. I have also planned a stained glass window that incorporates many themes, characters and motifs from different Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. My hope in creating this stained glass piece of art is that it will inspire all that see it to recall their own favorite fairy tale and be transported back to a time when they believed in magic.

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Stained Glass: Representing Fairy Tale Themes with Glass

Deciding what to do for my honor's college thesis was one of the most difficult decisions I had to make at Ball State. I wanted my project to reflect my learning at Ball State, but also to expose me to something that I had never experienced. I decided that I wanted my project to relate to my English 390 colloquium, which focused on fairy tales. This class, taught by Dr. Laurie Lindberg, was one of the most informative and entertaining classes that I attended at this university. I took this class during my fourth year at Ball State in the spring of 2004. While discussing thesis project ideas with my family at our kitchen table, I looked over my mother's shoulder and saw the beautiful stained glass window display that she had created years earlier. It occurred to me that stained glass would be the perfect medium to display the beauty of fairy tales. That is when I decided to create a stained glass window that incorporated many themes, characters, and motifs from different Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. Since I did not have any stained glass experience, I took a class at Merry-Go-Round Stained Glass in Castleton, Indiana. This class taught me the basics of the art of stained glass. The small window that I have created for my project was to practice the art so that I will some day be able to create the large stained glass work of art that I have created in my imagination.

The following is the process by which I created my creative thesis project.

The most important step in creating a stained glass piece is to pick the pattern. Picking the pattern for this piece was extremely difficult because I wanted it to depict a familiar fairy tale scene that would be recognizable to any viewer. I searched the internet for fairy-tale-themed stained glass patterns, but I was unable to find any patterns for sale. I then broadened my search to include coloring books. It is possible to adapt a simple
coloring book page into a stained glass pattern, but that requires careful planning. I found a book for sale called *Little Fairy Tale Stained Glass Coloring Book* created by John Green. This coloring book contained scenes from “Snow White,” “Aladdin,” “Sleeping Beauty,” “Cinderella,” and “The Little Mermaid.” I chose a scene from “Cinderella” in which the fairy godmother appears to help Cinderella prepare to go to the ball. I think that this scene represents many common themes found in fairy tales, including the main character going from “rags to riches” and the occurrence of magical events aiding a character in his or her time of need. This scene is identifiable by observers, even those who are not familiar with the long history of fairy tales.

Next, I had to adapt the coloring book page into a stained glass pattern. To do this, I first had to enlarge the 4 3/16 x 5 5/8 inch picture into a size that I was able to use for my project. I decided that an 8 x 12 inch pattern would best match my vision for the piece. When the piece was reproduced, the lines were too thick for a normal pattern. I had to carefully trace through the center of each line to divide the pattern into pieces. Due to the problems that I would have encountered when it came time to cut glass, I also had to divide some of the larger spaces into two or more pieces. Then each piece was numbered for later reference. There were sixty-nine individual pieces when the pattern was complete. I took my pattern to Moss Glass, a stained glass store in Anderson, Indiana. A worker there assisted me in choosing glass that would best complement the pattern. Each pane of glass has different color patterns, textures, and unique features. It is important to decide where each pattern piece will be cut, and choose glass that will complement the final piece. For example, I chose a textured glass to represent the bristles on the scrub brush that Cinderella is holding and I chose a transparent glass with pink swirls for the
flowing dress of the fairy godmother. I chose twelve different pieces of glass for my project.

The next step in creating my project was to transfer the pattern onto a thicker piece of paper. I taped my pattern to carbon copy paper and traced every line and number. When the original pattern was removed I had an exact replica. I cut out the pieces on the replica and separated them into different envelopes according to the color of glass from which each piece would be cut. When outlining the pattern pieces it was important to look for variations in the glass that would complement the final piece. For example, when I outlined the pattern piece that would be the fairy godmother’s hair, I found a part of the glass that had golden waves through the brown glass. I tried to place the pattern in such a way as to imitate the way strands of hair lie on a head. When the final piece was put together, these details made it more visually appealing. After each piece was outlined and numbered, I was able to begin cutting glass.

The term cutting glass is a misnomer. In actuality, the artist just creates a score in the glass, weakening it, and then breaks the glass on this weak point. The tool that creates the score is called a glass cutter. There are many different styles of glass cutters. Glass cutters with a carbide steel cutting wheel and axle will produce a cleaner score and maintain their cutting edge for a longer period of time. The glass cutter shown to the right is considered a beginning cutter. The artist must continually lubricate the wheel with cutting oil to prevent damaging the glass. The cutter that I used for most of this project is pictured to the left. It had a reservoir that held the oil and continually lubricated the wheel as I worked.
After the glass was scored on the pattern lines, I used running and grozing pliers to snap the glass on the weakened score line. Running pliers allow the artist to break difficult or long scores more easily than using his or her fingers. The artist must line up the score on the glass with the line on the middle of the head of the pliers. The curved jaw on the running pliers applies equal pressure to each side of the score line causing the score to break. Grozing pliers are serrated and used to gently nip, gnaw, or grind away small pieces of glass which remain after the glass has been scored and broken.

The next step in creating a stained glass piece is to prepare all of the pieces to be soldered together. After each piece had been cut into the desired shape, I then had to use an electric grinder to smooth the edges and to fix discrepancies between the piece of glass and the pattern, such as reducing the size of a piece or reshaping an angle. This is a difficult step because all pieces must fit exactly into their spots for the finished product to be visually appealing. After the pieces were ground, I cleaned them with a glass cleaner to remove any glass dust from the edges of the piece. This step must be done in order for the copper foiling to stick to the glass. When the glass was clean, I then carefully covered the edges of each piece with copper foil. Later, when the pieces are soldered together, it is the foil to which the solder adheres and thereby binds the pieces into one unified piece. This is a time consuming and delicate process because the foil must be centered on the edge of the glass so that all soldering between pieces will be a uniform width and the copper foiling will not show through the transparent pieces.
Finally, I burnished the foil tightly against the glass on both the front and back sides using the rounded edge of my lathekin, which is a flat plastic tool, to ensure that the foil did not pull away from the glass. This step is imperative to creating a beautiful stained glass piece because without precise copper edging the lead will look misshapen and give the piece a distorted look.

After all of the pieces have been ground, cleaned, and edged with copper foiling, the final assembly process began. In order to keep the pieces tight and square while soldering the pieces together, I had to brace the pieces around the circumference with zinc came. The zinc came serves as a brace while soldering the project and also makes the piece sturdy and gives it a finished edging when it comes time to display the piece. When all the pieces were arranged and the framing was square, I had to prepare the copper foil by brushing a small amount a flux over the areas that would receive solder. Flux is an acid that cleans any impurities from the copper foil. Then I used a soldering iron and a roll of solder, a flexible alloy of tin and lead, to tack all the pieces to each other and the zinc came frame. To do this I randomly melted a drop of solder here and there about the piece to hold the pieces together as I completed the soldering. When the objects were secure I coated the foil around the 69 pieces on the front and back with solder. I then ran the soldering gun over the solder-covered foil to give the piece a smooth, finished appearance. I placed a copper cut-out of the fairy godmother’s crown and wand onto the piece so that it could also be covered with solder. I then placed small wires onto the hands of the fairy godmother to create the appearance of fingers and on Cinderella’s dress to enhance her patch.
I still had a few steps to finalize my piece. I had to thoroughly clean the glass with a glass cleaner and a soft rag to remove any numbers or pattern lines which remained. I decided to coat the fairy godmother’s crown and wand with glitter to add a bit of whimsy to the piece. I also painted faces on Cinderella and the fairy godmother with acrylic paint to make the piece more lifelike. Seeing the final project made all of the training and work worth the effort.

I am very pleased with the outcome of this project. I have decided to create five more practice pieces that will all be soldered together into one large work of art. I will use other patterns from the coloring book to make a collage of different fairy tale scenes. When I have completed the final practice piece, I believe that I will have the expertise and experience necessary to create the stained glass piece that incorporates different themes, characters and motifs that I will describe below.

Fairy tales have been around for centuries; storytellers and authors have passed them down from generation to generation. With fairy tales, the way they are told has changed, their audience has changed, some elements of each story have changed, but one thing will remain the same - their entertainment value. Throughout the years, fairy tales have instilled wonder and hope in adults and children.

While reading and studying fairy tales, one notices that there are common themes and motifs that are found across the genre. While learning the new craft of stained glass this summer, I though how beautiful and amazing it would be to create a large stained glass window that shared my love of fairy tales with all who viewed the window. I would combine all of my favorite characters with common settings, themes, and ideas presented in fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. This window exceeds my current stained glass
expertise, but I hope to someday be able to create this window and share it with others. My dream is that my stained glass creation would instill the same wonder and hope in all that view it that fairy tales have instilled for centuries.

The setting of my artwork would be in the woods with the words, “Once Upon a Time” across the top of the window. Most fairy tales begin with this familiar four-word phrase. This preamble creates a sense of timelessness for the reader. The reader is unable to pinpoint the time when the story is set, which adds to the quality of wonder. The woods is a common setting for many Grimm fairy tales including “Little Red Cap,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and “Rapunzel.” The Grimm Brothers thought of the woods as a place where anything can happen and often would. The woods was a land of enchantment and often magical. That is why I believe the perfect setting for my fairy tale window would be in the woods. Also, in the horizon I would place the palace where Briar Rose and the entire kingdom still sleep awaiting the hundred-year anniversary when they are all to awaken. The castle will be covered with thorny brambles preventing anyone disturbing their sleep.

The characters that I would have dining together in my artwork would be Cinderella, Little Red-Cap, Hansel and Gretel, and Rapunzel and her twins. These are all characters that have conquered hardship in order to be living happily together with their families. The children will all be playing together as Rapunzel and Cinderella discuss life before “happily ever after.” The characters will all be beautiful since in fairy tales beauty often represents being good and being ugly means the character is usually evil. The two princes are not going to be dining with their families because in fairy tales the prominent
male figures are usually absent in their children’s lives. I will have seven people at the party because in fairy tales the number seven represents perfection and completeness.

Centered in the middle of the window with all of the characters surrounding it will be a long table covered by a pure white cloth. In fairy tales, white represents purity, wholeness, cleanliness, wisdom and joy. These are characteristics that the dinner party guests all possess. The characters will be dining on bread and apples that are piled by threes, and the adults will be drinking wine. The wine comes from the story of “Little Red-Cap” and was in the basket with the cake that she took to her ill grandmother’s house. The importance of the bread comes from the story of “Hansel and Gretel,” since they left crumbs of bread to help them find their way out of the woods. The apples come from the stories “Snow White” and “The Juniper Tree.” In “Snow White,” the evil stepmother tempts Snow White with a beautiful red apple, which ends up lodging in her throat and poisoning her. In “The Juniper Tree,” the evil-stepmother uses an apple to entice the young boy to stick his head into the wooden bin, which she then closes on his neck to chop off his head. The reason they will be piled in sets of three is because three is the most prominent and meaningful number in fairy tales. Usually items appear in groups of three, such as three drops of blood dripping from a cut finger onto the snow in “Snow White” or three large oak trees that grow above Little Red-Cap’s grandmother’s house. Events also normally occurred in threes. The third time an event occurs usually presents the change in a certain event or series of actions. For example, the first two times the stepmother appear at the cottage offering a corset and a hair comb, Snow White was saved before it was too late. The third time the evil stepmother appears at the seven dwarves’ cottage she finally succeeds in poisoning Snow White with the red apple. Other
examples of the prominence of the number three appears when Rapunzel’s mother craves
the rampion three times as much the day after she first tasted it or when the seven
dwarves weep for three days after Snow White’s death.

I would also include other characters and items from some of the Grimm
Brothers’ stories as part of the setting. There would be a bird flying high above the clouds
with a gold necklace around its neck. The bird has made his first exchange, a song for a
necklace, and is now heading to gather red shoes and a millstone. This character comes
from “The Juniper Tree,” and the bird is actually a small boy that is seeking revenge on
his stepmother. In the distance, barely visible, will be a red flag raised from a tower. This
flag comes from the fairy tale “The Twelve Brothers;” the flag was a sign from a mother
to her sons that they must not return because she had given birth to a daughter and they
would certainly die if they returned home. Placed on various branches in the forest would
be an owl, a raven and a dove, representing the three birds that came and wept at the
news of Snow White’s death. Also, under the table will be the basket, filled with cake
and wine, which Little Red-Cap carried to her sick grandmother’s house.

Some observers might not understand the importance of each item in this piece,
but they can still enjoy the window as a whole piece of artwork. For fairy tale enthusiasts,
this piece will challenge them to discover all of the hidden clues and determine their
relevance. My hope in creating this stained glass piece of art is that it will inspire all that
see it to recall their own favorite fairy tale and be transported back to a time when they
believed in magic.
Photo Gallery