

Living Windows

Recently I was asked by a student to explain what I had chosen to depict on the window coverings that visually set the teaching space apart from the street outside. The images were, I indicated, calligraphic abstractions based on the structure and dynamic function of the spine and its muscles. I could alternatively have used blank surfaces to function like the Shoji screens that separate living spaces in a Japanese home, operating as a neutral barrier to create the calming effect of a sanctuary within. But instead I had seen this as an opportunity to convey the essence of this work, which was not always easy to articulate verbally, in another medium. There was a precedent for this approach in the use of stained glass in medieval churches, where it was employed to tell Bible stories through narrative imagery for the benefit of largely illiterate congregations. Ironically, our cultural problem these days tended to be the reverse – so focused were we on the words, which assumed still greater authority when written down, that it was easy to miss the meaning.

My thoughts went back to the paradigmatic moment when this insight had first hit me with its full force. Some years ago I was in Paris in August during a wave of unprecedented heat. The temperature was so extreme that the songbirds in the streets were breathing with their beaks open and holding their wings away from their bodies in order to lower their temperatures. Signs were posted in the parks to watch out for falling tree limbs, as they were becoming so dry and brittle in the heat that they were just cracking off. Someone had been killed just the day before when such a branch delivered a blow to his head.

I had wanted to see Sainte-Chapelle, the old royal church on Île de la Cité, which had been the private island of Louis IX, housing primarily his palace and some government buildings of the period. Because of all the stone architecture, I planned to visit as soon as it opened in the morning, before it had a chance to heat up in the full sun and fill with a crowd of tourists. So it was that I entered

the upper chapel just at the hour when, 700 years earlier, the royal family would have gathered there for early morning Mass. The high gothic arches gave a strong vertical thrust to the nave, but it was the extensive expanse of colored light, from the fifteen tall windows of intensely hued and brilliantly transparent stained glass surrounded only by a delicate bar tracery of stone, that dominated the room. The secret behind the clarity and depth of those pure colors had been lost by subsequent artisans, but the master masons of the 13th century who had put this structure together had clearly been in full possession of that knowledge. This was the real thing, and I saw my fellow tourists all around me busily consulting their guidebooks, in a wide range of languages, in order to take in the architectural details of this magnificent edifice.

It was then that I noticed a phenomenon that seemed to have escaped the attention of the knowledgeable authors of these guides: the sparkling reds of these complex glass patterns appeared to be moving. As you watched them catch the rays of the sun, which was rising rapidly at that hour, the areas of maximum brightness were shifting along the trajectory of their moving light source. It reminded me of those class exercises in elementary school science lab in which you watched through a microscope as red corpuscles squeezed one at a time through the tiny capillaries of living frog feet and then shot forward, riding the rapids to the larger vessels beyond. Mesmerized by the sight, I stood transfixed, watching for a good fifteen minutes as the spectacle continued, until, with the increased height of the sun in the sky, the illusion came to an end.

Not so the other sightseers, however, who remained glued to their descriptive texts, conscientiously ticking off the listed sights, careful to skip nothing noteworthy. Lacking fluent French, I was unable to alert them to what was captivating me, and they, perhaps from politeness, appeared not to notice my state of rapt attention. This daily flowing of lifesblood may have been either serendipitous or by design, but it was in any event a dramatically effective and dynamic leitmotif that must have engaged the attention of the original parishioners, the king and his court, during their daily services. As for my fellow

visitors, the whole thing had gone on both literally and figuratively over their heads. While they had busied themselves with the official version of the site and its sights, they had missed the quintessential effect the space had to offer. Having failed to look, they could not see beyond what they expected to find.