

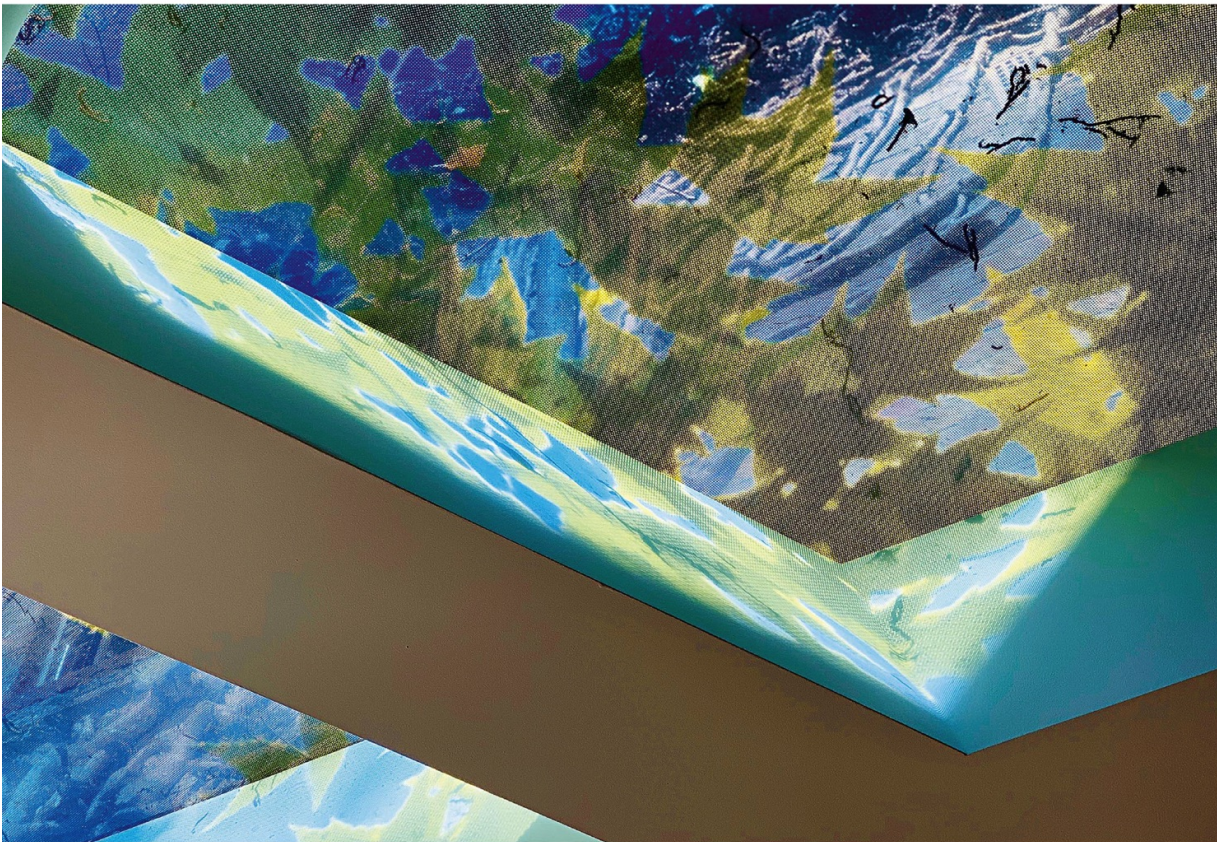
LIQUID LIGHT

Brian Clarke has spent five decades championing stained glass, both by creating luminescent artworks that push the medium's possibilities and by collecting seminal pieces by other artists. Malaika Byng visits his museum-like London home. Photography by Mary McCartney





Previous page, left: *Bathroom Window*, 2009, with collaged fragments of historic stained glass; and right: Clarke in front of *La Rosace*, 1954, Matisse's maquette for a window of Union Church, Pocantico Hills in New York. Left: *Kitchen Skylight*, 2009. Right: Gerhard Richter, *Patterns*, 2015, Jacquard-woven tapestry, and Clarke's studies for a five-floor stained glass window



Bathroom Window (previous page) and Skylight: photo Jordan Busson

A glorious blue light bathes Brian Clarke as he sits down at his kitchen table to tell me about his life-long engagement with stained glass. Giant sycamore leaves dance across the artist's face and the kitchen surfaces around him, then they fade away as quickly as they appeared when clouds obscure the sunlight pouring in through the stained-glass window overhead.

The oversized foliage and intense blue sky depicted by the artwork exaggerate an effect on the space that might appear naturally from leaves gathering on a glass ceiling. It's one of the subtler interventions he has made to his home in London's Holland Park, the images created with Lichtenstein-like dots, which have been ceramic-glazed

onto three layers of glass so that they oscillate as you move beneath them. 'I wanted a feeling that the sky is always blue,' says 67-year-old Clarke, who has been dubbed the rock star of stained glass, thanks to the musicians he collaborated with, the crowds he has drawn to his private views and the deliberate streak of anarchy that runs through his work. But it's emblematic of what's unique about the medium. As Clarke puts it: 'It's kinetic – it never stays still.'

The artist's ability to use stained glass to flood a space with luminescent, ever-changing pools of colour has seen him not only create windows for churches across the world but recontextualise the medium in airports, shopping arcades, private houses – and even Pfizer's world headquarters in New York. While working on projects for architecture titans



including Norman Foster, IM Pei and Oscar Niemeyer, he has pushed his medium to the max, pioneering new processes and material combinations. Whenever he has made 'a little bit of money', he has spent it on art, gradually amassing what must be one of the world's largest private collections of stained glass – something he hasn't spoken about in an interview until now. Among nearly 700 works, including preparatory drawings and pieces inspired by the medium stretching from about AD 1150 to today, are works by the artists and architects Clarke believes 'have had the most radical engagement with stained glass' such as John Piper, Johannes Schreier and Le Corbusier. They even include Henri Matisse's paper, card and canvas maquette for his final work, a rose window for a church in New York.

Ultimately, Clarke will gift the collection to the nation as part of his mission to revitalise the medium. 'Stained glass has existed in an intellectual backwater for so long, yet it has often been at the forefront of the most progressive art,' he says, pointing to the German school of artists working in the medium that emerged from the chaos of the Second World War such as Georg Meistermann, Ludwig Schaffrath and Schreier. 'When I began using it, stained glass was a dying medium and it still struggles for survival. But what little I've been able to do with my life has largely been devoted to keeping the craft alive, nourished by artistic expression. When crafts are simply a vehicle for themselves, they can get lost. But when they are used as a language to express any aspect of the human condition, they thrive.'

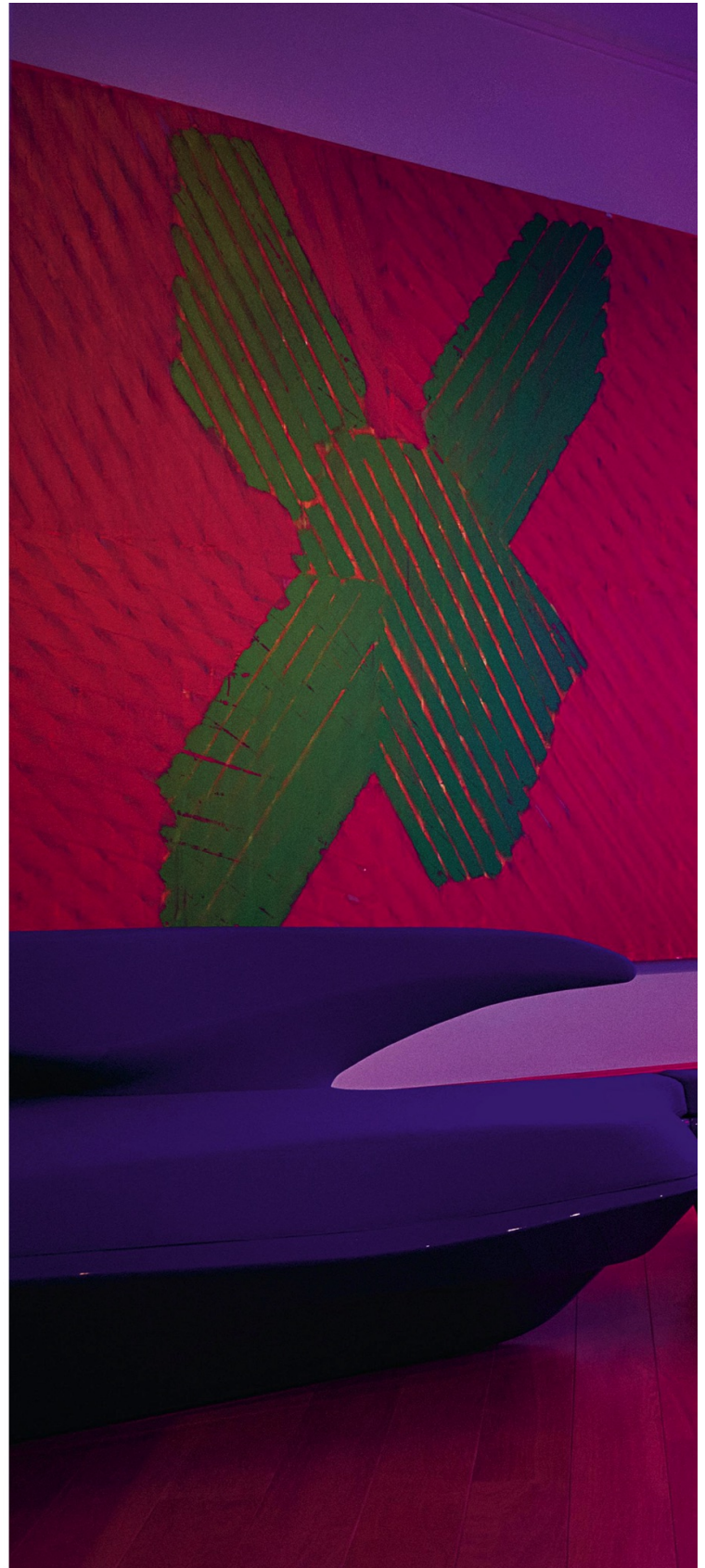


Stairway: photo Jordan Bussom

A fraction of his collection is in dialogue with his own work in his home, with electric results. And, with museums being shut due to covid-19 when I visit, it is a joy to explore them. The house itself, built by Arts and Crafts architect Richard Norman Shaw, is a fitting canvas. 'I have a connection to it in a poetic way, as I feel I'm in direct descent from that movement,' says Clarke, who won a scholarship to the Oldham Municipal School of Arts and Crafts at just 12 years old, becoming a full-time art student. Here, the artist – the son of a coal miner and a cotton spinner – learnt calligraphy, bookbinding and heraldry, among other crafts, 'which allowed me to earn a living, and gave me skills that not many people had', he says. This grounding instilled in him the confidence to disrupt these processes and begin pursuing more philosophical ideas when he went to art schools in Lancashire and Devon.

The first piece of stained glass he ever made, aged 16, was a heraldic eagle design, and the 'abstract power' of heraldry that thrilled him as a boy still compels him today, cropping up in his own works and his collection. He has collaged pieces that range from the 13th to the 19th centuries into the windows of his home, using his characteristic sketch-like lead lines. Two 14th-century shields hang against the window of the reading room on the ground floor, near five presentational drawings for Ulm Minster and St Mary's Church, Osnabrück, in Germany by Johannes Schreiter, who Clarke calls 'the most influential stained-glass artist of the 20th century'. It was artists such as Schreiter who encouraged him to break the lead lines free from their

Top: *Stairway Window*, 2009, with collaged fragments of Swiss *Kabinettsscheiben*, c.1600. Right: *Bermuda Triangle window*, 2009, collaborative space with Zaha Hadid, who designed the sofa





Clockwise from right:
Clarke in the former
ballroom of the Arts
and Crafts house; Harry
Clarke, *Bluebeard's
Last Wife* (detail), 1921,
stained glass panel in
cabinet by James Hicks;
Brian Clarke, *Glass
Vespers 6*, 2019



supportive role (typically holding the pieces of glass together) and make them a central element in the image.

The late architect Zaha Hadid, a collaborator and friend, once referred to Clarke's lines as 'like drawings in space', describing them as 'slightly crinkled'. Clarke adds: 'It requires virtuoso skill from craftspeople to translate my nervous, wandering line, that often begins thick and ends up very thin.' Initially the artist made all his work himself, but the scale of his commissions quickly necessitated working with other makers, mostly in Germany, which, he says, remains at the peak of stained-glass fabrication. He leads me to his only realised collaboration with the architect, a small chamber at one end of the vaulted former ballroom on the first floor of his home. A sofa designed by Hadid, with her characteristic curves, is swathed in brilliant ultramarine from the swirling clouds of Clarke's window design. A lattice of ruby-red ribbons unfurls across its panes, spelling out the letter Z (unintentionally, he says), delineated by spidery sketches rendered in lead. It's a radiant space that recalls the glass ceiling he designed for Buxton Thermal Baths in Derbyshire in the 1980s, which flooded the space in iridescent blue light.

At the other end of the former ballroom is another *Gesamtkunstwerk* – or total work of art – a constant in his career, yet this time in the unexpected form of a WC. Stepping inside, I am confronted by a black, white and red mosaic depicting the recurring Clarke motif of a skull. Reflective paint on the arched walls captures the transillumination from the blood-red stained-glass window. His team joke he's designed enough loos that he should release a book titled *Brian Clarke: At Your Convenience*.

The liquid effect of colour through stained glass – and its capacity to exalt the senses – has always driven his work, whether creating windows for a Cistercian abbey in Romont, Switzerland, or the pinnacle of Saudi Arabia's first skyscraper (Norman Foster's Al Faisaliyah Centre). It's why he sees Matisse's contribution to the medium as so important. 'Matisse's life was based on his pursuit of colour,' says Clarke. 'It wasn't until near the end that he discovered the colour that he was capable of through the medium of stained glass. In his windows at Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence – which he considered his most important work – he created a foreground, a middle distance and a far distance. There's a luminous shimmer between those layers that I've never seen achieved before.' Matisse's maquette for the rose window at Union Church of Pocantico Hills, New York, is a treasured piece in his collection. It was on the wall of the late artist's bedroom the day he died.

Also among his collection – begun aged 17, when his teacher gifted him a watercolour study he made of the medieval Christ roundel from Chartres Cathedral – are works by artists in other media that directly relate to or have been influenced by stained glass, or engage with it in some way. Hanging in the hall is a 1914 work by Georges Rouault, famous for translating the sensibility of stained glass into paintings, and a 1983 photo piece called *Coming* by Gilbert & George, which one could easily mistake for the medium. 'I've never asked if they're inspired by stained glass, but this work is very like it because the colours are so intense, and everything's outlined with a black line,' says Clarke.



'It requires virtuoso skill from craftspeople to translate my nervous, wandering line, that begins thick and ends up thin'





Left: *Order and Chaos*, 2018, stained glass folding screen; *Vespers* paintings and newsprint collages in progress, 2020. Right: stained glass panels by Jean Cocteau, 1958; *Study for Caryatid* by Brian Clarke, 2002; Linda McCartney and Brian Clarke, *Paul and Linda*, 1998, from *Collaborations* series; three panels from the Franz Xaver Zettler Collection

His collection reflects his own free movement between artistic processes and media, including drawing, painting, ceramics, tapestry and stained glass. 'They all inform each other,' he says. 'The painting nourishes the work in glass.' He recently released a book with Heni Publishing, called *Vespers*, of paintings of poppies produced in lockdown, set to go on show at London's Heni Artists Agency (6-30 July), along with works inspired by them in stained glass. His next tome (working title: *Inspirations: avant-garde stained glass*) is due in late 2021, and will be Clarke's take on the most radical works in the medium across the world.

The artist's constant experimentation has kept his work fresh over the decades. In his stained-glass pieces, he has sometimes eliminated lead altogether – instead fusing glass in laminated layers – while more recently he's made artworks comprised almost entirely of lead. He's also been pushing etching to its limits. Positioned by the large window in the former ballroom is *Order and Chaos*, one of 26 screens made in recent years with Heni Editions (shown in his exhibition at MAD, New York, which closed in April). Painterly impressions of blue wisteria trail down over neat red bricks, recalling the houses of Holland Park. The layers of flashed glass are etched and sand-blasted, then laminated together. 'We've been able to develop a level of etching that's not really been achievable before, although Harry Clarke came damn close to it,' he says of the late Irish artist, whose 1921 work *Bluebeard's Last Wife* he has just acquired. 'The detail of Harry's work is spectacular and it was all done by hand. It's a dangerous, toxic process though, which now has to be done in a controlled environment.'

He has recently patented a new technique to take etching further still, which he is applying to more screens. 'I've developed a few technologies in stained glass over the years, which quickly get into the hands of the commercial world. You see toned-down versions of them – intellectually and in terms of its craftsmanship – used in airports and offices. So we've patented this one, to enable me to use it to its full artistic extent before it gets used for a Chanel advert.'

The artworks in Clarke's home are in constant rotation, and his latest acquisition isn't visible when I visit: *Opacity of London*, a 2017 sculpture of a medicine cabinet, featuring a leaded, stained-glass door, by the cult 24-year-old artist and clothing designer Blondey McCoy. There's been mutual appreciation between the duo, with McCoy using Clarke's paintings of orchids on skateboard designs. Clarke admits McCoy's connection to the zeitgeist is 'useful and exciting'. Evidence of his own youthful links to it fill his downstairs living room, lined with gifts from artist friends including Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Richard Hamilton. Propped up on a window ledge is an image of close friends and collaborators Paul and Linda McCartney from a series he made with Linda, incorporating black-and-white photography, silkscreened onto mouth-blown glass (see Linda's interview in *Crafts* no. 153, July/Aug 1998).

Clarke's own connection to the zeitgeist helped him turn a medium associated with ancient churches into an art form of astonishing modernity. Let's hope that, through his continual championing of stained glass, he will inspire a new generation to see its myriad possibilities.

brianclarke.co.uk

