

Style and Techniques

Reading a Kempe Window

It might seem easy enough to understand what can be seen in a Kempe window. The five-light east window of St John the Evangelist, Oxford (*fig. 2.1*), for instance, appears simply to show Christ on the Cross flanked in the outer lights by twelve saints. A thirteenth sits below the Cross. This much is evident at first glance. But context always counts and in this window there is a great deal more than meets the eye.

East windows conventionally depict the Crucifixion, but what Kempe has designed here is a 'Tree of Life'. The words '*Lignum Vitae*', appearing on a scroll across the centre light, explain that the Cross has come alive; indeed, it is now green with sap and sending out shoots, branches, leaves, even bunches of grapes. In the centre of the window two small angels hold a framed text: '*Ego sum vitis, vos palmites*'. These words of Jesus – 'I am the vine, and you are the branches' – are recorded in St John's Gospel, and it is St John who occupies the seat of honour at the foot of the Cross.

The Evangelist's feet appear to rest on grass and rocks near the edge of the sea. This indicates that St John, in his old age, is on the island of Patmos; here, according to tradition, he received the vision of the Apocalypse that he was instructed to record in what would become the Book of Revelation. This is the book he props upright on his knee, while holding a quill pen poised in his right hand. Another Latin text appears above John's head: '*Ego Iohannes qui*

audivi et vidi' ('And I, John, saw these things and heard them', Revelation 22:8).

Chapter 22, the conclusion of the Book of Revelation, contains a description of the 'Tree of Life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month'. Accordingly, in Kempe's window, the Tree of Life has produced six strong branches that between them support the twelve saints in the four outer lights. These are (left to right, from top): Boniface, Benedict, Basil, Bernard; Bede, Augustine, Aidan, Anthony; Dominic, Columba, Francis and Bruno. There is nothing random about this list.

The church of St John the Evangelist has never been a parish church: it was built as the community church of the Cowley Fathers, the Society of St John the Evangelist. Nowadays it belongs to an Oxford theological college, St Stephen's House. The Cowley Fathers had three distinctive characteristics. They were the first monastic community established in Britain since the Reformation, so this window commemorates the founding saints of religious orders: Anthony the Great, 'Father of all Monks', then Benedict, Dominic, Francis and Bruno, founder of the Carthusian order. Cowley Fathers were to be scholars and theologians – hence the presence here of three 'Doctors of the Church': St Basil, St Bernard of Clairvaux and the Venerable Bede. They were also to be a missionary order, establishing houses in South Africa, India and the



United States. This missionary theme is reflected in the presence of St Augustine, charged by Pope Gregory to bring Christianity to England, of St Columba who brought Christianity to Scotland and of St Aidan, ‘the Apostle of Northumbria’. These three are joined by St Boniface, the English missionary and martyr credited with bringing Christianity to Germany.

Twelve figures, therefore, variously associated with religious orders, with teaching the Faith, and with spreading the Gospel; Kempe always ensured the figures in his windows could be identified and here the name of each saint is written underneath. Some also have identifying symbols: Bernard of Clairvaux, famous as a hymn writer, holds a book open at the words ‘*Jesu dulcis memoria*’, the first line of perhaps his best-known hymn. St Anthony carries a leper’s bell, because he was famously afflicted by a skin disease – sometimes still called St Anthony’s Fire. St Dominic has a bright star shining above his forehead, a sign of his special saintliness first seen at his baptism.

Kempe’s eye for historical detail is evident everywhere. St Basil holds not a bishop’s crozier, but the Eastern Orthodox pastoral staff topped by two serpents, St Columba wears not a Roman, but a Celtic, mitre; in his arms he cradles a model of the abbey he founded on Iona. St Boniface carries the palm of martyrdom. At St John’s feet stands his eagle. Usually this bird holds in its beak a scroll with the opening words of St John’s Gospel – ‘*In principio erat verbum*’; here, however, since the emphasis is on the last words of Revelation, he simply carries the evangelist’s name.

Now it is worth looking once more at the window as a whole. There is almost no tracery above the five lights, so the composition is remarkably uncluttered; indeed, with so much background white glass, the figures seem suspended in space. Such restraint is appropriate for a community committed to a vow of poverty, and the deeper colours of the window – Christ’s billowing loincloth, for instance, and the few clusters of grapes on the vine – are the more striking for being rare. And yet the window has richness, too, found in the gold of St Basil’s vestments, the bishops’ croziers, the foliage of the plinths, the tapestry behind St John and the plumage of his eagle.

Finally, one might expect such a window to be signed with Kempe’s wheatsheaf, if not with his full arms – three wheatsheaves on a red shield, edged with gold. Not here, however; but there is a signature, nevertheless, a symbol with a very personal significance for Kempe. In the cusps at the top of the centre light sits a pelican. The crest above Kempe’s family arms showed a pelican pecking at a wheatsheaf, and this bird became as much his private signature as the wheatsheaf was his public one. The pelican was his mark of faith – ‘*Ihesus pelicanus noster*’ (‘Jesus our Pelican’; see *Frontispiece, p.ii*) – and Kempe has here duly signed this window by placing the Pelican in its Piety directly on top of the Cross.

Subject, theme, figures, symbols, inscriptions and texts – all of these can help us to read Kempe’s windows with greater insight.

The Evolution of the Kempe Style

Of all the themes that the Kempe Studio was called on to represent in glass, none better illustrates Kempe’s evolving style than the Madonna and

Child – the Virgin Mary holding the infant Christ. This image is usually shown iconically – that is, in isolation and not as part of a narrative scene.

Fig. 2.i (opposite) Oxford, St John the Evangelist Church, Cowley: east window (1897).

One of its earliest appearances is in Wakefield Cathedral (1874; *fig. 2.ii*) where Wyndham Hope Hughes has emphasised the vulnerability of both Mary and her child: his Madonna's hair straggles over her forehead and her gaze is inward-looking, while the Child seems almost to

cover behind her cheek. Each appears as it were overwhelmed by thoughts of the future ahead of them. Jesus clutches a pomegranate, symbol of the Resurrection.

By contrast, only two years later Hughes returns to the subject in quite a different way:

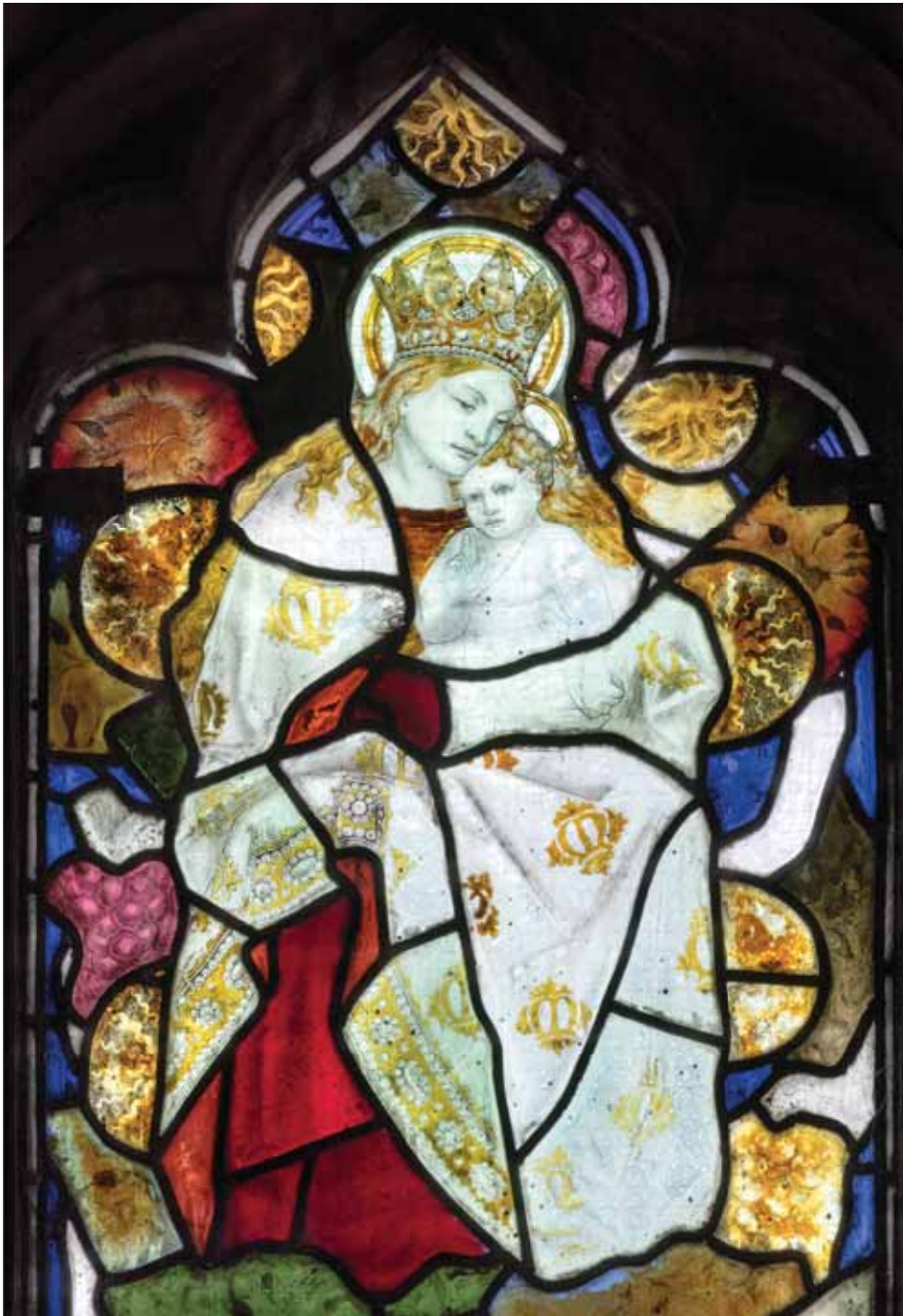
Fig. 2.ii Wakefield Cathedral (West Yorkshire): Madonna and Child, detail (1874).



at Nantwich (1876; *fig. 2.iii*) the Madonna and Child are shown at the top of a sumptuously coloured Tree of Jesse. Here Mary is crowned, as Queen of Heaven, and although her gaze is again thoughtful, it has lost the apprehensiveness of the Wakefield image. The Child, too, is shown

differently: although, again, his head is partly hidden behind his mother's cheek, his right hand is raised in blessing, as if he has already understood his role as Christ. Nevertheless, and now only just visible, his left hand still wraps itself around his mother's fingers, as if for reassurance.

Fig. 2.iii Nantwich (Cheshire), St Mary's Church: Jesse Tree, detail (1876).



An important technical contrast between these two images is that at Wakefield the faces of Mary and her son were painted on separate pieces of glass, the line of Mary's cheek being defined by the lead strip holding the two pieces together. At Nantwich the artist determined that the two heads and their haloes should be painted on the same piece of glass. Unfortunately, over

time the lower part of this glass has faded and much of the definition of the Child's body and hands has been lost, while at the top the richness of Mary's crown still appears almost three-dimensionally sharp.

An instructive example of the difference in style between Hughes and John Carter, his successor as Kempe's chief draughtsman, can be

Fig. 2.iv Clayworth (Nottinghamshire), St Peter's Church: Jesse Tree, detail (1891).



seen in another Jesse Tree image of the Madonna and Child, at Clayworth (1891; *fig. 2.iv*). Here, although Mary is not crowned as at Nantwich, her elaborate hair, tiara and headdress almost double the size of her head. Seen full face, she sits as though frozen, a woman not yet at ease in the part she must play. By contrast, the arms and legs of Jesus are already active, as if he is eager to embrace

his destiny. The tenderness of their relationship is glimpsed this time not in the touching cheeks of mother and baby but in the intimate way the thumb and finger of Mary's left hand just clasp the ankle of the right foot of her son.

John Lisle's approach is different again. At St John the Evangelist, Oxford (1896; *fig. 2.v*), he retains Mary's headdress (though not her tiara)

Fig. 2.v Oxford, St John the Evangelist Church, Cowley: 'Mater Amabilis' (1896).



and the gathered neckline of her smock; he retains something too of Mary's inscrutable look. But now the Child sits on a silken cloth and Mary's right hand holds not the foot of her son, just simply the end of the cloth. The composition of the image is masterly and formal: Mary stands on a sharply receding chequered floor, with a richly patterned gold and black cloth of honour

behind her. The red seaweed pattern background is embossed with three crowned monograms – superfluous perhaps, given that the scroll either side of her halo identifies her as '*Mater amabilis*' ('Mother most worthy to be loved').

In later Madonna and Child images, Lisle suggested a less intense and introspective mood. At St Peter's Church, Ealing, the Madonna and

Fig. 2.vi Ealing (London), St Peter's Church: 'Adoration of the Magi', detail (1913).



Child appear in an ‘Adoration of the Magi’ window (1913; *fig. 2.vi*). This is a four-light window in which Mary and the baby are set apart, occupying the second light alone, while Joseph, the Magi and their attendants fill the other three. The setting is full of detail but – by contrast with the Cowley face of Mary – the childlike face of the Madonna is bland and only lightly sketched.

Even her halo is only minimally decorated. Her face is tilted but she looks straight ahead. She sits on what appears to be a turfed bench, while Jesus occupies a tasselled cushion perched on her lap. These details, the turf and the cushion, are borrowed from Madonna and Child drawings and engravings by Albrecht Dürer, the artist whom Lisle greatly admired and from whom he

Fig. 2.vii Tenby (Wales), St Mary’s Church: Madonna and Child (1917).



learned and borrowed much. Both the turfed seat and the cushion can be seen, for instance, in Dürer's 1515 drawing 'The Virgin and Child on a Grassy Bank'.

John Lisle appears finally to resolve the relationship between Mother and Child in a 1917 window at St Mary's Church, Tenby (*fig. 2.vii*). Here, drawing once again on details from the earlier images discussed above, he shows Jesus cradled in his mother's right arm, her hand firmly tucked under his knees. Meanwhile, his left hand rests on the band that holds the two sides of her cloak together. Parent and child do not look at each other, but Jesus points toward Mary, as if to endorse

the declaration on the scroll above her head: '*S[anc]ta Maria Mater Dei*' ('Holy Mary, Mother of God'). Mary's own gaze is thoughtful but accepting, while in her left hand she holds a stem of lilies. This symbol of her purity is unusual here, being more frequently associated with the Annunciation. The silver staining in this window is particularly fine – especially the halo, head and neck of Mary painted on a single piece of glass – and demonstrates that the Kempe Studio was still capable of producing the highest-quality stained glass even towards the end of World War I when the number of artists and craftsmen working for C.E. Kempe & Co. had become severely depleted.

A Note on Silver Staining

Silver staining (sometimes called yellow stain) is a technique developed in Europe during the later thirteenth century. It became increasingly popular in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century glass and allowed a much more 'painterly' approach to stained-glass design and creation. Silver stain was applied with a brush to the back of a piece of glass; then with different thicknesses, treatments and successive firings, a whole range of colours from black to white and from pale lemon to deep gold could appear on a single piece of glass. It thus became a favourite method of treating heads and faces, for instance, or the complex patterns on the fabric of costumes worn by women or the vestments of apostles, saints, or priests depicted in windows. It also became popular for small, often intimate-scale roundels or panels used in domestic rather than ecclesiastical settings.

Fig. 2.viii Liverpool, St John the Baptist Church, Tuebrook: angel in armour, clerestory window, detail (1869.) Glass removed for conservation; image reproduced by kind permission of Dennis Eckersley, Design Lights (Stained Glass) Ltd.



Figs 2.ix (above) and 2.x (below) Wightwick Manor (Staffordshire): two roundels depicting the Annunciation.

These panels were originally in Kempe's own home, Old Place, Lindfield (Sussex), and were purchased and installed at Wightwick Manor in 1934.

The level of detail in these two small roundels is remarkable. Wyndham

Hope Hughes has deliberately shown Gabriel as an androgynous figure; his billowing diaphanous robe indicates he has just entered through an open door, through which can be glimpsed a winding lane; meanwhile the kneeling Mary is depicted open-eyed, even though she cannot look directly at the Angel's face.

From her waist hang both a book and a reticule dangling from a knotted cord. The alternating sharp and wavy lines of dazzling light emanating from the descending dove are to be seen in all Kempe Annunciation windows, and are based on fifteenth century Annunciation glass imagery. The flowing ends of the text above Mary's head further emphasise the sense of movement and stasis in this packed though miniature image.





Fig. 2.xi (above) Simonburn
(Northumberland),
St Mungo's Church:
'*Flos Florum*' (1877).

Fig. 2.xii (below) Clayworth
(Nottinghamshire),
St Peter's Church: '*Claves
Cæli et Inferni*' (1878).

Fig. 2.xiii (opposite)
Cuckfield, Holy Trinity
Church: Jesse Tree window,
detail (1887).



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In adoring praise of the Holy
Incarnation of our Lord Jesus
Christ, and in loving memory
of Walter Henry Wyndham
Raymond, her son, and of
Walter Wyndham Burrell,
Baronet, M.P. her husband,
Dorothea Lady Burrell, his widow
dedicates this window. July 1887.

The art of silver staining had to be rediscovered and refined in the later nineteenth century, and the Kempe Studio from the start played a leading role in recreating sophisticated effects found in late medieval, northern European glass. The earliest efforts may be seen in the clerestory of Bodley's Liverpool church, St John the Baptist, Tuebrook. They show Frederick Leach's designs for Kempe being interpreted by the London firm, T. Baillie & Co., who produced Kempe's glass before the Studio was fully established with its own glassworks (*fig. 2.viii*). The image is confident, boldly coloured and drawn, though without the subtlety – what Bodley would have called the 'refinement' – that Kempe was really looking for.

In the 1870s Wyndham Hope Hughes created designs for Kempe that gave the glass painters scope to show off their skill with silver staining. In two Annunciation panels originally made for Kempe's new home, Old Place in Lindfield, but now relocated in Wightwick Manor (*figs 2.ix* and *2.x*), Hughes designed what are in effect miniature windows intended to be seen close-up at eye level. For these, only silver staining was employed. The clinging diaphanous robe worn by the angel Gabriel is a striking feature, and the distant view of the winding path leading from the doorway of Mary's room gives unexpected depth to the image. Notable, too, are the intricately drawn frames of leaves and lilies.

Silver staining created opportunities for illusion. At St Mungo's Church, Simonburn, Hughes presented a striking image of a copper vase containing a rose bush (*fig. 2.xi*) that spreads its flowers and foliage across a background of leaded lights. The diamond-shaped quarries are decorated with leaf-tipped crosses and clusters of acorns. The vase is itself symbolic. Standing on a black-and-white tiled ledge, it tilts forward slightly to show that the rose is actually planted and not just resting in water. Its base and stem

are like a chalice; the quatrefoil bowl, with its elaborate foliate handles, resembles a loving cup. Across the upper part of the image spreads a billowing scroll with the words '*flos florum*' ('flower of flowers'), that customary reference to the mystic rose as an emblem of the Virgin Mary. By contrast with the spreading rosebush, the lettering on the scroll is tight and spiky, unlike the gentler thorns of the rose. (The Germanic letter 'r' is a distinctive feature often seen in Kempe calligraphy.)

The colours are all autumnal, though the image is framed by a delicate border of blue and red strips of glass, while the vase and the rose stand out against the white glass of the patterned quarries. But the quarries are not what they seem, for the criss-cross lines of lead are not lead at all: they are carefully painted – as can be seen clearly at the top, by the white rose where a wavy line of real lead crosses a thinner painted line. At the bottom of the panel, the hexagonal base of the vase and the black and white tiles are all painted on a single oblong piece of glass.

At St Peter's Church, Clayworth, a small tracery light at the head of a window depicting 'The Charge to Peter' (1878; *see below, p.111, fig. 5.xiii*) repays similar close attention. This lozenge-shaped light (*fig. 2.xii*) is filled by a pair of hefty crossed keys, and the thickness of their shafts is emphasised by the way the leadwork appears to bend slightly in crossing over the upper key. The keys themselves lie on top of an intricately decorated scroll bearing the inscription '*Claves cæli et inferni*' ('the keys of heaven and hell'). One tightly rolled end of this scroll seems almost to be three-dimensional: the leadwork in the left corner pushes into the surrounding stone, as if to give the scroll extra space.

But it is all illusion: there is no leadwork. This is a single piece of white glass onto which the entire image – keys, scroll and lead lines – has been painted using silver staining.

Fig. 2.xiv (opposite) Oxford, St John the Evangelist, Cowley:
censing angel (1896).



Kempe's Jesse windows (*see below, pp.70-76*), in particular those designed by John Carter, make full use of silver staining too, especially for the vine leaves which – as at Holy Trinity Church, Cuckfield, Sussex (1887; *fig. 2.xiii*) – are highly stylised: each section of the leaf just swells gently. Kempe usually presents Jesse asleep on a throne, but here he rests on the ground. The whiteness of his turban and cloak are offset by a purple curtain that hangs behind him. The tree, which will show all the branches of his family up to Jesus himself, rises from his navel. What could look almost comical is treated with considerable restraint: the artist has used silver staining expertly to create a delicate and sympathetic image of an old face in repose.

Inscriptions often play an important part in Kempe windows, not least because donors wanted them to show both in whose memory the window had been given and who had paid for it. Kempe himself disliked such ostentation, and often managed to insist that inscriptions should be prefaced (as here) by a phrase such as 'In adoring praise of the Holy Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in loving memory of. . .'. Inscriptions were usually placed in the bottom right-hand corner of a light or window; here,

though, it has been raised higher to allow the recumbent Jesse space to lie down. Kempe liked inscriptions to appear as if on parchment, and the careful shading that runs top to bottom suggests that here the parchment has just been unrolled. The lettering is distinctively Kempe's, especially the letter 'd' and the numbers '1' and '7'.

John Lisle treated silver staining in a different way. Whereas Hughes and Carter had aimed at effects of whiteness, Lisle more often called for a steely grey. At Bodley's church in Oxford for the Cowley fathers, St John the Evangelist, Lisle's figure of a censuring angel (*fig. 2.xiv*) makes an interesting contrast with Wyndham Hughes' censuring angels of twenty-five years earlier (*see above, p.10, fig. 1.xi*). Here, the thurible, its chains, the angel's feathers, his halo, his head and hair, his cloak and robe are all essentially grey, tinged occasionally with very pale lemon and gold. The image is nevertheless arresting: the thurible, much larger than the angel's head, is poised to swing down heavily at any moment. The greyness of the silver staining is dramatically offset, too, by the vivid blue of the seaweed-patterned night sky and by the green silk of the angel's dalmatic, with its striking red and black fringe.



Fig. 3.i Liverpool, St John the Baptist, Tuebrook: clerestory window (1869).

Probably designed by Frederick Leach and Alfred Tombleson; made for Kempe by T. Baillie & Co., London. See also, however, *fig. 2.viii* above, from the same set of clerestory windows. It is possible that the angels in vestments were both designed and made by Leach (whom Kempe had just engaged to run his own glassworks) while the image of the angel in armour was made in Baillie's workshop.