

CVMA 11th Forum for the Conservation and Technology of Historic Stained Glass “Stained Glass Conservation: Preserving Identity”

Provisional Title:

Narrative from Nonsense: Questions of Identity in the St Cuthbert Window, York Minster

Abstract:

Monumental narrative windows present complex challenges for conservators aiming to characterise and preserve their identity. As the transmission of a specific story or message is often the primary function of these windows, their legibility and structure are crucial components of their identity. Consequently, they are particularly vulnerable to the loss of narrative structure, as a result of disarrangement and damage, which can render a window's subject incomprehensible. Yet attempts to retrieve 'original' narrative structures present additional risks to both the historic fabric and structure of a window, and to material from later interventions. The proposed paper will explore the challenges faced by conservators of monumental narrative windows, as well as the opportunities they present for new approaches, using the fifteenth-century St Cuthbert Window, York Minster, as a case study.

Originally comprising seventy narrative panels, the St Cuthbert Window has been extensively disarranged and its narrative structure significantly disrupted. Additionally, it now incorporates eleven nineteenth-century panels designed to fit within an erroneous order introduced in 1886-8. Consideration of its current condition demonstrates the additional damage which can result from ill-informed attempts to restore 'originality'. Complex questions will be raised regarding the value of past interventions, and the nature of identity in narrative windows. An exploration of these questions, and examination of the historic value of the nineteenth-century arrangement and panels, will inform a discussion of how best to preserve and convey the window's identity. Drawing upon well-established conservation guidelines, especially the 2004 CVMA Guidelines, the necessity and potential impacts of future interventions upon the window's identity will be considered, and a range of solutions presented. In particular, opportunities for innovative solutions will be explored.

I am keen to present this research as an oral presentation, but would be happy to provide a poster if this is not possible.

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