

# Soulages, Richter, and Others

## Abstract Stained-Glass Windows performing in Medieval Sacral Monuments as a Universal Language for Strategic Public Commissions from the 1960s to 2000s

Marcela Rusinko

Assist. prof. Marcela Rusinko, PhD, Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Art History,  
Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, marcelarusinko@phil.muni.cz, ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-9592-7321

Abstract

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1.01 Original scientific article

This study explores how modern abstract stained-glass interventions can profoundly transform the atmosphere and meaning of medieval sacred monuments, imbuing them with new layers of spiritual, aesthetic, and collective identity. Focusing on non-figurative works by the renowned artists Pierre Soulages (Saint Faith's Church in Conques, France), Gerhard Richter (Cologne Cathedral in Germany), and Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová (Saint Vitus's Cathedral in Prague, Czech Republic), the research investigates how such interventions reinterpret tradition through contemporary visual language. It considers the performative and symbolic potency of these artworks, examining the intent of both their artists and commissioners, and how these projects reflect broader ideological contexts of a politically divided world and its aftermath. Ultimately, the study probes the unique resonance between medieval and modern artistic expression, revealing how abstract stained glass can serve as a spiritually and socially legitimizing force within historically layered sacred spaces.

Keywords: abstract stained glass, medieval monuments, commodification of art, Pierre Soulages, St-Foy de Conques, Gerhard Richter, Saint Peter Cathedral in Cologne, Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová, Saint Wenceslas Chapel in Saint Vitus Cathedral Prague

Izvleček

**Soulages, Richter in drugi**

**Abstraktna vitražna okna v srednjeveških sakralnih spomenikih kot univerzalni jezik za strateška javna naročila 1960–2010**

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek

V raziskavi ugotavljamo, kako lahko sodobne abstraktne vitražne intervencije globoko spremenijo vzdušje in pomen srednjeveških sakralnih spomenikov ter jim dodajo nove plasti duhovne, estetske in kolektivne identitete. Z osredotočanjem na nefigurativna dela priznanih umetnikov, kot so Pierre Soulages (opatijska cerkev Sainte-Foy v Conquesu, Francija), Gerhard Richter (katedrala v Kölnu, Nemčija) ter Stanislav Libenský in Jaroslava Brychtová (katedrala sv. Vida, Praga), v raziskavi proučujemo, kako takšni posegi ponovno interpretirajo tradicijo s sodobnim vizualnim jezikom. Obravnavamo performativno in simbolno moč teh umetniških del, proučujemo namene umetnikov in naročnikov ter razlagamo, kako njihovi projekti odražajo širše ideološke kontekste politično razdeljenega sveta in njegove razsežnosti. Končno v raziskavi proučujemo tudi edinstveno resonanco med srednjeveškim in sodobnim umetniškim izrazom ter razkrivamo, kako lahko abstraktno vitražno steklo služi kot duhovna in družbena legitimizacija v zgodovinsko večplastnih sakralnih prostorih.

Ključne besede: abstraktna vitražna okna; srednjeveški spomeniki; komodifikacija umetnosti; Pierre Soulages; St-Foy de Conques; Gerhard Richter; katedrala sv. Petra v Kölnu; Stanislav Libenský in Jaroslava Brychtová; kapela sv. Venceslava v katedrali sv. Vida v Pragi

### Modern Stained-Glass as a Performative Medium of Translation

“A stained-glass window is not a painting. It is the permeation of light through a structure, which thereby becomes a kind of resonator for the colors introduced by external light filtering through the colored glass. The composition as a whole is thus not located in the windows themselves, but within the interior space of the building,” stated the Czech painter Josef Šíma (1891–1971) in 1969, in connection with his late stained-glass cycle created for the choir of Saint James’s Church in Reims.<sup>1</sup> The Gothic church, dating back to late twelfth century, is one of the oldest and best-preserved examples of medieval sacred architecture in the city, located just a few steps from the famous Reims Cathedral, the traditional site of the coronation of French kings. To replace its choir windows that were destroyed during the Second World War, in the mid-1960s Josef Šíma conceived a strikingly simple design, still partially figurative, yet departing from the classical visual-narrative conventions typically applied to depict the lives of saints. In line with his profoundly symbolic, lyrical-imaginative, and spiritually infused artistic vision, Šíma’s approach eschews the canonized modes of representation in favor of a more abstract expression. Dominating the entire ensemble of the tall choir windows is a monumental archetypal motif of a white cross, extending across the full width and height of the choir space, set within an abstract cosmos of a starry blue sky and green earth. Saint James the Greater, to whom the church is dedicated, is represented in the stained glass only through a pair of brown boulders—an allusion to the *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, in which a great stone is said to have opened upon contact with the martyr’s body, receiving it into itself.<sup>2</sup>

In its simplicity, clarity, and accuracy, it appears to be a revolutionary idea that stained glass is not a “true” image or a “result,” a final work in itself—unlike an autonomous canvas painting or a sculpture independent of architectural function—but rather a tool, an alchemical medium of transmutation, a transformation of light, in which the actual oeuvre consisting of a much more complex dimensional “image” only emerges within the spatial and existential reality of architecture, in accordance with its very essence and constitution. It captures not only the fundamentally performative and mutable nature of the final essence of the *opera* (the genius loci) but also the essence of many modern interventions in iconic medieval sacred monuments.<sup>3</sup> These interventions are often not fully explainable through the mere necessity of replacing or restoring a damaged, absent, or simply unsuitable element, as was the case in Šíma’s stained glass for Reims in the mid-1960s, but instead emerge from a broader imperative: the need to recreate and recontextualize the performativity of the entire space within contemporary national sociopolitical narratives and the ambitions of proposed collective identities.<sup>4</sup>

To develop these considerations further, the resulting stained glass can thus be perceived in at least two layers. First, it can be perceived partially—as a physical artwork, embedded within a specific artistic style, and functioning as a vehicle of visual-cultural meaning and expression; that is, directly. Second, it can be perceived holistically—as an inherently performative and by its nature

<sup>1</sup> *Le vitrail et les peintres à Reims*, 75. See also Liot and Delot, *Couleur et lumière*, 96–107.

<sup>2</sup> Šmejkal, *Josef Šíma*, 347–48.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Soulages was one of those modern painters for whom this principle came across as being an organic part of their creative process itself; cf. his famous quote: “We talk about color . . . But the most important thing in a painting is the light and space that are born with it and from which it must not be separated” (On dit la couleur . . . Mais le plus important dans une toile, c’est la lumière et l’espace qui naissent avec elle et dont il ne faut pas la séparer); see Raymond, *Soulages: La lumière et l’espace*, introductory motto of the book. See also Lahy, *Kabbale et couleurs*.

<sup>4</sup> Recently on the issue of national identity, e.g., Barkhoff and Leerssen, *National Stereotyping, Identity Politics*.

perpetually mutable, unrepeatably unique synesthetic artwork (an *opera* or *oeuvre*), constituted through the interplay of stained glass and light, the architectural structure as a whole, and, crucially, in synchrony with the cognitive and perceptual capacities of the experiencing, singular human “Presence,”<sup>5</sup> the Heideggerian *Dasein*.<sup>6</sup>

A simple, fundamentally conceptual-performative element of modern stained glass<sup>7</sup> can endow a traditional sacred monument with an entirely new and singularly uplifted atmosphere—an atmosphere that serves not only as a distinct visual and energetic imprint of its artistic creator, but also as a transformed expression of collective identity. It becomes a translation of the “traditional” into a contemporary artistic language; a transgressive and necessary reinterpretation of the spiritual and cultural-historical as well as symbolic dimensions of the site. Why does this principle prove so surprisingly effective, particularly in contemporary non-figurative interventions by renowned artists? Can modern or neo-avant-garde artistic expression—with its radically altered structural field of aesthetic codes<sup>8</sup>—contribute a wholly new interpretative layer to a medieval sacred monument? One that is not only spiritual-existential or philosophical in nature, but also functions as a socially legitimizing and identity-forming mode of representation? Moreover, what seems to be the nature of the fundamental relationship between medieval and modern visual creativity that makes possible such a potent and functional transgressive resonance between these two historically distinct layers of artistic production?

To explore these questions, this article examines three notable examples of contemporary abstract art interventions applied to iconic medieval monuments—in France and Germany, as well as on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in Czechoslovakia—carried out between the 1960s and 2000s. It principally examines the most significant French modern painter of the postwar period, Pierre Soulages (1919–2022), for Saint Faith’s Church in Conques (Sainte-Foy de Conques), and within the German environment the equally important painter Gerhard Richter (born 1932) for Cologne Cathedral. The exceptionality of Soulages’s works primarily emerges in a comparison of the artistic, social, and other contextual aspects of both projects. Moreover, Soulages evoked more discussion and controversy, which is why somewhat more space is devoted to his work here.

This inquiry focuses not only on the artistic concept and intention of an influential contemporary artist tasked with “unlocking” the desired performativity—that is, the concept and intent behind

<sup>5</sup> At least since the mid-twentieth century, the conceptual paradigm of the viewer not merely as a passive recipient but as an active initiator of the entire artistic process—aligned with the principles of quantum physics and its related interpretations of reality—has constituted one of the fundamental premises of modern (and, by extension, contemporary) art. On this topic, see Mitchell, “‘Very Like a Whale;’” O’Byrne and Silverman, *Subjects and Simulations*; Kaitavuori, *The Participator in Contemporary Art*.

<sup>6</sup> See Schmitt, *Martin Heidegger on Being Human*.

<sup>7</sup> For the traditional nineteenth-century perception of religious stained-glass windows, see, e.g., Ottin, *Le vitrail*, 1: “Stained glass, like many other arts that flourished in the Middle Ages, is no longer as popular as it once was, from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. It is certainly not as neglected as in the last century, when the last practitioners were reduced to making only heraldic borders, or, worse still, simple stained glass; however, it is still far from the splendor it once attained” (La peinture sur verre de même que bien d’autres arts qui florissaient au moyen âge, n’est plus en honneur comme elle le fut jadis, du XIIe au XVIe siècle. Elle n’est plus, il est vrai, aussi délaissée qu’au siècle passé où les derniers praticiens étaient réduits à ne faire que des bordures armoriées, ou, qui pis est, de la vitrerie pure et simple, cependant elle est encore loin de la splendeur à laquelle elle atteignit). In light of Ottin’s words, does not contemporary interest in modern stained-glass window projects seem like a certain kind of renaissance of the technique?

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art*; Bourdieu, *Manet, une révolution symbolique*, 13–16.



1. Panoramic view of Saint Faith Church in Conques, Aveyron, France

the creation of an abstract stained-glass work within a medieval sacred structure—but also on the commissioner and the initiator of the public commission: their motivations and the extent of their respect for the original historical constitution of the heritage ensemble. From this perspective, might these proposed interventions also, in some way, reflect the ideological and political distinctions of a world divided by the Cold War and its aftermath? To approach this question from a wider perspective, a third example is added: the strikingly sovereign minimalistic modern stained-glass work in Saint Wenceslas Chapel in Prague’s Saint Vitus’s Cathedral in the mid-1960s by the globally recognized Czech glass artists Stanislav Libenský (1921–2002) and Jaroslava Brychtová (1924–2020). The visual and artistic essence of both national legitimizing projects—Soulages in Conques and Richter in Cologne—were fundamentally based on the visuality and principles of their free painting work of the late 1960s and early 1970s. That is, both originated at the same time as Josef Šíma’s abstract creations for Saint James’s Church and the windows of Saint Wenceslas Chapel.

All these projects were initiated following the negotiations of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), initiated by Pope John XXIII. A discussion on sacral art took place, especially reflected in *Sacrosanctum concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), which was approved and promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1963. Generally, the acceptance of modern religious art has undergone significant change, especially in comparison with the interwar pontificate of Pope Pius XI, sometimes referred to as a “crusade against modernism in sacred art.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jonová, “Boj proti ‘modernismu,’” 194, 211–12. The author here quotes from Dieguez, “‘Che tale arte.’” See also Benazzi, *Arte e Teologia*; Buranelli, “Chiesa ed Arte.”



(© Wikimedia commons; photo: Krysztof Golik)

### The transmutation of light and rhythmic breathing: Soulages in Conques

Soulages's abstract paintings were considered the prime example of works in which the formal elements of "pattern and light converged with psychic structures of memory, consciousness, and intuition" by the mid-1960s.<sup>10</sup> Surprisingly, as Soulages himself repeatedly noted, it was at the genius loci of Saint Faith's Church in Conques in Aveyron (figs. 1–3),<sup>11</sup> near the artist's hometown of Rodez, that he initially decided "to be a painter—not an architect—a painter."<sup>12</sup> He visited the church as a twelve-year old with his school: "I was in such a state of elation; I told myself that there was only one important thing in life, and that was art. I love to paint, I would paint," he recollected.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in January 1986, fifty-five years later, as a highly respected and globally recognized neo-avant-garde artist, he was in

<sup>10</sup> Brennan, "Illuminating the Void," 121–22, referring here to writings and curatorial strategies of the museum director and author James Johnson Sweeney (1900–1986) and his reception of Soulage's work, especially in the context of Soulages's 1966 retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. At the 2009 retrospective exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris, Soulages himself referred to Sweeney's first visit to his atelier in 1948 in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist; see Obrist, "Entretien avec Pierre Soulages," 124–25.

<sup>11</sup> Among various recent literature, see Foletti, "Spaces for Miracles;" Foletti and Palladino, *Conques across Time*.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Brennan, "Illuminating the Void," 122; citing Sweeney, *Sam Francis*, 15. Sweeney when recollecting his 1960s visit of the church with Soulages notes that even today in the character of "his handling the color, there remain something reminiscent of the warm half-light of the Romanesque interior of Saint Faith;" Sweeney and Daix, *Pierre Soulages*, 27–28; Raymond, *Soulages: La lumière et l'espace*, 104.

<sup>13</sup> "J'étais dans un tel état d'exaltation, je me suis dit qu'il n'y avait qu'une chose importante dans la vie, c'est l'art. J'aime peindre, je serais peintre." Heck and Soulages, *Conques: Les Vitraux de Soulages*, 34; Decron, "Pierre Soulages, une lumière pour Conques," 111; Bois, "Le verre en son opacité."

January 1986 officially approached by the *Délégation aux Arts Plastiques* of the French Ministry of Culture with the proposal of the commission for the entire 104 stained-glass windows, not like in many cases before – this time he didn't hesitate for long about the offer.<sup>14</sup>

By March 1986, he started his first investigations concerning the conditions of the proposal in relation to specifics of the spot and his – from the very beginning rather clear – artistic vision. As reflected in various aspects by to this day quite numerous literature, he was looking for a special kind of glass, ideally related to alabaster—that is, translucent but not fully transparent.<sup>15</sup> Unable to find such material, he started experimenting in cooperation with *Centre International de Recherche sur le Verre* in Marseille with the support of the company Saint-Gobain Vitrage and later also with *Centre de Recherche de Saint-Gobain* in Aubervilliers. In April 1988, the proposals for stained-glass windows for Saint Faith's Church were presented, and the search for a manufacturer for the monumental stained-glass series continued with the cooperation of the glass master Jean-Dominique Fleury (born 1946). In 1991, the German workshop Kunstglas Klinge in Rheine met all the requirements and became the place where all the windows were eventually produced. Thus, by March 1994 the very last of the 104 stained glass windows of various sizes was installed, and the work was also unveiled that summer.<sup>16</sup>

Soulages, an intellectual gestural painter of the “luminosity of black color,” following in the deepest possible way the philosophical and spiritual legacy of Kazimir Malevich, and known for thoughtful prudence and diligence in his work, therefore dedicated seven years to the project—from initial research, through the search for suitable material, to its finalization. “From the beginning, I was driven only by the desire to serve architecture as it has come down to us, respecting the purity of lines and proportions, the modulations of the tones of the stone, the order of light, the life of such a special space,” he stated.<sup>17</sup> In his *Notes de travail* (Working Notes), Soulages also explains why he preferred the diffuse transmission of light through glass to its transparency. The main reason lies in the process of restricting the view to the outside, which makes the architecture an enclosed space. In this concept, the windows appear to be – in a visual sense – just continuation of the Romanesque walls. He referred to light of such “changed” quality as “transmuted” (*transmutée*), bringing with itself “an emotional value, an interiority, a metaphysical quality in keeping with the poetry of this architecture as well as with its function a place of contemplation, a place of meditation”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For reference how many times he was addressed about this offer, as well from the very influential circles, like e. g. by the American high politician and businessman Nelson Rockefeller (1908–1979) in 1957, see Reymond, *Soulages: La lumière et l'espace*, 103.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Heck and Soulages, *Conques: Les Vitraux de Soulages*; Bußmann, *Soulages: Lebendiges Licht*; Duborgel, *Pierre Soulages: Conques*; Reymond, *Soulages: La lumière et l'espace*, 103–04; Cordez, “Pierre Soulages at Conques.”

<sup>16</sup> Bußmann, *Soulages: Lebendiges Licht*, 16–17.

<sup>17</sup> Heck and Soulages, *Conques: Les Vitraux de Soulages*, 57: “Loin de tout Moyen-Âge reconstitué, imité ou rêvé, j'ai cherché, dit-il, avec des technologies de notre époque, un produit verrier en accord avec l'identité de cette architecture sacrée du xi<sup>e</sup> siècle et de ses pouvoirs d'émotion artistique. Dès le début, je n'ai été animé que par la volonté de servir l'architecture telle qu'elle est parvenue jusqu'à nous, en respectant la pureté des lignes et des proportions, les modulations des tons de la pierre, l'ordonnance de la lumière, la vie d'un espace si particulier. Le but de ma recherche a été de les donner à voir.”

<sup>18</sup> Heck and Soulages, *Conques: Les Vitraux de Soulages*, 57: “Cette lumière que l'on pourrait dire ‘transmutée’ a une valeur émotionnelle, une intériorité, une qualité métaphysique en accord avec la poésie de cette architecture comme avec sa fonction: lieu de contemplation, lieu de méditation.”



2. Saint Faith Church in Conques and Soulages's stained-glass windows in 1994 (© Wikimedia commons; photo: madras91)

Thus, in Conques, the design did not apply Soulages's typical black monumental patterns, as some might have expected. Instead, it focused on a very subtle purist play of a range of tones, respective to the qualities of that specially created glass in the changing light conditions within the uniqueness of the genius loci of the space. The design involved thoughtful rhythmic division of large glass surfaces: "In my stained glass windows, I have chosen forms that evoke a breath—a breath gently paced by the rhythm of the lead comes," the artist noted.<sup>19</sup> The sketches for the rhythm of lines and tones of particular window groups were created simultaneously in the glass workshop, and, importantly, with the help of full-size sketches, thus not in the traditional way by enlarging original drafts.<sup>20</sup> Thus, as a mature artist, Soulages undertook the task more with the care of a gifted aircraft designer looking for a "unique" balanced synesthetic design than as an artist generally projecting a manifestation of his own ego into the masterpiece.

Already some decade before Soulages's world-renowned work started, the young French painter Jean-Pierre Raynaud (born 1939) designed one of the first series of modern stained-glass minimalist abstract windows in postwar France, intended for the medieval monastic space of the abbey and refectory at Noirlac.<sup>21</sup> Koestlé-Cate has compared Noirlac and Conques, suggesting that both

<sup>19</sup> Heck and Soulages, *Conques: Les Vitraux de Soulages*, 21: "J'ai choisi, dans mes vitraux, des formes qui sont comme un souffle. Souffle qui est rythmé par les barlotières."

<sup>20</sup> Heck and Soulages, *Conques: Les Vitraux de Soulages*, 37–79.

<sup>21</sup> Gonzales, "Les Vitraux de Jean-Pierre Raynaud à l'Abbaye de Noirlac;" Durand-Ruel et al., *Noirlac, abbaye cistercienne*.



3. Saint Faith Church in Conques, general view of the choir in the afternoon sun (© RE: CENT; photo: Anna Kelblová)

are forms of neo-Cistercianism in which the aesthetic of “restraint and economy aims, above all, to treat the configuration of light as primary consideration.”<sup>22</sup> For both Noirlac in the mid-1970s and Conques a decade later, the stained-glass windows were commissioned by the French Ministry of Culture as part of restoration programs.

For the respectable personality of Soulages, in regard of his artistic career of a very mature stage, the commission embodied – in terms of response – a certain principally recognized peak, an achievement organically completing a lifetime’s oeuvre that ensured his unique position not only within French social-cultural environment. The positive reception and promotion of the project was contributed to by the artist’s open communication in all creative phases of the process and the meticulousness of its documentation and publicity. As a result, the project in Conques is not only an integral part of all volumes on the author for the last three decades,<sup>23</sup> but it was also an interpretative pinnacle of his late career. Although art history literature praises the significance, geometrical pureness, and philosophical depth of this project, as early as April 1993, before the entire commission was finalized, criticism from conservationists appeared in the French periodical *Sites et monuments*, reflecting the opinion of the region’s residents.<sup>24</sup>

### Ten million French francs: The Conques windows controversy

The topical research-based article initiated by the in *Sites et monuments* was by Bertrand Rossi. It opens with the statement that “the case raises many controversies and will remain in the annals of heritage.” It points out that for the recent stained-glass windows project, the whole set of intact windows dating no later than to the mid-twentieth century was replaced. In fact, the original early medieval stained glass was destroyed by a fire already in 1568, and so the monument went through with noncoherent windows for almost the next four centuries. By the mid-nineteenth-century restoration,<sup>25</sup> when some of the original windows were also bricked up, the question was raised of thematic artistic replacement of the stained glass. However, new windows were not provided until the 1940s under the supervision of the architect Maurice Berry, the head for regional historic monuments. He differentiated windows of varied tones, adapted to the specific locations where they should be placed. He also defined their patterns, which were either geometric or figurative. The figurative notably depicted the lives and miracles of Saint Faith, Saint Norbert, and Saint Benedict. The last windows were installed by 1953.<sup>26</sup> Special emphasis was placed on the lightness of the windows in relation to the character of the interior. In this sense, the windows were referred to as “grandiose” (fig. 4).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Koestlé-Cate, “Cistercian Adventures in Glass.”

<sup>23</sup> Among the most important: Meschonnic, *Le rythme et la lumière*, 215–19; Сулаж, *светоносность черного*, 29–44 (The Hermitage, Saint Petersburg, 2001); Encrevé, *Soulages: Les peintures*, 305–25; Chassey, “Conques, une abstraction épiphanique;” Hesslinger, “Outrenoir and Outreblanc.”

<sup>24</sup> Rossi, “Conques: L’affaire des vitraux.”

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Foletti and Palladino, “Vynalézání ‘románského’ Conques.”

<sup>26</sup> Today the removed glazing can be found in the Treasure of Conques Museum.

<sup>27</sup> Rossi, “Conques: L’affaire des vitraux,” 6–10.



4. Saint Faith Church in Conques, detail of the choir interior with Soulages's windows (© RE: CENT; photo: Anna Kelbllová)



5. Friedrich Foltz: *Cologne panorama with St. Peter Cathedral and Rhine river*, 1865, private collection  
(© and photo: Marcela Rusinko)

Rossi notes that before the Ministry of Culture decided to finance new stained-glass windows—clearly going against public opinion and the opinion of experts—“Saint Faith’s Church was one of the best-glazed churches in France,” whereas many other churches were suffering because they were open to the elements. However, its position as a strategic tourist monument along the iconic pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela was decisive. Without further discussion, the project was quickly expanded to include all 104 windows, and it was commissioned to an artist well connected to the national social elite and with minimal experience in working with glass.<sup>28</sup> The article states that the local public, monument experts, and not least of all Church representatives were clearly in favor of retaining the colorful mid-twentieth-century stained-glass windows, and they strongly opposed their unjustified removal. One argument was that the colorful play of light created by the stained glass set was organic to the interior of this Benedictine church. Thus, uncertainty over the effect of Soulages’s design on the light inside the church caused great concern. Although Rossi obviously sided with those that favored keeping the old figurative stained-glass windows and the painter’s abstract and technological innovation raised concerns for him, he notably points out that in retrospect it was a “politically commissioned” legitimization project, which went significantly against not only the real needs to renovate the church, but also the wishes of the local community and the wishes of the Church itself. The text also pointed out that the final costs, including the five-year research phase for Soulages’s team project, cost almost ten million francs, financed from the public budgets of the Ministry of Culture.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Rossi, “Conques: L’affaire des vitraux,” 10–11. The decision was connected with Jack Mathieu Émile Lang (born 1939), a member of the Socialist Party, who served as minister of culture from 1981 to 1986 and again from 1988 to 1993, and with François Léotard (1942–2023), who was minister from 1987 to 1988.

<sup>29</sup> Rossi, “Conques: L’affaire des vitraux,” 12–15.

Although there was criticism of the loss of the functional postwar stained-glass windows, discussion about the meaning and form of this modern intervention in the French environment was essentially only temporary. It was dampened by the retrospective honors that not only the author but also the monument itself received in the French political narrative.<sup>30</sup> Soulages himself was symbolically elevated onto a pedestal previously achieved by only a very few painters and sculptors active in modern France. In a certain sense, using Bourdieu's terminology, in terms of symbolic value and identity legitimization, Soulages now definitely took the place of Manet.<sup>31</sup>

### The "radiant" nihilism of a television test pattern: Richter in Cologne Cathedral

The decade younger German artistic matador Gerhard Richter—who was born on the east side of the Iron Curtain<sup>32</sup> and become famous after his emigration to West Germany—may be a figure interconnecting both sides of this political divide. Although Richter's artistic expressions already comprised atypical painting or sculptural materials such as glass or mirror objects in the late 1960s, it was not until 2007, when he was in his seventies—thus, in his artistically very mature years—that he had the opportunity to create a monumental public stained-glass window for the southeast transept of Cologne Cathedral (fig. 5). Richter perceived an enormous exceptionality in this space, which is "charged with history and tremendous importance like no other," aware of the possible failure of a casual modern art figurative design.<sup>33</sup> The window, a south-facing visual dominant of the façade, is twenty-two meters high and nine meters wide, with an area of 113 square meters, and located about twenty meters above the ground, thus visible from a distance of tens of meters. Therefore, even though Richter's first two private sketches for this task involved figural motives derived from the photographs documenting the scenes of a forceful treatment of National Socialism victims, instantaneously, he abandoned this narrative orientation in favor of an abstract design. Here, as most sources say, a "coincidence" occurred when the artist intuitively attached a reproduction of his three-decade-old painting *4096 Farben* (1974) to the south window template (fig. 6). "It should only be a radiantly beautiful window, as good and beautiful and ambiguous as it can be for me here and now," he stated in an interview with the Swiss critic Hans Ulrich Obrist in November 2006 during the conceptual stage of the work.<sup>34</sup>

Among much literature on the subject, most of it written from a legitimizing Christian point of view, it is surprisingly difficult to find objective reflection on the commission's initiation, successive realization and the response to it. With its nonbiased point of view, a study by Claudia Pohl published in *Kunst und Politik* focusing on contemporary German art in church contexts after 1945 is exceptional.<sup>35</sup> Pohl addresses the topic factually, in an open-minded manner, based on archival sources. Thus, she correctly recognizes the key role of the initiator of the commission, Barbara Schock-Werner

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Cordez, "Pierre Soulages at Conques," 470–71.

<sup>31</sup> Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art*; Bourdieu, *Manet, une révolution symbolique*, 13–16.

<sup>32</sup> See Gross et al., *Documenta: Politics and Art*, 184–87.

<sup>33</sup> Elger and Obrist, *Gerhard Richter*, 538; Zweite, *Gerhard Richter*, 177–79.

<sup>34</sup> Zweite, *Gerhard Richter*, 177: "Es sollte nur ein strahlend schönes Fenster werden, so gut und schön und vieldeutig wie es mir hier und heute eben möglich sein kann."

<sup>35</sup> Pohl, "Gerhard Richters Fenster." This volume is titled *Kirche und Kunst: Kunstpolitik und Kunstförderung der Kirchen nach 1945*.



6. Interior of Cologne Cathedral with Richter's window in 2007  
(© Wikimedia commons; photo: Mazin Al-Salihi)

(born 1947), an architect with a doctorate in art history, who served as the cathedral's chief architect manager between 1999 and 2012. Schock-Werner was the first woman to serve in this function, and she is a published architectural researcher with a clearly secular background.<sup>36</sup> In 2001 or 2002, she addressed Richter, who had settled in Cologne in about 1983, regarding the project. This occurred with the support and assistance of Auxiliary Bishop Friedhelm Hoffmann (born 1942), a friend of the artist and also an expert in church art.

Although Schock-Werner obviously favored and promoted Richter as a potential artist for the commission from the very beginning, over the following years she gathered arguments supporting and defending his minimalistic non-figurative design as the only suitable one and vital for this artistically and technically demanding, complex, and publicly prominent task. A year later, in 2003—following the prevailing iconographic program and both the historical and visual inconsistency and complexity of the Cologne Cathedral windows' glazing as a whole—the cathedral chapter decided that the large dominant southeast transept window should depict the figures of six twentieth-century German martyrs and saints connected to the Nazi era, among them the Breslau (now Wrocław) Jewish philosopher Edith Stein (1891–1942).<sup>37</sup> Such a basic assumption would have weakened Richter's position and made his design proposal immediately irrelevant, yet it did not happen that way. Wolfgang Ullrich suspects that Richter remained among the artists under consideration only because a figurative design was still expected from him—Schock-Werner had already argued that he was working in both an abstract and figurative manner.<sup>38</sup> Schock-Werner approached two other German artists, Egbert Veerbeek (born 1953) and Manfred Hürlimann (born 1958), with a request for a suitable window design incorporating iconography of the twentieth-century martyrs. Notably, their works fit in terms of form and color with the cathedral's historically and visually very complex glazing respectfully well.<sup>39</sup>

Perceived in retrospect within the prism of the secular art history canon, it still appears quite surprising and professionally contentious how two practically unknown conventional local painters could appear in competition with the prominent and adored Richter, neither of them with experience in stained glass.<sup>40</sup> No doubt their role was simply to demonstrate the impossibility of a "traditional" figurative design while depicting the characters whose appearance is very well known and to legitimize Richter's convenient abstract project. In this manner, the key argument by the opined cathedral architect manager in favor of Richter deliberately also discussed the problem of dark colors as prevailing on the garments of the martyrs, deemed inappropriate for the large stained-glass window on the bright sunny south side of the edifice. As a supportive argument, Schock-Werner also referred to the well-accepted abstract stained-glass window for Mainz Cathedral (2004) created by the German artist Johannes Schreiter (born 1930).<sup>41</sup> However, it is worth noting that both final designs—the one by Schreiter and that by Richter—are practically incomparable in terms of their overall effect and a certain sensitivity with respect to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the architecture, including colorful dominance.

<sup>36</sup> See Deml, "Dombaumeisterin." *Kölner Domblatt* 2012 also contains Schock-Werner's bibliography (382–85).

<sup>37</sup> Schock-Werner, "Das Südquerhausfenster des Kölner Domes."

<sup>38</sup> Ullrich, *An die Kunst glauben*, 21; Pohl, "Gerhard Richters Fenster," 46.

<sup>39</sup> Both designs are reproduced in Schock-Werner, "Das Südquerhausfenster des Kölner Domes," 361, 366.

<sup>40</sup> The radical difference in approach, experience, and quality could also be a reason why there was no obvious effort to widely publish the designs by the other two competitors.

<sup>41</sup> Pohl, "Gerhard Richters Fenster," 45–46; Schock-Werner, "Das Südquerhausfenster des Kölner Domes," 360–70.

Consequently, the first mention of entrusting Richter to work on a proposal for the window appears in the annual report written by Schock-Werner for October 2004 to September 2005, with a remark that “the color scheme is still being worked on,” and that, considering the technical implementation, “different options are being tried out in collaboration with external glass workshops.”<sup>42</sup> The final design consisted of about 11,250 colorful squares, each measuring  $9.7 \times 9.7$  cm. Their positioning was computer generated but ultimately organized by the artist into a rhythmic pattern. Here, the visual concept is derived from the 1970s *Farbtafeln* series, which worked with the principle of gradual mixing of three basic colors and white, and as such could potentially, geometrically multiplied, continue to infinity. This was reduced to a range of seventy-two colors, a clear distinction limit for the human eye from the given distance. In addition, the technical choice did not use traditional leaded glazing; instead, the color squares of molded glass were set between two clear slices of glass and bordered with black silicon. The cost of almost €400,000 was allegedly covered by donations.

The new Cologne window was unveiled in August 2007 (figs. 7-8). Considering the revolutionary character of the idea, the difficulty of the technical choice, and time needed for determining the final color concept for the expected visual effect in its entirety, this appears to be an unprecedentedly short period of time—especially compared to the three long decades required for the important opposite window in the northwest transept. This is examined below. In light of the long and painful early postwar “struggle” seeking the right iconography and visual style for the opposite window, Schock-Werner’s “quick” design for the south side with a rather non-standard project “competition” seems at least suspiciously purposeful or even to indicate signs of manipulative intentions.

From the social point of view, it is noteworthy that a debate developed soon after the piece was unveiled. Richter’s abstract grid cathedral window, perhaps evoking the test pattern on an old television screen more than anything else,<sup>43</sup> was attacked by Archbishop Joachim Cardinal Meisner (1933–2017), who was not formally involved in the decisions and evidently preferred the idea of martyrs depicted in a figurative manner—and, moreover, was unable to attend the opening ceremony in person.<sup>44</sup> Furious debate developed on the pages of the newspapers *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* and *Kölner Express*. Meisner, systematically opposed to the cathedral representatives, referred to the design quite frankly as fitting much better into a mosque than into a Christian space.<sup>45</sup> If this is a new window, “then it should clearly reflect our beliefs,” he stated.<sup>46</sup> Two years later, during the mass in Cologne Cathedral marking the opening of the Kolumba Museum, Meisner added eloquently: “Where culture is disconnected from the worship of God, the cult becomes rigid in ritualism and culture degenerates,” while using the term *entartet* ‘degenerate’, highly sensitive in a German context, allegedly demonstrating that he insisted on his position. On that point, more fascinating seems to

<sup>42</sup> Schock-Werner, “46. Dombaubericht,” 32.

<sup>43</sup> Wolfgang Ullrich clearly refers to this visual analogy, stating that the “giant screen” mutates into a medium that does not broadcast anything; see Ullrich, *An die Kunst glauben*, 15–29. See also Pohl, “Gerhard Richters Fenster,” 51.

<sup>44</sup> Noteworthy is the fact that Meisner, as well as Edith Stein, was born in prewar Breslau (now Wrocław), part of territory that became Polish after 1945. Thus, the iconographic reference to martyrs of the Second World War could be a distinctly personal theme for him as well.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, “Alle Bilder sind darin vereint;” “Meisner wollte das neue Domfenster nicht.” See also Herrmann, *Das Gerhard Richter Fenster*.

<sup>46</sup> Pohl, “Gerhard Richters Fenster,” 47–48; “Dom-Fenster passt besser in eine Moschee!”



7. Detail of Richter's window pattern in Cologne Cathedral (© Publicdelivery.org; photo: Second-Half Travels)



8. West view of Cologne Cathedral with Richter's window (© Wikimedia commons; photo: Elisabeth Schittenhelm)

be the surprisingly affirmative statement by Richter himself, noting that Meisner “could be the only one that realizes that this really isn’t Catholic, the window.”<sup>47</sup>

In this regard, it is worth quoting the famous period phrase by the composer, artist, and theorist John Cage (1912–1992) in his *Lecture on Nothing*: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.”<sup>48</sup> As Zweite noted in his extensive volume, what makes this quote—opening the door to some artistic nihilist minimalist points of departure—especially significant in this context is the fact that it already appeared in Richter’s private diary in the mid-1980s.<sup>49</sup>

### Modern art or nineteenth-century historicism? A look back at postwar history

Below the reasons are outlined that could have led to the decision to replace the southeast transept window in Cologne right at that historical moment under unusual circumstances. It is well known that during the Second World War highly valuable medieval stained-glass windows were dismantled and saved as a whole. A set of these from the nineteenth century—among them the original southeast transept glazing donated by King Wilhelm I of Prussia in 1863 depicting six secular and Christian rulers—was destroyed during Allied aerial bombardment, when the cathedral suffered severe damage. Consequent frenetic renovation efforts, led by Willi Weyres (the cathedral’s chief architect from 1944 to 1972),<sup>50</sup> met the goal of making the cathedral partly accessible already on the seven hundredth anniversary of laying its foundation stone. On August 15th, 1948, when the festive reopening was held, among the most highlighted achievements was the installation of two bronze doors newly designed by Ewald Mataré in the south transept.

However, within the bulk of this first postwar period renovation work, already by the beginning of the 1948 the glazing in the south part of the transept nave was also installed. The large transept window was designed by the stained-glass artist Wilhelm Teuwen (1908–1968), a professor at the Cologne Academy of Fine and Applied Arts<sup>51</sup> and a disciple of Heinrich Campendonk (1889–1957), who had graduated from the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts. According to a report published in *Kölner Domblatt*, the window glazing consisted of “colorless, only partly toned cathedral glass, whose pattern formed by lead frames acted abstractly against the light as a dark ornamental grid.”<sup>52</sup> This indicates that this undemanding and even rather modern design fulfilled its function within the entire interior context well. Nevertheless, within the wide range of renovation work, new glazing clearly was not the main priority during these years. The real and decades-long marginality of this issue is testified to not only by the fact that Weyres alone as the chief architect designed several missing windows around 1960, adhering to a floral ornamental figurative style in terms of style and color, essentially not far from Teuwen’s design, without this fact being at least historically questioned.

<sup>47</sup> Imdahl, “Meisner irrt sich ein bisschen;” Pohl, “Gerhard Richters Fenster,” 51.

<sup>48</sup> Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 109.

<sup>49</sup> Zweite, *Gerhard Richter*, 453, record dated November 13th, 1985.

<sup>50</sup> Schock-Werner, “Willy Weyres und der Kölner Dom.”

<sup>51</sup> Engels, “Der Maler Wilhelm Teuwen.”

<sup>52</sup> Rode, “Die neuen Glassfenster des Domes,” 45–51: “Aus farblosen, nur zum Teil leicht getönten Kathedralglas, in dem durch Bleifassungen gebildeten Muster als dunkles Ornamentgitter abstract gegen das Licht stehen.”

This is underscored by Lippert's volume, which discussed the period between 1920 and 1960 while practically omitting the issue of glazing completely.<sup>53</sup>

However, when Richter's glazing design was discussed in the early 2000s, the dominant southeast transept window seemed to be the only option. Was it really? What came first: the need to replace unsuitable glazing with a new one, or a need for a new window by the most famous living German artist, even a local one? This is very difficult to determine from the available sources and thus remains unanswered; it hangs over the revolutionary artwork in Cologne like an insistent intrusive question. Schock-Werner later explained the choice they made: "Colourless glazing based on a design by Wilhelm Teuwen was installed in 1948; however, over time the window was considered increasingly inadequate, both from an artistic perspective and because it let too much light into the cathedral. It would have compared particularly unfavourably with the colourful windows of the Welter cycle."<sup>54</sup>

In his 1992 study, Papenbrock offers an alternative, more critical analysis, focused on the genesis, role, and even quality of Teuwen's transept window designs. While examining the circumstances in the competition project for the north transept window glazing announced by the city representatives in August 1949 and not delivered before April 1980, he brings together many detailed relevant data.<sup>55</sup> From the very beginning, the project was perceived to be a joint effort between the town hall and Church at a European level of prestige that should be designed by "well-known artistic personality." In terms of style, the expected design should clearly refer to modern art and avoid nineteenth-century historicism. At the same time, it should respect the old medieval glazing and the north position of the window. The required iconographic program covering the Prophets and Old Testament references to Christ was specificized in the most detail. Among the four artists considered, Campendonk's persuasively strong timeless avant-garde project was deemed most suitable. Teuwen's design was perceived as second best, with many positive elements and thus suitable after "further processing." However, the relevance of a figurative iconographic program with references to a sensitive issue of German contemporary history and the gravity of the task led the committee to announce a new competition in 1951, this time with the results publicly exhibited and thus subject to discussion. Although several dozen artists took part in the second competition, the city committee finally inclined toward Campendonk's first project. In 1952 he was entrusted with the task, but under the condition of further modification of the design. Some three years later, he resigned for health reasons, passing away in 1955. The committee then entrusted Teuwen with the task, insisting first that it should be carried out "in the sense of Campendonk's design," yet Teuwen defended his own design. In 1957, sketches of the window designs were submitted for discussion. In contrast to his teacher, in terms of style Teuwen's work formally referred more to ancient tradition, and in terms of content it appeared to be more philosophical, thus somewhat more distant from what was originally expected by the town hall and Church. Teuwen, under enormous pressure from not only official representatives but also the local press for a decade, appeared to be unable to finalize his design at that point. Similar to his professor, he passed away in August 1967, half a year after the dissatisfied Cologne periodicals called for a new competition.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Lippert, *Historismus und Kulturkritik*.

<sup>54</sup> Schock-Werner and Wolff, *Cologne Cathedral*, 48.

<sup>55</sup> Papenbrock, "Das 'Nordfenster' des Kölner Doms."

<sup>56</sup> Papenbrock, "Das 'Nordfenster' des Kölner Doms," 202–05.

A rather provisional and eclectic design, submitted under the tenure of Arnold Wollf—the cathedral’s chief architect from 1972 to 1999, the direct predecessor of Schock-Werner—was also not the final one. That design applied Teuwen’s available sketches for the triforium area. However, for the main high part of the window, the old nineteenth-century panels were restored and ornamentally connected to the tracery by the local stained-glass artist Hubert Schaffmeister. In April 1980, after more than three decades of high expectations and difficult discussions, the north transept window was finally installed. Unfortunately, practically everything in the work essentially differed from the initial propositions, and a certain kind of nineteenth-century “bizarre ornamental collage” arose. Cologne definitely lost a unique historical opportunity to be proud of the world-quality glazing by Campendonk, whose prewar sacral window project was awarded the Grand Prix at the Paris Exhibition of 1937.<sup>57</sup>

“From a distance, it would certainly make most sense to have Campendonk’s excellent first draft from 1949 accepted,” commented Papenbrock on the rather unfortunate consequences. “Even at the end of the 1960s, when Teuwen’s tracery sections and triforium zone were completed, but the artist himself had already died, a modern iconographically and stylistically uniform design would still have been conceivable: modeling and leading would have been done on light, monochrome glass created based on Teuwen’s unfinished drawings and inserted into the overall window in the sense of an ‘infinito’ principle,” he concluded.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the effort to restore the conventional nineteenth-century figurative windows continued practically until the beginning of the twenty-first century. This aspect apparently also affected the decisions regarding Richter’s window.

### **Marginal work or lifetime achievement? A variety of professional references**

Concerning Richter’s late creation in Cologne Cathedral, it is worth noting that it has not engendered any substantial systematic professional reflections or extensive discussions in the context of his productive five-decade creative career. For Richter, any professional interest among secular art historians regarding the monumentality, symbolic potential, composition, and visual lighting effect of the stained-glass window in Cologne seems to be overshadowed by discussion of key interpretational topics that were always related to the significant social, political, and historical messages that his work referred to. Thus, in his letters to Richter, Didi-Huberman primarily discusses the painting cycle *Birkenau* (2014),<sup>59</sup> whereas others such as McGonagill similarly emphasize the pivotal German historical memory and archive aspects in Richter’s unique manner of visual thinking.<sup>60</sup> In this sense, Zweite’s comprehensive volume on the author covers the Cologne Cathedral project while contextualizing it within the wider stream of Richter’s installations and projects for various secular public architectural spaces, although the volume clearly focuses on Richter’s essential modern art painting legacy. Zweite practically avoids commenting on and developing the surprisingly harsh

<sup>57</sup> Engels, “100 Jahre Werkstätten.” In contrast, in terms of modern figurative design and quality, analogical designs by the Italian stained-glass artist Amalia Panigati (1901–1975) were installed in Milan Cathedral. See Chiarelli, “Amalia Panigati;” Pinardi, “Amalia Panigati.”

<sup>58</sup> Papenbrock, “Das ‘Nordfenster’ des Kölner Doms,” 206.

<sup>59</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Wo Es war*.

<sup>60</sup> McGonagill, *Crisis and Collection*, 135–74.

controversy about the “television test pattern” window mentioned above, associating it instead with (from his perspective) generally positive appreciation and acceptance of the work. In that regard, Zweite concludes his legitimizing sensually visual analysis with a diplomatic statement that—in his personal view—the southern high transept window may be one of Richter’s most important works. Nevertheless, the fact that a five-hundred-page volume devotes only two single pages to this widely discussed masterpiece, both publicly dishonored and supported, dispensing with a real in-depth analysis, resonates instead with more of a certain diplomatic restraint and a lack of interpretative persuasiveness than a strong nonbiased professional standpoint.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, evidently, the thoroughness of attempts offering either evolutive transcendental metaphysical explanations or historizing contextual reading in the name of legitimate (dis)continuity of postmodern and contemporary artworks created within various medieval sacred spaces initiated by the Church itself appears to be remarkable and in evident contrast to a real secular research interest here, which appears to be significantly more feeble.<sup>62</sup> The topic was repeatedly recalled especially by the journal *Das Münster*, which has addressed the issue of modern stained-glass windows systematically and in a wider context. Here Hoppe-Sailer refers to Richter’s Cologne window as an essentially postmodern artistic achievement of radical plurality, thus, in the terms of Wolfgang Welsch, programmatically rejecting “all big” historical narratives, as well as in the name of a radical visual overwhelming decorativeness and attentiveness that the piece is evidently imposing in absolute asocial individuality, also rejecting any reference to the other windows and artworks in the same sacred space. Yet, he also refers to Richter’s engagement in what certainly could be the most significant sacral artistic commissions of recent decades in Germany as clearly intentional: “It is certainly no coincidence that one of the most popular international artists of these days was commissioned to design the window in the southeast transept. This is an attempt to continue the history of contemporary art in a church context,” notes Hoppe-Sailer.<sup>63</sup>

Hoppe-Sailer approaches the topic from a broader academic theoretical position. Not only does he question the role of contemporary art in the traditional Christian context, but he also points out the potential role of museums as aspiring “new sacral” fields, questioning what attracts artists like Richter—an avowed atheist, adored and even overpaid by the private art market—to create similar works for sacred spaces, ultimately without entitlement to a fee. What could be the value added here that could not be gained while working for museums or the private sphere? Opposing this, an article published a year earlier by Alex Hammes and Guido Schlimbach presents more traditional legitimizing positions. The authors, both theologians, see in Richter’s dominant south window design a “‘shining’ example of a possible dialogue between art and the Church.” Yet they go even further when, by evoking transcendental associations between light and metaphysics, they endeavor to link Richter’s abstract colorful mathematical grid pattern to the originally expected narratively figurative iconographic concept presenting modern twentieth-century German martyrs of Nazism.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Zweite, *Gerhard Richter*, 179.

<sup>62</sup> *Gerhard Richter: Zufall*; Büttner, *Kirche sein als communio*, 88–116.

<sup>63</sup> Hoppe-Sailer, “Zurück in die Kirche,” 264: “Es ist sicherlich kein Zufall, dass einer der derzeit höchst gehandelten internationalen Künstler den Auftrag bekommt, das Fenster des Südostquerhauses zu gestalten. Wird doch damit versucht, die Geschichte der zeitgenössischen Kunst im kirchlichen Kontext fortzuschreiben.” See also Schlimbach, “Christliche Kunst.”

<sup>64</sup> Hammes and Schlimbach, “Einleuchtendes Zeugnis.”

The discussion has also been developed in other volumes devoted to Christian art,<sup>65</sup> recently also briefly noting the three new stained-glass windows created by Richter for the Benedictine Tholey Abbey in Saarland.<sup>66</sup> Koestlé-Cate's controversial discussion on the geometrical abstract grid pattern of the Cologne Cathedral window is fruitful, yet still focused on modern art in the context of Christian space from the perspective of a cultural historian.<sup>67</sup>

What, then, is the place and the role of this sacral public artwork in the prolific and decades-long oeuvre of this important, honored, and broadly interpreted—but also expensive—contemporary living artist in the world? Was it a real “divine coincidence,” guidance from higher realms, or rather cluelessness that guided the artist's hand when a window template appeared on the reproduction of *4096 Farben*? To draw an analogy with Soulages: one can hardly expect this to be the lifetime masterpiece that will be remembered in Richter's obituaries because the reactions, especially the Christian ones, and attempts to retroactively legitimize this “apple of discord” within the wider theological context do not seem to offer a real consensus.

### Czech stained-glass Cold-War “color-field” minimalism for Prague Cathedral

During the long decades of the Cold War, Czech glass held the privileged position of a prominent export product that—often in contrast to numerous nonconventional progressive artists of the period—systematically represented this central European country, a loyal Soviet postwar satellite, in the Western world. Thus, among the most internationally acclaimed, the glass artists and couple Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová should first be mentioned.<sup>68</sup> Although their four stained-glass window proposals designed and created for medieval sacral architectural spaces between 1964 and 2003 (i.e., during the period of state socialism and early post-socialism) hold a secondary position in their extensive oeuvre, the project carried out as part of the 1960s restoration work in Saint Wenceslas Chapel, Saint Vitus's Cathedral at Prague Castle<sup>69</sup> categorizes to be a most notable achievement (fig. 9).<sup>70</sup> The cathedral is a key sacred space in the Czech lands. Even though its foundations were laid on the site of previous sacral architecture in 1344, it was not consecrated until 1929. Saint Wenceslas Chapel, the resting place of Bohemia's patron saint, was consecrated by 1367. It contains the chamber where the coronation insignia of the Czech kings are preserved. Sylva Petrová has thoroughly reconstructed the project for its two large south-facing seven-meter-high windows.<sup>71</sup>

The competition for the chapel windows was announced in 1963, when the entire chapel was undergoing a thorough renovation and a wider and informative national discussion was taking place

<sup>65</sup> Czerlitzki, “Künstlerkult und Kirchenfenster;” Weijers, “A strange lostness that is palpably present.”

<sup>66</sup> Wilhelmus, “Die neuen Chorfenster Gerhard Richters;” Zukić, “Mit starken Bildern und Botschaften.” For other comparative German stained-glass projects, see also Elger Machová, “Současná německá sklomalba.”

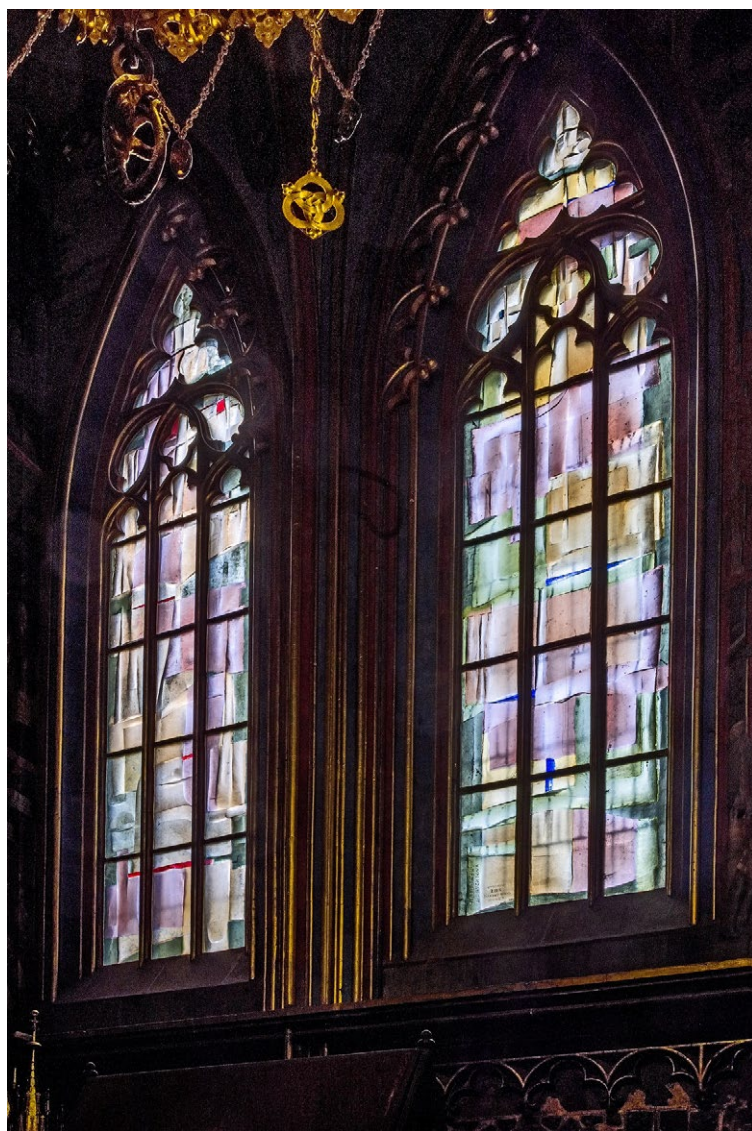
<sup>67</sup> Koestlé-Cate, “Cistercian Adventures in Glass;” Koestlé-Cate, “Grids: A Kraussian Perspective.”

<sup>68</sup> Frantz, *Stanislav Libenský, Jaroslava Brychtová*; Petrová et al., *Stanislav Libenský – Jaroslava Brychtová*; Oldknow, “Stanislav Libenský (1921–2002);” Klasová, *Stanislav Libenský, Jaroslava Brychtová*.

<sup>69</sup> From period literature, e.g., Krása, “Svatováclavská kaple.” More recently, see Uličný, “Blood in Stone and the Second Coming.”

<sup>70</sup> Palata, *Kouzlo imaginace*, 129–39; Petrová, *Via Lucis*, 27–48.

<sup>71</sup> Petrová, *Via Lucis*, 27–48.



9. Libenský and Brychtová's pair of stained-glass windows in Saint Wenceslas Chapel in 1968 (© UPM; photo: Gabriel Urbánek)

in periodicals on the role of modern and avant-garde applied art, as well as on glass in monumental architecture. Here, among other issues, there was criticism of the conservatism of church commissioners rigidly based on the character of the monument and prescribed iconography. In the case of Saint Wenceslas Chapel, the commissioner was the Czechoslovak state through the president's office because Saint Vitus's Cathedral (including Prague Castle) belonged to the state during the communist period in Czechoslovakia. In 1954, the government issued a decree that transferred the cathedral to state administration.<sup>72</sup> This move was part of a broader process in which the state took control of church institutions and property.<sup>73</sup> Several local artists participated in the competition, most of whom already had experience working with glass. The aim was to replace the Art Nouveau stained-glass windows from 1912 to 1913 by the architect that completed the cathedral, Kamil Hilbert, and the artist Artuš Scheiner,<sup>74</sup> which were considered insufficient in terms of artistic quality and their light and color parameters. A committee composed of representatives of the art and architectural community and the president's office could make the decision without taking into account the Church's opinion even though it concerned such a sacred national space. As Petrová clearly shows, the parameters and ideas set by a group of the most influential professional art historians<sup>75</sup> thus came to the fore: above all, this included a demand for an abstract design devoid of traditional figurative Christian iconography and muted colors respecting the character of the murals being restored. Art historians, especially the Catholic priest Josef Cibulka (1886–1968), a professor of Christian archaeology and church art, generally did not hinder modern designs in sacred space,<sup>76</sup> and they weighed in on Libenský's winning design.<sup>77</sup> As Petrová assumes, corrections to the designs primarily concerned attenuation of the color scale. The technological choice for the pair of tall chapel windows was fundamentally innovative at the time. Brychtová originated the experimental glass-making technique. It involved mold-melted glass installed in the large original Gothic lining and tracery, interspersed with a metal frame, assembled from a mosaic of painted colored segments (so-called "stones"), directly reflecting the typical medieval incrustations of the walls.<sup>78</sup> This design echoed the aesthetics of the 1960s because it worked sculpturally on the principle of negative relief

<sup>72</sup> Government Decree no. 55/ 1954, issued October 19th, 1954; Kostílková, "Činnost Jednoty," 70; Šindelková, "Sochařská a malířská výzdoba," 803–06; Měchura, "Památková péče v areálu Pražského hradu," 495.

<sup>73</sup> Cuhra, "KSČ, stat a římskokatolická církev;" Balík and Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu*; Uhlíková and Sklenář, "Instrumentalizace památkové péče."

<sup>74</sup> Kostílková, "Činnost Jednoty," 50–55; Kostílková, *Okna Svatovítské katedrály*, 30–31.

<sup>75</sup> Jaromír Neumann (1924–2001), period director of the Institute for Theory and History of Art of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, with Jaroslav Pěšina (1912–1992) and Josef Krása (1933–1985); see Kostílková, *Okna Svatovítské katedrály*, 31. The competition conditions and the committee's decision process are well documented in the Prague Castle Archive, President's Office (KPR), item no. 400,000.

<sup>76</sup> Jonová, "Boj proti 'modernismu,'" 193. Cibulka was involved in the creation of modern stained-glass windows in the cathedral as early as the First Czechoslovak Republic. In the commission, he certainly embodied a guarantee of continuity with the stained-glass windows already created in the neo-Gothic part of the cathedral before the Second World War; Kostílková, *Okna Svatovítské katedrály*, 22–29.

<sup>77</sup> The division of roles within this creative duo is well known. Libenský always acted as the designer. His role was thus quite close to a painter, draftsman, or free creative artist. Brychtová then acted as the head of the glass workshop at Pelechov near the famous northern Bohemian glassmaking locality of Železný Brod. She invented and refined her own technological procedures. However, the final stage of work on the object always took place in close cooperation, and in the case of any disagreement Libenský had the final say.

<sup>78</sup> Šedinová, "Symbolika drahých kamenů."



10. Saint Wenceslas Chapel in Prague St Vitus Cathedral (© UPM; photo: Gabriel Urbánek)

and intertwined colored surfaces with unclearly defined contours, offering a certain impression of scattered watercolor paint (figs. 10–11). The glass was finally installed in the frame in April 1968.<sup>79</sup>

The stained-glass window in Saint Wenceslas Chapel, created between 1966 and 1968, was positively reflected and interpreted as an organic part of previous stained-glass windows for the same space for the first time already in a 1970 publication issued by the same administration of Prague Castle.<sup>80</sup>

Consequently, colorful reproductions appeared in the mid-1980s, when the Rakow Award for Excellence in the Art of Glass was launched by the Corning Museum of Glass in New York.<sup>81</sup> The award committee stated that the Czech couple “have created a body of work unmatched by any other artists to date, aesthetically and technically, in sometimes monumental scale and innovative color.”<sup>82</sup> Subsequently, the work was examined in detail in a 1994 publication by the Corning Museum of Glass.<sup>83</sup> In addition to the comprehensive cathedral volume, the pair of windows, created under the strict supervision of art historians, was noted as most notable artistic achievement of the second half of the twentieth century in Saint Vitus’s Cathedral.<sup>84</sup>

Nevertheless, what appears as a remarkable and repeatedly acclaimed achievement from the perspective of secularized art history may well have been a very bitter pill for the representatives of the Catholic Church at the time of its creation. A disturbing circumstance, although practically unremarked upon, remains the fact that at the very time when the reconstruction of Saint Wenceslas Chapel, that most sacred of national sacred spaces, was being finalized, and discussions were taking place over the first designs for the windows by Libenský, the Archbishop of Prague, Josef Beran (1888–1969)—who since 1949 had been interned, held in various locations under house arrest—was forced to leave for exile in Rome following his elevation to cardinal.<sup>85</sup> In this context, the project can undoubtedly be considered not only a remarkable, successful, and timeless abstract artistic undertaking—approached from the outset in a primarily secular manner, rather than from the perspective of the religious function of the space—but also as a definitive step systematically continuing the longstanding persecution and subjugation of the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. It is therefore only logical that in this case no open critical discussion in the press took place—or could have taken place—as it had with the two later European projects discussed above. Furthermore, in the case of Libenský and Brychtová, whose works the regime repeatedly showcased abroad, it would be historically appropriate to ask to what extent there was conscious collaboration with totalitarian power and its institutions.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Petrová, *Via Lucis*, 27–48. According to Libenský’s recollections, the window panels for the chapel were cast twice. The first, more delicate version of the relief failed to achieve the desired chromatic effect in the light-exposed, south-facing setting of the third courtyard, appearing muted and pale in comparison with the design. During the second casting, the thickness of the relief glass was increased, which resulted in the desired harmonious coloration reflecting the chromatic character of the chapel’s interior. See Petrová, *Via Lucis*, 47.

<sup>80</sup> Burian, *Okna katedrály Sv. Víta*, s. p.

<sup>81</sup> Warmus, “The Art of Libensky and Brychtova,” 35.

<sup>82</sup> Warmus, “The Art of Libensky and Brychtova,” 30.

<sup>83</sup> Frantz, *Stanislav Libenský, Jaroslava Brychtová*, 42–43, 118–19.

<sup>84</sup> Petrová, *Via Lucis*, 27; Šindelková, “Sochařská a malířská výzdoba,” 806.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Balík and Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989*, 89–90. For the dispute between Czechoslovakia and the Vatican, see Kaplan, *Těžká cesta*. For the most detailed biography of Beran, see Vodičková, *Uzavírám vás do svého srdce*; Koura, *Diktatura versus naděje*.

<sup>86</sup> For a discussion of the forms of cooperation of the key period art historians with the communist regime, see Bartlová, *Dějiny českých dějin umění*, especially 149–225.



*11. Libenský painting the final life-size design for Saint Wenceslas Chapel around 1965,  
private archives (Petrová, Via lucis, 32)*

### Prominent performativity of abstract stained glass as a sociopolitical product

A prominent contemporary avant-garde artist in the mature stage of his<sup>87</sup> artistic career, recognized and linked to elites in a clearly representative sense, with art museum branding, collecting culture, top prices, and a developed market, an international icon of modernity or the avant-garde—combined with a crucially attractive, iconic medieval monument site, linked to the concerns of the national elites in the same sense. Could this be a sure recipe for success, especially during political and economic reconstruction, applicable under any social paradigm? In this sense, contemporary art—especially the neo-avant-garde segment, with peak popularity and peak prices, flawless in its incarnation of the representative legitimization needs of a seminal part of the society—appears to be enormously powerful. Surely, for some time, both western European creations analyzed here were covered by layers of first-rate criticism, adoration, or commentary, which were only rarely created from unbiased positions. However, a new performative coding had already been applied, and the sociocultural narrative of the monument had already been rewritten.

The vibrant, pure, immersive, and ubiquitous, almost “medieval” monumental spirituality of abstract restrained minimalism<sup>88</sup> seems to be the common thread that connects the detached ambitious applied modern art projects described above, all created within traditional, highly respected, valued, and guarded sacred spaces between 1968 and 2007, during four decades of artistic, cultural, social, and geopolitical development in Europe, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The term *minimalism* entered the scene by the end of the 1960s in the United States, signifying a movement in art that “makes its statement with limited if not the fewest possible resources.”<sup>89</sup> This especially applies to the rhythmical meditative introspective breathing of the light achieved by Soulages in Conques, even under significant local distrust during the years-long creation of the work.

What is noteworthy is a slight yet evident distinction, a variation in the effect of these contemporary performative stained-glass interventions, all installed in places where there was no urgent need for new glazing. The preserved monumental purity of the “Cistercian” Romanesque style in the case of both Raynaud’s and Soulages’s works for French monasteries instinctively led the authors toward full respect for the character of the space, to elevate it through the powerful performative effect of light invited into it with higher spiritual resonance through very minimal, respectful, and modest artistic means. On the other hand, the more complex nature of the cathedrals in Cologne and Prague—rich in terms of both style and character, as well as inconsistent, being built and decorated over the span of several centuries—allowed Richter on the one hand and Libenský and Brychtová on the other to work with a more colorful play of light, and thus their creations differ, especially in comparison with the dominant chord of ostentatious austerity achieved by Soulages in Conques.

Summarizing the institutional background, in the case of Conques, the decision came from the highest political offices of the French government, with the clear intent to apply the work of the most famous contemporary artist to a key historical monument. Initially, it seems that the extent of intervention was not firmly defined. Thus, it seems that no thorough discussion led to the decision to replace all 104 functional modern figurative windows. Not coincidentally, the situation in Conques

<sup>87</sup> Use of the masculine gender here is intentional because I do not believe that a female artist has ever found herself in the position of an “identity symbol” in modern art history.

<sup>88</sup> See Botha, *A Theory of Minimalism*; Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics*.

<sup>89</sup> Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, 7.

and that in Cologne show the typical elements of a prominent contract “pushed through” by high circles. In a similar manner, the Cologne elites, both secular and sacral, expected to draw attention to a top-class medieval monument site by engaging the most famous and most expensive living German artist. As mentioned above, Richter allegedly first worked on a figurative, narrative design only to abandon it in favor of an abstract mathematical geometric pattern. It appears that such a radical change in concept, violating the rules of the competition, was not satisfactorily elucidated or defended.

Furthermore, in the case of Conques the contractor achieved a goal that was apparently planned from the very beginning. The controversies and protests came from the public and institutions, primarily regional ones familiar for decades with the respected 1940s stained-glass windows, whose performativity was noted to be “grandiose.” In fact, both the old and new glazing were praised for their light qualities, appropriately complementing and empowering the effect of the visual and contemplative experience of the monument site, yet each in a distinctively different way. Contrary to this, in the case of Cologne things appear to have gone too fast and too far. Thus, paradoxically here, the high-ranking representative of the initial contractor seemed surprised by the inappropriateness and radical character of the final visual design. Those that advocated the monumentality of the playful “television test pattern” or “sock pattern” of Richter’s window were metropolitan intelligentsia, intellectuals, and influential locals, as well as political circles that are assumed to have covered the real costs of the oeuvre.

One last remark is worth making on the variety of technical approaches. Soulages and Brychtová went their own way and experimented with molded glass, looking for a suitable technical choice for a long time. However, this was not the case of the large south-transept Cologne window by Richter. Here, the technology bore almost no resemblance to the original glassmaking techniques, and this was reflected in the visual and luminescent qualities of the piece. In effect, the material qualities of the results make a real visual and performative difference in all three cases. The sculptural structural surface of the softly colored layered Prague mosaic glazing against the complex medieval artistic decoration of Saint Wenceslas Chapel fulfils its role very convincingly. However, given the background of Prague Castle in the late 1960s, questions arise about the project. The social paradigm itself was particularly dissimilar. Thus, there were no great public expectations, wild criticism, adoration, radical controversies, or changes to the project while it was being prepared, but also no distinct public fame and reflection on the piece appeared. This is not only because the details of the contract and the work were not publicized at all, but above all because in this case the role of the Church was entirely marginalized and intentionally pushed into the background. In this sense, this oeuvre under the conditions of secular communism, when Prague was not yet a top destination for crowds of tourists, was not commercialized as a political-cultural product, but was apparently instrumentalized in favor of a constructed cultural-political identity, exactly like those other more famous European projects discussed here.

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## **Soulages, Richter in drugi: Abstraktna vitražna okna v srednjeveških sakralnih spomenikih kot univerzalni jezik za strateška javna naročila 1960–2010**

### *Povzetek*

V prispevku obravnavamo vprašanje, kako lahko sodobne nefigurativne vitražne instalacije globoko spremenijo atmosfero in pomen srednjeveških sakralnih spomenikov. Te intervencije obravnavamo kot performativne akte, ki zgodovinskim spomenikom dodajajo nove plasti duhovnega, simboličnega in kulturnega pomena. Tradicionalno izražanje preoblikujejo v sodoben umetniški jezik in ustvarjajo dialog, ki presega čas in estetiko, hkrati pa je bistveno povezan s socialno kulturo elit. Postavljamo temeljna vprašanja o tem, zakaj so takšni posegi tako učinkoviti, zlasti kadar jih izvajajo vodilni sodobni ali neoavantgardni umetniki, uspešni na umetnostnem trgu in v muzejskem prostoru. Ugotavljamo, ali lahko sodobna abstraktna umetnost v sakralnih prostorih ne le prevzame eksistencialne ali filozofske vloge, ampak deluje tudi kot instrument družbene legitimacije in oblikovanja kolektivne identitete. Da bi raziskali ta vprašanja, v raziskavi analiziramo tri pomembne primere abstraktnih posegov v vitraže, izvedene med letoma 1960 in 2010 v Franciji, Nemčiji in na in na ozemlju današnje Češke in Slovaške. Ti primeri so: intervencija Pierrea Soulagesa v Sainte-Foy de Conques, delo Gerharda Richterja v katedrali v Kölnu ter instalacija Stanislava Libenskega in Jaroslave Brychtove v kapeli sv. Vavrlava v katedrali sv. Vida v Pragi. Vsi trije primeri ponazarjajo estetsko, tehnološko in filozofsko različne pristope k vključevanju sodobnih abstraktnih oken v srednjeveško arhitekturo, ki ponujajo različne vizualne in konceptualne rezultate, hkrati pa ohranjajo globoko spoštovanje do zgodovinske celovitosti posamezne lokacije. Poleg umetniškega vzgiba upoštevamo v raziskavi tudi

motivacije naročnikov, obenem pa poudarjamo, kako so institucionalni in kulturni okviri vplivali na uresničitev takih projektov, ter analiziramo zelo različne odzive, tako občudujoče kot globoko kritične. Razmišljamo o tem, kako lahko ti posegi odražajo širše ideološke in politične kontekste, zlasti tiste, ki so se oblikovali ob vprašanjih o iskanju nacionalne identitete, hladni vojni in njenih posledicah. Zlasti primer Prage ponuja vpogled v delovanje sodobnega umetniškega izraza v različnih kulturnih možnostih za železno zaveso. V članku smo pokazali, da sodobna abstraktna vitražna umetnost, ki jo ustvari ikonska nacionalna umetniška osebnost, povezana z zbirateljsko kulturo sodobnih elit, in ki je vključena v srednjeveški sakralni spomenik, lahko služi kot pomemben akt kulturnega prevajanja. Ne gre le za okras, ampak za aktivno redefinicijo duhovnega in kulturnega pomena spomenika. Ti posegi ponazarjajo močno interakcijo med zgodovinsko oddaljenimi umetniškimi jeziki in poudarjajo trajno pomembnost sakralnih prostorov kot živih krajev umetniške in skupnostne identitete, pa tudi tržne komodifikacije.