

THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

BY MARK ANGUS

I was surprised and delighted to be asked to display my work alongside Marc Chagall's exhibition of biblical prints at gallery *Kunsträume* in Bavaria, near the Czech Republic border.

We two artists have some obvious similarities, primarily that we have both completed many stained glass window commissions for the church.

And it was this common ground between us that resulted in something very surprising happening at the exhibition opening.

The collector of the Chagall prints, Heinz Ess, spoke at length about the work Chagall did in stained glass and for church architecture. Starting right at the beginning with mediaeval art and architecture, Ess explained the inherent qualities of stained glass that led to its on-going significance. He mentioned the spirituality of coloured light, the metamorphosis into sacred space through glass, along with narration, imagery and the breadth and depth of meanings depicted in biblical narratives.

Interestingly, the introduction to Mark Angus's work prepared by Katharina Eisch-Angus also contained similar observations on the significance of church stained-glass windows.

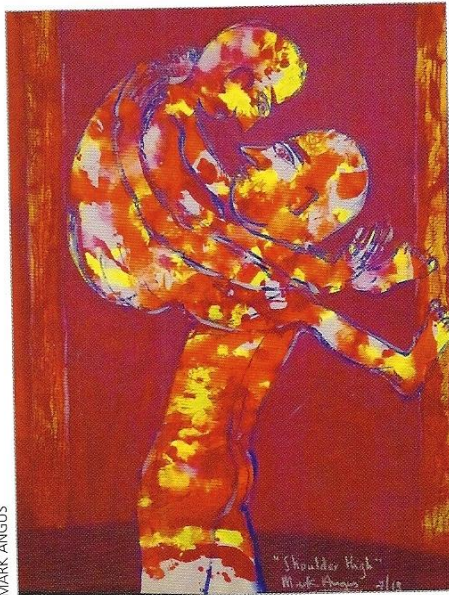
The surprise was that the exhibition(s) showed not even one piece of church stained glass. What was being talked about was *not present in the room*.

This discrepancy set me thinking about the studio glass movement and especially about where narrative – so closely associated with stained glass – fits into this scene.

Stained glass was slow to be embraced by the studio glass movement and was often excluded from reviews of contemporary glass. This leaves us to wonder if this exclusion goes back to a hesitancy towards narration that can be observed in dominant contemporary art scenes.

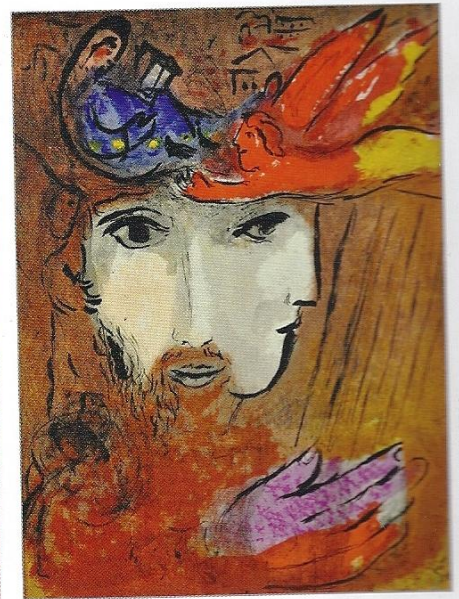
Both the stained glass of Marc Chagall and myself is distinguished, on one hand, by attention to the way that the light entering the building is coloured as it passes through the glass, and on the other by the narrative, the storytelling element where human stories come alive through painting and allow us to interpret our present lived lives through the stories of our cultural past and through artistic imagination.

To give an example, the central part of my exhibition focuses upon the story in Genesis of Jacob wrestling with the angel – an event loaded with ambiguity and pointing to the need to engage with the stranger and, through facing our fears, to risk transformation and change.



MARK ANGUS

▲ **SHOULDER HIGH** MARK ANGUS, 2013, ACRYLIC ON PAPER, 100 x 70cm.



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▲ **DAVID AND BATHSHEBA** MARC CHAGALL, 1956.

For me this transformative aspect of narration is crucial. Perhaps this is what lies at the heart of the divergence between stained and studio glass. Whereas stained glass traditionally embraces the narrative, studio glass admires glassiness and abstraction, and frequently strives to reach fine art standards by excluding narrative imagery on and through glass.

And yet how natural in the *Kunsträume* exhibition(s) to see fine art prints and paintings on the walls of an art gallery and to hear that these works are the less regularly seen and appreciated artworks of two artists who have a substantial body of their art work on daily public view in churches across Europe executed in a technique considered by some as a craft.

Of course Chagall is known as a painter and printmaker of biblical (Old Testament) themes. But I am equally sure that for many, his name conjures up the actual experiences of standing enthralled in front of magnificent stained-glass windows.

Stained glass in churches carries cultural connections of past narratives and memory and of present-day experience (which in Chagall's case – as the exhibition highlights – embraces the depth of Jewish and Christian mythology, and the contradiction of being experienced as a French artist, a Russian Jew and a Holocaust survivor).

It is this connection that renders stained glass, this oldest form of glass art, not only powerful but necessary, and we can delight in the transcendence of time and knowledge carried with this unfolding.

The exhibition in Bayerisch Eisenstein runs until 12 April. Details www.kunstraume-grenzenlos.de See also www.markangus.com