

THE BIRTH OF ANCIENT WALPOLE SILVER STAIN



The year was 1983. The month was March. I had moved to Walpole, New Hampshire from New York City and had opened a stained glass studio 4 years earlier. It was a typical small studio specializing in restoration and new construction.

In the early 1970s I had the good fortune to receive painting on glass instruction from the great master and friend, Albinas Elskus. This was approximately 7 years before the publication of his book *The Art of Painting on Glass*.

The time was before the great revolution in electric kilns. For glass painting, the most difficult piece of equipment to obtain was a flash kiln. I decided to build one and Albin generously sent detailed plans based on the one that he, his partner Paul Coulaz and John Gordon Guthrie had used at Durhan Studios in New York City.

Approximately a week after receipt of the drawings, I somehow found an old kiln in a barn buried among chord wood, in the next town across the river! It was a Hudson Appliance gas kiln built in 1920, with 10 burners on each side and came complete with the proper jets for propane, a stand and extra firing trays. It took four people to move. Once in place, it was restored and used with great appreciation.

I immediately informed Albin of the 'gift'. I think he was almost equally excited at the almost impossible find. The first kiln firing occurred on 25 August 1982. Albinas was there. He also wanted to show me how to make silver stain. The plan was to make and fire the stain in the 'new' kiln.

The process was new to me, but nothing that was not previously printed in old books on glass painting. Albin brought all the ingredients and once again, generously shared his knowledge. The kiln worked great; the first results, however, were mediocre. Albin left. I knew that I could do better. After reviewing our initial firings, I instinctively knew what changes had to be made. I still have the original notes made on kraft paper of the five new formulas tested.

One of the five, marked 'theta 5', was named 'Ancient Walpole'. The stain was named 'Walpole' from the town of its creation and 'ancient' because the depth of color resembled stains from previous centuries. I sent Albin the original firings. His response was: 'It is perfect! Don't change it at all!'

Somewhere around this time Albin was designing and painting a series of windows dedicated to Mother Seton, the first American Catholic saint. These windows, in my estimation, are 'high Albinas'. The style is a merger of traditional and abstraction as only he could do. This was the first major use of Ancient Walpole silver stain. I have attached an illustration (above centre) so that the reader can see this amazing creation.

Since its inception, the Ancient Walpole formula has never been modified. We have improved its smoothness and effectiveness by the use of improved mechanical equipment; however, it is still hand ground numerous times on a glass slab using a muller. There is a lot of effort and care that go into the production of every ounce of stain.

Ancient Winchester was originally created for Debora Coombs. It was a custom stain, originally ordered as 'no. 74'. This stain is deep, but not as intense as the original Walpole. It is extremely clear with perhaps more versatility and is less likely to 'metal'.

Ancient Lemon is a pale yellow stain. It is being used in the US and UK to match stain used in older windows. It is sometimes blended with the other two to better achieve the desired effect.

All stains are distributed by James A. Hetley.

Through the years, I have been fortunate to work with a great many highly regarded stained glass artists. The illustrations are slides from my collection. Hopefully their brilliance will be accurately reproduced here and will demonstrate the skill of the artist. Space will not permit inclusion of all the wonderful slides received.

I wish to thank all my friends and customers in the UK. I am proud to be a member of the BSMGP. It was a great experience to meet with you in London and to participate in the slide presentations. I hope to join you again this summer.

Please feel free to email me with any technical questions or comments. We can be reached at ceoster@aol.com.

Clifford Oster

(top, left and right): Native American window (detail), and African American window (detail), Debora Coombs, St Mary's Cathedral, Portland OR, 1998; (centre) 'Mother Seton' (detail), Albinas Elskus, 1983, Rohlf Studios; (below left) 'Feathers';' (below) Beth El, Robert Pinart, Charlotte NC, Wilmark Studios

