Dalle de Verre in Ireland

Words by Finola Finlay

Dalle de verre, sometimes simply called slab glass, is an architectural glazing approach in which thick slabs *(dalles)* of coloured glass are embedded in concrete or resin and arranged to form patterns. The 1960s and 70s saw a pivotal stylistic change for Irish churches as architects responded to the dictates of the Second Vatican Council, at the same time embracing innovative building technologies and contemporary artistic movements. Some championed this new material and incorporated walls of *dalle de verre* in their churches. To date, little has been written about *dalle de verre* in Ireland. This article will highlight some of the finest examples and will discuss how the inherent qualities of *dalle de verre* lent itself to the modernist aesthetic of the era, allowing architects to cast off traditional stained glass conventions in favour of whole walls of coloured glass. It will also touch on the eventual decline of *dalle de verre* as an architectural medium.

Figures and icons in *dalle de verre* windows are not normally painted as they would be in a stained glass panel, but rather formed through the arrangement of *dalles* and cement lines. They are, by necessity, minimally detailed and often non-figurative, relying on colour and flow to create interest and atmosphere. Thus, they suited the mid-century artistic movements of abstraction and cubism. Each slab of glass is faceted by knocking spalls or chips off it with a hammer, enlivening the colour through the layering and refracting of light coming through the glass, as seen in a detail of a panel produced by Murphy-Devitt Studios in 1967 (Plate 1). Once the *dalles* were assembled into manageable blocks they could be slotted together to create the overall image. The inherent strength of these blocks, made of thick glass and concrete, permitted architects to plan soaring expanses of glazing to introduce light and colour into the interior of the church.

Research by David Caron has shown that the earliest instance of this technique being used in Ireland was in Stanislaus Nevin's chapel in Holy Child School, Killiney, County Dublin[i]. However, George Walsh, working for Abbey Stained Glass Studios and independently, was the first Irish artist to make *dalle de verre* windows in Ireland, having learned the technique in the United States.[ii] He designed windows himself, sometimes working with his father George Stephen Walsh, and at times executing designs

Plate 1 Detail of window by Murphy-Devitt Studios in the Church of the Seven Sacraments, Lowertown, Co Cork (1967), showing the faceting of individual dalles. Photography: Finola Finlay

by George Campbell through Abbey Stained Glass Studios, for example the large rose window installed in St Mary's church in Westport, County Mayo (circa 1960s). The imagery - the Crown of Thorns - is recognisable, but occupies only the outer rim of the rose. The real power of the window comes from the deep red centre surrounded by an abstract kaleidoscope of shimmering colour. There is no attempt at flow, the colours do not grade from one to the other, rather the jumble of mostly primary hues suggests the agony of the subject matter (Plate 2).

Other notable practitioners of *dalle de verre* in Ireland were the Murphy-Devitt Studios, who produced large *dalle de verre* windows and schemes for churches. Additionally, Helen Moloney experimented with the technique on a smaller scale. Besides Irish artists, architects also employed British stained glass artists, for example the renowned Dom Charles Norris of Buckfast Abbey created a curved wall of glass for St Bernadette's in Belfast, a fan-shaped building completed in 1967, while Patrick Reyntiens produced schemes for two Waterford churches, St Joseph and St Benildus, 1968, and the Church of the Sacred Heart, 1973.

In the Reyntiens designs the emphasis is on horizontal, rather than

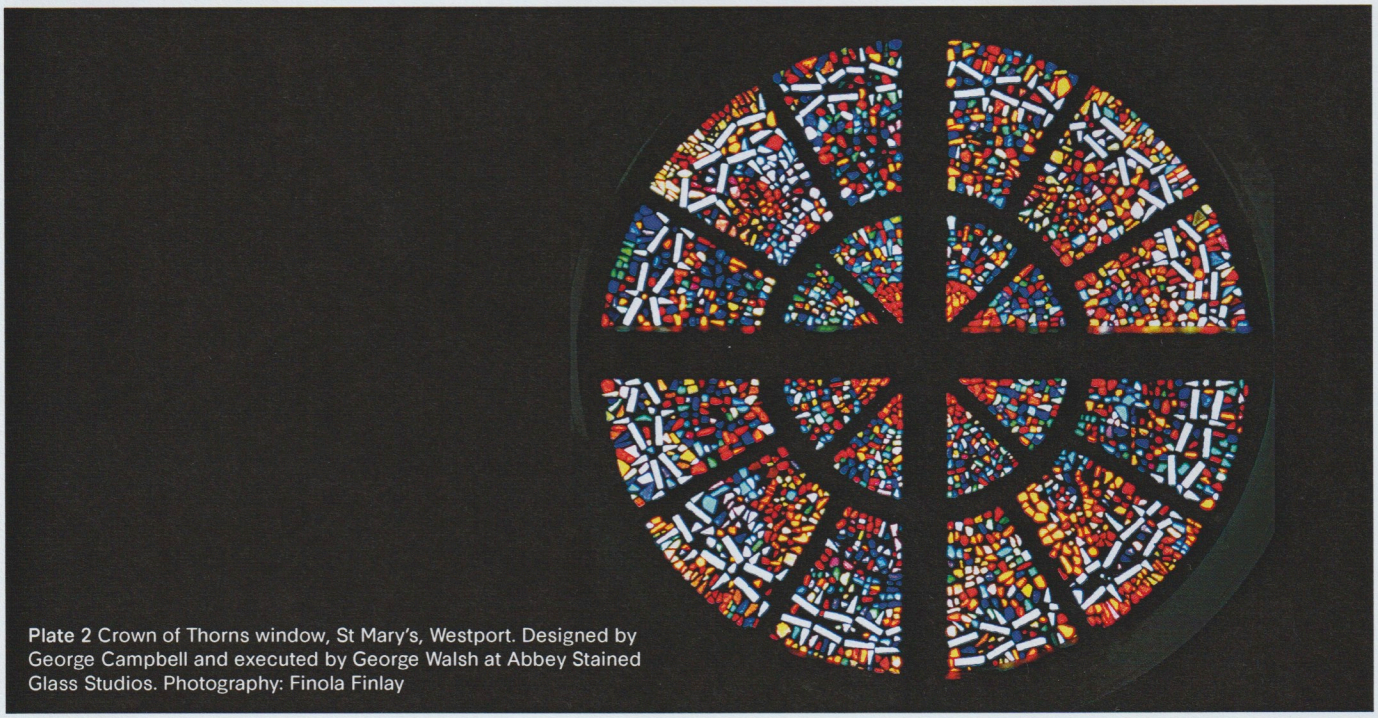

Plate 2 Crown of Thorns window, St Mary's, Westport. Designed by George Campbell and executed by George Walsh at Abbey Stained Glass Studios. Photography: Finola Finlay

vertical expanses of glass and rather than being faceted the slabs of glass have been shaped by hammering the edges. In the Church of the Sacred Heart the enormous windows feature a central cross in deep red, from which radiate areas of colour, changing from window to window to dominant shades of blue, green, red and orange (Plate 3). Reyntiens was interested in blocks of colour and in how these related to each other in tone while diffusing light and focusing different colours into the interior space as the sun moves across the building. His strong blues and reds are mediated by softer shades of blue, green, olive, grey and gold, separated and delineated by curving lines, creating a flowing and harmonious whole. This is true abstraction. Reyntiens intended all his glass to be experienced as "an atmosphere which is grasped by the eye, an envelope of experience within which the spectator moves, not a series of arresting points of contemplation."[iii]

For those used to traditional stained glass, *dalle de verre* represented a radical departure from their expectations and we must not underestimate the courage and vision of architects and congregations in embracing this avant-garde medium. Rather than a familiar depiction of a Resurrection, Annunciation, or St Patrick, what faced parishioners were swathes of deeply coloured glass, sometimes with recognisable iconography, but more often with difficult-to-interpret motifs or nothing but colour variation to encourage a prayerful, contemplative mood.

The French stained glass artist Gabriel Loire, acknowledged as a world leader in the design and production of *dalle de verre,* worked across Europe, North America, Japan and Africa. There are four magnificent examples of Loire's *dalle de verre* work in Ireland: Church of the Holy Redeemer, Dundalk (1965-68); St Patrick's College Chapel, Drumcondra (1964); St Augustine's Church, Cork (1971) and Dominican Convent Chapel, Belfast (1962). Loire adopted the maxim, "Arrange it so that in what you do, there is nothing, but in that nothing, there is everything each person seeks."[iv] His abstract philosophy can be seen in action in the Church of the Holy Redeemer in Dundalk, an extraordinary modernist building by Frank Corr and Oonagh Madden, with artwork chosen by Michael Wynne. Sculptures by Oisín Kelly, Imogen Stuart, Ray Carroll, and Michael Biggs adorn the exterior and interior, while floor to ceiling expanses of *dalle de verre* by Gabriel Loire provide, in Michael Wynne's words, "one great abstract symphony of colour."[v]

The Dundalk windows are typical of Loire's work. He lived and worked close to, and was deeply influenced by, the Cathedral of Chartres and 'Chartres blue' is almost always dominant in his work. These large-scale panels (Plate 4) hints at figurative elements but never fully reveals them. Light radiates from a yellow sun in the top left corner, but is picked out mainly in green. A large red area in the centre may be an enormous figure, with a hand reaching downwards, but it is not definitive and remains open to individual interpretation - that which "each person seeks." Curved lines appear but do not quite complete ovals or circles. Instead of representing an image or an idea, the window seems full of movement and mystery, a dynamic living entity.

The use of *dalle de verre* in Ireland declined over time as fewer churches were built, and as issues with the resin and concrete media affected the durability of some of the earlier windows. Glass, concrete and steel expand at different rates, while resin tends to twist as it ages, all exacerbated by the Irish climate. The damage – cracking of glass and concrete, leakage and instability – has been so severe that some churches, or portions of churches,

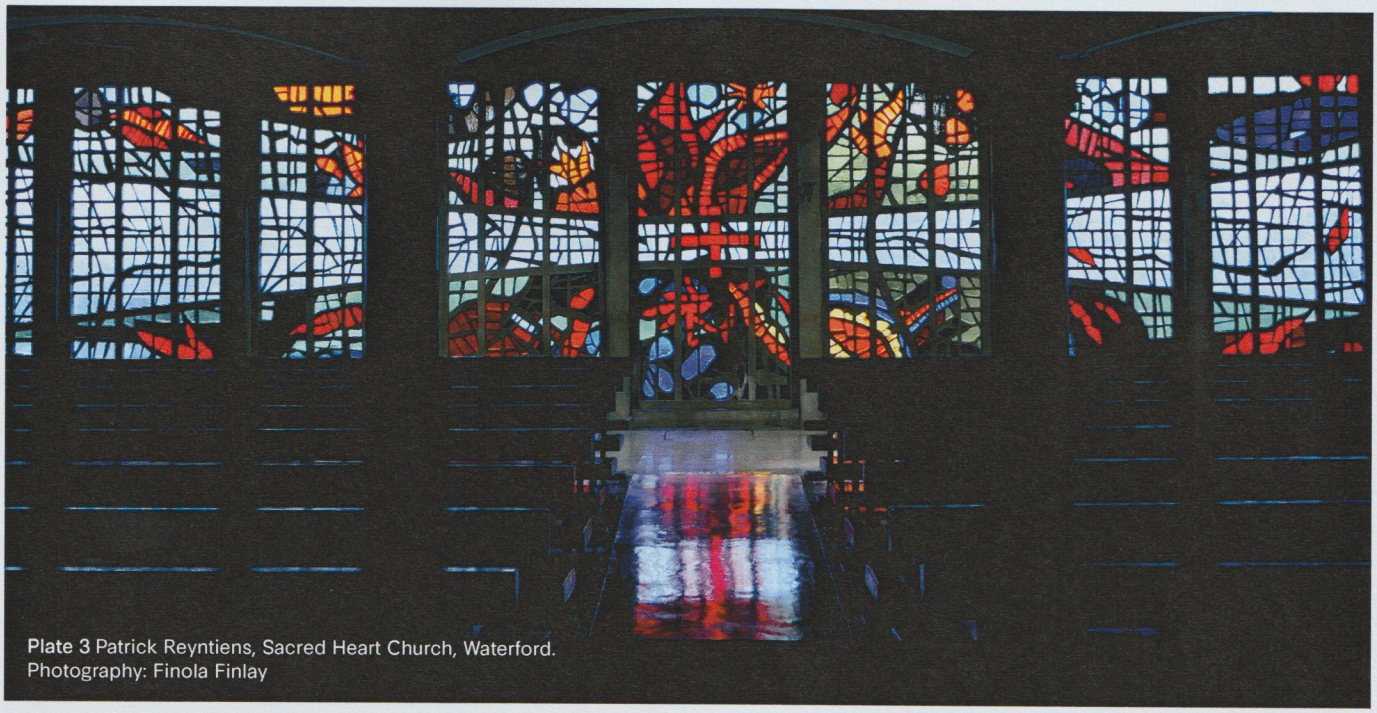

Plate 3 Patrick Reyntiens, Sacred Heart Church, Waterford.
Photography: Finola Finlay

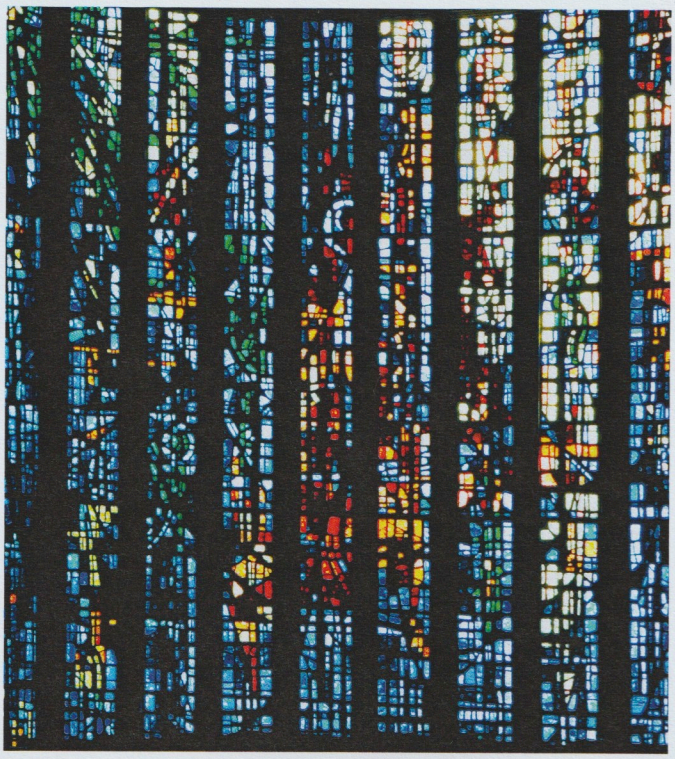

Plate 4 Gabriel Loire, Church of the Holy Redeemer, Dundalk.
Photography: Finola Finlay

have been demolished. Both the 1973 Holy Cross Priory in Sligo (Murphy-Devitt) and the 1979 Edmund Rice Mausoleum Chapel in Waterford (George Walsh) had to be knocked down for safety reasons, although some of Walsh's original panels are on display in the replacement church. The Church of The Sacred Heart in Waterford and St Bernadette's Church in Belfast, both mentioned above, have had to undertake expensive conservation programmes.

Dotted around Ireland, mid-century churches are an important part of our architectural heritage, although those with *dalle de verre* windows present special challenges. Fortunately, best practice in *dalle de verre* preservation was the subject of recent European research.[vi] In Ireland, *dalle de verre* is long overdue for a critical appraisal as one of the ways in which mainstream European art movements found their way into liturgical spaces in Ireland. This essay is, I hope, a first step in that direction.

Finola Finlay, with her husband Robert Harris, writes the arts and culture blog Roaringwater Journal. She is a contributor to the recently-published *Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass*.

[i] Caron D, Gordon Bowe N, Wynne M, 2021, *'The Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass', Second Edition, Irish Academic Press.*

[ii] Finlay, Finola, 2019, *'Sacred Lights and Secular Ground', Irish Arts Review,* Vol 36, Spring.

[iii] Reyntiens, Patrick, 1967, *'The Technique of Stained Glass', London, Batsford; New York, Watson-Guptill,* p 11.

[iv] Pratt, CW and Pratt JC, 1996, *Gabriel Loire: Les Vitraux/Stained Glass, Centre International du Vitrail.*

[v] Wynne, M, 1969, *'The Church of the Redeemer, Dundalk', The Furrow, vol. 20, no. 8,* pp.411- 414.

[vi] See, for example, De Vis, Kristle *'The Consolidation of Architecture Glass and Dalle de Verre: Assessment of Selected Adhesives'*, 2014, University of Antwerp.