

ART

by Jean Charlot



Medieval work

In the 12th century, some of the great cathedrals of France were begun.

The present-day tourist, gaping, guidebook in hand — and with the star rating system in his head — may forget that the purpose of these noble buildings was other than to beguile American sightseers to Europe.

Cathedrals were built in a burst of religious and democratic zeal for the people, by the people.

The buildings may be dream-like but their builders were no dreamers.

On each construction site shanty towns were erected to house masons, stone cutters, fresco painters, ditch diggers and stained glass joiners.

In 1145, Brother Haimon wrote to brother monks in England of what he had witnessed at Chartres:

"Powerful princes of the world, nobles, men and women alike, bend their proud and haughty necks to the harness of carts.

"Like beasts of burden, they drag to the abode of Christ waggons loaded with wine, grains, oil, stone, wood, and all necessities for the wants of life and for the construction of the church."

In our day, communal endeavour of a selfless nature still attends the building of churches.

This coming Saturday a brand new architectural offering, the Manoa Valley Church, Congregational, shall be dedicated, divested at last from the inner and outer scaffoldings that hid it from sight.

Wong and Wong are the architects. The Rev. Hiro Higuchi is its militant pastor. In hard hat and with sleeves rolled up, he marshaled to the task of building the church squads of his faithful followers.

Their zeal matches that of the medieval builders. Nobody missed the "powerful princes of the world," whom Brother Haimon had mentioned.

And Frenchmen being in a minority in Manoa Valley, casks of wine may well have been omitted from the list of materials needed to build this church.

The zeal is medieval. The building is modern. Yet its metal beams fan out in patterns as beautiful as the ribbings of ancient stone vaults.

The heart of the Manoa Valley Church is its majestic stained-glass mural, 38 feet high, designed by our Island's own stained-glass artist, Erica Karawina.

The technique used is that of the chunk, or faceted, glass embedded in cement. The design is that of a giant Chi Rho, the monogram of Christ.

New church

In use since early Christian times, Chi Rhos were frescoed on the walls of the catacombs, delineated in gold in Byzantine mosaics.

Karawina's rendering, dovetailing artfully with our present-day concept of abstract art, holds its own for beauty with the best the past has to offer.

Visually, glass is the most immaterial of matters. Shot through with light, it loses density and opaqueness.

Sunrays filter through it to spatter walls and pews with a confetti of rainbows, effec-



Karawina's "Christ Child as the Good Shepherd"

tive symbols of the spirit blown into the nostrils of matter.

The visions that stained glass conjures are not achieved in haphazard manner. They are the result of deep thinking and hard work on the part of an artist.

Seen through the eyes of the stained-glass maker, the history of art is quite different from its classroom version.

It is orthodox to state that the Renaissance is a Golden Age. Big names remain bracketed with great art.

The artist in glass believes

the Renaissance to have been a period of decadence.

The great masters of the craft lived instead in the early Middle Ages, not so long ago referred to as the Dark Ages.

They were men too humble or too absent-minded to sign their name to their works. These great artists remain anonymous.

They fully accepted the limitations of their difficult craft. They used hand-blown glass of unequal thickness, deep-dyed in ruby reds and ultramarine blues.

Leading, the metal strip

that holds the translucent mosaic together, was flaunted boldly, for the sake of its contrasting blacks.

Brushed-in details were kept to a minimum, a prolongation of the black-line leading.

Karawina used this technique in her early Hawaiian works. Outstanding is the charming ensemble of the Waioli Chapel, wrought entirely from her hand. Even a child can take delight in the story of Noah and the Ark, or in that of the three Kings so splendidly arrayed.

The artist understood the lesson of medieval windows. They were abstract orchestrations of color, ever changing with the seasons and the time of the day.

For non-readers

They were also more than an esthetic statement. The illiterate faithful could read them, vignette after vignette, as if turning the pages of some richly illuminated prayerbook.

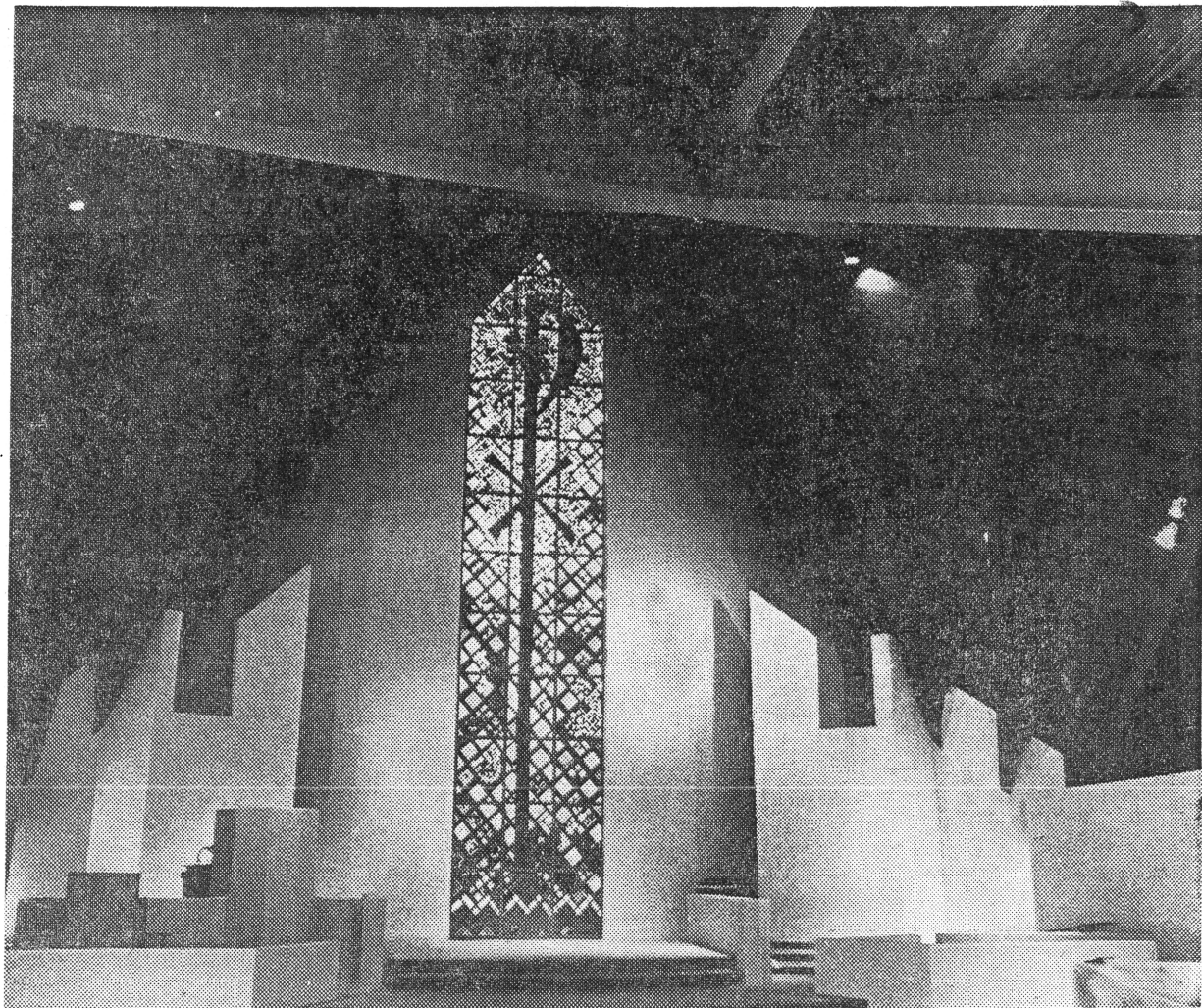
I reproduce a portable panel of Karawina's leaded glass. "Christ Child as the Good Shepherd" decorates the office of Sister Evelyn Ancilla, Superior of St. Andrew's Priory.

The oriental features of the Child are not consciously contrived. They are a natural reminder that the artist lived for years in China, near the Tibetan border.

This phase of Karawina's art, a blend of medieval Europe, modern art and timeless Asia, comes close to creating a distinctly local style, fitted to our complex milieu.

The art of stained glass was radically changed in our days when plate glass was replaced by chunk glass, and the strip of lead by an armature of cement.

The rough texture of chunk glass precludes any possibility of brushwork. The art of stained glass is thus removed one step further from painting.



Erica Karawina's stained glass in Manoa Valley Church. — Photos by Warren Roll

Cement can take more complex shapes than the strip of lead. Cement shapes, even without the glow of glass, express a beauty of their own.

In this new technique Karawina has designed a series of successful decorations. Among others: The baptistry of the Holy Family Church, a Tree of Jesse for St. Andrew's Priory Chapel, and now the apsidal window of the Manoa Valley Church.

Decadence set in in the art of stained glass when patrons insisted on an increased realism, whereas before that the medieval artist and his patron had been content with a kaleidoscope of colors and a stylized drawing.

Perspective and modeling, catering to the taste of the Renaissance, were ill suited to stained glass. But they made possible the portraits of patrons realistically presented.

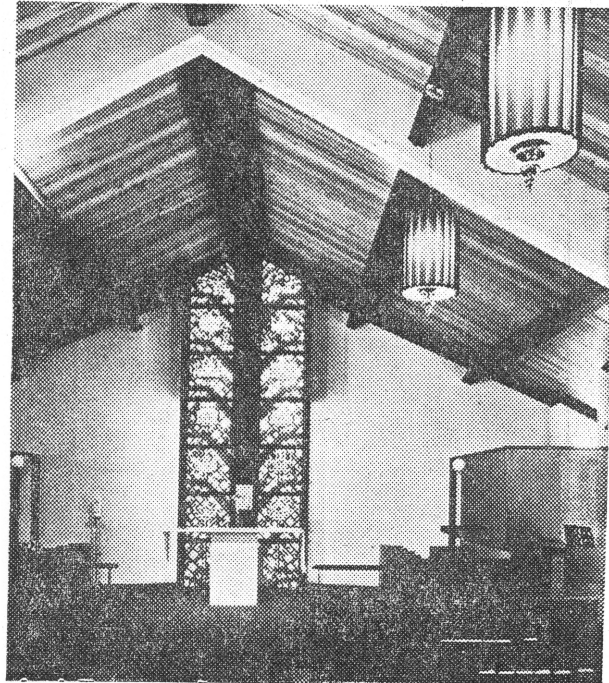
In case one should miss the point, their coat-of-arms were depicted and their names spelled out.

Halos hovering over the heads of these proud men pleased them, even though they may not have pleased God!

There are, in our day, stained glass jobbers who make it a point to furnish clients with what their hearts desire, right or wrong.

Imported goods always seem better than the local crop. Clerics are not immune to the feeling that what they have at hand in our Islands cannot be as exciting as what has to be brought from faraway, at additional expense.

Alas, in art things do not work that way. A tip of my beret to Mr. Higuchi for having resisted the lure of the faraway, and for having acquired, in so doing, a masterpiece of the art of stained glass.



Karawina's "The Tree of Jesse"