



LEONARD FRENCH'S STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

JUDITH FULLER EXPLORES LEONARD FRENCH'S INSPIRATION

ABOVE LEFT
Leonard French (b.1928)
Stained-glass window at the
National Library of Australia
1967
chunk glass and concrete
345.0 x 130.0 x 5.0 cm
(each window)

ABOVE RIGHT
Unknown photographer
Australian Painter, Leonard
French 1964
black and white negative
Courtesy National Archives of
Australia, A1200, L46651

THE FRENCH CUBIST PAINTER GEORGE Braque once stated, 'I love the rule which corrects the emotion'. This is a quote that Australian artist Leonard French (b.1928) uses to explain his own creative process: 'paintings are not about emotion they are about control ... squeezing a magnificent idea until only a few drops remain but they are yours and yours alone'. In viewing French's stained-glass windows at the National Library of Australia—works fraught with both emotion and control—his reference to this quote becomes even more interesting.

Thematically, there are two main concepts that override French's work. The first is the depiction of the spiritual struggle of a hero overcoming adversity. The second is of art being relevant and accessible to the masses.

Both concepts are well founded in the art and philosophy of Ferdinand Leger, whose work greatly inspired French after he viewed a Leger retrospective at the Tate Gallery in London in the 1950s. There followed French's commitment to similar humanist concerns and modernist aesthetic. He identified with Leger on many levels, including their working-class backgrounds and their training in trades that led them both to an interest in public art.

The site of the Library is significant, forming one corner of the inner parliamentary triangle, the other two being Parliament House and the National Gallery of Australia. Due to its prominent site, a building of significant monumentality was envisioned in the Library's design brief. The result is a contemporary interpretation of classical



themes, using a proportioning system and classical decorative motifs.

Relatively early in the design process, the Library's chief architect, Walter Bunning (1912–1977), envisioned a foyer space that contained works of art. He researched the use of decoration in other major libraries in Australia and overseas, including the New South Wales and Los Angeles public libraries. Based on this research, he chose for the Library a decorative theme derived from the natural elements of water, earth and sky.

The stained-glass windows were originally intended to form part of an exhibition space in the foyer, which meant that there were a number of factors and constraints influencing their design. These included light levels, visitor appeal, colour, materials and themes. Controlling light levels was particularly important for the building and needed to be balanced with the preservation requirements of the collections. The stained-glass windows would be used to diffuse and soften the light entering the space.

The theme of the motifs of the stained-glass windows, as set by the design brief given to French, was the 'sky' and, specifically, 'the planets'. French based the windows on Gustav Holst's orchestral composition, 'The Planets'.

Holst was influenced by Hindu spiritualism, a theme also evident in French's work. *The Great Turtle*, a painting that French completed in 1963, depicts a Hindu myth about creation. The turtle appears as a mandala-like form divided into geometric sections. Similar themes and forms are seen in the windows, including mandalas, crosses and stars. These symbols create a soft, church-like environment that provides a subtle spiritual quality. French

ABOVE
Leonard French (b.1928)
Stained-glass window at the
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chunk glass and concrete
345.0 x 130.0 x 5.0 cm
(each window)

BELOW
Craig Mackenzie
Interior View of National Library of
Australia Bookshop with Leonard
French's Stained-glass Windows 2008
National Library of Australia





ABOVE
Sam Cooper
Learning about Leonard
French's stained-glass
windows at the Library 2009
National Library of Australia

used 50 colours, with the range of reds representing Mars and the blues representing Venus. Mars and Venus also symbolise masculine and feminine concepts.

Initially, the architects decided that the Library would have 14 windows, each measuring approximately 350 x 130 centimetres; they later added two more windows. French selected approximately 20 centimetre-thick Parisian Saint Gobain glass, which he hand chiselled and set into concrete frames.

Bunning's manuscripts reveal that he requested French to submit full-scale sketch drawings of each window. Instead, French chose to submit 2":1' scale drawings, informing Bunning that full-scale, black-and-white panels were only provided to the craftsman cutting the glass. The lightest coloured windows were selected for the entrance foyer and set against the plain-glass foyer panels, creating an interesting and subtle contrast. The total cost of the windows was £15 000 pounds.

On 1 August 1967, Bunning inspected the windows in French's studio in Heathcote, Victoria. In a letter of 2 August 1967 to the

National Capital Development Commission, Bunning noted that 10 of the windows were completed and the remaining six would take an additional three weeks to complete. Another three weeks were required to clean the excess concrete and only three days were required to install them in the building. French had reduced the amount of concrete between the glass sections and had used a cement *fondou* to obtain a pewter colour that complemented the stained glass and the building's exterior.

The windows operate successfully on many levels. The use of materials is interesting, with the concrete and glass having a rough surface on the interior side and a smooth surface on the exterior. The windows refract the light and appear relatively well insulated. They also add a creative and decorative interest to the space and are thematically coherent with the other works of art in the entrance and foyer.

The integral distinction between fine art and design lies in pragmatism. A design must perform a function and serve a specific purpose. A work of art can exist alone as an object for viewing pleasure and is not



LEFT
Gustav Holst (1874–1934)
The Planets: Suite for Large Orchestra
(London: Boosey and Hawkes, c.1921)
Music Collection

BELOW
Wolfgang Sievers (1913–2007)
View from the Great Hall of the National Gallery of Victoria towards the Forecourt, with the Ceiling Design by Leonard French 1968
colour photograph
35.8 x 28.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24860843

necessarily a functional object. The French windows at the Library are works of art that serve a functional purpose. The beauty and quality of the craftsmanship and materials override the functional, practical aspects of the windows. While the Library's windows were heralded a success, French's National Gallery of Victoria stained-glass ceiling, commissioned in 1961 and completed in 1967, attracted mixed reviews. French was criticised for failing to resolve the relationship between the aesthetics and the function of the ceiling.

French has continued to work on public art commissions, including 47 windows for Haileybury College, Keysborough, Melbourne, in 1987. He has also completed various series of paintings, such as the *Dark and Light* series in 1999 and the *Minoan* series in 2001, both exhibited at Saville Galleries in Sydney. All his works in glass or paint have continued to display his commitment and refinement of the symbols and themes that inspired his earlier work.

JUDITH FULLER has a background in architecture, law and visual arts, and has practised in all three fields

