



BETH BALBIERZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Harriet Hyams with a window commissioned by a homeowner in Haworth.

# Stained-glass artist is master of points of light

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Harriet Hyams is illuminating the world, one pane at a time.

Her colorful stained-glass windows celebrate nature's shifting patterns of sunlight and the seasons of the year. Her windows are so vivid and free, they could almost be abstract paintings — except that the images are created with tiny fragments of glass, which Hyams carefully selects by hand.

Hyams, a stained-glass artist for more than 40 years, has designed windows for numerous churches, synagogues, government buildings, schools, and even a yacht.

Though much of her work has been for clients in Bergen County, such as the Trinity Lutheran Church in Tenafly, Temple Emeth in Teaneck, and

numerous private residences, she has also been called upon to design windows throughout New Jersey.

Hyams, who works out of her home studio in Palisades, N.Y., first creates the design, which is always original and is plucked from her imagination. She then draws a full-scale sketch, called a "cartoon" in the craft. Then she selects sheets of mouth-blown glass from among thousands of samples imported from Germany and France.

"I hold them up to the natural light and examine them for their texture and color," she said.

She cuts out the pieces she wants and assembles them into the designated pattern. Then she solders the pattern with lead and reinforces it so that it won't collapse.

Projects can take months, even years, depending on the



Hyams' stained-glass window depicting autumn.

size and complexity of the design.

"It's arduous, but at the same time I get such satisfaction from it. I love the challenge. You're

always learning."

Clearly this is a specialty that requires, in addition to skill and imagination, a tremendous reservoir of patience.

In an age when even art comes mass-produced, craftsmanship as painstaking as this can be hard to find. Is Hyams part of a dying breed of artists?

"I hope not," she said in horror. "I think as long as there are buildings and windows, there will be the opportunity to put in stained-glass windows. They couldn't do this by machine."

Her windows can cost from \$5,000 to \$100,000 depending on the scope of the project.

Her career in stained glass started by accident. Growing up in Jersey City, she knew nothing about art. Her parents pushed her to piano lessons instead. She discovered her artistic prowess in college, while taking painting courses. She found her niche and received an art degree from Columbia University in Manhattan. She for many years was a sculptor

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# Glass: Artisan masters light

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whose work earned much acclaim and was exhibited at the Newark and Montclair museums.

She was even hired to create a large welded steel sculpture in a pool of water at the New Jersey Pavilion for the World's Fair in 1964-65.

But with her love of form and space, she wanted to add other dimensions to her work by incorporating light and color. She started adding glass to her steel designs but was never fully satisfied by the results. Then, in the early 1960s, she entered a stained-glass studio in Manhattan and was enamored.

"I saw stained glass being put together and the colors in front of the natural light, and I got very excited," she said. "I was completely bowled over by the way the windows were made and the colors. It's very beautiful and seductive. I continued to hang around that studio and they let me watch. I learned not by taking a course, but by being there and watching."

She tried her hand at stained-glass making – learning as she went along, cutting her fingers in the process. But the results were thrilling to behold.

In an article about Hyams that appeared in a recently published book, "Women Working in Glass" (Schiffer Publishing), she said that when she first encountered stained glass, "I knew I'd come home to a journey that

would lead me to discoveries and adventures."

Her first professional stained-glass job came 40 years ago while she was a member of Temple Emeth in Teaneck. Hyams stepped forward and volunteered to create the stained-glass windows for a new sanctuary being built there. The architect, she recalled, nearly had a heart attack. "It was brave of me to ask and it was brave of them to say OK," she said.

Hyams chose the theme of Moses and the Ten Commandments. That particular episode in the Bible grabbed her, she said, because "it seemed to me to be a pivotal moment in history."

After that, her career in glass took off. Friends in Oradell hired her to do a window in their home and others soon followed. Eventually West Point hired her to create the three-story stained-glass windows in the military academy's chapel, and the Dominican Convent in Sparkill, N.Y., also sought her services. Thus far, she has created more than 100 windows for clients throughout the country.

Norma Nutman, an artist who hired Hyams, believes in her talents. Forty years ago, Hyams created three panels of colorful water lilies to hang in the courtyard of Nutman's Oradell home. They are still there – alive with light and color.

"There's something about the

way the light shines through it," Nutman said. "It takes on a different character at different times of day. Hyams enhances and enriches the space she works with. She sees how the light hits a particular area. That's a part of what she's so good at. She studied the physics of light. She's a bright, intuitive artist. She's one of the best in her field."

Her most recent project was an etched glass floor-to-ceiling partition at Trinity Lutheran Church in Tenafly.

"I read the Book of John and came up with ideas that have to do with the quote, 'I am the light of the world, I am the living waters, I am the bread of the earth.'" The project, which was created by sandblasting a design onto the glass, took about a year to complete.

The Rev. Thomas Donahue said his church members are very pleased with the windows.

"They are so expressive. I think they really add a transforming element to our worship services and to our whole environment."

Although she is Jewish, much of her work is for churches. "[Marc] Chagall was Jewish, and he did the most magnificent windows for cathedrals I've ever seen," Hyams said, referring to the famed artist.

"My art can resonate with anybody."

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