

“Stained Glass” in *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, 2012

People have made glass for over 3500 years. The initial discovery of glass has been lost in antiquity. Pliny maintained that Phoenician sailors discovered glass after building a fire on a beach. Supposedly, as these sailors observed, the sand melted, pooled, and hardened, into glass. The origins of stained glass remain obscure as well. Some historians point to Middle Easterners as the first to develop stained glass. Middle Eastern craftsmen desired to allow light to enter a building through small openings. Next, these craftsmen filled the openings with small pieces of colored glass. Others interpret history to indicate that northern European people produced stained glass originally. Regardless of the origin of stained glass, dating before the eleventh century and appearing simultaneously in several European countries, religious fervor prompted the extensive use of stained glass in churches. As Christianity expanded and churches became centers of learning, Christian artisans filled worship centers with sculptures, mosaics, and, stained glass. One of the oldest stained glass windows ever discovered was unearthed from a cemetery in northern France and dates from the ninth century. Excavations in Germany have discovered stained glass windows dating from the ninth and tenth centuries. Many historians maintain that the windows in the Augsburg Cathedral (Augsburg, Germany) date 1065 (others date these same windows about 1135) and are the oldest complete examples of stained glass. But by the time of the Augsburg monks, the technique they used to make their windows was highly developed. With the emergence of Gothic architecture in France in the tenth century, religious structures grew substantially in size, including windows. Builders desired to fill these large windows with glass and color. With the erection of new churches, stained glass workers established their workshops on site, oftentimes locating furnaces at the edge of forests. With the completion of one project, stained glass workers packed their tools and took their skills to other job sites. Eventually, stained glass workers branched off across Europe, stopping where their skills could be exercised. Art historians refer to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as the golden age of stained glass. After a fire in 1194, artists and clergy spent thirty years designing and building one hundred and seventy three windows in the Chartres Cathedral (Chartres, France). No other cathedral possesses such a quantity of stained glass as the Chartres Cathedral. Ultimately, in the fourteenth century, and as a part of the Renaissance movement, artists established stained glass studios in fixed locations. While the exact origin of stained glass remains ambiguous, the connection between Christianity and stained glass remains irrefutable. Stained glass workers brought their talents to the service of the church, so much so, that historians often refer to stained glass as “cathedral glass,” because of the widespread use of the glass in church windows.