

# MASTER CLASS WITH JONATHAN COOKE

*SGAA Scholarship Makes It Possible*

by Tim Carey



When Kathy Jordan invited me in February of 2010 to an October glass painting workshop at the Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center in New Jersey, my first thought was “no way.” There was no way I was going to be able to justify a weeklong trip to the East Coast this year. Not to my job, not to my family — not even to myself. With an overwhelming workload at The Judson Studios, a pregnant wife, and son entering the terrible twos, and a tight financial situation, the chances were slim that I would be doing anything of the sort. Making it even more unlikely was the fact that I had just returned four months earlier from the same workshop, which is hosted by Ken Leap at his Wheaton Arts studio. I felt like I was still digesting the

*Classes can be, among other things, an opportunity to experiment, explore new ideas, and try out new techniques.*

many new things I had learned in '09 with Kathy and Ken. It had been my first glass-painting workshop, and my first real foray into the American glass-painting scene since I started working at Judson in March of 2004. How could I justify going to the same workshop again?

After my initial response telling Kathy there was a “90% chance I wasn’t going to be able to attend,” I read her email a few times more — and realized that this was going to be much different than last year’s workshop. This was an invite-only Master Class, and they had

Jonathan Cooke, a heralded glass painter from England whom Kathy had admired for years and desired to study with, as the confirmed guest instructor. They had invited numerous top-shelf glass painters from all over the country, and Kathy mentioned to me that the SGAA offers a scholarship to students in need for workshops like these. I thought about how much my eyes had been opened in '09 to the importance of meeting and collaborating with other glass artists.

After encouraging conversations with my wife, Sophie, and boss David



*Workshops are also great networking opportunities, offering those who attend the chance to meet others working in the field.*

Judson, both of whom thought this was too good of an opportunity to pass up, I decided to apply for the scholarship. Fortunately I received the financial aid from the SGAA, allowing me to head east for the second year in a row to further my glass-painting education.

Cape May is a small town on the southeastern tip of New Jersey, a 45-minute drive from Millville, NJ, where Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center is located. It's filled with the requisite resort-town features — charming houses and b&b's, seafood restaurants and beachy gift shops, and a large plaza/boardwalk area, where vacationing families and locals stroll carelessly with hot dogs and ice cream cones.

One of the many turn-of-the-century Victorian homes in Cape May belongs to Kathy and Clay Jordan. For



*Experimentation and hands-on trial is key to advancing a set of skills*

two weeklong sessions in October every year, they host the students from the Leap/Jordan Wheaton Arts glass-painting workshop. This year, there were 10 of us, not including Ken, Kathy, and guest instructor Jonathan Cooke. Because of the size of the group, we were split up, the women staying at Kathy's house and the men in a rented two-story cottage next door. It provided the perfect setting for what was to be a most memorable week.

Attending the workshop were painters of all kinds. There were some who worked at large studios, some at small studios, some who owned their own studios, and some who worked as independent freelance painters and

designers. It was quite a diverse group, all of us brought together by the prospect of learning from a European master in Jonathan Cooke. None of us besides Kathy really knew much about Jonathan except that he was from England and had worked in stained glass with a focus on restoration painting. But, from Kathy's correspondence, I think we all had a feeling we were in for something special.

Upon my arrival at the Philadelphia Airport, I met up with a few of the other students, and we made the two-hour trek down to Cape May to meet up with the rest of the group. Jonathan and Ken were the last to arrive. It was Jonathan's first-ever visit to the United States, and

I, for one, was very nervous upon meeting him.

Once we all finally convened at Kathy's house on that first night, we sat down on the porch to a cozy candlelit dinner for 15. Trying to break the ice, I asked Jonathan, who had understandably yet to say much after a tumultuous couple of days of traveling, how and when he decided to go into stained glass. A couple of gasps and a Kathy Jordan death stare made me realize I probably should have just left Jonathan alone and let him eat and get some rest before diving into a topic like that. But he smiled wryly and answered the question with a story about how, as a child in South Yorkshire, during his daily school



*Examples of pieces created during the master class.*

assembly in his local parish church, he would stare up at the east window in awe. And how it was then, as a six-year-old boy, that he decided he wanted to be a stained glass artist. He then spoke about his traditional apprenticeship at York Minster at age 16 (where you can see his name carved in oak above the south transept door, together with all colleagues who were involved in the restoration of the rose window after the fire) and his work in Norwich for the firm of G King and Son, before establishing his own business in his native Yorkshire in 1987.

I could feel the energy in the room as we all listened to Jonathan tell his story. To know that we were in for a

week of study with someone of his caliber and to hear him speak so passionately about his experiences really took the excitement level up a notch.

In the weeks before the workshop, Kathy had asked us all to exchange bios and portfolio photos via email to familiarize Jonathan with our work, and, through this, we were able to get an idea of who the other students in the class were and what their backgrounds were. But to meet everyone in person and begin what was to be a weeklong dialogue and exchange of stories and experiences, techniques, and trade secrets was a feeling hard to describe. I now knew that I wasn't alone with my crazy musings and glass-painting obsessions

but that there were others out there with a similar passion: those who were interested not only in continuing the ancient traditions but also in looking for new techniques and contemporary applications for this expressive art form. As I climbed the creaky stairs and up to my charmingly crooked old bedroom that night, I couldn't help but smile as I thought about what was to come in the week ahead.

Our days began with coffee and a light breakfast, the boys in our place, the girls in theirs. Laptops were out and pictures and stories shared, all revolving around stained glass. From there, we would gather in the driveway, divide ourselves up into three cars and make



*A good workshop or class allows the participants to grow professionally.*

our way along the 45-minute route to Millville, bisecting the colorful forests and farmlands of southern New Jersey.

Once we arrived at the studio, we would set up at our light tables and organize our brushes, palettes, and all other necessities; then we would gather around for the day's demo from Jonathan. What struck me first about Jonathan was how thorough he is in his approach to glass painting. Nothing is left to chance, and all variables are considered. Everything he does is done with purpose and is backed by knowledge and experience. He is obsessed with his massive array of materials and seems to have a tool for everything, including one for collecting earwax, which he uses to decrease the bubbling of his vinegar mixture in cold temperatures.

Being a restoration painter in England for 25 years, Jonathan has seen and replicated historic stained glass from all eras. His knowledge comes from experience and exposure, trial and error,

and endless reading of historic writings on stained glass. Amazingly, he is able to tie all of his knowledge into an efficient five-day course and deliver it to his students with clarity and simplicity. He teaches a unique approach to glass painting, introducing specific paint and medium mixtures throughout the week that can be carefully layered to achieve a full range of values in one firing. He makes a specific point in his demonstrations to avoid painting anything specific or representational, rather to focus on the materials and their unique properties. His samples are an exercise in scratches, squiggles, and lines. By avoiding the imagery, he says, it's easier to focus on the technique and the materials.

After Jonathan's daily demo, which was constantly interrupted by rapid fire questions from what seemed like a group of hungry sharks surrounding a goldfish, it was back to our light tables. From there we'd spend the rest of the day practicing the newly learned technique and attempting to apply it to our own specific artistic tendencies. We would walk around and watch each other paint and chat about anything and everything. Jonathan was very attentive in looking over our shoulders and giving us pointers as we worked. I tried all week to pick his brain and ask as many questions as I could.

The great thing about this open time we had to work together each day was that it allowed our minds to wander. Any time a thought or question popped up, we were surrounded by colleagues, people with lots of experience in all things related to stained glass. We each made time to sit and share our portfolios with Jonathan and the other students. It was during this time that I really became aware of the talent that was around me.

While Ken Leap and Kathy Jordan purported to be "students" in the class, they both were very generous with their time and were great in assisting Jonathan as well as making themselves available to answer questions and share their knowledge with the other students. Ken sprinkled in interesting demos and experiments of his own and led us on an informative tour of the Museum of American Glass, which houses the world's largest collection of American glass. His studio is incredibly equipped with the necessary tools and stained glass materials as well as beautiful samples of his own work. Some of us spent time wandering the picturesque grounds, visiting the glass-blowing facility for a demonstration or simply relaxing outside amongst the towering trees. It truly was a peaceful environment in which to work.

In addition to demonstrating techniques and introducing us to new tools and painting media, Jonathan gave three separate slide presentations during the week. The first accompanied a painting demonstration, showing details of old painted glass pieces from the medieval period through the 19th century, and describing his theories as to how the paint was applied and how certain effects were achieved. The second slide show was during lunch one day, where he introduced us to a variety of contemporary glass artists working in the UK. On the final night of the workshop, Jonathan

gave a public presentation of a few of his notable restoration projects in England, culminating with stunning images of his complete replication of a C.E. Kempe window that had been completely destroyed in a fire.

At the end of each work day, we would switch up the groups in the caravan for our drive back to Cape May, providing an opportunity to chat about the day in the studio and anything else that was on our minds. These rides really were a pleasant surprise of the trip, allowing not only for a break from the large group and a more intimate conversation but also for quiet time to take in the beauty of the New Jersey landscape, often framed by a dramatic sunset.

While we were all in New Jersey to learn from Jonathan Cooke and to paint on glass for a week, there was plenty of time for some evening fun. Each night would start off with a beer or a glass of wine, and we'd all do a little to help Kathy prepare dinner for the group. Kathy's food was simply amazing the entire week. She opened her home to us and treated us all like family. It was quite a festive environment inside the house each night, all of us invigorated from a day of learning, getting to know each other more and more each night. Dinner conversations were endless, and most nights were capped off with late-night pow-wows around the backyard fire pit. No topic was off limits, though, surprisingly, we all seemed content with talking stained glass. Who would have thought that debating natural vs. synthetic lavender oil could be so interesting at 1 am? Whether sharing stories of fun jobs, difficult clients, or general studio practices, we couldn't seem to get enough.

The end of the week came quickly, and we all said our goodbyes, with the hopes of staying in touch and working



*The benefits of a workshop are many, not the least of which is that it allows participants to inspire and challenge each other.*

together again. I came back to my job at Judson Studios with a renewed sense of purpose, not to mention an arsenal of new painting techniques (which I started using right away and have been using daily for four months now). I realized that the stained glass community is a small one, and a tight-knit, borderline cultish phenomenon.

While I've known since the first time I scratched into a matte on a piece of antique glass seven years ago that I had found my medium of choice, until I met Ken Leap and Kathy Jordan in the fall of '09, I felt like I'd been working in relative obscurity out here on the West Coast. I felt like I had a lot of questions about glass painting but didn't really know what they were or who to ask. I'm thankful to have been invited to the Jonathan Cooke workshop this past year and to have been introduced to Jonathan and the other talented painters and quality people there.

Workshops like this one serve to continue the dialogue and keep alive the ancient techniques and practices of our

predecessors, not to mention help to foster relationships between colleagues. In a field full of mad scientists working in isolated studios, it's easy to lose this dialogue and, in turn, stop the flow of knowledge.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that through their scholarship program, the SGAA does a real service that not only provides artists like me the personal opportunity to better themselves but also strengthens the fabric of the American stained glass community as a whole. I'd like to personally thank the Ellen Mandelbaum family for their generous contribution to the scholarship that made this experience possible for me.

