

# Zen and the Art of Glass Painting



*Stanton Studios, a handpainted and leaded 32" x 22" glass window featuring desert plant life created for a home in Sante Fe, New Mexico.*

*Text and Photography by Bryant J. Stanton*

Late in the 1970s when I was just starting out my career in the glass arts, there was little written on the subject of how to build stained glass windows compared to the plethora of stained glass how-to books and DVDs on the market today. As a hungry-to-learn beginner in stained glass, I was elated to discover Peter Mollica's book, *Stained Glass Primer: The Basic Skills*, along with his follow-up, *Stained Glass Primer: Volume 2*. These books were a virtual gold mine of useful information for everything from how to build a basic leaded window all the way up to how to etch, paint on glass, and install a window.

## Not As Easy As It Looks

Mollica's first offering was on par with the "crunchy granola" style and feel of *Mother Earth News*. It resided on my bookshelf right next to my copy of *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Manual of Step by Step Procedures for the Complete Idiot* and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Repair*. But I digress.

Mollica's second book unlocked a whole new world to me on etching flashed glass and painting on glass. Through his book, he added a few new tools in my how-to arsenal. However, when it came time to actually pick up a paintbrush and *do*, the results were less than perfect. It was a lot harder to paint on glass than he made it out to be. So I filed this knowledge away in my mind under "painting on glass—it's a lost art" . . . lost on me, anyway.

I continued to design and build windows and limp past my inability to master glass painting with a brush and compensated by falling back on my skills as an airbrush artist. I learned I could airbrush with glass paint with varying results, but I never achieved what I was really hoping for. The windows I designed that had people in them would simply not have faces. They would remain blank. To rationalize away the blank faces, I would make it my artistic statement and would entitle my autonomous work with titles such as *Faceless Strangers*. While Mollica's book was helpful in many areas, it fell short in giving step-by-step instructions for actually painting on glass, since it provided just a cursory overview.

## Enter Albinus Elskus

Lithuanian painter, Albinus Elskus, learned how to paint on glass while attending the Institute of Decorative Arts in his native Lithuania. He went on to study architecture after World War II at the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt, Germany. During that time, he also studied painting at École des Arts et Métiers in Freiburg, Germany. In 1949, Elskus came to the United States and completed a four-year apprenticeship as a part of the Stained Glass Association of America while he lived in Chicago, Illinois, and later New York, New York, where he settled and became a co-owner and designer/painter for Durhan Studios.

During his career, Elskus designed over 100 original ecclesiastical commissions throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico. At the SGAA's 2000 Summer Conference, the Stained Glass Association of America awarded him with the SGAA's prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award.

In 1980, a seminal book by Elskus was published. *The Art of Painting on Glass: Techniques and Designs for Stained Glass* was grand and chock-full of techniques and color photos of paint samples and Elskus' contemporary window designs. He took an ancient art form and made it relevant to 21st-century artists.

After the release of Elskus' book, glass suppliers began to cobble together sample boxes for beginning glass painters filled with a variety of powdered glass paints and natural hair paintbrushes. I jumped in with both feet. I read and read, put into practice each technique, and eventually added facial features to my windows. I was finally done with lame, faceless windows.

## The Elskus Legacy Continues

Now in its sixth printing, *The Art of Painting on Glass* is still being sold through the SGAA's bookstore bundled with a bonus DVD of Elskus demonstrating his glass painting techniques. This sixth edition has been completely updated with the most current supplies and suppliers, as well as additional works of the author. This book provides complete and detailed instructions in the art of stained glass painting by one of the industry's most beloved teachers. For any student of this unique art of stained glass, Elskus' book is one of the most essential volumes for any stained glass library.

The film *Painting on Glass* featuring Elskus is also available from the SGAA. It is the perfect companion to *The Art of Painting on Glass*. In this short film, Elskus takes you into his studio to demonstrate his glass painting techniques. Originally produced in 1978 for use as a teaching aid, the silent 8 mm film has been digitally remastered on DVD and edited to include a narration of the original Elskus script. The cost of the book with the DVD is \$40.

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Visit [stainedglass.org](http://stainedglass.org) under the "Publications & Products" link for more information on these and other offerings available from SGAA.

Cover of the 1980 book, *The Art of Painting on Glass: Techniques and Designs for Stained Glass*, by Albinus Elskus.



Bryant J. Stanton's studio space prepared for painting on glass.

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