



Young African Girl

Joven Africana



Caribbean Village

Pueblo Caribeño

Shine On

A Costa Rican Artist Has Spearheaded a Revival in Stained Glass Art

Text by Pete Majerle

Experiencing Costa Rican artist Sylvia Laks' art is an arresting journey into extraordinary beauty. Her knowing hands, unique world vision and incredible mastery of her medium have made her one of the world's foremost experts in stained glass, bringing the magnificence of her art into the public realm.

The Artist

A lifelong artist, Sylvia Laks draws on her immediate natural and social environment for inspiration. Her professional career started as a clothing designer for a San

José-based manufacturer. In 1986 she began working with stained glass, and her interests quickly turned to painting a la grisaille, working to revive this largely forgotten technique. She is now one of a handful of people in the world who has mastered the technique. Today, the complexity and texture of Sylvia's work, combined with the artist's subtle command of subject matter, make her a true master of her medium.

The Medium

Stained glass is a particularly striking art medium. Her painstaking technique takes the luminosity and



The
Four Elements: Earth, Water, Wind and Fire

celestial qualities of glass to a whole new level. More than simple decoration, Sylvia's work is a fusion of light, glass and art. By joining different textures she creates designs that can truly bring a space alive. Ever-changing light conditions mean the piece constantly evolves throughout the day, meaning that sunrise will reveal different intensities, tones and shines than will dusk.

The Workshop

Sylvia works in the tradition of great European workshops. Her studio in the mountains of San Rafael de Heredia employs highly trained craftsmen and women working under the artist's direct supervision.

Her workshop has had a great impact on the local community. Most of her workers were formerly farmers and ranchers, and now they are extremely skilled technicians in the stained glass trade. The twenty expert craftspersons have taken their newfound skills and pride into their homes and community, creating an environment of artistic inspiration for the mostly rural town.

Technique

The renaissance of Sylvia's art lies in rescuing the elaborate technique of painting a la grisaille. Common over eight centuries ago in medieval castles and cathedrals, this art nearly disappeared from the world before Sylvia took to studying it. Sylvia is part of



Cuatro Elementos: Tierra, Agua, Viento y Fuego

a handful of stained-glass artists in the world who have started the renaissance of painted a la grisaille stained-glass art by rescuing this elaborate technique.

The process is far from simply cutting glass. After the artist conceives of a design on paper, she must carefully select the colors and type of glass she will use. By observing strict rules with utmost discipline and precision, Sylvia creates a plan to section off the pieces of a larger work. The glass is then cut to the artist's exact specifications.

For some pieces, Sylvia then employs the technique known as a la grisaille in which she applies special metal oxide pigments, brushing color into distinctive imported blown glass. She uses high temperature kilns where the painted pieces are fired at very high temperatures, heating the glass to almost its melting point of over 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, which heats the glass to its melting point thereby allowing the pigments to chemically fuse with the glass. The process is repeated several times so the pieces of glass are fired several times to achieve the required volume and depth (depending on the volume of the glass and the depth the artist wishes to achieve), until she has reached the effect she envisioned.

Once the glass has acquired

Sylvia's workshop is located in San Rafael de Heredia, Costa Rica.

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the desired color, Sylvia places the individual pieces on a light board. She then scrapes the glass to remove the pigment, allowing light to shine through. This is where the sculptural qualities of her work shine through. When the piece is finished, the glass appears radiant, transparent, glowing and textured. In the end of this painstaking, complex process, an inimitable work of art has been produced.

Individual pieces are then soldered together with two distinct techniques, using either lead or both copper foil and a lead-tin solder, and then mounted in metal frames before completion. The soldering becomes an integral part of the design, giving the artist the opportunity to make bold lines or extremely subtle divisions between pieces of glass. The process is so complex that a single piece will take at least six months of work, and many take much more time.

Once ready, Sylvia's a la grisaille pieces breathe exuberant life into antique-style blown glass.

Result

By rescuing painting a la grisaille, Sylvia has given this nearly abandoned technique a chance for true, modern expression. Her pieces boast rich contrasts full of carefully chosen, painstakingly coordinated