

Through the glass, brightly



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A new exhibition in Shrewsbury seeks to restore the neglected reputation of one of Britain's most impressive stained-glass artists who was also a Carmelite nun

She rode a motorbike, smoked cigars and became a Carmelite nun. And Margaret Rope, who died in the 1950s, also designed some of Britain's best stained glass. According to a new exhibition she is one of the most impressive, but also most neglected, artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The exhibition, which runs in her home town of Shrewsbury until 15 January, pays tribute to the legacy Rope left in the many churches illuminated with windows created following her designs; and it also poses questions about whether she sought to interpret often-ignored women's faith experiences in the unlikely medium of stained glass.

Rope was born in 1882, one of six children. Her parents, a surgeon and his wife, were Anglicans, so as a child and then as a teenager, Marga, as she was known to her parents and siblings, worshipped each Sunday at the medieval church of St Mary the Virgin, a stone's throw from their home in central Shrewsbury. Today the church is no longer in use as a regular place of worship, but it remains one of the town's biggest tourist attractions, not least because of the extraordinarily intricate, and colourful, stained-glass window above the altar that depicts Christ's antecedents through the Jesse tree.

It was not the only church in the town that had outstanding stained glass; another one nearby, St Alkmund's, has a fine eighteenth-century window, and there are other examples of medieval, Flemish and German glass. These dazzling displays on her doorstep seem to have inspired Rope's interest in stained-glass making and she enrolled at the Birmingham School of Art in 1900, aged 18, to learn more about it. Her father had died the previous year, and a more conventional way of coping with the lack of

family funds at this point would have been to find herself a husband; but Rope was an independent and unconventional young woman determined to make her own way, and to leave her mark.

That is certainly the impression one gets of accounts of her in her twenties: daringly, she wore her hair short, loved smoking cigars and riding her motorbike, for which during the First World War she was arrested by soldiers – they said later they believed any motorbike-riding woman had to be a German spy. Not long after her father's death, most of the family, including Margaret, converted to Catholicism, and faith became an increasingly important area of her life.

Two events played into Rope's artistic success: first, the First World War, which both inspired her choice of subjects and led to commissions for memorial windows; and second, the development of a new type of glass called slab glass, a difficult-to-handle material whose imperfections amplified its ability to reflect the light, creating a kind of jewelled appearance. This, combined with the influence of William Morris' Arts and Crafts Movement, was the background to the emergence of Rope's finest work: her glorious windows combine the strong colours made possible by the new material with the striking and authentic portraits the new movement encouraged.

Rope's windows tell the human stories behind biblical and saintly tales: in Shrewsbury's Catholic Cathedral, which gave her some of her most important commissions, a window telling the story of the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth depicts two young women poised for a journey both know will be arduous, in which they both as mothers will pay an almost intolerable price: their personalities shine out of the window as forcefully as the blues and reds of their robes.

The characters of the women Rope depicts emerge as strongly as the men – possibly even more so – and she often chose stories with female central characters; one panel in the exhibition depicts the story of Judith's beheading of Holofernes after she manages to infiltrate the tent of the Assyrian general who was about to destroy her city.

Through the war years and beyond, Rope worked out of the radical Glass House artists' studio, which had been set up in Fulham, west London, by the suffragist and pioneer in women's art, Mary Lowndes. It was a time of opportunity for women in stained glass and Rope was in the right place at the right time; but she made many visits home to Shrewsbury, and members of her family were often the models for depictions of saints in church windows, or as characters in their own right in windows and her other medium, painted wood-carvings.

One of her sisters was by now a nun, and a brother, Henry, became a priest and a friend of G.K. Chesterton; they are among the characters depicted in a window in the exhibition that shows her family at prayer, including her devout-looking mother. Rope herself features in a self-portrait, standing with a friend at the back of the gathering.

Faith was increasingly important in Rope's life, and in 1923 she decided to try her vocation as a Carmelite. She entered the community at Woodbridge in Suffolk, moving later to another convent at Rushmere near Ipswich, and eventually to the Carmelite Monastery at Quidenham in Norfolk. But being a nun did not stop her career: she continued to work from behind the grille as Sister Margaret of the Mother of God, sending work to the Glass House for cutting, firing and leading.

The Shrewsbury show includes an amusing letter sent to a bishop who wanted to commission a window, but who had clearly been a bit taken aback by how much it was going to cost: Sister Margaret apologises for having surprised him, and says her Mother Prioress is sure an arrangement can be reached.

Throughout her life, Rope's most important work was for Catholic churches; her first proper commission was from Shrewsbury Cathedral for its great west window, a depiction of six British martyrs from the Romans to the Reformation, and that remains one of her finest pieces. Elsewhere in the cathedral other smaller windows by her are punctuated with delightful reminders about how the big questions of faith mesh with the ordinary moments of life – her window depicting the Eucharistic Congress of 1921 in London, for example, features a red double-decker bus.

The echoes of war are ever-present in her work. The window in the north wall of Shrewsbury Cathedral tells the story of two soldier saints, Martin of Tours and Ignatius of Loyola, and elsewhere there are servicemen in uniform marching across many of her windows and altarpieces. Like many women who had struggled to get a foothold in the male world of art, realism was a central tenet of her oeuvre. And the locale inspired her work too: windows featuring the Virgin Mary and the saints of old also depict the hills, flowers and birds of Shropshire.

Stained glass was Rope's finest legacy, but not her only one: also in the exhibition is a handsome and elegant monstrance she designed in silver, crowned with a winged St Michael. The Second World War made it more difficult to get materials to Quidenham, and from then until her death in 1953 she became more a designer and less a creator; windows in countries as far afield as Australia and the United States were made from her cartoons.

Since her death she seems to have been airbrushed out of history, but this exhibition hopes to change all that. Connoisseurs of the art world could already be onside: in 2014 a piece of Rope's work from her student days was sold at Christie's for almost £30,000, and it now hangs in the influential Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Heavenly Lights: The Margaret Agnes Rope exhibition, Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery.

Joanna Moorhead - The Tablet