

FRANCIS EGINTON

DESIGNER AND GLASSPAINTER

Martin Ellis

In 1784, Francis Eginton embarked on his fourth, and ultimately most successful, career as a creator of painted glass windows. Having previously been a partner of Matthew Boulton and John Fothergill, and chief designer at the Soho Manufactory in Handsworth, near Birmingham, Eginton was able to exploit his contacts to become the most celebrated and productive glass painter of his generation.



Portrait of Francis Eginton, 1796, by James Millar. Eginton was the most celebrated glass painter of his generation.

By the second half of the eighteenth century a modest revival of stained glass was underway. Horace Walpole and fellow antiquarians were generating interest in historic glass as an architectural novelty, while Joshua Reynolds and the glass painter Thomas Jervais had produced a series of windows at New College, Oxford, to great popular acclaim. However, unlike the stained glass of the Middle Ages, or that with which we are familiar today, it used no coloured glass, but was painted in translucent enamels on clear, colourless panes, held in a metal grid.

Commercial Opportunity

It is possible that Francis Eginton (1736/7–1805) saw stained glass as the coming fashion. Following his departure from the Soho Manufactory, he moved down the Soho Road to Prospect Hill (demolished 1871), where he established a series of workshops producing buckles, japanned wares and general toys. An experienced enameller and pictorial designer, he soon began experimenting with enamelling pictures onto glass.

The Influence of the Wyatts

There is considerable correlation between Boulton and Fothergill's patrons and Eginton's subsequent glass commissions. However, the principal source of influence in Francis's career was Maria Wyatt, his second wife, together with her cousins, James (1746–1813) and Samuel (1737–1807), two of the most brilliant architects of the time.

Soho had been a source of employment for the extended Wyatt family from its outset, and Eginton must have known members of this talented dynasty before he married Maria in 1776. The first instance of this influence appears to be James's intervention on Eginton's behalf in proposing him, in 1786, as the glass painter of a set of shields of Garter Knights for St George's Chapel Windsor.

Major commissions followed, including a huge scheme at Arundel Castle for Charles Howard, tenth Duke of Norfolk, who had presided over work at St George's. By 1790, Eginton was able to concentrate his energies on glass painting. His establishment was a family affair involving, as glass painters, Maria, their son William Raphael, and his daughters Ann and Mary, and Ann's husband Samuel Lowe.

The Wyatts continued as key supporters. Francis supplied major windows for many of James's and Samuel's commissions including Salisbury and Lichfield cathedrals (1790 and 1795), Fonthill Abbey (a commission placed in 1794) and St Paul's church, Birmingham (1786–91), in the Jewellery Quarter.

Other important works include figurative windows at St Asaph Cathedral, now removed to Llandegla, Clwyd (1800, a commission obtained through another Staffordshire connection, Lewis Bagot, then Bishop of St Asaph), St Alkmund's Church, Shrewsbury (1795) and SS Peter and Paul, Aston, Birmingham (1793), all of which are extant although, in the case of SS Peter and Paul, in a



Eginton's east window St Paul's Church, Birmingham. *The Conversion of St Paul*, 1786-1791, Francis Eginton after Benjamin West PRA.

perilous condition. As was the practice of the time, these works were not designed by Eginton himself, but were based on specifically commissioned paintings by leading artists or adaptations of popular works by Old Masters.

A Family Business

In failing health from the early 1800s, Francis gradually removed himself from the business. It was Maria, William and Samuel Lowe who completed outstanding commissions, including the gallery at Fonthill and the glorious library lunette at Stourhead (1805).

On Francis's death in 1805, the business passed to Maria, and finally broke up following her death in 1811. Samuel and Ann Lowe continued at Prospect Hill, while William moved to Newhall Hill in Birmingham, establishing his own successful glass painting firm, and becoming Glass Painter to Princess Charlotte.

With the death of Ann Lowe in 1818, Samuel made an ambitious move to Newman Street, London, the heartland of English art and design. There he found himself neighbours with Benjamin West, the decorative and landscape painter Thomas Stothard, the cabinet maker Richard Bridgens and his rival glass painter Joseph Backler. His *List of Works in Vitreous Colours*, probably c. 1818, shows that he undertook projects with West, Stothard and Bridgens. It also suggests that it was he who executed the principal works for Francis Eginton, at least from 1790.



Detail from the library lunette at Stourhead. *The School of Athens*, Francis Eginton and family, after Samuel Woodforde, RA and Raphael, 1805. More information about this National Trust property in Wiltshire can be found at www.nationaltrust.org.uk/stourhead/

William's business flourished. Able to trade on the Eginton name, he undertook major commissions throughout Britain and Ireland. His latest windows, particularly those at St Nicholas, Brockley in Somerset, executed c. 1824, show a growing understanding of medieval glazing, and a cautious use of leading and pot metal colour in keeping with the growing fashion for a more accurate revival of medieval media. But it was too late for him to forge a reputation as a leader of the new style. He retired to Worcester in 1826, dying there in 1834.

Reputation

Francis remained a notable Birmingham worthy, both because of his associations with Boulton and because of the prominence of the east window of St Paul's Church as a popular work of art. However, without even the benefit of antiquity to recommend them, the great majority of late Georgian windows – and the memory of their makers – were unceremoniously swept away by changes in taste and Victorian programmes of building restoration.

Then, in 1866, when reviewing the history of the city's stained glass industry for Samuel Timmins's *Birmingham and the Midland Hardware District*, John Hardman Powell gave considerable mention to Francis. He also noted that a directory of 1818 made reference to a William Raphael Eginton. 'Of [his] works', wrote Powell 'we know simply nothing'.

Excellent windows by Francis Eginton can still be seen in the churches of St Paul, St Paul's Square, Birmingham and St Alkmunds, Shrewsbury. Windows by William Eginton can be seen in Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, and the only known surviving window by Samuel Lowe is now located in the Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady and St Benedict in Wootton Wawen, Warwickshire. ●

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Further Reading

W C Aitken, 'Francis Eginton', *Birmingham & Midland Institute, Archaeological Section, Transactions, Excursions and Reports*, Vol III. 15 February 1872, 27-43.

Anon (probably William Raphael Eginton and Samuel Lowe), *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LXXV part 1 (1805), 387 and 482-483, and part 2 (1805), 606.

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