

LEADING LIGHT

Peter Robertson keeps up a historic tradition of stained-glass artistry and restoration from his humble garage.

STORY + PHOTOS KATE NEWSOME

Millennia after glass was pioneered in ancient Mesopotamia and glazed into windows by first century Romans, Peter Robertson – specs perched low on his nose – pinches a tablet screen. He scrolls through the photo gallery on his homemade website.

As sure as stained glass found popularity as a heavenly medium for storytelling, each project Peter has undertaken in the past 4 decades tells a tale. There was the brassiere made of red ‘slumped glass’ for a 1980s tourism commercial; an arched window, tall as a pencil, for a model railroader’s boiler house; a window featuring a dove icon for a Brisbane Russian Orthodox congregation; eucalyptus trees and superb fairy-wrens for a Chinchilla, Qld, church; a saddle, billycan and campfire to embellish a country outfitter’s storefront; and a blue sapphire insert for the gold-gilded town sign of Inverell, NSW, where Peter and his Stained Glass Works business are based.

Desert print shirt tucked into his work khakis, Peter does the 20-step commute across loose gravel to the corrugated 2-car garage. He squeezes past the SUV taking up the first spot – the second is for his studio.

Peter may only take on a handful of jobs each year, but with each needing potentially months at a time, if there’s a project on the go, you’ll find him in the studio most days. Aged 84, Peter plans to work for as long as he can. “I’d be lost without it,” he says. >

Peter Robertson restores a window in his garage studio in Inverell, NSW.



A T W O R K



The carpeted workbench is crowded by a melange of tools: masks, gloves, H-shaped lengths of lead and bars of solder, glazing boards, gear for acid-etching, a diamond grinder, rolls of paper from a printing house, putty, paints, horseshoe nails and old boot brushes. Across one wall, a library of glass sheets are filed in different shades, patterns and peculiarities. The glass is iridescent, swirling, streaky, mottled, wispy, floral, frosted and 'seedy' (characterised by small bubbles formed – traditionally – when a potato is dropped into molten glass).

Peter flicks a switch. A lightbox made of two-by-fours and fluorescent light battens illuminates a gothic-shaped window. Next to it is a dustpan full of broken shards. Peter has just finished the arduous repair of 2 windows from St Andrew's Anglican Church in Walcha, NSW, dating back to the 1800s.

After removing, transporting and measuring them, he cuts out a timber template and orders the right glass. Following a paint-by-numbers-like outline, Peter uses a pinkie finger to rest his surgeon-steady hand – scoring a curve with a nail-thin cutter and 'nibbling' the glass away using running pliers. He fires the painted glass in a kiln, before soldering the jigsaw back together, all while using an old, printed brochure for reference and working "within the millimetre".

Over the next fortnight, Peter drives almost 2 hours to Walcha with a local carpenter to reinstall the windows and recommends that the parish add polycarbonate sheeting to protect it from weathering and possible vandalism.

Although creating original, mostly art-deco designs, are Peter's favourite commissions, restoration has been a mainstay of his work as stained glass cycles in and out of vogue.

The first of Peter's stained glass pieces, a Tiffany lampshade, has pride of place in the house alongside some of his paintings and the piano played professionally by his wife, Keiko.

The Robertson family emigrated from Scotland in 1949. Peter trained as a fitter and turner and worked in appliance servicing around Gosford, Sydney and Wollongong. It was the late 1970s when he first stumbled across stained glass shops while on a North American road trip from San Francisco to Vancouver, and via the Californian town of Eureka. "I had never come across stained glass and I just fell in love with it," he says.

He brought back sheets and tools in his suitcase, teaching himself and completing "a crash course on the finer points of glass working" at the University of Southern Queensland under the guidance of Norman Birrell. Peter says he enjoys the challenge of glass – engineering intricate shapes and designs with such a fragile medium. "I think with the background that I had in using tools and design work, it became second nature," he says.

By then, Peter had relocated to a property at Stanborough, south of Inverell, when the local Catholic church asked if he could restore and alter the shape of their ecclesiastical windows for a new building. Peter worked on the project in a simple lean-to, sharing the space with the Angora goats he was farming. Soon, he moved into town and picked up more commissions.

Over the years, Peter has exhibited his works and conducted teaching tours throughout the state, at training colleges, the University of New England, and at his studio. While there are stained glass makers and hobbyists speckled across Australia, mainly along the coast, Peter says that specialist knowledge and skillsets are dwindling.

"We're losing a lot of specialist trades," he says. "I would hate to see the trade die – a world where there was no creation of artwork involving glass or any of the arts. The magic of stained glass is it tells stories; it tells visual stories. Looking at the world through rose-coloured glasses, almost."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Peter holds up a completed stained glass panel; the broken windows before Peter repaired them in Walcha's St Andrew's Anglican church, featuring some of the earliest stained glass in regional NSW; scoring along a sketched template using a glass cutter.