



1246-48

Stained and painted glass

Diameter: 23 3/8 inches (59.3 cm)

French

Purchased with funds contributed by Mrs. Clement Biddle Wood in memory of her husband, 1930, 1930-24-3

### LET'S LOOK

#### Initial Observation:

Have students work as a group to create a list of everything they see in the stained-glass picture.

Encourage students to list colors, lines, patterns, and shapes, as well as objects and people.

#### Open Discussion:

Begin an open discussion about the medallion by asking students to share their first impressions of the work.

Encourage students to think further by asking them if they are responding to what they see in the picture, or if they are inferring things based on what they already know.

What visual information in the picture is leading them to certain conclusions or assumptions?

What life experiences are informing their responses?

## RONDEL DEPICTING HOLOFERNES'S ARMY CROSSING THE EUPHRATES RIVER

This stained-glass medallion illustrates the biblical phrase "And [Holofernes] crossed the Euphrates and came into Mesopotamia," from the Book of Judith. The medallion was once part of a tall window adorning the Sainte-Chapelle (consecrated 1248), the spectacular royal chapel built in Paris by King Louis IX (1215–1270) to enshrine relics of Christ's Crucifixion.

The Book of Judith describes events before the birth of Christ. Yet the soldiers in the medallion are dressed in what medieval viewers would have recognized as the armor of thirteenth-century European crusaders (warriors in the military expeditions undertaken by Christian powers to win the Holy Lands from the Muslims). Louis IX was himself a crusader and was canonized (made a saint) by the Roman Catholic Church in 1297, partly for bringing holy relics back to France.

### ABOUT THE STORY

The story of the Jewish heroine Judith is from the *Apocrypha* (books of uncertain origin that are included in the Latin and Greek versions of the Old Testament but usually omitted from Protestant Bibles). The medallion shows Holofernes' army crossing the Euphrates River en route to attack Damascus (in present-day Syria), native city of the young widow Judith. Later in the story, Judith ingeniously and courageously gains entry to the invaders' camp and kills Holofernes. When she shows them the enemy general's severed head, her people rush at the invading troops, who flee in fear. Judith has saved her city.

### ABOUT THE COMPOSITION

One of forty panels devoted to telling stories from the Book of Judith, the medallion depicts knights on horseback crossing a river of blue-glass water with painted black ripples. On the right, a large

army in close ranks is suggested by a tight cluster of helmets, a representational convention found in manuscript illuminations and other medieval works of art. On the left, the last two soldiers in the column look at each other as if engaged in conversation. The figure on the right has clearly visible features. His head is turned to face the other soldier, who is shown from the back.

Although the medallion is in good condition and much of the glass is original, it has required repairs, some of which are easy to see because they confuse the composition. For example, the pieces of white, green, and pink glass beneath the horses' hooves are replacements, and they disrupt the wavy pattern that represents the water of the Euphrates.

## STAINED GLASS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

With the advent of Gothic architecture in the mid-1100s, stained-glass windows attained a prominent role in church design. Pointed arches and exterior buttresses enabled the medieval architect to move supporting structures to the outside of the church so that the interior, non-load-bearing walls could contain vast expanses of stained glass.

To make windows like those in the Sainte-Chapelle, artisans sketched a design on a wooden board and filled it in with small pieces of glass called quarries. To cut a quarry to fit, the glassmaker traced the desired shape with a hot grozing iron (a pointed metal rod) and then applied cold water to crack off the excess glass. Details such as hair, facial features, and fabric textures were painted on, and the glass was then heated to fuse the paint to the surface. Finally, lead strips were used to connect the quarries. This medallion is an excellent example of how the strong lines formed by these strips helped make the images legible from a distance.

For a largely illiterate public, stained-glass windows were a storytelling medium that translated the Bible into pictures. The windows provided visual representations from which people could gain a more vivid understanding of the religious stories they knew and sermons they heard.

Furthermore, medieval philosophers conceived of light as a symbol for the Divine. God was understood to be manifest in the light of the world, and stained-glass windows, relying upon exterior light to illuminate their images, were seen as revelations of God's teaching. To theologians, stained-glass windows were also a metaphor for the Christian principle of the transformation of the soul; the interior of a church was vitalized by the warm glow of colored light just as the soul of a person was transformed when opened to the light of God.

## THE SAINTE-CHAPELLE

It was typical for Christian rulers in the Middle Ages to have chapels at their palaces, but few could compete with the remarkable architecture, stained glass, sculpture, and painted decoration of Louis IX's Sainte-Chapelle. The building—which still stands—has two stories, a common plan for private chapels. The modest lower story, which was reserved for nobles and servants of the court, supports a much taller upper story that served as the king's private chapel. The space is filled with multicolored light filtering through more than 6,500 square feet of glass. Fifteen immense stained-glass windows line the north and south walls. About fifty feet in height, the windows contain hundreds of biblical scenes. The Museum's medallion is from the fourth window on the chapel's south side.

The Sainte-Chapelle was built to house holy relics Louis IX acquired from the Emperor of Byzantium. Relics are objects—such as pieces of wood, cloth, and bone—associated with Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints, or others venerated by Christians. King Louis's two most revered relics were the Crown of Thorns that Christ wore during his mocking and Crucifixion, and a fragment of the True Cross on which Christ was crucified.

## WHY THE MEDALLION IS NO LONGER PART OF THE SAINTE-CHAPELLE

This medallion is one of three owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art that were removed from the Sainte-Chapelle early in the nineteenth century, after the French Revolution, when the chapel was converted into a library. (The Sainte-Chapelle has since been restored; two-thirds of its original glass remains, and many of the other sections have been replaced with copies.) The three medallions, like many pieces from disassembled stained-glass windows, were sold to art dealers. In the 1820s, a Philadelphian named William Poyntell purchased the medallions on a trip to France. They were among the first important examples of medieval stained glass to come to the United States. The Sainte-Chapelle medallions entered the Museum's collections in 1930.

## DIRECTED LOOKING

- What are the people in this stained-glass piece doing?  
*The knights are preparing to cross a river and go into battle. Two of them are having a conversation.*
- What visual clues tell you what is happening?

*The knights are dressed in full armor, mounted on their horses, carrying banners, and grouped tightly together as a troop. Note the blue wavy water under the horses' hooves.*

- Tell students that this scene is one of forty medallions telling the story of Judith and Holofernes. Summarize the story for them. Where in the story would this scene take place: at the beginning, the middle, or the end? How can you tell?

*This scene is from the beginning of the story. The soldiers are shown dressed for battle but do not appear to have fought yet. They are marching across the Euphrates River, which they have to cross before attacking Damascus, and it is during their siege of the city that Judith gains access to their camp and kills their leader. Note that when it was part of a window in the Sainte-Chapelle, this medallion's place in the story would also have been indicated by its position in relation to the forty other scenes in the window.*

- Which details in this medallion seem true-to-life? Which look less realistic?

*Realistic elements include: the colors of the water and sky; the folds in the clothing; the texture of the soldiers' hair and their sleeves of chain-mail armor; the windblown banners on their lances; and the interaction between the two soldiers on the left. Unrealistic elements include: the pink and blue horses; the heavy black outlines around things; the number of horses compared to the number of riders; and the size of the horses compared to the size of the men.*

- Why make things look unrealistic when telling a story?

*Bigger, brighter shapes can be seen from a distance.*

- There are two different kinds of black lines in this image—heavy, thick ones and lighter, thinner ones. What different functions do they have?

*Explain to the students that this picture is made up of many pieces of colored glass separated and supported by strips of lead. Have them find where the lead strips outline important shapes and figures. Then have them find the details and textures that are painted in black onto the colored glass—hair, ripples in the water, etc.*

## FURTHER DISCUSSION/RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Where are visual images still used to tell stories or teach lessons? Compare and contrast these images with the stained-glass medallion.

- Where can you see stained glass today?
- How have different cultures around the world decorated their holy places? How have different cultures told stories with visual images?
- The soldiers in this medallion are dressed in the armor of thirteenth-century French knights, but the biblical account of Judith and Holofernes is a much older story. How did soldiers dress in the ancient times told of in the Bible?
- Locate Paris, Damascus, the Euphrates River, and Syria on a map. Find out more about the history, geography, and people of these places.

## ACTIVITIES

- Have students choose a story and tell it only using pictures. Ask students what parts of this story would be most important to draw.
- Have students cover the classroom windows with colored cellophane or plastic wrap. Discuss how this changes the light in the classroom.
- Have each student make their own version of a stained-glass window, cutting black construction paper for the lead strips and colored cellophane or tissue paper for the colored glass.

*This stained glass is included in *Images of the Middle Ages*, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the Lila Wallace—Reader's Digest Fund.*