

A composite stained-glass window panel with birds in flight amongst scrolling foliage
France, Champagne or Essonne
c. 1220 - 1240



50 x 34.5 cm; clear, red, purple, yellow, green and blue pot-metal glass with silver stain and vitreous enamel. Stopgaps and modern quarries in the blue background. The lowermost right-hand bird modern.

Provenance

Private collection, England

Description and Iconography

A vivid composite stained-glass window panel showing birds darting in flight against an intense, lapis-blue background punctuated by rhythmical, sprouting vine tendrils, also known as *rinceaux*. Greens, pink-reds, blues, yellows, and clear quarries all jostle for position and pulsate before the eye. A number of the vine's foliate sprays are beautifully patterned with a red pigment obtained from copper oxide, applied to the surface of the glass while still molten and heated to fuse it in place. The resultant streaked effect gives ripples of texture to the glass but also had a very important function, since red glass could appear almost black if made, like other colours, by impregnating the entire thickness of the material with the same pigment. Instead, medieval glaziers invented a method in which they applied only thin layers of the oxide to one side of the glass, thereby ensuring the colour was kept bright and light.

The number of birds (seven excluding the modern example at the lowermost right-hand corner) and their survival alongside so much scrolling foliage, are important indicators that we are almost certainly looking at part of a monumental *Tree of Jesse* window, which routinely incorporate seven doves symbolising the gifts of the Holy Spirit, surrounding the figure of Christ at the top of a sprouting vine.¹ Compelling parallels survive in some of northern and north-central France's most important gothic cathedrals and churches; close comparisons to its treatment, style, and format can be found in the famous *Tree of Jesse* window at the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris (fig. 1), as well as others of the same subject in the Chapelle Saint-Alpin at the Chateau de Baye, Champagne (fig. 2), and the abbey of Gerçy in Varennes-Jarcy south-east of Paris (now Paris, musée de Cluny; see fig. 3a-b). All are firmly dateable between c.1220 and the 1240s, the latter two having been made by glaziers most likely travelling from Paris out to the adjacent Champagne and Essonne regions. Other isolated fragments, such as a light blue bird in flight in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. 30.73.141), and two birds amongst foliage in the San Diego Museum of Art (inv. 41:39A, B) are also closely related, and accordingly help to date the present panel to a moment during the third or fourth decade of the thirteenth century.²

Historical Context

In 1135, the medieval French cleric and early patron of gothic architecture Abbot Suger (d. 1151), set about rebuilding the royal abbey of Saint-Denis north of Paris (fig. 4). He was heavily influenced by the mystical writings of Dionysius the Areopagite (also known as Pseudo-Dionysius), who argued that divinity (the 'providential stream') showed itself and was made manifest on earth through the light of the sun. Suger used the theology of light propagated by Pseudo-Dionysius to fundamentally inform the construction of Saint-Denis, piercing the walls of the abbey with cycles of stained-glass windows – the first occasion painted and coloured glass had been introduced at such a scale in a medieval building. Crucially, Suger saw stained glass as the extension, in a flattened plane, of precious coloured gemstones, which he believed were made up of light trapped in a physical form. The method by which medieval stained glass was given its roaring colours through the addition of metal oxides to the mixture while still in the kiln, was an alchemical process that for both Suger and Pseudo-Dionysius was akin to a magical transformation. Thus medieval stained glass proliferated in French gothic church buildings because it was considered a magical substance that trapped, manifested, and visualised God's otherwise invisible presence on earth in a tangible material form. No other medium, save for gemstones themselves, could boast such lofty capability, and it was therefore one of the most revered and refined artforms for any medieval patron to commission.

Tree of Jesse imagery is first believed to have appeared during the second half of the eleventh century in illuminated manuscripts (one of the first surviving examples being the c. 1070s Vyšehrad Codex, believed to have originated in or near the St. Emmeram Monastery in Regensburg, and now kept in the Prague Metropolitan Chapter Library). It was an attempt to give visual form to an iconographic theme concerning Christ's lineage and ancestry that was drawn from a metaphorical passage found in the Book of Isaiah, melding it with the lists of Old testament names that appear in

¹ J. Hayward and Walter Cahn, *Radiance and Reflection: Medieval Art from the Raymond Pitcairn Collection*, New York, 1982, p. 148.

² M. Caviness and J. Hayward, *Stained Glass before 1700 in American Collections: Midwestern and Western States*, Studies in the History of Art Vol. 28, Corpus Vitrearum Checklist III, p. 82.

the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. By the mid-twelfth century, *Tree of Jesse* imagery had become so popular as a didactic, educational tool, that it had begun to percolate into the most important ecclesiastical architecture of the day. Key early examples that still survive in situ in their original locations are a window devoted to the image at Saint-Denis (fig. 5), which was made in around 1140-44, and a sister window at Chartres, which appeared shortly after and was heavily indebted in its composition and treatment to the former.³ By the time our darting doves were made in the early thirteenth century, the fashion for *Tree of Jesse* windows had spread across much of France and into Germany, and it was to continue well into the Renaissance period in monumental sculptural and window commissions.⁴ Few early windows survive intact, with those mentioned above being some of the most important exceptions, but they are consistently found near the east end of the church or cathedral in which they were mounted, most commonly in apsidal chapels. This demonstrates just how important the iconography of the *Tree of Jesse* became for medieval church imagery, and affords us a key glimpse into an incredible seam of theological thought that sought ratification via didactic, legible imagery placed in the most sacred space of the church building.

Related Literature

Elisabeth Antoine et. al., *Musée national du Moyen Age: The Cluny Thermae*, Paris, 2003, p. 67.

³ Louis Grodecki, *Les Vitraux de Saint-Denis: Étude sur le vitrail au XIIIe siècle*, Paris, 1976, p. 27.

⁴ For more on *Tree of Jesse* imagery from this later period see Susan L. Green, *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, London, 2018.



Fig. 1
Detail of a Tree of Jesse Window
c. 1245
Paris, Sainte-Chapelle, Window 'J'



Fig. 2
Detail of a Tree of Jesse Window
c. 1220s
Champagne, Chateau de Baye, Chapelle Saint-Alpin

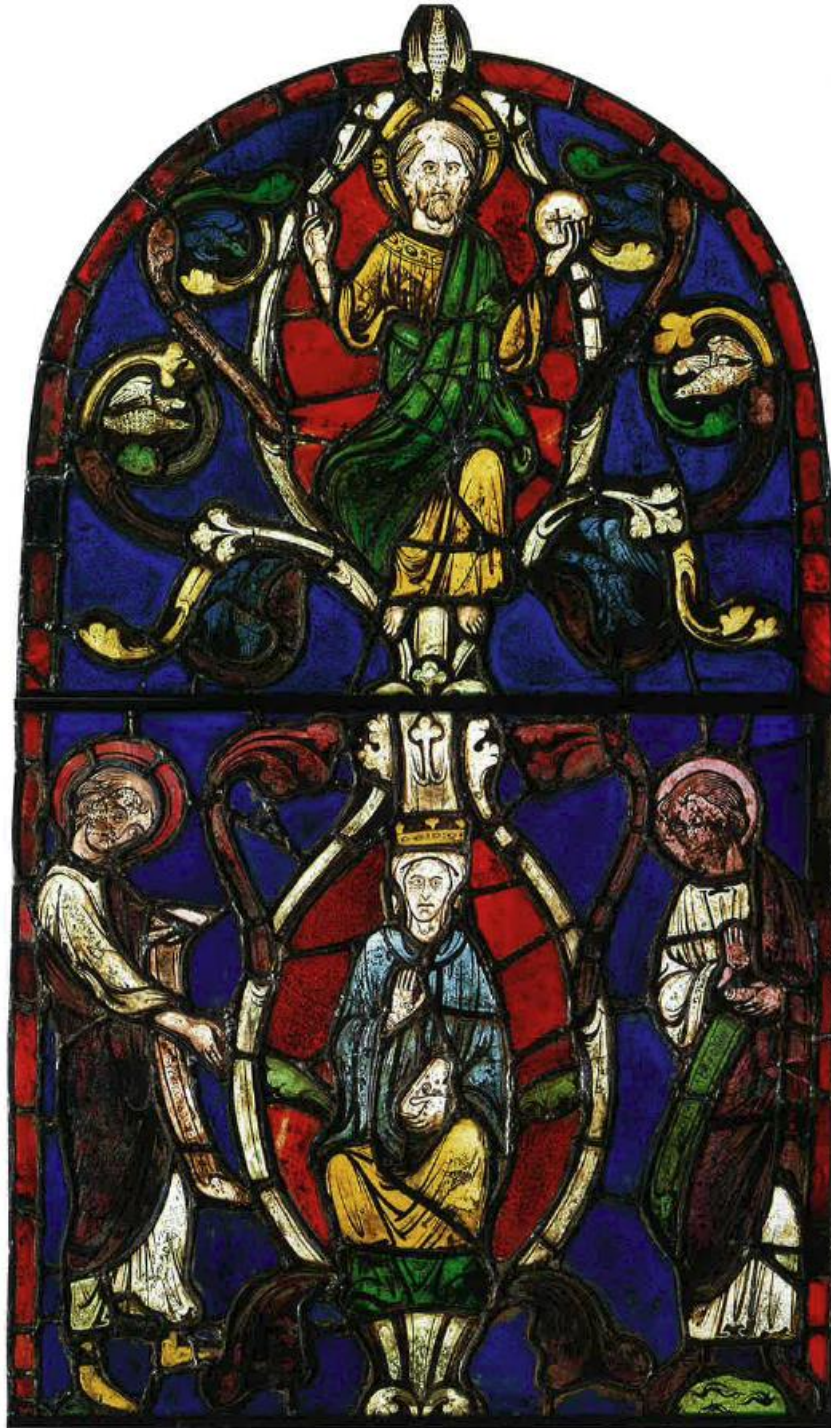


Fig. 3a
 Part of a Tree of Jesse window, showing Christ in Majesty, and the Virgin between prophets
 Varennes-Jarcy (Essonne), Abbaye de Gercy (?)
 c.1230-40
 Paris, musée de Cluny, inv. Cl. D. 23674, D. 23675

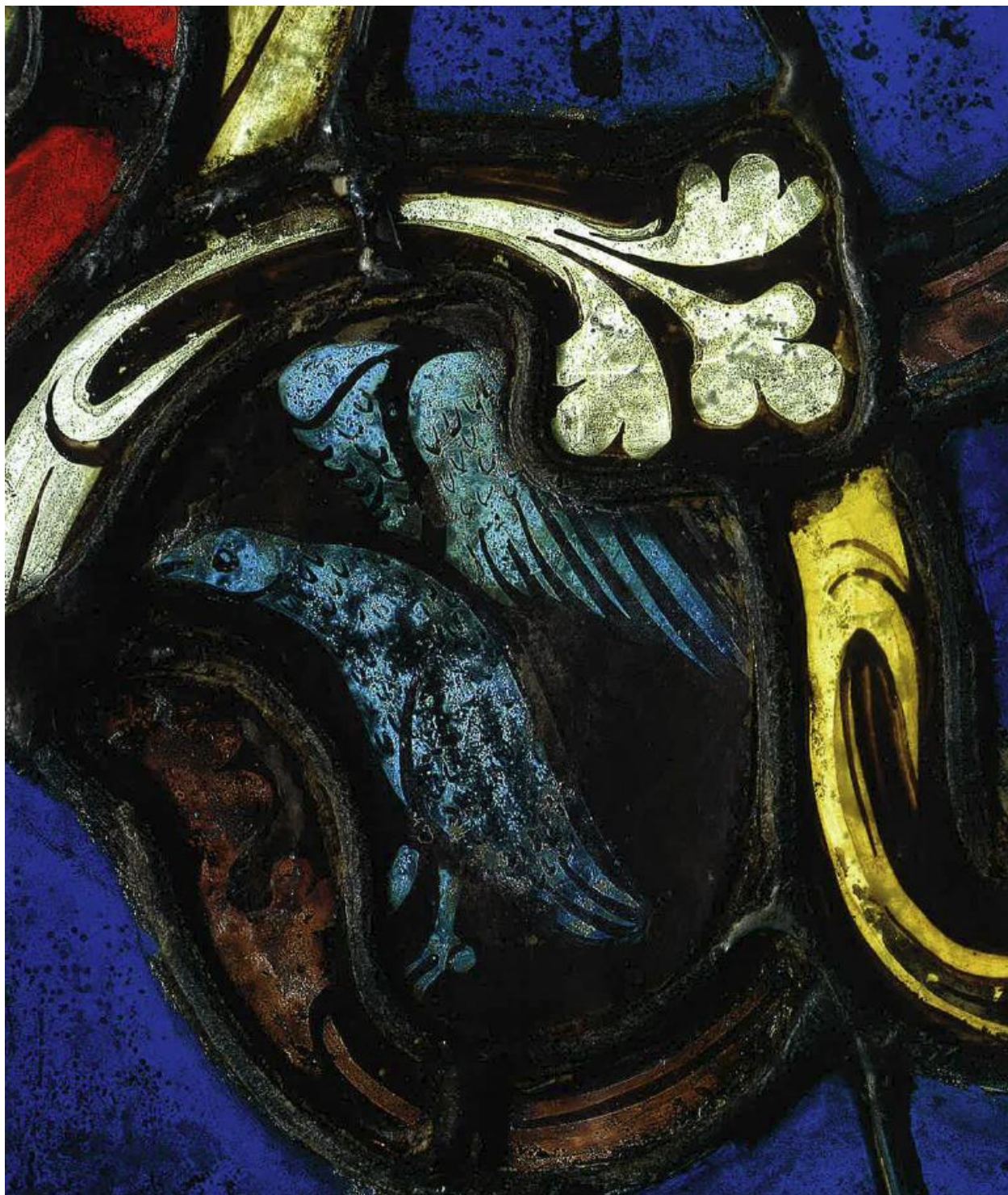


Fig. 3b, detail of the Gercy Tree of Jesse

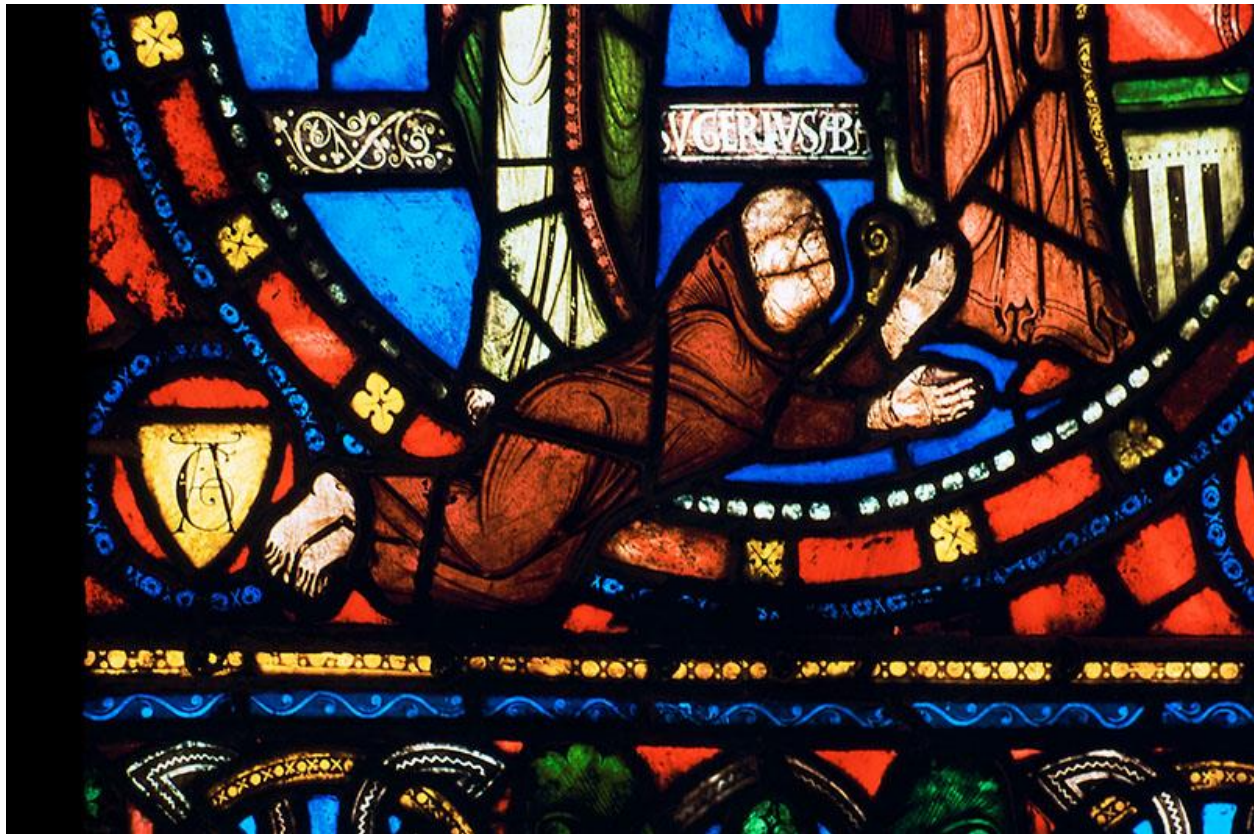


Fig. 4
Abbot Suger at the feet of the Virgin
c. 1140
Paris, Abbey of Saint-Denis

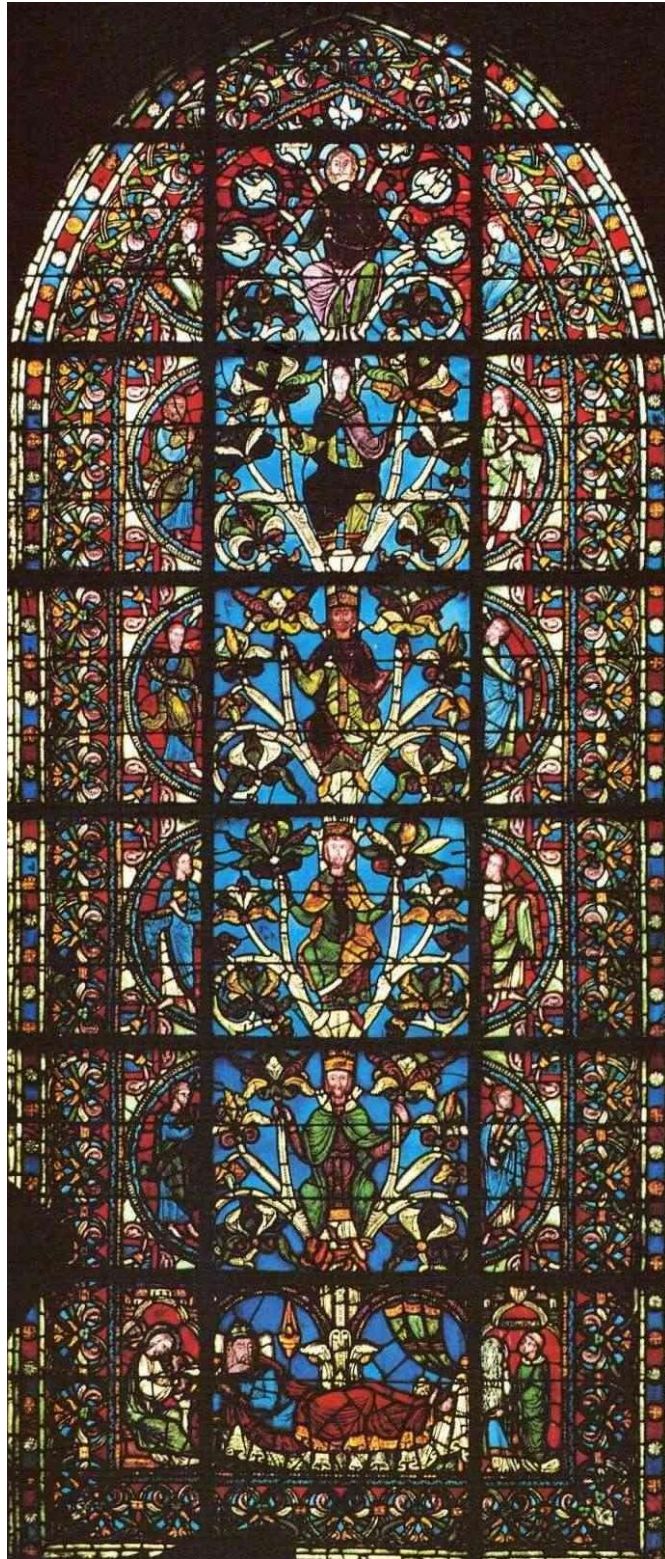


Fig. 5
Tree of Jesse
c. 1140-44
Paris, Abbey of Saint Denis