

FLORENCE CAMM AND THE CAMM STUDIO OF SMETHWICK

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In the nineteenth century the Arts and Crafts Movement led a renaissance in stained glass production. In the West Midlands, the Camm family business flourished and acquired global status. The firm's windows are widely remembered because of the work of their creative designer, Florence Camm.

The T W Camm Studio, which stood in High Street, Smethwick, is particularly noteworthy for the quality of its windows, which were manufactured for domestic and ecclesiastical clients across the world. The business was founded in 1888 by Thomas William Camm (1839–1912), who trained at Chance Brothers in Smethwick. On leaving the firm he set up his own business and the Studio soon gained an international recognition for the quality of its work. When Thomas Camm died in 1912, the business was continued by his daughter Florence (1874–1960) and sons Walter (1881–1967) and Robert (1878–1954).

Throughout their long careers, the Camms produced windows for churches, public and private buildings around the world, including North America, South Africa, and New Zealand. The Camm business remained in operation until around 1967, after the death of Walter Camm, and the Studio building in Smethwick survived until the 1980s when it was demolished.



Dante and Beatrice stained glass window. One of three designed by Florence Camm for the Turin International Exhibition of 1911.

Florence Camm: Education and Training

Florence Camm combined practical training in the decorative arts at the Birmingham Municipal School of Art with working part-time in the family business. She was a student at the School for varying periods of time between 1898 and 1909 and won many local and national prizes for her work. She was one of a significant number of young women in the region who were able to take advantage of a unique form of art and design instruction that was introduced by the School's Headmaster Edward Richard Taylor. Known as Executed Design, Taylor's system enabled students to not only produce drawings of decorative arts products in their classes, but to also to make the articles they had designed. This gave them a distinct advantage in the workplace and when competing for jobs.

Taylor also allowed women students access to life classes at the School, which enabled them to develop advanced drawing skills and the ability to depict human physiognomy with great accuracy. Florence Camm was an outstanding draughtswoman and this is reflected in the realism and naturalism of the figures in her stained glass windows.

Whilst at the Birmingham Municipal School of Art, Florence received training in stained glass design and production from Henry Payne (1868–1939). His work is notable for its highly naturalistic observation from nature, Pre-Raphaelite, medieval-styled subject matter, closely packed and minutely observed decoration and realistic facial features on the figures in his compositions, all of which can be seen in the work of Florence Camm.



T W Camm Studio, High Street, Smethwick, c. 1950.

La Vita Nuova

One of her finest pieces of work was not produced for commercial sale. In 1911, she exhibited a series of windows depicting key scenes from the story of Dante and Beatrice in Dante's poem *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*) in the English House at the 1911 Turin International Exhibition. Against competition from designers across Europe, these windows were awarded the Grand Prix in three classes and the Diploma of Honour for the entire exhibition. This was an impressive achievement for a professional woman stained glass designer and a West Midlands firm. They are now in the permanent collection at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Although the Turin windows were not produced for commercial sale, evidence suggests that they became invaluable for promoting the work of the Camm Studio. The windows were used repeatedly in advertising materials and placed on show in the window of the visitor and customer space at the Studio. Prospective clients were encouraged to visit the premises in person to see examples of the glass produced.

Commissions and Achievements

The T W Camm Studio produced domestic and ecclesiastical glass for clients across the West Midlands. Amongst the finest of these is a monumental window depicting *The Resurrection* for Christ Church in Coseley, which was completed in around 1910.

In the same church is a fine wall fresco of *The Ascension* which was solely the work of Florence Camm. Fresco is a difficult technique and thanks to her practical training at the Birmingham Municipal School of Art, the Coseley *Ascension* is one of Florence's masterpieces. She used local people as models for her windows and paintings and it is intriguing to wonder who posed for the figures in this composition.

Other notable commissions for the Camm Studio include a three-light window depicting *Saint Margaret of Antioch and Saint Cecilia* for a private house (now demolished) at St Margaret's Well in Halesowen, near Birmingham, and a memorial window entitled *I am the Good Shepherd* in St John's in the Square in

Wolverhampton, which was executed by Florence and Robert Camm as a memorial to a local industrialist called Job Evans who died in 1912.

A scene from the life of St Kenelm for a staircase window in a churchwarden's house at St Kenelm's Church near Romsley in Worcestershire and windows in Old Church, Smethwick (where Florence Camm's ashes are interred) are also noteworthy.

The Studio also produced domestic stained glass work for local Arts and Crafts Movement architects, including the Crouch and Butler partnership for a house in Edgbaston, Birmingham. Further afield, in 1908, Florence Camm designed a window depicting *Saint Cecilia* for the White Cottage, Harrow-on-the-Hill. This was secured through Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott, a leading figure in the national Arts and Crafts Movement.

As well as stained glass windows for private houses and churches, Florence Camm produced glass for major business organisations. For example, the Camm archive at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery contains a small-scale watercolour design for a three-light staircase window commissioned by the Iron and Steel Company. This was exhibited at the Royal Academy.

Florence Camm was admitted as a Fellow of the British Society of Master Glass Painters in 1930. She made an important, if currently little-known contribution to traditional stained glass design and production in England and her work is now becoming more widely appreciated. ●

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Further Reading

Roy Albutt, *Stained Glass Window Makers of Birmingham School of Art* (2013, See also www.roy-albutt.co.uk).

Sally Hoban, *Florence Camm*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford University Press, 2013).

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