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# Light Source

A modern-day Italian painter honors his country's stained-glass tradition.

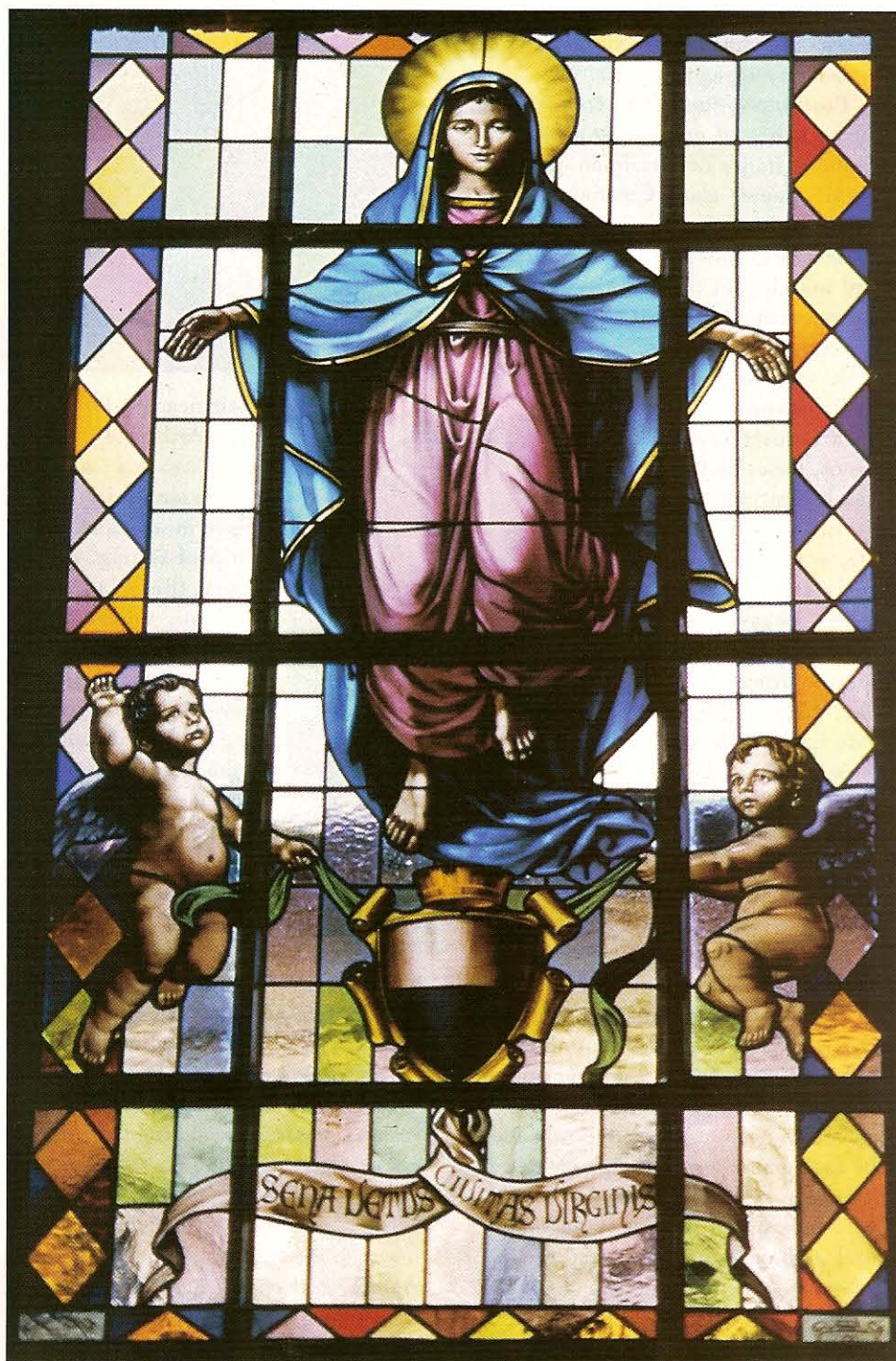
By Annie Osburn

**O**n a warm summer day along the cobblestone Via della Galluzza, the door to artist Alberto Positano's studio stands ajar. Curious passersby slow their pace to catch a glimpse of the angels and saints inside. Within this modest atelier, nestled in the heart



of the historic Tuscan city of Siena, the 39-year-old Positano renders human figures and celestial beings in a purely classical style.

It is July and the artist deftly sketches a depiction of the Assumption of the Virgin. Hands outstretched in supplication, she is surrounded by winged cherubs and a halo of light—the sort of beatific imagery long exalted in sacred settings. In just a few weeks, this Madonna will transcend the confines of paper to become a source of light: a



*Above: Positano's interpretation of an age-old image—the Assumption of the Virgin.*

*Above left: detail from a sketch for the Assumption window.*



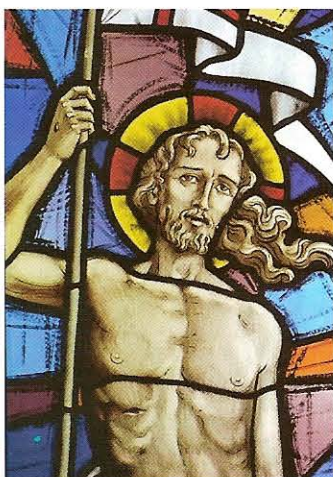
four-by-eight-foot stained-glass window for the medieval Saint Christopher's Church in Siena's Piazza Tolomei. If not for a Vespa motor scooter parked outside Positano's studio, one might think one were in another century. While most churches throughout Italy are rich with frescoes, mosaics, and stained glass, the makers of such marvels passed on long ago.

Positano enjoys little competition, for he is one of only a few artists who continue Italy's rich tradition of designing for stained glass. Creating with uncanny authenticity, he is commissioned to design mosaics and paint portraits and murals, but the majority of his designs become elaborate stained-glass masterpieces for churches in Italy, the U.S., and Canada.

Positano curls up on a tapestry-covered bench, tucks his feet beneath him, and speaks passionately about art, life, even medicine. An early stint in medical school, he says, fostered his fascination with the human form. To this day, many of his interests lie outside of the visual arts; he has a collection of more than 1,000 antiquarian books on the subjects of alchemy, medicine, philosophy, religion, literature, and anthropology. His immersion in other disciplines has perhaps left him skeptical about today's art world.

"The artist who thinks his work is to create whatever he wants, only to express himself, has a romantic notion," he says. "For thousands of years, the artist has been just a medium for ideas, be they metaphysical, religious, or civil. The idea of artists being bohemian is very pretentious, a luxury," he adds. "I feel embarrassed with this world of artists who theorize and live in ego."

In Old World fashion, Positano works as the master painter in association with colleagues Gianni and Massimo Bracciali, who construct and assemble the stained-glass windows in



their nearby studio, Vetrare Artistiche Toscane. The team's ancient craftsmanship takes place in an equally traditional setting, not far from the Piazza del Campo, where twice each year for more than 400 years thousands have watched Il Palio, arguably the world's wildest and most patriotic horse race.

Positano's commissions come from modern churches and monasteries as well as ancient settings, such as the Piazza Tolomei, where, in 1260, the Virgin Queen of Siena was elected. Not deterred by the loftiness of such projects, Positano first designs elaborate sketches, or *bozzetti*, and color renderings. He follows with detailed cartoons that are used as patterns for cutting the glass. In some cases, as many as 400 pieces of polychrome blown glass may be cut for a finished window. Individual pieces are then assembled, as if in a makeshift puzzle, and temporarily secured with drops of beeswax. Onto this assemblage, using the ancient glass technique of grisaille, Positano paints. "My classical training has been very useful for creating these windows. You must have

*Above: the artist in his studio. Left: The Resurrection (detail). These exuberant cherubs (below) are part of a window series depicting the sciences and liberal arts.*

an idea of the history of human thought to do such work," he says.

Grisaille ("gray painting") entails painting or applying a special enamel powder onto the glass image; after being fired at temperatures upward of 1,100 degrees, subtle shadings are permanently fused to the blown glass.





Using vinegar as a medium, Positano applies brown grisaille (instead of the more common gray) with a soft, long brush to highlight the outlines of a particular image. After a day's drying time, he then applies a filmy, powdery layer of grisaille by airbrush to coat the entire glass surface. Later, working in reverse, he removes areas of the grisaille film from the glass to create the effect he is aiming for.

"Working on the glass while it is back-lit, I am merely removing grisaille and adding light to make the figure appear. I sculpt and model the figure to create its three-dimensional quality," he says. "Although some glass artists may fire their glass more than once, we do not. To fire more than once would not be professional, nor the true traditional method," he explains.

First and foremost a draftsman and painter, Positano admits to having been inspired by the Old Masters and great Italian artistic traditions since childhood. Born and raised in Rome, he went to a special high school for the classics, studying Latin, Greek, and ancient literature, followed by studies at Rome's School of Ornamental Arts (once attended by the Italian painters Scipione, Mafai, and Ziveri) in the evenings, while attending medical school by day.

"I was very divided. It has always been difficult for me to let people forget that I was a medical student. It was a very alive period of my life. I enthusiastically studied medicine, and empathetically studied art," he muses.

Positano soon became so interested in his clinical psychology research that he often forgot to show up for his medical exams. Later, after compulsory military service as an air force officer, Positano eventually found himself working as a professional artist. The tide turned when he heard by chance that a stained glass firm in Siena was in search of a painter to replace its master, Fiorenzo Joni, who was expected to die soon from leukemia.

"When I showed Fiorenzo photographs of my paintings, he said that I would be the man who would substitute

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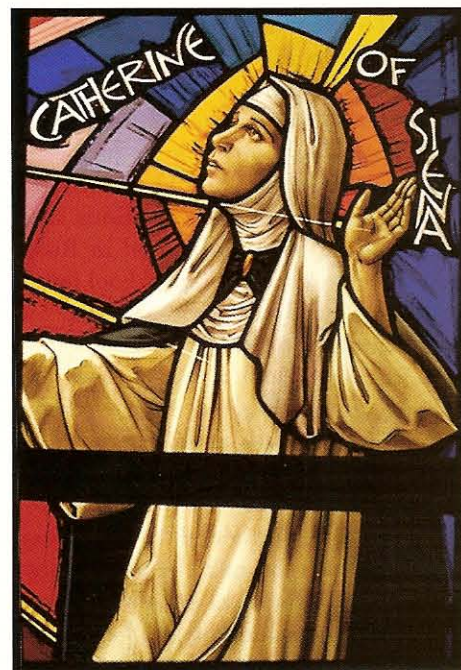
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for him. Fortunately, he did not die right away. I had the opportunity to work with him for four years."

Raised in full Sienese purism, Fiorenzo Joni (the son of Icilio Federico Joni, a 19th-century painter) died in 1991 at the age of 74, after spending his life drawing and painting for stained glass. "Fiorenzo was a very good draftsman. I learned a great deal from him about drawing the human figures of sacred and liturgical subjects. I painted the same way he did, but wanted to find my own technique," says Positano, who, after studying old texts of stained-glass painting, renewed and rediscovered the technique of removing



*The great medieval saint known for her holiness and asceticism looks heavenward in this image by Positano.*

grisaille, rather than adding it, as was Joni's practice.

Positano remains committed to maintaining his homeland's artistic traditions. Part of that entails embracing a decidedly unmodern idea of what it means to be an artist.

"Many artists have the illusion of being in the center of cultural life," he says, refusing that role. "I am a modern, I guess ... but I belong to the old world of humanism, too." □