Dressed in a pristine, loose-fitting, white shirt, sleeves rolled up, dark olive high-waisted trousers and lace-up brown leather boots (à la Doc Martin ©) the eponymous gas worker gazes into the distance, his Pre-Raphaelite good looks and fresh-faced Celtic athleticism set against a burnished golden-bronze sky. Flames leap as he stokes the fires of a beehive gas retort. His noble pose (gondoliere), balletic stance (flamenco) and spotless appearance project a romanticized view, which seems at odds with the polluting environment of the job. Yet, the artist has gone to great lengths to capture technical details of the workplace (Dalsholm Gasworks, Glasgow): the oven’s precision brickwork; the furnace’s leaping flames; the network of connecting pipes, valves and sumps; the rivet-ridden, steel-plated, gunmetal blue gasometer and the tank’s expansion frame pulley system. The Gas Worker is one of a series of 20 stained glass square panels showing local trades and professions, which the borough council commissioned Stephen Adams to make for Maryhill Burgh Halls, Glasgow, when they opened in 1878 [1]. The other panels include: Blacksmiths, Boatbuilder, Bricklayers, Calico Printers, Canal Boatman, Chemical Workers, Dye Press Worker, Engineers, Glassblower, Iron Moulders, Joiners, Linen Bleachers, Papermaker, Railway Men, Sawyer, Soldiers, Teacher, Wheelwrights and Zinc Spelters [1]. Adam made preliminary sketches based on intensive ‘on-site’ studies [2] before completing the artwork in his Glasgow studio. He deliberately used the panels’ lead lines to define the principal shapes of the composition and bold colours to emphasize the realism.
The economic, minimalist style and dramatic use of rich greens, browns, golds and greys with flashes of harmonious deeper tones to add depth and dimension are typical of his masterful work [3].

Stephen Adam was born in Edinburgh (1848) and educated at Canonmills School, where Robert Louis Stevenson was a classmate. He was apprenticed to Ballantine & Allan, Edinburgh stained glass-makers then moved to Glasgow (1867) and studied at the Haldane Academy (later to become the Glasgow School of Art). He subsequently worked for the eminent Scottish Pre-Raphaelite glass painter David Cottier [4] before setting up his own studio in Glasgow (1870) [5]. By 1877, he was one of the foremost and prodigious stained glass artists in Scotland. Over the next 40 years, he produced an eclectic array of modern neo-classicist designs for the domestic (urban villas and mansions), civic (town halls, libraries and hospitals), commercial (restaurants and offices) and ecclesiastical markets [5]. One of Adam’s last religious commissions (1905–10) was a set of seven commemorative windows for the Celtic round-towered Kilmore Church at Dervaig in the Isle of Mull where he had married a native Muilach 20 years earlier [6,7]. For the west nave, he created a boldly coloured, enigmatic and intimate image of a pensive, saddened Jesus Christ and a pregnant Mary Magdalene ‘handfasting’ (marital hand-holding) [5] in a very Dan Brown moment [8]. Adam died in 1910 and his obituary mentioned amongst many other works the windows at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Sydney [9] and two publications: Stained Glass - Its History and Development (1877) and The Truth in Decorative Art - Stained Glass Medieval and Modern [10].

‘Coal gas’, a by-product of the distillation (carbonization) of coal to coke, was used by William Murdoch to light his Birmingham factory c1800 and by 1950, 25 m tonnes of coal were being consumed in over 2000 gas works across the UK [11]. ‘Coal gas’ contains hydrogen, carbon monoxide, methane and volatile hydrocarbons. Between 1911 and 1938, 700 occupational skin cancers among coal-tar distillers were notified in England [12]. Richard Doll later concluded ‘that exposure to products of coal carbonization can give rise to cancer of the lung and probably also to cancer of the bladder’ [13,14]. However, ‘natural gas’ has gradually replaced ‘coal gas’ and historical environmental pollution has overtaken occupational health concerns. Many UK towns and cities were heavily contaminated with polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, cyanide, sulphur, ammonia and heavy metals and have undergone extensive remediation so that the ‘brown fields’ can be redeveloped [15]. Dalsholm Gasworks has long since disappeared but Mary Burgh Halls have been renovated and re-opened, allowing Stephen Adam’s beautiful and historically important [2] panels to be reinstalled [1] in what was once ‘the most important place in the burgh’ [2]—a fitting celebration of by-gone local industry and its workforce.

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References