

“ANGELS” AT ST. PAUL’S CHURCH, BOW COMMON

Work undertaken by Charles Lutyens – Artist
between 1963 and 1968



St. Paul’s Church, designed by architects Robert Maguire and Keith Murray was consecrated in 1960 and is the first church in this country built with the altar in its central space.

This mosaic mural was commissioned in 1963 to represent the “Angels of the Heavenly Host”, haloed, winged and clothed in white and in an open attitude of worship, underlining the universality of faith.

The concept of the Angels is integral to the church and the 14 spandrels in which the mural is held are incorporated into the design and structure of the building.

Supported 12ft from the ground on pillars the mosaic thereby forms a continuous image around the central space of the church, supporting the upper walls and roof lantern by which the body of the church is lit.

Made in mosaic of the type ‘smalti tesserae’ (in pre-cut form for reasons of time), imported from Murano near Venice, where the colours have been manufactured to secret recipes for centuries, the 800 sq.ft mural was on completion to rest harmoniously within the architecture and fabric of the building.

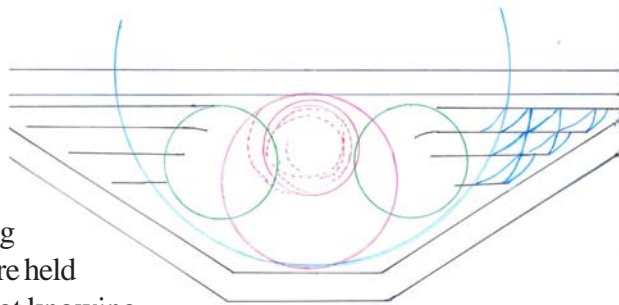
While the purpose and intent of the mural was conceptualised at the time of the church's design, the work started without its final appearance being known or drawn

Lutyens had no experience or other authority concerning the depiction of Angels. The question of how to represent an Angel, particularly of the "Heavenly Host" (who are defined as Beings attending to God around his Throne and are not messenger angels attending to humans) as a contemporary reality, was a pertinent problem. That the Angels would be "meaningful as a statement of faith today" Lutyens chose not to derive his image of angels from representations by artists in the past.

In this way of thinking Lutyens started to work with a sack of mosaic samples containing a myriad of colours. "These were very beautiful, working between light and dark it seemed as though I chose colours from the half-light of early morning or evening and green seemed to be a basis from which all colours could be drawn, both warm and cool". An environment for Angels?

It was thereby, after the application of the first tesserae to the wall and in the process of the making, that a visual structure and environment to hold the (unseen) Angels within the panels developed.

From the centre of each image interplaying circles reach upwards and outwards with lines through the wings spreading horizontally in a continual connection between the Angels, allowing for 'openness'. It seemed that this structure held also "my acceptance of the anxiety of not knowing and not pre-determining the 'appearance' of the Angels".



Each panel is individual in colour, expression, and in drawing.

In due course, as the application of mosaic increased around the church, the Angels took form. The corner panels came to represent the elements, Earth, Fire, Air and Water because they reach back to the Creation into which man has looked through the ages for his beginning and for evidence of God and because they express the qualities and feelings of man himself. The warm colours of earth and fire and the cool colours of air and water are carried into the panels on either side, so introducing a progressive change throughout the mural.

The representation of the element Fire was placed above the font in an acknowledgement of desire and passion. The other three corners contain the ambivalent shapes of Bird, Fish and Beast.

Lutyens created the mural single-handedly directly onto the walls of the church over a five-year period and with the sensitive help of a friend during the last year, completed it in 1968.

"My hope is that the images that have 'made their appearance' in the mosaic contain some truth as 'presences' in the experience of the onlooker."

Charles Lutyens lives currently in Hampshire. He has been a painter all his life. The central subject of his painting is 'Man and his being in this world', which also indicates religious enquiry. He is at present completing a 15ft Crucifixion in wood of an "outraged Christ".

Contact details: Telephone: 01256 770124, e-mail: cmlutyens@o2.co.uk

