

## OPUS SECTILE PANELS IN THE CHURCH OF ST JAMES, HAMPTON HILL

### INTRODUCTION

Opus sectile is a form of decoration similar in concept to mosaic work. It differs in that while the latter uses small, square stones (tesserae) of different colours to form a pattern or picture, opus sectile uses larger pieces, each shaped precisely rather like a jigsaw puzzle. Originally, only hard stone (pietra dura) was used but as these techniques developed, shell (particularly mother-of-pearl) and glass was also used. Gold leaf was sometimes added to great effect. Both techniques were used on floors, walls, apses, and in commemorative tablets and gravestones. While the square stones of mosaics were usually robust, the pieces used in opus sectile were cut in thin pieces, polished, then carefully trimmed to fit the chosen pattern. The design originated with a sketch which was worked up into a cartoon, sometimes by a different artist. Then it was the turn of skilled craftsmen to create the individual pieces, which can be of stone, ceramic, glass and even shell, and assemble them to form the pattern or picture. The finished work was usually ascribed to the artist who had drawn the cartoon.

Both techniques have been used for over two millennia, initially in Egypt, the Middle East and Greece, spreading eventually to Rome then elsewhere in Europe with the spread of the Roman Empire.

Although the technique died in Rome with the decline of the Western Empire, it continued to be used in the Eastern Empire, centered on Constantinople, particularly in Byzantine churches in which it was primarily used in floor decoration. In the 12th Century, the technique was brought back from the Eastern Empire to Medieval Italy in the form of the geometric patterns of the Cosmatesque style.

As with architecture and painting, the Italian Renaissance of the 14th to 17th Centuries saw a further development in the application and technique in opus sectile when it was used on furniture in the form of pietra dura work, pictures and geometric patterns formed of various types of stone on tabletops.

In the late 19th century, England experienced the emergence of the Arts and Crafts movement. This movement affected all aspects of art and design from jewellery to illustration to architecture. Opus sectile was revived particularly by the firm of James Powell & Sons at the famous Whitefriars Glass Works.

Whitefriars Glass Works was a small company that had been set up in the late 17th century just off Fleet Street. The Gothic Revival of Victorian England, and the accompanying boom in church-building and refurbishment, created a huge demand for stained glass windows. In 1834, an astute businessman, a wine merchant, seized this new opportunity by buying the company and renaming it as James Powell and Sons. Through experimenting with chemicals and techniques, James and his sons, and later his grandson, developed and patented new methods and the firm became a world-leader in its field. Among its products was work in opus sectile.

## THE PANELS

At the Church of St James, Hampton Hill we have four examples of opus sectile by the firm. The four form a pleasing set, placed symmetrically and each sharing an identical size, shape, and basic design. A marble surround sets each panel apart from the wall, a decorated white canopy, meant to represent limestone, surrounds each figure, and a dedication, in an identical script, appears in a panel at the base. Similarly, lest we be in doubt, the names of St Michael and St James are written in red in identical Medieval script on a gold panel above them: the Virgin and Child, and Christ need no such identification. Despite this unity in design, the erection of the panels was spread over a period of more than twenty years, each a memorial to a different person.

### St Michael panel

This was the first panel to be erected. The records show that a firm order was placed for it on 2nd December 1907 at a cost of £30. [1]

St Michael is often used in war memorials and of those to military men as in this case. Saints are usually human beings who have achieved a special status either by canonisation by the church or,



in the case of the Celtic Church, acclamation by their

congregations. But there are four exceptions, the archangels, each of whom has a special role. St Michael is one of these, a complex figure who appears in Judaic and Islamic texts as well as the New Testament, but essentially his role is the defeat of evil. His appearance in the Bible is restricted to the Books of Daniel and Revelation. In the latter, Evil is symbolised by a Dragon and it is this graphic image that artists, such as Epstein at Coventry Cathedral, tend to depict.

Our St Michael stands with his left foot on an utterly subjugated dragon, his chest, forearms, and lower legs protected by golden Medieval armour, cinched at the waist with a pink cloth. However, his upper arm and lower torso are clad in feathers, echoing his splendid wings. Behind him is the sky, further emphasising his power of flight and Heavenly origin. His long cloak is fastened with a brooch of Saxon design. He carries a shield that is a miniature version of a teardrop shape of a Norman shield and in his right hand is a magnificent sword with a golden, decorated handle and pommel. His special status is further indicated by his gold diadem, topped with a trefoil (representing, perhaps the Trinity) and his halo. The Medieval armour evokes nobility and the qualities associated with chivalry while the cloak, brooch, and shield give an English gloss to the figure. His sword points down, his gaze is upwards: Good has triumphed over Evil.

The three-dimensional effect is achieved in a number of ways. The armour is carefully shaded while the feathers of the upper arm, lower torso, and wings are outlined, the former with colour and the latter with golden tesserae. Golden tesserae also emphasise the folds in the cloak. Decorated gold sections edge the shield, enhanced by opalescent discs. Opalescent feathers also appear in the wings while carefully cut, leaf-shaped opalescent sections surrounded by a circle of golden tesserae comprise the halo.

#### St James panel

This was the second panel to be erected. The records show that a firm order was placed for it on 21st October 1913 at a cost of £34. We are also fortunate in that the designer was also recorded.

[1]



The Apostle St James the Greater, brother of St John the Evangelist, was the first Apostle to be martyred, beheaded on the orders of Herod. Legend has it that his head and body were taken by boat to Galicia (Northwest Spain). As the boat neared land, a man was seen drowning but, through the agency of St James, he arose alive from the depths, covered in scallop shells. St James' burial place was indicated by the fall of a star - perhaps a meteorite - and so, in due course, was established the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela: St James of the Star Field.

Having, or purporting to have, the earthly remains of a saint was important in medieval times, not only for veneration but also for prestige and the money brought by pilgrims to the shrine. Amalfi had St Andrew, and Venice, on its rise to prominence, replaced its little known patron saint, Theodosius, with St Mark, sending an expedition to Alexandria to steal his bones. (A small statue

of Theodosius slaying a dragon remains atop one of the two pillars marking the landing stage (the Molo) by St Mark's Square: the other pillar has the winged lion of St Mark).

Pilgrimage was and remains an act of piety and perhaps the most famous in Europe is that to Santiago de Compostela along one of the various Camino routes. That from England was the least arduous: after sailing to Spain, the Camino Ingles (English Path) went south from Ferrol. Today's Camino Ingles is even shorter as it starts in A Coruña (Spanish: La Coruña). The various Camino routes are today marked by the scallop-shell in various guises including life-size metal scallop-shells inset into pavements. As we do not know what each saint looked like, they are distinguished in art by one or more objects or creatures associated with them. These are known as "attributes". They are often their mode of death: St Paul has a sword, St Catherine a wheel, St Lawrence the gridiron on which he was roasted: St James has the scallop-shell and a pilgrim's staff with water-bottle attached.

Our St James is in the countryside: the background is of foliage. His staff and water-bottle are clearly visible. But what of his scallop-shell? Look closely at the book, the New Testament, he holds and there is the top of a scallop-shell visible. We also see two complete red discs and glimpse a partial one, each set in a golden square: we can safely infer a fourth. A cross is formed between them. These represent the Four Evangelists and, on a real manuscript, each would contain a separate depiction: an Angel (for St Matthew), a Winged Lion (St Mark), a Winged Bull (St Luke), and an Eagle (St John). Such was the loss in the minds of the general public of such knowledge that the artist has felt, as with the St Michael panel, the need for a title above the figure. The use of opalescence, shading, and highlighting techniques is as for the St Michael panel. But note: as it is a mortal depicted, no gold has been used other than on the Holy Scripture.

While the figure does not have the dramatic quality of the St Michael, there is a steady, calm gaze aimed directly at the viewer, a silent challenge to us, the pilgrim's path a metaphor of our journey to Faith. It is an effective and very fine design by a skilled artist. In fact, the records show us that it is by one of the most renowned designers of the age.

James Humphries Hogan (1883-1948) was a remarkable man who rose from humble beginnings to achieve great professional and commercial success. He is chiefly recognised for the number and quality of his stained glass designs but he also designed many opus sectile works. He joined James Powell & Sons in 1898 as a fourteen years old apprentice and spent the rest of his life with the firm. He learned his craft both as a student of Christopher Whall (a pre-eminent stained glass designer of the time) at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London and on the job under the firm's in-house designers. He worked his way up through the firm, becoming Chief Designer in 1913, Art Director in 1928, Managing Director in 1933, and Chairman from 1946 until his death. Recognition by his profession included election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (he also won their Silver Medal) in 1923; between 1941 to 1943, he was Master of the Faculty of Royal Designers in Industry, and was also elected Master of the Art Workers' Guild in 1945. [2]

His stained glass work can be seen in many cathedrals and churches particularly in England and America. Hogan designed windows for several cathedrals in England including those of Hereford,

Rochester, Exeter, Carlisle, and Winchester together with the hundred foot high windows in Liverpool Cathedral.

He was also prolific in opus sectile work, providing designs for churches, for example, in Wigan, Melbourne (Derbyshire), Copnor (Portsmouth), Amlwch (Anglesey), Ore (Sussex), Cromer, Eastbourne, Malta Cathedral, the Church of Heavenly Rest (New York City), and the Church of the Ascension, Mount Vernon (New York State). But of more immediate interest is that our "St James" has an identical twin as Hogan's design made an earlier appearance at the Church of St James, Trowbridge in Wiltshire! Reuse of cartoons was quite common: it made good commercial sense to use already extant designs where possible and figures of saints lend themselves to this.

Virgin and Child panel

The records show that a firm order was placed for it on 8th June 1924 at a cost of 75 guineas. The name of the designer is not given.[1]

Notre-Dame au Anges



The  
subject is  
both

ancient and popular in Christian art. A depiction of a mother and her child is a subject all people can readily relate to, pleasant and rewarding to look at and all the more so when weighted with the significance of the Virgin Mary and Christ.

Most paintings we see of this subject show the Virgin seated with the Christ-Child, if very young, cradled in her arms or, if older, sitting or standing on her lap. Such a composition, however, while good for a squarish shape of an usual canvas, does not lend itself to a narrow panel, nor would it harmonise with the other three panels, standing figures all. It has, therefore, the feel more of Renaissance church paintings or the kind of sculptures encountered in Roman Catholic churches. It is conventional to show the Christ-Child doing what children do, unaware of our gaze, though sometimes holding something of symbolic meaning: a Goldfinch, for example, the red surround of its beak prefiguring the blood that Christ will later give for mankind.

Here, the figure is in a most unchildlike pose, not reaching up and towards us as a child might but, rather, spreading His arms in an all-embracing gesture that also prefigures the outspread arms of the future Crucifixion. It is a very arresting image. It is further enhanced by the direct and aware gaze He gives us, the eyes of the Virgin cast down so as not to compete for our attention. Emphatically, He is no ordinary child.

A dim memory awakened, my research on Wikipedia has found that the panel is a copy of the central section of a painting, "Notre Dame des Anges" ("Our Lady of the Angels"), by a French painter, William-Adophe Bouguereau, famous (indeed, notorious!) in his own time and whose work is today much sought after. The painting has an interesting history. It was last shown publicly in the United States at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. It was donated in 2002 to the Daughters of Mary Mother of Our Savior, an order of nuns affiliated with Clarence Kelly's Traditionalist Catholic Society of St. Pius V. In 2009, the nuns sold it for \$450,000 to an art dealer, who was able to sell it for more than \$2 million to a private collector. Kelly was subsequently found guilty by a jury in Albany, New York, of defaming the dealer in remarks made in a television interview. Bouguereau was a very prolific artist: some 588 paintings are known. I looked through images of over 500 of them and found four, comprising two identical pairs, where the Christ-Child is depicted as in "Our Lady of the Angels" though in each case Christ is on Mary's left, rather than right, side and Mary is seated or shown only from the hips up. In "The Virgin of the Lilies" and "The Madonna of the Lilies" the halos are gold and, as in our panel, both are placed behind Mary. The background is floral. In the other pair, "Madone Assise" and "Virgin and Child (1888)", the halos are bright, light gold and the background is a rich, darker gold Damask. Bouguereau has solved the halos problem by placing the Christ-Child further forward so allowing space for His own distinct halo.

The convention of cloaking Mary in blue is an ancient one, signifying her as the Queen of Heaven. In medieval and Renaissance times, the source of blue pigment was lapis lazuli, a rare and expensive mineral. Such was its disproportionate cost that artists would price their paintings by how much lapis lazuli they would need to paint Mary's cloak. Lines of gold tesserae enrich her cloak and the background is richly ornate. Note, too, the halos: they differ from those of the saints and also from one another. Mary's comprises two opalescent, segmented rings bordered by a thin



circle of gold tesserae. That of Christ is also opalescent but note the distinct cross which overlaps the gold tesserae: a cross on a halo is reserved for depictions of Christ. Unlike the barefoot Mary of Bouguereau's original, our Mary is shod as indeed are the figures of St Michael and St James: only the figure of Christ with Orb and Sceptre is barefoot.

#### Christ with Orb and Sceptre panel

The records show that a firm order was placed for it on 19th November 1928 at a cost of £80. It is from a design sketch by Coakes and a cartoon by Read, both of whom produced considerable work in-house for Powell and Sons. [1]



This subject is termed the Pantocrator ("All-Powerful"). Christ is shown holding orb and sceptre, as do British, and other, monarchs at their coronations. Both symbols are ancient. For

example, Roman emperors used the orb, crowned with the Goddess of Victory, to show their domination of the world. For Christian monarchs, it was crowned with a cross and represents Christ's earthly dominion and the monarch's commitment to that. The orb is divided by decorated bands into three areas representing the three continents known in medieval times. The sceptre is even more ancient, probably originating in a club that would have been a very real indicator of the authority its successor came to symbolise. This portrayal of Christ with the coronation symbols of our monarchs, placed in an Anglican church, reminds us that, despite the Reformation, our monarchs did not relinquish the Papally-granted title of "Defender of the Faith" (Fid Def remains on our coins), have an ecclesiastical role as Governors of the Church of England, and, despite the suppression of the Divine Right of Kings, consider themselves to have a divinely ordained Christian mission. While there are many images of Christ holding an orb, I have been unable to locate any other images in which He holds both orb and sceptre (though I have a vague recollection of having seen a Byzantine mosaic or Orthodox icon which portrays it). It may therefore be that this panel design is unique, certainly in this country, though the panel itself might exist, like the St James panel) in other churches. It may be that, in previous times, such a parallel between depictions of monarchs and Christ was considered too close, bordering on blasphemous, but that by the end of the first quarter of the Twentieth Century such opinions may have softened.

On His head is a crown, decorated with fleur-de-lys, echoing the symbol at the top of the sceptre. The cross on the halo is a rich red and decorated with stylised, gold lilies-of-the-valley. These various lilies symbolise Purity and are often associated in artworks with Christ and the Virgin Mary.

He is wrapped in a white cope fastened by a decorated gold clasp, an echo of ecclesiastical vestments. His hands and bare feet display His crucifixion wounds, reminders that even in Heaven, Christ continues to bear the signs of the suffering, endured to save us, that was inflicted upon Him by Mankind. His calm gaze is directed at us.

The setting of the figure is within an aureole, a full-body halo-like symbol of Divine Glory generally reserved for Christ and Mary. Early Christians used a simple, stylised fish as their symbol, drawing no doubt on Christ saying that they were "fishers of men" with the mission of drawing others into the church. That symbol is derived from two intersecting circles (with each line extended at one end to form a tail). The use of the basic symbol is extremely ancient and was used to represent Woman. It was still used for that representation in Christian manuscript illustration where the *Vagina Indentata* graphically referenced sexual temptation.

While in geometry it is known as a "lens" (and hence our use of it for glass magnifiers as they have that cross-section), in art they are called *Vesica Piscis* as they resemble in shape the swim-bladders of fish. Similarly, the Italian term *Mandorla* ("almond") is also used. By using light gold rays, thick and thin, straight and undulating, against a gold background to the rays that shades to dark, the artist has sought to convey an active, shimmering aureole.

While today we place our hands together with palms touching when praying, it is thought that in early times only the tips of the fingers and the base of each hand would make contact thus forming

a lens-shape. Further, that the transformation in church architecture from the Romanesque/Norman round arch to the pointed Gothic arch was driven by an attempt to embody the shape: essentially to display the church building itself at prayer. The structural advantages of the Gothic arch were thus a consequential discovery rather than fundamental. The full shape is sometimes used for window apertures.

## SUMMARY

The four opus sectile panels are a set of magnificent works of art and craftsmanship, created over more than two decades, yet retaining a composition, style and size that is satisfyingly cohesive.

Whether through intention or, more likely, chance their subject matter provides a graduated range of beings central to Christianity from a man, albeit holy, through a heavenly being, to the woman who bore Christ, culminating in Christ in Glory. Above all, contemplation of each gives us pause to consider different aspects of Faith.

Together, they form a treasure of which the Church of St James can be proud to be custodian.

[1] "Powell's Opus Sectile Locations." Compiled by Dennis Hadley. Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society. Web. 2 August 2014.

[2] The Victorian Web