

A period of extraordinary fecundity: a survey of postwar murals

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It's now forty years since the Summer of Love, the summer of 1967, when thousands flocked to San Francisco, the Beatles released *Sergeant Pepper*, and the mass media discovered hippie counterculture and the flower children. But this wasn't a new movement, it was something that began around the end of the war; you could even say that 67 marked the end of the beginning. It took almost ten years for rationing and restrictions on building materials to be lifted after the war, and by the mid 50s the art world had changed considerably. Pop art made an early appearance at the 1956 exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, where Richard Hamilton's photomontage greeted visitors, and ten years on, by the mid 60s, London was swinging. In 1965 the editor of *Vogue* declared that 'London is the most swinging city in the world at the moment'. This was a time of hedonism, protest, consumerism, new fashions - and really bad beer. The writer Margaret Drabble recently summed up the 60s as 'a period of extraordinary fecundity', with 'a defining quality of daring'. 'In those days, people took risks'. This applied to art just as much as any other part of the cultural revolution of the postwar years.

The postwar fun really started in 1951 at the Festival of Britain. Its director of architecture was Hugh Casson, Professor of Interior Design at the Royal College of Art, and his young design team produced this brilliantly colourful watercolour of the proposals for the South Bank site. Colour was a crucial element in the overall South Bank design, one which sometimes gets overlooked now as the Festival was mainly photographed in black and white; as Casson said, 'it blazed with bright nursery colours'. On the right is the Dome of Discovery, to the left the Skylon, and between the Skylon and the bridge is the Regatta Restaurant, which I'll mention later. By the river, in front of the Dome, was the Sea and Ships pavilion, with on the left a huge mural by John Hutton, painted on 200 asbestos sections in a new plastic paint. It was the era of 'bringing art to the people' and murals were a significant element in the decoration of Festival sites throughout the country. The South Bank Exhibition alone included around 100 murals executed by almost as many different artists.

Many of the murals were in the restaurants dotted about the site; in the Rocket Restaurant was a mural by Betty Swanwick, who taught at Goldsmiths' School of Design; this was her first mural. The Turntable Café had a food-and-drink themed mural by Julian Trevelyan at the rear of the Beer Vault Terrace, and in the Garden Café, part of the Homes and Gardens pavilion, was this mural by Marek Zulawski. Even the Festival ship *Campania*, which toured round the coast, had a maritime-themed mural by Alan Sorrell in the Nelson Bar. Here's a better view of the mural, with the good people of Plymouth enjoying a drink. The vast majority of the South Bank murals were figurative, although here are a few of the exceptions; one visitor later said 'Naturally the figurative artists came off best in the public arena'. Another abstract was the first mural to be carried out by Cecil Stephenson, a former RCA student who was then head of art in the architectural department of London's Northern Polytechnic. He was commissioned to produce a mural for the ceiling of a gloomy corridor, and solved the problem by using

the recently developed fluorescent paints; his multi-coloured design was loosely based on musical notation. He was later commissioned by Plyglass of Harlow to design the glass laminate mural on the facade of the British Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels International Exhibition.

Also abstract was the ceramic tile mural on an outside wall of the Regatta Restaurant, alongside a busy double-height staircase connecting the Bailey Bridge and the River Walk. Victor Pasmore's black and white design, *The Waterfall*, was made up by Carter's of Poole; he intended it to transform how the building was perceived, by means of contrast. It received much press comment at the time and was thought to be one of the most successful of all the South Bank artworks. But most of the South Bank murals, including *The Waterfall*, were lost when the exhibition site was cleared to make way for a garden used in the 1953 Coronation celebrations.

The postwar building boom created increased opportunities for muralists. For one thing, modern architecture - with its tower blocks and broad expanses of blank surfaces - simply provided more space for murals, but it wasn't just the South Bank architects who were keen on colour. The Labour politician Anthony Crosland, in his 1956 book *The Future of Socialism*, wanted Britain to become 'a more colourful and civilised country to live in'. To achieve this we needed, amongst other things, 'more open-air cafés.... later closing hours for public houses.... more pleasure gardens on the Battersea model.... more murals and pictures in public places.... and statues in the centre of new housing estates'. What resulted, even apart from the Festival murals, was that more than 600 large scale murals, in a huge range of materials, were installed in Britain between the war and 1980. Over half of these are still extant, although they rarely get any mention in art historical publications.

In fact mural painting continued during the war; British Restaurants had commissions from several well known artists including Edward Bawden, Eric Gill, Kenneth Rowntree and Mary Adshead. After the war, Adshead painted a spectacular jungle-themed scheme for the Jungle Restaurant at Selfridges. Schools, too, were an important source of postwar commissions. In Hertfordshire, the emphasis in new primary schools was on prefabrication and standardized construction, with informal planning, bright colours and murals. Artists involved included Pat Tew, with three murals at Templewood School, and Kenneth Rowntree, who painted a stylized landscape at the Barclay School, which was designed by YRM. The school also had a ceramic tile mural by Peggy Angus, who was a consultant designer to Carter's for 10 years from 1951. YRM went on to use tiles by Angus in 18 of their projects, including at least 10 schools and colleges. In 1951 her tilework for two schools in Poplar, now jointly known as the Lansbury Lawrence Primary School, designed by YRM as part of the Festival of Britain *Live Architecture Exhibition*, was widely publicized and led to a series of mural commissions from other architects.

In 1953, Carter's produced its first postwar large-scale pictorial mural, for the serving counter of a new cafeteria in Lewis's department store in Liverpool. Some 65 feet long and 10 feet high, it was probably designed by A. B. Read, who became head of the company's design unit in 1952. Angus and Read were joined in the company in 1955 by Ivor Kamlish, who we shall be hearing from later; he designed this mural for Hartcliffe School, Bristol in 1960. Sadly the mural has not survived, although the school itself has. Large scale murals were popular with industrial and corporate concerns, the designs often featuring stylized images relating to the commissioning body. Good examples

include the 1959 mural at Transport House in Belfast, the headquarters of the Transport and General Workers' Union, showing workers in local industries; and in the 1960s the Shell Refining Company for their Shellhaven plant in Essex; Truman's Black Eagle Brewery, Spitalfields; and Parvaux Electric Motors of Poole. This was demolished some time ago, and the brewery mural has probably gone too.

Several architects worked for Carter's in the 50s. Gordon Cullen, best known as the author of *Townscape*, was commissioned in 1957 by Coventry's City Planning and Redevelopment Committee to design a mural illustrating the spirit of the city's postwar reconstruction. These are images of the mural at its original location in the central pedestrian shopping precinct. Despite years of neglect and then redevelopment plans, it was, due to the council, restored by Jackfield Conservation Studio and successfully relocated in 2002 to another part of the precinct, where it is much more visible and has been well received; a rare conservation success story. Kenneth Barden, chief architect with the contractors George Wimpey, designed several hundred murals worldwide and also worked with Carter's on occasion, one example being at the Herts and Essex Water Company's pump house in Harlow.

Also well known for their ceramic mural work in the 60s was Pilkington's of Clifton Junction, Manchester. One of their most important postwar commissions was at Carlisle's Civic Centre, where the four stairwells have dramatic double-height murals, all in different colourways. The major tile manufacturers were responsible for around half the large scale murals produced from the mid 50s to the mid 70s. The total number is probably in the region of 150, but archive records are scarce and it is impossible to be more exact. Generally, design and manufacture were relatively traditional, but by combining elements of hand craft and mass production, ceramic murals can be seen as transitional between earlier hand-painted and later concrete murals.

An example of a smaller ceramics firm, which produced murals in the north of England and then worldwide, is that of Rhys and Jean Powell, who began with murals for a series of Liverpool pubs in the 1960s. This is Jean seen earlier this year at an exhibition of their work. Their mural in Liverpool's Dental Hospital dates from 1969, and around that time they were also doing tile designs for Wade's of Stoke-on-Trent, which were used to make domestic-scale murals; this is a shot from the exhibition. The firm, now known as Craig Bragdy, is based in Denbigh and still produces murals, but from about 1980 most commissions have come from abroad. Another smaller firm notable for murals was Kenneth Clark Ceramics, set up in 1953 by Kenneth Clark and his wife Ann Wynn-Reeves. Their mural commissions began in the late 1950s, and Clark often worked in partnership with other designers, as at Harrow Civic Centre; this is just a small section of a mural designed by Pentagram and made by Kenneth Clark Ceramics. They also produced tiles which could be used in the home, like these from the 60s.

Mural commissions tended to come from architects, who could build up relationships with specific potters or firms leading to further commissions, as in the case of the architect Basil Spence and the artist William Gordon. Gordon was born in St Petersburg in 1905 and educated in Scotland, London and Oxford University, eventually working for the Walton Pottery in Chesterfield until 1955, when he returned to London to concentrate on developing ceramic tiles. Gordon's first large scale tile commission was from Spence for a full height stoneware mural at St Aidan's Church in the suburbs of Leicester. This is a perspective drawing by Spence of the church, and as you can see it

comes from the Scottish Royal Commission, which now holds the Basil Spence Archive. There are several other designs by Gordon for tile murals in the archive, which were possibly associated with the Leicester church. A second commission from Spence around 1958 resulted in a colourful abstract mural, measuring 100 feet by 18 feet, for a site above the shop frontages at Basildon Bus Station. Gordon collaborated with Carter's on this mural, which was lost during the mid 80s, and carried out several more with the firm.

Aside from St Aidan's, the only other comparable postwar external ceramic installation at a church is the massive *Last Judgement* at St Mary's in Leyland. The tympanum was designed by the Polish muralist and sculptor Adam Kossowski, who came to Britain in 1943 as a refugee from the Russian labour camps. He was soon invited to join the Guild of Catholic Artists and Craftsmen, and through them was introduced to the Carmelite foundation of Aylesford Priory in Kent. From 1950 he worked there intermittently during a period of over 20 years, but these works were only a part of his huge output. He was a prolific artist in several media, for instance the sgraffito decoration of St Benedict's Chapel at Queen Mary College. His major secular work *The History of the Old Kent Road* is on the exterior of the former North Peckham Civic Centre in London.

A number of artists who were primarily easel painters also experimented with murals in the 50s and 60s. The Civil Engineering Building at Liverpool University was the site of the sole ceramic mural designed by the artist Peter Lanyon. He was specifically commissioned by the building's architect, Maxwell Fry of Fry, Drew & Lasdun, who were well known for working with artists. Its location and title, *The Conflict of Man with the Tides and the Sands*, had already been decided by a committee, which also wanted a 'student-proof' mural. Fry therefore suggested using ceramic tiles, which were new to Lanyon. He found them problematic, as they shattered during firing and the colour quality was poor, partly due to his use of enamel rather than ceramic glaze. Lanyon went on to produce two more murals, in paint rather than tiles: one for his patron, Stanley Seeger, for his house in New Jersey in 1962, and the other for the entrance hall of the Faculty of Arts Building at the University of Birmingham. Currently it is partly hidden by a row of chairs and a large pot plant; unfortunately, this type of treatment of murals is all too common, as you can see on the left at Manchester, where the lunchtime trays are parked up against the Pasmore mural.

Other painters trying their hand at ceramics include Dorothy Annan, who designed a series of nine stoneware panels for the Fleet Building in Farringdon Street, then one of London's largest telephone exchanges. Still extant, in fact about a 10 minute walk from here, they were intended to 'add interest at street level'; the glazes have very rich colours and there is a wealth of different textures and detailing. The building is not listed and is currently vacant and the subject of a planning application. Dorothy Annan herself lived a bohemian life, mostly in London with her sculptor husband Trevor Tennant, including some time spent living in a single-decker bus. She was prolific, designing other murals for locations including the Bank of England and Durham University Library. Walter Hudspith, an RCA student who eventually became Senior Lecturer at Sunderland College of Art, produced his sole ceramic work for the extension to the city's Museum and Winter Gardens. The three panels were the first examples of public art to be commissioned in Sunderland, and represent music, art and literature.

The career of the designer and artist Robert Stewart, who studied at Glasgow School of Art during the 40s and taught there from 1949 until 1984, encompassed printed textiles, tapestries, ceramics and paintings. He designed and made over 20 tile murals during the 60s and 70s, for hotels, schools and offices, the commissions generally coming from architects. Many of his works, which were often abstract panels with unusual metallic glazes, have already been destroyed, but those at Motherwell Theatre, built as part of the town's Civic Centre development, have survived. The theatre is entered through a lobby defined by two sets of glass doors; on either side of this small space are full height murals.

The tile mural from Plymouth's Armada Way underpass was a collaboration between Kenneth Clark and the graphic designer Edward Pond. It was both innovative and popular, but when the local council wished to create a new city centre space, they simply buried it, in 2004, by filling in the underpass. More fortunate was the sculptor Fritz Steller, whose extraordinary series of massive stoneware murals *Articulation in Movement* on the east facade of Queensgate Market, Huddersfield, survived a council redevelopment proposal; the market is now listed grade II. The designs of the 10 panels reflect the structure and use of the market, one being pierced by stairs leading to the hall itself. After experiencing difficulties making the Huddersfield panels, Steller invented an easily handled ceramic cladding product called Transform, which could be used inside and outside, and offered many options of texture, form and colour. It was used on at least half a dozen British sites, as well as abroad.

By the 60s, concrete had become popular with many mural artists. They were looking for new textures, they favoured the 'machine made' with tough surfaces; if they were to have decoration, it had to be a part of the wall itself. Two of the most significant artists to use concrete were Bill Mitchell, who we shall hear from later, and Antony Hollaway; they were both hired by London County Council in 1958. As we shall also be hearing about the LCC and its artistic patronage programme, I'll confine myself to saying that Mitchell and Hollaway's work was hugely influential and gained a great deal of publicity. Mitchell's internal concrete wall for the reception area of the Lee Valley Water Works at Hatfield featured on the front cover of *Concrete Quarterly* in 1964. It was said to be the largest single cast ever executed.

So who else was working with concrete? George Garson, who taught at Glasgow School of Art from 1971 to 1985, carried out the double height structural concrete wall in the entrance hall of Glenrothes House for Glenrothes Development Corporation. Scottish new towns and educational bodies commissioned another nine Garson murals in mosaic, tiles, brick or paint during the late 60s and 70s. This unique mural was designed by the Scottish artist Charles Anderson for the Thompson Leisure Centre in Burnley. At 400 feet long, it was one of the longest murals in Britain. Anderson trained at Glasgow School of Art and carried out a series of murals and sculptures from the mid 60s for property developers, local authorities, banks and major insurance companies, until he returned to easel painting in the mid 1990s. The Thompson Centre was demolished in early 2007, but after a campaign to preserve the mural, it was saved by the intervention of a local businessman, who paid for it to be removed and put into store until a suitable home can be found. Anderson was prolific but it is surprisingly difficult to find surviving examples of his work. This was probably his, as it is signed; it is the social club at the old Scottish and Newcastle brewery in Edinburgh, just south of Haymarket station. The site is being redeveloped and this has probably now gone. And here too is

probably an Anderson, as he was definitely responsible for a mural inside the same building, Greenock Library. Another vast concrete relief was made by the stained glass artist Henry Haig for South Ruislip underground station in 1961. This example at Hull College does not feature in the newish East Riding Pevsner; I'm not altogether sure of the artist, though I think he may be here today?

The New York-born sculptor Mitzi Cunliffe took a completely different approach to concrete murals. A 1967 exhibition of her work, *Sculpture by the Yard*, focused on mass produced concrete and fibreglass units which she then assembled into large external reliefs; the press release stated her 'life-long dream is a world where sculpture is produced by the yard in factories and used in buildings as casually as bricks'. On the front of the catalogue was Cater House, now apparently one of the most hated buildings in Chelmsford. Of the nine reliefs shown in the exhibition, five came from Cunliffe's *Cosmos* series, including the cast concrete wall sculpture *Cosmos 2* at Wearmouth Hall, now part of the University of Sunderland. The building is currently threatened with demolition, but the mural may be moved. This is Cunliffe's stylised figurative stone relief on Heaton Park Pumping Station in Greater Manchester; it is one of only two postwar buildings to be listed solely for their sculpture.

There were other attempts to incorporate mass produced concrete into architectural reliefs. Francis and Dorothy Carr, who pioneered silk screen printing as a fine art medium, designed concrete relief cladding panels measuring a few feet square with various repeat motifs. These were produced in the early 60s under the trade name Kastone by Kendell's Stone & Paving Company. They were similar to the slightly later products of the Minkstone works in Longton, Stoke-on-Trent, whose high relief cladding blocks could be arranged in a wide assortment of patterns. They also made concrete murals, designed by a panel of artists, one surviving example being the *History of Cement*, made for the Cement Marketing Company but now mounted on the gable end of the former Minkstone works.

Philippa Threlfall's colourful murals were popular from the mid 60s. She took small pre-cast concrete slabs, added a one inch thick cement render, then set into it materials like pebbles and ceramics. The slabs were then attached to a wall with metal ties. She made several murals for schools, generally on historical themes, after which she and her husband, the historian Kennedy Collings, collaborated on a series of murals. The largest was the 85 feet long *Life in West Riding* for the restaurant at Leeds-Bradford Airport. The 60 feet long *Greenwich Mural*, whose theme is the maritime history of Greenwich, was commissioned for an external wall of Greenwich District Hospital. It was moved to a nearby park when the hospital was closed in 2001.

Henry Collins, who'd done a mural for the Sea and Ships pavilion on the South Bank, went on to produce a series of historical murals with his wife, the artist Joyce Pallot, using mainly concrete and mosaic. They date from the 70s and were mostly made for Sainsbury's and British Home Stores as well as the subways of their home town, Colchester. Here they are working on a mural for Gwent House in Cwmbran. They never worked on site but used a regular contractor who cast the concrete in panels around four feet square. Their *Newcastle Through the Ages* was a BHS commission. The designs had a lot of variety in terms of relief, roughness and colour; Collins said the murals were intended to be touched, describing this as 'spectator involvement', just as Mitzi Cunliffe wanted her work to be 'used, rained on, leaned against, taken for granted'.

Mosaic was often used in mural panels to add colour to new schools, housing and shopping developments. One of the most unusual occurrences is at Gosport, where these twin 16-storey blocks were clad with Carter's mosaic murals running their whole 135 feet height. The designs were by Kenneth Barden and the architect J. E. Tyrrell. I'm just going to show a few more examples of mosaic murals, excluding those by artists we shall be hearing more about later today. The first is at Thomson House in Cardiff, the offices of the Western Mail, now squeezed in beside the Millennium Stadium. The ceramic mosaic by Ray Howard-Jones, the Welsh landscape artist, is intended to symbolise the geographical area covered by the newspaper. Moving on to the 60s, Hans Tisdall designed the mosaics at the Faraday Building, now part of the University of Manchester. This is County Hall in Durham, and I don't have the artist's name - more historical figures in Huddersfield, where Ramsden House has a ceramic mosaic of the woollen industry by local artist Harold Blackburn, who was best known as a book illustrator. And here's *Three Ships*, a tribute to Hull's fishermen commissioned by the Co-op; it's an Italian glass mosaic by the Wolverhampton artist Alan Boyson and measures well over 4,000 square feet. Finally from the 60s is the Merrion Market in Leeds, a rather glum building which the owner decided to brighten up with a mosaic. The design was by the Head of Leeds College of Art, Eric Taylor, and it was made up by the Manchester firm Oppenheimers.

Another external mural, near Trinity College in the centre of Dublin, tells the story of the Irish warrior Setanta. This is one of several large-scale mosaics in the city by Desmond Kinney from Portstewart. Eduardo Paolozzi's mosaics at Tottenham Court Road underground station are well known, but his 1981 work at the Kingfisher Shopping Centre in Redditch predates it and has received much less publicity. The theme was the local needle-making industry.

Now to other materials. The entrances to Plymouth's Pannier Market have plaster murals by David Weeks, seen on the right here. They show market activities, while another entrance has outline figures of shoppers incised into the walls. Brick murals - this is the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, with its 100 yard long carved brick mural by potter-cum-sculptor Frank Maurier, using over 6,000 bricks. Decorating the front of Bristol Eye Hospital are five massive carved-brick reliefs by Walter Ritchie. The panels, each measuring nearly 6' by 12', depict *The Creation*. When installed, they were the largest non-reinforced brick reliefs ever carved. An unknown material for this mural at St Andrew's Methodist Church, Sheringham. Also unknown, but possibly painted concrete, is this mural on the former GUS Building in Burnley. Stone is occasionally used for murals, like *Delight* in Abbey Wood Park in Woolwich, with its abstract dancing figures, and this one by Arthur Ayres on the facade of the Mitchell Engineering building in Peterborough. Not forgetting metal and glass - this huge mid 60s mural by Brian Asquith, made from bronze and stainless steel, was in the Westminster Bank's Sheffield branch. And glass - this is Avinash Chandra working on his glass relief mural for Chappell's music shop in Bond Street; my opening slide showed this one. And here he is in front of his mural *Fire* at the Pilkington's offices in St Helen's.

Although I have mostly concentrated on tiles and concrete, they by no means took over completely from painted murals. The political murals of Northern Ireland are some of the few murals that have been studied in depth, and it is interesting to see the tradition being maintained but also changed, with non-political subject matter, and

maybe this reflects the current fashion for some graffiti being regarded as valuable artwork. Of course there were earlier non-political murals carried out in Northern Ireland, like Colin Middleton's series of six early 70s panels inside of Morelli's ice cream parlour on the sea front at Portstewart. Unfortunately there is no photograph of how they looked in situ, and the panels themselves were recently sold at auction.

I've also omitted any mention of Hans Feibusch, as he has been studied in depth; he is best known for his church murals but also did the wonderful history cycle at Newport Civic Centre. Also well known is the Ivon Hitchens mural at Cecil Sharp House, the home of the English Folk Dance and Song Society; he also did *Day's Work* for the refectory at the University of Sussex. Another restaurant mural, one of several artworks commissioned for Britannic House, BP's lavish London headquarters, was carried out by Edward Bawden. Perhaps more typical of the early corporate murals is this example by Tony Bartl in the reception of the British Welding Research Association in Cambridge. He had previously designed *A Short History of Engineering* for the Department of Engineering at the University.

To sum up, there are about 45 postwar murals at listed locations in England, many of those being churches and schools. The murals are generally mentioned in the list descriptions, as is John Poole's at the Rotunda, but are sometimes ignored, as at the Morrill Arms. There are only five listed ceramic murals in England, including this one at Bradford; the others are the Barclay School, Stevenage; Lewis's Liverpool; St Mary's Leyland; and Queensgate Market in Huddersfield. Most of those I have shown today are not listed, most surprisingly perhaps William Gordon's work at the Basil Spence-designed St Aidan in Leicester.

Too little critical attention has been paid to the murals of Britain's reconstructed towns and cities. This academic void is exemplified by the work of the otherwise splendid Public Catalogue Foundation, which is recording and publishing oil paintings in public collections; however, murals are specifically excluded from its remit. And crucially, murals are not seen as collectable, so do not have any clear financial value. Even if a mural is saved when a building is demolished, it can be hard to find a home for it; an instance is the 60s mural by John Luke at the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education. A complex story involving the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the Heritage Lottery Fund, demolition contractors, a construction firm and the Institute resulted in the demolition firm claiming the mural as salvage. There seems to have been no regard for murals from the major museums which might have been expected to show an interest in the demise of these modern artworks.

Although the present listed buildings system in England does not deal adequately with postwar murals, there are signs of hope, for instance the Trafalgar House mural in Portsmouth, which was threatened with destruction when the building was about to be converted into a pub, but the building was listed in 2002. Unusually the list description stated that 'the principal interest of the building is a painted mural'; it was protected and restored during redevelopment, and the pub opened in 2004. But several important postwar murals are currently under threat, including one depicting the history of the Clyde by the noted Scottish muralist William Crosbie at Duncanrig School. It was the new town's first school, was designed by Basil Spence and opened in 1956. Several of the town's schools are being merged and Duncanrig is about to be demolished. Indeed it would already have been demolished, mural and all, had it not been for the presence of a bat's nest. If other murals are not to suffer a similar fate to

Duncanrig and the Armada Way, more thought needs to be given to a method of dealing with these vulnerable artworks.