




Chester Cathedral: The Mosaics

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T may not be generally known that the word "Mosaic" is practically the same as "Music," in that it signifies something to do with the Muses; inspired, so to speak, by the Muses, and so having what we call an artistic and æsthetic value. Our varied use of the word "Museum" might remind us that there were more Muses than one; and that their province was supposed to extend over all the fine Arts, whether they appeal to the ear or the eye.

The term Mosaic is applied to the mode of representing objects by the inlaying of small cubes of glass, stone, marble, shells, wood, &c. It was a species of work much in repute among the ancients, as may be gathered from the numerous remains of it. It is supposed to have originated in the East, and to have been brought from Phœnicia to Greece, and thence carried to Rome.

The term Mosaic-work is distinguished from Marquetry (or Parquetry) by being only applied properly to works of stone, metal, or glass. Marquetry was

used by the early Italian builders in cabinet-work ; and John of Vienna, and others of his period, represented by its means figures and landscapes ; but in the present day it is chiefly confined to floors, in which the divers pieces of wood are usually disposed in regular geometrical figures, and are rarely of more than three or four species.

We have in our Cathedral various specimens of Mosaic-work. First of all, there is the eastern wall of the Lady Chapel, decorated in this manner after the design of Sir Arthur Blomfield. Here are subjects represented appropriate to that portion of the building ; and we have the Annunciation, the Salutation, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Flight into Egypt. The cubes used are of composition, and vitreous in character ; and a good deal of gold has been introduced. The outlines of the figures are given in lines of a decidedly marked character ; and some portion of the work seems to have suffered since it was executed, as the mortar or lime between the cubes shows rather too prominently in certain places, and detracts from the restfulness of the pictures.

Next there is the Reredos over the High Altar—one of the many gifts to the Cathedral of the late Mrs. Platt and her husband. Here we have a representation of the Last Supper, from the well-known picture. It is enclosed in an elaborate framework, and surmounted with a range of canopies. The material used is similar to that in the Lady Chapel, though more delicate and finished, and with greater refinement of colour. The cubes, too, are very much smaller ; as would of course be necessary in the reproduction of a picture on a smaller scale. I think I am right in

saying that, whilst the design was by Clayton & Bell, the work was executed by Salviati, of Venice and London.

This certainly was the case with the Mosaics at the east end of the South Aisle of the Choir. Sir Gilbert Scott, as you know, reconstructed the Early English Apse here, having first pulled down the Perpendicular extension of it, like that which still remains in the North Choir Aisle. This work was done by Lord Brassey and his brothers, in memory of their father, the eminent contractor, who was a native of Cheshire. The Mosaics were placed there in loving remembrance of their mother. They represent three female characters from Holy Scripture: the Widow of Sarepta, with Elijah in the centre; and on the two sides, Phœbe receiving the Epistle to the Romans from S. Paul; and Priscilla with Aquila instructing Apollos. Woman's work as a sustainer, a messenger or minister, and as a teacher is thus represented. The decorative portion around these pictures gives us the Beatitudes, and allegorical figures indicating the graces of the Spirit, as enumerated in the Epistle to the Galatians. Here again the pieces used in the Mosaic-work are very small, and the greatest care and skill must have been required in putting them in their proper places, as well as in the selection of them.

It may not be out of place to remark here that this Chapel is called the Chapel of S. Erasmus. There are two Saints at least bearing that name; we cannot say certainly which is the one commemorated here. Probably, the one who is styled by Baring-Gould "a popular Saint," though there is no trustworthy authority about his history. He belonged to the early

part of the 4th century; fled to Lebanon in the Diocletian persecution; was arrested, and died a martyr, various modes of death being attributed to him. There may be some confusion in his history between two others of the same name, one in Syria, the other in Campana.

Though not strictly Mosaic-work, as we use the term, but being rather of the nature of a tessellated pavement, attention may here be called to the borders which frame in the three Intarsia pictures of the First Passover on the floor of the Sanctuary of the Choir. These little pieces of marble are fragments of a tessellated pavement from the Temple Area at Jerusalem; and were, I believe, given to Dean Howson by Sir Charles Wilson, who had to do with the Palestine Exploration Fund. They probably, therefore, are some of the oldest specimens of this kind of work, not only here but elsewhere, and come from a spot very near to the country where such work had its origin. There is, of course, also a further value in them, as in their present position they form an interesting connection between the Old Dispensation and the New; and, remembering the subjects they surround, between the First Passover and the Paschal Lamb, Christ our Passover Who is sacrificed for us.

It may be noted that the surface of the Mosaics we have been considering is perfectly smooth and flat. This is to be expected in representations which are close to the eye, and which are to be seen from only a short distance. But a different treatment is made use of when they are far removed from the spectator, and at a considerable distance from him. Thus, the Mosaics on the ceiling of S. Paul's Cathe-

dral have not a plain surface. The outlines or other features are made more prominent, and brought into bolder relief, by the pieces representing them being raised, and so standing out from the rest. This, of course, cannot be detected from below without the aid of powerful glasses.

In the year 1895, I had the privilege of ascending, with Dean Gregory, the ladders which led to the scaffold and platform where the work was then being done. It was very interesting to see the workmen breaking up the material into fragments suitable in size and shape for the picture they were constructing. They had in front of them Sir William Richmond's designs. With marvellous celerity and aptitude, they selected the material of the colour which was best fitted for the purpose; and you could see growing under your eyes the reproduction of the picture of the artist. I was also able to note from close quarters, how, by the designed unevenness of the surface, a more pronounced effect and character was given to the details of the figures represented. It was a happy if not unique experience; certainly one which under my present circumstances, I should have been unable to enjoy.

We now come to the Mosaics on the wall of the North Aisle of the Nave. These, I believe, exceed in importance of aim and extent of area any similar work of modern times. They occupy the entire length of the original Nave, embracing the whole of its four bays, presenting a wall-space seventy-two feet in total length, by nearly fifteen feet in height. While equalling in scale, they differ in mode of execution from the marble pictures in the Albert Memorial

Chapel at Windsor. The latter are, in fact, a work of Intarsia executed in marble, and, as in the case of old Intarsia executed in wood, dependent for the expression of its drawing and details upon the engraver. The work here is of true Mosaic, in which every expression of form and colour is wrought in countless tesserae.

The work, too, differs in effect totally from the Mosaic of Byzantine character, now known as Venetian (such as the other specimens in the Cathedral which we have been considering), being *marble* Mosaic, the colours being nature's own colours, manifold and various though they are. It is an application of what the late Sir Digby Wyatt termed "*Opus majus vermiculatum*"; but up to the present time it has not been thoroughly developed. He says: "Tesserae are but rarely found in walls, except when they are adopted to form flat tints of uniform colour." Here marble and limestone of different shades of colour enter into the composition of these Mosaics.

There are advantages in this kind of work. Glass Mosaic is most effective at a distance, but without such distance it fails to produce its effect. In Venetian Mosaic the colours, in limitless variety, including the effects of gold and silver, are produced by manufacture. In marble Mosaic the sources of colour are discovered in nature only. The range of tints, therefore, at the service of the artist is restricted to the limited varieties afforded by the quarries; no factitious material being employed in these pictures. A difficulty was found in the case of blue, so recourse was had to *Lapis Lazuli*, of which there are altogether about fifty superficial feet, or more than a twentieth part

of the whole surface. These Mosaics, therefore, have been wrought under a severe denial of colour effect; and when this is borne in mind, the result is remarkable and surprising. The cartoons were designed by Mr. Clayton (of Messrs. Clayton & Bell), the subjects having been suggested by Dean Howson; and they were translated into Mosaics by Messrs. Burke & Co., of Newman Street, London, and of Paris; the workmen employed being Italians, who would be familiar with such handicraft.

It has been intimated already that mural decoration of this kind is unusual. You have it more frequently in pavements, and you have a specimen of this in the floor of the adjacent Baptistry. I will not draw your attention particularly to that today, because I hope that at some future time we may be able to examine more thoroughly that portion of the Cathedral, with the interesting Font it contains, and the curious history which attaches to that part of the building. Critics, too, have found fault with such mural decoration here, as being unsuited to a Gothic building. Theoretically, that criticism may be true; yet the custodians of Chester Cathedral are proud of the possession of these artistic treasures, which, in this country at any rate, are unique in their character.

Bearing in mind the conditions which have been alluded to already, the resultant effect is seen in the subdued arrangement of colour, and in the absence of gold, suggesting, without imitating, the appearance of tapestry. By such treatment the gravity and repose of the Cathedral wall are not disturbed, as would have been the case had a more pronounced system of colour been attempted. The wall-space is divided into four sections, each some eighteen feet in length, corre-

sponding with a like number of openings in the Nave Arcade. It was a special aim to give to the centre of these spaces a dominant feature, agreeing, as it would, with the central lines, respectively, of the Arcade openings. It was sought also to pronounce in this local point of each bay the historical motive to be illustrated in the Mosaics. These keynotes are, therefore, expressed in each bay by a large figure, standing statue-wise in a niche-like panel, divided by stone mouldings from the space on each side. These figures are about the size of life, and are respectively (beginning from the west) of Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah.

The selection of these particular Old Testament Saints was made by Dean Howson; but I cannot say what was the one idea in his mind to be suggested by them. It may have been similar to that which inspired the window of Lord Egerton in the South Transept, where "the triumph of Faith" is brought before us, as recorded in the 11th Chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews; the examples being taken from the Old Testament Saints. So here, these Old Testament Saints may remind us that, "having obtained a good report through faith, they received not the promise; God having provided some better thing for us, that they, without us, should not be made perfect." Or they may have been chosen to represent some particular virtue or characteristic in each case: Abraham, the friend of God, the father of the faithful; Moses, the man very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth; David, the man after God's own heart; and Elijah, the stern rebuker of sin. But this is a matter of conjecture; at any rate, we shall all allow that the examples convey lessons which we can all learn to our profit.



The Mosaics in Chester Cathedral—"Moses"

Frank Simpson, Photo.

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We are told that Dean Howson chose the particular incidents in the lives of the several Saints for the artist to illustrate, and that it was not left to the artist (Mr. Clayton) himself. I had thought that the latter was the case, and for this reason: When I came here 23 years ago, the Mosaics were unfinished; that is to say, the easternmost ones were not completed. The figure of Elijah in the centre was there, but not the scenes from his life. When Mr. Clayton was asked the reason for the delay, he replied, "I am waiting for an inspiration." He might have meant by that, "I am waiting till I am moved to choose my subject." At any rate, he felt that he could not do justice to the work if he wrought in a hurry. I think the general verdict will be that it was well worth waiting for the result.

Before examining the different pictures, I think a word may be said about the central figures. All of them are very striking and characteristic. They are not only life-size, but they are also life-like. They seem to bring the men before us, and we feel that we are in the presence of the personages themselves. Their individual character is set forth in the pose of the figure, the lineaments of the features, and in the dress or robes which they wear. And all this is produced, as we have seen, by the use of tesseræ formed of natural stones—a fact which is simply marvellous. *Abraham* is majestic and dignified; in his hand he bears a scroll with the inscription, "God will provide," which may be said to have been the inspiration of his whole life. *Moses*, bearing the Tables of Stone, stands out as the unmistakable Law-giver. *David*, with his harp and the motto, "Praise the Lord, O my soul," is the sweet Psalmist of Israel, to whom we owe so much of our devotional poetry; and *Elijah*, stern and

rugged in form and appearance, with the raven at his feet, and the words on the scroll, "Hear me, O Lord, hear me," tells us of the bold rebuker of vice, and reminds us also of his providential sustenance in the time of famine, and of his courage in standing up alone for God against all the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

The scenes depicted in Abraham's life, are the Sacrifice of Isaac, and the Burial of Sarah. Both are very realistic, as evidenced by the knife falling from the hand of the astonished patriarch in the one, and his figure, bowed with grief, in the other. For the representation of two angels in the first picture, there is artistic justification in Raphael's treatment of the same subject in the stanza d'Elidore in the Vatican; whilst with reference to the wreath which Abraham holds in the other, we may say that such memorial tributes have been found in those ancient burying places, the Pyramids. "The trees in all the borders round about" are faithfully represented. The texts underneath the pictures are: "And Abraham said, my son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering"; and, "And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah." In the space above each central figure is a corresponding canopy, and on either side of this, three niche-like panels, the central one being occupied by a historical personage connected with the Saint below; and the flanking ones by angels, bearing inscribed scrolls. Here we have *Melchizedek* and *Sarah*, the respective legends being, "Melchizedek, King of Salem, blessed Abram"; and, "Thou shalt call her name Sarah, and Sarah shall her name be."



The Mosaics in Chester Cathedral—"David"

Frank Simpson, Photo

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The incidents portrayed in the life of Moses are, "The finding of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter," and the upholding of the hands of Moses by Aaron and Hur. The corresponding texts are, "And the daughter of Pharaoh said, this is one of the Hebrew children"; and, "And it came to pass that when Moses held up his hand that Israel prevailed." In the former picture you may specially note the babe with outstretched arms supplicating the sympathy of the stranger, and the anxious sister on the right, trembling as to what the issue might be; and in the latter, the evident weariness of Moses, and the priestly figure of Aaron. Above, you have *Jethro*, with the words, "Blessed be the Lord, who hath delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians"; and *Joshua*, with the inscription, "Joshua, the son of Nun, shall go in thither, encourage him."

Next, we have David before Saul with the head of Goliath; and underneath, "And David answered, I am the son of thy servant Jesse, the Bethlehemite"; and David's grief at the news of Absalom's death, with the text, "Would God I had died for Thee, O Absalom, my son, my son." In each of these, the figure of David is very striking; in the one he is the *stripling*, the *youth*, as he is called again and again in the story. In the other, though you see not his face, the sense of intense grief is conveyed by his bowed attitude and bent head, and the sympathy depicted on the countenances of the servants. Above, you have *Samuel*, with the inscription, "Behold, I have walked before you from my childhood to this day"; and *Solomon*, with the words, "Then sat Solomon upon the throne of David, his father."

In the last bay we have the Angel of the Lord appearing unto Elijah, as he lies asleep under the juniper tree, with the text, "The Angel of the Lord said unto Elijah, arise and eat, because the journey is too great for thee"; and Elijah denouncing Ahab in the vineyard of Naboth, with the words, "And Ahab said to Elijah, hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" Both these pictures are very forcible. Note the evident relaxing of the prophet's limbs as he reclines, overcome with sleep, and the faithful rendering of all the accessories, the cake baken on the coals, and the cruse of water at his head. And in the other, you can almost fancy that you hear the stern voice of Elijah, as with uplifted hands he cries, "Hast thou killed and also taken possession?" and the abashed monarch in abject tones replying, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" Above are represented the *Widow of Sarepta*, with the inscription, "Behold, I have commanded a widow woman at Sarepta to sustain thee"; and *Elisha*, with the words, "The sons of the prophets said, the spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha."

Though I have dwelt at considerable length on these Mosaics, I know that I have not exhausted the subject, and I hope I have not exhausted you. I can well imagine that as we sit in quiet and reverent contemplation of the pictures, fresh beauties and points of interest would strike us; and I trust that one effect of this paper may be to lead to that quiet study of them, which, as you will have gathered, cannot fail to be profitable in the highest sense of the word, as well as instructive from the artistic point of view. The work occupied three years in execution. The pictures were put together in London, and brought down here in sections,



The Mosaics in Chester Cathedral—"Elijah"

Frank Simpson, Photo.

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and then fixed in their places. The spaces they were to occupy were carefully prepared and made smooth ; nails were driven in in various places, round which copper-wire was stretched, thus forming a hold on the lime or cement to which the mosaics were to be affixed. The sections were then carefully applied, and pressed upon the cement, pressure being continuously and evenly directed until the mortar had set. Some months after, when the exudations from the lime had created a film or excrescence, the surface was carefully cleaned and rubbed down with boiled oil, thus bringing out the colours more distinctly. That operation has been repeated, and will probably be repeated from time to time, so that the effect of the pictures may be enhanced and improved.

The cost of the work (which I believe was about £3,000) was munificently borne by the late Mrs. Robert Platt, of Stalybridge. She and her husband (who was an old King's School boy) contributed in all about £17,000 to the restoration of the Cathedral, among their gifts being the groining of the roof of this Aisle, and the consequent rebuilding of the adjacent Cloisters on that side. She was an invalid, and unable to come to Chester to see her beautiful gift, and I was only able to place in her hands the description of it which was published in the "Diocesan Gazette" of December 1886. Her brother, Mr. Higgins, of Thing Hill, Hereford, however, came and saw them, and was much struck with their beauty. The harmony of the whole effect was marred at that time by the glaring colours of the glass in the windows above. This was quite modern glass, and had been moved from the eastern window of the Lady Chapel, when the Perpendicular

tracery was replaced by the lancets of ancient form. Mr. Higgins asked if he might put in other glass, which would not detract from the tone of the design; and permission was gratefully given.

As a consequence, the present windows were executed by Messrs. Heaton, Butler, & Bayne, under the supervision of Sir Arthur W. Blomfield. In the two middle lights of each window are Angels with musical instruments, the whole forming a celestial choir of Angels. In the others are verses from the Benedicite, the background being filled with sacred plants in an ornamental manner. Thus we have in the inscriptions: "O all ye works of the Lord"; "O ye Angels of the Lord"; "O ye Stars of Heaven"; "O ye Servants of the Lord"; "O ye Spirits and Souls of the Righteous, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever"; thus allowing of one clause for each of the windows, and the refrain or chorus in every one. The appearance of the Mosaics was much improved thereby; whilst fresh light was thrown on the beautiful groining above. In the wall above the north-east door into the Cloisters is the inscription: "To the glory of God and in loving memory of Margaret Platt of Stalybridge, the windows in this Aisle were given by her brother Henry Higgins, A.D. 1890."

A melancholy interest attaches to this. Mr. Higgins was journeying to London, after recovering from an attack of influenza, to see the windows in the artist's studio, when he was taken suddenly ill, and died in the train. He did not live to see the completion of the work upon which he had set his heart; just as his sister, Mrs. Platt, was not permitted to see these

beautiful Mosaics, which she had given to God's House.

On the wall, near the north-west door, is a Marble Memorial, bearing this inscription :

“ This Tablet was here placed A.D. 1890, by the Dean and Chapter, in memory of Robert Platt, of Stalybridge, in this County, who died A.D. 1882 ; and of Margaret, his wife, who died A.D. 1888.

They offered willingly to the Lord, giving Him the glory due unto His Name, adorning His House with goodly stones and gifts.”

