

For anyone with even a modicum of interest in the art of mosaic Robert Field's solo exhibition 'Inspirations' is surely destined to be a high-light of 2004. Shown between April and June at the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum and at the Wiltshire Heritage Museum, Devizes, in July and August, it is both retrospective and current in the collection of works displayed.

This reviewer visited the show at Salisbury and was entranced by the beauty of the work on display. My major interest and work in the field of mosaic has centred around those produced in the Roman era. Apart from studying and writing about the iconography of ancient figured pavements, in the year 2000, I was afforded the opportunity of re-assembling the shattered central Orpheus panel from the Newton St Loe mosaic in Bristol Museum (Grout No. 3, Autumn 2000, p.9).

At Salisbury, the first of two rooms filled with mosaics was mostly devoted to Field's own interpretations of some of the figured pieces of Roman mosaic from Britannia and other provinces of the Empire. Strangely, these mosaics appear at the end of the numbered catalogue list although the room acts as an ante-chamber to the main gallery and somehow it seems right that they should be seen first. Greatest prominence was given to the copies of the two remaining seasons busts from the now ruined mosaic in the town house at Colliton Park, Dorchester. What was so noticeable about these pieces was just how three-dimensional the "wreaths" surrounding the busts appeared (and must have appeared on the original floor) simply through the use of diagonally placed bands of coloured tesserae and a highlighting strip of white. Also on display was a superb copy of the eagle from the Orpheus pavement at Shahba in Syria. This is one of the finest translations by a contemporary mosaicist in modern materials that I have ever seen. Apart from Mr Field's versions of two of the animals from the Newton St Loe mosaic, a great many of the subjects shown were examples of dolphins, gleaned from the vast and charming schools of the creatures to be found on Roman mosaics throughout the Empire. Indeed the flora and fauna of the natural world is obviously a great inspiration to this gentle and civilised mosaicist.

Allied to the figured 'translations' of Roman work in this antechamber, were several panels of geometric designs such as "Knot without End" which refer both to the glory of pattern in history and to this mosaicist's obvious love of its intricacies.

Although seeing Robert Field's versions of existing Roman mosaics was both comfortable and immensely enjoyable (rather like visiting old chums), they were not the wonder of the exhibition to this Romanist visitor. Field's true abilities shine out when both the idea and inspiration are his own. The collection in the 'Roman Room' hardly prepares one for the astonishingly varied collection of art works in the main gallery.

The show is called 'Inspirations' and what I thought immensely instructive and sensible were the inclusion of photographs of the objects that gave birth to the ideas in the mosaics. A collection ranging from seedheads to cracks in the tarmac at an airport. Objects that have provided the spur to design and execute what must surely be some of the finest mosaic works of our age. From comments overheard from the general public who were viewing the show, this accompanying photographic catalogue of inspirations was tantamount to having the mosaicist present explaining his thoughts. It is a brilliant and simple idea that others might do well to copy and not only in the medium of mosaic.

Again, this room contained examples of his figured work. "Torso Classico" and "Torso Chiaroscuro" are inspired by an ancient bronze statue of an ephebe or youth. The mosaics convert the surface of the original bronze into planes of patterned light and shade. Field's love of felines is evident in the mosaics of his own late cats Bugsy and Clyde, and in the charming "Whiskey" where the naturalistic head of the subject emerges from a 'landscape' of subdued coloured textiles. Incidentally the treatment of the 'Bugsy & Clyde' composition reminded me strongly of the famous 'cat with a bird' mosaic from Pompeii now in the National Archaeological Museum at Naples.

Field's love of the intricacies of labyrinthine pattern shines forth in the astonishing mosaics "Mazeolithic Skeleton" and "Labyrinthine Layers", which have an almost M.C. Escher feel to them in their three-dimensional complexities. In "Bear's Breeches", "Sunburst Revelations" and the linked compositions "White Moon" and "White Sun" and in the more abstract "Skeletal Sun" I was thrilled not only by the compositions, but also by the way in which the choice of grout colour added to the overall effect. The colour of the grout was so similar to that of the tesserae of the trees that it enabled the interstices between the tesserae to form an exciting part of the overall design. This effect was particularly strong when a dark tesserae background was employed. In the case of "White Moon" and "White Sun" the pattern was so dominant as to suggest a myriad of twigs emanating from the trees to cover the sky.

Robert Field's mosaics are generally of unglazed tesserae, through a preference for the shades available and also for their lack of texture. Occasionally, however, he includes marble-like glazed ceramic and vitreous glass as a foil to this and adds exciting highlights of iron pyrites or fool's gold, as in the case of the "Toulouse Tarmac" mosaics. The landscape "White Hill, South Harting" is a memorable work. Abstract but subtly believable, with a gentle palette of colours. Surely the most painterly of compositions and proof that this is fine art and not a handicraft.

'Favourites are generally unfortunate' is one of those old sayings that Victorian children were made to inscribe in their copybooks, and it is probably not the place of a reviewer to choose one item above its fellows in a show. That, notwithstanding, my favourite must be "A whiter shade of white", an elegant if not effulgent composition of white glazed and unglazed ceramic with a band of rough vitreous glass. The central design is an inscribed circle – an impossibility to describe, but a spur to the reader to visit this splendid exhibition to see it in all its glory.

Additional display cases have recordings and actual examples of Roman mosaics from the area as well as examples of tesserae and books on the art form. Robert Field has published a thirty six page colour book to accompany the exhibition entitled "Inspirations. Mosaics by Robert Field". Many of the works shown in the exhibition are illustrated and it forms a lasting reminder of a truly memorable artistic event. As an exhibition 'Inspirations' must place Robert Field amongst the forerunners of the artists now working in the medium of mosaic throughout the world.

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