

## Lawrence Lee & Coventry Cathedral

The most illustrious achievement of Lawrence Lee was masterminding the ten nave windows in the new Coventry Cathedral, designed by Sir Basil Spence in the early 1950s to stand next to the remains of the old Cathedral which had been destroyed in a bombing raid in 1940.

Spence believed that stained glass should be integrated with architecture at the design stage and be free from the constraints of traditional church commissions. He was so depressed by the pedestrian windows being produced in post-war Britain that he was about to approach the French artist Fernand Leger. As head of stained glass at the Royal College of Art, Lee invited Spence to be the external visitor for the college's final examinations, and there in the experimental abstract design of the students' work, Spence found what he wanted. The College was invited to tender and won the commission with a mid-priced proposal. There was a great deal of controversy about unfair competition and cheap student labour - especially from the august body of the British Society of Master Glass Painters - as this was the most prized stained glass commission for years. Robin Darwin, Principal of the Royal College, firmly backed the stained glass department, writing, 'We had to be extremely careful not to subsidise the work with public funds. Rent, rates and special purchases of kilns and all other overheads had to be included in this tender.'

The technical problems of producing the 70-foot-high windows were massive. The designers were Lee and two former students, Geoffrey Clarke and Keith New, whose final year's work Spence had seen. The windows were set in pairs at angles with the orientation of the altar set north to south. Spence chose the sequence of colours representing man's progress from birth to death, to resurrection and transfiguration. Lee chose to explore the possibilities of red, representing early manhood and gold for the afterlife. Each designer had a natural inclination for their colour and Keith New chose green for youth and Geoffrey Clarke chose the purple of wisdom and old age. They designed three lights each and collaborated on the tenth - the 'God side' Golden Window. Each designed one third of the window and Clarke made the final design after a coin toss. The students cut and painted the glass and the designers acted as their assistants!

The underlying idea of Lee's Red Window, the 'God side' is the maturing of the revelation of God's plan for man's redemption. The window is divided by the great Coventry Cross, below which are the prone male and female figures between a diapered circle representing the seed of the Word of God. Included are ancient symbols of the sun and bands of water signifying the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt. The Old Testament is summed up in a flaming seven-branched candlestick.

The design of the Golden Window on the 'Man side' is based almost entirely on the vision of the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem as given in the Revelation of St John the Divine. Lee portrays a conception of the City coming down from above with flying purple pennants, an arrow appearing from the unknown and the great circle of the light of God shining into the City. He wrote of this window, 'I am sure that atmosphere created through a symbolic and psychological use of colour and design is of the first importance'.

The Cathedral was finally consecrated in 1962 and the nave windows are still stunning over sixty years later, medieval in their energy but free of musty tradition.

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