

Bringing Design into Life: John Piper and the Chichester Tapestry

Background Notes

Diana Wooldridge - 13 May 2015



*The Holy Trinity, tapestry for Chichester Cathedral,
John Piper, 1965*



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John Piper (1903 -1992) is best known as a painter of landscapes and architectural studies especially focused on churches, encompassing a variety of styles from modernist abstraction in the 1930s to post-war neo-romanticism. Some of his most significant work is in what he described as “collaborative art”, where his designs were transformed into other media. The design and construction in 1964 of his tapestry at Chichester Cathedral, described by Piper as “bringing design into life”, is the best example of this approach to collaborative art, drawing on his work in other formats.

Experience in theatre design in the 1930s and 1940s involved Piper in working with craft workers who would translate his designs into sets or costumes, and this relationship was continued more intensely when he worked with non-painted media such as stained glass or tapestry. He expressed the creative stimulus this gave him: “Collaboration to me is natural. Two people strike fire out of each other, and together you create what neither could have done separately.”

This emphasis on the close inter-relationship between art and crafts had been a feature of the English art world since the late 1890s. William Morris followed Ruskin in holding up the ideal of the integration of all the arts in the Gothic cathedral; Morris wrote in 1901, “the complete work of applied art, the true unit of art, is the building with all its due ornament and furniture.” However a new critical approach to the relationship between art and crafts was emerging, expressed by Paul Nash in the 1920s and Piper in the 1940s, arguing that the modern movement in textiles production was a “renaissance rather than a revival”, and that ‘new life’ came from the artists and not from the craftsmen.

This partnership between artist and craftsman was at its height in Piper's stained glass. This must in large part be due to his highly creative and collaborative relationship with Patrick Reyntiens, the stained glass designer who worked with Piper on the various commissions they undertook together, most famously the baptistry window at Coventry but also many smaller projects designing to fit the existing shape of windows in traditional church settings. Piper's design for his first major stained glass commission, at Oundle School Chapel and Reyntiens' translation of this into stained glass illustrate the early stages of this partnership.

**Oundle School Chapel,
The Way, the Truth and the Life, 1954**



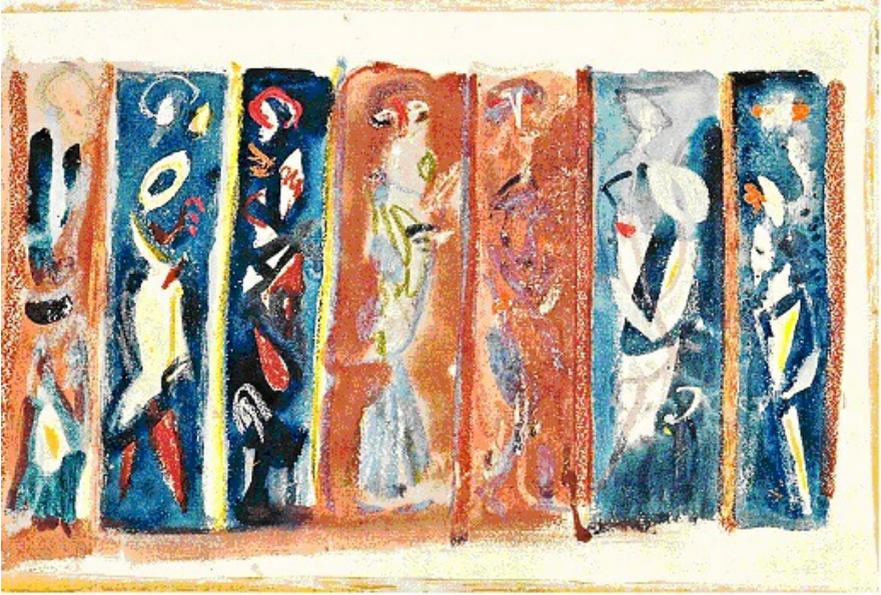
John Piper, Design



Patrick Reyntiens, Stained Glass

The commissioning of the Chichester tapestry in the 1960's followed a tradition established earlier by Bishop George Bell. Bell aspired to create a community of artists and craftsmen to develop decorative arts in the church and his approach to church patronage was taken forward by Walter Hussey, appointed Dean in 1955, who had previously commissioned modern works of church art from Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore. At Chichester Cathedral the altar screen was removed leaving a sixteenth century carved wooden reredos in seven sections, the Sherburn screen. Hussey wanted to enliven the view from the nave by modern decorative art work and approached Piper, one of the network of artists who had been involved in the major church art commissions for Coventry Cathedral, where Graham Sutherland had designed the centrepiece tapestry of Christ the King and Piper the large baptistry window.

Piper immediately thought of a tapestry rather than painting for Chichester in 1964, writing that tapestry had 'affinities with old stone and woodwork' appropriate for a medieval cathedral, also with the advantage that tapestry can be seen from a distance and retains its clear and brilliant effect. His approach to tapestry design was significantly different to that of Sutherland, who had viewed the Coventry commission as a representational piece of religious art, drawing on Byzantine and other traditions. Piper focused right at the start of the process on the shape to be filled – planning seven vertical panels to fit the spaces of the screen, seeing the tapestry like stained glass as a medium to fit in with and complement the architecture of the cathedral.



**First sketch for Chichester Cathedral tapestry,
John Piper, 1965**

His initial sketches for Chichester drew on his stained glass experience of stylised figures but the Cathedral authorities preferred a more abstract option and Piper moved on to the idea of a design based on colour and symbolism representing the Holy Trinity, to which the cathedral is dedicated. The theme of the Trinity in the final version (see front page) is shown by a triangle, fronted by a cross representing Christ and a feathered flame for the Holy Spirit, with side panels at the top symbolising of the four elements – earth, air, water and fire – and below them the four evangelists represented by animal heads reminiscent of the pre-Christian motifs of Foliate Heads. The glory of God the Father is represented in a blaze of light, reminiscent of the Coventry window.

The technique of tapestry was a major challenge to Piper; he described this as 'in some ways the most frightening commission I have received.' He was very aware of the three-dimensional quality of the medium and the reflections and shadows created by its textures and this is evident in viewing the tapestry as it is situated at Chichester.

The weaving of the tapestry was commissioned from Pinton Frères, at Pelletin, near Aubusson, who had made work based on designs by Picasso and Chagall, for example, as well as the Coventry commission. Piper, built up a highly successful partnership with Oliver Pinton, acknowledging the great skill of the dyers of Pinton Frères in translating the cartoons into weaving and the accuracy of their colours. He was particularly impressed by their chief dyer and the standard of their work. He produced his designs in the form of individual panels, virtually full size, initially sketching in pastels, and then using gouache and collage, reminiscent of some of his earlier abstract painting in the 1930s. The use of collage gives a three dimension aspect to the designs which is still suggested when translated into the woven tapestry; this effect is heightened by his use of paper scraps he has already marbled or decorated with inks.

Piper's church art also draws on his experience of theatre set design, using the inter-relationship of stage and architecture. It is arguably one of the key strengths in his stained glass windows that he used the shape of existing Gothic windows as a space to be filled like a stage, and in the case of the Chichester tapestry his use of the architectural form of the reredos screen with its seven arches contributes much to its effectiveness. There are further elements of theatricality as a backcloth for the drama of cathedral liturgy – Piper also designed celebration vestments for Dean Hussey.

Piper's work in stained glass and tapestry depend on the creative stimulus of collaboration between artist and craftsman, enabling the translation of the design into an art object. In his words:

“Design remains design until someone's imagination brings it to life in the new medium.

I have had the pleasure - thrill is really a more appropriate word - of seeing this with my own designs for the stage, for stained glass and for tapestry.”

His partner in producing stained glass, Patrick Reyntiens, described his own role in the relationship creating the art object in musical terms as “the violinist - interpreter - to a piece of music”. The Chichester tapestry is unique as a piece of collaborative art. In its setting, as has been argued above it is not simply a decorative art object in the building but transforms the whole visual appearance of the cathedral and its liturgical space.

Further Information:

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