

# THE PAOLOZZI MOSAICS

## 1 Introduction

Did you know that some of the most significant public art in the West Midlands is here in Redditch or further more probably the most important modern art outside of a metropolitan area in the UK? If you want to find out more , read on..

## 2. The Paolozzi Mosaics

The Paolozzi Mosaics which are twelve huge panels each measuring 21' x 10' are located upon the four walls of Milward Square in the Kingfisher Shopping Centre, Redditch. They were unveiled by Sir William Rees-Mogg (Chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain) on 19th April 1983. They provided the backdrop for the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in July of that year.

The idea for commissioning a piece of 'public art' to be placed within the new Kingfisher Shopping Centre came from the Redditch Development Corporation Chairman, Professor Denys Hinton. Denys said in 1981:

*"We are not afraid of putting up something controversial as long as it is good".*

## 3 Funding The Work

Funds were also made available from the Arts Council of Great Britain, whose 'Arts in Public Places' scheme assisted the commissioning of works of art throughout the country 'for the benefit of the public at large', especially in non-metropolitan areas far from other centres of modern art. The idea was 'to inform a non-specialist public of the virtues of contemporary British art' or to bring an art gallery to the people, rather than vice-versa.

Until the mid-twentieth century much of Britain's public art had taken the form of statues commemorating local worthies, or edifices celebrating local or national events.

Therefore, not surprisingly, the first thoughts of the Redditch Development Corporation were to commission a 'modern' figurative sculpture or statue. However, practicalities, the durability of the materials, and the need to navigate safely around a free-standing object in a busy public space, led to the decision to confine the proposed work to the wall surfaces above the shop fascias. A brief was subsequently prepared, stipulating 'a feature/artwork related to the historically primary industry within Redditch, namely, needles'. Eduardo Paolozzi was approached, and he soon accepted the commission.

#### **4. Content**

Paolozzi was given the freedom to interpret the brief of relating the mosaics to the needle industry in his own terms, and declared that the needle industry theme ran through all twelve panels in the form of a multi-evocative metaphor, floating in some cases against woven material, symbolizing the uses and results of the needle in its widest sense – a vital tool for the uniting of many substances in both a global and metaphysical sense’.

#### **5. Inspiration**

He considered the shape and the pattern of needle packets as well as the machinery used in the needle industry, and he also included such natural imagery as butterflies and lizards ‘which might be found in tapestries and fabrics’. Many historical sources were consulted for the palette of colours, including the British Museum and the V&A. The astronaut, the camera, aeroplane and spaceship, together with the mechanical and electronic images, emphasise the contemporary setting and the progression of the town of Redditch, and the overall impression is one of pulsating manufacture, progress, and modern life in full Technicolor.

#### **6. The Artist and his work**

Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005) was a visionary and inspired choice. He was a British artist, born in Scotland of Italian parents, and although best known as one of the founders of ‘Pop Art’, he had embraced many artistic movements and had worked in many different creative media during his career. He was renowned for constantly re-inventing his style by the absorption of new ideas and influences, resulting in an eclectic and kaleidoscopic body of work.

Born in 1924, Paolozzi spent his childhood in the port of Leith, Edinburgh, where his parents ran a confectioner’s shop. His father made radio sets for every room in their flat, beginning Eduardo’s lifelong dependence on radio broadcasts for entertainment and information.

The coloured wrappers and papers in the shop fuelled his love of colour and popular imagery, and he filled scrapbooks with these and with cuttings from magazines and newspapers. Aeroplanes were another obsession, and his first sculpture was of a propeller fashioned in wood.

## 7 After School

Eduardo left school at sixteen, helped to run his parent's shop, and registered for evening classes as a mechanic at Edinburgh School of Art in 1941. Later in the day he changed to a commercial art course. He was then called up for service in the Pioneer Corps in June 1943, when he spent time drawing fellow soldiers in the style of Leonardo da Vinci and then discovering contemporary art in the life-changing volume: *Foundations of Modern Art* by Amedee Ozenfant. This turned out to be his defining introduction to the artistic movements of Cubism and Surrealism. He said later:

*"It showed aeroplanes, and Zulus and Greek Architecture all in one volume, whereas before I had thought art to be beyond some unbridgeable gulf".*

## 8. After the War

Paolozzi was discharged from the army in 1944 after feigning madness, and enrolled in the sculpture school at the Slade School of Art where his early sculptures were influenced by 'found objects', and his mechanical interests pursued by visiting and sketching in the Science Museum. Fellow students at the Slade were enthusiasts of the Modern Movement in art, literature, and popular culture; and introduced Paolozzi to the works of Marcel Duchamp and the British surrealist Roland Penrose (a Picasso devotee). Through the works of Picasso, Paolozzi acquired an appreciation of strangeness, the bizarre, and of primitive art, as his sculptures of this period show. Around this time he was also making collages, fusing imagery of traditional, classical figurative sculpture with machinery.

Paolozzi moved to Paris in 1947. He studied Egyptian sculpture in the Louvre and the ethnographic collections of the Musee de l'Homme and made drawings of the vivacity of Parisian life. Returning to London in 1949, Paolozzi taught textile design at the Central School of Art until 1955, making terracotta reliefs in his free time. His work in textiles and sculpture in this period were in a primitive and graphic style.

In 1952 Paolozzi became a founder member of the "Independent Group", artists and thinkers who wanted to look at the effects of change in the modern world in a way that consciously and positively looked at mass culture. Discussion topics included science fiction, cybernetics, helicopters, popular music and car design and a silent slide show of such images (made by Paolozzi into collages and tearsheets) entitled 'Bunk', was seen as a crucial event in the development of Pop Art. 1955 saw Paolozzi take up the post of teacher of sculpture at St. Martin's School of Art in London, and here his sculptural style developed using impressed reliefs collaged together. He used objects such as toy frogs,

clock parts, pieces of bark, and a broken comb, to create the desired finishes to produce what has been described as 'rough-textured, blasted sculptures' with 'ghosts of forms'. In the late 1950s Paolozzi began to use mechanical imagery - plates, cogs, and wheels – which made his style increasingly abstract, the patternistic quality enhanced by the bright colours and reflective surfaces.

Paolozzi was active in printmaking in the 1960s, using the technique of colour-change combinations to be employed four years later by Andy Warhol in his iconic Marilyn Monroe images. His prints included aeroplanes, heads and skyscrapers – part of an increasing visual language of motifs which was to appear in his work (including the Milward Square mosaics) for the next twenty years.

The 1970s saw Paolozzi embrace abstract sculpture and relief printmaking, his visual vocabulary developing to include wavy and geometric contours and patterns in differing combinations. It was during this phase of his career that Paolozzi accepted many public commissions, including the Redditch mosaics, closely followed by another mosaic scheme for Tottenham Court Road Tube Station, for London Underground in 1981-2. Much of Paolozzi's visual alphabet is common to both works – the butterfly, the hexagons, the geometric mask shapes (not unlike inverted houses) and stylised faces. Paolozzi described the Tottenham Court Road images as "my interpretation of the past, present and future [of the area] – metaphors exist on many layers simultaneously".

Later he was to depart from the mosaic medium to concentrate on sculpture once more, becoming Professor of Sculpture in Munich in 1981. Paolozzi continued metamorphosing the human figure in his works, culminating in his monumental bronze figure of Newton after Blake (1997) sited outside the British Library. A similarly sized sculpture, of Faraday, stands on the campus of the University of Birmingham.

Paolozzi was knighted in 1988, and died aged 81 in 2005.

### ***9. Production and installation***

Paolozzi produced and selected the images for each of the twelve panels which were drawn individually, hand-coloured, and then put through a Xerox machine to regularise the colours used. They were then cut out and collaged onto sheets to form the individual panels, and the pattern sheets were sent to Spilimbergo, northern Italy – a town with a mosaic-making tradition dating back two centuries. The Italian glass tiles have 'extreme permanence', and they will retain their brilliance in perpetuity – meaning that the need for maintenance and cleaning is minimal.

Paolozzi chose the exact glass tile colours to be used, in consultation with a resident mosaic artist. A master pattern was made for each panel and each colour was coded for assembly. Interlocking numbered sheets were individually hand-made and numbered following the patterns, and the sheets were used for fixing and grouting the panels. It took three craftsmen, based in Birmingham but originally from Spilimbergo, two weeks to install the work.

## **10 Enjoy!**

One of the aims of the Paolozzi mosaics, according to the artist himself, was to provide 'a counterpoint to the living theatre of the shopping centre'. Vast, colourful, impressive and entertaining, they succeed endlessly - a public artwork that is literally above and beyond a mere gallery. The panels are not meant to be a narrative or didactic work, like an academic 'history' painting – there is no need to look for a deep meaning. Like Paolozzi, we should revel in the colour and exuberance of the work, possibly recognising some familiar images, but also enjoying the juxtaposition of the bizarre and the unexpected, the immediacy and the vivacity for its own sake. The work is a great example of contemporary, non-judgemental, visual communication as well as being, paradoxically, an example of 'high art' by an internationally renowned artist.

If you look closely at this image you can see Paolozzi himself in the bottom left of the image back in 1983 admiring his own work.

Source: <http://artsinredditch.com>