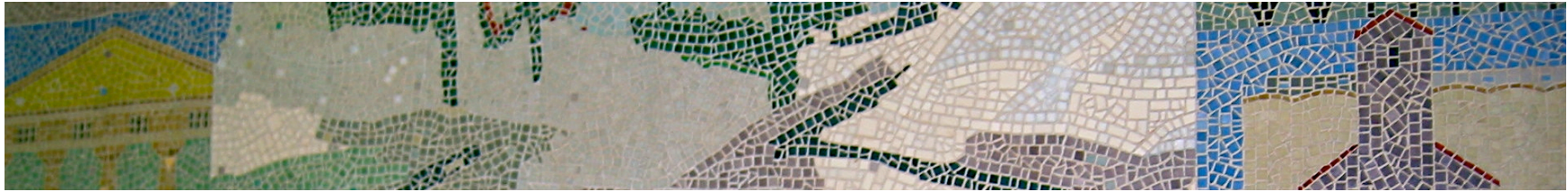


# MOSAIC



WINNIPEG  
ARCHITECTURE  
FOUNDATION



Cover: Astra Building mosaic, Robert Bruce, 1957. This page: Winnipeg Builder's Exchange mosaic, Takao Tanabe, 1956. Photos: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2005-13.

An ancient art, mosaic is the practice of creating images or designs out of assembly of small glass, tile or stone pieces. These small pieces are referred to as tesserae. The medium of mosaic was particularly popular amongst the ancient Greeks, Romans and Byzantines. Its practice continued in Medieval western Europe and reached prominence in the Islamic world and Eastern Europe. In the modern period the use of mosaic experienced a revival within parts of the Arts & Crafts movement and styles related to it. This trajectory of rebirth continued as modernist architects and artists took up the use of mosaic. In this respect an important early figure was Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí, whose practice brought mosaic to the international forefront. The use of mosaic and tile in architecture was also keenly evident in Latin American modernist architecture – particularly that of Mexico and Brazil. Likely influenced by these models, mosaic appeared in a number of examples of modernist architecture elsewhere as well. The reasons for the re-adoption of this medium within modernism are many. Certain strains of modern architecture generally maintained a profound interest in bringing art into architecture. This effect is visible in the widespread rise in public art in Winnipeg in the post-war years. Mosaic was also used in more strictly decorative respects. One aspect specific to mosaic which may have been important is the degree to which this medium – flat, smooth and hard– suited the overall aesthetics of modern architecture. There were also, undoubtedly, issues of material availability, interests of specific artists and a degree of fashionability which encouraged the medium's rise. In Canada, outside of Winnipeg, important examples of mosaic in a modernist architectural context include Bertram C. Binning's works at the B.C. Electric Building (1956), at radio station CKWX (1957), and at the Imperial Bank of Commerce (1958) – all in Vancouver. Another important instance is Mexican mosaicist Andrew Salgo's large piece at the 1963 Royal Trust building in Victoria. With well established schools of art and architecture, and a history of incorporating art into its buildings architecture, Winnipeg was well positioned as a place for mosaic's re-emergence. In Manitoba, mosaic also served to add a shot of colour to a local architectural landscape dominated by cream toned Tyndall stone and neutral metal, glass and brick, all within an environment characterized by many months of white snow.





*Birks Building mosaic, Percy Nobbs, 1912. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2013.*

Likely the first extensive appearance of mosaic in Winnipeg architecture came with the re-decoration of the Birk's Building (1901, 276 Portage Avenue). Here, a new façade designed by Montreal architect Percy Nobbs was installed in 1912. Nobbs was a central figure within Canadian architecture who taught at the McGill University School of Architecture. The mosaic is made up of irregularly shaped pieces of terra cotta which are arranged in a dramatic frieze around the top of the structure, as well as in smaller decorative roundels. These medallions depict the seven primary materials used by jewellers. The frieze portrays a visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon.





*Winnipeg Builder's Exchange mosaic, Takao Tanabe, 1956. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2005.*

One of the first examples of Winnipeg mosaic work within modernist architecture is noted Canadian artist Takao Tanabe's 1956 piece in the Winnipeg Builder's Exchange building (290 Burnell Street; Waisman Ross). The work, situated in a courtyard which has since been enclosed, depicts the history of construction. It was unveiled 7 December 1956 by Builder's Exchange head J.J. Bernard and director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery Dr. Ferdinand Eckhart. Here the tesserae are made up of a mixture of square tiles and more irregularly shaped pieces, with the overall effect being uneven and lively.





*Astra Building mosaic, Robert Bruce, 1957. Photos: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2013.*

A further example of modernist mosaic is found in another Waisman Ross designed structure: Robert Bruce's 1957 piece set in the entry colonnade of the Astra Building (208 Edmonton Street). This colourful array of tiles is one of the first examples of an abstract public art work in the city. Bruce, then a professor at the Winnipeg School of Art stated that he desired his design to be sufficiently engaging and vivid to hold its own against the nearby shop windows filled with commercial merchandise. Like Tanabe's piece, this mosaic also provides a sense of colour and complexity which nicely balances the otherwise muted and clean-lined modernism of the building as a whole. Here the tesserae are both irregular and square and are arranged in a fusion of grids and spirals. In an episode which demonstrates the vulnerable character of much public art in the city, this work was nearly demolished in 1983 when an interior designer deemed the piece did not fit the decor of the restaurant which then filled the adjacent rental space. It was only saved due the efforts of Bruce's widow Melba Cumberland.





*Mosaic for the Home of the Good Shepherd (Leacock House), Marymound, Robert Bruce, 1958.  
Photo: City of Winnipeg.*

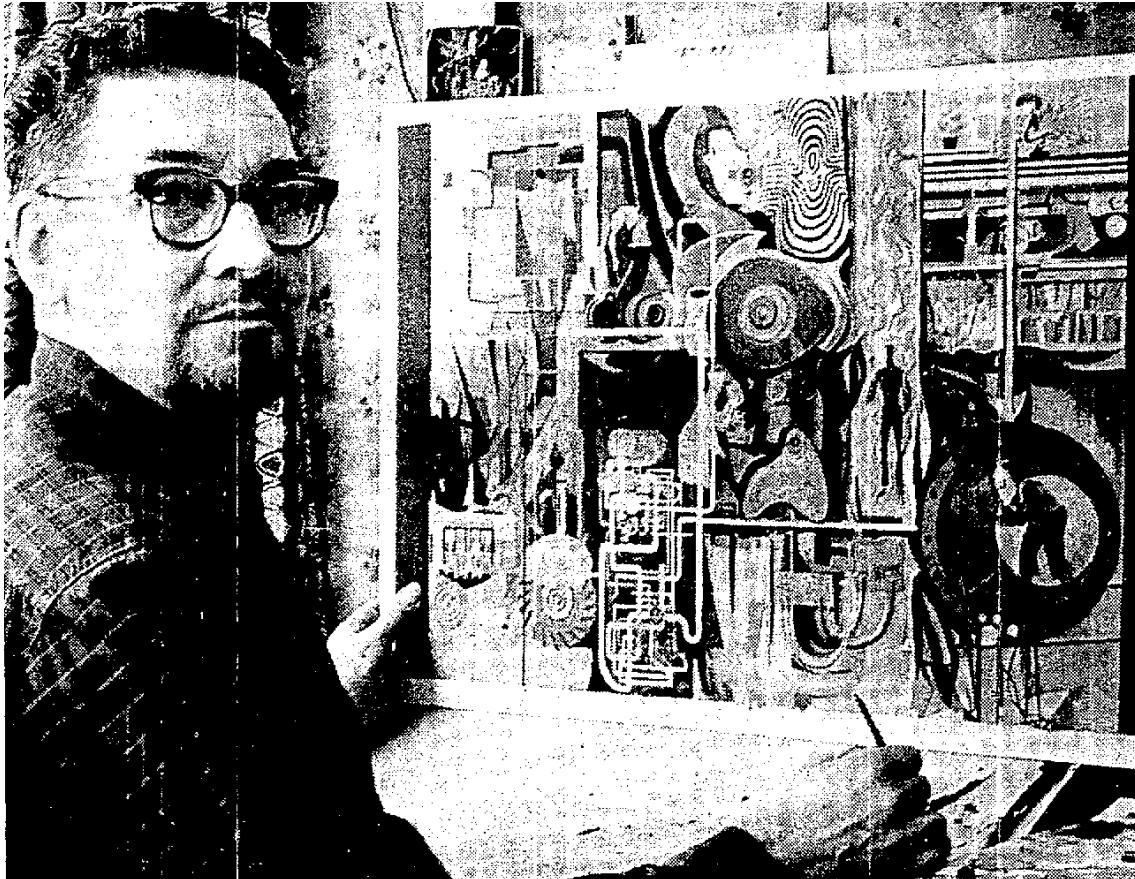
Bruce was undoubtedly the chief figure in the revival of the medium during this period. Another example of his mosaic work is his 1958 piece at Marymound School's Leacock house. The mosaic depicts the Virgin Mary and Child, in a similar colour range to the Astra building work.





*Smith House mosaic, Robert Bruce, 1959. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2013.*

For the modernist home of architect Ernest Smith (909 Kildonan Drive, 1959) Bruce created an abstract mosaic in a manner which recalls mid-century “colour-field” painting. Here, as at the Astra building, the colourful addition to a threshold space invigorates an otherwise spare palette. Smith was a founding member of the prominent local architecture firm Smith Carter and designed this house for his family.



*Robert Bruce with Manitoba Institute of Technology mosaic design, 1963. Photo: Winnipeg Free Press. 2 March 1963.*

The largest of Bruce's mosaic works was his 1963 competition-winning design for a massive 6 by 4 metre installation at the Manitoba Institute of Technology (now Red River College, 2055 Notre Dame Avenue). The piece, for which Bruce won \$6,000, portrays many of the technologies and trades taught at the school. It features a background of gold, recalling the mosaics of the late Roman and Byzantine Empires, medieval and eastern Europe.





*Simpson-Sears Polo Park south wall mosaic, 1959.  
Photo: Winnipeg Building Index.*

Another large mosaic from this mid-century period appeared at the city's 1959 Polo Park shopping centre (1485 Portage Avenue, Green Blankstein Russell and Associates), then site of an extensive public art program. Here, on the south façade of the mall's Simpson-Sears outlet, University of Manitoba School of Art professor George Swinton created an abstract mosaic which spanned 45 metres. The composition was of various blue tones, enlivening the monochromatic colour scheme of the overall building. Here the tesserae used were all square and arranged in a grid. As recounted in a period newspaper article, these various shades were used "to give a distinct color impression from the street and a gradually diffusing appearance as you approach the store." The mosaic, of Italian glass tiles, was demolished in a 2003 renovation.



*St. George's Anglican Church, Green Blankstein Russell and Associates, 1959.  
Photo: Winnipeg Architecture Foundation.*

Swinton worked on the mosaic panels found inside St. George's Anglican Church (168 Wilton Street, Green Blankstein Russell and Associates, 1959) as well. Here the building's interior designer, Joan Harland, initially brought in church volunteers to install mosaics which decorate the nave's slender pilotis-style columns, though in the end professionals completed the project. The square, gridded tesserae are in a range of colours suggested by Swinton, including red, green, yellow, pink, brown, black and a variety of shades of blue. This mix lends an Impressionistic sense of vibrancy. Once again alongside stained glass and carpeting, mosaic is here used to bring in colour to a clean-lined modern architectural space which makes extensive use of cream-toned Tyndall stone.





*National Revenue Building, Moody Moore and Partners, 1957.  
Photo: Winnipeg Building Index.*

St. George's was not the only site in the city where mosaic was used to wrap the slender, pilotis-style, columns of a modernist building with an otherwise neutral colour scheme. At the Winnipeg General Hospital's 1954 nurses' residence (700 McDermot Avenue, Moody Moore and Partners; now known as the Isabel M. Stewart Building) a buff brick façade with aluminum windows and mahogany granite trim was brightened by the placement of bright turquoise free-standing columns at the ground floor. Three years later, the same architects used mosaic to decorate free-standing columns at the ground floor of the National Revenue Building (391 York Avenue; now known as the Stanley Knowles Federal Building). Here the entry stairway also featured a large mosaic tile mural.



*Gladstone School mosaic, William Enns, 1962. Photo: Winnipeg Architecture Foundation.*

During the post-war period, schools, too, found themselves embellished with mosaic. In Winnipeg, examples include the geometric mosaic panels decorating Gladstone School (1962, 500 Gertrude Avenue) by architect William Enns.





St. Paul's College exterior chapel mosaic, Lionel Thomas, 1958.

Photo: Winnipeg Architecture Foundation.

Likely the most dramatic and largest mosaic in Winnipeg from this era is that found at St. Paul's College chapel at the University of Manitoba (70 Dysart Road, 1958). Here the entire structure is wrapped in colourful tile – primarily in bright teal – with a enormous, stylized image of *Christ the King* gracing the West façade. The work is by Vancouver artist Lionel Thomas. The building's architects were Gardiner Thornton Gathe Associates of Vancouver and Winnipeg's Green Blankstein Russell and Associates.



Our Lady of Wisdom, M. Gabriel Loire, 1958. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2013.

1958 saw two other mosaics installed at the University of Manitoba campus. *Our Lady of Wisdom*, of Venetian enamel, is within St. Paul's College, above a stairwell adjacent to the south-east entryway. The work is by M. Gabriel Loire, who also completed the building's stained glass windows. Loire is a noted artist with a speciality in stained glass and religious art.





*Sun and Wheat, S. G. Esley and Leo Mol, 1958. Photo: Jeffrey Thorsteinson, 2013.*

The other 1958 mosaic University of Manitoba is located above the north doorway of the Agriculture Research Building (66 Dafoe Road). The architects of this building were Moody Moore and Partners, a firm with a history of utilizing mosaic in their buildings. The work, an expressive, modernist composition titled *Sun and Wheat*, was designed by S. G. Esley and cast by Leo Mol. The theme of sun and wheat speaks to the purpose of the building as a whole.





*St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church mosaic, Emil Telizyn, 1988. Photo: Winnipeg Architecture Foundation.*

Likely the most recent example of a large, public mosaic in Winnipeg architecture is located at St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church (737 Bannerman Avenue, Green Blankstein Russell and Associates, 1966). Here a thirty square metre mosaic bearing the image of Christ stands above the main, south-facing doorway. The work was designed by Toronto artist Emil Telizyn. The tiles – 70 percent of which are Venetian gold – were produced by G. Travisanutto of Spilimbergo (near Venice). The mosaic, which commemorates a millennium of Christianity in Ukraine and was installed by Crovatto Mosaic of Yonkers, New York, in 1988.

Author: Jeffrey Thorsteinson  
© Winnipeg Architecture Foundation Inc., 2013