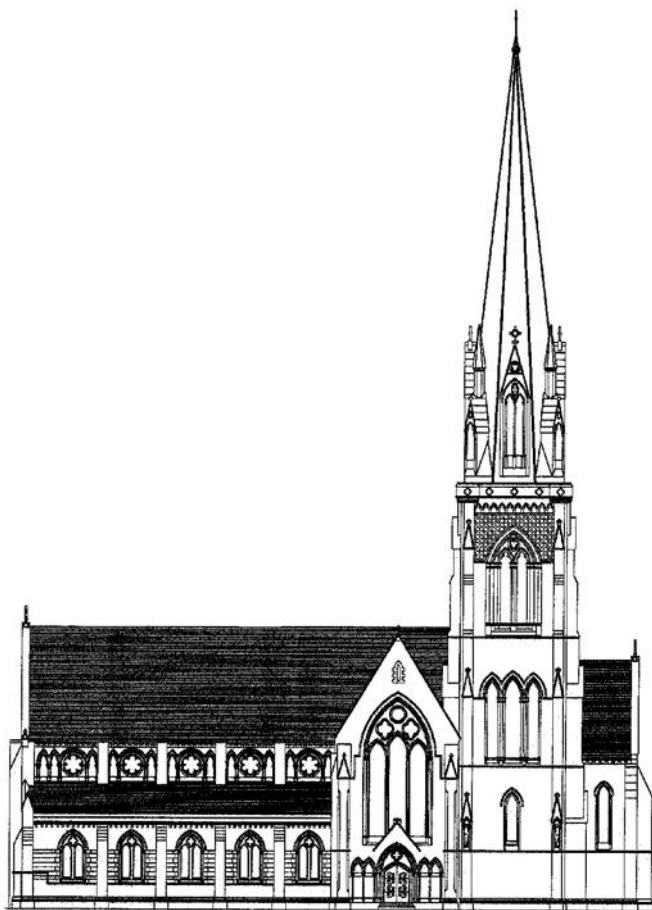


St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow



The Murals
Illustrations by Gwyneth Leech



From early in its history, the Church has recognised how art can speak directly to people of the great truths of life; and the partnership between artists and the Church played a substantial part in the development of the culture of Europe.

A major restoration programme, begun in April 1989, provided an opportunity to revive such a partnership at St Mary's Cathedral, and in 1990, Glasgow's year as European Cultural Capital, the painting of the newly-restored interior of the Cathedral made a significant contribution to the public art of the city.

With the help of the Scottish Arts Council and Glasgow District Council Festivals Budget, a national competition for designs for the decoration of the interior of the Cathedral was launched. The winner, Gwyneth Leech, was commissioned by the Cathedral Vestry to execute her design, and the work, completed in Phase I of the restoration (April – September 1990) comprises the roof of the chancel and crossing, three murals above the crossing arches, one above the east window, and the decoration of the chancel walls.

The centre of Gwyneth Leech's scheme is the figure of the ascended Christ above the nave altar. In early Christian and Byzantine art, the figure of Christ as *Pantokrator* (Ruler of all things) was the chief image in every church, either in the dome or in the apse, and this tradition is revived here to proclaim the Lordship of Christ, crucified and risen, over his Church and over the world. The wounds of his passion are an important feature of this figure.

On either side of Christ are the symbols of the four Evangelists, in a style which evokes the Celtic tradition of Christianity in Scotland – Matthew (a man), Luke (a bull), Mark (a lion) and John (an eagle) – all focussing on the Christ they proclaim.

At either foot of the mural are miniatures of the Holy Family and the Crucifixion, which introduce an underlying theme of these three murals: God's gifts to us, and mankind's spoiling of them.

Mural paintings occupy the space above the north and south arches of the crossing. The three-fold nature of the areas to be decorated suggested the central Christian mystery of the Trinity, symbolically represented by creative hands (the Father) reaching down into the seas, and a dove (the Holy Spirit) hovering above the air, linked by their position with the glorified Christ at the centre of the whole conception.

The whole of creation is God's gift to mankind, and we are his 'stewards'. Our failure to live up to this calling is one of the major religious insights of today, and one of the most important challenges facing the whole human race. This is eloquently expressed in the depiction of creatures currently under threat of extinction in the two side murals, the creatures of the sea to the north, and the creatures of land and air to the south: Right whale, walrus, blue whale and leather-backed turtle; red kite, golden eagle, kestrel and osprey, with badger, mountain hare, wild cat and other small mammals along the crest of the arch. All are portrayed in motion, joining, as it were, in our offering of praise to Almighty God, which is the fundamental purpose for which this great building stands.

At the foot of the murals, the theme of God's gift in creation and mankind's rejection of it is expressed again in miniatures. On the south side we see the Garden of Eden, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, tellingly set against a modern industrial landscape. On the north side is the story of the Flood – the few saved in the ark, while others (including an amusing representation of the artist and her assistants) perish in the waters, and the ark coming to rest on the mountain.

So the murals combine traditional iconography with contemporary concerns in a way that makes an important and compelling statement of Christian belief. It is hard to look at Gwyneth Leech's work and not be reminded, as Gerard Manley Hopkins said, that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God". No one can deny the urgency of the need to recapture that vision, and, for this reason alone, these murals are a major contribution by the church of 1990 to posterity. It must be our prayer that all who admire them will respond with a renewed reverence for the works of God all around us – everything that God has entrusted to our care.

The ceiling of the crossing is decorated to focus attention on the sanctuary around the nave altar – "the point of intersection of the timeless with time" (T. S. Eliot) – and reflects a medieval tradition of crowning the rood screen with a 'glory' (or 'ceilure') of stars and the sky. Here it is a canopy both to the figure of the glorified Christ in the central mural, and also to the nave altar, around which the worshipping community of St Mary's Cathedral gathers week by week for its Eucharist, in which we proclaim and celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus our glorified Lord, whose image oversees the whole Church of which he is the Lord and Head, and in which we receive his strength in Holy Communion to serve him in our daily living.

A contemporary note is struck by the space-rocket depicted among the stars of the ceiling, reminding us that even our probing of outer space is but a further exploration of the wonder and mystery of God's creation.

The vivid blue of the ceiling at the crossing emphasises the Cathedral's dedication to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and this is taken up in the fleurs-de-lys, white lilies and roses of the stencilled decoration to the east wall. The gradual fading of the colour of the roof away from the crossing emphasises its centrality in the worshipping life of the Cathedral.

Above the east window is a mural of the Annunciation, cleverly using the double space created by the roof timbers. Mary is shown seated in a tenement flat, with the scaffolded spire of the Cathedral visible through the window – a small reminder to future generations of the 1989-90 Restoration, which is mentioned also in an inscription on the south window in the chancel. The visit of the angel in the midst of the activities of our everyday life is a telling reminder that God's call comes to us wherever we are, and when we least expect it; and part of our response to that call must be in the consecration of the ordinary things of life to him.

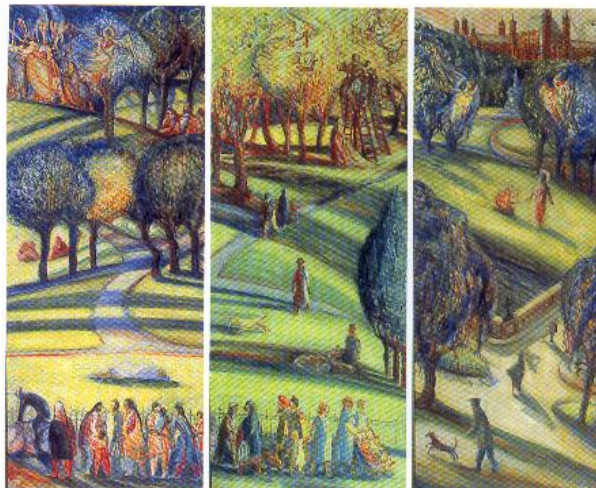
St Anne's Chapel murals

The new paintings in Saint Anne's Chapel, by Gwyneth Leech, reinforce the concept of a church 'without walls'. Their subject is Christianity in the midst of the every day.

The North wall features the Kelvingrove Triptych: three panels, each seventeen feet high by seven feet wide, which relate closely to each other but are not intended to join physically. On either side of the east window are hung two further panels, twelve feet high by three feet wide.

The panels are painted in acrylic on canvas and are hung in such a way as to allow for the eventual restoration of the fabric of the chapel. They are meant to act as an incentive for undertaking this much needed restoration work, which would involve the replastering of walls, the repair and cleaning of the stone work around the east window, north door and west arch, the re-leading and repair of the east window, the repainting of the ceiling and timbers and the installation of a new lighting system. In the meantime, the canvases are being dedicated into

the service of the cathedral in recognition of the long term nature of our restoration programme.



The triptych depicts the Easter Passion set in Kelvingrove Park. First, the eye encounters the figures at the bottom of each panel - actual portraits of regular park users on a late summer afternoon when the shadows are long: Sikh gentlemen, a group of Muslim women and children, cyclists, dog walkers and the ubiquitous nursery nannies and their charges. Certain figures will be familiar to members of Saint Mary's congregation - Alastair Young, a past verger of the Cathedral, and Oran the golden retriever both appear in the centre panel. The artist's daughter appears twice in the same painting - once as a small baby in red in a pushchair and then as a toddler walking beside the pushchair, recording the span of time taken in the completion of the canvases.

As the eye travels upwards, the viewer discovers the Easter story. **The left panel** is Gethsemane. Reclining figures in the park on a sunny afternoon become, at the top, the disciples who cannot stay awake. In the upper left is the Arrest of Jesus, with Judas embracing Christ in the centre of a crowd of soldiers wielding spears and torches. **The centre**

panel is dominated by the Deposition. The male disciples have all run away; the women are taking Jesus down from the cross to lay him in the tomb. **On the right** is the *Noli Me Tangere*. Mary Magdalene encounters the Risen Christ in the garden and does not recognise him. When at last she knows who he is, he says “do not touch me” (*noli me tangere*). He is real yet transfigured.

The composition of the three religious scenes is inspired by Italian frescoes of the early Renaissance: Giotto’s *Arrest of Jesus* in the Arena Chapel in Padua, a Deposition in the Lower Church of St Francis in Assisi and Fra Angelico’s *Noli Me Tangere* in the Monastery of San Marco in Florence.



The panels on either side of the east window represent the *Magnificat*. The pregnant Mary has come to stay with her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. In this depiction, they stand in small fenced gardens beneath the elm trees remaining in Barrington Drive and Woodlands Drive. Around them are the blackbirds, pigeons, collar doves, starlings and magpies so familiar in this neighbourhood.

GWYNETH LEECH was born in Philadelphia, USA, in 1959, and came to Scotland in 1981 with a scholarship to study drawing and painting at Edinburgh College of Art. She has exhibited widely in Britain and overseas, including numerous solo exhibitions. In 1988 she was elected a Professional Member of the Scottish Society of Artists, and was their President from 1996-99. In 1990 she was Artist in Residence with Scottish Opera in Glasgow. Gwyneth, her husband David and their daughter Megan were members of the congregation until 1999, when they left to start a new life in the USA.

*The Cathedral Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Glasgow (St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral)
is a charity registered with OSCR, number SCO06225.*