

THE “COSMIC CHRIST” MOSAIC RESTORATION PROJECT

Background

Even prior to the completion of the Cosmic Christ mosaic in 1973, tiles began to fall off. Several attempts were made through the years to glue back on pieces of the mosaic and to seal the surface, but none of those attempts proved successful. There were multiple points of failure regarding the original mosaic's design and execution—materials, preparation and installation. The material used was pressed glass tiles (machine made) that did not have enough surface area for proper bonding of the cements. Therefore the tiles were not “locked” in place. The assembly of the 3/4” square tiles into one foot square panels involved a mesh netting, bonded by epoxy, that resulted in additional points of failure. The epoxy became brittle over the years, and did not bond well to the cement or tile. Additionally, the tiles were placed too closely together and there was not enough room for the grout to bond between the sides of the tiles. The symmetrical pattern of uniform squares led to long vertical and horizontal cracks allowing water to seep in and freeze. Another area of failure in the preparation was in regards to the substrate wall. This wall needed to have some “tooth” to allow the mounting cement to have a chemical as well as a mechanical bond. The types of cement used were questionable. The installation was done by local workmen who apparently did not have adequate (or any) experience with exterior mosaics.

After years of unsuccessful repair attempts, the church decided to seek help from some of the world's foremost mosaic experts.

Who did the restoration work?

The church trustees consulted with Mr. Jim Piercey of J. Piercey Studios in Orlando, Florida. Mr. Piercey connected the church with Barsanti Marble Bronze Mosaic, a firm located in Pietrasanta, Italy. Mr. Barsanti's firm is fourth generation and was founded in the year 1882. Manrico Bertellotti, who is the most experienced mosaicist for Barsanti, along with his father, own Ferrari & Bacci Mosaics, also in Pietrasanta. That firm became another key partner in the project.

The Piercey/Barsanti team advised that the best option was a complete replacement of the mosaic using the correct methods and materials. Their work began with Mr. Piercey and his crew making the measurements necessary to reproduce the artwork. They used drones to photograph the existing mosaic and carefully map out each small section, panel by panel. The replacement work then proceeded one panel at the time. For each panel, Mr. Piercey and his team removed the original mosaic tiles and prepared the surface for replacement. Then, Mr. Barsanti and his team applied the sub-surface material and adhered and grouted the new tile panels in place. The removal/installation process took about a month per panel, but the background preparation of the material took about six months for each panel. So, the entire project became a five-year effort.

What is different this time?

The original square venetian tiles were replaced with glass tiles called smalti, manufactured in Italy. These are hand cut pieces of glass measuring about 1/4" X 5/8" X 1/4" thickness. The Italian team hand-cut approximately 6 million pieces of glass for the mosaic. (The original mosaic had about 1.4 million square pieces.) For each panel, a "cartoon" drawing was made the actual size of each bay. This "cartoon", which was converted to a "reverse image," was laid out on a floor and the smalti tile glued face-down to the paper. That process places the paper image on the outside surface so that the tile can bond directly with the cement without anything in between. (Upon installation, the paper is removed from the face.) The large panels were divided into smaller irregular shaped sections, numbered, and packaged for shipment. The irregular panel shapes prevent symmetrical patterns and eliminate the issue of water entry. The surface preparation used techniques and modern materials intended for exterior applications. This process has stood the test of time. The mosaicists have completed numerous projects around the world that have continued to display their beauty for decades.

Is the artwork the same?

The church was very cautious about making changes to the original design. The decision was made to replicate as closely as possible the original intent of the artists who created the work. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and this certainly holds true for any work of art including our mosaic. The mosaic has been referred to as "Egg-beater Jesus" and other nicknames. The members of FBC prefer the original title of "Cosmic Christ", but as the restoration proceeded, it was encouraging to hear so many in the community affirm the decision to preserve the original image. The "Cosmic Christ" had become, and will now continue to be, an iconic part of Huntsville for decades to come.

What was the cost?

The cost of the project was approximately \$1.6 million and was funded entirely by gifts from the members of First Baptist. This work of art is truly our gift to the city. The mosaic tells our story as a church, our story as a community, and it glorifies and honors God with its spiritual significance.

What happened to the old tiles?

The old tiles have been recovered and are being recycled into works of art themselves. Jewelry and other decorative art pieces have been created by members of the Huntsville community. The proceeds from these projects have funded a mission of the church called "Fresh Expressions". You can learn more about Fresh Expressions on the FBC website. In addition, community art pieces have been created at Panoply and other venues. These mosaic art pieces are displayed in various places