

## **Birmingham Cathedral – Arts Strategy**

2022

Birmingham Cathedral seeks to engage actively with the arts, that is artistic expression through movement, sound, visual and material creations. We aim to establish a semi regular programme of contemporary art intervention that explores, deepens and enhances our role as a place of worship, our spirituality, heritage, and engagement with the city and region.

The Cathedral is keen to tell a story through work that is site responsive and engages passers-by as well as those that come into the building. It is about raising its profile and having a contemporary nuanced conversation with the many people that walk through our grounds daily.

Our Arts Strategy has some **key principles**:

- The Strategy flows out of our *Pray, Serve, Grow* Strategy.
- We want to be as ambitious as we can in terms of arts in the Cathedral, establishing Birmingham Cathedral as a venue for international art.
- Arts in the Cathedral should respond carefully to the context of the Cathedral and the city.
- We seek to work in partnership with artists in the development of new work.
- Community engagement comes naturally out of all this, not least the partnerships and relationships we already have. We seek to develop and build new audiences, and to deepen our relationships with all the communities in the city and diocese.
- Many opportunities for public theology flow from this.
- We have capacity to do something major every year or so, and aim to move into a position of programming outstanding work that we have commissioned.

### **Art and the Sacred**

The theological imperative is that God our Creator invites us to co-operate in God's creative work and in grateful response to the gift of life in all its suffering and joy. In the Incarnation, the Eternal Word of God - through whom all things come into being - becomes fully God and fully human in Jesus born of Mary. In this central truth of Christianity we see most fully expressed God's love for creation, and thus we can find a tangible holiness and sacredness in the material.

## CATHEDRAL

*Stone  
of the earth  
made  
of its own weight  
light*

*Wendell Berry*

*'The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls'  
Pablo Picasso*

Cathedrals strive to offer the very best human beings can create to the glory of God. Churches and cathedrals are set apart 'to represent the truth that all time and space are God's.' As the C of E Buildings Review Group report 2015 notes, 'we need to recognise the scriptural truth that place is a fundamental category of human and spiritual experience and that churches, operating "sacramentally" can help us to see through the material to the spiritual.'

The western Christian church became a significant and enthusiastic patron of the arts. At times of illiteracy visual art in churches was a powerful means of communicating story, theology and doctrine. Christianity, in which God enters his creation, taking human flesh to demonstrate his great love, places profound value on the material world. The material world may convey God's grace to us. The creative spirit is God-given. The work of artists and craftspeople can be sacramental.

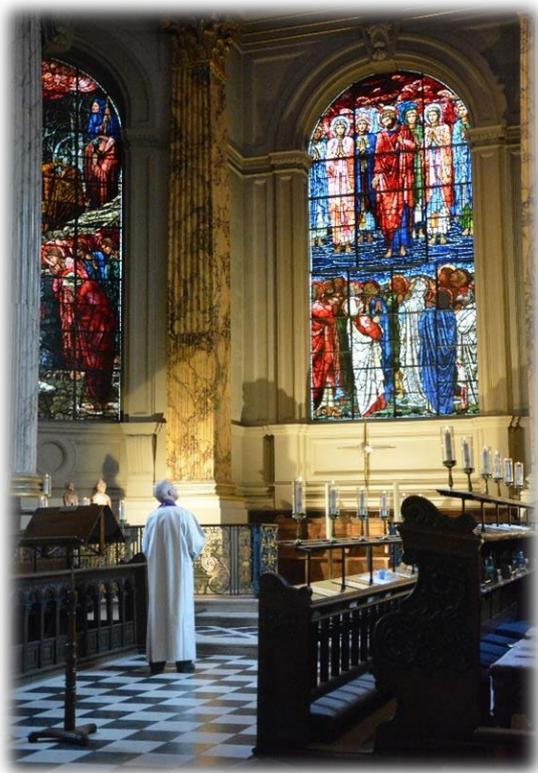
Our dedication as a Cathedral to St Philip invites a visual encounter with the divine. In John's Gospel our patron saint invites people to 'Come and See' (John 1:46) echoing the invitation of Christ himself (John 1:39). We are called to show and recognise Christ in the heart of our city and diocese. We believe that art in the cathedral can be one of the powerful ways that people can see and encounter deeper truths and the glory of God.

We understand that our sacred place enables an experience of sacred 'space'. A visitor referred to Birmingham Cathedral as a 'breathing space' in the city – a place where people can find space to think, contemplate and re-orientate themselves within a bigger context. Sacred buildings encourage us to encounter and reflect on life's big issues. In them we can see our lives in the context of eternity. In the same way art can engage with the imagination and evoke intellectual and emotional responses that 'open' us to the wider context of time and eternity and a greater sensitivity to awe and wonder as well as greater attentiveness to the particularity of the present moment. By attempting to make the unknown known, or the invisible visible, art provides space for contemplation and transformation. Art can nurture desire.

The four magnificent Burne-Jones windows in Birmingham Cathedral depict moments of epiphany and revelations of God's loving activity among us: incarnation, crucifixion, ascension and last judgement. These events reveal heaven on earth. The windows support, we believe, our cathedral vocation to be a 'gate of heaven' (Genesis 28: 17). The Cathedral's vocation is to be a 'thin' place where we can glimpse, and even have a palpable sense of, the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Visual art can support this vocation, enabling viewers to see things differently, pay attention and experience something new. The Burne-Jones windows up-close can be an emotionally overwhelming experience, putting the viewer both in the centre of things ('this all happened for me...') but also revealing the smallness of individual existence. Art opens up this paradox of human experience.

'Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.' Thomas Merton



The location of our building, an exquisite work of art in itself, and filled with both magnificent works of art and animated by natural sun-light, set in a natural performance space, close to University art departments and resourced by a city of inventors, craftspeople, manufacturers and artists all gives confidence to this mission. We are set within the only green space within the city centre, in a wonderful context where the busyness and demands of contemporary urban life flow in and out of the quiet rhythm of our daily prayer.

## **Some possible themes**

We reflect on the **permeability of our walls**. Sound travels in and out of the eighteenth century building easily; the noise of the city centre flows into and informs the quiet contemplation of prayer. Cathedral Square is a major thoroughfare and meeting place; up to 20,000 people a day come through it. How can the work of art speak to people walking by, communicate to them, entice them into a deeper relationship with the Cathedral?

There is a keenness to support **emerging talent** of artists and musicians – evidenced by the Choir and Music Department, and by the Cathedral's support of the annual craft fair. We are seeking to deepen relationships with the Universities, particularly the Conservatoire, the School of Art, and the School of Jewellery. We seek to play our part in developing creative talent within the city.

**Music** and choirs are a strong theme and something that could be used to inspire a new work.

**Politics and identities:** We have begun work on reflecting on the sensitive histories emerging from the British Empire, particularly in relation to Birmingham's role as a manufacturing centre for Empire, its part in arms manufacture, and the traders and investors who have previously supported, been commemorated, or who have been involved in funding the cathedral's activities. How do we interpret and make sense of this contested heritage and embrace our role in contemporary Birmingham?

Most prominent representations of Christ within the cathedral depict a white man – and there is little within the cathedral itself reflecting the incredibly **diverse communities** that visit and worship at the Cathedral. We seek an engagement with all who make up our city, not least those of other faiths.

The site also contains a memorial to commemorate the **1974 Birmingham Pub** bombings, and a close working relationship with the Catholic Cathedral could inspire an artist to work across this partnership.

Our first Bishop, **Charles Gore**, is depicted in a fine statue outside our doors blessing the city. His social commitment meant money was spent on poor relief rather than a new large Cathedral. This social commitment is at the heart of our life as a Cathedral, not least in work with the many homeless and other vulnerable people who visit us. How can art reflect and enhance our social good and joys?

**In the wake of the pandemic, how can art speak to and inform a renewal of society?**

**How can encounter with the Cathedral and Cathedral Square lead us into a deeper relationship with our city, with one another and with God?**

**Cathedral Square is one of the very few green spaces in the city centre. How does artistic endeavour reflect natural beauty and enhance our commitment to the environment.**

### **Possible sites and locations**

There is limited room inside the cathedral for large installations and few walls to hang paintings. Possible locations could be:

- The upstairs galleries inside the cathedral
- The roof or high windows of the Cathedral
- Railings surrounding the Cathedral site.
- The Cathedral grounds.
- Possible partnership with St Chads.

### **Possible mediums**

- Light
- Sound – as long as this can be turned off for services. The Cathedral is in a noisy place which is lively at night, and therefore some noise is not a significant issue.
- Dance and performance
- Installation outside
- Poetry and spoken word

### **Possible audiences**

- Passers-by and those who use the grounds for lunch/ meetings/ coffee
- Parishioners
- Lively at night as at the centre of Birmingham's nightlife district
- Close to the train stations (5 mins walk)
- Significant numbers of students nearby
- Many hotels and visitors staying nearby
- Nearby Children's Hospital
- A huge diversity of groups and communities throughout the city we have links and relationships with

### **Funding and partnership opportunities**

The Cathedral is not cash rich but is well situated for partnership working. It has a fundraising team that can support income generation.

It may be possible to find small pots of match funding for funding bids.

### **Notes for Artists:**

To be considered for the cathedral, an artwork should:

- cohere with the Key Principles of our Arts Strategy.
- please note that the nature of our Strategy and of our building mean that we are unlikely to accept touring shows or works that have been developed for other contexts.
- If you wish to work with us, please complete the Arts Expression of Interest Form and return it to **enquiries@birminghamcathedral.com**

