

**Upon the Unveiling of ‘A Dance to the Music of Time’
– An Address by Michael Burden**

In 1989, the College was still reeling from the appointment of our first full time Bursar; tonight, he is sadly away, and not able to be with us. Incidentally, in 1989, the College had hardly noticed the arrival, at the same time, of its new Stipendiary Lecturer in Music.

David, having glanced around the estate, saw immediately that an architectural survey was in order. Whether he had any idea what would be revealed is doubtful; what I can tell you is that the architectural practice the College employed remarked that it was used to finding families living in grand interiors with the exterior falling down, whereas at New College, the inhabitants lived in some squalor, but with the outside stonework largely in excellent condition.

I should record that the horrors revealed by that survey have now mostly been put right, after 20 years of hard labour and scaffolding by the Works Department, and tolerance by the Fellowship.

Among the rooms surveyed was the College’s Founder’s Library, a long 14th-century room, which by the time of the survey, was used as the Senior Common Room lunch room. Three cases of books remained, and what emerged during this survey, was that dust, food-scrap, and constantly changing temperatures, had combined to allow the books to grow a range of fungi, some of which at least looked (if not in fact) unique to this situation.

The then Library Fellow, Penry Williams, and the College’s librarian, Patrick Lamb, showed the College the extent of the problem in full technicolour, and it was clear that the books needed to be moved. There were both Fellows and Old Members who felt that if the last book was removed from Founder’s Library, it would be end of the College as we knew it. In my view, the College’s Founder was a great deal more pragmatic than this suggests, and would have had no trouble in dealing with (as we might say in planning parlance), ‘change of use’. In any case, the books went, and the College remains.

For a while, we simply had empty shelves. When these were removed and the fabric repaired, not only was the room starker, but it was also noisier. And hence, the idea of tapestry was born. It’s a great pleasure to see Penry Williams here tonight, who was first to suggest the idea; as he says, he did so, without specifying what type of tapestry he had in mind. This was wise.

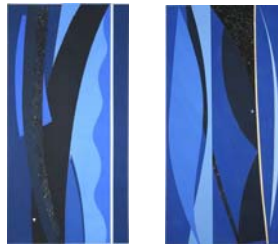
The then Warden, Harvey McGregor, proposed that we have copies of St George and the Dragon tapestries. This was vetoed by the Fellowship. It was then proposed by our now-retired Fellow in Fine Art, Jean Lodge, that we have some third world tapestries woven. We never found out what she had in mind, because the Fellowship vetoed these as well.

However, the noise problems continued – and still do; I fear the College will be hearing more on this in the coming year.

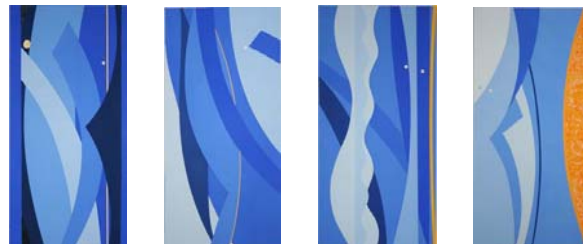
So, the idea of the tapestries was revived. The College did look at a range of designs, the production of which proved to be problematic, and in the end, the work of a number of makers was canvassed, and the output of Jeni Ross came to our attention. And I have to record the input here of the silversmith Rod Kelly, who has been commissioned regularly by

the College since 1994, and who gave us some valuable assistance. Jeni's tapestries can be seen in a range of public buildings across the United Kingdom, from the tapestry in the House of Lords, to three at the Norwich Castle Museum, to the woven tapestries for the Strode Theatre, Somerset and the Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield. And somewhat unexpectedly, but of interest to the Fellowship, a two-panel tapestry and tufted wool carpet for Government Science laboratories.

As will be clear to all of you, Jeni's work is primarily concerned with colour and movement. Her influences are drawn from a number of sources; fine art, literature, and most interestingly from my own point view, performance. Her own statement suggests she deals in dichotomies: earth and air, night and day, negative and positive. She also emphasises planes and textures, aspects which are apparent in the New College set.



'A Dance to the Music of Time' was conceived as a cycle, which can be hung together, or as a set of two and four, as they will be when they are hung in Founders Library. Jeni's starting point was the work of artist Johannes Itten, who taught at the Bauhaus from 1919 until 1922, where he had invited Paul Klee and Georg Muche to join him. Itten was influenced by Adolf Hölzel, who had developed what he called a 'colour wheel'. Itten's own book, *The Art of Color*, claimed to take these ideas further, in what he called a 'colour sphere', which in the end, encompassed 12 colours, an artistic twelve-tone theory. Starting with these, the New College cycle uses six of these shades in blue, which are then taken further to represent the passing of time.



And for a College that has held the Savilian Chair of Astronomy since 1870, with a new incumbent just arrived, the second motif of the solar system, is entirely appropriate. Looking from left to right, the colours of the tapestries move from midnight to midday and also show the night sky with deep space, the Milky Way, the eight planets of the solar system, and the edge of the sun coming in on the last tapestry.

On a personal note, perhaps one of the most arresting aspects of seeing the set hung as a cycle for the first time is being able to see the planets curving in an arc, either away from Pluto (which may - or may not - be a planet!), or away from the sun. And if you stand in the middle, it will be apparent that the four inner planets are closer together, than the outer four. However, the tapestries themselves don't further advocacy from me, except to say that we are looking forward to having them in College in the fullness of time!

Any message or email to New College from the Chattels Fellow inspires a round of whimsical responses from its members. The first reply this time to the announcement of tonight's event, was my favourite: 'Couldn't possibly miss the Tapestry Fest. Will we be doing lines off the commission?' I have to report only one 'line' as a tie-in product: postcards!



Michael Burden
Chattels Fellow
New College

Michael Burden concluded by thanking, on behalf of the Warden and Scholars, 'Tom, for his remarks; Christopher, who may or may not remember suggesting that the tapestries could be hung in the Ashmolean, and Agnes, the Ashmolean's exhibitions' manager; Maggie Davies and Jacqui Julier, without whom the administration of the commission would have been impossible; and, of course, Jeni Ross; and I can record that working with her has been a great pleasure.'