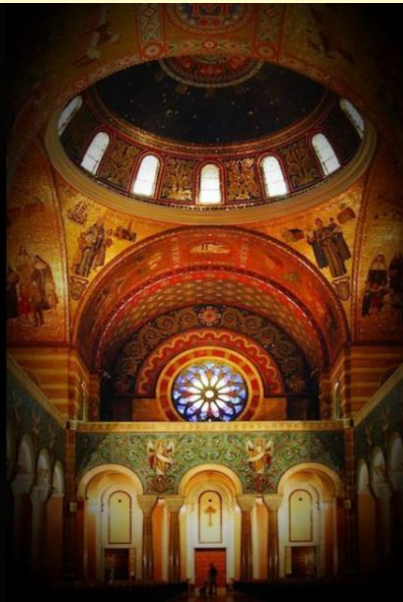


SACRED WINDOWS



Sunday – July 23, 2023

This Cathedral is a Museum of Mosaics

Dear Thomas,

Most people would be surprised to find out that there is only one *painting* in all of **St. Peter's Basilica in Rome**. (It was done by the famous Renaissance artist Raphael, so it was kind of hard to turn down.) The rest of that massive space is filled with artwork, yes, but not the painted kind. Its domes and altars are covered with little pieces of stone and glass...i.e., mosaics. Wow!

Yet, St. Peter's Basilica is *not* the church we're talking about in this newsletter for two reasons. First of all, **it's not a cathedral**. The cathedral church of the Bishop of Rome is on the other side of the Eternal City – St. John Lateran.

Secondly, it "only" has 33,000 square feet of mosaics on its walls. Does that sound like a lot? It is, but our museum of mosaics has literally **83,000 square feet of mosaics** covering virtually every inch of its upper walls, arches, and domes. I'll have to give that a **triple Wow**.

(There is another mosaic church in **St. Petersburg, Russia** that claims to hold the world record for mosaics. But I'm sure that's just Russian disinformation.)



Cathedral and Basilica

The famed mosaic church I want to consider here is the Catholic cathedral of our nation's Gateway City, St. Louis, Missouri. The cathedral is named

after the patron of the city, **St. Louis IX**, King of France, and its majestic green dome rises 227 feet above the earth.

Now, I know that would actually look tiny in comparison to the **massive 630-foot Gateway Arch** for which St. Louis is so famous, but the Arch is just a simple structure of undecorated steel. Despite its impressive size, it has absolutely nothing on the magnificent temple to God's glory that is the city's Catholic cathedral.



The cathedral is also called a basilica because **Pope John Paul II** designated it as such in 1997 prior to his visit there in 1999. In simplest terms, a basilica is a type of church that has a long central aisle held up by huge pillars.

The architectural style is directly related to **magnificent buildings of the ancient world** that showcased the dignity of kings ("basilica" comes from the Greek words, *basileia* and *oikos*, meaning "royal

house").

A church gets designated a "basilica" in the Catholic Church due to its antiquity, its great dignity, or its value as a center of worship. There are **over 1700 designated basilicas** in the Catholic world, each one of which is utterly magnificent – and that term certainly describes St. Louis's mosaic cathedral.

Word Pictures

As the title says, the St. Louis Cathedral is a veritable museum of mosaics. To put a clear image on the square footage, it covers the area of nearly one and a half football fields (or, if you are a Cardinals fan, **more than ten baseball diamonds**), which is a pretty impressive amount of artwork, I'd say.

One more image, just to make the point: since mosaic tiles are usually smaller than the average puzzle piece, **imagine how long it would take** you to piece together a jigsaw puzzle larger than a football field. In this case, the answer is **76 years!**



Brief History

How this is even possible becomes clear with a little sense of the Catholic history of the city. The first bishop of St. Louis was appointed in 1817 before there was even a diocese! He was sent to oversee **the mission territory** when St. Louis was little more than a frontier town.

The Diocese of St. Louis was formally established in 1826, and soon afterward, the faithful built their **first cathedral** dedicated to King St. Louis IX of France.

As America grew westward, the diocese of St. Louis grew with it, and the rapidly growing Catholic population eventually



needed a new cathedral. When the diocese was elevated to the status of Archdiocese in 1847, they decided to build a larger cathedral, but our Civil War and other matters delayed the construction until the 20th century.

Under the leadership of John Cardinal Glennon (1903-1946), the cathedral broke ground in 1907 and laid the cornerstone in 1908. The **installation of the mosaics** began in 1912 and were not even close to being finished in 1926 when the cathedral was formally consecrated.

But even though the cathedral *structure* was complete, the temple of worship was not considered *fully complete* until all the **artwork was finished in 1988**. So, from beginning to end, the installation process for the mosaics took *three-quarters of a century*!

The Catholics of St. Louis are patient if nothing else.



Pentecost Mosaic



Resurrection Mosaic



Mosaics as a Durable Artform

Buildings constructed entirely of rock and stone endure longer than any other structures, and artwork made with these materials has the same durable power. Archeology certainly witnesses to this truth.

Whoever decided to make this cathedral's walls, altars, and domes go "full mosaic" wanted to **guarantee that that the artwork would last a long, long time**. It's likely that people centuries from now will be marveling at the mosaics in St. Louis Cathedral just like we do today.

Two quick and fascinating facts about the mosaics in the cathedral:

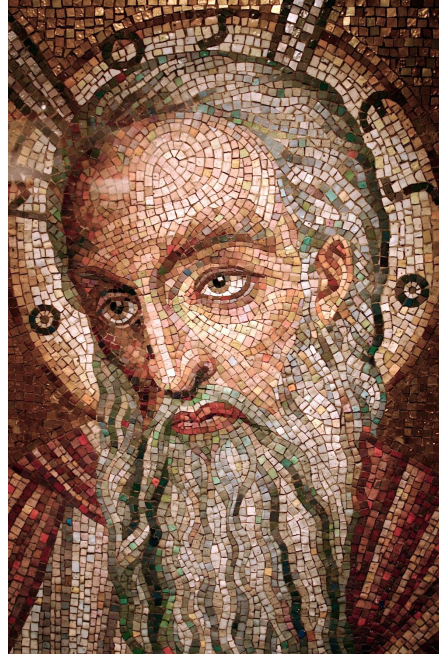
- They consist of **41.5 million pieces of colored glass** and
- Encompass **7000 shades of color!**

I didn't know there were that many colors in the light spectrum. The now-defunct enterprise called the **Ravenna Mosaic Company**, which had been founded just to create the St. Louis Cathedral mosaics, had an inventory of that many colors set aside for the work!

(Right: Stunning details of the **Moses mosaic** in the cathedral.)

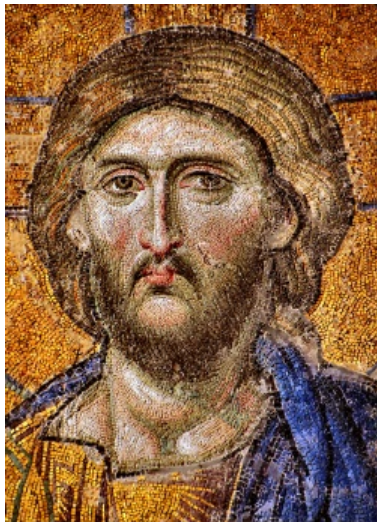
Some other distinctive features of the St. Louis cathedral and its mosaics:

- The mosaics that decorate the side chapels on the west side (the Blessed Virgin Chapel and the All Saints Chapel) as well as the sanctuary walls were **designed and installed by Tiffany Studios**, and it is said that the famed Louis Comfort Tiffany himself designed many of them.
- The mosaics depict many biblical scenes, but there are also sequences of mosaics featuring the life of King St. Louis IX, the history of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, and the saintly personages who contributed to the **expansion of the Catholic faith in the US** and in that area in particular.
- Given the length of the project, dozens of people contributed to it. One story stands out among them all: **the father and son team**, Paul and Arno Heuduck, spent virtually their entire working lives creating and installing the mosaics. Arno died in November of 1988, just after the last mosaic was installed.
- There is a **museum in the church basement** dedicated to the mosaics and 76-year history of their installation.



Mosaic by Any Other Name

The earliest examples of mosaic art (roughly 2000 BC) are found in Zoroastrian temples in Iran and consisted of colored pebbles used to create images on walls. The ancient Greeks improved on the art form by creating colored glass, but it was the **Romans who gave us the word "mosaic"**, which is a derivative of the Latin term for "museum", a collection of diverse works of art. The **"mosaicum"** was a collection of diverse colored stones or pieces of glass!



The Romans later perfected the art by placing gold leaf behind pieces of translucent glass or **sandwiching gold or silver leaf** in between two pieces to create a sense of depth in the image and make it shimmer as the light would fall on it at various different angles.

This technique would be key to adopting the art form for *religious artwork* as it gave the images **an ethereal look**. The Byzantine (Greek) Christians virtually perfected the art of religious mosaics.

The image of Christ (at left) from **the Church of Hagia Sophia** in Constantinople is just one magnificent example.

By the time of the high Renaissance in the 1500s, mosaic work had been largely eclipsed by fresco and oil painting, but Pope Gregory XIII single-handedly breathed new life into the art form when he decided that **the interior of new St. Peter's Basilica** would consist entirely of mosaics. (Okay, he caved to Raphael's oil painting, but who wouldn't?)

He had a **medieval mosaic of the Apostle Peter by Giotto** installed above the main entrance to St. Peter's to symbolize the continuity of the old basilica with the new.

Since that time, the Vatican has maintained a school of mosaic art, which exists even to

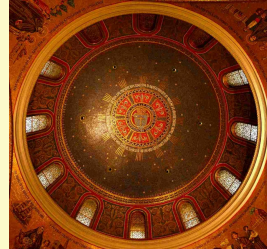
the present day both to **preserve the many mosaics in the basilica** and to train artists in the technique. (They also sell gorgeous mosaic works, which is a huge money-maker for the Vatican, but you didn't hear that from me.)

Three Focuses

If you ever have the blessing of visiting the cathedral of St. Louis, you could be overwhelmed at the totality of all the artwork. So, follow this very simple break down for your mosaic tourism – **domes, saints, and scriptures** – and you will view the full measure of beauty that streams through these sacred mosaic windows. Oh, and don't forget to bring **binoculars** to get the details.

Domes

Needless to say, the three domes of the cathedral are filled with magnificent mosaics, and each one is a **distinct wonder in itself**. Here they are in red, amber, and blue.

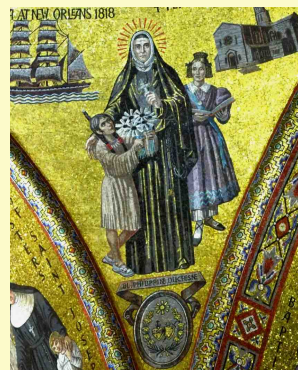


Saints

Also, don't miss the saints that sit *under* the domes and hold them up, as it were. You can spot some great American saints whose images fill the **triangular joint areas** which connect a lower wall or pillar with a dome above.

The mosaics below literally give us a **short history of American sanctity**: Mother Cabrini, St. Rose Philippine Duschene (the "local saint" of the Archdiocese of St. Louis), and the North American Martyrs.

And, speaking of saints, you can view the life and acts of the **cathedral's patron saint**, King St. Louis IX in the foyer which is dedicated entirely to him.



Scriptures

Finally, don't miss the biblical scenes that can be found all around the basilica, as typified by the **Pentecost and Resurrection mosaics** shown above.

On a final note, what you will *not* find throughout this immensely decorated space, though, is a **unified artistic style for all the mosaics**. They were created by numerous teams of artisans over a 76-year period, so you will see a diversity of styles and genres, which, in my opinion, adds to the truly unique character of this majestic house of God.

To cap off our discussion of mosaics, let's end where we started, with St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. **St. Peter's** has greater size, grandeur, and authority than perhaps any other church on earth, and it even has its own school of mosaic art.

Yet... *let's admit* that even the great St. Peter's **must bow** to America's St. Louis Cathedral Basilica in the splendor of its mosaic beauty!

Feature

Louis Comfort Tiffany, whose mosaics grace the sanctuary and side chapels of the St. Louis Cathedral Basilica was something of a Renaissance man in the arts. **His many stained glass works**, particularly those on religious subjects, are just as magnificent as his mosaics.

Please take a moment to read an article I wrote last year on the windows of the Seven **Angels of Revelation** that Tiffany and his studios crafted for a church in 1902. They are absolute masterpieces in every respect and are very aptly called “sacred windows” in both subject matter and impact on the viewer. Enjoy!

[How the Book of Revelation Inspired 7 Tiffany Windows](#)



Wishing you and yours a blessed Sunday.

Peter Darcy

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