

## **PANEL 1: The Artist**

### **Virgil Cantini: His Life**

Virgil David Cantini (1919-2009) was born in Pietransieri, Italy. He immigrated with his family to Weirton, West Virginia in 1930 to escape the rise of Fascism under Mussolini. Artistic and athletic, Cantini was an All-American quarterback and received a football scholarship to play in college. He attended Manhattan College in New York before transferring to Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh. His education was interrupted by World War II when he volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a modelmaker and topographer. After an honorable discharge in 1945, he returned to Pittsburgh and in 1946 graduated from college and married fellow artist Lucille Kleber. They lived and worked in their home on South Craig Street in Oakland, raising two daughters.

In 1948, Cantini earned a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Pittsburgh, where he later taught and helped to create the Fine Arts Department. He chaired the department until his retirement in 1989. Cantini was active among professional organizations, such as the Sculpture Society, the Craftsmen's Guild, and the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. In a 1953 Time magazine poll he was named one of the hundred leaders of tomorrow, and in 1957 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study European sacred art. Virgil Cantini passed away in 2009 in Pittsburgh, at the age of 90.

### **Virgil Cantini: His Work**

Virgil Cantini's prolific artistic journey began with traditional, small-scale compositions during his time as a student and young artist and grew throughout the mid-20th century into a robust multi-media studio practice, including special commissions for large-scale public works. He was a firm believer that art should not just be relegated to museums, but should enrich and enliven public life. Universities, architectural firms, churches, landscape designers, city facilities, businesses, and private patrons were eager to engage Cantini in noteworthy projects, integrating modern art into newly designed spaces and sites. From his studio in the Oakland neighborhood, Cantini worked primarily in metals, enamel, glass, mosaic, and wood, often pushing the boundaries of art media by combining traditional methods with modern and experimental processes and scales - truly a leading artist-craftsman of his time. Virgil Cantini interacted with Pittsburgh and the public realm through color, texture and his distinctive approach and bold visual language. "My feeling is that art is not confined to a particular media. To me, painting, mosaic, sculpture - all are a form of a man's expression," said Cantini.

### **Select notable works in Pittsburgh by Virgil Cantini:**

*Ode to Space*, 1966

Painted steel and glass sculpture

David Lawrence Hall, University of Pittsburgh

Original location, in honor of former Chancellor Edward H. Litchfield.

*Enlightenment and Joy*, 1977

Enamel on steel panel mural

Wesley W. Posvar Hall, University of Pittsburgh

Original location, commissioned by University of Pittsburgh

*Joy of Life*, 1969

COR-TEN steel sculptural fountain

Originally Penn & Highland Avenues pedestrian mall, East Liberty, with Simonds and Simonds landscape architects for the URA, City of Pittsburgh. Relocated in 1987 to Baum & South Whitfield Street with modifications

## **PANEL 2: The Artwork**

*"The art is supposed to lend a feeling of movement, not of a specific image. I want to give an experience of sensing the city - both day and night... gold and silver will shimmer like the lights of the city. They will pick up the lights of the tunnel and give an experience, a point of view...By spacing the mosaics, I hoped to create the idea of a strata cut into the earth - the city growing out of the earth and not bound by a frame. You visualize the city simultaneously from many points of view."*

### **The Mosaic Tunnel**

The original location of the mosaics was within a 60-foot long pedestrian tunnel in Downtown Pittsburgh, connecting Chatham Street to Seventh Avenue beneath Bigelow Boulevard. The 1964 commission from the Urban Redevelopment Authority was, at this point in Cantini's career, the artwork of the grandest scale he had yet undertaken. The artist took a sabbatical from his position at the University of Pittsburgh to dedicate himself to the creation of the mosaics. His daughter Lisa recalled, "her dad driving around the city, day and night, in a green Rambler station wagon searching for inspiration."

The installation of 28 individual mosaic panels comprised a two-part "mosaic sculpture". One composition evokes an abstracted cityscape, the other an aerial perspective of urban topography, rendered in bold geometric forms and with metallic accents. With a nod to the vibrant mosaics experienced in subways and public spaces throughout Europe, Cantini created a pedestrian experience that commemorated the vitality and dynamic nature of the city. The individual panels, ranging in size from just over one foot to almost seven feet long, were installed in a slightly askew linear composition, with planned space between, and were originally surrounded by a background of irregularly shaped white marble pieces, installed under Cantini's direction.

## **PANEL 3: The Site**

### **Urban Redevelopment**

Pittsburgh underwent major urban renewal projects from 1946-1973, a period known as the Pittsburgh Renaissance. It was a collection of wide-ranging initiatives that sought to remedy problems facing the city such as infamous pollution, frequent flooding, congested traffic, and neighborhoods experiencing deterioration or abandonment of properties due to neglect, crime, or lack of support. Urban centers across the United States were undergoing similar redevelopment efforts as new federal funding became available to American cities in the post-war period. While the intention of urban renewal was progress, in practice, many projects targeted low income and minority communities, segregating populations and displacing residents without a plan for relocation.

Under the direction of Mayor David L. Lawrence, the first phase of the Pittsburgh Renaissance laid the groundwork to redevelop areas near the city center, including Point State Park, Gateway Center, and the Lower Hill District. The Lower Hill was a densely populated neighborhood known as “The Crossroads of the World” as it was an energetic, multi-racial, multi-ethnic community consisting of numerous Western and non-Western cultures. Located near a railroad depot, it was a landing place for African Americans after the Civil War and during the Great Migration (1910-1970) and for Jewish and Catholic immigrants from Eastern Europe, Italy, Syria, Lebanon, and Greece during the New Immigration Period (1880-1921). The different communities lived, worked, and worshipped in the neighborhood until the late 1950s when 1,300 buildings were seized through eminent domain and razed to clear land for redevelopment and build the Crosstown Boulevard (now a section of Interstate 579), displacing 413 businesses and 8,000 residents.

The vision of city leaders and the Urban Redevelopment Authority was to develop 95 acres of the Lower Hill into a district of theaters, auditoriums, and cultural organizations. The Civic Arena (now demolished) was built in 1961, but the plans for the entire site were never realized. The sunken highway cut off pedestrian traffic between downtown and the Lower Hill, creating a physical barrier and isolating the remaining residents. A tunnel, the original site of the mosaics, was designed below the interstate to connect pedestrian traffic between the neighborhoods, but fell into disuse after the intended cultural district never materialized.

### **Preserving the Mosaics**

In 2016, the city of Pittsburgh announced its plans for the I-579 Cap Project, a 3-acre urban green space linking downtown and the Hill District. The project proposed the construction of a park spanning over I-579, which required regrading, to bury the pedestrian tunnel where Cantini’s artwork was located. Because the project was partially funded by a Federal Highway Administration grant, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act took effect, which requires federal agencies to consider the effects of projects they sponsor on historic properties.

In February 2018, the Mosaic Tunnel was determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places through consultation with the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office and with information contributed by the Section 106 Consulting Parties. The Mosaic Tunnel is significant as a public works project of high artistic value designed by prominent mid-century artist Virgil Cantini.

Through the collaborative efforts of the City of Pittsburgh, the Federal Highway Administration, the Sports and Exhibition Authority, the State Historic Preservation Office, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, and the Section 106 Consulting Parties, a plan was made for the removal, storage, and reinstallation of the mosaic panels. In April 2019, the panels were removed from their original location in the pedestrian tunnel, and restoration work was undertaken by McKay Lodge Fine Art Conservation Laboratory. The mosaics were reinstalled at their current location in 2023, bringing this historic artwork once again to the public realm for all to enjoy and interpret what a celebration of the city means to them.