**Broadcasting House (BBC building), Portland Place, W1**

Date: 1932.

Architect: G Val Meyer

Sculptor: Eric Gill.

**Sculptures:** Various relief and free-standing sculptures by Eric Gill, which were commissioned in 1929 and executed in 1932.

1. Ariel between Wisdom and Gaity (Gaity holding pipe) [G]. High relief panel above NW entrance [C].

2. Ariel between Wisdom and Gaity - Ariel playing celestial music [H]. High relief panel above SW entrance [C].

3. Ariel piping the children [I]. High relief panel set in surrounding frame for E entrance (fronting Langham St).

4. Prospero and Ariel [D-F]. Large free-standing group set within a curved niche above the main entrance on the S side [A-B].

5. The Sower. High relief (flattened but free-standing) statue set in a central arch inside the main foyer opposite the entrance [J-L]. Hopton Wood stone.

6. Frieze of abstract birds in flight against a geometric pattern in relief [M-N], on balcony at third floor level on W side.

7. Frieze of abstract wave patterns in relief [O-P], above first floor level underneath balcony.

Nos. 1-5 are by Eric Gill, the panels for 1-3 roughed out in his studio and finished in situ on site. The long friezes nos 6-7 were designed by the architect Val Meyer (sculptor unknown).

The sculptures were commissioned by the BBC Board of Governors who, rather than the architect, chose the subject, which is loosely based on Shakespeare’s play The Tempest.
The governors chose the subject "because Ariel was an 'airy spirit', a superficial reference to the airwaves of broadcasting, who carried out the wishes of Prospero, Duke of Milan, presumably the Governors" (Collins 1992: 43). In the large sculpture above the front entrance Ariel [D-F] is depicted with stigmata, so in Gill's own explanation is "as much about God the Father and God the Son as they are Shakespeare's characters". The Sower, a free standing but flattened relief sculpture in the entrance foyer represents - actually and symbolically - a man 'broadcasting'. No doubt the birds and the waves on the two long friezes on the W side were meant to represent the idea of the flight of the airwaves through the ether. Malcolm Yorke describes all this symbolism as "pretentious" (Yorke 1981: 230), but this attitude is perhaps somewhat anachronistic.

However, whatever the success of this iconography, the sculptures are important in the overall design of the building. They were used to create a hierarchy of interest across the simple facade of the building, strategically placed to highlight entry points and to flank the vertical end panels of the curved nose of the building - itself designed to reflect the curved front of All souls Langham Place next door to the south [A]. The large sculpture of Prospero and Ariel above the entrance in the front of this 'nose' provides a stunning focus to the building which faces directly southwards down the street. The whole ensemble is justly well known as one of the most successful marriages of architecture and sculpture of the period, and makes an exceptionally important visual statement of townscape design.

Sources:

Builder 1928.


Collins (1992), catalogue entries nos. 82-90, pp 110-12.
