The Painted Church: Medieval Wall Paintings in England and Wales 800 – 1540

Background Notes

Roger Rosewell FSA - 24 January 2018

Detail from Westminster Abbey Chapter House, 1375-1404

WAHG
Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk

The Painted Church: Medieval Wall Paintings in England and Wales 800-1540
Roger Rosewell FSA

Written and archaeological evidence shows that at least some Anglo-Saxon churches and monasteries had painted walls before and during the 9th century. A figurative painting found at Winchester has been dated to the late 9th century.

The earliest surviving painting still *in situ* is at Nether Wallop (Hants) church and dates from around 1000. It is painted in a 'sketchy' Anglo-Saxon style.

Although very little survives from the following century (Houghton-on-the-Hill in Norfolk may be an exception), the impact of the Norman Conquest (and wider French/continental influences) can be seen from 1100 onwards.

The most important examples can be found in a group of churches in Sussex collectively known as 'the Lewes Group' in the unsubstantiated assumption that they were painted by artists attached to Lewes Priory. The churches include Hardham, Clayton, Coombes, and Plumpton. The paintings date from c 1120. Examples of a similar date survive elsewhere, e.g. Kempley in Glos, c. 1130. Very fine twelfth century paintings also survive in Canterbury Cathedral and Winchester Cathedral. We can assume that monasteries of this period were also extensively decorated.

Changes in architecture and church governance from the thirteenth-century onwards had profound implications for wall paintings. Window opening became larger, shrinking available wall space and creating opportunities for stained glass artists to enrich churches. The Lateran (or Papal) Council of 1215 instructed Bishops to encourage lay devotion and piety influencing the range of subjects depicted on church walls. Finally a convention that the priest/church would be responsible for the chancel/sanctuary area of the church and the laity for the nave saw an increase in popular devotional subjects.

By the fourteenth century the most common subjects were:

The Infancy and Passion of Christ; Images of Christ/the Crucifixion; The Virgin Mary; Images of, and Lives, of Saints; The Seven Works of Mercy; The Seven Deadly Sins; The Doom or Last Judgement; The Weighing of Souls; the Three Living and the Three Dead; Warning to Sabbath Breakers; Warning to Gossips or Janglers and Warnings to Blasphemers.

Such paintings helped parishioners to visualize Holy people and stories during their prayers and enwrapped them with Christian imagery and virtues. Paintings were often situated above altars where they added to the intensity of worship, Paintings were commissioned in cathedrals and monasteries as well as parish churches.

The paintings were made by professional artists who travelled from church to church painting not just walls, but tombs, woodwork and other commissions. They also decorated the palaces or the houses of the wealthy and were probably based in cities or large monastery towns where they could find regular work.

In the eleventh century most paintings were made in the 'true' *fresco* technique of painting on wet plaster but this was soon superseded by paintings on dry or *secco* plaster allowing artists to use a much wider variety of pigments and techniques, including silver and gold leaf and oil binding mediums.

Sadly most of this art was lost either during the Reformation when hard-line protestants demanded that catholic imagery be destroyed or in later centuries when well-meaning, if often misconceived, architects repaired ancient churches and stripped the old plaster from the walls.

Yet despite the ravages of iconoclasm, time and indifference, a remarkably high number of these paintings have survived, albeit in an often fragmentary state. Exciting new discoveries are still being made.

Detail from Miracles of the Virgin, Eton College, grisaille technique, c. 1480

Slide guide

2, 3: Nether Wallop, Hants, c.1000

4, 5, 6, 7, 8: Hardham, West Sussex, c. 1120

9: Clayton, West Sussex, c. 1120-30

10: Kempley, Glos, Chancel, 'Book of Revelation', c.1130

11, 12: Winchester Cathedral, Holy Sepulchre chapel, c. 1170-80

13, 14: Winchester Cathedral, Guardian Angels chapel, c. 1240

15: Salisbury Cathedral, 1230-40

16: Kempley, Glos, the nave, c.1500

17: Inglesham, Wilts, Consecration Cross

18: St Albans Abbey, Herts, Patterning

19: Stencilling; Meaux Abbey stencil and patterning Silchester, Hants

20, 21: West Chiltington, West Sussex, 'Passion of Christ' and patterning c. 1230s

22: Slapton, Northamptonshire, c.1500

23: Pickering, Yorkshire, 15th century

24: Turvey, Bedfordshire, c. 1310

25: Peakirk, Cambridgeshire, 14/15th centuries

26: West Chiltington, West Sussex, c. 1230s

27: Burton Dasset, Warks, Virgin Mary, late 14th century

28: Winchester Cathedral, Lady Chapel, miracles of the Virgin Mary, c.1500. Repainted by Prof. E.W. Tristram

29: Salisbury Cathedral, Shrine of St Swithun

30, 31: Corhampton, Hants, Miracles of St Swithun

32: South Newington, Oxfordshire, St Margaret c. 1330

33: Pickering, Yorks, Life of St Katherine, 15th century

34: Nether Wallop, Hants, St George, 15th century

35, 36: Slapton, Northants, St Christopher, 15th century

37: Winchester, Church of St John, St Christopher

38, 39: Freefolk, Hants, off A34, nr Whitchurch, St Christopher

40, 41, 42: Idsworth, Hants, nr Horndean. Scenes of John of Beverley and the Decollation of St John the Baptist with Salome

43: Hornton. Oxon, 'Doom' or Last Judgement, late 14th century

44: Combe Oxon, Detail of the 'Doom', late 15th century

45: Winchester, St John's church, drawing of lost 'Doom' painting

46: Swalcliffe, Oxon, 'Weighing of Souls', 14th century

47: Catherington, Hants, 14/15th century

48: Raunds, Northamptonshire, 'Three Living and Three Dead', late 14th century

49: 50: Trotton, West Sussex, 'Seven Works of Mercy', c. 1400

51, 52, 53: Ruislip, Middlesex, 'Tree of The Seven Deadly Sins', 15th century

54, 55: Seven Deadly Sins, 'Anger', 'Lust', Llancarfan, South Wales, 15th century

56: 'Warning to Sabbath Breakers', Breage, Cornwall, 15th century

57: 'Warning to Blasphemers', Broughton, Buckinghamshire, c.1410

58: 'Warning to Gossips or Janglers', Peakirk, Cambridgeshire, 14th century

59: Raunds, Northants, painted clock, John and Sarah Catlyn, c. 1400

62: Money

63: Wall painters at work by Peter Edwards

64: Psalter of Robert de Lisle, 'The Three Living and the Three Dead', c. 1310

65, 66: Belchamp Walter, Essex, 'The Three Living and the Three Dead', 1325-30

67: Pattern books; Pepys sketch book, Cambridge, and St Christopher, Ashby St Ledgers, Warks

68: Hardham, West Sussex, 'True Fresco'

69: Painter's palette

70: South Newington, Oxon, Murder of Thomas Becket, oil, c. 1330-40

71: Canterbury Cathedral, 'St Paul and the Viper', c. 1150

72: Westminster Abbey Chapter House, scene from 'Book of Revelation', Gold leaf, c. 1400

73: St Albans Abbey, Herts, St William, 1302-08

74: Bishop's Palace, Wells, Head of unknown Lady, c. 1450-80

75: Henry VIII, Reformation begins, dissolution and destruction of monasteries

76: Edward VI, Reformation intensifies, destruction of images

77: Winchester Cathedral, Lady Chapel, Tristram repainting

78: Winchester Cathedral, Lady Chapel, iconoclasm

79: Llancarfan, South Wales, whitewashed walls

81: Winchester Cathedral, south transept, Scriptorium? Saint with text, 13th century

82, 83: Romsey Abbey, Hants, panel paintings, c. 1510

84: Lichfield Cathedral, Staffs, Lady Chapel stained glass from Herkenrode Abbey

85: Canterbury Cathedral, Trinity chapel, Becket windows, 1213-20

86, 87: Winchester College stained glass by Thomas of Oxford, c.1393; Virgin & Child; Detail from Tree of Jesse

88: Winchester Cathedral, St Genevieve of Paris, c. 1405

89: Winchester Cathedral, the prophet Amos, 1520s

90: Winchester Cathedral, head of the Virgin Mary superimposed of body of Apostle

91: Seven Works of Mercy, 'Feeding the Hungry', Tattershall, Lincolnshire, 15th century

92: The Seven Deadly Sins, 'Gluttony & Lust', Newark, Nottinghamshire, 15th century

93: Warning to Gossips, Stanford, Northamptonshire, 14th century

94, 95: Llancarfan, South Wales

96: Terahertz imaging

97: St Teilo, National Museum of Wales, St Fagans, Cardiff, South Wales

Winchester Cathedral, Christ as Pantecrator, Holy Sepulchre Chapel, c.1220

Reading list

Wall Paintings General:

R. Rosewell*: Medieval Wall Paintings in English & Welsh Churches*, The Boydell Press, 2008

R. Rosewell: *Medieval Wall Paintings*, Shire Books, 2014

Local:

Baigent, F. J. (1848) 'Account of mural paintings in Winchester Cathedral [in Silksteade's Chapel]', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, **3**: 340-41.

Baigent, F. J. (1849) 'On a fresco in St Lawrence's Church in Winchester', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, **4**: 387 -88.

Baigent, F. J. (1850) 'Communication of Discoveries of Medieval Paintings, etc', [paintings in Winchfield church and a medieval sculpture in Stoke Charity church], *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, **6**, 76-80.

Baigent, F. J. (1851) 'On paintings in Wellow church', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, **6**: 442.

Baigent, F. J. (1851) 'On a painting discovered in Soberton church', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association,* **6:** 442**.**

Baigent, F. J. (1852) 'On distemper paintings in Goodworth church [Clatford],' *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, **7**: 431-32.

Baigent, F. J. (1852) 'Wall paintings in Bramdean church, Hampshire,' *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, **8**: 155-56.

Baigent, F. J. (1854) 'On the Church of St. John, Winchester, and the paintings discovered on the north wall', *Archaeological Journal*, **9**: 1-14.

Baigent, F. J. (1855) 'On the Martyrdom of St Thomas of Canterbury, and other paintings discovered in St. John's Church, Winchester', *Archaeological Journal*, **10**: 53-87.

Biddle, M. (1967) 'A late ninth-century wall painting from the site of New Minister', *Antiquaries Journal*, **47**: 277-279.

Biddle, M. and B. Kjølbye-Biddle (1990) 'The Dating of the New Minster Wall Painting', in S. Cather, and D. Park and P. Williamson (eds) *Early Medieval Wall Painting and Painted Sculpture in England*, BAR Series 216: 45-62.

Curteis, T., S. Paine and D. Park (1994). 'Recently conserved paintings in the south transept', *Winchester Cathedral Record*, **63**; 27-32.

Edwards, J. (1983) 'The Wall-painting at Idsworth, Hampshire, reconsidered', *Antiquaries Journal*, **63**: 79-94. See also: Deighton (1993)

Deighton, A. (1993) 'The Literary Context of the Wall Painting at Idsworth, Hampshire', *Antiquaries Journal*, **73**: 69-75. See also: Edwards, J. 1983

Howard, H. C. (1995) 'Techniques of the Romanesque and Gothic Wall Paintings in the Holy Sepulchre Chapel, Winchester Cathedral', in Wallert, A. Hermens, E. and Peck, M. (eds) *Historical Painting Techniques, Materials and Studio Practice*, Leiden: 91-104.

James, M. R. and E.W. Tristram (1928–29) 'The wall paintings in Eton College Chapel and in the Lady Chapel of Winchester Cathedral', *Walpole Society*, **17**: 1-43.

Park, D. (1983) 'The Wall Paintings of the Holy Sepulchre Chapel', in *Medieval Art and Architecture at Winchester Cathedral* (British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions **6**, 1980), London: 38-62.

Park, D. and P. Welford (1993) 'The Medieval Polychromy of Winchester Cathedral', in J. Crook (Ed.) *Winchester Cathedral 1093–1993*, Chichester: 123-138.

Park, D. (1994) 'Recently conserved wall-paintings in the south transept', *Winchester Cathedral Record*, **63**: 27–32.

Park, D. (2011) 'Repairing "that vision by which Christ may be seen": The St Swithun Cycle at Corhampton, and the Depiction of Patronal Saints in English Romanesque Wall Painting in *Image, Memory and Devotion: Liber Amicorum* Paul Crossley (Studies in Gothic Art) Z. Opacic (Editor), A. Timmerman (Editor)Brepols: 135-143.

Rouse, E. C. (1966) 'Wall paintings [in Breamore Church]', *Archaeological Journal*, **123**: 203-04.

Rouse, E. C. (1966) 'Wall paintings [in Corhampton Church]', *Archaeological Journal*, **123**: 189.

Tristram, E.W. (1933) 'Wall Paintings in the Lady Chapel', *Winchester Cathedral Record*, **2:** 14-17.

Tudor-Craig, P. (1990) 'Nether Wallop Reconsidered', in S. Cather, D. Park and P. Williamson (eds) *Early Medieval Wall Painting and Painted Sculpture in England*, BAR British Series 216: 89-104.

Webster, L. (1984) *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art*, Catalogue entry No 25, London: p. 44. [Discusses figurative painting from Winchester]