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
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
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
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:


Local:


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.


© Roger Rosewell FSA

These notes are for study use by WAHГ members only and are not to be reproduced.