

MURAL PAINTINGS DISCOVERED IN CHARLWOOD CHURCH,
SURREY, WITH SOME REMARKS ON THE MORE ORDINARY
POLYCHROMY OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

ONE great merit of the Greek and Mediæval phases of architecture is their completeness. Buildings erected in those times were not, as with us, mere shells, destitute alike of sculpture and painting ; on the contrary, both those arts were more or less employed before any edifice was considered as entirely finished. Of course it is not to be supposed that every building could be decorated in the same manner or degree as the Parthenon, on the one hand, or the church of St. Francis at Assisi, on the other ; still some story was told, either in stained glass, in painting, or in sculpture ; the only difference being that artists of inferior abilities were, doubtless, employed in the more humble buildings. Thus, for the most part, in structures of less stately character, the glass was merely grisaille, with colored windows at the East and West ends ; a few carved label-heads or the tympanum of a doorway represent the Art of Sculpture, while the painting is executed in three colors only, or even is reduced to monochrome ; but still there was sculpture and painting—the dead walls spoke and a story was told.

Leaving aside, however, the important subjects of glass-painting and sculpture, it is proposed to consider how the artists of the thirteenth century carried out their less costly wall decoration.

Through the industry and perseverance of the Rev. Thomas Burningham, Rector of Charlwood, Surrey, a series of very curious paintings has been brought to light in the church of that parish which perfectly illustrate the subject under consideration.¹ It should be mentioned that the writer, having been afforded every facility in the use of scaffolding

¹ This discovery occurred in the summer of 1858, and it is noticed in this Journal, vol. xvi. p. 89.

and other assistance during four days occupied in their reduction upon paper, has been enabled to make a careful examination of the processes employed.

Charlwood church presents the usual plan of a Saxon or Norman structure of its simple class, namely, a nave, certainly with one aisle, if not with two, a tower at the eastern extremity, and beyond that a shallow chancel. The first alteration was the rebuilding or addition of a south aisle, some time towards the latter part of the thirteenth century, and it is upon the walls of this aisle that the contemporary paintings have been discovered. The next insertion was a window, about the time of Edward II., in the old north aisle; in this window may be noticed a rude figure of a peacock incised or scratched upon one of the jambs, being possibly a rebus of the name of a workman, for the height from the floor prevents our considering it to be the work of some idler during divine service. At the end of the fourteenth century, part of the paintings in the south aisle having suffered damage, perhaps in consequence of the erection of a south porch, the martyrdom of St. Edmund, or of St. Sebastian, was executed in figures of gigantic proportions. In the fifteenth century a chantry chapel was built at the east end of the south aisle, thereby destroying its eastern wall together with the paintings upon it; and quite at the end of the same century the chancel was entirely rebuilt.

We will now return to the paintings in the south aisle, of which only two bays have been preserved, namely, those on either side of the window easternmost from the porch.

When a church is built in the present day, the jamb-stones of the doors and windows stand out about an inch above the rubble walling, so as to allow room for a thick coating of plaster; when the whole work is finished, the stone-work presents one color, and the plastered surface another. In the old work, on the contrary, the jamb-stones and the rubble were nearly on a level, the interstices of the latter being filled up with coarse plaster, and over all was placed a coating of fine stuff, or *gesso* (whitening and size), to receive the paintings. This coating is seldom found more than one-eighth of an inch in thickness. When it approaches to the stone it is then eased off and becomes little more than a thin wash, to stop the pores when directly applied to

that material. The consequence was that the jamb-stones did not show at all ; they were there, because the angles wanted strength, and not for mere ornament, or to show that stone was actually used and not plaster.

Sooner or later the services of the painter were required. In all probability he may have been a travelling limner, who went from church to church with colors and brushes in the wallet on his back, and a sketch-book like that of Willars de Honecort under his arm. It is also not unlikely that he may have had some choice and difficult subjects portrayed full size on linen, so that they might be transferred to the wall with little trouble. The artist, having found the wall to be perfectly dry (a rare circumstance in these days), and having settled the subjects with his employer, forthwith began by dividing the walls into horizontal bands ; he seldom subdivided these by perpendicular lines, as the Italians were in the habit of doing ; on the contrary, some of the finest works, such as the Painted Chamber at Westminster, are without any such divisions. The next process was to enlarge the subjects from the pattern-book ; to do this he probably used charcoal, which would easily admit of corrections by means of a cloth or feather, and he then traced over the outlines with red ochre or Indian red, probably the former.

The figures had next to be colored and properly shaded ; to do this the mediæval artist had only four colors—red ochre, yellow ochre, lamp-black, and white, this latter being used for high lights and details ; for instance, the ribs of the skeletons in the Charlwood painting described hereafter are marked out with white. The great difficulty must have been so to distribute these four colors, that there should be no preponderance of any one over the others. To effect this he frequently broke one color by means of another, as may be noticed in the middle skeleton. It is often difficult to determine at the present time whether a certain color is red or black, and if this tone has not been effected by the blending of the black and the red, it could only have resulted from the employment of red lead, which has since become decomposed by the action of the air or by the whitewash laid on in the sixteenth century. However this may have been, there can be no doubt that portions of these paintings were shaded, but the broken colors and

the white details must still have had a very important share in the general effect. In the fourteenth-century picture of St. Sebastian, at Charlwood, we find vermilion added to the pigments, and indeed, from that period the decorations gain in gaudy colors what they lose in drawing. After the fourteenth century the art of our church decorators appears to have declined, nearly in the same manner as the architecture itself.

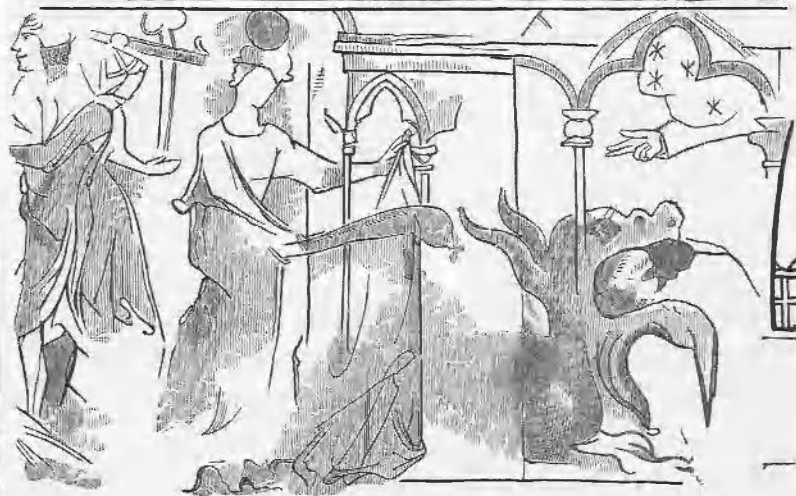
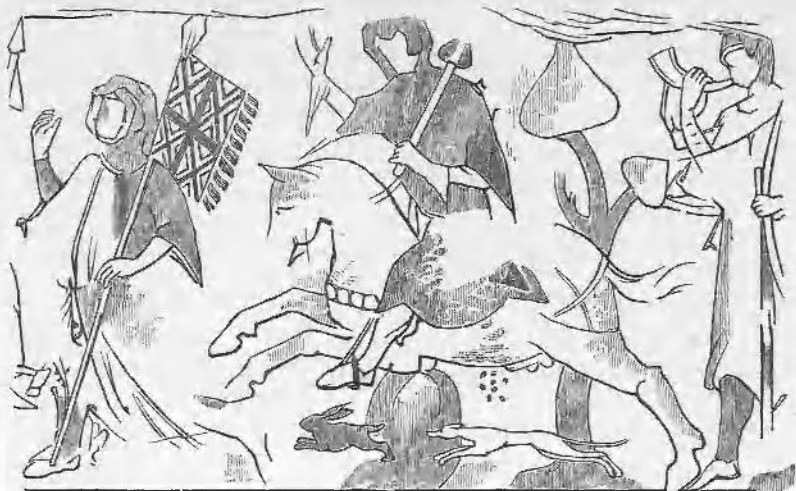
It would be a long task to enumerate the various discoveries of wall-paintings resembling those under consideration, namely, those executed in the four colors, but almost every church anterior to the fifteenth century will be found to possess some traces of such decoration. The most complete series perhaps is that covering the interior of the chancel of Charlgrove church, Oxfordshire, described by the writer of this memoir in a recent volume of the *Archæologia*.² It must be remarked that these paintings are of the middle of the fourteenth century; the art, however, is by no means so good as in those at Charlwood. At the latter church, unfortunately, only two bays are preserved, one on the east, and another on the west, of a two-light Early Decorated window. The easternmost division contains three bands,—the westernmost only two, thus carrying out the principle of increasing the decoration as it approached the east.

We will begin with the eastern bay which is occupied with the history of St. Margaret; the arrangements of the subjects corresponding closely with the illuminations in a nearly contemporary MS. in the British Museum, commonly known as Queen Mary's Psalter.³ The story begins on the upper band (see woodcut), where we see the Governor of Antioch, Olibrius, engaged in hunting; behind him is a huntsman or attendant who blows a horn; and behind this figure appears a hand grasping, as it would seem, a bow or a hunting-staff. It was upon such an occasion that Olibrius first saw St. Margaret, as she was guarding the flock of her nurse. The legend relates that on his return from the chase he sent a slave to summon St. Margaret to his presence,

² *Archæologia*, vol. xxxviii., p. 432, plates 23, 24. Full-sized tracings of these remarkable mural paintings were obtained by Mr. Parker, and reduced by

Mr. C. H. Buckler for the illustrations of that paper.

³ Royal MS. 2 B. vii.



The Legend of St. Margaret. Mural Paintings in Charlwood Church, Surrey.
From Drawings by Mr. W. Burges.

and accordingly we here next see the messenger bearing a banner, fringed, and charged with a cross on a field fretty; he appears to be kneeling before St. Margaret, whose figure is not shown in the woodcut, whilst he delivers his master's commands. It is indeed possible that this figure may be intended for the governor himself, as the colors of his dress correspond with those of the equestrian figure. This view is farther borne out by the MS. before cited, where Olibrius is represented addressing St. Margaret, while seated on his horse.

In the middle band there are three scenes, arranged from east to west, whereas those above run from west to east. The three subjects, which are very indistinct in the present damaged condition of the paintings, represent, first, St. Margaret beaten with rods; in the next she is portrayed thrown into prison; and, lastly, she is seen swallowed by Satan in the form of a dragon; above, in the westernmost corner, is seen the Divine hand, in the gesture of benediction, issuing from a cloud. The first subject is curious as showing corrections in the drawing; the figure of the jailor, in the second scene, having been commenced too far to the east, it was subsequently covered over by that of the executioner. In the MS. all these subjects occur, with the addition of St. Margaret's first interview with the governor. In this illumination, the servant who introduces her holds a long wand, which seems in some degree to correspond with the banner held by the kneeling figure in the upper band of the Charlwood paintings.

The lower band of the paintings, which is very much obliterated, appears also to be disposed from east to west. It contains two subjects. The first is nearly effaced; the second represents the decapitation of the saint in the presence of Olibrius, who is apparently crowned and seated on a throne; her soul, ascending towards heaven, is represented under the form of a white dove. This symbol is generally an adjunct to the legend of St. Eulalia,⁴ and it is possible that the whole of this last band may have related to her story; the very mutilated state of the easternmost subject, however, prevents any definite conclusion. The Royal MS.

⁴ See *Christliche Kunstsymbolik und Ikonographie*, Frankfort, 1839. Dr. Husenbeth, however, gives the Departure

of the Soul in the form of a Dove as the symbol of St. Scholastica. *Emblems of Saints*, second edition, 1860, p. 212.

concludes the legend of St. Margaret with the following subjects :—she is swallowed by the dragon ; she conquers two devils ; placed between two jailors, she disputes with Olibrius ; she next appears plunged naked into a caldron of boiling water, whilst two executioners blow the fire with bellows ; one of these tormentors appears to have wings on his head, probably a representation of an helmet thus ornamented ; she again disputes with the governor ; an executioner leads her away, three women following her ; she prays to Our Lord for women in childbed who may invoke her intercession ; the hand of Our Lord appears through a cloud ; on one side is the group of three women, on the other are seen the executioners, one of them wearing the winged helmet ; the executioner cuts off her head, whilst a violent storm kills the assistants ; she is placed in the tomb ; and, lastly, angels present her to Our Lord.

The westernmost bay has only two bands, and it evidently contained the story of St. Nicholas and his miraculous resuscitation of the three scholars, after their bodies had been cut up and salted as pork. A figure of an armed knight, to the east of this subject, has probably no connexion with it ; like the coats of arms on either side of the top of the window, this figure had probably been introduced only to fill up the space. The lower portion of the figure of the pork-butcher's wife is covered by the remains of the head of St. Sebastian, added in the fourteenth century. These subjects, which like other portions of the paintings at Charlwood are in very imperfect state, are not included among the illustrations accompanying this memoir.

The lowest band is occupied with the popular Middle-Age story of "*les trois vifs et les trois morts*," of which other examples have been brought under the notice of the Institute, and are enumerated in some observations by Mr. Albert Way which are appended to this memoir. The group of horsemen in royal attire, shown in the accompanying woodcut, is exceedingly spirited, and will almost bear comparison with the similar group by Orgagna, in the Campo Santo at Pisa.

It should be observed that in the eastern bay the bands are divided by double thin parallel lines ; in this bay, on the contrary, the division is effected by a broad interval of red and yellow chevrons, the artist having more space than

required for his work. Over the doorway may be seen the fourteenth-century additions and the lower part of a seated figure, evidently the judge or persecutor under whose directions the martyrdom took place.

There are certain considerations which it will be well to bear in mind on our inspection of these mutilated paintings at the present day. First, they have been destroyed, and, had they been left untouched, they would probably have been nearly as fresh as on the day when they were painted. The reason for this is that they are executed in distemper, not in oil or encaustic. The colors are simply earths ground more or less finely, and mixed with just sufficient medium, such as size or white of egg, as would prevent their being rubbed off. The second point to be considered is, that, however carefully the removal of whitewash may be effected, it is almost impossible to prevent the scaling off of portions of the painting together with it; thus we have before us not only what the artist intended that we should see, but much that he had intended to conceal; hence the appearance of one figure cropping out from under another, and hence also the frequent complication of details.

Such are the remarkable relics of thirteenth-century design which have been brought to light at Charlwood; it is true that they frequently err against anatomy and good drawing, yet, if we compare them with the subsequent productions of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we cannot fail to be struck with a certain gracefulness and monumental severity displayed in the earlier works. They enlivened the general aspect of the church, assisted both the architecture and stained glass, besides telling a history upon which the unlearned of such a rural parish might look both with pleasure and instruction.

These notices would be incomplete without mention of the credit which is due to Mr. Burningham, not only for the care with which he removed the encrustation of whitewash with his own hands, but for having insisted upon the preservation of the paintings; if others, under the like circumstances, followed his example, we should become possessed of ample materials for the illustration of Iconography in England, and be enabled possibly to trace the progress of the arts of design as compared with those of other countries.

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