

XVII.—*On the Mural Paintings in All Saints Church, Friskney, Lincolnshire.*
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SECOND PAPER.

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THE accompanying plates are copies of two fresh subjects in the series of mural paintings lately discovered on the clerestory-walls of All Saints church, Friskney. Four of this series have been already described in the *Archaeologia*,^a viz., the Assumption, the Stable at Bethlehem, the Last Supper, and the Gathering of the Manna; the copies before us of the newly-found pictures represent (I) the Ascension, and (II) the Resurrection.

I.—THE ASCENSION.

This picture (Plate XX.) is on the spandrel over the easternmost pillar of the north arcade of the nave. It adjoins on the east the painting of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, a tracing of which has been shown to the Society as having been found on this clerestory next to the chancel arch. The size of the entire spandrel on which this was painted is 8 feet 7 inches in width by 7 feet 5 inches high. Unhappily the lower part of the painting was quite destroyed in fixing to the wall, at the restoration of the church in 1879, the scaffolding for repairing the clerestory windows, so that little more than half, the upper half, of the picture, as shown in this tracing, remains; the lower part of this too is so much injured as to make it extremely difficult to assign any meaning to the lines which faintly survive.

Fortunately the best preserved portion of the picture is the central and principal figure, that of the Saviour himself. This stands out in very effective

^a Vol. XLVIII. 270.

prominence—light, and with rays of light, as from a “glorified body,” upon a broad background of deep crimson.

The dark background, by which, as in the painting of the Gathering of the Manna, is represented the distance, extends over the whole of the upper part of the spandrel, and from it stands out alone and conspicuous, even now, from the floor of the church below, the figure of Christ—alone, except that at each corner a small angel, with wings as in flying, holds forward with both arms extended a long scroll reaching downwards to the group below.

That this painting represents the Ascension seems evident from the general character of the grouping, and may be said to be proved by one characteristic, which belongs to all medieval representations of this subject, viz., the footprints on “the Mount” beneath the Christ. This, as so frequently seen in illuminated manuscripts, is a small round summit, with the top, on which the footprints are seen, formed something like the section of a truncated tree. The slope up to this is painted green.

Upon this green slope stand a group of figures, fewer in number than usually represented, four on the right and five on the left being discernible. The nimbus marking each head is almost all to show them, except in one instance, the head on the extreme right, which alone (on this side) is turned towards the Saviour. The eye of this face has been curiously preserved better than anything else in the painting, inasmuch as a little hollow in the wall, just the size of an eye, was chosen to contain it, and, thanks to this little recess, it has remained almost as clear and fresh as when first painted.

To this figure, apparently, belongs the scroll which reaches upwards to that proceeding from the right hand of the Christ.

On the left, next to the footprints, is a figure (the face resembling that of St. Peter in the Last Supper,) who also is looking upwards towards the Lord, with his right hand raised as high as his head. In an illuminated manuscript of this subject^a there is, as here, one figure with right arm extended; but I have seen no instance in which any of the group of figures at the Ascension is represented with a scroll, as speaking. In the lower part of the space there appear hands, probably those of figures the outlines of which have perished.

On either side of the group of figures are conventional trees, their foliage, like the slope of the mount, coloured green. The stems of these trees, as also the footprints and the nimbus round each head, are in yellow ochre.

^a British Museum, 2, 13, xv. *Horae Beatae Virginis et alia officia.*



FRISKNEY CHURCH, LINCOLNSHIRE.—WALL PAINTING OF THE RESURRECTION.

Comparing this painting with examples of the same subject in illuminated manuscripts there are slight variations from the usual treatment, viz. :—

1. The cross bearing a banner, an inseparable incident in paintings of the Resurrection, but rare in those of the Ascension.

2. The full figure of Christ. It is more usual to represent only the lower portion of the Lord's body, often only just the bottom of the robe and the feet, rising above the mount with the footprints in it.

3. The small number of figures. There are frequently fifteen of these.

4. The absence of the Blessed Virgin, who is usually placed quite in the foreground.

II.—THE RESURRECTION.

This painting (Plate XXI.) occupies the space, 8 feet 7 inches by 7 feet 5 inches, of the spandrel over the second column from the chancel of the north arcade, and stands, in the series of Scriptural subjects, between that of the Nativity on the west and the Ascension on the east. No painting of the Crucifixion has yet been found. I hope to discover it on the opposite wall, probably next to the Last Supper.^a

This painting, in its manner of treatment, offers some points which are suggestive of the great change which had been and was taking place in Christian art, when, on the completion of the enlarged church, *circa* 1420, this decoration was added to the new clerestory.

The effect of the Renaissance, following the introduction of Byzantine artists into Europe after the conquest of Constantinople in the thirteenth century, had been a gradual but vigorous development from the rigid austerity and meagreness of eastern art. New, freer, and bolder conceptions of form and composition prevailed over mere servile repetitions of former traditional treatment. The manly, vigorous life of the west, and I think we may say especially of the north-west countries, coming into contact with eastern art, touched and made the dry bones to live.

The growth of architecture and increased church building at that period had their undoubted effect in the same direction, as the treatment requisite for large spaces, such as church walls, called forth a bolder method, more graceful outline, and greater skill in composition than had been possible in the miniature work of illuminated manuscripts.

^a *Archæologia*, XLVIII. Plate XIII.

Together with this came also a new departure, noticeably on this subject of the Resurrection, in the treatment of the theme itself, viz., in the representation of Christ himself rising out of the tomb.

The reverence of early art had forborne to supply by any effort of imagination more than Holy Scripture had recorded. According to the maxim of the Venerable Bede, "We cannot know that on which Truth keeps silence."

As Mrs. Jamieson remarks, "an artist in the early ages of the church shrank from, or never dreamed of, a representation of a mystery not revealed to human sight over which the silence of Scripture rested like a pall forbidden to be lifted."

In the painting before us I think we have examples of this transitional stage of mediæval decorative art.

The conventional treatment is maintained, but with a degree of individual adaptation which agrees with that development which is admitted in the words of Durandus, even a century before this, that "various subjects of the Old and New Testament were painted according to the discretion of the painters."

And that also, which had not until the end of the fourteenth century entered into the treatment, *the actual rising of the Lord out of the tomb*, is here a predominant feature.

Hitherto, as in a lovely altar-piece by Duccio, as late as the fourteenth century, the act was only referred to by representing an angel pointing out to the Three Maries the open tomb, and that treatment prevailed up to the fourteenth century.

Here is represented a combination of incidents, in themselves separate and not simultaneous—the actual rising—the descent of the angel—the approach of the women—and the appearance (as when the Lord subsequently appeared to her alone) of the Magdalene.

The picture before us plainly tells all this with realistic simplicity.

The central figure of the Christ is raised above and prior to all else in interest. It stands out from the dark background, which does not, I think, represent the darkness of night—not as signifying that the rising was before the dawn of day—but is merely, as in all the other pictures of this series, employed to represent distance, as a medium for throwing out effectively the group of figures.

This background is not carried on over the head of the Christ. That part of the wall is unfortunately so defaced that I can gain no clue to the meaning of the few lines which remain above the head. The right hand is raised, with the two fingers uplifted in benediction; in the left is held the staff with flag of victory surmounted by a cross. The right knee and foot are advanced as if stepping out

of the square tomb, the lid of which is closed—as showing the passing of the glorified body through the closed tomb, as afterwards through the locked doors of the upper chamber, where the disciples were assembled. This representation of the tomb as closed is exceptional; the general use being to show the lid or upper slab lifted or placed transversely, as having been removed. It points to the change in treatment which prevailed in later examples (sixteenth century pictures), in offering proof that the rising was miraculous. In an example quoted by Mrs. Jamieson, by Annibale Caracci, there is represented the Christ rising not only through the closed lid, but also the lifeless body of a soldier lying upon the lid.

Close by the knee which appears out from the lid, and on the right extremity of the tomb, is the figure of one of the soldiers fallen forwards on the tomb, the peaked helmet downwards, the shoulders and back curiously but not ungracefully foreshortened; the right arm doubled up under the head, showing at the bend of the elbow a joint in its armour; evidently the hand, though hidden by the helmet, still maintains its grasp of the spear, which is held upright, with a small pennant attached to it just below the blade. The character of the helmet—sugarloafed and high, with sharp peak—seems to mark a period certainly before 1450, for in the latter part of the fifteenth century the helmets were worn lower, and gradually became more flat or round. Beneath the tomb, and in the lower centre of the picture, are lines which seem to indicate the recumbent figures of two other soldiers; and out of the wreck of this portion of the picture there survives a palpable sword as it were dropped from its owner's hand, for the clearly-marked hilt shows no trace of fingers grasping it.

From the extreme right a group of women enter, whom we may conclude to represent Mary the wife of Cleophas, Salome, and Joanna, the drapery carefully drawn after the manner usually seen on medieval brasses.

The central figure of the three, whose headdress is manifestly different from the other two, raises to her breast her clasped hands, the right arm being supported by her companion on the right. The third, with face slightly inclined towards the figure with clasped hands, points with her left hand towards the Christ, while her right hand holds before her breast a vase containing (doubtless) the sweet spices for embalmment.

On the opposite extreme left is a graceful figure of, I think we may say, the Magdalene, the head bent reverently downwards, and the right hand pointing, with two fingers extended, towards the Christ. The left arm, which hangs down, seems to hold a scroll, which, contrary to the usual treatment, is drawn almost in straight lines *downwards*.

In all the picture, to which I think we may assign considerable merit in grouping and composition, no feature is more graceful than the figure of the angel, which is poised with great lightness and delicacy of movement, as that of a bird just alighting on a spray, upon the surface of the tomb at its extreme edge on the left of the central figure.

The wings, half folded, are beautifully placed; and the hands, *palmis sublati*s, turned in adoring homage towards the risen Lord. I wish that any tracing could do justice to the expression of this and the other faces; but it is impossible. Although there lingers about them in their effaced condition signs of a grace which I am sure they possessed, yet to trace here the bits of features which survive would spoil them.

I have therefore omitted these altogether, leaving the general outline only without marring the effect by the grotesqueness which mutilated features might present.

The nationality of the painter is an interesting matter of conjecture. Possibly he was one of the monastic body of that house of St. Catherine's, Friskney, subsidiary of Bolington Priory, which we know had, since the time of Stephen, been there reclaiming the lands from the marsh and civilizing the fen-men. Possibly a German or Italian brother of the monastery, he may have learned art in the school of Siena or Pisa or Cologne, and so a faint ray from the light kindled by the genius of Giotto or Meister Wilhelm may have penetrated even so far as to this remote place.

But may he not have been one of a native English gild who has left us in this work a suggestion that there was too an English school of painting, and that our country shared in a measure in that spring-tide of art which was rising on the continent?

Certainly, I humbly submit, he has left us in the careful and graceful outline, the skill of composition and grouping, in reverent feeling, in the general merit which this picture possesses, proof of a development of the trade or industry of decorative ornamentation in England into something worthy of the name of art.

Whoever he were, I am thankful that his reverent conscientious work for the glory of God and advancement of art has escaped the ruthless hands both of Puritan scraper and churchwarden whitewasher, and that enough survives, after the lapse of nearly five hundred years, for a new generation, now at the end of the nineteenth century, to rise and call him benefactor.