

MEDIÆVAL MURAL PAINTINGS.

BY REV. H. A. HARRIS.

“Uncouth unkist” is an ancient proverb applied by the unappreciative to Mediæval Mural Paintings. And from the standpoint of a Modernist, educated in the Art Schools of to-day, is possibly a correct generalization.

But is a modernist in a position to judge ?

This is an age of jazz music, negro songs and dances, Seven and Five Societies, risque novels, C.C. Houses, Cubist, Futurist and Impressionist artists and neo-logicistic culture generally.

The heady wine of to-day oft produces the headache of tomorrow and when that morrow dawns, relief will be found in the sober style with which mediæval mural paintings are associated.

There is no objective definition of beauty and it is impossible therefore for any national or periodic conception of beauty to supply a standard for works of art.

Exclusive art, produced for a select circle, has often lost its beauty in the eyes of those moving outside that circle.

Mediæval Mural Paintings are exclusive art. They belong to a period, planned to perform a purpose.

That they are true art is proved by the fact that they fulfilled the function for which they were conceived by their creator, for he infected with his feelings those who drew inspiration from his paintings on the walls.

Possibly it is on account of their size that they are ignored or passed over as hieratic or quaint.

Large canvasses to-day are unsaleable. We do not cover our walls with large paintings. We prefer one or two "gems" of art because they are in keeping with this age of short skirts and "nips," but it is no mean artistic achievement to plan the colour scheme and decoration of a Church interior. Mediæval churches were a blaze of colour the entire surface of the walls and roof being painted with designs and figures, even the stone and wood work, pillars, font, splays, and tracery of windows were coloured and decorated.

Ornament in the early centuries was somewhat heavy and formal and the figures stiff, but about 1300 there was a wonderful development in the treatment and rendering of art, showing a tendency to become more natural and less symbolical.

A symbol stands for an abstract idea, and if the desired idea was conveyed, it mattered little if the symbol was crude, unnatural or aberrant.

As years rolled by the idea conveyed by the crude symbol was forgotten or superseded and the symbol, which remained, was embellished and beautified. Anatomy was considered, postures made more graceful and natural history studied.

The early Artist showed his skill in drawing and painting by his ability in conveying an idea. Other matters were of little importance, such as accurate detail, foliage, anatomy, etc., and in dealing with Wall paintings this symbolic conforming to the art of the day must temper our judgment as to what Art was and is.

The earliest wall paintings were the pictographs scratched by the Cave men on the walls of his cavern. These gradually became symbols and the symbols letters and the letters words and the words pictures, forming a circle around which Art revolves.

Mediæval Art is a half way house in which symbolism lingers. To a Belshazzar they are but writing on the wall but to a Daniel are infinitely informative.

All religions had their secret writings, revealing much concealing more. Our Churches are full of Pagan symbols, few being exclusively-Christian. This for the simple reason that symbols were in universal employ before the Christian era.

The unthinking endeavour to explain them away on account of their pagan association, as they would the origins of our Feasts and Festivals. Christianity needs no apology. Our life originated in slime. To remain in it needs apology but not to rise above it. Our Bethel is raised out of Pagan cults and heathen creeds by a process of evolution that shows the growth of soul.

The bare and white washed walls of our Churches to-day tell us in dumb show that Wall paintings went out of fashion ; and the passing of symbolic language was a potent cause for their disappearance. The art and beauty of symbolic painting lay in its capacity to teach and when its language was forgotten its beauty was gone and tolled the passing bell of symbolism.

Lost was the lore that could see " the whole history of humanity past and future " written in the Zodiac.

The Sabean Language, i.e., genuine astronomy, lapsed into magic—symbols degenerated into talismans and charms, and the Christian Church set her face against the mesalliance.

Concurrently wall paintings acquired magical properties, and a superstitious veneration played around its symbols, they fell from grace and a new style of representing the Old Old Story was painted over them.

Symbols were converted into Saints and their teaching into legends and in more ways than one symbols became legendary.

Symbolic borders and backgrounds lost their diacritical position and lapsed into decorative effects and the walls became the whitened sepulchres for their remains.

This improved method of teaching by Wall painting was popular until in turn it was superseded by the never changing laws of change.

The Reformation and the period of the Restoration are supposed to have wiped the wall paintings from the walls of the Churches.

They contributed to their removal but the basic reason was public opinion, change of fashion, ideas and views. Colour went out of fashion. In camp and court and clothing the ostentatious display of colour ebbed and waned.

Gay coloured jerkins, slashed doublets and brilliant hues yielded place to a more sombre garb, military displays such as The Field of the Cloth of Gold lost their appeal.

This was to be expected in a progressive civilization for savages revel in gaudy colouration. Loud tones make an appeal to their eye and ear, which education tends to soften.

Education taught the people to read. Wall Paintings were no longer the "Poor Man's Bible," they became a negligible background, endowed only with the sacredness of time hallowed opinion, the potency of habit and right of long possession.

The Mediæval Paintings in our Churches cannot be put upon the Market, otherwise they would compete with the Early Masters and Stained Glass of the period.

Money talks in a tongue that compels attention and we would listen to the jingling of the guinea and recognise that in them, with the exception of Illuminated MSS, we have the only examples of this style and period of Art.

Historically they are a priceless link between the old time methods of Church teaching and those employed in more enlightened days.

Writers of Church history ignore the Pagan overlap, and the fact that Christianity is built upon heathen foundations. They apologise for the Creator as if He had made a mistake and had to begin all over again and try a brand new religion.

Christianity is a "New birth," and this necessitates an embryo—a gestation and parents.

The "New birth" is a separate entity but is dependant upon its parents for its existence and first stages of growth.

The earlier wall paintings in our Churches take us back to the time when Christianity was beginning to walk alone but with uncertain steps. Stumbling and clutching at any support to aid her faltering progress, when everything, outside Herself, was pagan.

They illustrate the time when the Church structure with its fittings, furniture and decorations were all doctrinal.

The vocal Services being in Latin neither touched nor taught the unlettered peasant.

His vocabulary was limited to some few hundred words, and his comprehension bounded by the daily toil the trivial task, of his sequestered life.

That the Services were in Latin mattered nothing to him, as they would have been equally unintelligible if translated into English; as he did not speak English.

"Common" Prayer was impossible as the dialect of one district would be as "Latin" in another.

It was easier for an Artist to convey his ideas by a picture than by words and upon this foundation elaborate his superstructure.

The doctrine of the Atonement, Redemption and Eschatology was capable of explanation with the painting of the Doom for a foundation but without some such basic foundation there was nothing to appeal to, nothing to build upon.

Without books and almost without language the Church was constrained to teach her scheme of redemption. It was a period beset with ignorance and difficulties, with heathen intrusions, with ideas of sanctity, irreverence, and morality so different from our own, that many writers gloss over or ignore these days of infant diseases, troubles and peccadilloes.

Pictures take a prominent place in nursery education and were indispensable to the early Church. She spoke with "other tongues" which made her walls eloquent.

The framing of these pictures was also linguistic and doctrinal, for the whole architectural structure and design of the Church was educational.

On the outside of the Church hideous monsters were carved, and on the Porch were dragons and wodemen, typifying those outside the pale of the Church, unregenerate, animal man.

The interior of the Church was divided into three parts, Chancel, Nave and Court of the Gentiles.

On a line drawn between the S. and N. door stood the Font, and W. of the Font was the Court of the Gentiles.

This portion W. of the Font, was less sacred than the Nave. Here the unbaptized were permitted to enter and the Processions formed up. It was also called the Galilee. In some Churches there is a special annexe called the Galilee, in which the processions formed and to which they returned.

The word is probably derived from the Hebrew Galil, a wheel as being the point from which and to which, the processions wheeled.

In Thornham Parva Church there is a wheel painted over the centre of the Early English north doorway, suggesting that here was the Galilee.

Entrance to the Church was usually by the S. door, and this doorway was very low so that those entering were compelled to stoop in token of humility.

Having entered you move to the west or left, in accordance with the custom of those who had not "passed the Font," that is with the Sun or Desiel. To go to the right is unlucky or fatal and for this reason the Scythe is the emblem of Death. as a scythe cannot be used desiel, that is it is always swung from right to left in fatal fashion.

The Mural Paintings in the Court of the Gentiles were symbolical of animal man and depicted such scenes as the Fall of Man and the Gathering of Manna, the appropriateness of this last is evident when we recall Our Lord's words "your fathers did eat manna and are dead."

The passage from animal man and death is by way of the Font and on the stem of many Suffolk Fonts are Lions and Wodemen—Lions symbolising Horus, the Nile god, and its vivifying water were introduced by the Comacine builders.

Wodemen symbolise both unregenerate man and mad men but with a different application.

Mad persons were "touched by God," and under His special protection. Madness was akin to divinity. The mutterings and incoherent speech of the mad was on a par with that caused by intoxication, and was venerated in the Oracles and Mysteries.

The god Woden or Odin derived his name from the same source as the Wodemen, as do Divines from dei vini.

After a period of preparation in the Court of the Gentiles the Candidate was baptized and passed into the Nave of the Church. Advancing round the west end of the Church desiel, he approaches the Font on its north side, as is still the custom. After baptism his first step into the Nave brings him before a Mural Painting on the margin of the Nave north wall representing eternal life symbolised by a figure with a ring or some amulet representing life and new birth.

This is well represented in Wordwell Church. Over the south door on the outer wall is a carving consisting of unregenerate animals entangled in sin. In the corresponding tympanum over the north door inside the Church, are two human figures, one of which has his arms uplifted in prayer and the other holds out to him a ring, extending his arm over a bridged stream.

The figure with hands lifted in prayer is emblematic of man yearning for higher things and acknowledging his God. The water is flecked to show that it is flowing water. Water, the Mother of All, that flows into the unknown or death. The bridge shows that it can be crossed and the ring denotes that eternal life is the attainable result.

When symbolical representations of this description went out of favour a more popular type, such as St. Christopher, was painted over it.

It has a similar significance but the meaning has to be forced into it before it can be drawn out.

At Creting St. Peter there is a case in point, for on the north wall there is an early painting of a figure holding a ring which has been partly painted over by a later figure of St. Christopher.

The Cross may be a better Christian symbol for eternal life than a ring but the more modern attitude of prayer, in which palm to palm the hands are held before the face is borrowed from the Solar cult, in

which the suppliant arched his hands over his eyes to guard them from the dazzling radiance of his diety. Tommy Atkins when he salutes his bright and shining superior Officer, borrows from the same source. Also when he marches, it is always "left, right" never right first or against the Sun's direction.

Prayer is more than "humble access" it is a compelling power. The figure with arms outspread represents the power of the cross. The Logos or Word. The Will of God in action. The Theon ti in man which makes him the dominant lord of creation and synchronises with the Divine, thus making prayer a compelling power and not a mere tentative hope.

In early days the Nave was not seated. A ridge or ledge for leaning against rather than sitting upon, ran round the walls for the benefit of the aged and infirm and the open space of the Nave was used for many purposes other than Church Services for which reason the accusation of profaning the Church is often brought against the Mediæval Church.

In our Country Villages the religious mentality of the Peasant was the mentality of a child, and can a child act profanely?

Their conception of God was more companionable than our own—His House had many mansions, not omitting a Playroom for his children. A loveable apperception incomprehensible to the puritanical minded. With this view the Mural Paintings were germane, many were neither Biblical, Saintly nor uplifting. They were of the style called grotesque, the offspring of imagination run riot and ungovernable.

Moralities preached pictorially, were popular in the 14th century, when the abstract ideas of symbolism assumed this mode of expression. They were usually of a gruesome nature. Death was portrayed as a skeleton king crowned and covered with toads, snakes

and lizards—a sorry figure of the “gate immortal,” and no advance upon the symbolic scythe of the “Reaper whose name is Death.”

The Vice of vanity and of trusting in things that tempt on earth, was elaborated into a pictorial representation of “Le dit des trois rois vifs et des trois rois mort” in place of the simple symbol of a Speculum of burnished metal.

Belton Church contains the copy of a rendering of this Morality taken from the walls of its Church.

An allied horror is the Dance of Death or Dance, Macabre (from Arabic Macabra, a cemetery) and some painting found on remnants of Yoxford Screen, possibly represented this Dance.

Repellant Wall Paintings of such a bizarre appearance would hold no permanent position in a Gospel of love, they were tottering for a fall when the improved method of lighting a Church with larger windows and white glass put all wall paintings out of harmony with their environment.

Their bold outlines and crude colouring was toned down and softened into beauty by the dim religious light, filtering through the painted panes but appeared harsh and discordant in the hard white light of the sun, streaming through large expanses of white glass. Their beauty fled as do moonlight effects when the sun rises.

It is superfluous to mention that the Mediæval Wall Paintings on our Churches are not Frescoes, they are painted in tempera, that is in colours tempered in some medium such as egg, size or gum. The Romans painted in Fresco and it is used for modern Churches but no Mediæval Frescoes have been found in our Suffolk Churches.

Frescoes were painted on a very thin coat of specially prepared plaster whilst it was moist. Three men were

employed, one to mix and knead the plaster to the correct consistency, another to apply, smooth and level it in front of the paintbrush of the artist.

It is English neither in name nor application.

We often find Wall Paintings that have been painted over by another layer of paintings. The first designs have not been wiped out nor obliterated but are overlaid.

This was policy. To lay violet hands upon a Saint or Devil, was an insult that might be resented with disagreeable consequences. They might be painted over with impunity but not scratched or mutilated. To cover them was emblematic of Night which was created by God on the first day.

As various saints and scenes rose or fell in popular favour the new love was painted over the old and precedence left for them to settle for themselves.

If the virtue of the latter was the more potent, then the painting of the usurper would peel off and fall to the ground.

It is this veneration (do not call it superstition) of the people for Holy things that has preserved so much of the past in our Churches, otherwise they would have disappeared as they have from Civil life.

This is particularly noticeable in the preservation of Wall Paintings for they have been whitewashed over, not cleaned off the walls. It is to the reversal of this process we owe their discovery, for in cleaning off the whitewash, before rewashing, the mural paintings are revealed.

But alas their glory has departed. Their beauty is sentimental rather than actual.

The chemical action of the lime-wash affects the colours, changing red into black with other corrosive discolourations.

PLATE I.
EARL STONHAM CHURCH.



First State. Martyrdom of St. Thomas a Becket.
Second State. Figure of St. Catharine interpolated.

In removing the white wash much plaster and paint clings to it and many details and outlines are lost thereby, and in addition the wall surface crumbles and adds to the general despoiling of the painting.

When uncovered the paintings require immediate treatment, for time has destroyed the medium by which the pigment was protected and it rapidly fades when exposed to the light. For this reason wall paintings should be copied when first uncovered.

Copy what you see and use your judgment as to filling in destroyed lines and blank spaces. Your restoration will not deceive but tend to elucidate the general effect.

Mediæval wall paintings are all more or less stereotyped, as was the architecture of the period. A few Victorian interpolations in an Early English Church do not deceive an expert any more than interpolated touches in a mediæval wall painting.

They never are quite perfect and all copies have defects and even true copies have their drawback. As for instance if you order a dozen new shirts from an Oriental, and give him an old and worn shirt as a pattern, you will receive the new dozen and in every one of them will be reproduce the darns, patches and tears that were in the old pattern. You receive true copies.

The Plates which accompany this Article are from copies made by Mr. H. Watling some 50 years ago. Not that the name of the Copyist matters greatly as we judge them on their merits, as we judge the Churches in which they appear whose builders are unnamed.

Plate I is the reproduction of a Mural painting in Earl Stonham Church and described as the Martyrdom of St. Catharine. It is one of the most interesting Mural Paintings in Suffolk. It is so obviously a faked and made up painting that the Copyist is naturally

accused of palming a deceptive patchwork concoction of his own upon the public as a reliable copy of the original but this "make up" is really the highest proof of his integrity.

He had before him all the stereotyped details of the Murder of St. Thomas à Becket, as given by Jacobus de Voraggo in the "Legenda Aurea." The four French Knights, the devoted Sir (Dominus) Edward Grim warding off the first blow with his Crozier or Cross, even to the gruesome "stirring of his brains," all these, he faithfully copied, as well as the figure of the Martyr which must have perplexed him, as it was that of a woman.

To reconcile this anomaly we must remember the dramatic fall from favour of St. Thomas.

The Martyrdom of St. Thomas à Becket was painted on the wall of Earl Stonham Church about the end of the 14th century when St. Thomas was highly venerated by King and people alike. His martyrdom represented the opposition of the Church to Royal encroachments.

About a century later when Henry VIII attempted to subjugate the Church he came in conflict with everything that this popular martyr stood for and was opposed on all counts by his example and precept.

Henry VIII therefore determined to rid himself of this stumbling block in his path and decreed the decanonization of St. Thomas. His name was to be erased from all religious books and none was to dare call him Saint, his Shrine was broken up and bibliographs and legends of the Saint torn, defaced and burnt.

This decree was issued in 1538, and evidently caused the erasure of the figure of St. Thomas from the group in Earl Stonham Church.

As the ban affected St. Thomas alone, the rest of the group was utilised as the background for another

martyrdom. The Martyr must be a woman, as a male Martyr would not pass as complying with the decree, and since St. Catharine was the most popular female Saint, any female figure with the requisite emblem, would meet all requirements.

This staging of the new scene was ingeniously cast, by converting the Crozier held by Grim into a sword, and the altar into a timbered-wall background.

The recognised emblem for St. Catharine is a Wheel but emblems are suggestive rather than distinctive and the wheel is often omitted and a sword or book, generally combined, employed. The sword is common to many Saints the Wheel to six.

This Painting is interesting in that it appears to be faked but history confutes the imputation. It also evidences the public reluctance to destroy Wall Paintings beyond the bare letter of the law. For the Artist who introduced the female figure was a better and more skilled painter than his earlier collaborator, and must have shrunk from associating himself with such a stiff and unnatural group and longed to paint his own conception of the martyrdom entirely afresh.

It is also interesting to be able to date the intruded figure c. 1538.

We should beware of those wise ones who give an accurate date for all "cobwebs of antiquity," which existed before dates were invented.

A village might be a century or more behind its more enlightened neighbour, whilst another would be in advance of the times. Ideas that arrived from over seas, were stale when they arrived, it required at least a generation for their acceptance by the masses and then they were so firmly established that a cataclysm was necessary to eradicate them.

A transcurion that defies chronometry.

Plate II is a panoramic painting of the Journey of the Magi, The Message to the Shepherds, The Adoration of the Magi and the Nativity.

The costumes are 14th century. The Magi are three in number, and in the first panel are mounted, bearded and crowned, each bearing a cup in his left hand. The legendary ass bearing their gifts is omitted.

The Shepherds are also three in number, three being the comprehensive number. Two carry staves and one plays the Bagpipe. The Bagpipe and the trumpets of the angels above are symbolical as are the cups carried by the Magi. The Magi did not wear crowns and carry cups as a habit when out for a ride nor did they present cups to the Young Child. A cup denotes the ability to give. The productive power of nature often represented by the Cornucopia. The cup is not the gift.

The Bagpipes and trumpets are inept unless introduced symbolically. Music symbolises the reconciling of conflicting and discordant elements and signifies the cosmic harmony attendant upon the Nativity.

The "Music of the Spheres" is not a happy touch of poetic poesy. Each planet uttered a musical note as of a harp. Saturn being the furthest distant, gave the deepest note, from the longest string, the Moon the shrillest, being the nearest and thus having the shortest string.

Wireless is no new idea. Sounds and sights never die, they pass outward into space and our doings go before to judgment. The "past" is present somewhere in space, getting more and more distant from our earth, as the present pushes the past further into the infinite.

The hillock upon which the Shepherds stand, and from which this music proceeds represents Golgotha, replete with Cabbalistic mysteries. It is the centre

PLATE II.
EARL STONHAM CHURCH.



The journey of the Magi — The message to the Shepherds.
The Adoration of the Magi — The Nativity.

PLATE III.
EARL STONHAM CHURCH.



St. George and the Dragon.

of the cosmos where Adam was formed and Christ crucified.

An eight rayed star is over the building, and apart from its property as guide it symbolises love, and the origin of the human soul. The soul being brought to earth from the stars and thither returning at death to form the Milky Way. The Magi followed the star-borne soul in accordance with their special study of Genethliacs.

The ubiquity of the Magi is not adventitious but instructive. They represent a lasting doctrine that heeds not time nor space whilst the Shepherds represent a concrete fact.

The Lion of the House of Judah, over the bed is heraldic rather than symbolical.

The agonised expression on the face of St. Joseph bears witness to his concern for the safety of the Child and Magi. They must leave the Country by another way, the door of escape being behind him. This is a prominent point in the Mystery Play.

Plate III representing St. George and the Dragon is also a copy made by Mr. Watling from a painting in Earl Stonham Church. The rescued maiden, Cleodolina, should be somewhere in the background.

Her parents enjoy an exalted view and the one gives advice while the other uplifts her hands in prayer. The mother's figure is not given. She symbolises prayer. The united prayer of the whole community, focussed by her personal appeal.

Iconographs of this description are pure symbolism. The Legend of St. George is borrowed from the combat of the Nile god Horus and Seth-Typhon.

The name George means the Earth-worker or Creator (Gee-urges) and the fiery dragon represents the scorching Sun. Which according to the Legend

first destroyed the vegetation, then, as a natural consequence, the cattle died, causing such deprivation that the people, more especially the children, were brought to death's door. At the critical moment, when even the King's daughter was dying of drought and starvation, Gee Urges brings deliverance in the form of rain and saves the situation as his prototype Horus when he liberates the Nile and fertilizes the dying land.

The Spear is an emblem of fertilization and an instructive symbol at the Crucifixion.

Plate IV and Plate V represent the Doom, both by the same Artist, the former copied from Earl Stonham Church and the other from Yaxley Church.

The Doom appeared in every Mediæval Church with many variants but similar purport.

The trumpets sound the dead arise—Christ sits above in judgment consigning those on His left to Hell's mouth and those on His right to the heavenly mansions represented by a Church-like building. Scrolls issue from the mouth of the Trumpets—Venite Benedicti and Discedite maledicti.

Evidences of Solar symbology form the background, composed of semi-halos, distorted to the resemblance of clothes brushes. These are rays and symbolise power, the power of the Sun in Splendour. On the head of Moses they are often mistaken for horns, and in a Halo for a cross.

The rays of the Sun are symbolised by hair and denote power, their absence or baldness portrays weakness, or contempt and gave cause for the mockery of Elisa.

The setting sun is rayless, powerless and bald and can be conquered and imprisoned by Night but there his hair grows again and he breaks from his prison in the morning.

PLATE IV.
EARL STONHAM CHURCH.

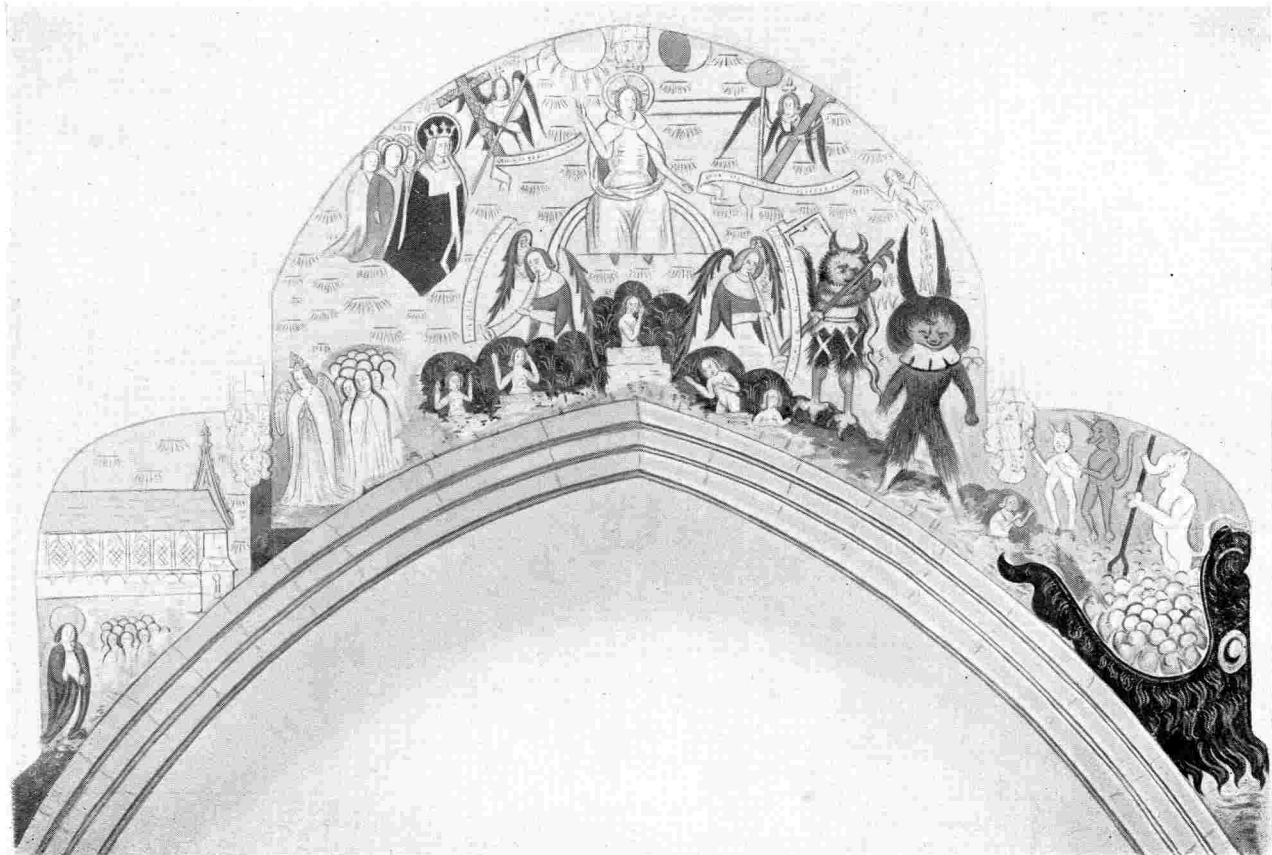
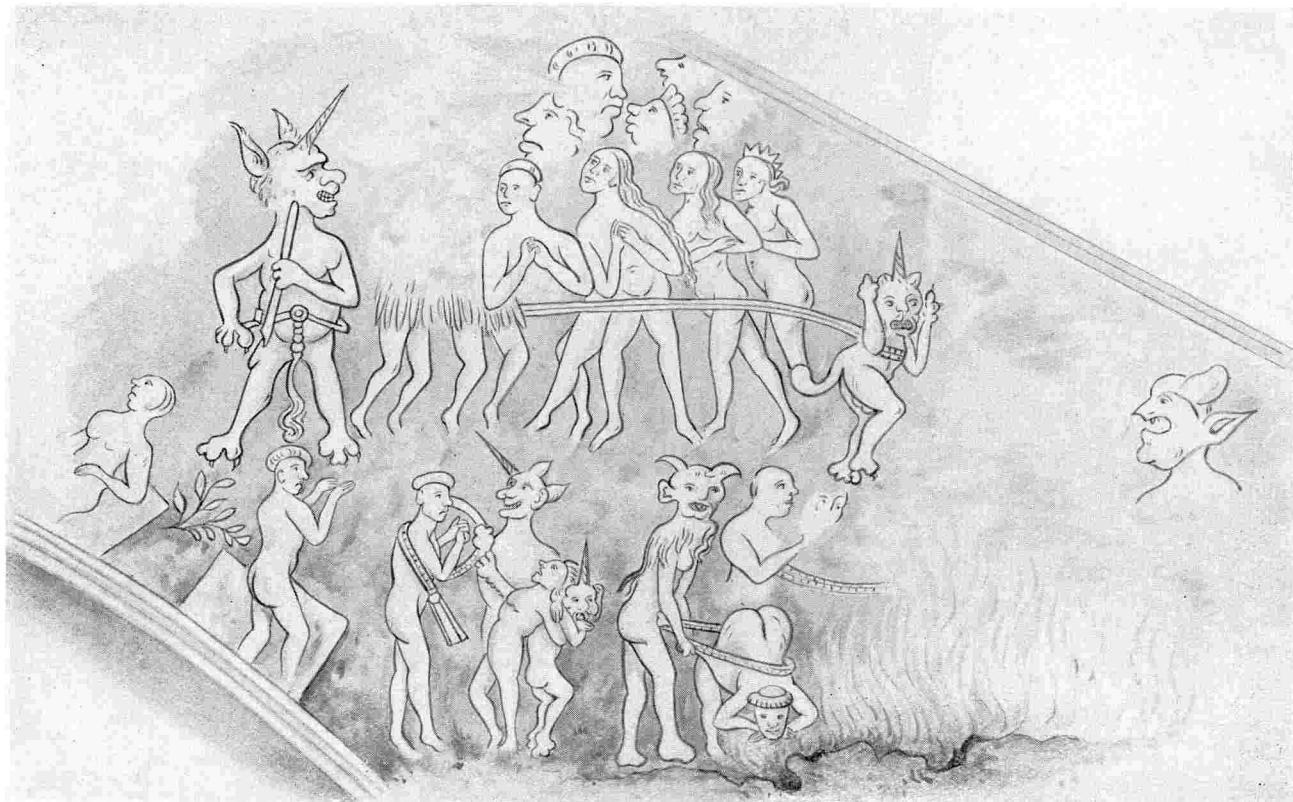


PLATE V.
YAXLEY CHURCH.



PART OF DOOM.

With the help of Mr. Watling's copy (Plate 5) the southern portion of Yaxley Doom can be recognised still. The style is barbaric and contains many evidences of the Pagan-Christian overlap.

It is evidently drawn and painted by a Monk, possibly from Eye, as the majority of those consigned to Hell are of the "fair sex."

The devils are horned, four bearing on their heads the horn of a Unicorn—a curious illustration of the migration of symbols for the Unicorn's horn was valued for its anti-toxical properties and was the emblem of chastity.

Horns and hoofs which formerly denoted the power of wealth, obtained from flocks of cattle. The pecus from which we get our word "pecuniary" value. Now no longer betoken the rich man but the Devil or a man deceived by a woman who was a devil.

In Suffolk the key of the cowhouse or stable is often tied to a horn by a piece of string, a relic of sympathetic magic or luck with cattle.

Mediæval Wall Paintings are an adolescent form of art that depicts those loving allegories to which the world listened in its dreamy childhood, relics of a style unrepresented except in illuminated MSS and indicative of the halting teaching through which the Church emerged out of darkness into light.

NOTE.—I am indebted to the Rev. A. A. L. Gedge, M.A., for the original Paintings from which the Stonham Earl Blocks are taken and to Miss N. Layard for that of Yaxley Doom.

H.A.H.