

# Suffolk Institute of Archæology and Natural History.

---

## SCREENWORK IN THE COUNTY OF SUFFOLK.

BY W. W. LILLIE, B.A.

### PART II. COLOUR DECORATION.

Of the 60 or 70 considerable fragments of screenwork surviving in Suffolk, three-quarters bear traces of colour with which they were once decorated, and more than half of these painted screens are still adorned with symbolical portraits of the saints and protectors of the Church. They represent a part of that vital contribution of East Anglia to the story of architecture and of painting, which arose from among the uncertain shadows and courageous attempts of the colourist and woodworker of the fourteenth century, flourished suddenly and triumphantly for a generation, and died in the gloom of Puritan zeal and ignorance. It is securely bolted with the past, because we have lost the spirit which gave it life. It has passed into the province of the antiquary. But it is a very precious possession, now fading before our eyes, and worthy to be praised and recorded whilst there is time.

It is a well-known axiom of art that painting appears when architecture has reached its climax. The framed and ordered decoration of the roodscreen and loft, as distinct from the childlike exuberance of the wall-painting, calls us more clearly than anything else to behold the last phase of Gothic building. For the progress of medieval architecture was not cut short

by the Reformation, or even by the Renaissance, but was prevented by its own achievement of ripeness and perfection. It was colour, and the polyphonic music to which it bears so striking a likeness, which the Protestants destroyed. This colour, therefore, once the characteristic feature of our Suffolk churches, focuses the attention upon the whole complex achievement of fifteenth century art.

What we observe therein is, however, no matter for this short paper, and we must return to a consideration of the colour as it appears on our screens. The screenwork of Norfolk and Suffolk cannot indeed be fairly regarded apart from its colour. The wood-worker and the painter had by now entered into partnership, and their work was complementary. The delicate surface-carving of the fourteenth century had been replaced by the finish of the gesso-worker and gilder, and where this finish has been removed the screen itself has been mutilated. Thus treated it often appears full of uninteresting surfaces and misproportioned detail. At Yaxley, for example, the heavy tracery was relieved and transformed in the past both with gold and gesso. Here, too, the sturdy build of post and beam was formerly lightened with a diversity of colours, thus bringing the tracery over the doorway into a harmony which it now decidedly lacks. So important did this decoration in gesso and colour become, that towards the end of the fifteenth century we notice the painter aspiring to a position of seniority in his partnership with the woodcarver. Mr. Howard\* has rightly shown that in East Anglia the screen and the other furniture of the church evolved along independent lines. But in the pulpit at South Burlingham and in the font-cover at Elsing these two lines have converged. It was to the screen-worker's tradition of colour-decoration that this was

\*English Church Woodwork, Howard Crossley, 2nd edition, 1927, p. 35.

due, and he has in these examples imposed his own style and scale of work upon the maker of pulpit and font-cover.

These remarks are primarily concerned with the effect of colour in matters of detail, and within separate pieces of furniture. It is not until the screen is considered as an æsthetic whole, and as part of the architectural unity of the building which contains it, that the full value of this decorative treatment can be appreciated. The Perpendicular style as developed in East Anglia makes its appeal through a sense of spaciousness and light. No other characteristics could possibly have made a harmonious impression in the roodscreen. Had the use of colour in these counties never proceeded beyond that of an auxiliary, we should therefore still have been denied the West Country alternative of concentrating upon an elaborate treatment of texture rather than line. A skilful combination of colours has not only relieved a comparatively light framework of the suspicion of attenuation, by giving the highest possible value to receding surfaces and mouldings, but has also retained the brilliance and freedom of its surroundings with the reserve and dignity of treatment in line. That these contentions are not mere fancy will readily be seen by imagining two such screens as those at Southwold and Ashton, Devon, transposed, remembering also that Southwold church has lost the other half of its medieval colouring, and that in the unlighted central roof of Ashton church the loft and rood which belonged to the Southwold screen would probably not be visible.

This brings us to the liturgical consideration. The roodscreen was more than an architectural composition fulfilling the needs of order and convenience. It was part of the Church's dogmatic and religious teaching, and truthfully reflects the attitude and

faith of the worshipper. In East Anglia, this, the threshold leading from the nave and the people to the altar and to heaven, was treated less as a barrier than as a window and a guide. There is more than medieval quaintness in the adoring of the Angel Host at Southwold or Barton Turf or of the angels with the instruments of the Passion at Hitcham, more than convention in the raised hands of blessing and admonition with which the Apostles and Doctors are often painted. They display in honour the Christ of the Passion and the Resurrection, to whom, Triumphant, are given the keys of life and death so realistically shown in the background of the Doom, and with whom are raised from the earth the saints and confessors painted in the panels below. Hence the screen and loft are to be regarded as one composition with the rood and Doom, and even with the painted roof-bay with which they were so often honoured. The nearer these parts approach to a perfect scheme, the worthier the means. Where the craft of such a decorative system was not forthcoming to aid them, as in Bedfordshire or in the notable example at North Crawley, Bucks, the panels have something tentative about them, as though they had come there by happy accident and not by art. They are lacking in decorative effect, because they are not framed and harmonised with their surroundings. The wallpainting fails in a similar way, by comparison with the Norfolk or Suffolk screen-painting. Nor is this due to its earlier date, which in a symbolical style is probably in its favour, but to the need for this stimulus of propitious limitations.

During the middle ages colour was employed more or less strictly according to the rules of heraldry. The screen decorators remained true to this tradition, though occasionally deserting it for the sake of economy, especially in early examples, such as Santon

Downham or Parham, on the eastern faces of several screens, and away from the centres of the craft, in Oxfordshire or Cambridgeshire. In these districts gold is commonly spared, and yellow, or white, as in the fine painted screen at Barton, Cambs., is used instead. Originality found its place, not in the general scheme, but in the diversity of tiny floral ornament with which the parts were embellished, and in the skilful management of the surrounds of the panels and of the black letter inscriptions frequently found in the hollow of the rail.

Much of this peculiar contribution, it has been suggested,\* was due to the influence of environment. Modern research has rightly forbidden us to picture the achievements of the Gothic age as the work of the village craftsman, steeped like a nature-poet of the nineteenth century in the beauties of his surroundings and conceiving his images in a sort of mystic dream from the humours of the fields. We are shown instead the spectacle of guilds which were highly organised trades unions, and something very like the modern systems of factory production in more than one "picturesque" craft.† Nevertheless, the standards of life were then still measured with the eye of the husbandman, and commerce itself was close to nature. It is in that land where the yellow corn stands thick and gleaming under the ocean sun, where the field-flowers spread their enamelled eyes among the rich green pastures of the broadlands, that we find the characteristic work of the East Anglian school of craftsmen. It is noticeable that when we move westward, into the fen country of the Ouse, or among the quieter and softer landscapes of Constable, we do not find in their churches painted work adorned after this sort. Kersey and Stoke-by-Nayland, for example, once centres in a great and rich

\* Rood-screen Painting by William Davidson, F.R.I.B.A.

† See G. G. Coulton, *Art and the Reformation*.

weaving-district and able to summon the most sought-for art, preferred craftsmen (apparently the same) who adorned the panels of their screens with simple though dignified figure-paintings, upon backgrounds of red and green varied only with the simplest gold cinquefoils and surrounded with effective but quite unambitious tracery, without a vestige of decoration in gesso.

Eye, where I should like to give a rather full description of the painted decoration, lies on the borders of the home of this art. Whilst reproducing many of its characteristic features most worthily, and creating a total effect of typical splendour, it nevertheless shows important distinctions, one of which I believe to be unique. Since these distinctions are chiefly to be observed in the panels below the rail, I will begin my description there. Unlike their neighbours at Yaxley, the donors of the screen at Eye contented themselves with panel-figures which, though highly decorative, are extremely primitive in character. Perhaps it is to this we owe the appearance of the highly interesting saints, William of Norwich and Lucy†. We certainly find them accompanied by peculiarities of decoration. The figures, their robes as well as the backgrounds of alternate red and green diapered with gold in a way I do not remember seeing elsewhere, stand upon a conventional field of grass and mushroom-like plants a point in which the Edward Confessor panel, however, is unlike the rest, showing instead a floor of square tiles, set diagonally and without perspective. Behind all the figures, the coloured background is carried shoulder-high, and crowned with a comparatively deep semicircular band of blue (in most cases reduced to the white upon which it was painted), with a simple cresting

†In the eyes which she carries upon a book it is possible, and certainly not out of keeping with medieval thought, to believe the intention of a pious pun.

indicated in black line over the gold above. Whether this is intended to convey the effect of a sculptured niche, which is not quite incompatible with the conventional growths in the foreground, or whether we are to imagine the loops to represent hanging embroidery, a view with which the converging points of the cresting rather agree, I have not been able to decide. If the former effect is intended, we have here a most interesting contrast with the pedestal-bracket which appears at North Burlingham and Walpole St. Peter's in Norfolk and in the more distant examples at North Crawley (Bucks.) and Hilton (Dorset). The gold above the heads of the figures is powdered with tiny embossed ornaments of gesso, which is only sparingly used on this screen. Blue, it may be noticed, is again found under the gilded carving in the hollow on the face of the rail, a favourite position for the use of that colour, but one seldom afforded east of Cambridgeshire. Occurring again in the cuspings over the doorway, alternately with red, and in the semicircle above those in front of the vaulting, in the space where we read the words "Pray for John Golding," blue performs more than its usual part in the scheme, which is confined as a rule to the decoration of the vaulting-panels, and a few small under surfaces. This colour was also found in the small openings under the niches with which the tracery of this screen, like that at Yaxley, was once filled; but only half a panel of this tracery still remains in position at Eye.

If blue appears in more profusion than usual on this screen, white (except by the accident of time) appears in less; and the prevailing colours are still red and green and gold. Gold on the prominent surfaces of the tracery, as on the carvings in the spandrels above the panels, undoubtedly once appeared in combination alternately with red or green, following

the tradition observed in the panels themselves. It was also used in little cinquefoil flowerets powdering the familiar red-and-green wave-ornament, which climbs up the side of the posts from the sill to the springing of the vaulting. But the most charming little pieces of decoration were reserved for the buttresses. Here, on a white which time alone cannot have given its mellow tint of cream, we see short twisted trails of red and green, two of the one, then one of the other, with narrow curling leaves and tiny five-petal flowers, applied in graceful freehand, in thin coats which must quickly have acquired this shade of brown. At the level of the rail these separate tendrils give place to a continuous trail, red and green alternately for a short space, then red alone to the top of the buttress.

At Yaxley, much the same general scheme appears to have been followed as at Eye; but the parishioners sought to steal a march upon their neighbours in the matter of panel decoration, and imported the craftsmen whose hands we see at Bramfield and at Sotherton. The figures are taller and more graceful; their dresses and robes are painted in elaborate detail; and they are placed upon a floor of neat tiles seen in perspective, in front of high, straight backgrounds of gesso stamped in a rich variety of patterns. It is amusing to notice in one of the panels emulation carried to ridiculous extremes. Not content with a tower which even at Eye surpasses symbolism, St. Barbara is here provided with a building larger than the panel itself.

Bramfield, an exquisite piece of unrestored colour, deserves more space than I have to give. Here blue is used in far greater proportion than at Eye or in any other screen. It may even have dominated the scheme, being used alternately with red in the tracery panels, in the cusped arches over the heads of the figures, and, of course, in the interstices of the vaulting. But



it is now hard to tell, for this colour has fared very ill indeed, and for the most part has faded or flaked to an ugly white. Gesso appears here more profusely than in any screen except that at Southwold. It is used, as the illustrations show, not only in the panels, but also in continuous and minutely-executed patterns on the face of the buttresses; in small embossed flowers and even leaves which run among the mouldings of the rail; right down the hollow which starts under the ogees of the tracery; as a sort of barber's pole ornament along the moulded ribs of the rail's upper surfaces, and in flat geometrical pattern below; on the panel-tracery as at Southwold; and as stars over the blue heavens of the vaulting. Even the names of the Evangelists and of St. Mary, along the band which appears behind their shoulders, are cast in gesso. Several other fresh ornaments occur in this screen. The sides of the buttresses, which are whiter and narrower than those at Eye, have short leaf-trails with tiny pale mauve flowers, less flowing, but far more delicately and elaborately drawn, which are carried right round the heads of the tracery and along the ribs of the vaulting, and occur again in the hollow surrounding the panels. There is another foliage pattern, also taken round the arches, in green and gold; but these colours being upon white, and of a rather stiff semicircular shape, are not so successful. Other noticeable features are the little golden angels among the stars of the vaulting; the ornamented scrolls with the gospel words of the Annunciation carried by three of the Evangelists, who have their symbols at their feet and not, as is usual, in their hands; and the very heavy decoration of the beading which divides the pairs of panels.

To consider our store of wealth in painted screens minutely would tax the reader's patience too far. I propose to bring this paper to an end with a summary

of those features therein which appear to me most interesting or beautiful.

At Sibton, for example, the counter-change of red and green upon the fine tracery surviving from the former screen is delightfully managed. The colour on the north panels is green on the outer surfaces, with white cusplings and gold carving; whilst red instead of green is used under the ogee farthest to the left. Red is used in the main tracery of the southernmost panel, with green under the ogee. Quatrefoil instead of cinquefoil powderings are found on the wave of colour-and-white.

Other notable pieces of decoration are the black letter inscriptions at Westhall, where also the common feature of drawing the figures in black outline is so crudely apparent; the fine leaf-trails at Barningham; the buttress ornament at Hessel, where the foliage on the sides is unusually stiff, and bears berries instead of flowers, and the gesso on the faces shows birds among twists of a trail of leaves; and the primitive treatment of the wide early panel-surfaces at Santon Downham.

---

In Part I of this Paper the Writer purposed, with the collaboration of fellow-members, to produce an exhaustive list of Suffolk Churches containing Screens or parts of Screens, but the response has been so inadequate that it has been deemed preferable to leave the proposal in abeyance than publish an imperfect list.

EDITOR.