

## THE RETABLE AT THORNHAM PARVA.

By the Reverend W. W. LILLIE.

## I.

The unassuming little thatched church of Thornham Parva lies a mile or so to the west of the main road, almost mid-way between Ipswich and Norwich. It has long been known to contain wall-paintings, unusual but obscure, a simple early-Perpendicular rood screen, a little Jacobean panelling, and a very ordinary late Western gallery. It is less generally known that, since 1927, the western wall above the gallery has held an extremely important piece of medieval painting. This painting, originally a Retable, forms the subject of the following description and enquiry.

Its history has been obscure and neglected. It received a brief notice by the Editor of these Proceedings in the year of its reappearance at Thornham, wherein its saints were named, and the suggestion advanced that it had proceeded from the monastery at Eye. In the same year (1927) the panels were lent for exhibition at the Ipswich Church Congress. They were catalogued without comment, and apparently passed by unregarded. No further public mention has been made of the Retable, and the brief statements of the editorial notice referred to have remained unquestioned and unexpanded. It is strange that paintings so splendid and so rare should have been received so silently.

Not long ago, through the courtesy and with the kindly help of the Rev. the Hon. V. A. Henniker-Major, Rector of the Thornhams, the Retable panels were taken down by the writer and photographed. The central panel, showing the Crucifixion, with the attendant figures of Our Lady and St. John, has also been copied in water colours by the Reverend Christopher Woodforde. The colour and draughtsmanship of the original has been excellently preserved, whilst the stains which are the accidents and not the fruits of time have been

removed, and the original brilliant gilding of the backgrounds (since smeared with a dull grey) restored. Together with the photographs now reproduced, this watercolour should make a valuable record of a piece of painting which ranks at least as high as the later and more elaborate Retable at Norwich.

With the hope of tracing the Thornham Retable to its source of origin, or at least of ascertaining something more than the scanty facts given above, the writer has made many enquiries. Little has been learnt. Lord Henniker has kindly given details which supply a line of approach, but no more. He states that he found the panels about six years ago in a loft of his stables. They were quite unknown to himself or to his family, but he was informed by the Rev. E. Farrer, F.S.A., that they came from Rookery Farm, Stradbroke, which, in the year 1778, had been bought with all its contents by an ancestor of Lord Henniker's, Sir John Major, from a family named Fox. The Foxs were Roman Catholics, and during their habitation of the Rookery Farm they had collected materials to furnish an attic room there as a chapel. The mark of the sale at which they acquired the Retable paintings is still to be seen, in the shape of a small and ancient label on a corner of the frame—*Second Day, Lot 171.*

After Rookery Farm changed hands, the Retable, together with at least one other of the contents of the attic chapel, came to Thornham. Whether the Retable was then offered to be placed in Thornham Parva church, as it has been now, but was refused, or whether it was accepted and subsequently turned out by "restorers," or whether it has merely lain where it was brought a hundred and fifty years in obscurity, we have no record and can only conjecture. The sober and useful panels of the Jacobean pulpit which accompanied it from Stradbroke were, as we can see, dismembered and made to serve as a pleasant dado behind the altar.

The important consideration is, however, the earlier history of the Retable. We would give a good deal to know all that that sale label, *Second Day, Lot 171*, points back to.

## II.

As a piece of furniture, the Retable consists of nine upright panels, in groups of three.\* Each panel is divided from the next by slender pilasters, with capital, anulet and plinth. The pilasters rise two thirds the height of the whole frame, and carry horizontal boards carved in the form of an arcade. The spandrels above the beading of this arcade are filled with large and somewhat shallow carving, roses with buds and foliage, sprays of oak leaves and acorns.

This framework is highly interesting, as a parallel of the early, lithically-conceived chancel screens,† even apart from the paintings for which it was made. But medieval framing was regarded as an integral part of any painted design, and the Thornham Retable is no exception. To be fairly appreciated, the present half-drap, half tawdry, setting of the paintings must be visualised in its true original brilliance of gold and red and blue. It is much to be regretted that, pending a wholesale removal of the present covering, the details of those colours cannot be known. It is extremely probable, however, from signs and patches visible here and there, that the carving of leaves and flowers was gilded throughout, the open spaces of the background being red; that the ridges of the cusped tracery were red and the hollows blue; and that the pilasters were gilded. The gessoed backgrounds of the paintings themselves were certainly covered with gold. Green, as is often the case in so early a work, is entirely absent in the frame.

The measurements of the Retable are as follows:

Total width	..	..	..	12' 6"
Width of average panel	..	..	..	13 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
Width of centre panel	..	..	..	25"
Total height	..	..	..	36 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

The width of the vertical boards of which the panels

\*For the necessarily larger central panel special provision had to be made in the frame. (See illustration). Even the scale of the figures had to be modified, so greatly marring the general design.

†See *The Screenwork of Suffolk, part I*, in the Proceedings, Vol. XX, p. 214.

are composed varies within the neighbourhood of 5 inches—a width noticeably less than anything to be found in panels of the fifteenth century.

These preliminaries over, some attempt must be made to describe the paintings themselves.

The figures symbolised are (from the spectator's left) St. Dominic, St. Katherine, St. John the Baptist; St. Peter, Our Lord with the Blessed Virgin and St. John the Evangelist, and St. Paul; St. Edmund, K.M., St. Margaret of Antioch, and St. Peter Martyr. The paintings may be examined in the same order.

1. *St. Dominic.* The background is composed of row upon row of tiny squares of gilded gesso, stamped in the form of an eagle displayed within a quatrefoil, the corners of the square being filled with minute fleurs-dé-lis. St. Dominic stands with widely planted feet upon a tiny mound or hillock of grassy earth. He is tall and slender, like the other figures in this conventional scheme, but lacks the easy rhythm of attitude which endows the convention elsewhere with charm. He stands somewhat stiffly, and his black cope falls from his shoulders in severe simplicity, with none of the gentle curves and fine folds of the clothing of St. Peter or King Edmund. Beneath the black cope is a white robe, much toned down to obviate staring contrast. The shoes have been subdued by time to a purple-brown. The book which the saint carries in his right hand, and the halo, are gilt, picked out with green. The hair and beard are also strongly marked with green—a primitive convention to be seen in one or two other figures, but beyond the comprehension of the sober artist who "restored" the figure of St. John the Baptist.

2. *St. Katherine.* Here the background is a kind of chess-board chequer of pattern and blank. Within the same quatrefoil mould is a large fleur-de-lis. The motif may possibly have been used as a hint of the virgin's royal birth, for it appears also in the Edmund panel. The remaining royal saint, St. Margaret, is

not paid this compliment, but she appears next the King, and the same design is never found in this Retable in adjacent panels. The question however is trivial.

The figure itself is one of the most beautiful. It has none of the emotion of the Crucifixion panel, and none of the dramatic liveliness of the St. Paul, but the attitude conveys a supreme dignity and calm. The victory is won: the cruel wheel is a golden symbol upon a fur-lined sleeve. The body is turned slightly and effortlessly to the right, and graceful folds sweep down in the direction of the left heel. The free arm, easily bent towards the shining wheel, is tightly covered with a sleeve of fine silk reaching to the wrist. The figure is clad in the rich and ample folds of a long red wrap or cloak, the lining of which appears in a dagged line at its edges, above an inner robe of purple-grey. The feet are concealed. The delicate brown hair is covered with a transparent veil, like that worn by the Blessed Virgin herself.

3. *St. John the Baptist.* The pattern of the background is once more continuous, and consists of a series of repetitions of the *Agnus Dei* held in the figure's left hand, having the same elongated body and pennon. The *Agnus* is inscribed within a cusped circle, with tiny trefoils in the corners outside. The figure of St. John has been a good deal repainted, but with apparent faithfulness to the ideals of the original. The hands are elegant, like those of the other figures, but the legs and feet are clumsy and bony in the extreme. The garment of camel's-hair is a chasuble-shaped robe of a "grape" purple, with rough white tufts and edges of hair, and a greenish lining.

4. *St. Peter.* In the two outer wings of the triptych, the panels to left and right are fully patterned, and the middle panel has the alternate squares left blank. In the inner section of the Retable the middle panel is fully filled, and the others chequered. The St. Peter has a background in which the alternate squares show a pair of birds opposed, grapes or some other fruit between them, within a diamond pattern, three leaves filling

each of the four corners remaining. In his left hand St. Peter bears the "massy keys" of his charge; with his right he makes a difficult gesture which may perhaps be construed as a compound of worship and admonition. † His feet are bare, as the feet of an apostle are always drawn in early times, and would appear unnaturally long if they were not partially hidden under his robe. The mantle, lined with a rather yellowish green, is of a ruddy purple, not far removed from the pink of the robe beneath. It is looped high up over the breast, and its large and heavy folds have scarcely the grace of the rest. In fact the whole figure is lacking in that easy poise which distinguishes the St. Paul or the youthful St. John, and appears as though it had made a sudden and incomplete turn away to the right.

5. *The Crucifixion.* The background is of a simple and effective raised quatrefoil design. The colours of the group are as follows:—

*Our Lady.*—The robe rather like St. Peter's; the mantle green, much duller than the lining of St. Peter's just described, with here and there a faint shadow of blue; the hair a delicate fawn, and the eyes (as in every figure) a clear blue. *The Christ.*—The loin cloth a dark grey lined with pink; the hair a rich dark brown marked in delicate waves, contrasting with the light close curls of St. John; the slender cross of living wood a dull brown touched with fawn; the superscription black, with red initial "I" and tailpiece. *The St. John.*—the robe an even deeper green; the mantle or cloak pink, with marked brown shading; the book gold, as are also all the haloes. The group is beautifully as well as conventionally conceived, with a dignified passion which is continually satisfying. The typical curves of the Virgin's head and neck are drawn with a pathetic beauty. The suffering of the Christ is realistic but calm and unself-conscious. The St. John stands somewhat apart—a weakness in the composition which nevertheless adds poignancy to the suffering of the divine Son and his Mother.

† Cf. the Newport figures.

6. *St. Paul*. The background shows lions rampant. St. Paul, like St. Peter, has the head turned outward from the scene beside him. His left wrist and elbow are curved towards the hilt of the sword of his martyrdom; the right hand is raised didactically towards the Rood. He is as usual shown bald and heavily bearded. His robe, again a purple hue of pink, is, like St. Edmund's, tightly gathered about a high waist, where it stands out in folds. The mantle of purple grey is looped gracefully from the shoulder and gathered up upon the right between hip and elbow. The sword, of a very blue steel with red haft and golden guards, has been repainted.

7. *St. Edmund King and Martyr*, whose emblem has also been repainted, has many special marks of his noble birth. The hair is elegantly curled at the sides; the forearm smoothly covered with silk, and the hand and wrist with a white gauntlet. The mantle, like those of St. Margaret and St. Katherine, is lined with ermine or some rich fur, whose irregular edges show white against the profusion of green folds. Once more a purple-pink is used for the robe.

8. *St. Margaret*. The background is similar to that of St. Peter. The figure itself is obviously intended to balance that of St. Katherine, as that of St. Peter Martyr balances the St. Dominic. It stands with the same nobility and calm as St. Katherine, amongst the hideous folds of the evil-looking red-and-brown beast through which she has plunged the staff of her cross. The mantle is girt about the shoulders with an *Agnus Dei* morse, done in gesso, and since re-gilded. The book which the Saint holds in her right hand is similarly embossed, with two gold eagles copied from the panels of the two Dominicans.

9. *St. Peter Martyr* bears detailed resemblance to St. Dominic himself. Cope, tunic, the wide amice or collar, the emblem of a book, the severe attitude, all are similar. But the cover of the book, instead of being hatched, is embossed like that of St. Margaret; and the skull, with the scimitar of martyrdom lodged in the wound, is split, and bleeding like the heart.

## III.

Some attempt may now be made to place the Thornham paintings in relation to contemporary English art, and to arrive at a conclusion upon their date and origin.

It will be convenient to begin with a further word upon the carved framework. To any person familiar with such early screens as those at Stanton Harcourt (Oxon) or Willingham (Cambs.) or East Harling (Norfolk), the Thornham Retable presents a piece of construction of recognisable primitive family. The arcade over the Retable paintings, with the simple carvings above, is cut from horizontal boards, and pegged down upon the vertical shafts which separate the panels, in exactly the manner of the tracery upon the mullions of the screens. By the end of the fourteenth century this clumsy, lithical method of construction had been entirely superseded. But the screens named were made quite in the beginning of this clumsy fashion, which continued for a considerable period. Further, the woodwork of the Thornham Retable is of a more primitive type than they. Making due allowance for its smaller scale and lesser prominence, and the consequent simplification which might be expected in the framing of this work, the woodwork can hardly be placed later than the first quarter of the fourteenth century.

One may consider next the supplementary colour-decoration. The striking peculiarity here must have been first of all the broad masses of gilding, almost unbroken, except by the paintings themselves, from one end of the Retable to the other. In the second place the eye is attracted, even now they are painted over, to the elaborate repetition of small square designs in gesso upon the background. One may also detect a comparatively liberal use of blue in the original colour-scheme of the frame.

From each of these features some tribute of information may be taken. The wide expanse of gilding, as well as the gessoed patterns, seem to prove a fact also otherwise suggested, namely that the Retable was derived from a group, if not from a particular example of a group, of



illuminated manuscripts. A panel-painter, evolving his own "mystery," would never have been content with such glaring masses of gold; they arose through transcription from a medium and a scale where they were not a fault. The fifteenth-century panel-painter, on the other hand, either employed such gilded gesso backgrounds within the limits of narrow panels and broken by the bulk and colours of muntin and buttress, or else used it in combination with masses of red and green. The square patterns of the background show another and an obvious connection between the Retable and the illuminators.

The use of blue above mentioned is an indication not of origin but of date. It was in the experimental stages of painting upon wood that this colour was most used. The passage of years quickly proved how unstable it was, and in all but the earliest work it is confined to an occasional under-panel or the hollow of a moulding.\*

More important and more exact information comes to us from the drawing, painting, and iconography of the figures themselves. A brief reminder of the contemporary fortunes of English painting may be appropriate. The progressive achievement of the four schools of Winchester, St. Albans, Westminster and East Anglia was an essential condition of such works as the Thornham Retable. By them English art was led, during the 13th century, from the conventions and crudities of a "Byzantine" manner to the congenial and polished style which we call "Gothic." The student of primitive English art will turn for the details of this progress to such works as Borenius' and Tristram's *English Medieval Painting* and the Catalogue of the *Exhibition of British Primitives*, 1923.† The Winchester paintings are at the beginning of the advance, and retain many marks of Byzantine origin, notably the exaggerated emphasis of the contours of hip and thigh beneath the draperies, and a certain archaic as well as naïve treatment of the

\*The screen at Bramfield, where there is an exceptional amount of blue employed, remains as a practical and exceptional demonstration of this fact in the fifteenth century.

†Royal Academy of Arts, Oxford University Press.

faces. The St. Alban's school, still severe and still retaining traces of the earlier manner, definitely puts forth the characteristic buds of "Gothic." It has also a peculiar interest in the present connection, because at St. Alban's we have record, and may presume beyond it, of seven painted retables, of which the Newport chest is perhaps an imitation. At Westminster, which seems always to have been a courtly school, and to have had affinities with those of France, the peculiar Gothic style, with its curves and types, has definitely arrived. We may note the widespread demand at this time to have the monastic and aristocratic painting of the psalters and missals translated upon the furniture of the collegiate presbytery, and even upon the walls of the parochial nave. Finally, somewhat apart from the rest, developed the East Anglian school of painting, which maintained the emphasis upon manuscript painting. To this belong the famous works associated with Norwich and Gorleston; and from this, we would maintain, sprang the paintings with which we are now concerned.

Let us supplement these general statements by a comparison of the Thornham paintings with actual examples of contemporary, or nearly contemporary, English works of the same nature. Such comparison will provide, amongst other things, the main evidence as to date. The first example, a very well-known work dated within the years 1270-1275, is that of the St. Faith in the chapel dedicated in her name at Westminster. There is close similarity between this and the Thornham paintings. The face, though with a frowning strength more like that to be seen in the king and the ecclesiastics than in the female saints at Thornham, yet clearly has the same characteristics. The elegant fingers, the tight sleeves, the small clasped book, the draping of the fur-lined mantle with its low circular folds and hanging corners, the robe with its simple neck, the crown, the colours of the garments, also are alike. The difference is scarcely more than that of a certain stiffness and severity in the Westminster painting. The Thornham figures give the impression of being a little later and were assured in their tradition.

The chest at Newport, Essex, placed within less certain limits at the end of the 13th century, affords similarities, but far more striking contrasts, with the Thornham Retable. † The architectural setting, and the cross on which the Christ is borne, are of the same type; but both are coarser at Newport, and the shafts and arches there are painted, not carved. The figures are drawn in the same stylised attitudes, and with the same curve of head and neck; but the Newport figures, far shorter, of attenuated rather than slender proportions, with large heads, are painted in somewhat awkward attitude and with naïve effects of expression in face and limb. They are also similarly clothed and draped, but lack many of the distinctive details of the Thornham costumes. Further indications that the Newport chest is of an altogether different and more primitive school are the use of a black outline in the manner of wall-paintings, and the absence of any elaborate decoration or gilding. But the work is separated from our East Anglian Retable far more by its style of execution than by time.

We must pass over the "English" paintings which were made for, or in, Scandinavia about the turn of the century—although one or two of them present detailed affinities both in figure and decoration with the Thornham paintings—and turn to a further example of the Westminster school, the two kings—Henry III and Edward II—on the sedilia in the Abbey. Lack of space forbids detailed description here, but a glance at any good reproduction of the figures will convince the reader (if he makes allowance for the details to be expected in a courtly work of far larger scale) of their essential similarity in date. They are placed by Professor Lethaby at about 1308.

One more example, dated within a year or two of the Westminster Kings, may be given. This, a reliquary cover now in the Cluny Museum, is not only interesting as English work of often minutely similar detail, but is

†For the benefit of readers who do not know of this piece of furniture, it should be stated that it is a portable altar, and that the paintings, which are done on the inside of the lid, are designed for a temporary reredos when the lid is raised.

of the same scale and general purpose as the Thornham panels, with even the same small gilded squares of gesso, and some of the same motifs within them. It is at least a possible conjecture that it likewise proceeded from an imitation of the East Anglian illuminators.

Amongst surviving English panel- and wall-paintings it is not necessary to go further. With such examples as the wall paintings in the St. Stephen's Chapel of the House of Commons (dated 1350-60) and the Norwich Retable (at the end of the 14th century) we have entered a different world.

It only remains to refer the reader to the earlier illuminated manuscripts of Norwich and Gorleston, made in the first years of the 14th century, and to let him judge for himself of the reasonable nature of the connection claimed between them and our Suffolk Retable. The Arundel Psalter† is the most obvious example. Here, in the Crucifixion scene, the resemblances are so striking that the connection can hardly be believed accidental. Even such details as the curling hair of St. John, the gilded borders of the nimbi, and some of the patterns of the backgrounds, are alike. The detailed working out of such a connection would take many pages to describe, and must be left to others. It must suffice here that the claim has been indicated. We would place the Retable between 1300 and 1320\*, as the fruit of direct imitation of works of the East Anglian school of manuscript illumination.

We are led to this conclusion from negative as well as positive evidence. There have survived no panel-paintings which might have led to such a degree of development as that shown at Thornham. The Cluny panels, which may possibly have a similar origin, are in a

†The Arundel Psalter itself is, of course, attributed to the "Court" school.

\*No attempt has been made to date the work from the evidence of the costumes of the figures, because costume in itself can add little exact testimony, especially where, as in the Thornham paintings, it was desired to convey the sublime victories of the past. Yet the following details may be noted. The girdles concealed under the overhanging folds of the tunic, gloves (like that of St. Edmund) with cuffs a little pointed, the low rounded necks of the kirtles, the sleeves tight over the forearm, the fur-lined cloaks, all undoubtedly agree with the rest of our evidence as to date.

similar category of workmanship. It is natural to assume that such finished painting, standing so far down the line of its particular art, must have sprung from such a parent movement as that of the illuminators.

A further piece of information arises out of the iconography of the Retable. St. Edmund, though East Anglian, was popular enough to be painted at London or St. Albans. But the two Dominicans, which flank the other figures, definitely prove that the Retable was made for a Dominican house. We may therefore advance a claim for its provenance in Yarmouth, Thetford, or King's Lynn in Norfolk, or Dunwich, Ipswich, or Sudbury in Suffolk. Yarmouth, Dunwich and Thetford are all near Stradbroke, whither we have traced the Retable before 1778. But we have no evidence that Stradbroke, or even the neighbourhood of Stradbroke, was its original home. All that can be said is that the three towns named are also near the illuminators' centres of Norwich and Gorleston.

It is very much to be hoped that the provenance of the Retable will not long be permitted to remain a subject of mere conjecture. For, in the words of Professor S. C. Cockerall, it is a Work "in the very front rank of English art of the period."