

## ANCIENT MURAL PAINTINGS

*From: Historical and Antiquarian Notes, Gawsorth Church, Nr Macclesfield, Cheshire. Ancient Mural Paintings. By Joseph F A Lynch dated 1879.*

About a year before my discovery of the paintings, I issued a lithographic view of the church, which had an extensive circulation. I repeatedly examined the interior of the building at this time, my attention being principally given to the remains of the decoration on the roof of the older part of the structure. I studied the subject very closely, and came to the conclusion that it must be part of a complete system of decoration, including the wall surface. I could not reconcile my mind to the view that the ceiling only should be decorated, and that, too, in so elaborate a manner, with numerous figures of angels in various positions – some in the act of incensing, others holding scrolls, which originally contained inscriptions – the face of the beams on each side being literally covered with these carefully executed figures. The bosses were gilded, and the whole of the mouldings picked in with colour and gold. The walls were thick with layer upon layer of dirt and whitewash. I had a strong desire to examine them thoroughly, but, strange to say I could not obtain permission, at the same time receiving the suggestion that I had better make my experiments elsewhere! However, I cared little for this discouragement, and cherished the hope that some opportunity would yet occur.

This fortunately, and in an unexpected manner, presented itself in the October of 1851, the year following, during the alteration and repairs of the building. The removal of the thick covering which so completely buried these remarkable works was a task requiring the greatest patience and caution. “The Doom,” or Last Judgement, I discovered on the east end, in the space between the window and the south wall, extending to the roof. It was of large proportions, being about 16 feet high, by 7 feet 9 inches wide.



The “St Christopher” occupied the space between the first and second windows from the tower, on the north side, being about 13 feet high by 11 feet wide. The “St George” was painted in the next space formed between the second and third windows, and was 13 feet high by 7 feet 6 inches wide.

Were I to be asked what is the value of these paintings to us in the nineteenth century, I could not reply in better terms than in the words of the late John Harland, FSA., the distinguished antiquary and writer. He honoured me with a visit at the church immediately after the discovery, and in company with me made a most minute and critical examination of the original paintings on the walls, comparing every portion with my copies, which he deemed most worthy of an interesting review in the Manchester Guardian. In one part of this article he makes use of the following remark, “Such works are of the greatest value to the history of Pictorial Art in this country, by supplying some of the links wanting to connect its earlier with its later periods,” and that these three “remarkable mural paintings are without doubt of great and rare interest to the ecclesiologist and antiquary.”

He also in the same article agrees with the view I held relative to the general decoration of the building, stating, “There is little doubt but that the greater part of the wall surface of this building must have been painted over, for Mr Lynch found remains of colour and outlines of a highly decorative character on several parts of the walls.” These brief extracts at once express the important historic value of the Gawsworth Mural Paintings. It must be admitted that to many these works are a source of surprise and no little perplexity – subjects, in fact, of amusement, in which they see nothing but what appears of a very primitive character, rude and full of distortion. They are, however, of peculiar attraction.....

Joseph Lynch then goes into the History of Ecclesiastical art for some pages ending by saying “I have, therefore, no hesitation in saying that they were executed during the thirteenth century. Two of these works come under the domain of legendary art – St Christopher and St George – and were produced on established types, having their origin in Byzantine or Greek Art. They were painted on the north side of the church in the oldest part, as already stated, the original decoration of the roof of this portion remaining to the present time, and of which I have spoken in connection with the west end. In entering on an explanation of the subjects in the paintings, we shall be greatly assisted by references to acknowledged authority for the texts of their composition and symbolism. This is the more necessary in the case of the paintings of St Christopher and St George. The former is remarkable, presenting the figure of a gigantic man.



The Gawsworth paintings were executed in the medium known as “Tempera,” simply meaning that the colours were tempered, or diluted with a medium, so as to be easily applied to the surface and to adhere. This “Tempera painting” (which is of great antiquity, and appears to have been revived about the thirteenth century) was the prototype of the styles that followed in encaustic, fresco, and

old painting. The early history of "Tempera" gives many different "mediums" or "vehicles". The principal medium among the Italians was a glutinous material, such as the yolk of an egg beaten frequently with the white, and diluted with the juice of the fig tree; and where the latter was not obtainable, vinegar was used. In this country wax was much used (according to authentic Mediaeval MSS), and that its solution was accomplished by a lixivium, potash, and lime. This appeared clearly the medium adopted in the Gawsorth paintings, a conclusion arrived at after very careful investigation. The method followed in these paintings was to lay a thin cream colour over the space to be painted, as a ground. Then the subject was sketched with a small brush, using black. This being complete the colouring commenced. The artist's resource in this respect was simple, but of considerable brilliancy. The process was to apply large washes of colour, which dried very rapidly.

The pigments had scarcely any intensity of tone, the browns being very weak. There were great difficulties in their way in giving the effects of light and shade, the vehicle dried too quick to admit of blending, so as to produce gradations or shades. They had therefore to resort to "hatching" or "stippling", the former consisting of lines and the latter dots. The wax medium was used also as a mordant for the gilding. The gilding in these paintings was in a remarkable state of preservation and excited great curiosity. It was found that the gold leaf used was considerably thicker than that used today.