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The History of Art in Gloucestershire

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A GOOD many years ago I proposed to a publisher a *History of Art in Gloucestershire*—naturally with the idea that writers from other counties would do likewise to form a series. I got a very courteous letter, explaining that the circulation of such a book would be too limited to justify publication. Today, however, I am assured of publication in the *TRANSACTIONS*, and find this a chance to say what I had wanted to write at greater length.

The history of Art in Gloucestershire—where does that begin?

Not in the early periods; we must accept the fact that Neolithic man in Gloucestershire, as everywhere else, was an artificer but not an artist. With the Bronze Age? Perhaps; certainly with the splendid Celtic metalwork of which the Birdlip mirror is the most beautiful and most famous example. In Belgic Gloucestershire I find real beauty in the Mediterranean lines of the jars from Bagendon, and in some of the strangely vital devices of the Belgic coins that Mrs Clifford found there—not, I know, all local products, but a part of a local civilization.

Somewhat less beautiful, but perhaps more significant, are the strange 'Celtic' sculptured heads that find their best analogies in France, even as far South as the valley of the Rhône. One, a new acquisition to the Corinium Museum at Cirencester—though found at Chipping Norton, just outside our frontiers—affords fascinating comparison with the famous Gloucester head that we all know. In that, you can see some Roman influence, especially in the hair-do; in the head from Chipping Norton there is nothing of the kind. Bagendon must have had a sculptural art like this.

The Belgae lead us to the Romans; and in Roman art we are very rich. Some of it, splendid as it is, seems to me as irrelevant as something very expensive from Maple's that has been exported to Delhi or Kenya; but it is none the less part of the history of art in our county. I must confess that when I see the pavements at Woodchester I am only reminded of Italy; but that when I see much humbler mosaics at Frocester, with curlicues that are not Roman at all but pure Celtic, I feel more at home.

I am not qualified to guide you through the ages that followed. For me they are well called Dark. But at Bibury you have extremely primitive Saxon capitals with classical reminiscences; from Bibury again the remarkable stones with Viking-like ornament that our friend the late Sir Alfred Clapham thought to be of the early eleventh century; and at Deerhurst the same inspiration can be seen at work. And at Deerhurst in about 910—I depend for the date on a Gloucestershire archaeologist, David Talbot Rice—you have a genuine sculptural creation in the angel that you all know: a work that has its inspiration in a Celtic manuscript. Then there is the splendid roundel of Christ in the Chapter House at Gloucester, which I first knew in a dank shrubbery of the garden of the Bishop's Palace. It combines Byzantine and Carolingian themes, and is probably only a few decades later than the Deerhurst angel. Time has battered it: but it is great art. There is no reason to suppose that it is not local work: and it sets Gloucestershire in the main current of European art somewhere about 950. Nor does it stand alone. Professor Talbot Rice has written of the remarkable relief of a standing Christ holding a long-stemmed cross, now built into the South wall of the tower at Beverstone; and you all know the superb relief, of Christ raising Adam, in the Cathedral here at Bristol: both probably of about 1025; and the rather later reliefs at Daglingworth. You will remember the head stone at Newent, and many other instances of Anglo-Saxon sculpture in our midst. You will remember, too, the long series of early fonts in our county. It probably begins by the middle of the eleventh century, though most are of the twelfth; how many have we not seen on our expeditions?

Thereafter we are on more familiar ground. I am talking today of works of art rather than of architecture, but of course the distinction is a false one. The great columns of Gloucester and Tewkesbury in the 1080's have certainly that quality of 'something beyond what is absolutely necessary' that some philosophers have desiderated as an element in a work of art; and their particular quality you hardly find elsewhere. There are parallels elsewhere in England to the splendid decoration of the chapterhouses of Bristol and Gloucester, that date, I suppose, from the mid-12th century; but they are as fine as any in England, and Bristol, I think, finer.

In pure pictorial creation we have the wall-paintings at Kempley and Stoke Orchard, both recovered and preserved in our own time. Kempley is nowadays unique, the only testimony we have in England of how the manuscripts of the Apocalypse passed from parchment to wall and became familiar even to those who could not read. The paintings at Stoke Orchard are less important; but those of us who saw

them revealed will never think them insignificant; and indeed they are not. They have the greater interest because, so far as we know, none of the *great* schools of manuscript illumination seem to have been sited in Gloucestershire, though Winchcombe had a scriptorium.

With them we come to some of the most characteristic creations of our county, the sculptured tympana. We are so familiar with them that I think we sometimes forget how remarkable and how unusual they are. Not even in Burgundy will you now find so many and such various sculptures, though there too they had the necessary good stone and the necessary great abbeys to form schools of sculptors to meet their needs. Malmesbury, the finest west country tympanum, is just outside our scope: but think of the innumerable small churches—Quenington, South Cerney, Moreton Valence, Beckford, Ampney St. Mary, Elkstone, Kempley, more than twenty in all: and wonder at our riches. Nor must we forget that at South Cerney we have that very rare thing, a superb head of Christ carved in wood about 1100.

I suppose the next monument in the history of art in our county is the Gloucester candlestick, that can definitely be dated between 1109 and 1112. Here I must admit myself a heretic: I do not think it was made in England. It was undoubtedly made for the Abbey of St. Peter at Gloucester to the order of its Abbot, but there is nothing else like it in England, and there are a great many candlesticks like it that are known to have been made in Germany. To my mind it is evidence of the Abbot's travels rather than of Gloucestershire art.

The early Gothic age poses a problem to the Gloucestershire art-historian. We have lost so much—the great Abbeys of Hales and Kingswood and Flaxley and Winchcombe and Cirencester are little more than memories. The vaulting of the naves at Gloucester and Tewkesbury probably represents the style well enough, but I can never feel that the marriage with the great Norman pillars is altogether a happy one. Moreover it was not, I think, a particularly fruitful time in ordinary church architecture; it is significant that one of the characteristic local things is the modulation of Norman dog's tooth and beak mouldings into a Gothic form, as for example at Ozleworth.

The richness and elegance of the Decorated Style were congenial to the West. It is, I suppose, fanciful to see in its exotic grace and the convolutions of its growth something of the Celtic quality that we perceived in early art in our county, but the quality, whatever we call it, is there. The 14th century was the time when trade was bringing wealth to Gloucestershire, and even architecture was enriched. In the South transept of Gloucester, for example, the nine ribs of the vaulting are reflected in nine 'beads' in the wall pier; the tracery at

Badgeworth, consecrated in 1315, is everywhere budding with ball-flower ornament; and so is the exterior of the South aisle at Gloucester. There, too, the elaborate buttresses, with niches and pinnacles and statues, give the building something of the quality of a metal shrine.

You will not want me to retell the familiar story of the birth of Perpendicular Style. Whether it was indeed created at Gloucester, or whether in fact it first appeared in London, is still uncertain, though I think opinion is veering towards London—at any rate in London. But it must be studied here; there is no equivalent either for Gloucester cloisters or St. Mary Redcliffe or for the strange skeleton vault of St. Augustine's, Bristol. Nor will I talk of our splendid windows, beyond reminding you of Tewkesbury and Gloucester and Fairford. But there are two things which I would stress a little: the importance of Gloucestershire masons even in royal buildings, and the influence of the patronage of our great merchants. The researches of my friend John Harvey have established a whole series of masons from these parts working in the King's service: John, Robert and Thomas of Gloucester, at various times between 1249 and 1359; John Sponlee, who from Spoonley might well have learned his trade at Winchcombe, and probably Robert Westerley who flourished between 1430 and 1461. Henry Yevele's closest partner, William Wynford, seems to have come from near Bristol; and a number of his masons, such as Richard Washbourn and John Swallow, were Gloucestershire men. Any Gloucestershire man has a need to come 'home' at intervals; and Gloucestershire buildings cannot have lacked master masons of first rate quality.

The second point I want to stress is the part played by William Grevel and the Forteys in the middle of the 15th century in inspiring their master mason—I think the same one worked for all—to create that unique style we enjoy at Northleach and Chipping Campden. With its fluted columns and the in-turned curves of its capitals, it is unlike anything else in England or elsewhere; and it is, without question, beautiful.

The wool merchants make us think of their incised brasses—though whether these were made in Gloucestershire I do not know—and of their town houses and the manor houses of the lands that sold them wool. But such domestic architecture is so familiar to you that I need not linger over it; it is, I think, a tribute to its quality of seeming to grow naturally out of a fertile soil that one hardly thinks of it as part of the history of art. The same must once have been true of the innumerable chapels and guild houses in Bristol and Gloucester. 'The old proverb, "As sure as God's in Gloucester"' Stukeley tells us,

'surely meant the vast number of churches and religious foundations here; for you can scarce walk past ten doors but somewhat of that sort appears.' How few are left! And how hard it has proved to preserve those few.

The Renaissance came to Gloucestershire with the very early stained glass in the style at Rendcomb and Temple Guiting—glass not, I think, made locally. The style came in slowly and not always very gracefully; there was too strong a medieval tradition established here. But we must not forget the splendours of Thornbury Castle, that had it been finished would have been the finest private house in England. It was too fine, and brought death to its master. His builders had certainly worked on Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster, but they may well have been Gloucestershire men.

None the less the style seems less at home here for a time than it does nearer London. Even in the 17th century the most beautiful Renaissance tombs, such as those at Miserden, are London-made; and our sculptured tombs in the churchyards are picturesque rather than landmarks in the development of artistic style. I suppose that it was not until the quarries at Bath became important, and a school of sculpture grew up there once again, that what are strictly works of art played much part in Gloucestershire economy. I do not speak of architecture, for the splendid squares and terraces of Bristol, the more modest ones of Gloucester, and even early 19th-century Cheltenham, depend on mass and proportion rather than on enrichment for their effect. And I do not speak of the great houses of Gloucester, from Stanway to Dodding-ton, because there is not time. But I would remind you how, in the late 18th century, creation once more happened here. No history of English art can omit Tetbury Church, built in 1783-4 but planned earlier, which is one of the most successful of the early neo-Gothic Churches; or Sezincote, where for the first time you have an Indian style and cast iron structure and ornamentation. And I would remind you how at this time Gloucestershire became a repository of great paintings, many of which are still here, and many of which our Society has been privileged to see. I need only mention Mr Gambier Parry's collection at Highnam Court, and Captain Spencer Churchill's at Northwick. I would only point out one curious fact, that our county has never produced an important landscape painter. It is the dull countrysides, like East Anglia and Holland and Northern China that produce landscape paintings. Gloucestershire is too beautiful; we do not need landscape paintings, for we can look out of the window instead.