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THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE, ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL

CONSERVATION REPORT

The work on the painting was started on 19 April 1993 and completed on 17 June 1993 by David Perry.

Situation

Sited on the north wall of the Quire at the west end, the painted area is roughly rectangular and measures approximately 178cm x 72cm. This shape corresponds to the pulpit which was removed in 1835 thereby revealing the painting. The wall around the pulpit had been disastrously stripped bare causing the loss of nearly 50% of the painting.

Description

Dating from 'not later than c.1250' (Professor E W Tristram), this subject and related depictions to do with pride, appear to have been customarily painted in this position, ie. above the Abbot's seat. The extraordinary quality of the painting seems to have more in common with panel painting than mural techniques, and indeed the preparation was similar to that used on wood.

A fine skim of lime in plaster form was applied to the stone as a support, and although it has not been established that this skim had a glue content, its ultra solubility would suggest this inclusion as in gesso.

Elegant analysis of paint samples made by Ms. Jo Darrah of the V&A museum shows that most of the pigments were bound with oil and that glazes were also used. Of particular interest was the use of tin foil on the crown and medallion on Fortune detailed in Jo Darrah's enclosed analysis which is the basis of any further reference to pigments in this report.

The rosettes which are found on both the red and green backgrounds also appear to have supported gold or silver foil. These rosettes have a yellowish hue which suggests the presence of an adhesive oil. On that basis the wheel itself is of a similar colour and may have been treated in the same way.

Analysis of these colours would help to clarify this theory. The shield in the top west corner of the painting, obviously painted over the green background, is also an oil based pigment which although a later addition, may have been painted soon after the original scheme.

Condition Prior to Conservation

The physical damage to the painting is contained mainly in the lower few inches commensurate with the effect of rising damp and possibly abrasion by virtue of its accessibility. The edges have also suffered some damage as have the mortar joints especially in the lower section. At some point two separate plaques were attached to the wall using screw holes with fibre dowels of relatively recent origin.

Presumably during the Reformation the painting was covered with limewash painted with a linear decorative scheme (see photograph C) much of which was removed when the painting was discovered in 1835. That this uncovering was arbitrarily carried out was due in no small measure to the difficulty of the task and no doubt some damage occurred during this process. Vertical channels eroded in the limewash were caused by water running down the painting and in some places colour from the green background was carried onto the vermilion.

It is difficult now to see from where this water permeation originated, but its effect caused particular damage to the green by softening the lime support, which suggests that this colour was not as well bound as the other pigments. It is possible that a form of varnish was applied to the finished painting; some evidence of this can be seen on the green background, although this could be part of the orpiment glaze, but in areas exposed from beneath the limewash this coating was water permeable. The wax varnish which covered the whole area including the residual limewash was presumably applied in this century.

Conservation Treatment

After careful study of the colour analysis a comprehensive photographic record was compiled using colour print and transparency films. The photographic plan is in six sections lettered A, B, C, D, E, F. Photographs taken during work are numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, etc.

The first cleaning test was made in section A on the lime wash over the green background near the west edge of the painting. Removing the wax coating with white spirit impregnated cotton wool swabs, the yellowish colour of the lime wash was revealed.

At this point an attempt was made to soften this coating with water which indeed occurred. However this action also destabilised the lime support of the painting making the removal of the lime wash without disturbing the paint layer extremely perilous. It was decided therefore to remove the lime wash dry using No 15 scalpel blades.

This proved to be a slow process; approximately 20 sq inches being exposed in a day's work. So that no damage occurred to the 'varnish' layer over the colour, the lime wash was gradually pared away till the colour could be seen to ensure that no material attached itself to the back of the fragments being removed. Similarly the wax, where possible, was not entirely removed to avoid disturbing any sub-coating. Although fragments of the limewash layer appear on the crown and medallion on Fortune, it proved too potentially dangerous to remove them and neither were these areas of the painting cleaned to avoid chemical contamination of the sub-structure. All cleaning of the waxed areas was carried out using only white spirit on cotton wool swabs.

On some of the edges, particularly on the east side, a thick oil paint was found probably residual from redecoration of the pulpit when it was still in situ and this was also removed.

A few areas within the painting needed plaster repair - most notably on the left hand of the central figure of man, the vertical mortar joint in section A and the screw holes. Some parts of the edges were also secured with mortar. The cement pointing of the stones was removed and replaced with lime mortar using silica sand and slaked lime in a 2x1 mixture.

The areas of the lime support exposed by erosion and other damage were tonally integrated using raw umber pigment in water. No other colour or medium was used.

It was originally intended to surround the painting with a mortar frame specifically to protect the edges but as these were quite stable with some repair, the stonework was left exposed to show clearly the physical structure of the painting. Finally, to protect the painting from superficial accretions, one sparing application of Paraloid B72 (a class 1 consolidant) in Xylene in a 5% admixture was made.

General Comments

This painting although partially destroyed, must still be considered one of the great treasures of English medieval art. The richness of the colour and superb quality of the drawing can now be appreciated in almost the form that the artist intended. It must be stressed that no retouching was carried out during this conservation nor any found from other treatments or periods.

To preserve the exceptional condition of this painting, care must be taken to obviate any potentially deleterious effects. Although none of the colours identified in the analysis are particularly sensitive to ultra violet rays in their present form, this protection should not be neglected. Sunlight from the clerestory windows does fall directly on the painting in varying degrees; for example on the 20 May 1993 it was illuminated by each window for approximately 45 minutes starting at 14.50 hours. This effect should be monitored seasonally to establish the best form of U.V. filtration.

Finally the rarity of this subject in English wall painting (see enclosure : Professor E W Tristram) adds greatly to its historical value and the tradition of fine painting in the cathedral.

Appendices

1. Analysis of pigments- Jo Darrah
2. Professor E W Tristram, English Medieval Wall Painting: The Thirteenth Century, Oxford 1950, 286289.