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Medieval Carvings in Colour

Bob Trubshaw

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Thinking like a medieval patron

The well-to-do and clergy of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries who commissioned carvings and other church ‘furnishings’ and decorations had significantly different ideas and ideals than those who restored English churches in the nineteenth century.

The august and comparatively austere ideas which now typify the decoration of parish churches the length and breadth of England originated less than two hundred years ago, in the 1830s when the Cambridge Camden Society was founded. The main aim of the CSS was to remove Georgian boxpews and pulpits and allow a more

Top: *Roman Catholic exhuberance. Santa Maria in Aracoeli, Scala dell’Arcicapolina, Rome, Italy.*

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The eighteenth century box pews and 'tester' pulpit inside the church at Brooke, Rutland. Once described as 'one of the churches the Victorians forgot'.

medieval, although still Protestant, liturgy to be enacted within the churches.

Medieval patrons and clergy were, of course, Roman Catholics not Protestants. Ultimately the churches and furnishings were for the glory of God. But nevertheless statues and paintings of saints, archangels, apostles and crucifixions abounded. And of course they all reflected – nay, enhanced – the status of the patrons. So nothing dull and colourless. At the very least they were sumptuous. And, to modern sensibilities, they might be deemed to be verging on 'bling'.

The notion that you would commission someone to carve a tympanum, font,



St Mary's, Wymeswold, Leicestershire. An early example of the Gothic Revival designed by A.W.N. Pugin in the 1830s.

The Gothic Revival was all about bare stone only in CofE. A.W.N. Pugin – who simultaneously also designed most of the interior fittings for the Houses of Parliament – designed this interior for the new-in-1846 Catholic church of St Giles at Cheadle, Staffordshire. Minton tiles cover all available surfaces.

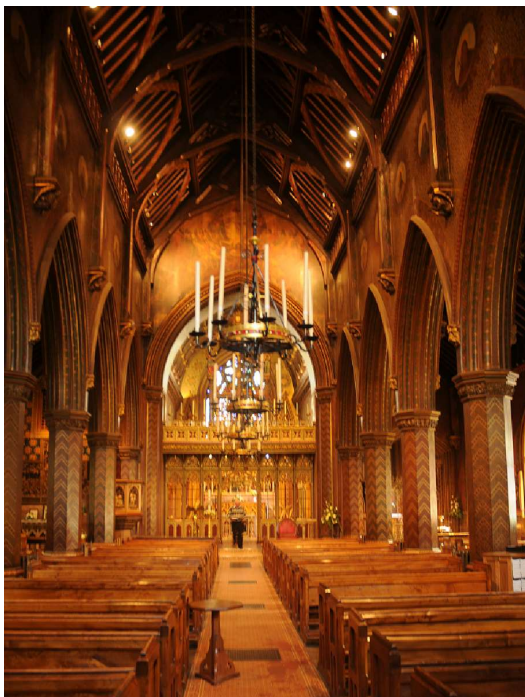


image of a saint, or whatever and then leave it as bare stone was as alien to medieval sensibilities as a UFO being depicted among the motifs. The naked stone which now prevails in cathedrals and parish churches is a result of the Camden Society's ideology and owes nothing to earlier decorative schemes with whitewashed walls and extensive use of paint. To what extent paint had survived on Romanesque and Gothic carvings until the 1830s is unknown. But by the 1870s almost all of it had fallen victim to stiff wire brushes as the Gothic Revival 'restored' almost all churches to a 'mock medieval' configuration.

Exactly how well Neo-Gothic churches recreate the interiors of medieval churches requires lengthy discussion. But by far the least authentic aspect was the removal of whitewash and plaster from interior walls, leaving the rubble stonework visible. Just as the walls were bared, so too any figural carvings were stripped of painted decoration. A few escaped. The roof beams and bosses at Ashby

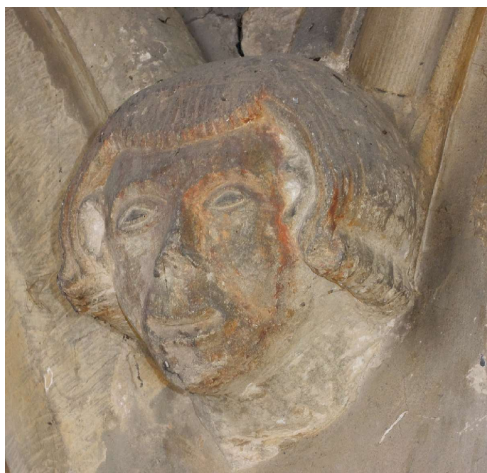
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Above: Mid-fifteenth century roof bosses at Ashby Folville, Leicestershire.

Right: Springer in the chancel at Goadby Marwood, Leicestershire, with traces of two shades of brown pigment.

Folville church, Leicestershire, retain paint that may date back to the construction of roof in the mid-fifteenth century. Whatever the actual date, the paint is certainly pre-Victorian.



Traces of what seem to be iron oxide-based pigments survive on a springer in the chancel at Goadby Marwood, Leicestershire. The corbels inside the nave of the now-redundant All Saints church in Leicester also have more extensive paint (although the only photographs I have of them were taken several decades ago in black-and-white!).

Which pigments were not available?

Medieval artists had more colours available than might be expected. However nearly all the pigments commonly used today have only been available since pigment technology took off as the

Sunflowers (1888). Van Gogh's palette included all the latest innovations: yellow ochre, chrome yellow, cadmium yellow, chrome orange, vermilion, Prussian blue, ultramarine, lead white, zinc white, emerald green, red lake, red ochre, raw sienna, and black.



industrialisation of textile manufacture created the demand for large quantities of cheap synthetic colours.

The first of these 'new-fangled' pigments were the so-called 'Mars reds' (synthetic iron oxide pigments) in the later eighteenth century. Chrome orange appeared in the 1790s and chrome yellow followed in the next decade. Cobalt blue was introduced in 1807. Emerald green (copper-acetoarsenite) was used from 1808 but was deemed too toxic and production ceased in the early twentieth century as viridian (first manufactured in 1838) took over. Cadmium yellow was introduced in 1820, cerulean blue in 1860, and then synthetic ultramarine, zinc white, and cobalt violet later in the nineteenth century.

The successive innovations of the Impressionist painters reflect this timeline as these pigments, although created for the textile trade, subsequently became available for artists. Curiously the main innovation was not the pigments themselves but the now-ubiquitous collapsible paint tube. Invented in 1841 by an American painter, John Rand, this allowed a range of pre-mixed colours to be taken out of the

studio, giving birth to *plein-air* oil painting. Then, at the end of the nineteenth century paint companies developed a method to maintain pigments particles suspended in linseed oil. This ended need for painters to grind their own pigments.

Between 1863 and the 1880s the range of 'azo' dyes was developed. While important for textiles these have been of lesser importance for artists. Optical brighteners gained momentum as the twentieth century progressed, while 'DayGlo' pigments were invented in the 1930s, although only becoming commonly-used by artists from the 1950s.

Which pigments were available?

So, after taking away all these modern innovations, what's left? Gypsum- and lime-based white and soot-based black, of course. All the 'earth colours' based on iron and manganese oxides and hydroxides. Malachite (copper carbonate) was the best source for green although a natural compound called 'green earth' was also widely used, even though it had poor opacity. Verdigris provided a more vibrant green but is prone to turning dark brown; it is also toxic. Orpiment, also toxic, provided a vivid 'golden' yellow. Cinnabar (mercury sulfide) had been used as an orange-red pigment since prehistory but its high toxicity was also known, so seems not to have been widely used as a pigment in the medieval era.

Azurite, a copper compound usually produced from malachite, has been used as a blue pigment since the ancient Egyptians. However in the Middle Ages ultramarine was more typically used. The exceptionally high price of the pigment, lapis lazuli, sourced from north-eastern Afghanistan, meant it was appropriate for the clothes of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Illustrations in medieval manuscripts provide clear insights into the range of pigments available at the time. These web sites (one about manuscript illustrations, not painted sculpture) provide considerable further information about medieval pigments:

www.webexhibits.org/pigments/intro/medieval.html

web.ceu.hu/medstud/manual/MMM/pigments.html

A great many medieval illuminated manuscripts have been digitised and made available online. Good examples include:

www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f1r

www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/TourBestiaryEnglish.asp

www.univ.ox.ac.uk/news/ms-120-bestiary/



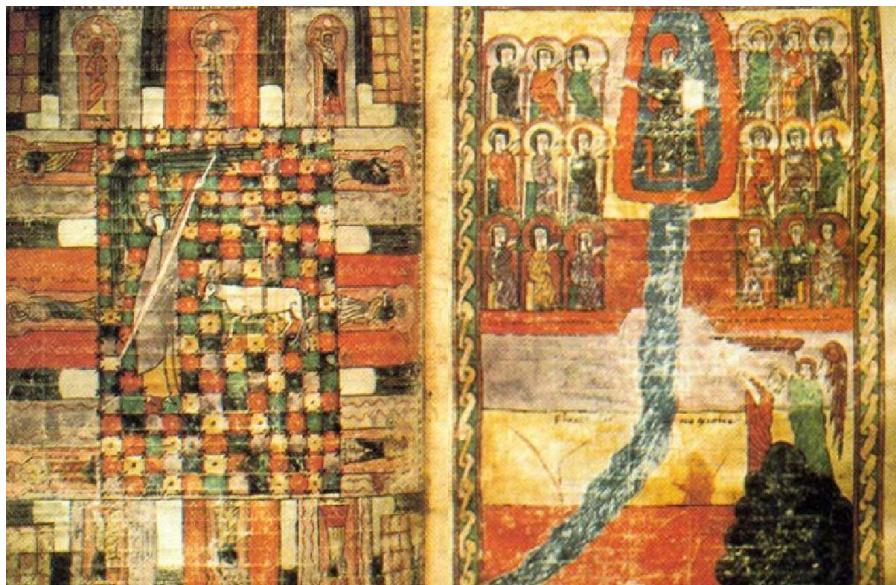
What sort of 'colour schemes' were used?

Medieval paintings and painted sculpture in churches only survive in exceptional circumstances – although, as I will show, there are more examples than might be reasonably expected. More likely to survive are illuminated medieval manuscripts. Crucially these have usually been stored with the pages folded together so pigments are least likely to fade.

Many of these manuscripts go back before the Norman Conquest in 1066 so the colour schemes may no longer have been in fashion by the time the Romanesque 'took off'. However the so-called 'Beatus manuscripts' from twelfth-century Spain are late enough to offer more reliable indications.

Around the same time three generations of Benedictine monks at Reichenau (an island in Lake Constance in southern Germany) were

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Above: Tenth century depiction of Fleuve de Vie, ("River of Life") from the Urgell Beatus.

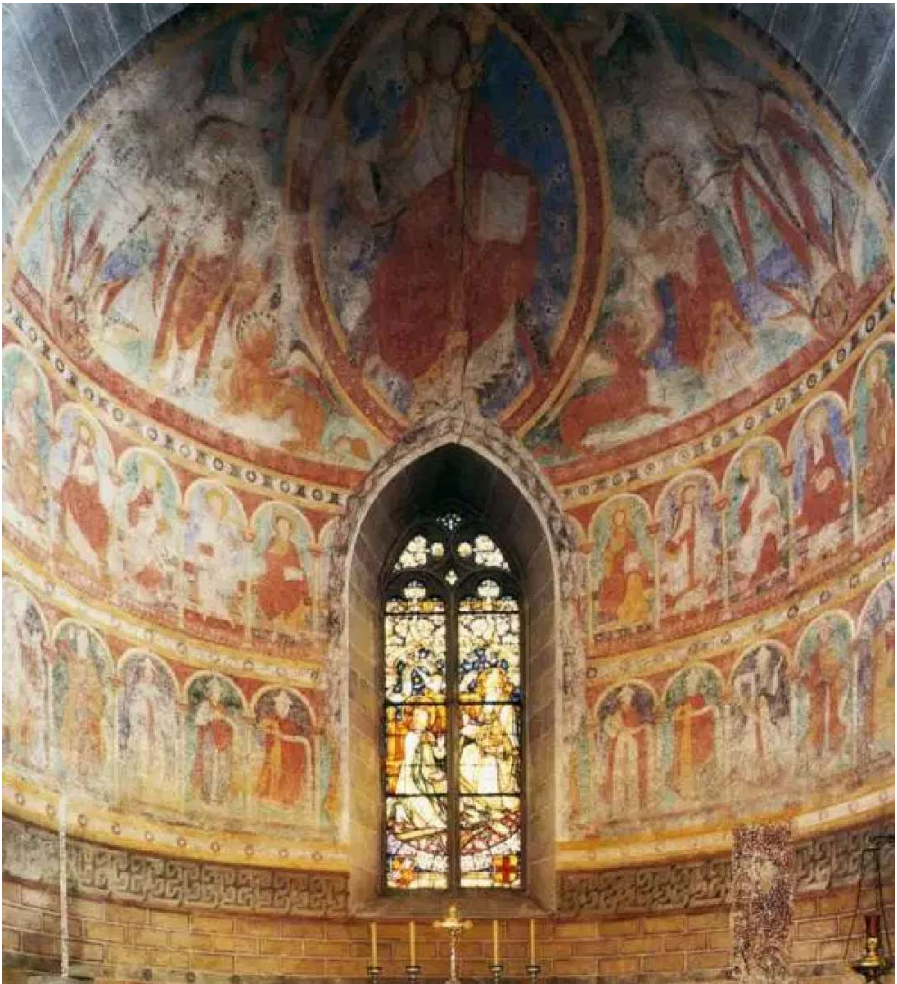
Right and below: Leaves from Beatus manuscripts.



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renowned as skilled mural painters. Their work has survived in five churches, including:

- ❖ the chapel of St Sylvester (Sylvesterkapelle), Goldbach
- ❖ the basilicas of St Georg, Oberzell
- ❖ the basilica of SS Peter and Paul, Niederzell



Fresco at St Peter and Paul, Niederzell painted circa 1120.

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Examples of the Reichenau paintings are online at:

arsartisticadventureofmankind.wordpress.com/tag/reichenau-mural-paintings/

My thanks to Nigel Pennick for information about the Reichenau paintings.

In Catalonia a surprising number of twelfth-century wall paintings have survived.





Pages 10 to 13. Examples of twelfth century Catalan paintings. Mostly from [funkystockphotos.com/pictures-photos-images-info/photos-of-romaneseque-catalan-frescoes-from-mnac-barcelona/](https://www.funkystockphotos.com/pictures-photos-images-info/photos-of-romaneseque-catalan-frescoes-from-mnac-barcelona/)

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Twelfth century capital with original colours at Brioude, Auvergne, France.

Anthony Weir has kindly drawn my attention to Romanesque sculptures in France which have been restored, seemingly according to original colour schemes. In an email Anthony commented that:

Romanesque painting of sculptures was pretty lurid (some examples survive in France fadedly) and I think that anything goes, artistically speaking. Why not use spray-glitter? Had it been available in the twelfth century, it would have been used.

The overall impression of the Beatus MSS, and the Reichenau, Catalan and northern French examples is that in the twelfth century colours schemes were as bright as could be achieved.

Sadly nothing comparable to the Continental examples has survived in Britain. What we are missing can be seen from a 'reconstruction' of the west front of Wells cathedral, perhaps based on reliable research,

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*Romanesque
carvings at
Loches,
central
France.*





prepared for a BBC 4 TV programme called 'Romancing the Stone – The Golden Ages of British Sculpture' which was broadcast on 9 February 2011.

Can the colour be restored to medieval carvings?

Seemingly in France it's acceptable to restore the colours in Romanesque churches.

See:

atlas-roman.blogspot.com/2015/04/agen-cathedrale-saint-caprais.html

decouverte.inventaire.poitou-charentes.fr/images-romanes-de-poitiers/images/large/1.jpg

inventaire.poitou-charentes.fr/documents/images/inventaires_thematique/patrimoine_roman/decouverte-sculpture/1/01_ivr54_20098600890nuca.jpg

N.B. Google offers a translate option if your French is as badly corroded as mine ;-)

Doing anything similar in an English church would require a faculty from the diocese.

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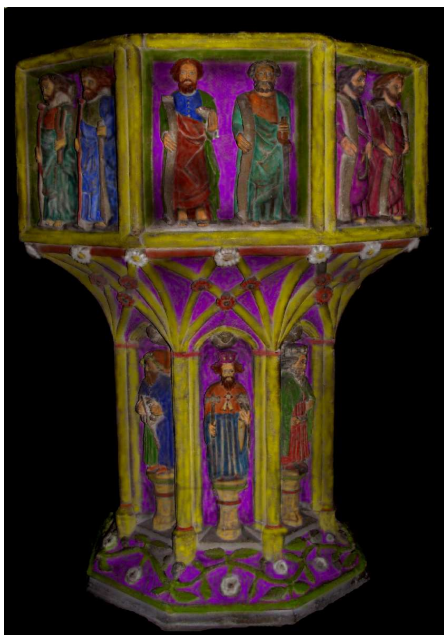


Modern restorations at (left) Agen Cathedral (above) Chauvigny.

However there is nothing to stop anyone taking photographs of sculptures and using digital picture editing tools to 'colour in'. A very experienced illustrator, Norman Fahy, has done just this with some of



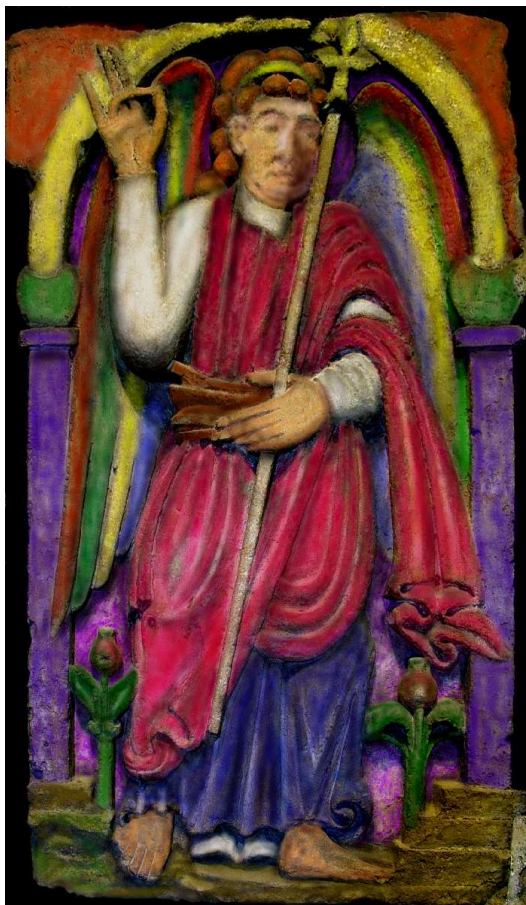
Norman Fahy's reconstructions of Norfolk fonts.



the superb Romanesque fonts in north-west Norfolk, and also the so-called 'Breedon angel' (actually Archangel Gabriel), an Anglo-Saxon sculpture at Breedon on the Hill, Leicestershire.

Have a go

Indeed, why not draw and paint the sculptures instead of using a computer? I just happen to have some simple line drawings of some Leicestershire carvings, prepared for a booklet published in 1990 – see the final two pages. Print these out on A4 paper and have a go – preferably with watercolours rather than acrylics.



Norman Fahy's reconstruction of the Breedon 'angel'.



Medieval manuscripts depicting battlefields with stylised decorative patterns where landscapes might be expected. Thanks to Nigel Pennick for drawing my attention to these examples.

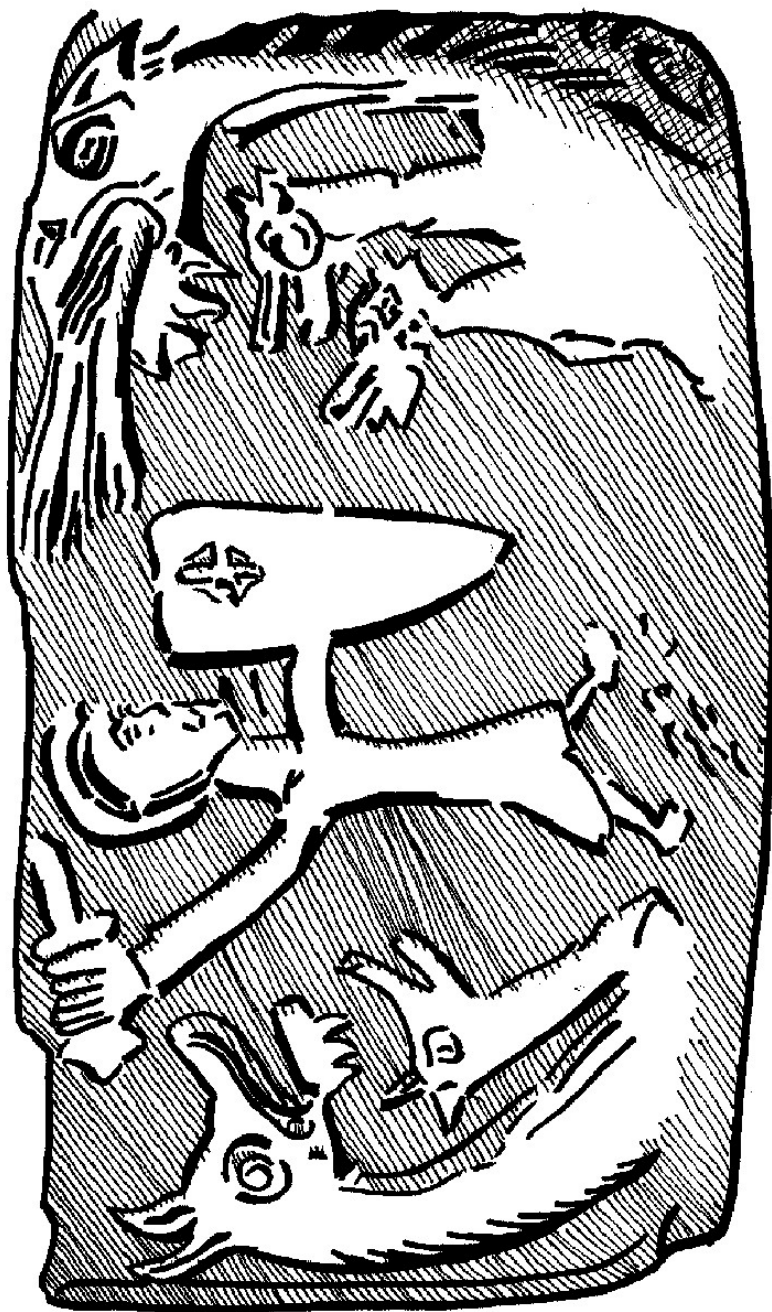
Backgrounds

As can be seen from the Catalan paintings, the backgrounds might be solid colours. However the cost of red and blue pigments would be significant so earth colours, white and off-white shades pigmented with earth colours would have been more common.

However there seems to be no evidence of anything resembling perspective landscapes! These originate in later styles of painting. Where we might expect a landscape – as with depictions of battlefields instead quite stylised decorative patterns appear. Traces of geometric ‘diaper’ decorative painting are also known from some English churches and cathedrals.

Acknowledgements

This essay was inspired by requests from two friends, Patricia Lynott and Norman Fahy, for advice on the sort of colour schemes which might have been used around the twelfth century. Nigel Pennick and Anthony Weir provided considerable assistance and my remarks would not have been possible without them.



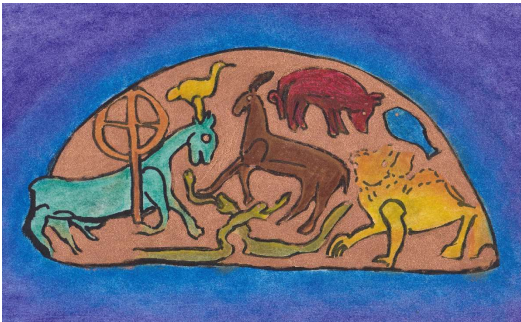


Previous page: An 'unwrapped' view of the twelfth century font at Thorpe Arnold, Leicestershire.

Above: One of the fifteenth century corbels in the same church.

Tongue-in-cheek colourings

As part of a parody on regional art centres the following pastiche illustrations were prepared and attributed to 'Jim Pepper'. They are not intended to offer an accurate indication of original colours, although they may be helpful in providing suggestions of different 'quick and dirty' techniques which might be usefully imitated.



Three Romanesque tympana:

Top: Stoney Stanton, Leicestershire.

Centre: Parwich, Derbyshire.

Bottom: Hognaston, Derbyshire.

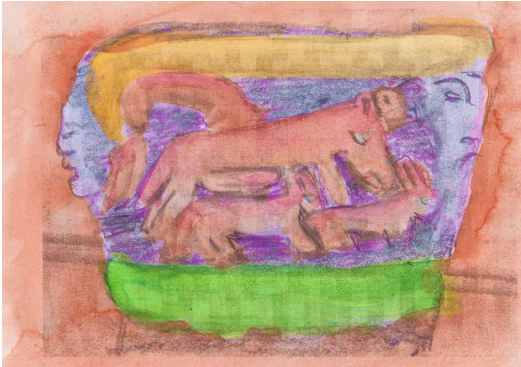


Three Romanesque fonts:

Top: *Thorpe Arnold, Leicestershire.*

Bottom left: *Burnham Deepdale, Norfolk.*

Bottom right: *Sherborne, Norfolk.*



Above: *The Romanesque font at Belton, Lincolnshire.*

Above left and centre left: *The early Romanesque font at Luppitt, Devon*

Below left: *A Romanesque corbel at Morcott, Rutland.*

