

## EARLY PAINTINGS ON THE WALLS OF CHURCHES.

● FROM the earliest period of the history of the Church, even during the brilliant yet dreary era of the catacombs, has it been the custom to adorn the walls and vaultings of ecclesiastical structures of every rank with paintings in fresco; at first rudely executed, and the subjects veiled in such mysterious and symbolical forms that their hidden meaning was not evident to the uninitiated; but, as time rolled on, and Christian art, in its several branches, rose above the rigid conventionality in which it was long fettered, magnificent buildings were erected, many of which were especially constructed with a view to the introduction of this effective and instructive decoration. Their walls and roofs glowed with sacred emblems and subjects, the windows with the resplendent hues of richly painted glass, and the Office-books with exquisitely elaborated illuminations.

There are abundant proofs that our English interiors were often embellished in a very superior manner in accordance with the prevailing taste; witness the examples in St. Stephen's Chapel, the painted chamber and the chapter-house at Westminster, the beautiful Madonna in the chapel of the Bishop's Palace, Chichester, the roof of the chapel of the Holy Angels Guardians and the north wall of the Lady Chapel, Winchester.

Although many of the specimens which have been brought to light in our village churches possess considerable merit, in general these remains are not in a style of execution which commends them to special notice, and they are often so coarsely drawn as to resemble the performances of itinerant draughtsmen.

It is true that the greater number have been covered for ages with repeated coats of whitewash, after defacements which were sufficient to deprive them of whatever superior touches they originally received at the hand of the artist.

In many ancient buildings successive layers of mural paintings, one upon another, have been found.

In the recent repair of one of the arches of the tower of Iffley Church, it was discovered that the whole of the stone-work had been coloured; and the fragment of a highly sculptured Norman column, consisting of a gold pattern on a red ground, was found in the wall of St. Peter's-in-the-East, Oxford, during the restoration of the chancel.

At Winchester, Ely, St. Alban's, Chichester, and Exeter, interesting specimens of early fresco may be observed, presenting respectively chequered and diapered fields and interlaced foliage, or flowing tendril patterns. As a more recent example of the latter form, on a white ground, the decoration of the groining of the choir of Boxgrove Priory is valuable, and similar in

general effect, but with beautiful medallions of saints in lieu of shields, to the fresco work in the venerable cloister of the Dominican convent at Genoa.

Among many recent discoveries, the fragments which have called forth these remarks are few and detached, but they present sufficient interest to be preserved for future reference.

In the chancel of the new interesting little church of Westwell, Oxfordshire, we have full evidence of the design with which the interior was originally covered. The lack of carved embellishment in the stone-work was to be supplied by the ingenuity of the limner, who bordered the arches of the windows with floriated ornaments in great variety, exercising much ingenuity both in design and execution, while the general surface was lined in imitation of masonry, with a small star in each square. He felt himself at liberty to treat the subject as best suited his taste and genius, to mimic the ornaments of architecture which had no substantial existence in the building, in a style and with a freedom of execution allowable in the painter, but very much beyond the latitude permitted to the sculptor.

In this view the subject might admit of illustration abundant in interest, as explanatory of the auxiliary embellishments of architecture; the object and effect of such work can scarcely be appreciated, however intently the attention may be bestowed upon a detached portion, which may attract notice by the representation of some well-known event connected with ancient history or a popular legend.

It often happens that in the earlier specimens of this branch of art, the painter expressed the forms and ornaments of a bygone style, and used no effort to represent in his own familiar way the characteristic features which other hands had just before relieved with the chisel.

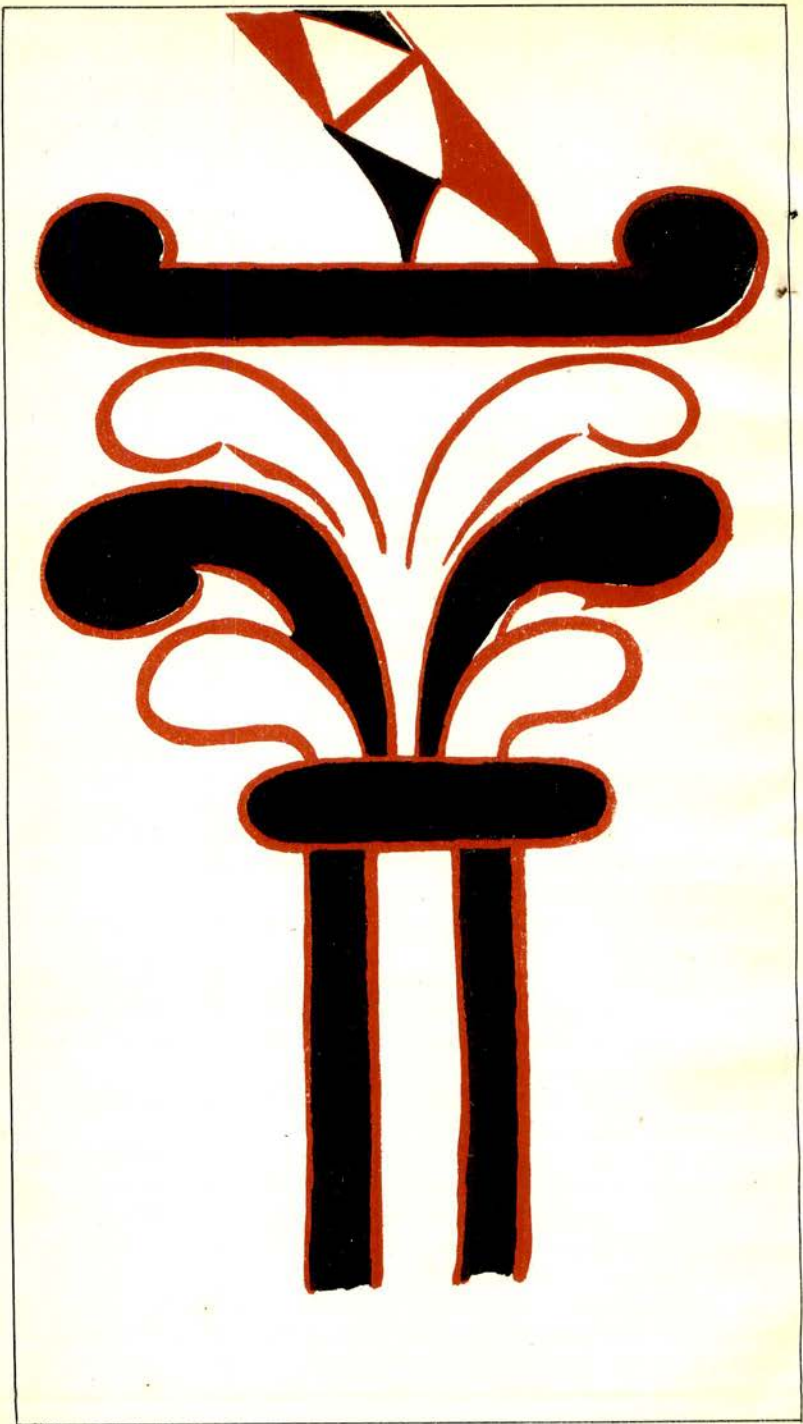
The engravings from the churches at Westwell and St. Twinnel exhibit productions of the early part of the thirteenth century. The former represents a pilaster and capital, with the ornaments which curved over the arch of the window and completed its marginal decoration; the latter exhibits the profile of a capital, with the arch-joints of the masonry and remnants of other devices of a fanciful kind. This church is likely to have resembled in its embellishments the Norman apse of East Ham Church, Essex, painted in the thirteenth century, in which the whole surface of the masonry, including the window-splays, was lined in imitation of the squared blocks, each marked with a kind of cinquefoil; the arch and piers have a green border, and were covered with an entwined pattern of elegant design.

It seems probable that in poor village churches, where the people could not afford to employ carvers in stone, painting was often employed to imitate stone carving; and as the carving was usually coloured, the general effect would be very similar.

C. A. B.



ST. TWINNEL'S CHURCH, PEMBROKESHIRE.



WESTWELL CHURCH, OXON.