

REVIEW

doi:[10.1017/S0003581524000064](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003581524000064)

Temlau Peintiedig: murluniau a chroglenni yn eglwysi Cymru, 1200–1800. Painted Temples: wallpaintings and rood-screens in Welsh churches, 1200–1800. By RICHARD SUGGETT with ANTHONY J. PARKINSON and JANE RUTHERFOORD. 345mm. Pp xii + 366, 275 ills (mostly col). Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2021. ISBN 9781871184587. £29.95 (hbk).

This impressively synthetic survey of medieval painted churches is rooted within the context of a widespread and remarkable movement of church rebuilding that proliferated throughout Wales in the late fifteenth century. Suggett dextrously explores this fleeting moment of zealous architectural renewal, which, attended by a simultaneous resurgence in domestic construction drawing upon the same skilled craftsmanship in timber, has tended to be overlooked in more orthodox art historical analyses of the period. Evidence attests that, astonishingly, all but one of the country's surviving medieval churches were reroofed in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The resulting paradox was that modest, and often remote, single-celled structures were adorned with incongruously elaborate timber roofs and rood screens, the painted embellishment of which was frequently accompanied by a renewed programme of more extensive mural decoration. In a scholarly landscape where, as Suggett observes, 'interpretation has not kept pace with recording', this volume provides a much-needed exploration of the parish church interior as a product of, and theatre for, evolving devotional practices. The resulting review is ambitious in its timespan and, while focused on schemes of decorative polychromy, adopts a far more holistic approach than is typical for such material-specific studies (and is all the more successful for it). The decorative programmes that form the focus of this volume were, often, lay commissions reflecting the spiritual preoccupations of parishioners, and as such it

illuminates an area of research that has only recently begun to receive the attention it merits.

The opening chapters of Suggett's survey chronicle the proliferation of polychromed rood screens and lofts – ornately carved from malleable green oak – erected by Welsh congregations in the decades around the turn of the sixteenth century. They stand as physical testimony to a popular pre-Reformation devotional focus on the Cross, which simultaneously found voice in contemporary vernacular verse. It is both remarkable and interesting that so many more rood lofts survive in Welsh churches than in the naves of their often more affluent English counterparts, where now only scrubbed and mutilated screens remain, and that some of the most flamboyant examples – such as the magnificent screen in St Ishaw's Church in Partrishow, carved with intricate bands of interlaced decoration – were commissioned by less wealthy congregations, unfettered by the conservative conventions that constrained patrons of higher status. Most commonly, though, it is the painted backdrop to a lost rood that survives, whether executed on boards (as in St Ellyw's Church, Llanellieu, where the rose-diapered timbers are tantalizingly punctured by elevation squints) or directly onto the plaster of the chancel arch (as is the case with the strikingly illusionistic geometric hanging painted on the nave's east wall in St Illtud's Church, Llantwit Major).

The close association of the rood loft with other painted decoration in the parish church is further explored in a subsequent chapter, in which Suggett addresses the perennial question of how wall paintings were perceived and used by their medieval audiences. While late medieval mural painting appears to have featured less extensively in chancels, among the most exceptional survivals showcased in the book are those decorative schemes painted on timber canopies of honour ('*mwd*') which were widely installed in the north of Wales around this time to demarcate the sacred space around the altar. Two such schemes – at St Benedict's Church in Gyffin and St Elian's Church in

Llanelian-yn-Rhos – are particularly fine figurative examples of a phenomenon that would seem to be altogether absent from English medieval churches. Figurative paintings on plaster were, by contrast, mainly confined to the nave, their iconographic programmes – chosen and paid for by the congregation – adhering broadly to the same repertoire of subjects documented in English mural schemes of this date. Together they comprise what Pauk Binski (1999) termed ‘a spiritual encyclopaedia’, among which abound scenes from the Life and Passion of Christ and didactic scenes, such as the Sunday Christ and Seven Deadly Sins. Representations of the Virgin and other intercessory saints are depicted alongside the ubiquitous St Christophers and Last Judgements. These discretely placed and often disconnected depictions, sometimes bounded by painted frames or accompanied by explanatory inscriptions, were used as devotional *foci* – as Parkinson observes in his exploration of the painting scheme at Llandeilo, ‘rather like woodcuts pasted onto a wall’. Indeed, what this exploration of later medieval Welsh church interiors illustrates particularly well is the integrity of the iconographic scheme as a unified whole, extending across all available surfaces and expressed through a variety of decorative media.

The final three chapters of the volume chart a ‘chronology of loss’ as church building in Wales was halted and their associated adornment proscribed, first by the Reformation and subsequently as a result of the Civil War. Suggett estimates that, in the ensuing years of destruction and neglect, over a third of Wales’s recorded chapels were lost, with many ultimately converted to dwellings. But alongside this cheerless reality, the author offers a refreshingly invigorated perspective on post-Reformation church decoration. At a time when worship in the vernacular was mandated by law and mural embellishment became predominantly scriptural, inscriptions in Welsh became tightly bound up with a sense of local identity. The distinctive ‘blackscript’ texts that survive from this period, accompanied by a proliferation of successively overpainted Royal Arms, offer a window onto the earthly realm and, as Rowan Williams notes in his foreword, afford ‘a forceful visual expression of the new relationship between church and state’. Chapter 6 of the book cites evidence of a dynamic movement in the early seventeenth century, under Archbishop Laud, to repair the country’s dilapidated

churches – the exuberant technicolour interior of Rûg Chapel testament to a renewed tolerance for painted decoration (as long as it remained secular in character). While a further period of church repair followed the Restoration, Suggett reflects upon the changing aesthetic of the parish church, as monuments began to encroach on the painted walls and obliterate post-Reformation texts, their interiors increasingly ‘bleached of colour’. Indeed, it is noteworthy that, despite evidence of a renewed awareness of historic schemes of ecclesiastical decoration (an interest invigorated by the work of such assiduous copyists as the Reverend John Parker), there remained little enthusiasm to *restore* that colour.

Only towards the end of the nineteenth century (which falls beyond the scope of this volume), with the meticulous recording undertaken over successive decades by C E Keyser and E W Tristram, did more widespread appreciation for medieval mural decoration begin to take hold (Keyser 1883; Tristram 1944; 1950; 1955). It was a movement from which modern-day conservation practices – grounded in careful condition recording and rigorous diagnostic assessment – evolved. Thus, while the engaging chronological overview crafted by Suggett feels ever so slightly interrupted by the insertion midway of two in-depth case studies of recent mural conservation programmes, their inclusion in his narrative is certainly fitting. Jane Rutherford reports in detail on the discovery and subsequent conservation (by herself and Ann Ballantyne) of an extensive and striking scheme of early fifteenth-century decoration in the south aisle at St Cadoc’s Church in Llancarfan, exceptional in both its subject matter and coherence. Unusually, this impressive ensemble, comprising an elaborate portrayal of the *Legend of St George* alongside an animated rendition of the *Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Works of Mercy*, seems to have been rendered in imitation of embroidered hangings, complete with wavy bias edge. A further contribution from Tony Parkinson details the recovery of not only the wall paintings but the entire parish church of St Teilo from Llandeilo Talybont, famously reconstructed (and its painted interior vividly recreated) at St Fagan’s National Museum of History. The latter study is particularly valuable in so far as St Teilo’s was, as Parkinson notes, a relatively unimportant, late medieval church. Ironically, in falling derelict before it was subjected to any well-meaning restoration attempts, its obscured painted interior was

better preserved as a coherent whole. The decorative programme, which is believed to have been executed around 1500 following the insertion of a new roof, was recorded with meticulous detail by the RCAHMW, affording an extraordinarily precious glimpse of the everyday when, too often, we find ourselves preoccupied with the exceptional.

Alongside other recent explorations of the parish church – including general overviews by Jenkins (2012) and Goodall (2015), and more specialised studies by Bernstein (2021), Bucklow *et al* (2017) – and other scholarly investigations of wall paintings and roods – among which Rosewell's (2008) work on the former and a recent project on roods by the Hamilton Kerr Institute – this new volume helps to relocate buildings that too often lie at the periphery of our art historical consciousness back at the centre of our vision. Welsh churches seem to have been conspicuously poorly represented in art historical surveys undertaken at a national level (it is a matter of no small irony, given that Tristram was born and bred in Carmarthen, that his three seminal volumes on medieval wall painting feature only a handful of sites beyond the Marches). Happily, several hundred schemes of Welsh mural decoration, in both ecclesiastical and secular settings, receive treatment in the soon-to-be-launched National Wall Paintings Survey database. The timely and significant contribution made by Suggett's study cannot be overstated at what we must hope is a turning point for research in this field. The immense detail and wide-ranging scope of *Painted Temples* is impressive, its bilingual text engaging and abundance of lavish illustrations a delight, all of which more than compensate for the mild inconvenience of its unwieldy size. The catalogue appended to the volume, which is based upon a gazetteer of wall paintings compiled by Tony Parkinson, provides the reader with a wealth of valuable information, further enriched by cross-references to both

published literature and site records accessible via the National Monuments Record of Wales's excellent Coflein database.

- Bernstein, M (ed) 2021. *Towards a History of the Parish Church: 1200–1399*, Courtauld eBook, <https://courtauld.ac.uk/research/research-resources/publications/courtauld-books-online/parish-church/> (accessed 20 Feb 2024)
- Binski, P 1999. 'The English parish church and its art in the later Middle Ages', *Stud Iconogr*, **20**, 1–25
- Bucklow, S, Marks, R and Wrapson, L (eds) 2017. *The Art and Science of the Church Screen in Medieval Europe: making, meaning, preserving*, Boydell & Brewer, Woodbridge
- Goodall, J A A 2015. *Parish Church Treasures: the nation's greatest art collection*, Bloomsbury Continuum, London
- Jenkins, S 2012. *England's Thousand Best Churches*, Allen Lane, London
- Keyser, C E 1883. *A List of Buildings in Great Britain and Ireland Having Mural and Other Painted Decoration*, 3rd edn, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London
- Rosewell, R 2008. *Medieval Wall Painting in English and Welsh Churches*, Boydell & Brewer, Woodbridge
- Tristram, E W, with Constable, W G 1944. *English Medieval Wall Painting: the twelfth century*, Pilgrim Trust, Oxford
- Tristram, E W, with Bardswell, M. 1950. *English Medieval Wall Painting: the thirteenth century*, Pilgrim Trust, Oxford
- Tristram, E W, with Bardswell, M and Tristram, E M (eds) 1955. *English Medieval Wall Painting of the Fourteenth Century*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London

EMILY HOWE