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## THE ICONOGRAPHY OF ANGELS.<sup>1</sup>

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The few brief notes on this most interesting subject were originally written for the *Journal* in 1847, soon after my election as a member of the Institute, but kept amongst our papers, until lately when Mr. Hartshorne sent them to me for revision. But as lapse of time does not in any way invalidate facts connected with archæological research, they may possibly be of interest to those who care about the adornment of our churches, although they have not the advantage of freshness. Since they were written, Mrs. Jameson's excellent book on Sacred and Legendary Art has appeared, and, guided by the indications contained in it, I have taken opportunities of inspecting the chief examples of this branch of iconographic art on the Continent, and consequently have been able to add a few observations about them to the original remarks which have reference almost entirely to English examples.

There is no occasion to give a disquisition on the existence, or the nature of the "heavenly messengers" which the word *αγγελλοι* means literally translated. As to their existence all believers in the truth of Holy Writ acknowledge that there are superhuman beings acting as agents between God and man—that there are ranks and orders among them—such as Cherubim, Seraphim, Archangels and Angels, and that some of the higher members of the heavenly hierarchy bear names such as *Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael*. As to their nature, it

<sup>1</sup> Read at the monthly meeting of the Institute, June 3rd, 1886.

is to a great extent a mystery. All that we can learn about them is admirably summed up by Mrs. Jameson, who gives texts to prove the exactitude of her statements, which texts I need not take up time by quoting. She says truly that it is necessary to give a brief summary of the Scriptural and theological authorities relative to the nature and functions of angels before we can judge of the manner in which these ideas have been attended to, and carried out in artistic similitudes. Thus the angels are represented in the Old Testament :—

1. As beings of a higher nature than men and gifted with superior intelligence and righteousness.
2. As a host of attendants surrounding the throne of God, and as a kind of celestial court or counsel.
3. As messengers of His will conveyed from heaven to earth, or as sent to guide, to correct, to instruct, to reprove, to console.
4. As protecting the pious.
5. As punishing by the command of the Most High the wicked and disobedient.
6. As having the form of men ; as eating and drinking.
7. As wielding a sword.
8. As having the power to slay.

“In the New Testament” she says “they are far more familiar with us as agents, more frequently alluded to, and more distinctly brought before us than in the Old Testament.” All that concerns us at present, however, is the mode in which they were symbolized in art in the early and middle ages. The artists of those times depicted them as youthful and beautiful, *i.e.* according to their ideas of beauty and without indication of sex, and with wings emblematical of power and swiftness of locomotion. The Cherubim of the Ark and those of Solomon’s Temple are described as having wings. Hence the iconographers had sufficient authorities for appending wings to human forms.

There is also sufficient authority for dividing them into different classes. Dionysius, the Areopagite, who is supposed to have been the friend of St. Paul, divides them into three hierarchies :

|             |               |               |
|-------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1 Seraphim. | 2 Domination. | 3 Princedoms. |
| Cherubim.   | Virtues.      | Archangels.   |
| Thrones.    | Powers.       | Angels.       |

Later writers differ in the order of their classification. For iconographic purposes (as it is not of theological importance) I think the clearest classification is that of Sylvanus Morgan and Randle Holme, which is preferable to that contained in Heywood's Hierarchy of Angels. It is the following :—

- “ 1. Order of *Seraphim*, whose chief is Uriel, with the ensigns of a flaming heart and sword.
- “ 2. *Cherubim*. Chief, Jophiel. They are shown as young to exhibit their perpetual strength, having wings to signify their swiftness of motion and unweariness, with garments white to show their purity, or gold to show their sanctity, and girt to show their readiness. (Holme.) The cherubim are chiefly found represented in the most holy places—around the altar on the frontals, embroidered on copes and other similar vestments. Pugin says they should be of a bright red colour, and should be used for the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, as they signify the immediate presence of God under the old law.
- “ 3. *Archangels*. Chief, Michael. Ensign a banner or a cross, or with a cross in one hand and a dart in the other. (Holme.) Sometimes St. Michael carries a buckler on his left arm. Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries St. Michael was frequently painted in a full suit of armour. In an early picture by Raffaele he is armed *cap-a-pie*. In that remarkable specimen of the approaching change of taste, shewn in the admixture of Italian with Gothic details—the tomb of Henry VII.—he has a Roman breastplate and sandals.
- “ 4. *Angels*. Chief, Gabriel. Ensign, a book or staff. They are clad in white robes with jewelled borders, either of sapphire to signify celestial contemplation; of ruby, divine love; crystal, purity; or emerald, unfailing youth.

- “5. *Thrones*. Chief, Zaphkiel. Kneeling with a palm and crown.
- “6. *Principalities*. Chief, Hamiel. Ensign, a sceptre, and a girdle across the breast, he being the guardian of kingdoms.
- “7. *Powers*. Chief, Raphael. Ensign, a thunderbolt, a flaming sword or heart.
- “8. *Dominions*. Chief, Zadkiel. Ensign, a sceptre, a sword and a cross. The sword in the right hand, the sceptre in the left.
- “9. *Virtue*. Chief, Hamiel. Ensign, a crown of thorns in one hand, and the cup of consolation or a bulrush in the other.”

This classification by the old herald may seem a little fanciful, but it is, notwithstanding, the best authority for the painter or sculptor, who wishes to represent the heavenly hierarchy, which frequently was a subject used for the decoration of churches.

At Wells, the nine orders of angels occupy as many niches on the West front. They are engraved in Carter's Ancient Sculpture. In the South Porch of Chartres Cathedral and in the Cathedral of Orvieto, may be found the whole hierarchy in painting and sculpture, but as a rule, seven orders of angels only are employed in early Christian decorations.<sup>1</sup>

Figures of angels were amongst the most frequent and appropriate sources of ecclesiastical decoration in the middle ages. They are found in a vast variety of situations, attitudes, and dresses;—as supporting the pillars of the nave and chancel; as exhibiting the emblems of the Passion, as joining in a hymn of triumph with the collected harmony of all instruments; as sustaining the pillows of recumbent Saints; as conveying souls to judgment; as trooping round the Divinity thurible in hand; as attendant upon earthly pilgrims, and lastly on all the more precious furniture of the Church. In all cases there is a certain conventionality about them which the archæologist recognises as the true source of their beauty. There is generally also a grace and contour in their wings,

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Jameson mentions the seven angels in the choir of St. Michael's at Ravenna, in the Last Judgment by

Orcagna, at Pisa, and in a picture by Taddeo Gaddi, at Florence.

a sweetness of devotional expression in their countenances, and a richness of effect in the intricate folds of their drapery, which please the eye of the artist whether he be an antiquary or not.

*Dress.*—Some of the earliest representations of angels are to be found in diptychs<sup>1</sup>; there they are clothed in long flowing robes without girdles. In Saxon MSS. they have long tunics with full sleeves and an upper garment wrapped round the waist and carried over the shoulder. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries an albe with or without apparels was the most common dress employed. Occasionally a jewelled amice was added. In an illustration of Mr. Way's legend of St. Werstan in the second volume of our Journal an example of this simple but beautiful style of dress is given. Stoles were used, if the angels were represented as officiating; and in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries embroidered copes stoles and dalmatics gave still greater richness to their figures.

The woodcuts in some of the black-letter volumes issued before the Reformation afford a great variety of angelic costume. For instance, in Schledels Chronicon printed at Nuremberg in 1493, there is a fine cut representing the creation of angels. The angels are grouped in a circle around the sacred Monogram in all sorts of attitudes, all are in albes except two, one of whom wears a cope and the other a dalmatic. Other interesting figures of similar character may be found scattered throughout the book. In a woodcut in the Nova Legenda there are archangels robed in dalmatics richly ornamented, and wearing stoles. The title page has some figures plumed all over. Similar plumed angels may be seen in the Beauchamp Chapel at Warwick, at Tattershall, Lincolnshire, and at Winwick, Lancashire. Pugin, however, pronounces them to be inconsistent with Catholic tradition.

*Situations and Attitudes.*—Angels bearing shields are, perhaps, the most common of all on monuments and as corbels. The bearings on the shields are generally sacred emblems, but frequently, in later times, the arms were those of the reigning sovereign or of donors to the church. Demi-angels holding shields may be seen in very many Perpendicular churches acting as corbels to the principals

<sup>1</sup> See Gorius, Thesaurus Diptychorum.

of the roof, as brackets for niches, or in screens or cornices. Henry VII.'s Chapel is adorned with rows of these, some in armour, others plumed, bearing between them the badges of the Tudor family. Astbury Church, Cheshire, has beautiful examples of these corbels under the roof of the south aisle. The shields have on them the crown of thorns, ladder and spear, and other emblems of the Passion. The Royal arms in the Hall of Croydon Palace are sustained by angels.

*Altar Tombs.*—Angels are often found ranged in niches round altar tombs of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

*Playing upon Musical Instruments.*—Angels playing upon musical instruments come next in point of frequency. The old designers seem to have delighted in representing the heavenly choir wherever they could be admitted with propriety. What a rich effect they give to the noble choir of Lincoln ranged in the spandrels of the triforium, and also to the exquisite *jube* of York, which is crowded with ranks of angels in niches singing from scrolls, every fifth playing on a harp or guitar, cittern or cymbals! Above them there is another row, sedent, with outstretched wings. These occupy the lowest member of an elaborate frieze, and have organs, bagpipes and violins in addition to the instruments above mentioned. The nave of Manchester Cathedral offers an admirable series of minstrel angels surmounting the demi-columns, from which spring the arched spandrels of a rich panelled ceiling. They all wear albes with amices or folding collars. Their hair is curled in those peculiar masses which characterize angels of the later styles. They are fourteen in number, and bear instruments like those in the Minstrels' gallery, which fills a bay of the nave of Exeter Cathedral—viz.: organ, trumpet, clarionet, single and double bagpipes, fife and drums, guitars, dulcimers, harps, etc.

In Dibdin's *Literary Reminiscences* vol. 2, there is a plate copied from a French MS. of angels surrounding the Blessed Virgin, some singing, others playing upon harps and guitars.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Pullan exhibited to the meeting a photograph of some lovely little angelic figures playing in concert around the Nativity. by one of the talented

Robbia family. Nothing can exceed the beauty of these figures, which are coloured after nature in the original terra cotta.

*Figures on Tombs.*—The cushions on which the heads of bishops, priests, and kings repose in sculptured effigies, are generally upheld by diminutive angels habited in long flowing robes; such are those on the tombs of Archbishops Walter de Grey, and Thomas Savage at York, of Edward II at Gloucester, and several at Salisbury.

*Censing Angels.*—Censing angels are often to be seen in the upper lights of stained glass windows and also painted on walls and roofs, signifying that they convey the prayers of the faithful from earth to heaven. On either side of an empty niche above the central doorway of the rood screen at York there is an angel with a thurible. Similar figures also occur on the roof of Gawsworth Church, Cheshire. A good example of a censing angel remains in a window of St. Martin Micklegate, York (see Weale's Quarterly Papers on Architecture). In the archivolt of the tomb of Dagobert, formerly at St. Denis there were according to Montfauçon full length figures of angels bearing thuribles.

*Carrying souls to Judgment.*—On various monuments we find a symbol of the soul being borne to judgment under the likeness of a naked figure carried upwards in a sheet held by an angel at each end. This is the case on the pediment of the Percy tomb at Beverley, on that of Alymer de Valence in Westminster Abbey, and on the side of Bishop Bridport's monument at Salisbury. Montfauçon gives a similar example from the life of St. Louis existing in his time in the glass of the sacristy of St. Denis. Dibdin gives one taken from a MS. in the Imperial Library at Vienna of the thirteenth century. Carter gives another from a brass engraved in his Ancient Sculpture.

*Angels Attendant on Our Lord.*—The aureole surrounding figures of Our Lord sculptured in the tympana of doorways is frequently supported by angels, as in that of Essendine Church, Rutlandshire, and in the west door of Rochester Cathedral. In the window of the north aisle of Gresford Church there is a figure of our Saviour in the midst of an aureole rayonné, with white angels on a ruby ground. Many earlier specimens of the arrangement may be found in the Thesaurus Diptychorum.

*Various other positions of Angels.*—Diminutive figures of angels were used as the terminations of label moulds, as at Beverly, Christ Church, and Magdalen Colleges,

Oxford. They formed the pendants to stalls as at Chester and Manchester; crowned pinnacles as at Hampton Church, Oxfordshire; served for poppyheads, as at All Soul's Chapel, Oxford, and in fact were used for all appropriate purposes of church decoration; but the finest specimens of these beautiful figures in England were perhaps those which formerly existed round St. Stephen's Chapel at Westminster. Their albes were adorned with jewelled apparels at the wrists and arms, their wings were painted in imitation of peacocks' feathers, they wore coronals with elaborate crosses, and held draperies covered with rich diapers.

There is no doubt but that pictorial art in the middle ages was more developed on the continent than in England, and in Italy more than in any other country. It is to Italy therefore we should look for the most perfect examples of the iconography of angels. Since writing the foregoing notes, I have had many opportunities of inspecting pictures of angels in all parts of that region of fine art.

Græco Italian art at Monreale presents us with gorgeous angels robed in enriched priestly and regal garments, stiff as regards their Byzantine character, but of grand proportions and striking effect.

These are excelled in stateliness by Cimabue's magnificent figures in the upper church of Assisi. which are the most noble of their kind.

The frescos of the Campo Santo at Pisa are full of angels, especially that of the Last Judgment by Orcagna. These too are grand looking creatures.

Giotto's angels are not ethereal, but somewhat heavy, like his human beings.

Fra Angelico, as his name would lead us to believe, was the most perfect in his representation of the heavenly beings, and many of my hearers will be familiar with the reproductions of the angels playing on musical instruments which surrounded the Madonna of the Uffizzi, at Florence. Clad in long embroidered robes of various colours, with faces refined and passionless, with curls of golden hair and wings of rainbow hues these lovely creations of the recluse's mind are perhaps the highest possible realizations of these superhuman creatures.

In the ceiling of the chapel of Orvieto, in the gallery Belle Arti, and in the Convent of St. Marco in Florence similar productions of his pencil may be seen but none equal to those of the Uffizzi. The Coronation of the Blessed Virgin is perhaps second, as regards the groups of angels to those already mentioned.

Almost equal to them and perhaps possessing more animation are the remarkable groups from the Capella Riccardi at Florence. These surrounded a picture of the Nativity which has been unfortunately removed. Botticelli's angels have more of earth about them, and have evidently been painted from models while those of Angelico must have been the creations of his own imagination. Borganogne's angels in the choir of the Church of San Cristoforo at Milan come next in order as regards beauty.

The finest and most powerful picture of a choir of angels is that of Gaudenzio Ferrari covering the dome of the church of Saronno near Milan. Here we have an infinite variety of attitude and of expression. Some are standing, some sitting, some kneeling, all engaged in the work of praise.

But for sweetness of devotional expression, and for life-like effect produced by the union of colour with relief, none have ever surpassed the angels of the Robbia family.<sup>1</sup>

In some of the figures the attitudes are a little exaggerated, but on the whole these charming representations of the heavenly host are unsurpassed.

Perugini Luini, and Raffaello in his early days, were the last to paint angels with any traces of the conventional forms of the middle ages about them. Those of Luini, in the Family of Tobit, and in the Burial of St. Catherine in the Brera are, for tenderness of expression, far superior to those of Raffaello's later conceptions.

After the time of Raffaello the study of the classical school of art led to a change in forms and draperies. Angels were depicted as strong young men, with arms and legs bare, sometimes puffing at trumpets with inflated cheeks, and sprawling amongst clouds, or as Rubens

<sup>1</sup> In confirmation of this opinion Mr. Pullan exhibited photographs from the Natività in the Museum of Florence, by

Andrea, and that from Casentino, by Luca della Robbia.

occasionally painted them, robust young women with ruddy complexions and fully developed forms. Cherubs as baby's heads with wings, but without bodies, or if they had bodies, they became the *puttini* imitated from Cupids, so common in the works of the later painters' forms. So on until our own times when the acme of absurdity is reached in a recent woodcut in which a dishevelled woman bearing on her shoulders with difficulty and distress an enormous globe is supposed to represent an angel. Nowhere is to be seen evidence of the purity, power and refinement which characterize the heavenly messengers in the early days of art.

*Note.*—Mr. Pullan exhibited a design for the decoration of the dome of St. Paul's in which an attempt to introduce the angelic host has been made. The subject chosen for illustration is the magnificent

hymn of St. Ambrose. Blue Cherubim, red Seraphim, with crowds of hymning angels are represented in the upper part of the dome, which is understood to symbolize the highest region of Heaven.