

TWO BUCKINGHAMSHIRE PAINTINGS OF THE DOOM

BY

E. CLIVE ROUSE

The Doom, or Day of Judgment, was one of the most popular subjects chosen by the mediæval artists for representation upon the walls of churches; and it would be safe to say that before the Reformation there were very few such buildings that had not a painting of the Doom, or of one of its derived scenes or subjects. The theme is one that appealed particularly to the mediæval mind. In times when life was cheap and mortality, owing to disease of various kinds, was very high, the idea of the transitory nature of this existence was very much to the fore. "No man knoweth when the end cometh," and "In the midst of life we are in death" were thoughts constantly in men's minds. And the Church's teaching of what the end would mean was kept prominently before the people by these paintings over the Chancel arch or in such other parts of the church as offered the best scope in space or prominence.

In Bucks alone there are existing remains or records of no fewer than nineteen or twenty examples of this subject or its derivatives. This is not the place for a minute examination of them, interesting as that would be. Suffice it to say that The Doom, owing to its large scale, and the scope it offered for decorative or individual treatment, provides one of the most valuable sources of our knowledge of the development of art from the 12th to the 16th century, as well as a remarkable insight into medieval thought and temperament.

It may be briefly stated that the main scenes in the conception of The Doom as a great Drama are as follows:—1. Christ in Majesty judging the quick and the dead. 2. The general Resurrection. 3. The Weighing of Souls. 4. The joys of the saved in

Heaven. 5. The torments of the damned in Hell. It will be seen that the whole subject was treated with extraordinary elaboration and required considerable space. It thus afforded a glorious opportunity for the craftsman to "let himself go." And as a result we have a series of paintings of extreme interest both artistically and in the evidence they afford us of the mind and temperament of the Middle Ages.

Individual scenes like the Weighing of Souls, the general Resurrection, the Majesty, etc., were often extracted and treated separately, serving, incidentally, to provide the same reminder of the eventual way of all flesh; but where the whole drama was shown in one composition the general arrangement of a Doom was as follows:—

In the centre, Christ in Majesty, showing the five wounds, is seated on a rainbow, an orb, representing the Earth, in his hand or at or under his feet. On his right is often shown the Virgin, pleading her motherhood, interceding for the souls. This as a rule is the one touch of softness in the whole composition. Frequently, in the more elaborate examples, the figure of Christ is flanked by the Twelve Apostles, or the Four Evangelists or their symbols, or both. Angels sound the last trump to waken the dead, who are shown rising from their graves in the lower portion of the picture. That all estates of mankind are to be judged equally is shown by the fact that the little naked souls are often shown wearing crowns, mitres and more humble head-gear; and it is to be inferred that the corruption of the Church and Court, particularly in the later 15th century, is often hinted at by the painter with something of a Socialist tendency for the abasement of the great and the exaltation of the humble. Elsewhere in the scene is shown the Weighing of Souls; this is often a beautiful composition. St. Michael holds the scales with a naked soul in the balance; and if the Virgin has not been placed at the right hand of Christ, she is introduced into this scene, often touching the scales in favour of a soul or placing her robe or rosary

in the pan as a make-weight, while a demon is shown usually doing his best to drag down the other side. (This is seen at Broughton, Bucks). The rest of the composition is divided into two parts, the left-hand side (spectators' right) being reserved for the carting off of the damned and the artist's obviously-enjoyed portrayal of their various torments by a wonderful assortment of Devils in Hell (sometimes shown, as at Wymington, Beds, as a great monster's mouth belching flames); while the right (spectator's left) is given up to the reception of the saved into Heaven and their joys in the new Jerusalem, depicted as a collection of buildings often extremely interesting in their architectural details. This much by way of summary to make the scheme of the composition more readily understood.

Paintings of The Doom reached their greatest elaboration and beauty in the 15th century. And it is two examples of this period in Buckinghamshire that I wish to consider since they are of particular interest and widely different in treatment, although probably painted within 20 or 30 years of each other. Although one has been known for some time it has never been recorded in detail, and recent treatment has made it much more intelligible; the other is a comparatively recent discovery. The Society saw it at Winslow on the Annual Excursion in 1934.

Denham is fortunate in possessing a fragment of a fine and unusual treatment of the theme which deserves detailed description. It is in rather an uncommon position, over the South door, and formed part of a very complete composition. Recent cleaning and preservation revealed a number of interesting features only decipherable at close quarters. The general setting out of the painting is shown in plate I. At the top centre is the lower portion of the figure of Christ in an elaborate robe of pale blue lined with a material of damask design represented by criss-cross red lines on a buff ground. He is seated on a rainbow, His feet resting on an orb. At His right (spectators' left)



1 The Doom, Denham, Bucks.—Archangel blowing the Last Trump.
The dead rising from their graves assisted by Angels. About 1460.



II. Denham.—Angel in the Doom.

stands the Virgin in a black and yellow robe falling in graceful folds, interceding; the upper part is unfortunately defaced. Below, to left and right, are adoring angels gazing towards the central figure, excellent in detail and in a wide range of colours, particularly a good green used in the wings of one; while the centre is occupied by the Archangel blowing a trumpet, characterised by an unusually brilliant yellow, vigorous in action, with puffed cheeks. (Plates II and III). The boundary of Heaven is neatly marked off by a straight line and amusing little clouds. Below, the very unusual scene of the sea giving up its dead is depicted—souls rising in various stages from the waters, some shading their eyes from the brightness of Christ's appearing; while on the banks angels with red wings assist other naked souls from their graves, or point the way to Heaven. In the bottom left corner of the picture is a very interesting feature. A woman in the costume and head-dress of c. 1460, is apparently kneeling before an angel. The scale and treatment of this figure is quite unlike the rest of the composition; and Professor Tristram agrees with the supposition that it probably has in this case a personal significance, either as a memorial or as a representation of a female donor of the painting, like those in the 14th century paintings at South Newington, Oxon, less common in wall painting than in glass. A fragment of two of the symbols of the Evangelists remains. The existing area of the painting is about 6 feet by 7 feet, and when complete the whole composition must have been a magnificent thing, probably extending many more feet, and including the joys of the saved in Heaven, and the torments of the damned in Hell. Parts of the painting were still covered by the black letter (16th cent.), and later texts with which it had been defaced; portions of these were left, as a matter of interest, where they did not interfere with the mediæval painting.

The second example that I wish to consider in detail is the remarkable subject at Winslow which, for all its

curious position upon the North wall, is undoubtedly another representation of The Doom. It is notable for four things: its medium, oil colour, its late date, about 1500, the very unusual treatment of the scene, and the fine workmanship. Unfortunately no proper record was made when the painting was uncovered and treated some time ago; and without scaffolding it is now difficult positively to decipher all the details. This is an example of the extreme importance of recording minutely every painting when it is under treatment: more important than the actual preservation, since the opportunity is so seldom available, and details become visible at close quarters, upon the first application of the fixative, that one can often never see again.

The general scheme is treated in a very formal and symmetrical manner with much architectural detail. A frieze of buildings and landscape seems to represent the Heavenly Jerusalem. Next, placed centrally, are two rayed aureoles containing figures of Christ and the Virgin, on each side of which, again, are niches (each with a group of figures), probably the Twelve Apostles. Canopied niches border the subject and contain figures with scrolls which, though fragmentary, are undoubtedly the Four Evangelists, while under a wide arch at the base is depicted the general resurrection, with an angel blowing a trumpet. The detail is of miniature excellence, and is no doubt based on an illumination from a manuscript; this is especially suggested by the symmetrical architectural treatment as if the original had been designed to fit a more limited space. The colour-range, drawing, and shading are of the highest order; and the use of gilding, some traces of which are visible, and the oil colour, give a quite unusual solidity and richness to the painting. It is unfortunate that it is so badly defaced by the plaster with which it was covered.

These two examples are probably sufficient to show what interest these paintings of the Doom have, when minutely examined; and are eloquent of the painted glories that our churches formerly possessed.



III. Denham.—Archangel,