

THE CONSERVATION OF ENGLISH WALL PAINTINGS¹

By E. Clive Rouse

THIS Report, published with the aid of a grant from the Pilgrim Trust, who also made generous grants to make possible the collection of much of the material appearing in its pages, is long overdue and therefore doubly welcome. One's first impression on looking through the report is one of astonishment and shame that England, with its fine heritage of medieval painting, is so far behind most European countries in its appreciation, and in the techniques of its recording and conservation. What we tend to regard as small, and in some ways primitive, countries like Spain, Yugoslavia and Denmark have been employing for years methods of treatment, removal, re-setting and recording that up to quite recently were unpractised and indeed hardly known in England. Another impression is that most of the practically helpful information only came from about two sources. Italy with its great wealth of mural decoration and its long tradition of conservation seems to have contributed little: Spain, where such excellent work has been done in Catalonia in the wholesale removal of wall paintings in danger, and their resetting in museums or elsewhere, is not mentioned. Nor does much seem to have come out of France which has a great wealth of mural painting perhaps more akin to our own techniques than anywhere else, and where the recording and reproduction of the best wall paintings has been more thoroughly accomplished than anywhere else. One is left wondering whether the techniques of these countries were not approved by the Wall Paintings Committee, or whether sufficient, or right contacts were really made. Of the members of the Committee at various times no fewer than five were pure scientists, three were architects, only one a practising artist, and the remainder had only general qualifications. Only one had ever had practical experience of handling a wall painting.

It is good to see on page 4 a tribute (if a somewhat qualified one) to the work of the late Professor Tristram. It is unhappily the fashion in some quarters now to vilify him and belittle the value of his work.

¹A review of the Report of a Committee set up by the Central Council for the Care of Churches. Published by the Central Council for the Care of Churches, 1959. Pp. 30, plus 18 figures. Paper covers.

It is undeniable that his main method of preservation of wall paintings by the use of wax is now proved disastrously wrong. But the service he performed in arousing interest in wall paintings and demonstrating their importance not only as art, but as social documents, cannot be over-emphasised. Above all, his work in recording by measured water-colour copies, hundreds of examples, stands alone. His records are often criticised by those not fully conversant with his methods of making them, or not realising his penetrating observation and background knowledge in interpretation. The necessity for record is briefly mentioned (on page 24) and in Appendix III. But in my view not enough is made of this. It is one of the scandals of this country that recording is so imperfect, and its desirability so little appreciated. Photographs are valuable, even essential. But a photograph can never do what a really accurate and disciplined measured water-colour copy can do, namely to sort out the actual painting from accidental or deliberate blemishes. Many copies by Professor Tristram are deposited at the Victoria and Albert Museum: it is tragic that the vast majority of his collection which remained in his hands and until lately in those of his widow, were ordered to be deposited at Buckfast Abbey in the wilds of Devonshire. What use the good monks will make of them, or how they will be made available to the public and the research worker (which is their main value) remains a mystery. My own copies are destined for the Victoria and Albert Museum, eventually to join the Tristram collection in the hope of starting the nucleus of a national corpus: but meanwhile, photographic copies of them are available in the Conway Library of the Courtauld Institute. We have not a single full-size facsimile of a wall painting in England, such as are found in Yugoslavia and France. And it is rather late in the day to start, since no museum space is available. But scale copies could be co-ordinated.

As regards technical methods, this is no place to discuss them in full. It had become apparent to me soon after the last War, that all was not well; and I believe I started the ball rolling by discussing the wax problem with Dr. Plenderleith. One does not need to be a scientist to realise that when a damp surface is covered with an impervious substance and the moisture then dried out inwards, something has got to give way—that is simple mechanics, and that is what is happening with almost every wall painting in England that has received a wax, or varnish fixative. Professor Baker has performed a wonderful service in conducting analyses of materials, and in experiments in plaster, fixatives and pigments, and has been most generous in making his results available. Many of these are illustrated in the various plates and

diagrams at the end of the Report. In the briefest terms, these are to mend plasters and preserve painted surfaces with little more than the materials of which they were originally made—lime, sand, and occasionally skim milk or size—a sound principle in any undertaking. Above all, the wall must be able to breathe. But it should be emphasised that it is not all quite as easy as that. And the Committee warn that no inexperienced person should attempt, or be allowed to attempt, such work. Research into methods of cleaning and removal of wax and other unsuitable fixatives has also been done, and is most valuable. Some results are given in Appendix I. But again, the warning must be given that there is no one infallible specific that can be poured out of a bottle. Everything in the long run depends on the judgment, skill and experience of the operative.

I feel that the Committee's purist attitude to repainted examples (Appendix II) is excessive—but here one must use one's own judgment—and the same applies to the toning down of plaster repairs or in-filling of gaps. I would agree that no over-painting or guessing at missing portions should ever be indulged in. But where a painting is heavily repainted or restored, it usually means that little remains beneath: and one should hesitate to remove what people have been used to looking at for 100 years or more and leaving them a ghost, even though it may be pure 14th century.

Another impression one cannot avoid on reading the Report, is that there is only one method for doing anything nowadays. This is unwise and dangerous. Even the methods evolved recently have yet to stand the test of time. And since every wall painting differs from every other, it is patently absurd to insist that every one must be uncovered by a hammer. There are a dozen ways of doing it; one must simply be guided by experience and circumstances, and surely there is room for more than one opinion on controversial issues unless we are to become hide-bound.

This brings one to a fundamental issue—indeed the whole Report raises as many questions either directly or by implication, as it settles, and in doing so has performed a most valuable function, and my remarks must not be taken in any derogatory sense. Is there to be centralised control and direction of all practitioners working in this field? In other words, are we to be bound by departmentalism and Museum mentality? While some measure of control is clearly desirable, unless the State, as in other countries, is to assume total responsibility, I cannot help feeling that this type of work depends so much on individuality, freedom and temperament, that to make it merely office

routine would be to kill its whole spirit. The qualifications required in one who would deal with wall paintings are varied and subtle. While having considerable technical knowledge, and understanding the properties of the materials he is handling, he must not be a mere scientist. He should be an artist; he should have extensive "background" knowledge of his subject—architecture, iconography, costume etc. Above all, he (or she) must be passionately interested in the work in hand, and not undertaking it as a mere occupation or livelihood. This gives added point to Appendix V, where the training of future practitioners is discussed.

The question of finance is pressing. At present, it is left to individual places to raise what they can, with occasional grants from the Ministry of Works, or the Pilgrim Trust, if the Central Council approve. This haphazard state of affairs will have to be tackled, and practitioners in this highly skilled, and inevitably costly, work should receive good remuneration.

One of the most valuable portions of this Report is Appendix IV, an advisory schedule for custodians of buildings containing wall paintings. (Copies of this are separately available in pamphlet form from the C.C.C.C.) The suggestions set out may seem elementary: but it is appalling how seldom they are carried out. For example, the elementary precaution of having the walls inspected in any church likely to contain paintings, *before* redecoration work or during repairs. Item (g) "cleaners should be told not to wash or dust the paintings", was violated only a few weeks ago where the locals, anxious to prepare for a visit of the Archdeacon and myself to a certain church, virtually destroyed a 15th century painting by brushing the wall down to remove cobwebs!

Much remains to be decided as to future policy. But this admirable Report has made a start. And its effect, one hopes, will at least be to make those with wall paintings in their (temporary) care, sensible of their responsibility.