THE MEDIEVAL CARVER
Frontispiece

West front. Wells cathedral.
Christ in Majesty.
The twelve Apostles.
The nine Orders of Angels.
Resurrection of the Dead.
THE MEDIEVAL CARVER

by

M. D. ANDERSON

With a Preface by

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PREFACE

Miss Anderson’s book possesses the unusual characteristic of having been conceived and carried out to meet a definite need. The work of classifying and describing a rapidly growing collection of reproductions of English medieval architecture and sculpture, and the demands of students using that collection, have made increasingly clear the want of some systematic account of the ideas which inspired the medieval masons and builders of England, and the forms in which those ideas found expression. For France, the three volumes of Emile Mâle’s great work on L’Art Religieux en France have become the standard and indispensable authority on the subject, even though some of its conclusions have been disputed. For England, the work of Dr M. R. James and many others has laid a firm foundation; but much of that work is concerned with particular buildings or particular aspects of the subject, and lies buried in learned journals not readily accessible. So Miss Anderson has set herself to bring within one pair of covers some part of this scattered wisdom, reinforced and coordinated by her own observation and knowledge. She herself disclaims any intention of writing for professed scholars; her book is limited to the work of the sculptor, and leaves aside that of the illuminator, the painter, the maker of stained and painted glass, and of the embroiderer; and she has
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described and arranged rather than sought for deep-laid influences. But I venture to think that there is no one for whom the art of the Middle Ages has any significance, from the casual visitor to church and cathedral to the systematic student, but will be more than grateful for what she has done. Joined to such a work as J. C. Cox’s *English Parish Church*, the traveller in medieval England has in her book an invaluable aid to understanding, and a satisfying stimulus to further study.

One particularly interesting result which emerges from Miss Anderson’s study is an important difference between Gothic art in England and France. In England the work of the builders and sculptors on any given building was less fully organised, less completely dominated by a conscious doctrinal and didactic purpose. Even in the cathedrals and greater abbeys of England, where ecclesiastical direction was most vigorous and sustained, there is not that similarity in the disposition of sculpture, glass and painting, which runs throughout the cathedrals of Northern France. There is not in England the same obedience to the “rules of a kind of sacred mathematics”, as M. Mâle calls it, in which the north is devoted to the Old Testament, the south to the New, and the western façade to the Last Judgment; while within that ordering a rigid hierarchical system governs the disposition of individual figures or scenes. At Westminster, Lincoln, Wells a planned disposition of themes is clear; but each has its own character and basic idea. Every-
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where, it is true, certain themes appear common to the whole of Christendom, or to the English part of it. But however well worn in their treatment, or standardised in their workmanship, their use and disposition has a local character; and by their side are introduced motives or incidents which reflect an individual outlook. The explanation seems to be in the nature of English ecclesiastical organisation in the Middle Ages. From early times, centralisation was less marked than in Northern France; and so even the greater ecclesiastical centres were less ready to conform to any predetermined scheme either of building or decoration. A contributory cause, or perhaps a consequence, is that in England there was apparently little or no use of such compilations as the Speculum Ecclesiae of Honorius of Autun, the Rationale Divinorum Officiorum of Durandus, and the Speculum Majus of Vincent of Beauvais, which provided the French ecclesiastical authorities with textbooks of ordered arrangement and symbolic meaning.

In the parish churches this element of self-determination was even more marked. Far less than in France were they dominated by great cathedrals and abbeys; and far more were they centres of communal life, serving not only as places of worship but as meeting-places for the transaction of parish business, and the administration of parochial funds. The great proportion of the population learned from hearing, rather than reading; and diversity of teaching among the secular clergy helped to accentuate local differences in ideas. Thus the parish church provided a field for an
Preface

art which was essentially popular in inspiration and appeal, and not markedly ecclesiastical in conception. So, as Miss Anderson’s book clearly shows, the English instinct for and enjoyment of the grotesque and the humorous found a ready outlet. While the more important parts of the church were devoted by long prescribed custom to the exposition of certain stock subjects, in the corbels, the misereres, the bench-ends, the capitals, and so on, a license was allowed, wherein a true folk art could find expression.

Thus, Miss Anderson’s book, with its examples drawn from the length and breadth of England, helps to put us in touch with the minds not only of the medieval churchman but of the merchants, the tradesmen, the craftsmen and labourers of medieval England. The writings of the Middle Ages are no sure guide to its thought and feelings. A welter of documents survives; but in an illiterate age the mind of the vast mass of people must be sought largely in its monuments. Moreover, art in the Middle Ages was more closely woven into the texture of life than it is to-day, and so gives fuller expression to the thoughts, hopes and fears of the world in which it was created. This world was a very different one from that vision of a Golden Age in which the nineteenth century sought refuge from the horrors of industrialism. In fact it was a world more akin to that of Victorian England than to that of any intervening period. Both were ages of faith, one in a Christian, the other in an Imperial destiny; both were ages of certainty in outlook and belief in a settled order,
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whence issued a passion for the codifying and ordering of knowledge, so that both became ages of encyclopedias; both were periods of high ideals and mighty achievement; yet in both there was a persistent gulf between those ideals and the actual conduct of life. But in the Middle Ages contrasts were more strident, light and shade more intense. The medieval man lived in a world of extravagant logic. This earth was a microcosm of an ordered universe, with God at its centre; and acceptance of a complete and divinely inspired organisation implied recognition of the reality of evil and the omnipresence of its ministers, who take their place as part of the divine machinery for the punishment of sin. Thus devil-dodging was an everyday occupation of the Middle Ages, in which the aid of the Virgin and saints, through prayer and the sacraments, was continuously invoked. Moreover, the thought of the Middle Ages was dominated by a form of Platonic idealism, involving a conception of the pre-existence of ideas, which led to the use of allegory and symbolism to give those ideas concrete form. So the inextricable linking in art of personifications of the divine and diabolic is a direct and vivid reflection of the medieval mind.

Such a view of the world also coloured men’s attitude towards nature. In a universe divinely ordered, everything was ex hypothesis capable of explanation; and that explanation was to be found through a priori reasoning, rather than empirical investigation. Thus was born a whole race of fabulous monsters,
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which play so important a part in medieval art, each giving in generalised form external reality to some natural phenomenon. Too often the medieval craftsman has been acclaimed as the supreme exponent of naturalism in art, humbly submitting himself to the guidance of nature. But such a view is superficial. On occasion, as in the chapter-house at Southwell, the sculptor threw himself into transcribing natural forms, with a virtuosity comparable to that of Monet in his transcription of light. But more often, the expression of an idea or the telling of a story by means of accepted conventions was his aim; and the inspiration came from the written or more usually the spoken word, rather than the thing. The Middle Ages, too, are often extolled as the period of patient, sterling craftsmanship, unalloyed by thoughts of self-glorification or of financial gain. Yet the same contrast between the ideals of the medieval church and the practice of its clergy, and between the ideals of chivalry and the conduct of the feudal lords, is found in medieval art. From an early period, craftsmen were organised in workshops on a commercial basis; the medieval guild laid down standards of workmanship and of material, but was primarily organised for the benefit of its members; strikes were by no means uncommon, also lock-outs; and jerry-building or worse was frequent. Time has concealed some of the worst crimes of the medieval builder; but there is plenty of evidence surviving that he could be both lazy and dishonest.

Thus to tear the halo from the medieval artist and his
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times is not to diminish his stature, or to belittle his work. Rather it gives a feeling of a reality, of substance, which enables the greatness of his achievement to be more fully realised. With the aid of such books as Miss Anderson’s, the student can hope better to see the art of medieval England not as in a glass darkly, but face to face; and so to realise the force of imagination and vigour of craftsmanship which brought it into being.

W. G. Constable

January 1935