Imagery and Iconography in Monastic Cathedrals: visual impact.

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'An object has an image of something beyond itself, charged with meaning'
Hodder*, 1991a, p.67*

The Church building was an important focal point for society during the medieval period in England. Within this paper I aim to consider how and why visual images, both moralistic and saintly, were employed within churches and cathedrals to engage the viewer and how the symbolic contents of these images were displayed and deployed. To do this I will be considering examples from several secular churches of the period. I use secular in this context to refer to churches which were not directly connected to monasteries or abbeys.

I propose that iconography was employed as part of a visual framework which sought to teach both moral and basic religious concepts. These images or devotional objects also have a symbolic meaning as well as being examples of compositional forms. In my interpretation each image, whether individual or part of a collection, is filled with symbolism which would be known to visitors to the religious building and to members of the congregation. This would have resulted in the viewer being subjected to either conscious or subconscious messaging.[1] To illustrate this I will use two examples, the chalice and the cross. The chalice and cross reflect their compositional form of metal work and woodcarving respectively, and have symbolic meanings relating to Jesus' life and death. The cross represents his death and resurrection sending messages of salvation whereas the chalice implies the presence of the holy body and blood through transubstantiation, making Christ's sacrifice overt and symbolically available for all to partake in. The use of symbolism was particularly important at a time when services were in Latin and therefore

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[1] Ucko 1991: xiii.

difficult for the majority of people to understand and also illiteracy prevented many from engaging with either Latin or vernacular religious texts. This suggests that images played an important part in assisting people's understanding of the tenets of the Christian faith.

In this sense art conveyed religious truths through its subject matter, and details of iconography illustrated nuances of belief. Art taught people how to conceive the mysteries of Christianity and sought to exemplify and explain what God was like. Iconography also sought to supply spirituality on earth, providing both the means to perform ceremonies and devotional acts, and *foci* at which to direct them. These ceremonies and *foci* led to the manufacture of finely adorned altar frontals, chalices, effigies, reliquaries, and manuscripts. These objects and what they represented or contained were regarded with reverence due to their religious nature.[2] The importance of an ecclesiastical work of art emanated from its religious nature, the subject matter depicted and the value of the material and quality of the craftsmanship.[3] This is evident in depictions of Becket's shrine, in Canterbury Cathedral, which was elaborately decorated with marble, gold and jewels, elevated on steps and had a suspended canopy. The shrine occupied a prominent position, suggesting a reflexive relationship between the positioning of the piece of art and its significance. There is little information on the decoration of this piece and therefore on its symbolic impact, however, such a sight must have been awe inspiring. This contrasts to the symbolic and naturalistic elements of St Frideswide's tomb-shrine in Christchurch Cathedral, Oxford, where hawthorn represents eternal life, and the vine is the symbol of the Eucharist. Both of these tombs, despite their differences in design and construction, were important due to their religious nature, and they both held the bones of a venerated saint.

The main reason for decoration within cathedrals and churches was to enable Christian symbolic coding to be employed by the religious authorities to teach their congregation and visitors to the building the tenets of the faith. It could

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[2] Gameson 1995: 264.
[3] Gameson 1995: 264.

be argued that the Church authorities thought that viewers of these images may find them easier to engage with than words in reference to catechism and church teaching.[4] This is due to the messages passed through such images relying on the link between material culture and human behaviour, with the cognitive processes resulting in 'common patterns of perception and communication'.[5] This indicates that symbols are automatically recognised through teaching and suggests that different people interpret the same things in a similar manner. Therefore, the perspective of the creator can be imposed on the audience. These images not only helped the viewer to remember the stories and religious messages delivered in sermons, but also appealed to those who could not speak Latin or read the scriptures themselves.

As modern viewers, however, it is easy to impose our interpretations on iconography rather than focussing upon medieval views. There is little documentary evidence on perceptions for this period with researchers applying their knowledge of the medieval period to the scarce remains. However, Tilley suggests a problem with this as 'an object has no ultimate or unitary meaning that can be held to exhaust it. Rather, any object has multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings'.[6] Here Tilley is not only referring to the dichotomies invested in symbolism, for example the contradictory depictions of Mary as a virgin and mother and Jesus as human and god, but to the multiplicity of reading that can be interpreted from material culture.

One particular reading fostered by the Church was fear. The Church controlled access to religious information, knowledge and actions[7] and developed 'theories of deviance' to prevent challenges to their existing system of control.[8] Images related to the punishment of the deviant and the consequences of straying from the true path can be seen in depictions of purgatory, the vices and the seven deadly sins. These ideas are also evident in depictions of death as is seen in *Dance Macabre* written by Lydgate, from a

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[4] Fletcher 1991: 33.
[5] Wiessner 1991: 56.
[6] Tilley 1991: 191.
[7] Hulin 1991: 91.
[8] Hulin 1991: 93.

fifteenth century wall painting at La Chaise-Dieu, and Hell, with Hell's jaws being depicted as locked around its subjects from the mid-twelfth-century Winchester Psalter.

These moralistic representations, whether in cathedrals, churches or psalters, encouraged viewers to live morally and hence to die the good death, with preparation including confession and penance to avoid purgatory and Hell. These preliminary rites of separation were necessary for continuity and to ensure the soul's future, with the macabre being reinforced by late medieval demographic disasters, including the Black Death of 1348 and the subsequent recurrences of plague.[9] The oppressive and domineering nature of the Church also relates to control over the Gospels and Scriptures, as until the first vernacular translation of the Bible appeared between1380-1400, the texts were only available in Latin and restricted to clerical use.[10] Translation became viewed as heresy, as the authority of the Church was being questioned, and was punishable by death.

Images could be overtly moralistic and therefore oppressive in nature. For example the chancel arch may have represented the Last Judgement with the terrifying threat of reckoning, there may have been wall-paintings and windows illustrating the deadly sins, and possibly a representation of the three living and the three dead.[11] The Last Judgement is illustrated in a thirteenth-century wall-painting in Chaldon, Surrey, which depicts souls being weighed and Christ emptying limbo in the top section, and beneath is Hell and the bridge of souls, with the two stages being linked by a ladder with souls ascending and falling. The impact of such a depiction creates a fear of death and encourages people to adhere to Church teaching to be saved. The three living and the three dead, as depicted in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle c.1310, reflects death as the great equaliser, showing no concern for wealth and

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[9] Binski 1996: 12.
[10] Pearsall 1999: 232.
[11] Duffy 1992: 187.

estate. The doubling or reversal of the image simultaneously denies and affirms mortality through the oppositions of the dead to the living.[12]

The oppositions which highlight the differences between mortal and spiritual life are also used within church decoration. Some of the images both on the inside and outside of churches can be interpreted as profane and inappropriate in a religious setting. Camille describes these images as profane subjects which create odd intrusions into the religious sphere. He argues that they create binary opposites, with the profane being essential to the sacred.[13] He claims medieval people enjoyed the ambiguity in the confrontation between the sacred and profane, with the hegemony of the church being underscored and not undermined by blasphemous and irreverent images.[14] Camille suggests that eruptions of 'low life' squabbling appear in the laity area of cathedrals,[15] for example the imp in Chester Cathedral and the mouth puller on a capital in Wells Cathedral c.1220, imply that irreverent images complement religious depictions. Perhaps it could be argued that the contrast between religious and irreverent images serves to enhance the sacredness of the religious images. It is possible that these irreverent images represent a transition from normality to the realm of the divine through their inclusion in the religious sphere.

Symbolic polarities between inside and outside, associated respectively with order and disorder are also observable in south Indian religious traditions,[16] but can equally be applied to medieval churches. This relates to heavenly order inside and societal issues of everyday chaos outside, as is evident through gargoyles on the exterior of Canterbury Cathedral's south west porch. Iconographic representations affect the impressions of an ordered hierarchy, with Duffy supporting the assertion that the imagery within a church was a 'manifestation of the inward-looking meditative and affective dimension of the

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[12] Binski 1996: 134-8.
[13] Camille 1992: 9-10.
[14] Morrison 2000: 98.
[15] Camille 1992: 82.
[16] Aldhouse-Green 2001: 61.

piety'.[17] Preston has emphasised the power of these special places as 'spiritual magnetism' which can be defined as the power to attract devotees, not through an intrinsic 'holy' quality, rather deriving from human concepts and values, via historical, geographical, and social forces that merge in a sacred centre.[18] Therefore, imagery creates behavioural meanings,[19] for example, they generate silence when the viewer enters a religious building and encourage homage and piety through a sense of being in the presence of something divine.

The idea of being in the presence of something divine was enhanced by artworks. It was thought that art within a religious context increased interaction with God and provided the means by which humans could achieve a link with Heaven.[20] An item commissioned for, or donated to, a religious foundation was a material gift that was projected into the spiritual, bridging the divide between the material world and the divine.[21] The majority of surviving tenth and eleventh-century sculpture is found in secular churches and therefore it can be presumed that monks were not involved in its production.[22] Perhaps then, patronage of the arts and its donation to religious houses won favour with God, and the evidence suggesting that monasteries lacked sculpture is linked to the possibility that secular patrons were largely responsible for decorative elements.

It could be suggested that decorative elements and images were repeated from one medium to another, for example stained glass, wall painting, manuscript illumination, textiles and stone sculpture.[23] Repetition of such imagery can be interpreted as encouraging a reaffirmation of faith, with God around the walls, on and above altars, in books, on vestments, and also

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[17] Duffy 1992: 39.
[18] Preston 1992: 33.
[19] Fletcher 1991: 35.
[20] Gameson 1995:265.
[21] Gameson 1995: 265.
[22] Gameson 1995: 245.
[23] Gameson 1995: 118.

carried in procession.[24] Numerous devotions, prayers, and homilies were designed to make people ever-mindful of God and to encourage them to reflect upon their relationship with him. The repetition of imagery was one of many devices and structures used to achieve this.[25] When a group of these images are displayed together it may be interpreted as resulting in the viewer engaging with an endless sequence of images where 'each signifier is only understood in relation to other signifiers'.[26] This suggests that when a number of images form a collection the impact is greater due to the interaction perceived between the images.[27] This interaction is especially notable in the collection and sequencing of images depicting events in life stories. This is evident in Canterbury Cathedral with repeated images of Becket in the Trinity Chapel stained glass and a depiction of his murder dating to the fifteenth century, painted at the head of Henry IV and Joan of Navarre's tomb. However, prior to the Dissolution it is possible that many more images were present, and this is suggested by surviving depictions of the martyrdom in roof bosses found in Exeter and Chester Cathedrals.[28] These sequences of images tended to illustrate important episodes from the life and death of the given Saint and act as a visual story book for the illiterate or unlearned.

Within these images the saint could be identified by their symbol, an item usually part of their story and often the cause of death. This is evident in the early fifteen-century painted rood screen at St Mary's Church, North Elmham, which depicts eighteen stylised saints including St Philip with his basket of bread which fed the five thousand, St Paul with the sword of his execution, St Barbara with the tower of her imprisonment and death, and St Cecilia with a wreath of lilies and a circlet of flowers. According to Gameson, the painted figure that formerly decorated the vault in the Trinity Chapel of Canterbury Cathedral was of this type. The visual identity of this figure was supplied by archiepiscopal garb and, perhaps, a martyr's palm, but it was principally

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[24] Gameson 1995: 133.
[25] Gameson 1995: 134.
[26] Hodder 1991: 69.
[27] Tilley 1991: 186.
[28] Cook 1960: 231.

inscriptions that revealed Becket's identity.[29] However, it could be argued that in many representations of Becket, namely those in stained glass, he is always characterised by his archiepiscopal mitre and garb, and therefore this image would have been clear without inscription and obvious to the illiterate. It is only at a later date that figures of Becket are found distinguished iconographically by a sword or dagger in the head. The martyrdom scene occurs in every narrative depiction and this was part of a long-standing tradition of depicting martyrs by alluding to their suffering and death. Almost everywhere, in defiance of the fact that the struggle took place in the north transept, Becket is depicted beside an altar,[30] as is evident in the Chester roof boss and the painting at the head of the tomb of Henry IV. This emphasises the holiness of the saint, the sacrilege involved in his murder, the contrast between the holy archbishop and the secular knights with their implements of violence, and simultaneously shows a contrast between those who served the king of England and those who served the King of kings.[31]

As you can see the veneration of the saints provides a different viewpoint on the usage of imagery. The heavy emphasis on duties and obligations which can be found in the moralistic elements of Church teaching was never a dominant feature of the veneration of the saints. Instead the brightly painted images spoke only of the abundance of God's grace.[32] The reason for this difference may stem from a belief that the saint had a direct relationship with their image, and the identification of homage to the image with homage to the saint, meant that possession of the image gave a certain amount of control over the person represented.[33] The statues belonged to the religious complexes, through purchase and donation, and therefore the leverage is in the hands of the Church with visitors having to make offerings and prayer for mediatory activity.

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[29] Gameson 2002: 52-3.
[30] Gameson 2002: 53.
[31] Gameson 2002: 53.
[32] Duffy 1992: 187.
[33] Duffy 1992: 186.

From this brief discussion of some of the surviving images from medieval churches I hope to have highlighted two ways in which images were used to instruct the viewer, either through moralistic messages or the life stories of various saints. Both types of image have symbolic contents which were displayed to enhance their meaning to the viewer and to help the viewer to develop as a Christian. These images were used to control the illiterate populace by the Church, without the need to divulge the secret and powerful knowledge of their Latin texts. The depictions of religious media in art played an important role in the power relationship between the Church and the laity. By setting images, especially from the lives of saints, in permanent media and using recognised symbol systems the Church was able to 'prove' that the saints' lives that were depicted were true and therefore to influence and manipulate the beliefs of the viewers.

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Appendix One

Link to St Frideswide's tomb mentioned in paragraph 3:

http://www.sacred-destinations.com/england/oxford-christ-church-cathedral.htm

Link to the Dance Macabre at La Chaise-Dieu mentioned in paragraph 6:

http://www.abbaye-chaise-dieu.com/-La-danse-macabre-.html?lang=en

Link to Winchester Psalter mentioned in paragraph 6:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellmouth

Link to Chaldon mentioned in paragraph 8:

http://www.paintedchurch.org/chaldon.htm

Link to Robert de Lisle Psalter mentioned in paragraph 8:

http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=472

Link to Chester Imp mentioned in paragraph 9:

http://www.chestercathedral.com/chester-cathedral-gallery.htm#

Link to mouth puller in Wells Cathedral mentioned in paragraph 9:

http://cidc.library.cornell.edu/adw/gravely/wellscaps.html

Link to Becket windows in Canterbury Cathedral mentioned in paragraph 12:

http://www.sacred-destinations.com/england/canterbury-stained-glass-photos/slides/h-7807.htm

Link to Joan of Navarre and Henry IV tomb mentioned in paragraph 12:

http://www.bookloversbookstore.com/vacationphotos/171.jpg

Link to Exeter roof boss mentioned in paragraph 12:

http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue7/monastic-cathedrals/

http://www.paradoxplace.com/Photo%20Pages/UK/Britain_South_and_West/Exeter_Cathedral/Exeter.htm

Link to North Elmham rood screen mentioned in paragraph 13:

http://www.norfolkchurches.co.uk/northelmham/northelmham.htm