

## Dominic Dromgoole on the mystery of the ghostly paintings

When the theatre director attended a church wedding this month he met some unexpected guests



Dominic Dromgoole at St George's in West Sussex

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Simply to be at a wedding seemed a miracle. This nuptial, thrice delayed, took place early this month, within Covid restrictions. A classic English affair, the congregation brought the hunger and thirst of the long locked-down. No masks or social distancing could quell their enthusiasm. All the details of the ritual, the silly and the serious, seemed charged with surplus delight and meaning. The flowers, the fantastical hats and the confetti were celebrated as if they had just been dreamt up; the words of commitment were listened to as if lives depended on them. All that had become tired and blasé from repetition pre-Covid was fresh and alive.

What sealed the deal on a special day was the church — St George's, Trotton, in West Sussex. This simple 14th-century edifice sits shyly just off the A272, that tarmac thread which runs, under an arching canopy of trees, through the green of southern England. The church is plain enough, a solid rectangle of stone wall, without chancel or extra aisles, built by the Camoys family to bulwark their grace and godliness. It is replete with history; Thomas Otway the playwright is memorialised here, and Shakespeare's "gentle Kate", the wife of Harry Hotspur, lies in a tomb at the altar, beneath a bronze of unique size and beauty.

She shares the bronze with her second husband, Sir Thomas Camoys, a hero of Agincourt. He is kitted out in slim-fit body armour, his left hand encased in an iron gauntlet. His right hand is bare, and folded into it are the tapered slender fingers of his wife. It is the only instance of a couple holding hands in a bronze of the period, and renders a heartstopping moment of discreet tenderness.



All this is remarkable, but doesn't touch on the impact of the greatest surprise. Right across the back wall of the church, and on both sides near by, as if from within the walls, figures emerge. Knights, pilgrims, everymen and everywomen, souls, creatures in torment and creatures in bliss, all in shades of ochre, creep through the rough cream of the plaster. Like ghosts they shimmer bashfully in an indistinct terracotta. In its modest simplicity, it is the most direct contact with the Middle Ages I know.

The wedding was already a charismatic event; it was enhanced by the blessing of these semi-present spirits. The surprise came when the priest and the warden instructed us that these figures should be enjoyed with relish, since they had

only emerged more fully during lockdown. Amid the excitement of the day, it seemed as though they had come out to join the fun.

The idea of figures manifesting through lockdown stuck in my head. A couple of weeks later I returned to chat with the warden and a local historian. They remembered opening up the church this spring, and being taken aback by the amount they could see. Old details that had long been indistinct had found new definition. Angel wings were sharper; a dog's lead in a hunting scene was clear; the face of a Camoys lord loomed in pale yellow; tunics and feet shimmied into shape. Thin streaks and clouds of yellow and blue linger, but by far the most efficient survivor is the ochre.

A pigment known as sinoper haematite, it was brought in boatloads from the Black Sea to England. It was mixed with water and egg yolk, and then applied to a plaster often bound with parish offerings of skimmed milk. The lockdown intensification of the ochre may be down to the stillness of the air, and the regularity of the cool temperature. It is more probably down to damp, since ochre has a resilience to, and sometimes a relish for, moisture. It is known as the red that darkens when you turn your back on it, since it pulls damp from around itself, and shades its hue.

The whole church would have been blazing with colour in its first incarnation. The ochre would have played a bass note to the razzle-dazzle tenor and soprano work of the blues, yellows, greens and golds. First painted around 1380, it would have endured in its Catholic disco colours for 150 years, though the dazzle would have been dimmed by the belching of stoves and the tallow smoke of candles. Then the Reformation performed its aesthetic violence, and robbed churches and lives of colour and fancy. Limewash would have been crudely splashed over the art of generations, and the Protestant God's blank whiteness triumphed.

An attempt to strip the walls back to the original stone wall in 1906 revealed the survival of the ochre, if not the other colours. An attempt was made to seal what remained in wax, a process abandoned in 1986, when the wax was stripped away. Since then the colour has slowly ebbed, until the silence and the cold and the damp of lockdown allowed it to regain some of its strength.

There is much to marvel at. It is not great art, and a million miles from the Sistine Chapel, but in its crude simplicity it has an emotional, and moral, effect. The back wall is given over to a broad depiction of what could be the Last Judgment. Christ sits on a rainbow. On his right side, in a flipping of conventional placement, are depicted the seven deadly sins, with figures in the throes of sin being swallowed by dragons. Such judgments featured prominently in that age so weatherworn congregations couldn't miss seeing the cruelties that would follow if they didn't cough up their tithes on time. Happily the sun has stepped in and editorialised the whole scheme, its rays pouring in from a window on the left and bleaching out most of the gloomy drama of crime and punishment.

More striking is the scheme below Christ's left side. A figure of Everyman in a brown robe, his face ruddy and pious, is surrounded by seven kindly roundels, each depicting one of the seven acts of mercy. They are shaped in a medieval mandorla, the acorn-shaped aureole that usually surrounded a Christ figure. Here they are more reminiscent of a mandala, the Buddhist arrangement of circles to enable meditation. Happily, the sun has not reached this side, and it remains unbleached and vivid.

A surge of goodness emanates from this scheme; the same modest, humble goodness that was the saving grace of the past 18 months. The seven acts depicted are those that have sustained us: caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, finding water for the thirsty, visiting the prisoner, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and, tragically, burying the dead. Beyond the rhetoric and the manipulations of government, these are the principles that have held our communities together. Virtues that have emerged as sharply as these images.

How close is caring for the sick and feeding the hungry to all that we have most admired recently? And how far is the injunction to visit prisoners from the present demonising of them? Or the instruction to welcome the stranger from our monsterring of refugees? When politicians blather about the spirit of our country, it would be great to set them in front of this timeless wall-sized document. The Trotton historian told me that in the Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for preachers to be incapable of reading from the texts provided. In these cases, they would preach from the imagery, opening out the simple lessons of each roundel to make vivid the case for goodness in the world. Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings could profitably sit in front of them now. Preferably in the stocks.

There is every chance that as people return, and the summer heats the room up, the shy images will recede back into their plaster, and leave a fainter trace in the world. Just as many of the virtues we have lately witnessed will become plastered over by the venality of the everyday. These acts of mercy, whatever your faith, are very much the best of us.

Ribbons connect the Everyman figure to the roundels, with words within them — spes, fides, caritas — faith, hope and charity. Even for someone irreligious, it is hard not to be struck dumb.