

Mont Orgueil wall painting

Visitors to Mont Orgueil Castle can now see the remains of an ancient wall painting that has been uncovered in the Medieval Great Hall. David Park, Emily Howe and Sharon Cather, of the Courtauld Institute of Art, investigate the origins of this mysterious, exceptional work.

TRACES OF A PAINTING WERE FIRST DISCOVERED in 1997 when an archaeological investigation of Mont Orgueil's Great Hall began. The most significant area of the image was on the soffit of a partially unblocked window at the south end of the west wall. In 2004 further work was undertaken to unblock this window and revealed an unusual decorative painting of large, red flowers with rounded petals and a finely drawn black design.

The remains of this painting, though slight, are of exceptional interest because they appear to be the only medieval paintings so far discovered in a purely secular context in the Channel Islands. It is also extremely rare for medieval paintings to survive in a royal castle.

The painting was created using an unusual technique and a decorative design that appears to have no close parallels anywhere. Despite the numerous small cracks and repairs, it was immediately obvious that the red flower painting was of a notable quality and had certainly been painted with luxury materials. The pinkish red used was easily identifiable as vermilion, which was an expensive, luxury material to use.

The relationship between the floral design and the free-flowing black linear design below it was less obvious. Originally, the red flower was thought to be late 15th

century but the black design probably from an earlier period. However, the exuberant black lines do appear to provide a context for positioning the blooms in a way that is similar to some designs found in 18th century textiles and wallpaper.

After the initial discovery, traces of the black design were found on the northern window in the west wall and four small areas with remains of red paint were found in the east wall under modern emulsion paint and plaster. All the painting was scrupulously preserved and left exposed. The painted plaster in the south-west window was stabilised with edging repairs carried out by Charles Herbert, a conservator mason, but no other work has been carried out.

However, it was clear that further technical, art historical and archaeological investigations were needed to clarify the origins of this unusual painting. So in Autumn 2004 a scientific examination of the painting was undertaken by the Conservation of Wall Painting Department at the Courtauld Institute (University of London). The expert team aimed to establish whether the different sections of painting were part of the same scheme and they were particularly interested in the materials and their application, which could provide valuable evidence about the origin of the work.

Initial inspection showed areas of pigment alteration,



Charles Herbert restoring the plaster work surrounding the wall painting in the Medieval Great Hall in April 2004. (Gordon Collas)

both lightening and darkening, in the areas of red painting, which were highly characteristic of red lead, a widely-used pigment in medieval painting. A few minute samples were taken for analysis, which included an examination of the layer structure in cross-section, the optical properties and microchemical tests.

The results were surprising. Examination of the plaster support in the cross-sections of paint samples and in two small fragments that had been found loose during the unblocking of the window, showed that the paint had been applied directly to the plaster, which was most unusual. The plaster itself was lime-based, roughly 5mm thick made of relatively large particles, unevenly distributed. The low-grade composition of the plaster meant it was weak and this was a factor in the poor condition of the surviving material on the walls of the great hall.

Analysis of the painting material showed that the red was vermilion (with some red earth added) but not painted over a base coat of the cheaper red lead as expected. It is thought that the patron's approval would have been required for such profligate use of vermilion. The black design was painted in

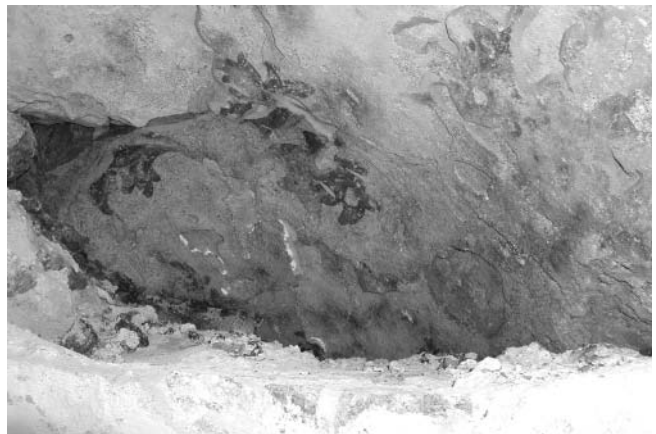


View of the wall painting above the doorway in the Medieval Great Hall at Mont Orgueil. (Gordon Collas)

carbon black pigment and the analysis shows unequivocally that it is contemporary with the red flowers. The intimate bond between the black line and the plaster and the vermilion shows a wet-in-wet process, where the black was painted onto the fresh plaster and the vermilion onto the fresh black painting.

The analysis also explained what originally had been thought to be the lightening and darkening of red lead. The lightening was due to a residue of lime mortar, used when the window was blocked, and the darkening was due to a layer of dirt. This suggests that the paintings were exposed for some time - long enough for the dirt to accumulate - before the window was covered. Analysis of the east wall sample showed that the painting there was part of the same scheme, which probably extended around the whole hall.

The analysis of materials does not provide absolute evidence for when the paintings were executed but they are certainly consistent with a medieval date. There are some unusual features, such as the lack of layering. The application



Detailed view of a wall painting in the Medieval Great Hall at Mont Orgueil. (Gordon Collas)

of vermilion over red lead would have extended the covering power of the paint as well as creating a translucent effect, with the red lead reflecting light back through the vermilion layer. The black painting was even more unusual. Black lines were usually used for under drawings and there are no comparable English medieval wall paintings where black forms part of the final design and is meant to be visible. As a result, the Jersey painting is likely to have created a more open, airy effect than contemporary decorations, the spindly black stems embellished with fat and luscious pink flowers. The selection and use of materials suggests a lack of familiarity with mural painting methods of the time. Perhaps the painter of the Mont Orgueil work was more used to another medium and was pressed into service to decorate the hall.

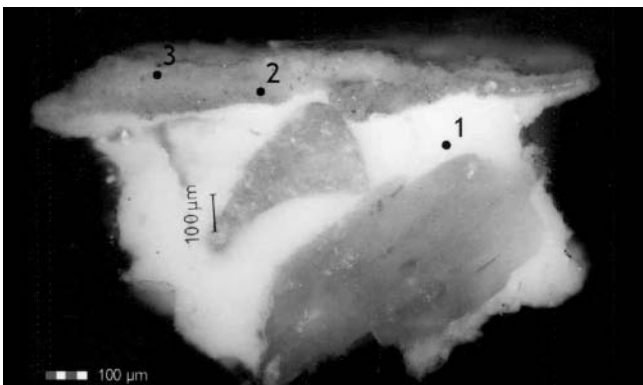
The light, free-flowing almost trellis-like design covered the vault and window splays, but probably not the vault or dado, where no traces were found. There are no surviving



Dr Warwick Rodwell examining the wall painting in the Medieval Great Hall at Mont Orgueil in April 2004. (Gordon Collas)

parallel schemes in England, but this is not surprising since other Channel Islands medieval wall paintings – at the Fisherman’s Chapel and St Clements’s church - have French connections, probably because the Islands were part of the diocese of Coutances until 1499. Obviously, however, the connections of Mont Orgueil throughout almost this entire period were not with France but with England and, despite an intensive search, no close parallels for the hall decoration have come to light in France either.

One group of wall paintings that does afford reasonably close parallels to the castle decoration is the surviving late 15th and early 16th century schemes, particularly on vaults, in the Low Countries. Many examples survive but of particular interest is a delicate, open design of a vault scheme dating from the second half of the 15th century in Ponthoz in Belgium, which shows delicate drawing in black. Such decoration was not confined to churches but also appeared in domestic contexts. The Flemish schemes often included other elements such as figures and inscriptions as well as foliage, which may well have also been the case in Jersey originally. In the later medieval period, artistic influences from the Low Countries were ubiquitous in both England and France.

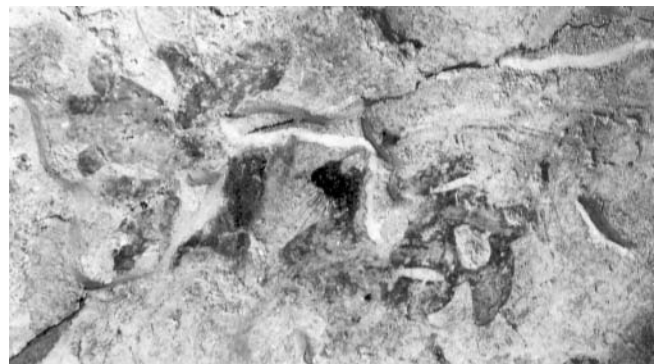


A sample from a wall painting at Mont Orgueil. (Courthauld Institute of Art)

If the Flemish parallels point to a dating of the Jersey painting between 1450 and 1550, it confirms the suggestion by archaeologist Warwick Rodwell that it dates from the late 15th century, most likely from the governorship of Richard Harliston between 1470 and 1487. Having captured the castle from the French in 1468, he was responsible for a number of other works, including Harliston’s Tower, and served Duchess Margaret of Burgundy, one of the leading contemporary collectors of Flemish illuminated manuscripts. Harliston dies in Flanders in 1495.

The walls and windows of the hall date from the early 13th century but the walls were lined and plastered when the hipped barrel vault was added in the 14th or 15th century. The south-west window was blocked in the second half of the 16th century so this architectural and archaeological evidence also indicates that the paintings were created between 1400 and approximately 1550.

Other decoration in Mont Orgueil is likely to date from Harliston’s period of governor, namely the painting



Detail of one of the wall paintings found at Mont Orgueil. (Courthauld Institute of Art)

discovered in and around a recess and on walls in the south-east Tower, or Prynne’s Tower, when it was unblocked in 1927-8. The paintings, which are also in black and red, depict fictive curtains and a shield with the cross of St George but appear more crude in execution than the Great Hall work. A study by Finlaison concluded that the walls were probably decorated some time during the last two decades of the 15th century.

Several fragments of stained glass were found in the tower in the 1920s and some are decorated with delicate scrollwork similar to the hall paintings. It seems probable that the pieces belonged to a Garter badge, a popular device. Another fragment of the same type has been discovered in the Great Hall during the recent investigations, suggesting this was the original location of the glass. If so, it would certainly have formed an appropriate complement to the delicate scheme of painting adorning the walls and windows.

Mont Orgueil castle is open from 10am seven days a week until 30th October. Last admission is at 5pm.