

St Mary the Virgin Lakenheath



Medieval Paints
and Painters



Colours and Paints

The range of colours available to the medieval wall painter were really no different from those available today. However, all of the colours would have had to come from natural ingredients and some, such as the vermilion used on the painting of the risen Christ at Lakenheath, were very expensive and are therefore less common. More normally the pigments used in medieval church wall paintings are cheaper and more locally sourced. The vast majority of the paintings at Lakenheath are produced using simple combinations of three basic colours – black, white and orange/red. Examples of where these colours, and others, were obtained from are listed below.

The pigments, whatever their colour, first had to be mixed with a binding agent before they could be applied to the walls. In many cases the binding agent was simply water. However, many of the more expensive pigments were bound in mediums such as oil, size (glue extracted from animal bone and skin) and casein (a curd made from soured milk). Each of these mediums would have reacted differently with each pigment – producing a different finish to the painting.



Above: The face of an Angel from the earliest of the paint schemes at Lakenheath. The outline was sketched out in carbon black with all the other colouring being created using only a red/yellow ochre and a lime white. Simple - but highly effective.

Pigments:

Black – one of the easiest to produce and most stable of all paints. Produced in a number of ways, the two most common being lamp black or ground charcoal. Both are referred to as ‘carbon black’.

White – usually known as ‘lime white’ and produced by mixing slaked lime with water.

Red/Orange – most usually made from the iron rich clay based soils known as ‘ochres’. Mixed with a variety of binding materials all the ochres tend to be very stable. More expensive pigments, that often produce ‘brighter’ colours, were vermilion (obtained from the mineral cinnabar), red lead and kermes (obtained from the dried and crushed bodies of the Kermes beetle).

Blue – This was one of the most expensive pigments to create and therefore one of the rarest. The finest blues were ultramarine, made from lapis lazuli, and were imported all the way from Afghanistan. Slightly less expensive, although still uncommon, was ‘german blue’ – derived from a copper carbonate known as Azurite.

Green – These colours were obtained in one of two principle ways. Firstly, from the washing and grinding of the mineral glauconite – formed from the decaying organic matter found in sea mud. Secondly, and more brightly, from covering thin sheets of copper with hot vinegar or urine and sealing them in warmed containers for about two weeks. The resulting colour was referred to as ‘verdigris’.

Yellow/gold – Yellow was actually one of the hardest colours to obtain. In normal circumstances a decent approximation could be achieved by mixing the darker ochres with lime white. However, these yellows were always quite dull in appearance. More vivid yellows could be obtained from the mineral orpiment – an expensive import from Hungary, Asia Minor or Macedonia.

An extract from *Il Libro dell’Arte* by Cennino d’Andrea Cennini, 15th century

ON THE CHARACTER OF LIME WHITE.

A natural colour, but still artificially prepared, is white, and it is made as follows: take good white air-slaked lime; put it, in the form of powder, into a pail for the space of eight days, adding clear water every day, and stirring up the lime and water thoroughly, so as to get all the fatness out of it. Then make it up into little cakes; put them up on the roofs in the sun; and the older these cakes are, the better the white will be. If you want to make it quickly and well, when the cakes are dry, work them up with water on your stone; and then make it into little cakes and dry them again; and do this twice, and you will see how perfect the white will be. This white is worked up with water, and it wants to be ground thoroughly. And it is good for working in fresco, that is, on a wall without any tempera; and without this you cannot accomplish anything in the way of flesh colour and other mixtures of the other colours which you make for a wall, that is, for fresco; and it never wants any tempera whatever.



Far left: the scroll-work pattern beneath the arches of the north arcade was created using only red and yellow ochres - many of which may have been locally sourced. The pigments have proved highly stable over time, perhaps due to their simplicity, and they look almost as fresh as when they were first painted many centuries ago.

Left: The Risen Christ on the chancel arch dates to the very end of the 15th century. It was originally painted in an almost monochrome style - highlighted with gold for the halo and bright reds for the blood of the wounds. The red was created using expensive vermillion pigment (circled). However, despite its cost the vermillion has proved far less stable than the earlier ochre pigments and has now chemically changed to a very dark brown colour.

The Painters

Despite playing an important role in the medieval life of the church very little is actually known about the individuals who painted the scenes that we see today. Earlier painters tend to be associated with monasteries and, in many cases, were most probably monks. It is quite possible that the earliest scheme at Lakenheath, which was painted to a high standard, was actually the work of a monk of Ely. In later centuries the painters were more often drawn from the non religious classes.

Those later painters we do know a little about tend to be associated with the royal court and expensive commissions. For the most part these individuals are male, although a few cases of female painters are recorded, and those who worked for the king could become very wealthy indeed. One such recorded artist, Hugh Payntor of St Albans, worked extensively for King Edward II and died a very wealthy man in 1361. In his will he left a 'mansion-house' in London to his wife, as well as numerous other extensive gifts and bequests.

In most cases the images found in parish churches were not the great works of art found in the Royal court or private chapels and, as such, there was no real record made of the artists who created them. Indeed, it is quite likely that many of the images that do survive were painted by individuals who, at very best, would have described themselves



as 'craftsmen' rather than 'artists'. One collection of churches in Sussex, known as the 'Lewes Group', all appear to have been painted by the same individual or group of individuals, which suggests that many of these craftsmen may have travelled from church to church undertaking commissions. Despite the large quantity of images that survive at Lakenheath, and the wide time span that they cover, we have no details of any of the individuals involved. Indeed, the paintings themselves may well be the only thing that they left behind them after their deaths.

However, by looking closely at the images themselves we can learn a little about the artists and the way in which they worked. All three of the faces above are taken from the scheme that was created in about 1350 - but all are taken from different parts of the church. Close examination shows that, in all cases, the artist had a very distinct way of painting the eyes - with a straight line running across the bottom. This suggests that all three faces were painted by the same person and that the entire 1350's scheme was the work of a single individual. However, we still do not know who this individual actually was.

