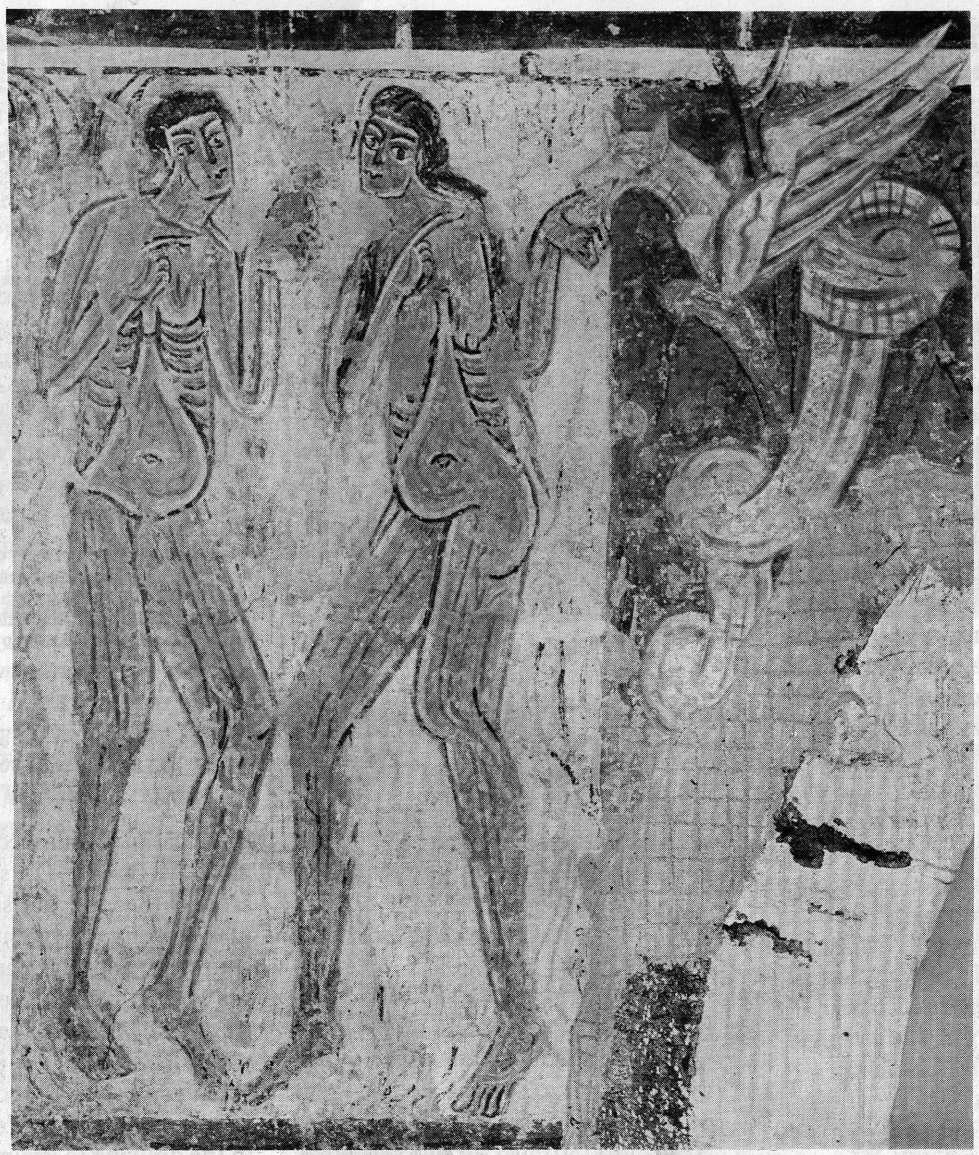


Hardham: St Botolph. Chancel, west wall. Fall of Man c.1100-25

The Inspiration of English Romanesque

Part One: Living Books and Lost Walls

Timothy Hyman

In Southern England, from about 1120 onwards but especially in the fifty years up to 1200, a kind of painting blossomed which to me has become a touchstone. There's nothing in subsequent English achievement that excites me in the way that, say, the Sigena wall-paintings do, or the Morgan Leaf, or the wonderful psalm-book usually referred to by its manuscript number "8846". I'm well aware these names won't conjure anything to most English readers, let alone English painters; and these particular works are spread about the world, in Barcelona, New York, Paris.

But the Romanesque is also on our dooorstep. When I first went to live in Sussex, I'd never heard of the painted churches of the "Lewes group". But I lived for ten years within half an hour's walk of Coombes, and I think it was my gradual awakening to those exquisite fragments that first shaped my interest in the Romanesque. If English painting had such authority at Coombes – today little more than a stone-built shed in a farmyard – if that limpid touch, that dash and vigour in the highlights, that sweeping rhythm, occurred even in a little rustic chapel, then imagine the quality of those well-travelled masters who peopled the huge acreage of plastered wall in our great cathedrals.

A church like Hardham, twenty miles west, is modest enough; but once we've seen those three tiers of imagery, the life-size figures enclosing us as they march towards the east, we can turn to the surviving bibles and psalmbooks, and reconstitute the glory of those lost walls. Master Hugo, illuminator of the Bury Bible, worked also on the mural scale; each wall a blown-up miniature, each page a pocket fresco.

Romanesque painting reached its climax in England; it's the only moment when English art achieved truly international stature. Territories at least as inaccessible – India comes to mind – have now been incorporated within the empire of contemporary art. So why has the Romanesque remained so unfamiliar to most of us, so exclusively a specialist or antiquarian concern?

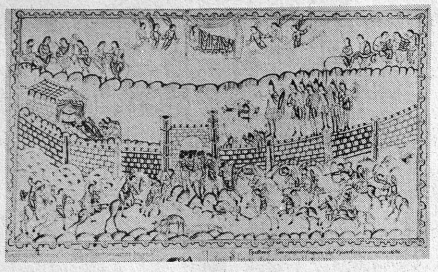
The story that began with Vasari – the foundation of Western painting about 1250, when Italy renounced the "crude and clumsy" style of the "old Greeks" to begin the gradual ascent to Michelangelo's peak – was long ago

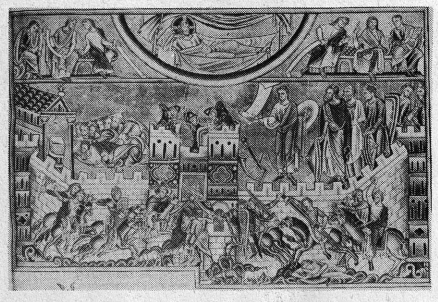
questioned. Yet aren't we still Vasari's victims? Doesn't our National Gallery still reflect that evolutionary scheme, with Room One forever jammed at Tuscan 'Primitives'? What a shift of consciousness would immediately be marked if we kicked off instead with a room or two of the Romanesque. And again with the Tate, where English painting is made to begin, not in Lindisfarne or Winchester, but where it might more truly be said to end, with the European portrait-hacks who consoled the Tudor court after Henry's iconoclasm.

Meanwhile medieval painting remains cast out, scattered among the glass cases of London's vast museums (and we've no intimate equivalent of the Musée de Cluny to recreate the flavour of English medieval life). What survives of the Romanesque is of the most obvious power and beauty; if they'd been easel paintings these images would have captured popular interest long ago. Yet walls can be gathered (I'm thinking of the Catalan Museum in Barcelona), or less controversially, copied (the amazing Musée des Monuments Historiques has three floors of full-scale facsimiles of most of the great French mural cycles, including the entire vault of Saint Savin). As for the books: remember that almost every Indian painting began life as an album illustration; and so did Blake.

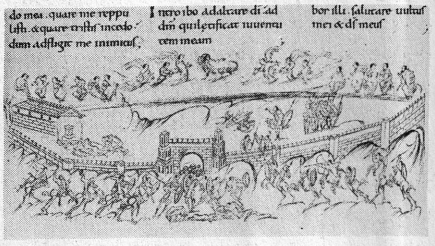
In mounting a major show at the Hayward, the Arts Council are making amends for decades of neglect. Will it lead to a popular break-through? Will any of the English mural cycles be reconstructed, and will that facsimile be found a permanent London home? Will we squint at bibles in glass cases (open as at the British Museum, at the same page for a generation) or will reproductions of some of the other pages be shown alongside? Will manuscripts benefit – as Blake now does at the Tate – from being lit against darkness? Will any miniatures be blown up to mural scale? Above all, will there be a new impetus to publish, not only books, but slides and cards?[1]

The artist who is drawn into this terrain soon feels a trespasser; there are so many considerations – the comparison of scripts, the minutiae of ornament – beyond amateur competence. But I think we must learn to claim the same licence in interpreting medieval art as we all assume face to face with an Italian painting; to recover our lost heritage, to recognise the Anglo-Saxons as our 'primitives', the Sigena Master as our Michelangelo.





Illustrations to Psalm 43 in the Utrecht Psalter and its three copies:



"Up Lord why sleepest thou?" Our fathers who record the deeds of the Lord. Men crouching in the dust before the Temple. "Our belly cleaveth unto the ground". The Psalmist, armed, appealing to the Lord. David's people dispersed and killed "like sheep for the slaughter".

Around the year 1200, an artist at Canterbury based a particularly gorgeous psalmbook on an earlier one made in Rheims about 832. Two intermediate versions (from roughly 1090 and 1150) also survive. Together these four manuscripts allow us to survey, under laboratory conditions, the whole development of English painting, from Anglo-Saxon to High Romanesque; but also, perhaps just as importantly, to decide on our own individual *preference*.[2]

The unique survival of these four books almost impels us to such a choice. The stylistic gap between the first version (now in Utrecht) and the last (the one in Paris I've already referred to as "8846") is so palpable; as great as between, say, a Trecento and a Baroque Madonna (and separated by as many centuries). Put the two books alongside, and we see at a glance a whole spectrum of aesthetic choices. Between intimacy and monumentality; between spontaneity and design; between evocation and statement . . . The comparison spells out a structure of gain and loss which could help each one of us to define our priorities.

It's difficult to illustrate the Psalms, since most are a series of imprecations, unlinked by any narrative thread. The solution of the artist of the Utrecht Psalter was to set up a horizontal segment of each page as a kind of panoramic landscape (not unlike a Brueghel in conception); and this space became a matrix, pregnant with figures, animals, incidents – whatever associations came to him as he scanned the text. We may be struck, in the drawing to Psalm 73, by the presence of a mare and foal; the reference is: "I was stupid and ignorant; I was *like a beast* before thee." So the drawings, despite their appearance of drama and life, are really accumulations of scattered metaphors; essentially akin to riddles or charades, yet conjuring spurious microcosms.

This free-wheeling response to the text is marvellously embodied in the reckless fragile flickering line of the Rheims master. When the Utrecht Psalter arrived in Canterbury (perhaps about 1000), this sleight of hand had an immediate echo in Anglo-Saxon art. The artist of the Harley Psalter (probably an Anglo-Saxon monk) was basically copying the lines, but in coloured inks; each figure might be parcelled out between five or six quite arbitrary hues (blue hair, green profile, one leg violet, another red). Handling the manuscript (somewhat larger than a big children's book) in the British Museum, I was struck by the smooth polish of the vellum; it must have been

a strange material to tackle with a quill – a little like sliding a set of fibre-tipped pens across a sheet of plastic – and some of the headlong speed of the line may come from this runaway surface. (I would estimate as many as three drawings a day.) Yet the addition of colour does put a brake on the action, destroying some of the illusionism; at the same time it opens the door that will lead from drawing to painting.

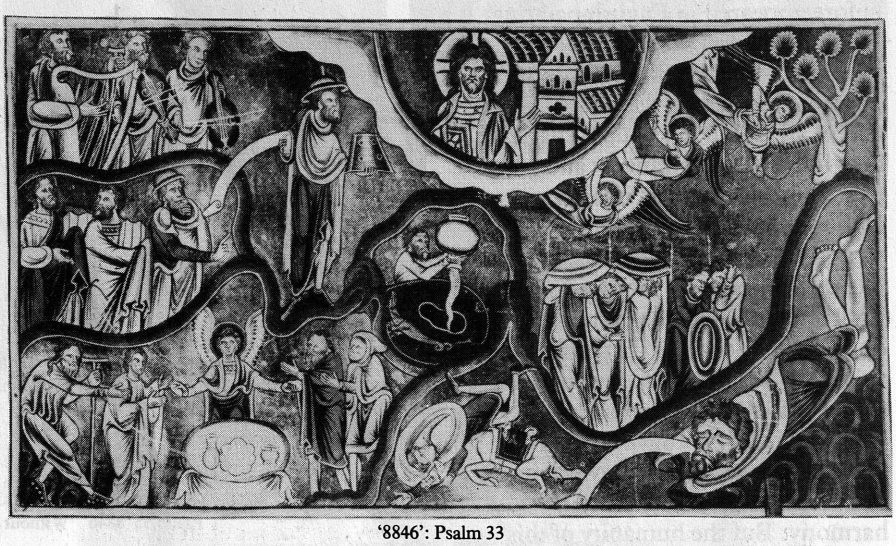
Eighty or ninety years after the Conquest, another Anglo-Saxon, the monk Edwin (or Eadwine) completed a further version, to which he added a famous self-portrait – perhaps the first by any English painter. Around its border he penned a splendid boast:

> *I am the prince of writers; neither my fame nor my praise will die quickly; demand of my letters who I am. The letters: Fame proclaims you in your writing for ever, Eadwine, you who are to be seen here in the painting. The worthiness of this book demonstrates your excellence. O God, this book is given to you by him. Receive this acceptable gift.*

Edwin takes great liberties with his source. Upon that same world (still peopled with a bare-legged common humanity, and a robed upper-class of angels and prophets who speak from rocks) he has imposed a network of linear divisions. A frame holds the image in place; the faint spatial indications of the Utrecht Psalter now become firm coloured contours that separate man from man, blessed from damned. Perhaps it's not fanciful to see in this change some impact of the Norman state, where the authority of a few was imposed upon the many as never before.[3] Yet Edwin still keeps some of the old Anglo-Saxon wit. It's only when we turn to our final version "8846" that we feel the full weight of that world-conquering Norman machine.

Those ad-libbed incidents among feathery trees are here transformed to ritual drama in heraldic setting (where trees resemble exotic fungi, and clods of earth take on the appearance of human ears). The overall sense of the world as a living organism is established above all by the wide red writhing ribbons that now dominate each design, like the earth's crust in motion – opening the mouths of caves, creating worlds within worlds, a whole animistic cosmogony. The figures are fewer, but much larger; Edwin's cartoony profiles have become noble, often bearded character-actors, their faces tramlined with tragic experience. God no longer hovers among them, in the same indefinite spatial envelope, but looms out of his own compartment, at a different scale. And his word is handed down by long white scrolls that

'8846': Psalm 12



'8846': Psalm 33

'8846': Psalm 23

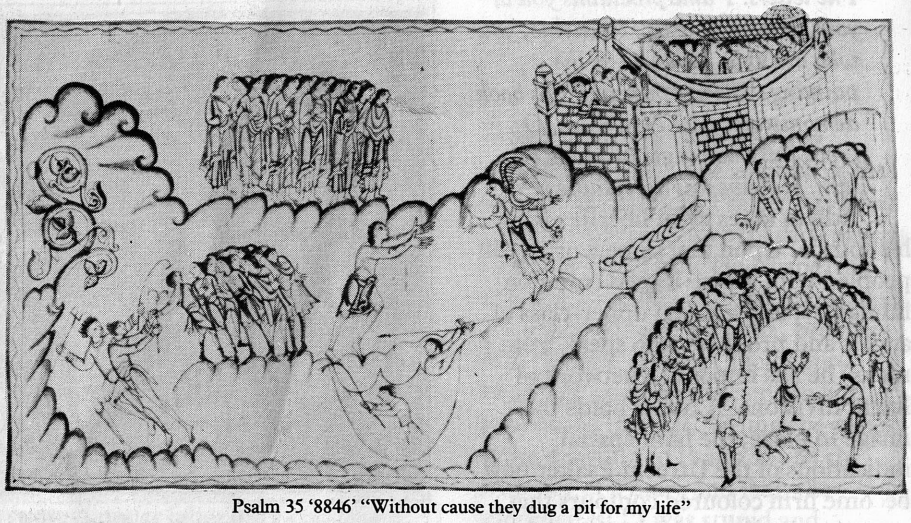
convert the whole surface to a kind of snakes-and-ladders.

The losses are obvious: that airiness and lightness, so well suited to the fast-moving excited voice of many of the psalms, has been shut off by a solid wall of patterned colour. The book-scale no longer seems adequate; the image threatens to overwhelm the page, its sixteen inches happier at sixteen foot, or sixty. There is something oppressive, almost stupid, about the completeness of this surface, the tight enclosures of gold and vermilion and ultramarine, relentlessly elaborated. The book represents not months, but years of work.

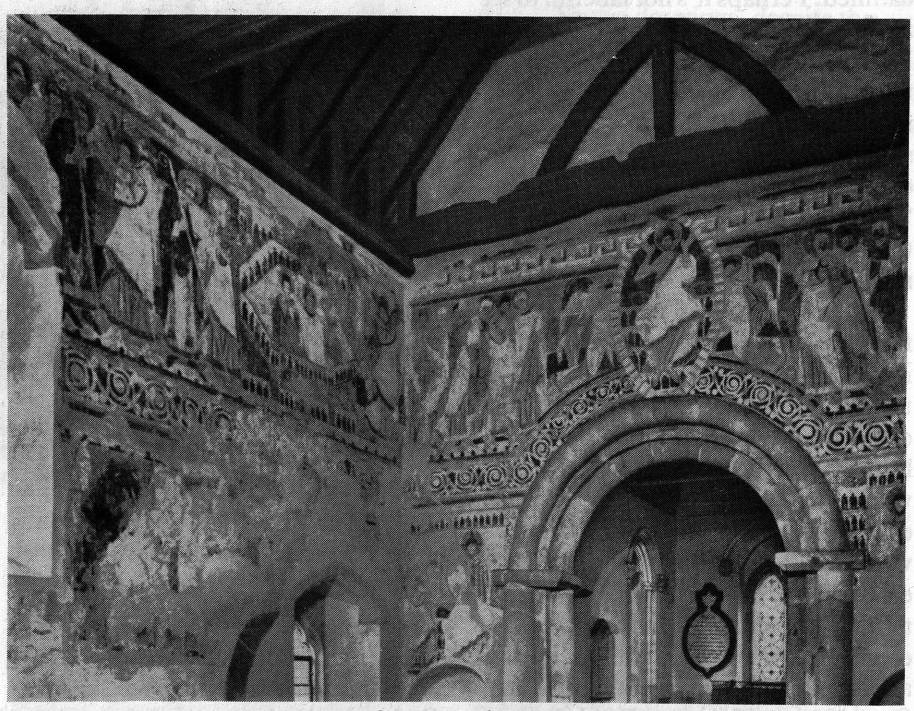
Yet in this characteristic product of the High Romanesque, there is also a classical solemnity, a potential for depth of emotion, that had never before appeared in English painting. It's in the denser, more consistent Psalms that we see the gains most clearly. Take Psalm 23, the best-loved text of all. It is a miraculous marriage, how literally, yet strangely and poetically, each verbal image is embodied, one by one, within the pastoral landscape. The "still waters", like a giant tadpole; the "paths" of righteousness, which at lower right, double as the crest of that terrible valley, (where enemies prepare their arrows); the visionary table, and the brimming cup. It conveys a world where the relationship between man and God has been perfected in harmony. But the humanity of this image, and its mood of repose, is inconceivable within the nervy calligraphy of the Utrecht Psalter. The image had to wait three hundred years, before its potential could find fulfilment.

I first encountered a single illumination from this psalmbook about fifteen years ago, reproduced in an unexpected place – at the beginning of Erwin Panofsky's *Early Netherlandish Painting* – and I immediately responded to its complex formal organisation, as much as to its mood of fervid prophecy and imminent apocalypse. I could assimilate its maplike compartments to other images that thrilled me – to certain kinds of Indian miniature, to Blake, to Leger, or to some of the last works of Max Beckmann, especially *The Cabins*. What I recognised in all of them, was that they articulated in an almost diagrammatic way, the complexity of experience; what William James meant

Psalm 35 Eadwine Psalter



Psalm 35 '8846' "Without cause they dug a pit for my life"



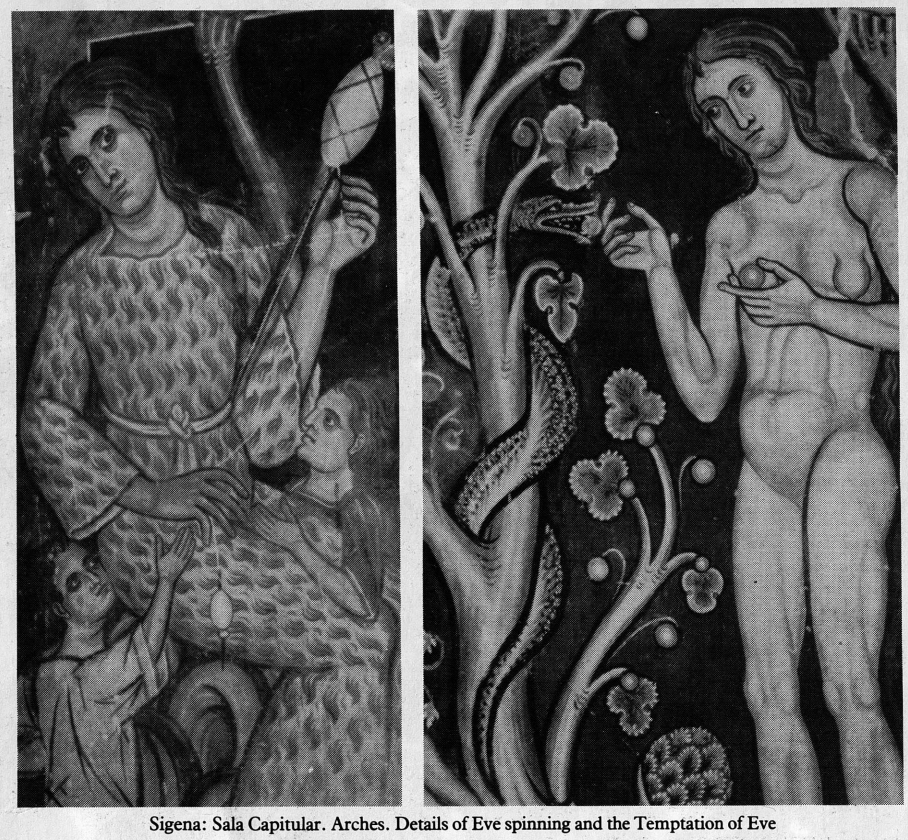
Clayton, East Sussex

when he defined the world, not as a universe, but a 'multiverse'. They presented the *mechanics* of events that could be internal or external; that could be the cyclic processes of mind and spirit, or of living forms.

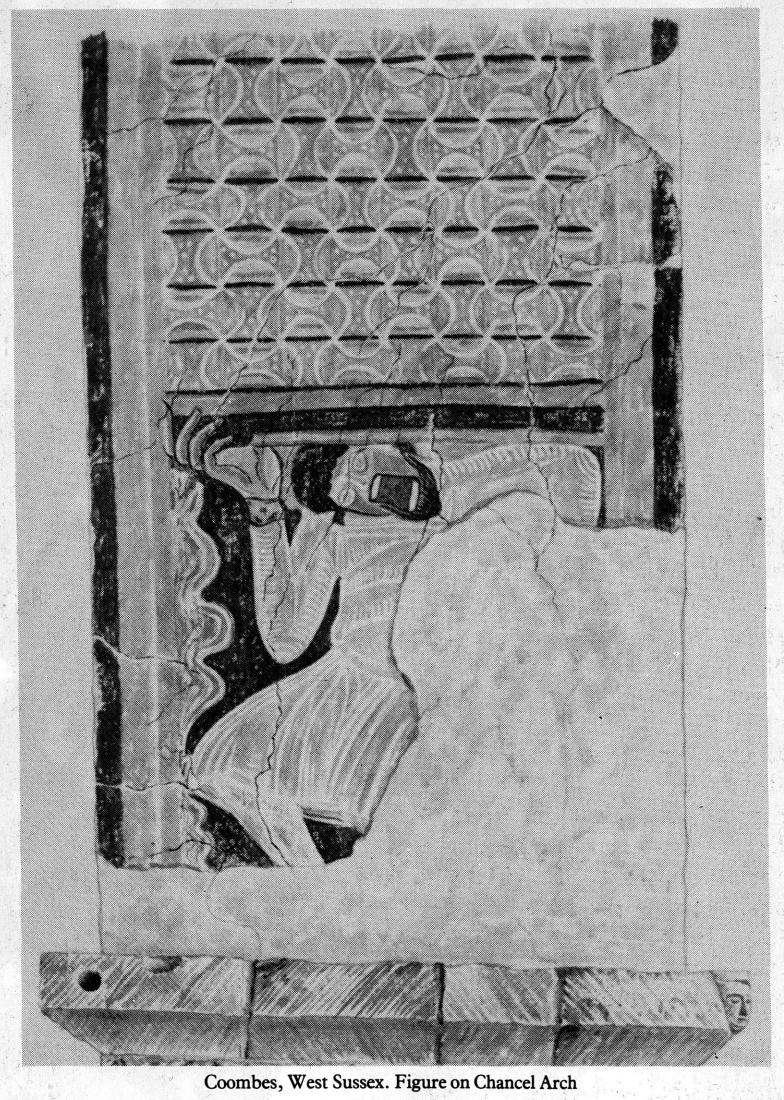
The story of the Utrecht Psalter and its metamorphosis into the imagery of "8846" speaks of the continuity of inspiration; it seemed to follow that I, or anyone else, might still find there in turn, the germ of a wonderful kind of picture. I remember hurrying to the Victoria and Albert library to photocopy some black and white reproductions of "8846" (the only ones available); and drawing from one of them, and later making a large painted version with made-up colour – until the *idea* of the image seemed so embedded in my aesthetic that I could forget about it . . .

Coming back to the original now, I find I look upon it rather differently. I recognise just how many other wonderful 'ideas' are locked away within that complex book (which still remains so little published or discussed). But I also see it as the work of a particular artist.

Its combination of extreme formalisation and powerfully individuated figures is peculiar to the last phase of English Romanesque. But many characteristics narrow the identification further, suggesting an attribution to the greatest painter of the day, the Sigena Master himself, or to an artist close to him. In the second part of this article, I hope to explore the personality of this extraordinary figure, who fused English and Mediterranean traditions in a uniquely vigorous way, and whose journeys – which probably included personal contact with Byzantine masters – read like a historical romance. □



Sigena: Sala Capitular. Arches. Details of Eve spinning and the Temptation of Eve



Coombes, West Sussex. Figure on Chancel Arch

1. If Indian painting is now familiar, it's largely through the availability of many excellent popular picture-books. Strangely (for these are among the most beautiful books ever created) English Romanesque manuscripts have been ill-served. There are few monographs one can honestly recommend and most of these – the Faber series, for example – are no longer in print. Teaching problems are reinforced by the failure of most libraries – most disgracefully the British Museum – to publish slides. The Bodleian is a shining exception.
2. No book exists which reproduces all four in a series of double-spreads, which seems to me one of the strangest omissions in current art publishing.
3. By 1086 a quarter of England was owned by ten men.

Part Two will incorporate a review of the Hayward's "1066".

Following pages: *Calling brother Fuseli in London* drawings made for *Artscribe* by Martin Disler

Following pages: *Ego Geometria Sum* project for *Artscribe* by Helen Chadwick