The Inspiration of English Romanesque

Part Two: The Sigena Master and the High Romanesque Synthesis

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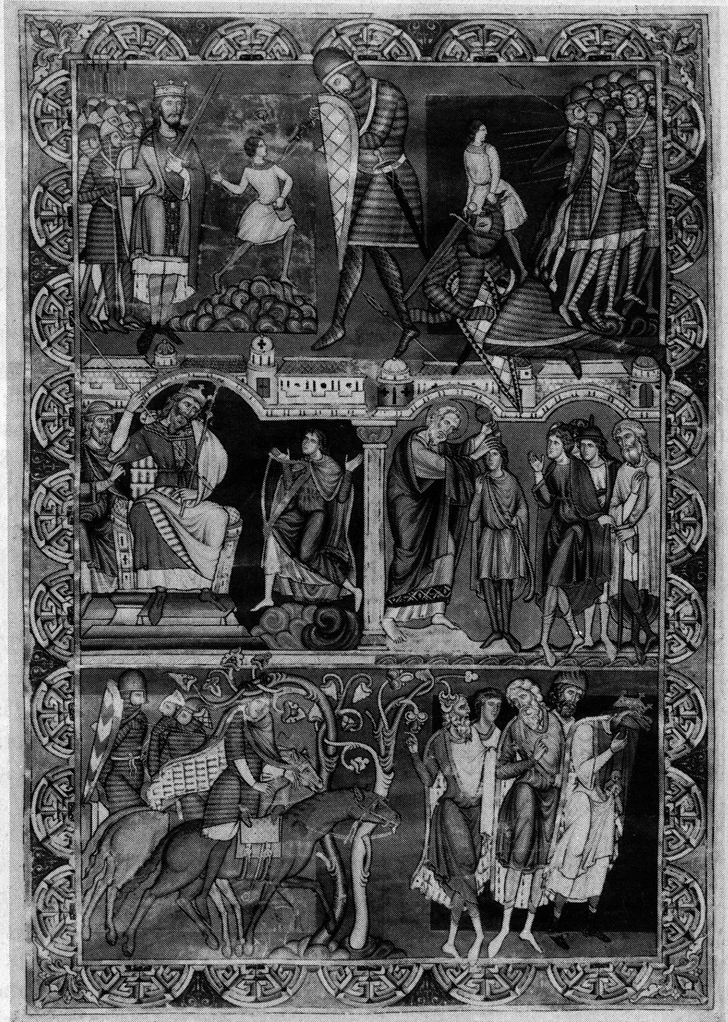
The Romanesque of bare stone interiors and primitive carved figures – the truth-to-materials Romanesque we all learnt to admire along with Modern Art, and to play off against the 'too sophisticated' Gothic or Renaissance – is revealed at the Hayward[1] as less than a half-truth, and almost a misconception. Filigree refinement is as characteristic of this style as rugged simplicity. The Romanesque is the greatest vehicle of prophetic and visionary emotion the West has known; in this wonderful exhibition, that sense is reinforced, but with a new awareness of how an ivory comb, an iron door, a copper finial, a silver seal, an enamelled cup, can each speak with that same thrilling voice.

There's no loss of vitality in substituting for rude barbarians, a rich and elaborate culture. But there is a heightened ache of loss. This remains an exhibition of fragments. One head and a foot are captioned as "the unique survivor" from all the "thousands of painted wooden crucifixes buried at the time of the reformation." We may need to have visited at least some of the great cathedrals and the painted churches, to glimpse through so many shards the wholeness of that world. Each carries an extraordinary tale. That pair of liturgical combs, a few inches long, encrusted like netsuke with miniscule New Testament scenes; think of the ivory brought from Africa or India, to be carved in St Albans around 1120, where English illumination first flowered after the Conquest (what chance now of a great master emerging in St Albans?) to be used in ceremony wherever and however, and then scattered, to end up in glass cases in Verdun and the V and A!

Perhaps wisely, the organisers have made no attempt to create an atmosphere; apart from sensitive lighting and some unobtrusive, actually rather ghastly, cardboard arcades, the objects are left to speak for themselves. To have mingled photographs or reconstructions alongside such potent talismen might have been crass. Yet this sober installation – less risky than the Indian



The Morgan Leaf Story of David, Winchester *c.*1180

Detail of *Morgan Leaf* (David weeping)

show (which I would reckon a failure), and less atmospheric than the splendid "World of Islam" – does tend to emphasize sculpture at the expense of painting, the object at the expense of the individual artist. Does the average visitor realise that in each of these books (objects among so many other kinds of object) may be bound up at least another 100, often surprisingly *personal*, paintings?

It would need another kind of exhibition to bring out, for instance, the character and range of activity of Master Hugo; or, more central to my interest, the Sigena Master. The four key works associated with him – the Winchester Bible, the Morgan Leaf from New York, the '8846' psalter from Paris, and some of the surviving Sigena heads from Barcelona – were all somewhere in the exhibition. But no one could guess from the evidence here, that the same artist might be responsible for all four, with all the Mediterranean travel and cross-cultural contact that implies. An opportunity has been lost to bring the Romanesque artist up close, where he speaks to our own experience, and thereby to acknowledge this culture as no less complex and eclectic than our own.

In the effort of imagination needed to reconstruct the Romanesque world, an Indian temple city might be more relevant than the drab fastidious stony silence of our typical Norman church. We have to conjure a profusion of imagery, of colour above all; how those bare cushion capitals were plastered and painted; how even the timbers of secular buildings were often brightly daubed, and the spaces between patterned. It's not just the obvious loss of sculptured and painted figures, but the national loss of a strong stomach for imagery of any kind, that one laments in our post-Reformation culture. We've inherited the aesthetics of a Quaker meeting house; we look to the pure walls of the Romanesque (the result of centuries of ferocious destruction) with all the enthusiasm of iconoclasts. As artists we are doubly wounded by that second more recent 'reformation', which turned sacred story into significant form, made demons of images, and cast out fantasy. From all this, the Romanesque can be, and should be, a deliverance.

The Fable of the Sigena Master

At its most fabulous, the tale goes something like this. That an English artist, born about 1130, arrived in Norman Sicily about the middle of the century. There he had contact with Byzantine mosaicists working in Palermo. Returning to England, he illuminated books for St Albans and Westminster. Then, about 1170, he joined the team working on the two-volume Winchester Bible, and completed the Morgan Leaf. He returned to Sicily, with some of the Winchester team as his assistants; on the way home, about 1185, they stopped off in Catalonia, where they frescoed the chapter-house at Sigena. He spent the last years of his life at Canterbury, illuminating the last version of the Utrecht Psalter, '8846'.

I want to use that fable as the framework for my essay. I call it a 'fable', because I'm claiming a certain licence; and although this account is based on the work of such sober scholars as Otto Pächt and Sir Walter Oakeshott, anything we say about an individual master at this period is bound to be conjectural. The total Romanesque survival rate is reckoned at less than 1 per cent: we make a story out of what we've got, but our 'Sigena Master' might well be at least two or three different artists, working in a closely similar style. Yet putting it all together as one artist does I think bring us closer to the probable scale and range of a great medieval painter's achievement.

By 1150 an artist was not usually a monk; but he might have been educated in the monastic schools, and he would work much of his life in the service of religious communities, moving freely from one to another. His apprenticeship would probably fit him to be a general artificer for that community; as is evident at the Hayward, great masters often turned their hand to the 'minor arts'. An artificer was also part of the entourage of any great personage; probably a young painter often attached himself to a specific patron and moved with him about the world. It's likely to be in that role that our master first made his way to Sicily.

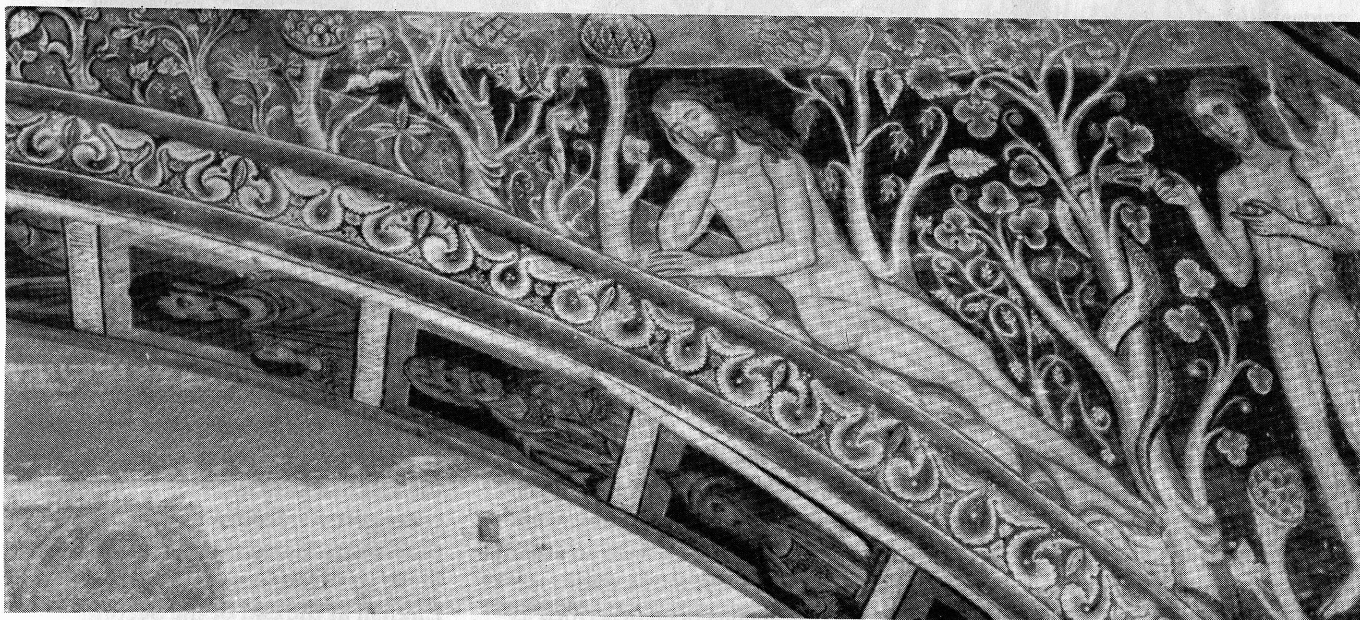
Byzantine and Barbarian

For an Anglo-Norman painter to go to Sicily in 1150 meant, in aesthetic terms, renewing contact with his source. The term 'Romanesque', coined when Graeco-Roman art was still the European ideal, is misleading. The '-esque' conjured Barbarians wakening among ruins, botching their pidgin out of the fag-ends of that Roman world which they'd destroyed. And even the modern definition – the style of Latin-speaking Europe, 'Romania', between 1000 and 1200 – probably won't do. Year by year the evidence mounts that a truer view of this art may be to see it as only the Western segment of a common visual culture, which stretched from Armenia to the Orkneys; whose only true metropolis and chief source was not lost Rome, but living Byzantium.

This provincial Byzantism is true above all in English painting. For the architect, there was always the local presence of Roman buildings, to be quarried and cannibalized; for the sculptor, there were few useful precedents in Rome or in Byzantium, and he had to a remarkable degree to start anew. But for the painter there was little question. The Byzantine was the dominant visual language of the day; and so an English twelfth-century Bible, neither classicizing nor primitive, was painted in one of the dialects of the Byzantine world.

But what then are the *special* qualities of this dialect – of the painting that flourished in England between 1150 and 1200? I first asked myself that question in the 1960s, when a civil war was raging between 'Abstract' and 'Figurative'. It was tempting to project back the same schematic terms, so that the Anglo-Norman artist came at the end of a long struggle. Between Celtic geometry and Roman illusionism, between primeval ornament and Mediterranean humanism, Viking knots and Carolingian panoramas; the Mediterranean drew nearer and receded, the battle ebbed and flowed. Secular antique figures were swallowed up, trapped and squeezed in the intricate carpets, to re-emerge a century later charged with a new metaphysical resonance. In these terms, the 'special' synthesis of English Romanesque, especially in its last 'High' fifty years, was when the figural authority and monumentality of classical tradition was wedded to the patterned vitality of a springtime, and essentially popular culture.

Adam and Eve shown the garden



Eve tempted

Adam delves, Eve spins Details from the chapter-house, Sigena c.1185

Sigena, chapter-house *c.*1185 Nativity

One problem with a formulation like 'Provincial Byzantine' is that we know so little of the metropolis. As Peter Brown writes, "the culture of Byzantium was burnt out at its heart. What survives comes less from Constantinople than from the ragged fringes of Empire." We may be seeing in Venetian and Sicilian mosaics the merest shadow of the marvels that once existed in the capital. Nevertheless, the negative response many Western people first have towards Byzantine imagery – that it is rigid, repetitive, desiccated, over-formalized, distanced – does have some basis. When Byzantium created imagery again, after the terrible interruption of iconoclasm, it was in a somewhat *defensive* mode. Peter Brown writes of the grave face of the icon, deliberately inexpressive, or rather, "expressive of the silence of God." The image had to be correct, to obey the rules, to be authentic; some of these prescriptions were said to date from the time of, even the hand of, St Luke himself. Their chief function was to prime the inward eye of the worshipper:

> *For what the prophet or holy man had seen with his own eyes, the average man could nightly imagine in the icon, its tones as clear, as sharp in outline, and as shadowless as a dream.*

All this seems a long way from Graeco-Roman humanism, and yet these New Testament figures, with their Augustan togas, were an attempt to preserve the authentic tradition. Byzantine art has been described as passing on the classical heritage in 'dehydrated' form; it would be the function of Western artists, such as the Sigena Master or Duccio, to add the necessary moisture and heat, to make that tradition digestible again. Beside the frozen authority of their Byzantine sources, their work has the rhythmic fluidity and emotional warmth, as well as the narrative invention, that we recognise instinctively as a beginning not an end.

Sicily had been Norman for some eighty years by the time the Sigena Master arrived there; but it still remained Byzantine in its art. It was simply the most prestigious visual language available. Three centuries earlier, when Charlemagne wanted to declare himself a Caesar, he'd revived the illusionism of Ancient Rome. But by 1150, it was Byzantium which preserved the Imperial myth; and in Sicily the Normans, so keen to assume the Imperial mantle, literally wore Byzantine court dress. The mosaicists in Palermo and Cefalu, working often for English patrons, may well have come directly from Constantinople; the Sigena Master, perhaps arriving in Sicily in 1147 along with many other English at the end of the Second Crusade, may have been caught up in their great mosaic programmes.

The Palermo mosaics are immensely impressive; they had already influenced an earlier generation of English artists. Perhaps because they were made for the Latin church, in a world where Jew and Arab mingled freely with Frank and Greek, they are more unpredictable, more accessible, than most comparable cycles. But these absolutely confidently constructed figures, this totally assured and consistent spatial convention, has a kind of impenetrability; it tells of a very old culture, one whose experience is so rich that it has nothing more to receive. As Richard Southern put it:

> *Western Europe was not at home with its past, had not identified itself with its past, as Byzantium had*

Lambeth Bible mid-12th century

done. But this Byzantine sense of being one with the past shut out all the more rigorously those who had strayed away from or had never known this past.

In the long run, the Anglo-Norman artist, like the Anglo-Norman knight, would only have one relation to Byzantium – that of plunder. Already in 1147, Roger of Sicily had raided Greece; in 1204 Venetian and Frankish crusaders would join disgracefully in sacking Byzantium. By then the Sigena Master was probably dead. In Palermo, working under a Byzantine master, he must have felt his inadequacy, have tried to assimilate and conform to metropolitan criteria. But as he embarked, as he voyaged further from Byzantium, out towards Ultima Thule, he must have felt the rules becoming less clear, the possibilities opening again.

Narrative and Icon: Winchester and the Morgan Leaf

By the time he returned to England, the Bury and Lambeth Bibles were finished, and Winchester under way. These huge Bibles are among the few complete cycles of imagery surviving from the major centres; they give us almost our only information about their lost murals. For Otto Demus, writing about the whole range of European Romanesque, these illuminations convey "an overwhelming impression that Anglo-Norman art must have been one of the great creative forces of the High Romanesque." In the fifty years after the Conquest, there'd been little painting of any kind, though every major British church was rebuilt. It was only in the 1120s, with the walls ready for painting, and the treasuries waiting to be filled, that a vast programme began.

All monasteries claimed a 'library' but that usually meant no more than a cupboard full. Many books were in plain script; others reached already far into history (and Pächt believes there was a substantial store of Roman books in medieval Britain). The new Bibles involved an immense outlay, at least comparable to a fresco-cycle; the preparation of calfskin parchment (the Winchester Bible used 250 animal hides), the gesso and gold-leaf, and the elaborate, often jewelled, bindings, made of them not so much a score for reading aloud, as a consecrated ceremonial object, a miniature monument. Such imagery had special needs. As Pächt writes in *Pictorial Narrative in 12th Century England*, this art was searching for "a compromise between narrative proper and the devotional image"; it needed to tell a story, but to tell it with a kind of timeless authority.

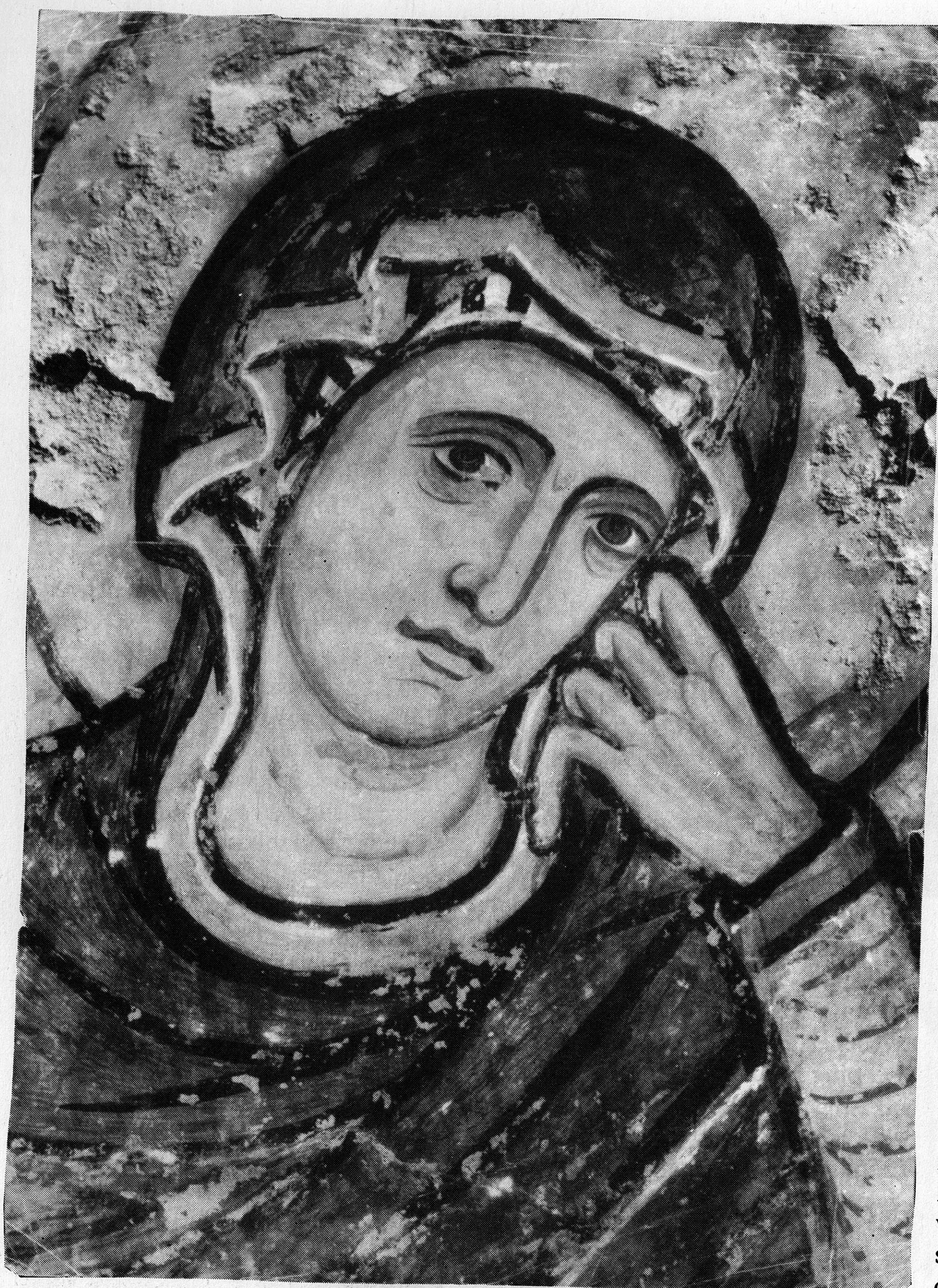
Anglo-Saxon art, with its wit and dancing line, had pointed in a different direction. The name given to the most striking artist of the first phase of the Winchester Bible, the Master of the Leaping Figures, is graphic enough; creating a weightless tribe of eternal children, mannered, a little precious, employing the (ultimately Byzantine) 'wet-fold' convention to fantastical ends, so that the human body is reinvented with amazing resource. English Romanesque never entirely lost that special dynamism and flamboyance, but when the Winchester Bible is resumed after 1170, we suddenly encounter strongly individuated figures, who bear the tragic weight and experience of an old culture, and who've obviously made the long weary journey from Palermo in the baggage of the Sigena Master.

His masterpiece at Winchester was a single leaf now in New York – a frontispiece, never in fact inserted in the Bible, designed and outlined by a different artist, but painted, in such a way as to utterly transform it, by the Sigena Master himself. It is both the greatest piece of story-telling, and among the most exquisite objects, in English art. In a single piece of paper, twenty-three inches by fifteen, the life of David is unforgettably encapsulated, in all its subtle correspondence and tragic symmetry. The elaborate frame, and frames within the frame, constantly and wittily assist the action; Goliath's head pokes hugely beyond it, next door his headless corpse dangles a leg out of it, the Philistines melt away into it, Saul's threatening spear breaks it. (Goliath living and Goliath collapsed actually overlap one another.) The colour is certainly highly formalized, the high-pitched absolute red and blue alternating like an Albers; yet the *dramatis personae* emerge in all their human depth, with richly modelled features. Without that individuation, I would not be so moved by the final image, where Absolom is caught by his hair in the tree, and David told of his son's death. That wonderful weeping figure, turning and leaning towards the Night – the only moment where the blue touches the border, where the outside edge remains empty – ends the crowded story on a note of utter solitude. And this mantled figure, hiding his face in shame, is linked by the angle of his crown to the two vertical images of King Saul above. In a sense, he has become Saul; and the cycle is complete.

Wit and tragedy; the great *range* of emotion within the single page would not have been available to either Anglo-Saxon or Byzantine. It needed a fusion of those two possibilities to create the phenomenon of the Sigena Master.

Sigena: The Greatest English Painting

In 1936 a black-and-white photographic record was made of some splendidly coloured paintings west of Barcelona; within a few months, they were blown sky-high, a casualty of the Spanish Civil War. An attempt at reconstruction has been made (in the great Museum of Catalan Art in Barcelona); and the photographs were in 1972 published here, as *Sigena*, by Walter Oakeshott. My own conviction is that the Hayward show should have drawn more attention to these, still not popularly known works; and in the long run I hope one of the London museums will attempt a reconstruction. (I've just revisited the Musée des Monuments Français, in the Palais Chaillot opposite the Eiffel Tower – that stupendous concept first dreamed up by Viollet-le-Duc, and


Detail of the Nativity (the Virgin)

now consisting of four enormous floors, crammed with replicas of every major medieval monument and wall-painting in France. Students of English wall-paintings badly need an equivalent.)

The chapter-house was a complex space, every surface covered in figured imagery. In triangular compartments to either side of a series of arches, the Genesis story is told with luminous tenderness – not least in the kindly angel who instructs Adam how to delve. But each scene gives way at the narrowing middle; in the first arch, to a glorious parade of the formalized plants of the paradise garden; subsequently to a quite 'irrelevant' Bestiary (whose legendary and exotic creatures were so much a speciality in late twelfth-century English manuscripts). The ferocity and rhythmic, wiry vitality of these grotesque beasts complements the humane narration of the Bible story; a kind of safety valve for these more primitive emotions excluded by Byzantium, the shadow in the margin.

Even with the colour lost, the linear boldness of the drawing has few parallels; one thinks of Indian Kaligat painting, or of Léger. Yet the nobility and assured authority of bearing in each figure (including the nude Adam and Eve) is completely, classically, convincing. The much larger end-wall of the Nativity seems to me clumsier, and is nearer to Byzantine sources. Yet on closer scrutiny the slight edge of naive comedy – in the pantomime ox and ass, or in poor puzzled Joseph, more than ever out of things – confers a warmth and geniality nowhere to be found in Palermo. And close up, the Virgin's head shows the English artist recreating the Byzantine stereotype in a fluent graphic idiom, somehow rendering her suddenly earthy, a womanly Mary, a true second Eve. The first Eve, on the first arch, had listened to the serpent's teaching with wide-open, candid eyes; now the Queen of Heaven looks out at us from beneath her sky mantle, with joy and promise. "Eva has become Ave."[2]

The master who completed Sigena would perhaps live to paint the Canterbury psalter discussed in my earlier article. But 1200 marks the cut-off point for Romanesque mural schemes by Northern European artists. The Gothic, with its aesthetic of coloured light, meant the death of English mural painting; as Von Simson pointed out, "Gothic is not the heir but the rival of Romanesque, created as its explicit antithesis." Only in Italy, where the unbroken wall survived, would fresco assert its continuity.

The Romanesque has come to mean many things; to the eighteenth century a 'collective nightmare', to the early twentieth, a weapon against classicism. To me it seems, as much as anything else, an exemplar for our visual culture, emerging from iconoclasm, recovering from schism. English Romanesque means an art which combines the most compelling story-telling with unmatched decorative splendour; highly formalized, bound within an elaborate frame, yet whose figures are always dramatically conceived, individuated almost to the point of portraiture. What is achieved is a metaphysical art, yet which sacrifices astonishingly little of the natural world. □

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1. "1066: English Romanesque Art" at the Hayward Gallery to 8 July.
2. "Eva has become Ave": the words of the Annunciating Angel in an English mystery play.

Some recommended reading:
Sir Walter Oakeshott *Sigena*
Otto Demus *Romanesque Mural Painting, Byzantine Art and the West*
C.R.Dodwell *The Great Lambeth Bible*
O.Pächt *The Rise of Pictorial Narrative in Twelfth Century England*
Peter Brown *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*
Christopher Brooke *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*
Sir Richard Southern *The Making of the Middle Ages*
O. Von Simson *The Gothic*