

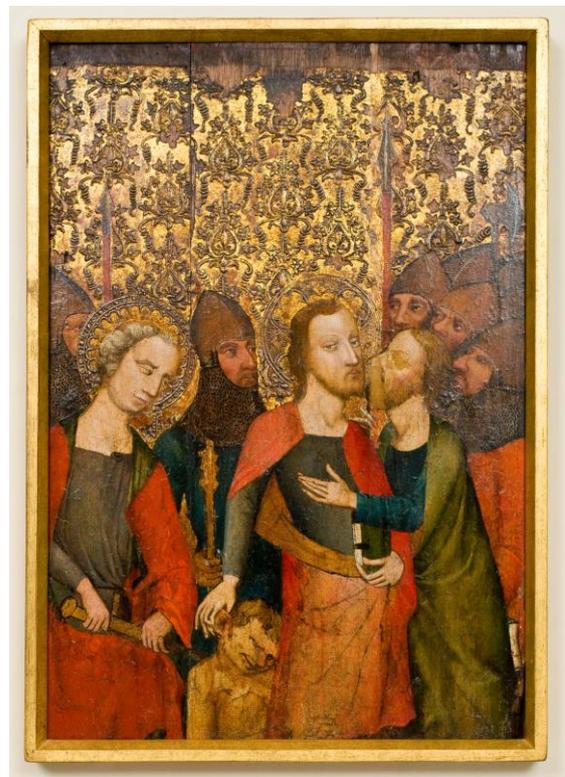
The Painted Panels from St Michael-at-Plea

In his work on Norwich published in 1741 the Reverend Francis Blomefield noted some painted panels in the church of St Michael-at-Plea.

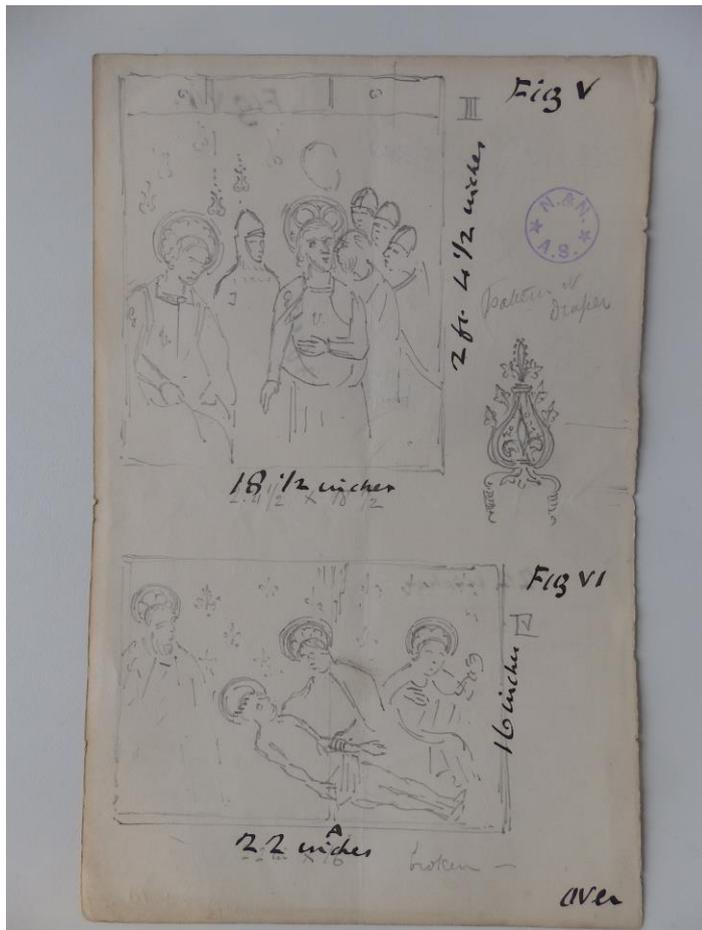
there still remain several ancient paintings on boards, as an old *salutation* hanging at the west entrance, and our *Saviour's* resurrection and crucifixion, on the north side of the entrance into the chancel; together with the *Virgin of Pity*, surveying her son's dead body, the *salutation*, *Judas betraying Christ*; and *St. John*, and the *Virgin*; and opposite are paintings of the *crucifixion* with *Mary* and *John* by the CROSS, *St. Margaret* and the dragon, *St. Benedict* and *St. Austin*. (Blomefield 1741, 715).

Of the twelve panels eight are still in Norwich and were conserved and moved to Norwich cathedral after the Second World War (Thurlow 1961, 2): the Resurrection, two Crucifixions, a Betrayal, St Margaret, one of the Annunciations (*salutations* in Blomefield) and two male saints. The missing pictures are the second Annunciation, the *Virgin of Pity*, *St John*, and the *Virgin*.

The extant panels come from at least three different ensembles. The two earliest, a Betrayal and a Crucifixion with two devotees, are probably from a five-panel altarpiece originally about 3 metres wide, suggesting that it was for the high altar of a parish church. The missing panels were most probably the Flagellation, an Entombment and a Resurrection (Heslop 2015, 202, 211, cf. Thurlow 1961, 2, 7). On a visit to St Michael's, in 1859 according to Waller, G. W. Minns saw ten pictures, the eight listed above and also a Scourging and an Entombment 'lying about in the vestry' (Waller 1898, 331 n.2). Waller, relying on some drawings Minns sent him, described the Flagellation as very similar to that on the Passion Altarpiece in the cathedral: showing Pilate and Christ with his hands tied above his head to the column. This supports the idea that the dismembered Plea altarpiece was indeed by the same artist as the cathedral's altarpiece (Hope 1898, 312).



Betrayal panel from St Michael at Plea, on display in Norwich Cathedral. Photograph copyright and courtesy of Andy Crouch.



G.W. Minns. Drawing of the Betrayal and Pieta panels from St Michael at Plea. Copyright and courtesy of Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society

The drawings by Minns of all ten panels enable us to judge the accuracy (or not) of his draughtsmanship in relation to the extant paintings and to give some idea to the compositions of the two lost pictures. In general he captures such things as poses and expressions well, though he is not consistent in representing the proportions. So, for example, he shows the Resurrection as considerably wider in relation to its height and this is reflected in the figures being stockier than they actually are; otherwise he conveys a good sense of the organisation of the scene. As regards the Flagellation, as Minns depicts it there is no space for a man with a scourge between Christ and Pilate – it is not just that Waller omitted to mention his presence. This has the effect of creating a much more direct confrontation between the two figures. If the torturers were present, they must have been to the right (sinister) side. So far as I know, this arrangement is unparalleled but it is indicative of the inventiveness of the painter. The style of these three of the Plea panels, the costumes of the

male and female figures at the foot of the Cross, and the armour of the soldiers at the Betrayal, all suggest a date c.1400.

The so-called Entombment turns out to be a Pieta (presumably Blomefield's 'Virgin of Pity'), with Christ laid on his mother's lap and a figure to either side – probably John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalene. Its landscape format indicates that it was an independent image of a kind increasingly popular elsewhere in northern Europe, for example in the circle of Roger van der Weyden. While it can never have been part of the Passion altarpiece with the Betrayal, 'Flagellation' and Crucifixion, there are however indications that it had a gold-patterned *pastiglia* background similar to the early Plea panels, in which case it would have been a precocious example of the type. By 1869 it was badly damaged 'having our Lord's legs destroyed' (Thurlow 1961, 7).

The next grouping that can be reconstructed on the basis of formal similarities are the three with a dark blue sky and white clouds. They depict two bishops and the Resurrection. One bishop is clearly St Erasmus, the windlass of his martyrdom being depicted by his feet. The other is probably St Thomas Becket: he wears an archbishop's pallium and holds a cross staff typical of archbishops of Canterbury, rather than the much more common volute crosier. The panels can be dated by the armour of the sleeping soldiers around Christ's tomb to c.1450 or rather later. Although it has often been suggested that they were part of a

screen - 'a portion of the rood screen was then in situ and formed part of a pew' (Waller 1898, n.2), there are no signs of tracery at the tops or bottoms of the panels as was common practice on screens by the mid-15th century. However, as the tops of the two bishops' panels have been cut off there may once have been tracery there. This mutilation had occurred before they were incorporated in the screen in which Minns saw them, so it cannot be their original location. The Resurrection is 1.45 m high and 0.51 m wide, and it seems probable that it was always taller than the bishops' panels as it is also wider than they are (i.e. 1.10 x 0.44 m). It is not obvious where in St Michael-at-Plea any of them might have belonged. The north transept dedicated to John the Baptist does not well suit the episcopal saints. One possibility is that the Resurrection was associated with the 'Easter' sepulchre, to which parishioners left money for lights, but whether the other two were displayed with it is unknown.

This analysis accounts for five out of the eight extant panel paintings; what of the remainder? A second Crucifixion panel, an Annunciation/Visitation panel, and St Margaret of Antioch are of similar dimensions to each other (about 1 m high and 0.44 m wide) and have gilded tin relief patterned backgrounds as opposed to blue sky. They are also comparable in style, especially the Annunciation and St Margaret. Even so it is hard to see how they could all have come from a single devotional object, though the presence of St Margaret (associated with childbirth) could perhaps be linked with the Lady chapel. A thorough physical examination of the panels, especially for any signs of joinery on their reverses, may help resolve their relationship. As regards the style of figure painting, these three panels are quite similar to the Resurrection group in the depiction of faces and drapery. They also relate to other paintings apparently produced by Norwich artists, such as the screen panels from St John Maddermarket, commissioned by Ralph Segrym before 1456 (see case study), and the screen at Barton Turf (Baker 2011, 65-67, 118-20) perhaps of around 1460.

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