The Collaboration of G. F. Bodley & J. R. Spencer Stanhope in Florence 1892–1904

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Recently discovered at St. Mark’s English Church in Florence, is a portion of a wall stencilling by G. F. Bodley (1827-1907), the famous Victorian Neo-Gothic architect and designer, and pupil of Sir Gilbert Scott. It was Victorian artists who made stencilling into a respected art form and drew their ideas from a range of sources. These designs were used to enhance all sorts of architectural features like ceilings, arches, dados and wall friezes.

Bodley, who was born in Hull, designed many churches in England, as well as two cathedrals in America in his later years. His father claimed descent from the founder of the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Bodley was highly influenced by Ruskin who published *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* in 1849, followed by *The Stones of Venice* in 1851-53. Ruskin’s conclusions in these books led Bodley to reject Scan’s influence and adopt the Gothic style of Northern France and Italy. Later, in 1865, he became attracted to the English Decorated style of the fourteenth century and the secular architecture of the Queen Anne period.

The history of St. Mark’s English Church goes back to 1880 when the Reverend Charles Tooth bought a small fifteenth century palazzo in the Via Maggio on the south side of the Arno River. Here, he altered the ground floor to provide a nave, aisles, transept and chancel, all with low groin vaults supported by columns and piers. The whole structure is about 90 feet in length. The first Eucharist was celebrated in 1881. According to the Reverend H. A. Varty, in 1935: ‘... the whole of the decorations of the walls and groined ceiling were designed by Mr J. R. Spencer Stanhope, A.R.A., a well-known artist of the Pre-Raphaelite School and they were executed by him at his own expense’. A plaque commemorates Stanhope’s contribution: ‘This Brass has been placed here by friends and members of the congregation of St Mark’s in affectionate remembrance of one who did much for the beautifying of the church. December 1908’. The floral motifs, still in existence, decorating the upper walls, arches and vaults of the church are charming, with a wonderful sense of naturalism. Lilies decorate both the springing of the vaults in the nave and aisles, and the crown of thorns and roses, with sprigs of olive branch on the pendentives, in the chancel.

However, the devastating floods in Florence in 1966 caused some damage to the interior of St. Mark’s Church. The height of the flood water can easily be seen by the waist-high watermark on the carved white marble font at the rear of the
church. The interior walls and piers, which had once been highly decorated with stencil painting in the late nineteenth century, suffered damage, and the decision was taken to whitewash over the old stencil work, creating plain walls and piers devoid of any ornamentation.

It was thought that the stencils had been lost for ever as there was no specific mention of them in the church records. The only possibility of finding any of the old stencil decoration intact was behind an old display cabinet attached to the North Wall. It was hoped that the workmen who repainted the walls after the flood in 1966 would not have bothered to remove the cupboard to plaster behind it. On the basis of this idea, the back of the cupboard was recently dismantled to reveal about three square meters of the old nineteenth century decoration, in good condition. A muscular, complex and energetic design appears, incorporating pines, crowns, fleur de lys, ivy leaves and flowers in subtle tones of dusky blue and grey, creating a beautiful effect. Although some of the design was missing, it seems that below the ivy branches the motifs transpose to make a half-repeat. The zigzag leaves emphasise the longitudinal axis of the aisle walls, and the pines and flowers create an interesting counter rhythm, with the half-repeat adding further intrigue. The ‘pineapple’ has been variously described as a pine cone, pomegranate or teasel, and became a popular motif in Renaissance fabrics at the end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries – possibly following its discovery in the New World by Christopher Columbus or maybe because of biblical references to the pomegranate decoration on ecclesiastical vestments.

Were these designs also by Spencer Stanhope (1829-1908)? Stanhope had been one of the intimate band of painters who revolved around Rossetti in the 1850s, and one of the group who decorated the Oxford Union amidst much youthful hilarity. He was also a member of the Hogarth Club, an exhibiting society made up of artists in the Rossetti circle. However, on consulting the Victoria and Albert Museum, I was informed that the design was not in Stanhope’s style, and Bodley was suggested as a possible author, since Bodley and Stanhope had collaborated on previous projects in England. This was later confirmed by the London Design Company, Watts & Co., which is still in existence, but was originally founded in 1874 by Bodley, Thomas Garner and George Gilbert Scott as an alternative to Morris & Co., with a specific ecclesiastical bias. Not only is the vigorous style typical of Bodley, but so too is the subtlety of the colours. Bodley was a brilliant colourist who frequently stated that Nature was his great inspiration: ‘And the sky, is not its great dome at times all blue gradated indeed, again, in a silvery tint . . . And the clouds, are they not at times all tints of grey?’2 Like A. W. N. Pugin, Bodley was influenced by Renaissance patterns, especially the silks and velvets woven in Lucca, Florence and Venice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, similar to those so richly painted by Denazzo Gozzoli in the mid-fifteenth century for the Chapel of the Palazzo Medici Ricardi in Florence, and so much admired by the Pre-Raphaelites. Hans Holbien the Younger uses the same heavy Renaissance damask pattern as a background for his famous painting *The Ambassadors* of 1533, now in the National Gallery in London. It appears to be derived from an early sixteenth century Venetian damask, a fragment of which is now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The pattern, with its flowers, crowns and cones is strikingly similar to the church stencil pattern. The
difference is that the stencil pattern is treated as a flat abstract design in order to enhance the plane of the wall. It makes no attempt to create the folds and pleats of the imposing curtain in Holbein’s painting.

Members of the Pre-Raphaelite group, and their extended circle of architects and designers, often worked together on important artistic projects. Bodley had first made friends with members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle in 1859 and gave William Morris his first chance of making ecclesiastical stained glass for churches in Brighton, Selsley and Scarborough (where, too, Stanhope designed figures for the organ case). In a similar fashion, Bodley and Stanhope collaborated at Marlborough College Chapel where Stanhope produced twelve panels of angels in 1871.

In 1872 Stanhope and his wife, for health reasons, settled on the outskirts of Florence in the Villa Nuti at Bellosguardo – an area beloved by the English because it has exceptional views over the city. Soon after Stanhope bought the Villa Nuti, it became affectionately known as the ‘Villa Stan-hoo-pee’ by the contadini. Stanhope’s niece described it as a spacious medieval building encircling a courtyard with orange and lemon trees. From the rose terrace one could see dotted about on the hillside below the blue-grey olive trees and the more sombre cypress groves, and here and there other villas with their beautiful gardens creating an atmosphere of old-time romance. Burne-Jones and Morris visited Stanhope at the Villa Nuti in 1873. Burne-Jones wrote to his little son, Philip: ‘Yesterday I walked up a hill to see Mr Stanhope who has a pretty house that looks all over Florence’. Burne-Jones and Stanhope were close friends, having shared a studio in their early years, and each had a high regard for the other’s work. Burne-Jones particularly admired Stanhope’s use of colour.

At this time there was a strong English presence in Florence. The first English Church, Holy Trinity, behind Piazza S. Marco, in Via Lamarmora, had been opened in 1844. It was a plain structure with a flat roof which had been designed by S. Domenico Giraldi. When work on St. Mark’s began 33 years later with the aim of catering for a more Anglo-Catholic liturgy, there was fears that Florence would not be able to support two English churches. Notices of the services at Holy Trinity were accorded great prominence in the Florence Gazette. Those at St Mark’s appeared underneath always preceded by the words: ‘licensed by the Bishop to hold services’. But in fact each church had its own catchment area: Holy Trinity served the new suburbs in the north while St Mark’s attracted the residents of the numerous villas outside Porta Romana. In 1890 it was decided that Holy Trinity was in urgent need of placement. A more central site was sought, but none found, so a decision was taken to rebuilt the church on its existing site. The Building Committee, of whom Stanhope was the Vice-Chairman, chose as their architect G. F. Bodley, A.R.A., ‘whose name, particularly associated with church architecture, was in itself a guarantee of success’.

Bodley visited Florence in May 1892 and stayed with Stanhope at Villa Nuti. These two Yorkshiremen must have had complementary personalities: Bodley had a slight stammer which added to his charm, while Stanhope was more outgoing, and according to his niece, A. M. W. Stirling, radiated fun and had a joyous philosophy of life. Bodley decorated the interior of the Villa with stencil patterns, and these together with the rich brocaded hangings and Stanhope’s own paintings...
in rare Italian frames, created a wealth of exquisite design and colour. Bodley’s plan for Holy Trinity was to retain as much as possible of the old building but to turn the church around on its main axis, and to provide a new entrance porch bearing the arms of the sees of Canterbury and York, and a bell tower. The interior was divided into nave and aisles, creating lofty arcades with pointed arches elegantly supported by green marble compound columns. The barrel-shaped ceilings of the aisles were painted in Indian red, while the nave ceiling is flat and the panels are decorated with floral motifs in blue and green. The Florence Gazette reported on the reopening of the church: ‘The proportions are very graceful, and the light column of green marble give a great effect of height and dignity. We heard many expressions of admiration and of wonder that even Mr Bodley’s genius should have been able to turn the very ugly building which served so long as the English Church in Florence into so striking an interior’. The stone used throughout was pietra serena, although Bodley had preferred pietra forte because of its warm brownish colour. However, it was difficult to find the latter in large quantities and it was also expensive.

The interior decoration of the church was completed in 1895. Miss Tassinari in her book The History of the English Church in Florence describes the sidewalls up to the string-course under the windows as being stencilled in a pineapple design worked out in two shades of Indian red. The wall above the string-course was stencilled for about two-thirds of its height in shades of dark green, the remaining third showing a variation of the pineapple design in lighter green on a white ground. The upper portion of the chancel wall was similarly decorated, the rest being blue with ‘H I S’ in gilt letters. Bodley’s great strength as a designer was that he kept tight control over every element of the design, not just from floor to ceiling but even in altar vessels and vestments. The colour scheme of Holy Trinity Church represented a microcosm of the world - earth, vegetation and sky. The rich polychrome colouring of the interior culminated in the magnificent 30-foot-high reredos for the high altar painted by Stanhope and consisting of fourteen panels. The large central paintings depicting The Annunciation and Crucifixion were flanked by angels and prophets.

Several of the stained glass windows in the church were designed by Bodley and constructed by Burlison and Grylls, a firm founded in 1869 by Bodley’s partner, Thomas Garner (1839-1906). The two windows in the Memorial Chapel of The Annunciation and Noli Me Tangere are particularly beautiful in their Botticellian grace and detachment. In the latter, Mary Magdalene and Christ stand amidst a profusion of lilies of the valley, daises, hyacinths and cornflowers. The large reredos in this Chapel, painted by Stanhope, depicts The Resurrection and Christ Triumphant with two panels of angels; the Botticellian angels perfectly complementing Bodley’s windows. The 90-foot tower and the sculpture that adorns it, give the structure a distinctly ecclesiastical feel. The latter were not completed until 1904 due to a lack of funds. In fact, it seemed unlikely the funds for this project would have been raised unless Mr and Mrs Stanhope had not sold a Botticelli altarpiece which they owned. A plaque commemorating their gift is set in the wall of the Memorial Chapel at the base of the tower. The new church must have given the English community a great deal of pride when they saw it for the first time with their flag flying from the battlements. Five years later the Italian
Gazette wrote: ‘Mr Stanhope, the Mastermind of the Reconstruction Committee of the Holy Trinity Church, and Mr Bodley R.A. the architect, have both passed away, but the edifice remains a living testimony to their loving care’.6

In 1965 it was decided that the diminished English community living in Florence no longer justified the existence of two churches. Holy Trinity Church was therefore sold to the Waldensians and many of its treasures removed to St. Mark’s. Amongst these were the two reredos painting by Stanhope. These were later dismantled and sold as individual panels. Although the larger frame was destroyed, the smaller is still stored at St. Mark’s. The Waldensians, requiring a much simpler interior, painted over the stencilled walls and removed the chancel, leaving very little to indicate Bodley’s original concept for the interior of the church.

As mentioned before, nothing in the records refer to Bodley’s work on the wall decoration at St. Mark’s. All that is said is that he described the church as ‘an almost perfect specimen of Renaissance work’.7 The most likely explanation is that he designed the pattern while in Florence during his 1892 visit, and that it was used to decorate the aisle walls of St. Mark’s at Stanhope’s expense. The fact that two years later the same design was used at Holy Trinity – although utilising a different colour scheme – provides a unique link between the two churches. What is particularly interesting at St. Mark’s is Bodley’s choice of a blue and grey colour scheme. Cool colours were possible in Italy because of the light and climate. In England, warmer colours were desirable. This is seen at All Saints’ Church, Cambridge (1871), where the pineapple stencil decoration was carried out in brown and gold. Bodley’s use of blue is also appropriate for religious reasons. Blue is the colour one associates with Trecento and Quattrocento Italian painting and it is also associated with the Madonna. It is therefore a perfect foil for the other Marian symbols in the church – lilies and roses. The symbolic use of colour in this way was entirely appropriate for the Anglo-Catholic congregation of the church.

Miss Mary Elsdale wrote: ‘I remember as if it were yesterday the first time I entered St. Mark’s, [on] November 1st 1893; the Romanesque looking interior, . . . [and] the warm soft colouring of the highly decorative stencilled walls’.8 Unfortunately, now one can only imagine the rich visual effect created in both St. Mark’s and Holy Trinity a hundred years ago by Bodley and Stanhope. Nevertheless, while the genius of their partnership in Florence has been largely lost, the rediscovery of the Bodley stencil decoration on the walls of St. Mark’s, has brought their partnership back into focus, and provides a fascinating glimpse of their friendship, generosity, patronage and skill.

NOTES
2 Anthony Symondson, ‘Wallpapers from Watts & Company’, Connoisseur Magazine, June 1980, p. 120.
5 *The Florence Gazette*, 28 April 1894.
6 *Italian Gazette*, 4 October 1909.
7 *A Short History of St Mark's English Church*, op. cit., p. 14.
8 ibid., p. 18.