

## THE STODMARSH PLASTER PANELS.

BY T. A. LEHFELDT.

As year after year passes by the number diminishes of fine old houses which formerly enriched the towns and countryside of England. The wear and tear of use, the stress of wind and weather, the pressure of increasing population, all combine in the melancholy process, and one by one interesting remains of art, so lavishly and so finely applied in old days to the decoration of English homes, are either destroyed by fire or fall under the hammer of the housebreaker. Or if at best some fragments are rescued from destruction it is only to reappear divorced from their natural and appropriate setting in alien houses or in the cold atmosphere of a museum. We can but acquiesce in this inevitable decay and hope that in museums at any rate, where such remains can be seen and studied by all, they will become seed, from which may be developed yet another phase of art to continue the splendid series that illustrate the life of the English people.

Some highly interesting fragments of this nature have recently been secured for the Victoria and Albert Museum, where they form a most welcome addition to the group of exhibits illustrating the decoration of houses. They were found in a house at Stodmarsh near Canterbury, and consist of eight plaster panels\* of various sizes, painted with monochrome designs in black on white.

These panels, considered according to the nature of the designs with which they are decorated, fall into three groups.

\* The panels bear registered numbers, W. 28 to G. 1913, in the Museum collections (Department of Woodwork). Photographs of them are on sale at the Museum.

Two panels are decorated with figure subjects symbolizing the "planets." Four others deal with subjects connected with the story of Actæon, while the two remaining panels are each decorated with a standing female figure. The following is a detailed description of the various panels, with their dimensions:—

No. 1. (a) This panel is divided by a column into two parts. In that on the spectator's left Venus is seated in a car drawn towards the left by a pair of doves; in her left hand she carries an arrow, and in her right an uncertain object resembling a ribbon, which might be a girdle. She wears a robe with short sleeves, decorated with horizontal stripes. Her hair is tired, and a pendant hangs down on her forehead. On the fore part of the car stands Cupid in the act of shooting with his bow, which he holds in his right and draws with his left hand; at his side he carries a quiver with arrows. In the background is a globe inscribed "VENVS," and bearing the sign of the planet, ♀. The foregoing is surrounded by cloud-forms, below which is a garden scene with a table set out on the left for a feast. A lady is seated at it playing a lute, to the sound of which a lady and gentleman are treading a measure. On the right is seen a lake in which is a man bathing.

(b) On the right half of the panel is Jupiter seated in a car drawn towards the right, probably by eagles, but the forms are almost obliterated. He is clad in classical armour, and wears a helmet with plumes, and a cloak. In his right hand he holds an arrow, while his left is advanced to grasp a cup which a kneeling man in armour presents. The cup is a standing cup with cover, of the type made in the latter part of the sixteenth century. On a globe in the background is the name "IUPITER" and the sign of the planet, ♃, and the monogram VS. Round the foregoing are clouds. Below is a landscape with a church or some other building on the left, while in the other part of the scene a man advances on foot hunting with a pack of five hounds. The man carries a spear in his right hand, and is blowing a horn. The panel is further decorated with an imitation cornice

above, and below with a base ornamented with sunk roundels alternating with short flutings.

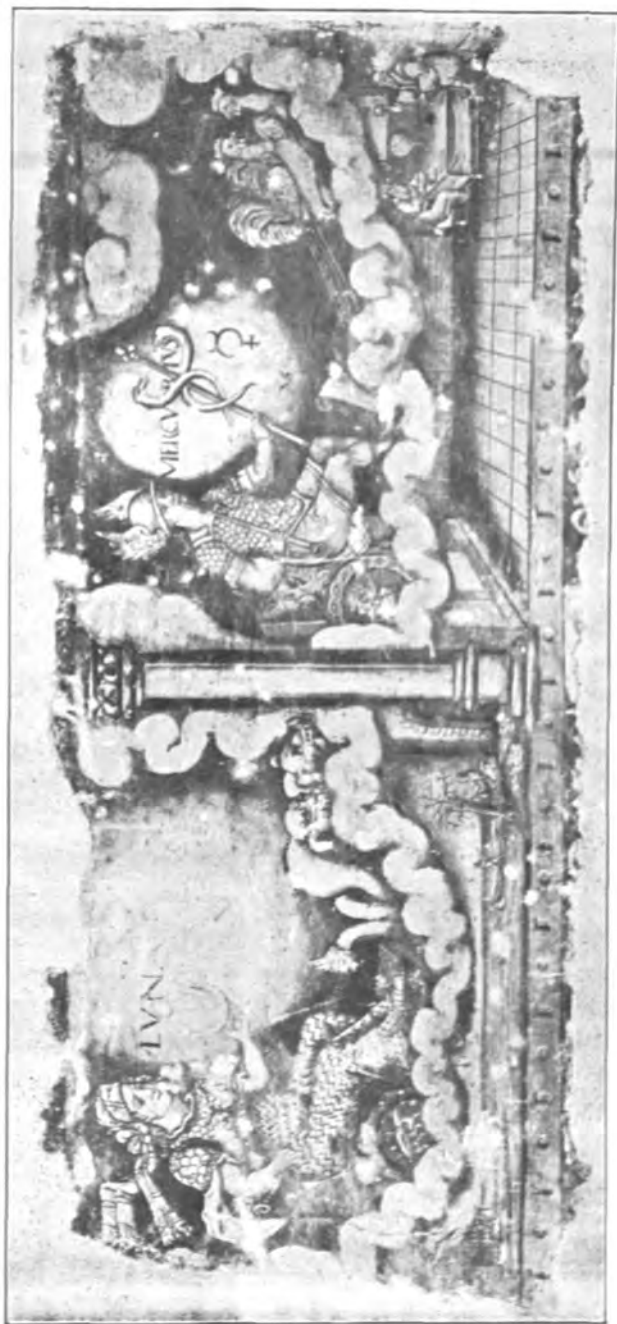
Height of panel, 3 ft. 7 in. ; width, 8 ft. 0 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.

No. 2. (a)\* On the spectator's left Luna is seated in a chariot drawn towards the right by a pair of dolphins ; in her left hand she holds a crescent. The dress she wears is decorated above with scale pattern, and below with wavy horizontal stripes ; on her head is a scarf arranged as a sort of turban with the two ends floating behind. On the one visible wheel of the chariot is represented an insect (? grasshopper). In the background is a globe inscribed "LVNA," with a crescent (?) and the monogram VS. below. All the above is surrounded by cloud-forms. Below appears a lake or river scene with a water-wheel (?) on the left bank, while on the right, between a stunted tree and a tower-like building with a round-arched door, is a man standing in the water and pointing towards a man in a boat, who is apparently plying between the banks.

(b) In the other half of this panel is Mercury seated in a chariot, drawn by two cocks, also to the right. He is clad in a short closely-fitting coat decorated with scale pattern, worn over a rather longer loose garment. On his head is a winged hat, and on his feet shoes reaching half way up the calf. He is blowing a pipe which he holds in his right hand, while in his left is the caduceus with the entwined serpents, tipped with a fleur-de-lys. Near him in the background is a globe with the word "MERCVRIVS," the sign of Mercury, ♀, and the monogram VS. All the foregoing is surrounded by cloud-forms. Below is represented a room in which, seated at a table, are two sages, perhaps an astrologer and an alchemist, for one holds up a retort (?) while the other is apparently measuring from a book. Between them stands an astronomical globe. The floor is formed of square tiles or pieces of parquet.

These two designs are separated by a column, and the panel is finished off with a cornice and base similar to those in the first panel.

\* See accompanying Plate.



PAINTED PLASTER PANEL (No. 2).

From a house at Stodmarsh, near Canterbury.

Height of panel, 3 ft. 9¼ in. ; width, 8 ft. 0¼ in.

The genre scenes below the four principal subjects would seem to have some relation to them. For instance, that in the Venus panel relates to feasting and merrymaking, while under Mercury, who it will be remembered was the patron of thieves, are an astrologer and an alchemist! The connection of the scenes below the other two subjects seems somewhat obscure.

No. 3. Actæon, in the fashionable dress of the end of the Elizabethan period, with high-crowned hat, carrying a spear in his right hand and holding in a leash of hounds with his left, stands gazing at Diana bathing with two of her nymphs. Diana holds a bow and an arrow. One of the nymphs is stooping and gathering water in her right hand, as though about to throw it at the intruder. They stand in a bath which is apparently fed with water from a fountain close by, consisting of a column surmounted by a group of three nude female figures. The background to the scene is formed of trees and shrubs.

Height of panel, 2 ft. 9 in. ; width, 3 ft. 9½ in.

No. 4. In the upper part Actæon, holding a spear horizontally in his right hand, is running towards the right accompanied (or pursued) by a hound. Below this, and occupying about half the height of the panel, is some boldly designed leafy scrollwork and flowers.

Height of panel, 5 ft. 6 in. ; width, 1 ft. 11½ in.

No. 5. Three hounds are represented running towards the left.

Height of panel, 2 ft. 10 in. ; width, 1 ft. 11½ in.

No. 6. Actæon, with his head changed into that of a stag, is being pulled down by four of his hounds. In the right-hand corner is a castle with a round-headed door of the same type as that in the tower shewn in the second panel.

Height of panel, 2 ft. 9¼ in. ; width, 3 ft. 10¾ in.

No. 7.\* On this is painted a standing female figure wearing a close-fitting cap and a gown with stomacher. In

\*. See accompanying Plate.

her left hand she holds a besom, while her right is outstretched. The figure is surrounded by boldly-designed leafy scrollwork.

Height of panel, 5 ft.  $4\frac{1}{4}$  in. ; width, 1 ft.  $11\frac{1}{4}$  in.

No. 8. On this also is depicted a standing female figure resembling that on No. 7, but slightly smaller, and she does not hold a besom. The sleeves of her dress are considerably puffed at the shoulders, and appear to be either slashed crosswise or decorated with cross banding.

Height of panel, 5 ft.  $9\frac{1}{2}$  in. ; width, 2 ft.  $2\frac{1}{2}$  in.

The "Planet" series is plainly incomplete, for out of the five planets known to our ancestors before the eighteenth century only three are represented. At least one more panel with Mars and Saturn is required to make the number complete. Examination of the extant panels shews that three of the chariots containing the figures are being drawn towards the right, while only one, Venus, is being drawn in the opposite direction. It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that the remaining two planets were represented in chariots proceeding to the left. It will be noticed that what may be called the leading lady and leading gentleman of this little company, Venus and Jupiter, appear on one panel, and lead off in opposite directions. It seems likely, therefore, that this panel formed the centre of this portion of the scheme of ornamentation, which would thus be not less than twenty-four feet in length. It is not improbable then that this series formed the decoration, or at any rate a considerable portion of it, on one wall of a room of the house, probably of the Long Gallery, that very usual and very charming feature of earlier mansions.

The total width of the "Actæon" panels as they now appear in the Museum is 11 ft. and 7 in. It is scarcely possible to determine what length this painting originally occupied, though it may be conjectured that it was not much longer. No doubt the fine scrollwork which is seen under one of the panels (No. 4) was repeated also under the other portions of the picture, which would thus be raised some 3 ft. or so from the floor at an agreeable height to be seen.



PAINTED PLASTER PANEL (No. 7).

From a house at Stodmarsh, near Canterbury.

There can be but little doubt that the "Planet" series received somewhat similar treatment. Very similar scroll-work appears in another fragment in the museum, which came from an old house in Ipswich.\*

The character of the work makes it almost certain that all these eight panels were produced at the same period and probably for the decoration of the same house, whether the one in which they were found or some other. That such a mode of decoration for walls was not unusual appears from what Falstaff said to Mine Hostess of the "Boar's Head" in Eastcheap when he advised her to adopt some substitute for her threatened tapestries,

". . . and for thy walls a pretty slight drollery, or the story of the Prodigal, or the German hunting in water-work" . . . †

In this connection the choice of a hunting subject, Actæon, for one series of these panels and for one scene in the "Planet" series, is noteworthy, as is also the characteristic term "waterwork," since the painting is executed in tempera. Remains of such wall decoration are still to be found here and there *in situ*, as for instance on the walls of ruined Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, where a hunting scene is the subject of a modelled and tempera-painted frieze in the Presence Chamber.

The monogram VS. which appears on the "Planet" designs is the initials of Virgil Solis (b. 1514; d. 1562), one of the Little Masters, who executed many engravings, among others some for Alciati's Emblems and Ovid's Metamorphoses. The "Actæon" drawings in these fragments of wall decoration bear some resemblance to designs for the last-named work, but the resemblance is not close, and the influence is probably indirect.

From a consideration of the costumes of some of the figures in the designs, notably of Actæon and the two

\* This panel was given by Thomas Partington, Junior, Esq., to the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is numbered W. 9—1913.

† Second Part of King Henry IV., act ii., scene i., line 155. This play is considered to have been composed in 1596 or 1597.



standing female figures, the date when these interesting examples of wall decoration were executed may safely be assigned to the latter years of the sixteenth century. It would be interesting to know who are the ladies represented by the two standing figures, for they have rather the air of portraits, and particularly what is the significance of the besom which one of them holds. Was she the Elizabeth Master who came into possession of Stodmarsh Court some time between 1558 and the end of the century? and was she perhaps a "notable housewife"? Or perhaps the figures represent mistress and maid? Though it seems doubtful if in that aristocratic age they would be dressed so nearly alike. If any information were forthcoming that would throw light on this singular point it would add to the interest which these rare remains already possess.

*22nd January 1914.*