



Stained glass fragment, head of an angel

Not on display

Title/Description: Stained glass fragment, head of an angel

Born: 1460 - 1480

Object Type: Stained glass

Materials: Lead, Painted glass

Measurements: h. 133 mm

Accession Number: 759

Historic Period: 15th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe, Norfolk

This fragment shows the head and wings of an angel. Its relatively small size indicates that it is most likely to have been placed originally in the upper tracery area of a larger window.

Three contexts are most likely. It could have been one of a group of musical angels accompanying a central subject like a Virgin and Child or a Nativity scene, each playing an instrument. Remains visible on the bottom lefthand edge could be part of such an instrument. It may also have been part of a larger scheme showing the Nine Orders of Angels. The late sixth-century scholar, the Pseudo-Dionysius, set out three hierarchies of angels, each divided into three orders: the *Epiphania* (Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones), the *Hyperphania* (Dominations, Virtues and Powers) and the *Hypophania* (the Principalities, Archangels and Angels). Finally, groups of angels were sometimes depicted holding scrolls with sections of the *Te Deum*, an important medieval hymn, part of which read:

To thee all Angels cry aloud: the Heavens, and all the Powers therein.

To thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry

Not enough remains of this individual to be certain as to his original identity. The neckline of his garment probably identifies it as an alb (a white linen garment worn by a priest for the mass under other vestments). This garment was typical for an angel of this date, but does not help with identification. It appears both as a plain alb (as seen on angels from a complete set of the Nine Orders at St Lawrence's, Harpley, Worcestershire), or under a feathered garment, such as that worn by a musical angel playing a viol from the Guildhall, Norwich.

The scroll is not easily legible, but rules out identifying him as Gabriel from an Annunciation scene, as that scroll would read 'Ave Maria, gratia plena'.

Eleanor Townsend, March 2022

Further Reading

R. Marks, *Stained Glass in England during the Middle Ages* (London, 1993)

P. Cowan, *English Stained Glass* (London, 2008)

E. Carson Pastan and B. Kurmann-Schwarz (eds.), *Investigations in Medieval Stained Glass*, (Leiden and Boston, 2019), particularly S. Brown, 'The Medieval Glazier at Work'

See also two Vidimus articles both of which explore the iconography of the Nine Orders of Angels, and give examples:

<https://www.vidimus.org/blogs/news/fifteenth-century-order-of-the-angel-panels-acquired-by-the-stained-glass-museum/>

<https://www.vidimus.org/issues/issue-35/panel-of-the-month/>
