

Handwritten Frescoes

St.Stephen's chapel - Giaglione village- Susa (TO)

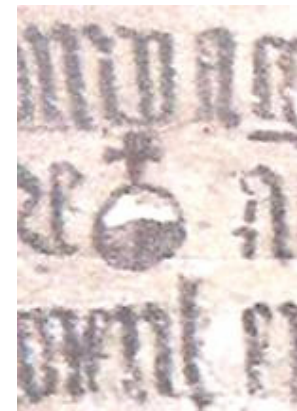
An interpretation of their meaning

On the outside wall of St.Stephen's chapel in the village of Giaglione (Susa), can be found some Old French words written in Gothic-style letters, enclosed in a rectangular frame at the bottom of the group of frescoes near the main road (which are sub-divided into three horizontal bands).



This type of square frame was commonly used from the XIIth century onwards for liturgical transcriptions.

Here however, it contains a rare example of a symbol (logo) inserted in the body of the writing to replace an entire word. Normally a logo or decorated letter was used by calligraphers or miniaturists as an initial letter at the beginning of a story (or chapter, or sentence), but never, as here,



to replace a phoneme or group of letters in the middle of a text.

The part of the fresco exclusively in writing, has not been decorated or illuminated, either with regard to its individual lettering, or to parts of the body of the words (in the interspaces and margins).

The inscription in question is of a biblical text made up of ten lines (as follows: “ *These pictures show Lazarus, the brother of Mary Magdalene and Martha, who Jesus had brought back to life; about which Simon doubted, as our Lord said. Lazarus confessed in front of all his companions what he had denied before Jesus – (then follows) the symbol of a globe with a crucifix -....*”). Rather than a section from book XI of the Gospel according to St.John, it is an interpretation of the story that Lazarus told after his resurrection, about the punishment of hell, as treated by Verard. The contents of the frescoes at the side, on the punishments of hellfire, are to warn passers-by travelling along the main road.



What is extremely important is the omission of the word “*Jesus*” at the beginning of the seventh line, and its replacement with the globe and the crucifix, a symbolic logo already existing at the beginning of the 14th century, showing a sphere (the world) surmounted by a cross (icon of Christ who would rule all the earth).

This is a very rare and complex miniature decoration which overturns all the canons of decorated and illuminated calligraphy of that period.

The words are austere outlined, and lacking in flourishes, frills or other embellishments. The choice of the unique logo present among them however is significant: a coloured painted miniature of the imperial globe, replacing the word “*Christ*” which would not have stood out very clearly among the words traced in black on a grey background.



The ascetic rigour of the letters, headed with the forceful coloured icon, confers a new and highly original aesthetic on the handwriting, which may be unique of its type.



Remember that other sacred refigurations (above all in cathedral windows) and in the churches and chapels to be found all over Italy, were often used as symbols of Christ (for example, a heart wounded by a crown of thorns) or an oval or almond, the symbol of Celestial Glory, which was very often replaced with groups of interlinked or isolated letters.

Also, the monogram IHS, or X P, followed by the Greek letters alpha and omega, were used to symbolise Christ, the creator of the beginning and the end of everything.





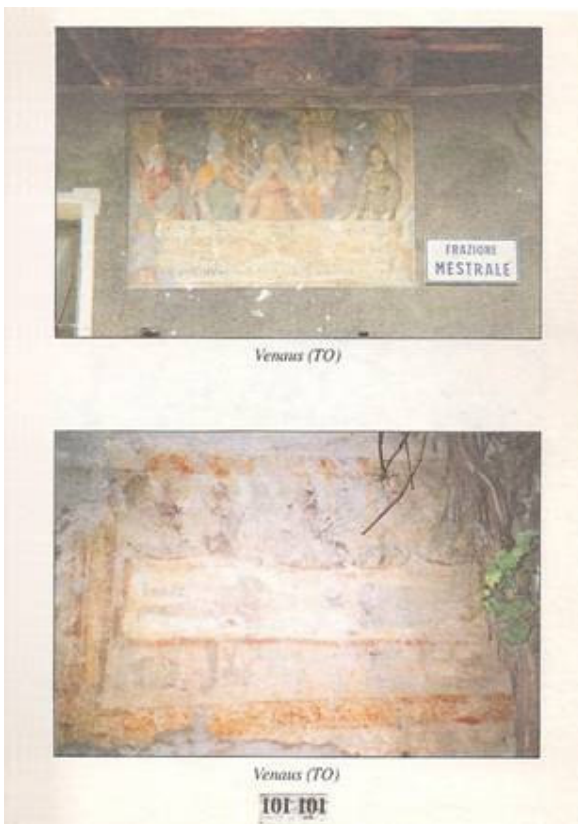
Also, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet TAU is sometimes transformed into a sacred ideogram.

It is very rare however to find a word replaced with a logo-style icon, as in the case of the writing on the outside wall of St. Stephen's chapel in Giaglione. Among sacred decorations, the images of icons were frequently to be seen replaced with individual letters or monograms.



In the Russian or Greek orthodox icons, for example, the presence of the Lord in painted pictures is indicated by letters or monograms traced at the side of the icon. In the case of the frescoed head of St. Stephen here, however, this appears to become the exact opposite: the presence of the sacred script is indicated by the icon of Christ (the globe).

Finally, I'd also like to mention one detail which emerges from the chapel and its fresco (representing the vices, virtues and infernal punishments): the figure of Lazarus, as the protector of lepers.



Throughout the Susa Valley, in fact, the devotional frescoes (mostly refiguring Christ's shroud) that were painted on the outside of private, public or religious buildings, (Susa and Venaus have many beautiful ones) served in the past to exorcise the plague. Leprosy however was feared above all because of the continual transit of troops across the frontier, and several small houses were built in the Foresto gorge near Susa to keep those people suspected of having the symptoms of this terrible disease in quarantine.

Raffaele Palma