



Introduction

Many of our historic churches contain wall paintings, some of them hidden under later layers of plaster and limewash. This guidance will help you identify the signs of damage to wall paintings and understand their causes, along with practical maintenance tips and guidance on conservation.

Wall paintings were once commonplace in our churches: they were a simple form of decoration and an effective means of providing a Biblical narrative, especially for those unable to read, from the early Middle Ages onwards. Sadly, many were painted over or destroyed as taste and theology changed, so they are now a rare and treasured feature where they survive.

In Britain, true 'fresco' paintings (painted directly on to fresh damp plaster that binds the pigments as it sets) are rare. The preferred method of wall painting in the medieval period was 'lime painting' where paint was applied to fresh limewash. This might also be in combination with organic media such as egg or oil, applied to a dry surface (known as 'secco' painting), which allowed for a wider range of pigments to be used. Later, and especially during the Victorian period, oil was the preferred medium. Wall paintings can extend over different building elements including plaster, timber and stone, and sometimes include attachments made of moulded plaster, paper, canvas or metal.

However they are made, wall paintings are part of the structure, so keeping them in good condition depends on effective maintenance of the building.

Signs of damage

You should regularly check wall paintings in your church for damage. Look for the following signs:

- loss or flaking of paint or plaster: this may mean there is debris on the floor underneath the painting
- cracks or bulges
- salt crystals
- stains or damp patches
- 'blooming' (a white, cloudy layer on the surface)
- dirt, dust, cobwebs or other accretions such as bird or bat faeces across the surface
- mould, algae, or lichen growth
- recent losses, which may appear white and clean

Causes of damage

The main causes of damage to wall paintings are:

- **Water**
Direct water infiltration, for example from broken gutters, missing roof tiles, faulty drainage, or even floral arrangements can cause irreparable damage to the wall paintings. Changes in relative humidity can also cause paint to fracture and flake, through the repeated dissolution and crystallisation of salts and the swelling and shrinking of materials. A high relative humidity also encourages microbiological growth on surfaces.
- **Environmental conditions and heating**
Wall paintings are sensitive to changes in temperature and relative humidity, and fluctuating conditions can be a direct cause of damage. Heating systems can contribute towards these fluctuations. It is advisable to consult your DAC if you have wall paintings and are considering changing your heating.
- **Building condition**
Structural damage to the building can cause cracks and bulges in a wall painting.
- **Building repairs or maintenance**
Wall paintings are very vulnerable to knocks and abrasion which can cause permanent loss of plaster and paint. Well-intended cleaning or dusting of surfaces can permanently damage a wall painting. Inadvertent damage can also be caused during building repairs and redecoration within the church.
- **Biological growths**
Fungi, algae and lichens can grow on the painted surfaces and accumulated dirt, disrupting and staining the paint and underlying layers.
- **Animals**
The urine and faeces of bats or birds can damage and stain wall paintings.
- **Light**
Light can cause vulnerable pigments to fade or change, and varnishes to discolour.
- **Past repairs and treatments**
Poorly applied repairs, treatments with inappropriate materials, or the application of impermeable coatings may also cause deterioration.

Looking after wall paintings

The building

A well maintained church in good condition can offer a relatively stable environment for wall paintings. Above all, it is important to keep the building in a good state of repair and regularly check the roof and rainwater goods and drainage. If water stains appear on or near a wall painting it is vital to find the cause and stop the leak as soon as possible. A conservator will be able to take emergency measures to protect the wall paintings whilst repairs are made.

A stable environment without dramatic fluctuations in heat and humidity is ideal.

Awareness

If wall paintings are obscured by later layers of paint or they are fragmentary, they may be difficult to see and people may not be aware they are there. It is important that anyone who uses the building, or comes to carry out repairs, is made aware of them. Historic England has published [advice](#) on this topic.

Never touch the surface of a wall painting—they are highly vulnerable to abrasion. Carefully positioned furniture may help prevent contact with the painting, but make sure that the furniture does not touch the wall.

Never screw, fix or nail anything to the surfaces of a wall painting. Wall paintings should not be protected using glass or Perspex—these can trap moisture and cause damage.

Protection

Where possible, wall paintings should be protected from direct sunlight—but without covering the surface directly. Covering paintings with curtains or panelling is not advised. If direct sunlight is a problem, contact your DAC for advice on possible measures to protect the wall paintings from sunlight.

Protect the wall paintings during building work or redecoration, following specialist advice.

Inspect the paintings regularly (and ideally at least quarterly) for any signs of damage, and take photographs. This can be useful to assess whether a wall painting is deteriorating or just becoming dusty.

Get specialist advice

Engage an accredited conservator to dust and clean wall paintings—do not include them in the parish's normal cleaning regime.

If small parts of paint or plaster have fallen off the wall, collect them by hand and keep them in a box. A wall painting conservator may be able to reattach the parts.

Further information and advice

The conservation of wall paintings is a specialist task. If a wall painting is showing signs of damage, you should contact a professionally accredited wall painting conservator to inspect it and advise you on required treatments. You can obtain details of accredited conservators on the Icon [Conservation Register](#).

Historic England offers guidance on wall paintings, including information on anticipating and responding to the discovery of wall paintings during building works, available on their [website](#).

Some conservators may charge for visits and the preparation of [conservation reports](#) but we can help you with a grant towards this initial work. Our [Churchcare grants](#) also support conservation projects.

The conservation of wall paintings is likely to require formal approval. If you are a church, contact your [Diocesan Advisory Committee \(DAC\) Secretary](#) at an early stage about a faculty. If you are a cathedral please contact your [Fabric Advisory Committee \(FAC\)](#) for advice in the first instance. Follow the links to find out more about DACs and FACs.

