

THE MINISTRATION OF ANGELS ON EARTH:
TWELVE BIBLICAL PAINTINGS BY
SPENCER STANHOPE

Francesco Fiumara

“Few people of to-day know the name or work of John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, yet of all the painters inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite movement he was the most tender in spirit and alluring in design, while as a colourist he surpassed even the members of the famous Brotherhood.” Thus wrote *The Morning Post* in a review of the small commemorative exhibition held at the London Carfax Gallery in March 1909, six months after the painter’s death.¹ Though occasional, such a warm appreciation was not a celebratory flattery; it reflected the opinion of most of Stanhope’s colleagues and closer workmates. Burne-Jones was firmly convinced that Stanhope was the greatest colourist of the nineteenth century. His use of colour was “beyond any the finest in Europe; an extraordinary turn for landscape he had too—quite individual. Rossetti was in a perfect state of enthusiasm about it” (G. Burne-Jones, 2:76). As a true Pre-Raphaelite, not only did Stanhope seek inspiration in the art and the spirit of the “primitives,” but he also rivalled them as far as the use of the medium was concerned. He had such a command of the pure egg-yolk technique that he used it as successfully as the old masters of early Italian Renaissance five centuries before. This made his painting very suitable for decorative purposes. No wonder that his finest work, the work by which, according to *The Times* (6 August 1908), Stanhope was probably best known among his English contemporaries, was a decorative tempera enterprise: *The Ministration of Angels on Earth*, a series of twelve biblical pictures which he painted for the side walls of the Chapel of St. Michael and All Angels at Marlborough College, Wiltshire, in 1875-79, and which he reworked in 1885-87.

The original Chapel was erected between 1846 and 1848 by the Gothic Revival architect Edward Blore, a skilled draughtsman but not altogether a great architect. The edifice was badly built, rather disproportionate, and, moreover, its stark interior bore comparison with that of a barn (Bradley, 203). Notwithstanding this, it was only in the 1870s that a comprehensive scheme for the ornamenting of the Chapel was taken in hand by the architects George Frederick Bodley and Thomas Garner.