

The Art of Mysticism: Evelyn Underhill's visual art and journeys in Europe

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novelist, poet, theologian, spiritual director, historian
Ecumenist with strong connections to Roman
Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox theologians, and global
approaches to prayer and faith

Londoner

Fellow of King's College London

Honorary PhD, University of Aberdeen

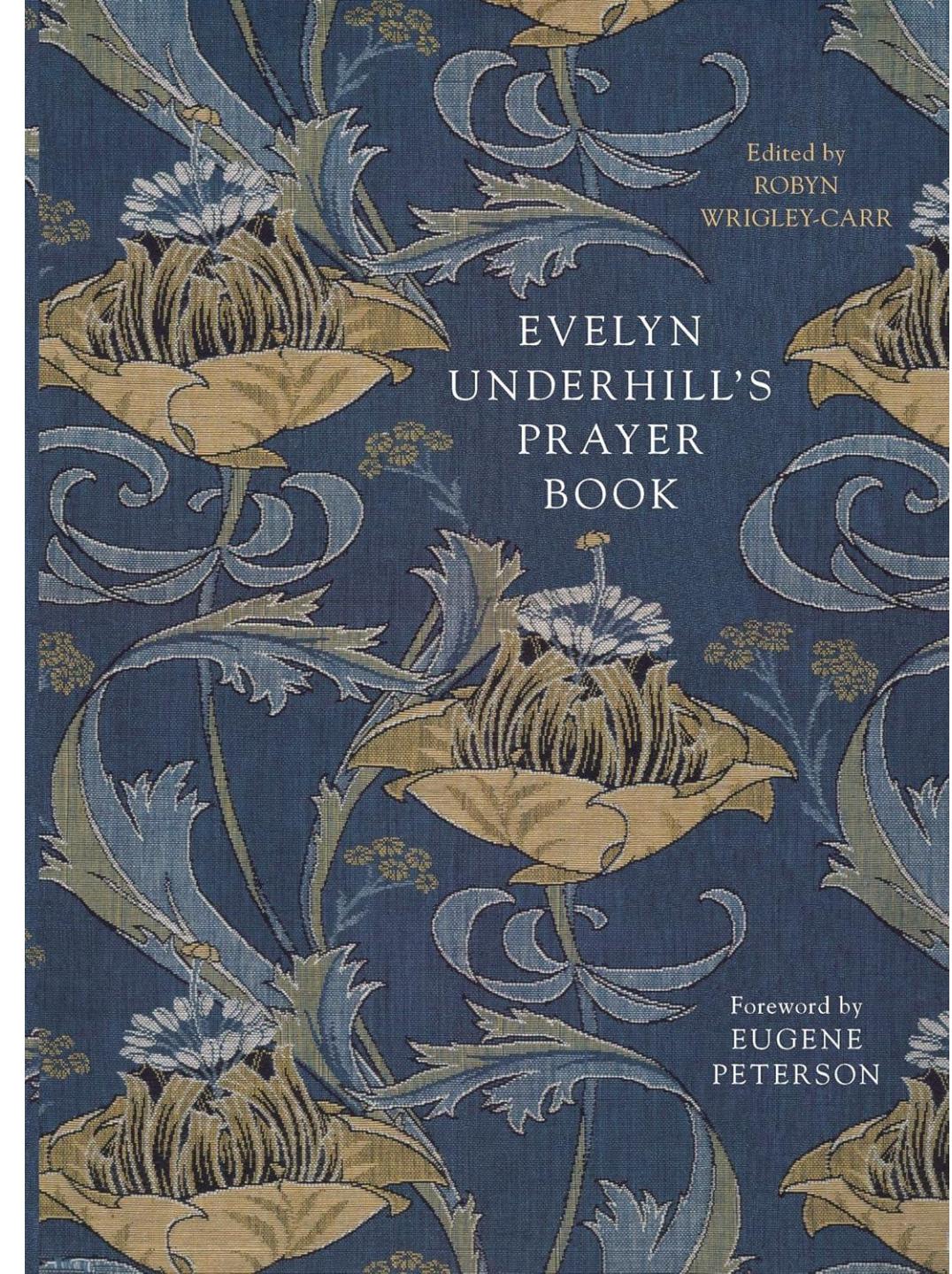
Retreats and spiritual direction open to all, especially at
Pleshey

First woman to lead clergy retreats at Canterbury
Cathedral (her ivory crucifix is in the All Saints Chapel
there)

First woman to lecture on theology at Oxford University

Evelyn Underhill scholars:

Jane Shaw
Ann Loades
Dana Greene
Lucy Menzies
Margaret Cropper
Julie Gittoes
Robyn Wrigley-Carr



Underhill wrote all her life. She published over 30 books, 350 articles, and her correspondence with friends, family, and spiritual directees is vast.

She was an avid artist and art historian too, and published her research on Northern Renaissance altarpieces. Everywhere she went, especially in her 20s and 30s, she brought sketchbooks, pencils, and watercolours.

If you want to delve into primary source material, Underhill's archives are accessible to the public at King's College London.

For an introduction to Underhill, her collected letters edited by Charles Williams and Ann Loades' biography are an ideal place to start. Robyn Wrigley-Carr's Advent book on Underhill is a prayerful way to journey through this season too.

‘Once you have found it out (what the Italian painters are really trying to paint) you must love them to the end of your days...This place has taught me more than I can tell you. It is a sort of unconscious growing into an understanding of things.’



Chartres, 1901

Rouen, 1901

Assisi, 1902

Ravenna, 1903

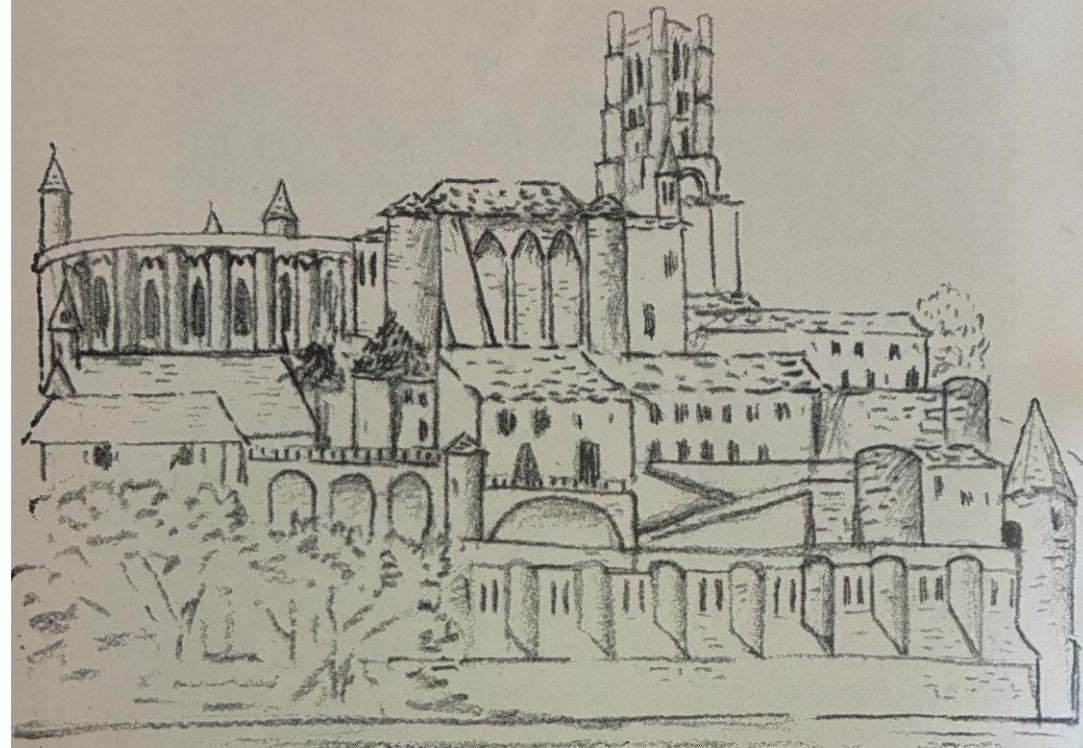
Siena, 1904

Venice, 1905

Albi, 1906

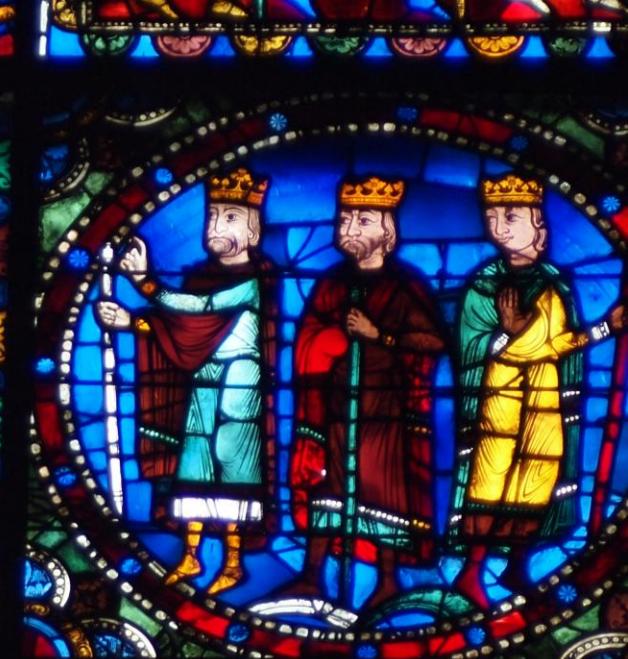
Assisi revisited, 1907

Siena revisited, 1907



Albi (25 April 1906)

strong with turrets, loopholes and outworks, all within walls. Everywhere red brick: in the timbered houses, where brick herring-bone work fills the space between the beams in the loggias with which—another trick caught from Tuscany—these houses are often crowned. In the old and narrow streets, roof leans to roof. Under the eaves, very often one sees the little old wheel still *in situ*, by which fodder and firing were hauled up to the loft. Red—all red—till one enters the Cathedral and is caught quickly in a tangle of white and blue. Never did so austere an exterior veil so splendid a complication within.





The Three Queens from the Portail Royal, Notre Dame de Chartres

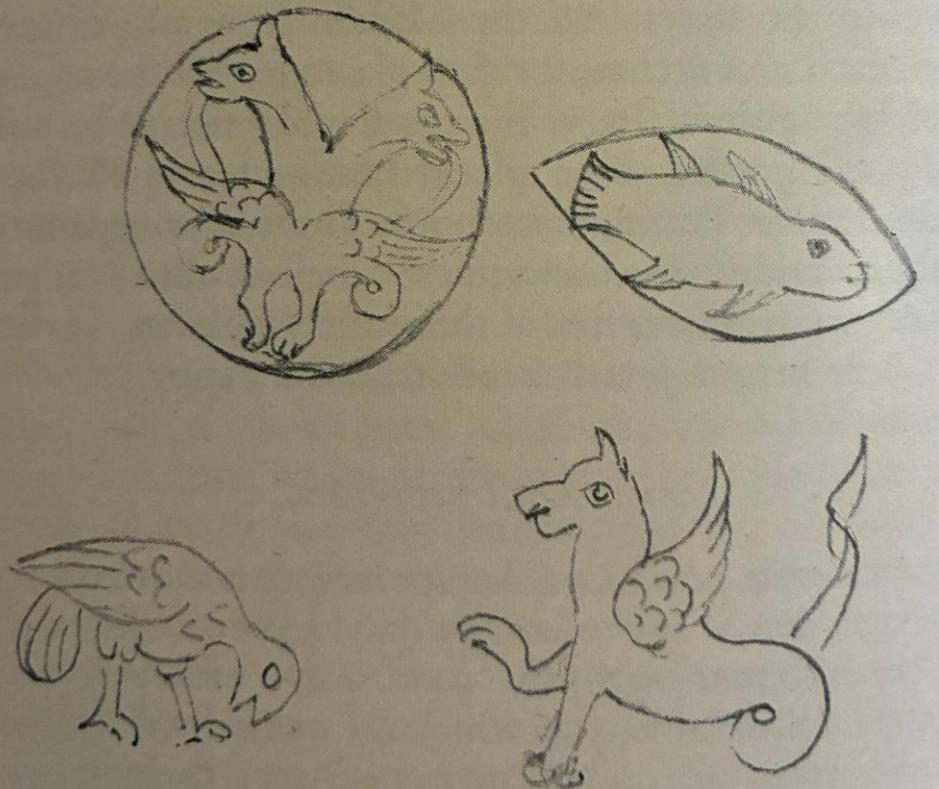
remind me of a Wise and a Foolish Virgin. The Wise Virgin has one wise grave eye of a window through which the evening light shines. The Foolish Virgin has an eye too, but that twinkles naughtily.

Inside at first

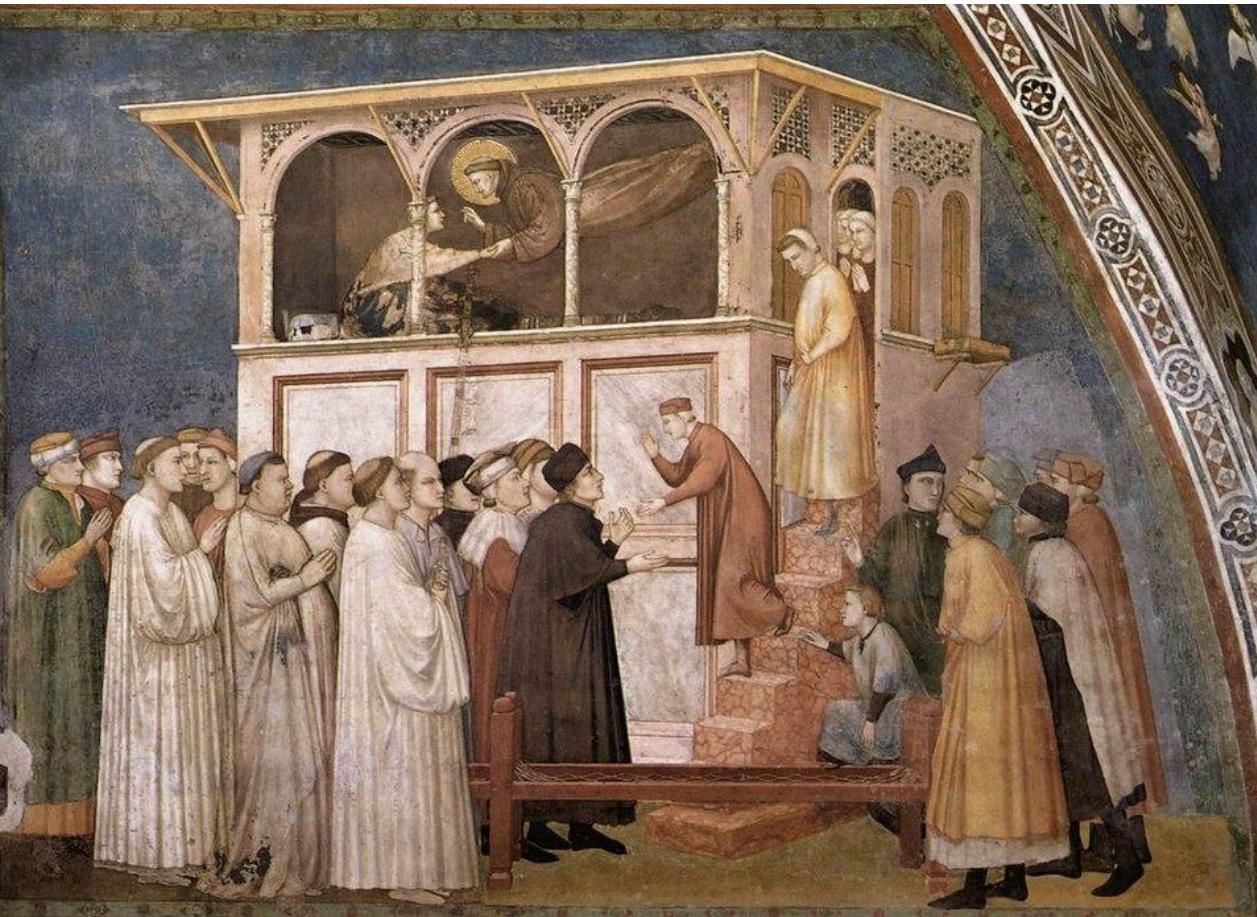


natural shrines of the local saints. I think after careful consideration, that S. Francesco must rank with Our Lady of Chartres as one of the two most beautiful and most spiritual churches that I have ever seen.

There is an ordered repose about Italian Gothic which differentiates it very sharply from the aspiring agonies of the Northern styles. The lower church, rather like a lofty crypt, massive and beetle-browed, with huge piers, glows with a rich, sombre majesty from the marvellous rainbow of painting which covers its walls.¹

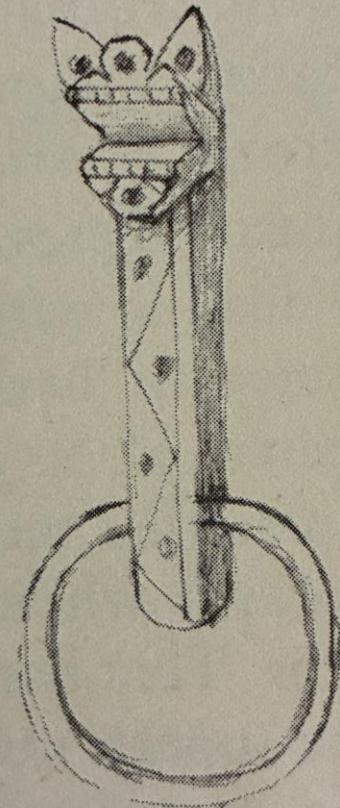


From the doorways of S. Rufino, Assisi, twelfth century





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*Iron Rings from the
Palace of the Lily,
Siena*





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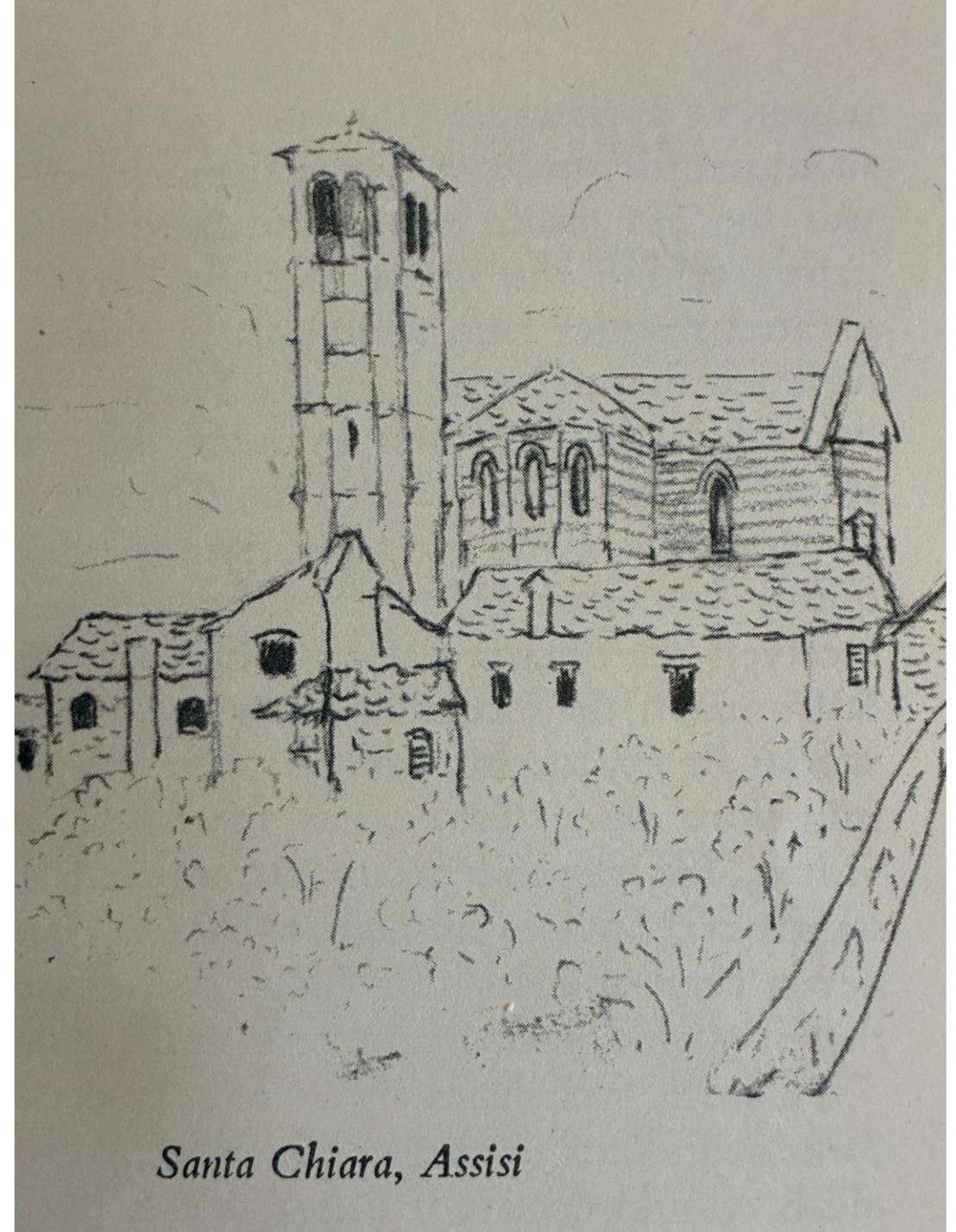
*Byzantine Relief in the Atrium,
San Marco, Venice*

And the place is alive. I saw the Liturgy
of the Hours in the Chapel of the Virgin



Defend and keep the soul of Thy little servant among so many perils of this corruptible life, and Thy Grace going with us, direct us by the way of peace to the country of everlasting clearness. Amen.

- Thomas a Kempis, read by Underhill as a prayer at all of her retreats



Santa Chiara, Assisi