Sight Unseen: Mediating Vision and Emotion in Gothic Revival Churches c.1830–50

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Abstract

With the revival of Gothic ecclesiastical architecture in nineteenth-century Britain, a cultural interest in church furnishings reignited alongside intellectual attention to their symbolic and emotive power. Rood screens, in particular, became both a symbolic and literal locus for the production of awe, mystery and revelation. The primitive interpretation of rood screens both exalted the object symbolically and allowed it to activate the spiritual senses by limiting physical sight to the altar, thus preserving the mysteries of the Eucharist. This essay considers how rood screen controversies during the mid-Victorian period unveil complex relationships between emotion, revelation and sight within Gothic Revival church interiors.

Keywords


The architectural and religious revivals which took place during the mid-nineteenth century in Britain offered members of the Anglican Church both a form and a space of worship that had not been publicly practised since the sixteenth century. The theological discourse brought forth by the Oxford Movement between 1833 and 1845 prepared the ground for complex forms of symbolism to emerge in Victorian sacred art and architecture.1 The original

1 The Oxford Movement was initiated in the early 1830s by Anglican clergymen at the University of Oxford. Its primary objective was to seek the spiritual renewal of pre-Reformation rites and practices within the Church of England.
purpose of the Oxford Movement was to revive pre-Reformation liturgical practice; that is, it was not to ‘Catholicise’ the Church of England, but rather to educate Anglicans about its ‘already catholic nature’. The Cambridge Camden (later Ecclesiological) Society, contemporary with the Oxford Movement, was specifically concerned with reviving and developing Gothic forms of architecture and church decoration. Thus, one movement was concerned with liturgy and one with the architectural expression of it; the Oxford Movement provided the theological underpinning for the architectural innovations of the Ecclesiologists.

This essay will explore the revival of the Gothic rood screen as a significant point of contact between Oxford Movement leaders, the Cambridge Camden Society, and British architect A. W. N. Pugin, who published an influential treatise on rood screens in 1851. Although each party held different motivations for seeking to reinvigorate the use of the screen, their individual influence on religious and architectural culture exerted influence over the design, conservation, and production of rood screens that lasted into the early twentieth century (Figure 1). This study does not seek to be a wide examination of Victorian Gothic Revival screens, but rather to explore how the abrupt shift in ritual and architectural innovations within the Anglican Church accommodated new emotional regimes, a dimension of the Gothic Revival movement which has been under-explored within architectural history. Furthermore, these new emotional regimes were expressed through physical ritual and were supported by architecture both spatially and symbolically. As Monique Scheer suggests, the coalescence of subversive ritual performances and novel forms of architecture acts as a signpost for the formation of new ‘emotional practices’. Her approach to the history of emotions ‘entails thinking harder about what people are doing, and to working out the specific situatedness of these doings. It means trying to get a look at bodies and artifacts of the past’. Where the his-

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3 The Cambridge Camden Society was founded in 1839 and became known as the Ecclesiological Society from 1845.

4 William Reddy has developed and extensively applied the concept of emotional regimes, which he defines as ‘the set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them.’ William Reddy, The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 129.


6 Scheer, ‘Are Emotions a Kind of Practice,’ 217.
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Furthermore, these new emotional regimes were expressed through physical ritual and were supported by architecture both spatially and symbolically. As Monique Scheer suggests, the coalescence of subversive ritual performances and novel forms of architecture acts as a signpost for the formation of new ‘emotional practices’.

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Figure 1  Sir John Ninian Comper, Rood Screen, St Cyprian's Clarence Gate, London. A late Gothic Revival masterpiece which looks back to Pugin's screens of the 1840s. Photograph by Author.
tory of emotions has traditionally focused on textual sources for evidence of past emotions, Scheer’s ‘emotions-as-practice’ approach demands a new attention to architectural space.⁷ This opens up new possibilities for architectural historians who seek to understand how past actors engaged emotionally with architecture through an understanding of how bodies interacted with buildings through spatial logistics, materiality, symbolism and form.

My aim is to explore the interaction between bodies and buildings through a focus on the revival of the Gothic rood screen, a form of liturgical furnishing that was a typical feature of medieval Catholic churches.⁸ The rood screen is at once a material religious symbol, a mediator of vision, and a divisor of physical space. Its presence in Victorian churches became a subject fraught with controversy during the nineteenth century, symbolising changing beliefs and new modes of religious feeling.⁹ Despite the centrality of the screen to the Gothic Revival movement, rood screens have only recently begun garnering critical attention, particularly to their materiality and liturgical function (Figure 2).¹⁰ The intense passion both for and against Gothic rood screens points to its ability to evoke the presence of spirit as the ultimate threshold between earth and the divine – a provocation for some, and for others a transcendental experience.

Forms of Gothic ecclesiastical micro-architecture such as rood screens, stalls, fonts and pulpits held vast emotive power during the Middle Ages, serving as both a fascination for the general public as well as a means for architects to refine stylistic experiments on smaller, non-structural objects.¹¹ François Bucher revealed the medieval tendency for forms of micro-architecture to surpass the cathedral structure in terms of spiritual value:

If we read sources in their totality, we learn to accept that to the medieval church-goer or pilgrim sacred objects offered an infinitely more valid transcendental experience and vicarious identification with the Heavenly Jerusalem than the cathedrals whose structural arrogance only few could appreciate and even fewer could comprehend.¹²

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⁷ Margrit Pernau, ‘Space and Emotion: Building to Feel,’ History Compass 12, no. 7 (2014): 541–49.
⁸ I use the term ‘rood screen’ or ‘chancel screen’ alternatively depending on the context and whether or not the screen incorporated a rood, or triumphal cross in the design.
¹⁰ See especially British Art Studies 5: https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-05.
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Religious symbols are potent sites for emotion, especially when an individual can relate to a symbol within the context of a religious community which shares similar emotional responses. Because the ultimate purpose of a religious symbol is to move one from the sensible world to the divine world, one can imagine that symbols existing only in sacred space (rather than portable ones such as rosary beads, for example) hold an even greater affective power.

due to the context of the sacred space. Furthermore, architectural symbolism is often more multivalent and complex than strictly representational visual symbolism, which is perhaps why there is a lack of scholarship in this area. Sociologists Ole Riis and Linda Woodward’s study of religious emotion points to a process of ‘religious objectification’ through which an object acquires the ability to generate emotions in accordance with spiritual aims. Sacred objects, such as architecture, sculpture and paintings, represent ‘a tangible and permanent example of objectification expressing certain emotions’ which can be communicable, even offering outsiders and new generations ‘a sense of the wider regime to which they belong’. Symbols are often viewed as the point of contact between emotional experience and religious understanding, which leads many modern theologians to view them as indispensable to Christianity. The Tractarians adopted the belief that symbols are part of sacramentality, widening the understanding of the term beyond the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic tradition. David Brown explains that ‘in effect during the first millennium, the term [sacramentality] could be applied to almost any material reality that symbolically mediated the divine presence’. Although the sense of the term is typically believed to have taken place during the twentieth century, Brown finds the first modern recuperation of ‘sacramentality’ in the Romantic writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, who share a ‘sacramental understanding of the world, with its symbols suggesting mystical participation in a larger reality’. Many of these ideas formed during the Romantic movement were largely influential in shaping the later Oxford Movement.

1 Tractarian Reserve and Emotional Discipline

The doctrines of the Oxford Movement which ultimately developed into the wider Anglo-Catholic Revival were cultivated in a climate of religious crisis and controversy. The Tractarian vision promoted by John Henry Newman, Edward Bouverie Pusey, and John Keble was a radical departure from the

18 Brown, ‘Sacramentality,’ 617.
High Anglican Church of the eighteenth century – a reactionary rejection of the ‘High and Dry’ school of Anglicanism, characterised by rationalism, empiricism and cold formalism. The role that emotion played in the religious revivals of the nineteenth century is often underemphasised, but the tension between the ‘emotional styles’ of worship of Evangelicals, High Anglicans and Tractarians is worth noting. It was the dry and rational temper of the orthodox Church which both Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics repudiated in the nineteenth century, with both parties seeking to reinvigorate religion with feeling and warmth, even if it manifested in markedly different ways. The fear that the French Revolution engendered within the Church of England created an atmosphere even more censorious of religious feeling in the early nineteenth century than it was during the Enlightenment, leading to many children of ‘traditional High Church households who would embrace Evangelicalism in the era c.1800–25 precisely because ... there was a perception that religious feelings were no longer given an adequate outlet within contemporary High Churchmanship.’

The Tractarian understanding of divine revelation was communicated through a principle Tractarians called ‘reserve’. Viewed in the context of revelation, reserve – usually seen as a function of self-denial and discipline – can be understood in a softer, yet more complex, light. The early Church had laid out a system by which pagans who wished to enter the Church could receive doctrine in a slow and unfolding process that initiated the catechumen gradually; this process, called the disciplina arcani, could be justified on the basis that God himself only revealed truth slowly and partially. Implicit in the notion of reserve is that it invokes a desire to attain divine knowledge but also a discipline of the mind to approach God in a reverent manner, as He ‘hides from those who approach sacred truth with a mere speculative mind, out of curiosity’.

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21 Tractarian ‘reserve’ is traditionally associated with self-denial and ascetic values, but even acts of medieval monastic asceticism such as self-flagellation were practised in order to ‘arouse the emotions.’ See Niklaus Largier, ‘Medieval Mysticism,’ in The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 373–74.
Tractarians viewed the zealous displays of emotion in Evangelical worship as an extreme counterpoint to the cold orthodoxy of the previous generation, and thus considered Evangelicals the most flagrant offenders of the notion of reserve. As Pusey wrote to Keble,

> On the province of ‘feelings’ in Religion ... it would be almost too much to expect that a distinction should be made between ‘feeling’ and ‘feelings’: the one the faculty of the mind, the other the outward manifestations of that faculty – the emotions. It is I think the employment of the latter as a test of religion which has caused so much mischief and self deception and misery; while the neglect of the former appeared to me also to have been injurious to Religion by causing the intellect to be alone considered.\(^{24}\)

In this passage there is an explicit sense of how ‘feeling’ is a form of spiritual discernment. It is not an outpouring of emotion as for Evangelicals, which has caused ‘mischief’ and ‘self deception’, but rather a way for the soul to ‘feel’ God through careful attention to the signs and symbols of the natural world. The concept of reserve was therefore capable of absorbing many meanings. Viewed in this context, it was a meditative holding back of one’s emotions (particularly unstable ones) while being open to channels of divine communication through noble feelings. At the same time, the Tractarian practice of reserve served as an imitation of God himself, whose incomprehensibility could only be communicated through indirect and gradually revealed ways, a practice which often became symbolically represented by the Gothic rood screen.\(^{25}\)

### 2 The Victorian Screen Controversy

The rood screen is a complicated symbol within ecclesiological history. Its narrative during the Victorian period is likewise complex. Viewed as a structural holdover of medieval churches, screens do not seem to occasion much comment. But situated in a broader context of theology, sacramentality,
iconography and Romantic visionary imagination, its Victorian historiography becomes much more relevant to discussions of architecture and emotion.

Gothic Revival churches that were closely tied to Tractarian theology negotiated a careful balance between sensory engagement and control. Concealing and revealing within Gothic Revival sacred space was a greater matter than merely disciplining the gaze – it functioned as an invitation to feel the infinite, incomprehensible and eternal portion of the Divine. David Morgan points out that as a phenomenon of religious symbols, ‘visibility is often a kind of condescension of the transcendent to the threshold of human experience. The image mediates the viewer and the unseen, both revealing and concealing’. This is both symbolically and literally true of screens. In medieval churches, mass was celebrated at the high altar, separated from the laity by distance and further obscured visually by the screen, which was typically solid to waist-height and pierced with a series of small windows, allowing the laity to visually penetrate the interior of the sanctuary.

Thus, the screen clearly had a functional purpose – to keep the laity separate from the clergy – but it held a mystical and symbolic purpose as well. When the Cambridge Camden Society was founded on the belief that Gothic architecture was the only appropriate architecture for Christians to worship in, it was largely due to the symbolic value they attached to the forms and furnishings of Gothic churches. In 1843, Benjamin Webb and John Mason Neale published *The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments*, in which they asserted evidence that ‘Catholick architecture must necessarily be symbolical’. James White emphasised that while symbolism had not been unknown previously, ‘it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this work for it materially changed the course of ecclesiology’. In the introductory essay to the *Rationale*, Neale and Webb asserted the essential sacramentality of symbolism in Gothic architecture, which is not just a logical system of symbolism applied to material forms, but it is underlaid with feeling. Insisting that being a knowledgeable architect was not enough to produce a church fit for Christian worship, Neale

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and Webb claimed to have ‘remarkable proofs that feeling without knowledge will do more than knowledge without feeling’.

The Society demanded maintaining rood screens in churches as much as it demanded the use of Gothic, which they believed to be ‘primitive, universal, and binding by the laws of our Church.’ The apparent primitivity of rood screens was a significant aspect of their value to ecclesiologists. Neale and Webb stated that, concerning evidence for the division between the nave and sanctuary by a screen, ‘the passages that might be cited from ancient writers would be innumerable.’ For those architects and ecclesiologists who believed in the ascendency of the early, or primitive, church, they ‘all read the relationship between the Old and New Testaments typologically, seeing in particular the Temple in Jerusalem (and its eschatological counterpart in Ezekiel and Revelation) as the type of which the Christian Church building was the fulfilment.’ This is borne out by the common description of the chancel by many Victorian architects – including Pugin and George Edmund Street – as the ‘holy of holies’. Understanding the chancel through its Hebraic equivalent can perhaps be considered the architectural parallel of reading the Old Testament prophetically and typologically – it is a point of contact between the Eastern and Western Church as well between architecture and theology. The ‘holy of holies’ imagery is complex, and partakes in a number of exegetical traditions that are worth mentioning here. Architecturally, it refers to the innermost holy sanctuary of the tabernacle where the presence of God dwelt, subsequently becoming metaphorically embodied by the sanctuary in the Byzantine church. Gregory of Nyssa (335–395 CE) was one of the Church Fathers to relay Moses’ vision and subsequent construction of the tabernacle as told in the book of Exodus. He described the divine vision of the tabernacle as containing a ‘secret and inaccessible core of the holy space’, represented in the early churches by the sanctuary. The secrecy of the sanctuary thus held scriptural significance – irrefutable proof for those in favour of screens. While

31 Neale and Webb, Rationale, xxi.
33 Neale and Webb, Rationale, lxxiii. ‘Father Thiers’ referred to Jean-Baptiste Thiers (1636–1703), whose multi-volume work Dissertations Ecclesiastiques (c.1688) was a source of inspiration and authority on the use of rood screens (among other things) for Pugin as well as the Ecclesiologists.
Ecclesiologists were staking their claim on the revival of rood screens in the 1840s, Pugin had already designed several successful screens for his own churches by the time he published the 1851 text *A Treatise on Chancel Screens and Rood Lofts: Their Antiquity, Use, and Symbolic Signification*. The need to write the *Treatise* arose out of the desire to defend his views on screens, not from Protestant detractors, but, ironically, from the Roman Catholic side. Having been an early convert to the Roman Catholic church in 1835, Pugin was naturally delighted when several members of the Oxford Movement converted to Rome in the 1840s, including Pusey and Newman, both of whom he had nurtured fledgling friendships with during the years leading to Newman’s conversion. Yet Newman, after his reception into the Roman Catholic Church in 1845, would prove to be Pugin’s biggest opponent in matters of liturgical architecture.36 For a short time after Newman’s conversion, he was still hospitable to Pugin’s ideas on liturgy and architecture, but this seemed to end with the opening of St Giles, Cheadle, in 1846, as Newman and his circle of recent converts had moved away from their previous attempts at reviving the English Catholic Church and turned instead to embrace both Roman rites and architecture.37

While the subject of rood screens may have been one of his most passionate, Pugin’s *Treatise on Chancel Screens* was one of his least-read works.38 It did, however, find strong support amongst Ecclesiologists and Anglo-Catholics who shared with Pugin a distaste for the more conservative ultramontane Roman Catholics such as Newman. One sympathetic Anglo-Catholic reviewer of the *Treatise* felt that the battle of screens hinged on differences in the doctrine of the Real Presence, which had become increasingly materialised in the Roman Catholic Church, an issue that created ‘a sentimental craving for physical proximity to the altar ... as if in this bodily approach an increase in blessing was involved’.39 The material problem was a significant one, for the existence of the screen itself depended on the manifestation of the Holy Spirit.40 The argument came down, again, not to aesthetic preference, but to doctrinal differences in Catholicity. Sensing these fractures, the author asserted that the true division was not between Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics, but between

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37 Powell, *Pugin*, 270.
39 ‘Pugin on Chancel Screens,’ *The Morning Chronicle*, 2 September 1851: 3.
40 ‘Pugin on Chancel Screens,’ 3.
those who derived their practices from the primitive church and those who, like Newman, believed in development.

3  ‘Porta Coeli’: Light, Material and Emotion

Pugin was often irascible by the lack of interest he was able to generate in implementing screens in Catholic churches, particularly by his patrons.41 His strong conviction of the necessity for screens most successfully took shape in two diverse screen designs at St Giles’s, Cheadle (1841–46) and St Edmund’s College Chapel, Ware (1845–53). The former church, built in his preferred Decorated Gothic of the fourteenth century, was considered to be the highlight of his career as a liturgical architect, while the building itself has frequently been thought to be ‘undernourished’.42 The opening of St Giles’s in 1846 was attended by an enormous amount of fanfare and seemed to leave an indelible mark on witnesses.43 One commentator reflected that the feeling brought upon him by the church was an impression of ‘that Paradise which is Heaven itself’ for ‘the things must be somewhat alike which create the same emotions’.44 The description is powerful, and the impression of the church was shared even by Newman, who wrote that ‘the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament is, on entering, a blaze of light. I could not help saying to myself “Porta Coeli”’.45 The interior, although richly decorated, was dimly lit at the south porch entrance, with much of the illumination, dramatic and golden, emanating from the chancel and the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, evidence of Pugin’s ‘dark, enfold- ing and complex’ interiors.46 This lighting programme itself is significant both architecturally and theologically. The movement through the nave in partial darkness towards the blazing light of the sanctuary recalls the verse about light which Abbot Suger symbolically mapped onto the bronze doors of the Abbey.

41 Hill, God’s Architect, 238–39. For example, Cardinal Wiseman petitioned to have the screen removed at St Chad’s in Birmingham when it was nearing completion. Wiseman only backed down when Pugin threatened to resign if the screen was removed. Pugin wrote to Ambrose Phillips, ‘we nearly stand alone if we except the Oxford men, for among them I find full sympathy of feeling.’ Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and Margaret Belcher, The Collected Letters of A. W. N. Pugin, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175.


44 ‘Opening of St. Giles.’


46 Hill, God’s Architect, 227.
of Saint-Denis: ‘The dull mind rises to truth through that which is material, / And in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion’.47 Like the Gothic screen, the light that Suger describes materially mediates the gaze, for unmediated light or sight would be too overwhelming for a ‘dull mind’.48 Stephen Jaeger traces this influence to the early sixth-century Christian mystic pseudo-Dionysius, whose work Mystical Theology widely influenced Western Christianity. In view of the perspective on light supplied by Suger, the sacramental symbolism of light in Gothic architecture may be more complex than is generally assumed.49 Famed Victorian art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) often echoed this in his own writings. In the midst of his long exposition on the value of shadow in architecture, Ruskin considered the diffusion of light in Byzantine architecture a demonstration of the Byzantines’ sympathy with God.50 The power exemplified in Byzantine architecture, though barbaric, is ‘embracing and mysterious ... faithful more than thoughtful ... its imagery was taken from the shadows of the storms and hills, and had fellowship with the night and day of the earth itself’.51 For him, mystery embodied in shadow is an indispensable aid to faith. Although Ruskin and Pugin were not often in agreement with each other, they both understood the symbolic gesture of mediated light and vision.

Stephen Kite also suggests that Pugin anticipated Ruskin’s emphasis on shadow in architecture.52 The light in St Giles seemed to be a constant source of worry for Pugin, as his patron John Talbot, the sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury, began installing clear glass in some of the windows to allow in more light, the effect of which Pugin described as ‘beastly’.53 Richly coloured stained glass not only preserved the integrity of the dimly lit interior, allowing for more complex shading, but it also prevented the gaze from wandering outside of the church, both literally and metaphorically. The limiting of sight in sacred space, whether through physical screening or controlled light, held a dual purpose.

49 David Brown, ‘Sacramentality,’ 620.
51 Works of John Ruskin, ed. Cook and Wederburn, vol. 8, 121.
53 Hill, God’s Architect, 353.
Not only did it instil in the laity a more affective form of devotion in which to ponder the mysteries, but it also attuned catechumens to the proper affective stance in which to worship. A.-J. Festugièrè has revealed that there is a persistent theme in hagiographical histories in which a miraculous veil descends upon the altar, consisting of fire or very bright light. In such cases, the veil that manifests to protect the Eucharist is interpreted by these sources as the very materialisation of the Holy Ghost.

Pugin had pinned all of his hopes on St Giles, which he often referred to as his ‘consolation’ among his many perceived losses – architectural and personal. In the six years it took to build St Giles, Pugin travelled frequently, surveying a wealth of medieval examples, which he would eventually include in his Treatise on Chancel Screens. The final rood screen was carved out of English oak from the local estate and painted in a polychrome scheme of gold, red and green (Figure 3). The design of the screen was based on medieval examples from Norfolk and Somerset, and consists of six lateral sections divided by a central doorway, spanning the width of the chancel arch. Each section contains open tracery, divided by shafts from which overhanging groining springs, supporting the rood loft. The base of the screen contains twelve panels which were intended to be painted with images of the apostles, but the work was never carried out. The loft which surmounts the screen is pierced with quatrefoils and is inscribed with scriptural quotations. Rising from the centre of the loft is the great rood, with the traditional attendant figures of the Virgin Mary and St John the Evangelist to either side. Finally, thirteen brass candlesticks with tapers line the top of the loft. Above the chancel arch is a fresco of ‘The Doom’, representing the Last Judgement, a traditional feature of English medieval churches.

The screen does not only interfere with the sight of the Mass, but it also provides dense subject matter to meditate on. The whole symbolic programme of the screen bears witness to the emotional lives of Christ and the apostles through their suffering and faith, asking the laity to cohere in and around these emotions. Neale and Webb elaborate the complex web of symbolism:

The first great symbol which sets this forth is the Triumphal Cross.... The images of the Saints and Martyrs appear in the lower panelling, examples of faith and patience to us. The colours of the Rood Screen itself represent their Passion and Victory: the crimson sets forth the one, the gold the other.... And for as much as the Blessed Martyrs passed from this world to the next through sore torments, the mouldings of the Chancel Arch

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Figure 3 A. W. N. Pugin, *Detail of Triumphal Cross on Rood Screen*, St Giles, Cheadle

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represent the various kinds of sufferings through which they went. Faith was their support, and must be ours.\textsuperscript{55}

This description highlights the empathetic goal of the screen. Peter Kidson viewed this shift towards empathy mediated by the symbolism of the rood screen at Naumburg Cathedral as ‘a sustained onslaught on the emotions of the devout’.\textsuperscript{56} The screen is not just a passive structure which interrupts the gaze, but is participatory, inviting active intention on behalf of the laity.

The rood screen that Pugin designed for St Edmund’s College Chapel in Ware, Hertfordshire, equalled the artistry and craftsmanship of the Cheadle screen, though it is remarkably different in material and design, displaying the breadth of his skills as an ecclesiastical designer. Carved entirely from white Caen stone, the rood screen is an impressive double screen, two bays deep and seven bays wide, with cusped tracery and quatrefoil medallions carved in the spandrels (Figure 4).\textsuperscript{57} Placed within the screen are two altars dedicated to St Peter and St Paul, with stained glass contained in the tracery above depicting the images of the saints. The screen supports a deep loft containing a large painted oak rood, with the supporting figures of St Mary and St John carved from pine. The St Edmund’s College Chapel rood was chosen to be displayed in the Medieval Court at the Great Exhibition in 1851. Not surprisingly, the sight of a large cross in the middle of the Crystal Palace caused somewhat of a sensation, sparking ‘a trail of rumour that a Roman Catholic chapel was being built in the middle of the Great Exhibition’.\textsuperscript{58} Pugin eventually agreed to lower the rood from its original position, and it indeed seems to have been placed in a less prominent site, as it does not appear in any views of the Medieval Court except for one commissioned by George Myers, Pugin’s builder. In the Myers lithograph, the rood appears prominently, but without the figures of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or St John, which were likely to have been removed in order to prevent Protestant hostility.\textsuperscript{59}

The total assemblage of the rood and screen as it appears \textit{in situ} at St Edmund’s is markedly different in appearance and effect from Pugin’s other wooden screens. Its pointed bays direct the gaze upward, rather than resisting

\textsuperscript{55} Neale and Webb, \textit{Rationale}, cii–ciii.
\textsuperscript{57} ‘Roman Catholic Chapel of St Edmund’s College,’ Historic England, https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1308305.
\textsuperscript{58} Hill, \textit{God’s Architect}, 463.
it as in St Giles; this is further enhanced by the uncoloured white stonework. Attention is anchored instead to intricately detailed figures on the crucifix. The figures of St Mary and St John, in addition to the cross itself, are richly coloured in contrast to Christ’s starkly pale body, which is foregrounded against the colours of the other figures. The iconography of the Crucifixion is not grotesque, and in fact the representation of blood on the wound at Christ’s side is marked by the smallest amount of red paint. The body of Christ is also much larger than the figures of his adoring saints; this difference in scale, coupled with a negation of colour, expresses a transcendence of the material, ironically, through the material. Almost no evidence exists which helps elucidate Pugin’s design decisions for the screen at St Edmund’s, and once again we must appeal to the medieval understanding. Paul Binski proposes that the interior of the church, and particularly the sanctuary marked by its portals, represented a ‘different zone of material experience ... the affective and demonstrative powers, the aesthetic experience, of the church interior was just as eloquent, just as marked by a sense of occasion, as the great doorways on the cathedral and abbey churches’.60 While it is impossible to know whether or not Pugin was consciously aware of this medieval dynamic, his symbolically rich screens, creating islands of attention, demonstrate that Pugin’s intuitive grasp of Gothic architecture is far more complex than historians have yet realised.

4 Conclusion

The emotions that liturgical furnishings engendered during the nineteenth century were often intense, and the study of nineteenth-century ecclesiological architecture, I argue, cannot be fully understood without a wider approach which encompasses both emotions history and theology. The cultivation of affective devotion in sacred space was, for many, a function of concealment rather than sight. Pugin was less interested in promoting the architectural and aesthetic significance of the screen as he was compelled by its sacramental importance; like the Ecclesiologists, he appealed to earlier sources to form his argument, particularly to French liturgists and to histories of the early church and its separation of the chancel and the nave.\textsuperscript{61} His emphasis on preserving the mystery of mass behind a chancel screen makes him seem isolated and pedantic in his views, but his concern chimes with a wider cultural obsession with the visible and the unseen. When the presence of the visible and the invisible competed for attention, the inward, spiritual vision held more power than physical vision dependent on the material world; richly decorated ecclesiastical environments thus depended on mediating vision through devices such as screens and shadow.

\textsuperscript{61} Powell, Pugin, 317.