

The Symbolism of the Sculpture of Archangel Michael
Our Lady of Lourdes and Saint Michael, Uxbridge
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Archangel Michael, visible from the entrance, invites people into the church, guiding them towards the altar. The overall design evokes a peaceful bearing and a prayerful response.

Animation

The pose encapsulates a series of moments in time animating the sculpture. These transitions from one attitude and event to another, creates a movement and narrative: the congregation is encouraged to consider the battle that has taken place, meditate on the victorious Archangel Michael and reflect on how this prefigures Christ defeating evil.

The battle scene is eluded to through representing the moment before the snake's death and the gesture of the right arm and hand. The devil, represented as a snake, being held down by Archangel Michael's right foot and toes that wrap around it's body, has just been struck with the spear, which penetrates through the head. At the point of dying the snake opens it's mouth in terror and throws its tail upwards before the inevitable loss of strength. Following the spear upwards, Archangel Michael's arm and hand, still tense from thrusting the spear into the snake, give an indication to the action and battle that has just happened.

The overall pose focuses on Archangel Michael at the moment of victory. Standing triumphant over the devil, the angel is portrayed with a meditative, peaceful and still outlook, yet emanates power and presence as a protector, showing his dominance over the devil he defeated. A strong, assured expression is captured on the classically idealised face.

For the final moment, the gesture of the left arm and hand guides us towards the crucifix inviting us to contemplate the definitive victory of our Lord Jesus Christ over evil.

The Classical Greek pose

The pose is based on the classical Greek contrapposto: the weight of the body falls on the left leg allowing the free movement of the right, in this case, to stamp down on the neck of the snake. The hip is raised on the side of the weight bearing leg and the shoulder drops down pinching the body, while on the right side, the torso becomes elongated. With this piece, the shoulders appear horizontal due to the cloak over the left shoulder, which helps to give a more solid and stronger appearance, a point of rest in an otherwise dynamic composition.

Typically, the torso in the current pose would be twisting in the opposite direction, to the sculpture's left, away from the nave. By twisting the torso towards the centre of the church, Archangel Michael is engaging with the congregation through his whole body. The head in the same direction, leaning slightly downwards, allows Archangel Michael to look at and connect with those gathered.

This composition reinforces the final event: in a swirling motion, the congregation are drawn up to Archangel Michael's gaze, down the left shoulder, following the movement through the upward gesture of the arm, hand and fingers towards the cross. This gesture towards the cross is reiterated through the sculpture, with the orientation of the head, body, wings and spear.

The role of Archangel Michael expressed through the drapery, pose and gestures

Three layers of drapery have been used. A fine drapery can be seen covering the arms, which emphasises the tension created from thrusting the spear into the snake. A second thicker drapery, loosely referencing the ancient greek himation, runs from the left shoulder down to the right ankle. It partly covers the armour, giving a flowing, dynamic movement to the piece and imitates the Sacred Heart sculpture on the opposite side of the chancel arch. Thirdly, an even thicker garment

or cloak, flows from over the left arm and shoulder, down behind the body, giving the piece a dramatic backdrop.

Archangel Michael has several roles, which have been portrayed in the sculpture and combines western and eastern influences and interpretations. These ideas play out through the drapery and armour.

The depiction as a warrior is presented through the armour visible on the right side of the chest and shoulder, through the shield leaning against the wall and the holding of the spear in his right hand. The armour has been heavily influenced by western depictions from the Renaissance and Baroque periods and within the eastern tradition, where depictions of Byzantine armour and drapery can be found.

The battle with the devil is understood as the spiritual warfare that we all confront. Archangel Michael reflects the outward expression and strength of a warrior, his demeanour, pose, armour and equipment, inwards. He conveys an inner strength which is felt through the whole piece and particularly in the assured expression across his face which gives us confidence in our battle.

The gesture of the left arm and hand and movement of the sculpture towards the crucifix, references Archangel Michael battling in the Lord's authority, suggesting his roles discussed below as a deacon and servant of Christ. Reflected upon the congregation, the gesture also leads us to Christ's authority.

The important role Archangel Michael has as the guardian and protector of the Church is expressed through his pose, the spear, how it is held and positioned and the setting of the sculpture in close proximity to the altar. The spear, which echos the long, thin staffs and spears found in icons, symbolises authority and power. The expression of the work as a guardian also relates to the faithful individually who can turn in their prayers to Archangel Michael to 'defend us in the hour of conflict' and 'Be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil.'

In the eastern tradition, Archangel Michael can take on the role of deacon, servant of the King of Heaven, wearing the sticharion, derived from the Greek chiton, which has been represented in this sculpture by the second layer of drapery over the body.

The deacon also places an orarion over the left shoulder and the front portion draped over his left forearm, which has been reinterpreted in this sculpture through the thick, third layer of drapery.¹ The inclusion and reinterpretation of the orarion reinforces the encouragement of prayer through the sculpture: In the past, the orarion was used during the liturgical service by the deacon to call the congregation to prayer and today is used for exclamations by the deacon and to make the sign of the cross.

His role as a courtier and messenger, sent to announce or to accomplish the will of God, indicated by the staff, as an intercessor and accompanying souls of the dead to heaven, all reiterate a closeness to God, but importantly, also to us. Consequently, this reinforces the gesture already discussed above by directing his gaze towards the congregation and then through his left arm and hand, connecting the people through him to Christ.

¹ Oraria symbolize the angelic belts described in Rev 15: 6, as well as angelic wings. Deacons symbolically represent cherubim and seraphim during a divine service. Apparently, this is the reason why the words of the angelic hymn are inscribed on double oraria (Isa. 6: 3). The ends of oraria flutter while walking, symbolizing an angelic flight. The fringe, also seen on other liturgical vestments, resembles bird feathers, indicating that these vestments are an image of the heavenly, angelic attire.