

Overview of Medieval Art and Its Time

PREFACE

The art of the Middle Ages—a span of 1,200 years, roughly the period between the late Roman era and the fifteenth century—set new standards of technical achievement, particularly in architecture, enamelwork, mosaic, painting, sculpture, stained glass, and tapestry. The dynamism of the age is embodied in its architecture, which provides the context for many of the works of art featured in this resource. Between 1000 and 1300, in France alone, more stone was quarried for construction than had been quarried in ancient Egypt during the 3,000 years of building pyramids and temples. In early medieval Europe, stone went into the solid, powerful structures of **Romanesque** churches, in which round arches, thick walls and pillars, small windows, and—in many cases—rounded stone ceilings gave their interiors a mysterious darkness. Then, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, ever higher **Gothic** churches arose, in which walls were transformed into networks of stained glass through the use of pointed arches and ribbed construction of the ceilings inside and **flying buttresses** outside. Although the corresponding change in the style of medieval art, from Romanesque to Gothic, is often familiar to many teachers, this resource also shows artwork from the full range of the Middle Ages, whether it was intended for the church or for the home of a member of the nobility.

THE OLD WORLD OF ROME CHANGES (CA. 300–CA. 800)

Although there can be no exact date for fixing broad changes in human history, such as that between the **classical** and medieval worlds in Europe, the reign of Roman emperor **Constantine I (the Great)** (r. 312–37)

is a useful starting point. In the Edict of Milan of 313, Constantine formally recognized Christianity as a lawful religion in the Roman empire. From then until the outbreak in 726 of Iconoclasm—the destruction of religious imagery—in the fully Christian Roman empire (known as Byzantium), Christian religious imagery came into its own, often imbued with the **naturalistic** style of Greek and Roman art. During the fourth century, depictions of events in the story of Jesus proliferated in all media, including carved stone coffins known as **sarcophagi** (image 1). The transition from classical to Christian art was not abrupt, however. The Roman empire’s educated elite, though eventually converting to Christianity, continued to rely on Roman law and Greek and Roman culture to maintain a highly organized government centered on its great cities with their diverse populations (fig. 1). Even when Christianity became the empire’s state religion, schools still taught ancient Greek texts such as Homer’s *Iliad* and images of **antiquity** persisted in elaborate works of ivory, gold, and silver.

Beginning with the reign of Constantine, the economic and governmental foundation of the Roman empire gradually shifted to its eastern region, while invasions increasingly disrupted the political and cultural fabric of the West. Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), the empire’s new capital, built by Constantine on the **Bosphorus** as a “new Rome,” transmitted much of its surviving Greek and Roman heritage to Europe during the Middle Ages. By the sixth century, the emperor Justinian (r. 527–65) and his powerful and intelligent wife, Theodora, had unified the empire, quelled the **barbarian** threat, and acquired new territories. Justinian inaugurated a building campaign of magnificent churches, public buildings, city walls, and aqueducts, not only in the capital but also throughout the empire. His greatest achievement was building the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in just five



Fig. 1 Bowl fragment with menorah (candelabrum), shofar (ram's horn), scrolls, etrog (citron tree), and Torah ark, 300–350 Roman, probably from Rome
Glass, gold leaf; $2\frac{1}{16} \times 2\frac{3}{4} \times \frac{1}{4}$ in. (6.9 x 7 x .64 cm)
Incomplete Latin inscription along its border: I BIBAS CVM EVLOGIA COPI (“Drink with praise together”)
Originally a banquet scene was below this fragment
Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.145.1a,b)
(Location: Main Building, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Fig. 2 Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 532–37, dome rebuilt 558, exterior



Fig. 3 Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 532–37, dome rebuilt 558, interior



Fig. 4 Two capitals with grape-leaf-and-vine pattern, 500–700 Byzantine; modern restoration; said to be from the monastery of Apa Jeremias, Saqqara, Egypt
Limestone; H. $22\frac{1}{2}$ in. (57.2 cm) (.66); H. 22 in. (55.9 cm) (.76)
Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.175.66,.76)
(Location: Main Building, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

years (532–37) (fig. 2). Embellished in every conceivable way, including with mosaics (a sense of which is captured in image 3), the church's chief glory was an enormous central dome “dematerialized” by forty windows along its rim (fig. 3). It led one contemporary to exclaim with wonder that “it seems not to be founded on solid masonry, but to be suspended from Heaven.”

Greek and Roman art—with its naturalistic style—was a major influence on Byzantine art, particularly that created at Constantinople. This influence is eloquently expressed in nine silver plates embossed with episodes of the life of **David**, with the largest showing the battle between David and Goliath (image 5). Were it not for their **control stamps**, which place them in the reign of Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41), one might think that an artist from antiquity had made these plates. Elsewhere in the Byzantine empire, different regional styles coexisted, some more abstract than others but each reflecting the varied conditions of its area. One of the most distinctive arose in Egypt, which had developed a branch of Christianity that was key to the formation of monasti-

cism and that evolved into what is today called the **Coptic Church**. Essentially decorative in character, with a delight in foliate and geometric patterns, Coptic art (fig. 4) would come to influence Islamic art. The Byzantine era in Egypt ended in 641/2 as the province fell to the advancing forces of the new religion of Islam.

With the spread of Islam in the seventh century, the Byzantine empire entered a time of instability. Islamic forces wrested many territories from Byzantium, permanently transforming the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and Spain. In 726, a violent dispute erupted in Byzantium over the legitimacy of creating or owning images of saintly or divine figures. During the ensuing period of Iconoclasm, which lasted until 843, images were officially banned in the empire and early depictions of Jesus, his mother, Mary, and the **saints** were destroyed. Thus, from an artistic point of view, the eighth and ninth centuries represent a period of stagnation for Byzantine religious art.

Fig. 5 Pyxis (box), 10th century (950–75); Caliphal Spanish; made in Andalusia
Ivory; H. 4⁵/₈ in. (11.8 cm),
Diam. 4¹/₈ in. (10.6 cm)
The Cloisters Collection, 1970 (1970.324.5)
(Location: The Cloisters)



BORDERLAND CULTURES

For centuries, the Rhine and Danube rivers defined the borders of the Roman empire in continental Europe, separating the citizens of Rome from the inhabitants of Germania, the Roman name for the area stretching as far north as Scandinavia and as far east as the Vistula River in present-day Poland. The empire had never isolated itself from the Germanic peoples—called barbarians by the Romans: they were adversaries at times, but they were also trading partners, and from the fourth century onward barbarians increasingly joined the Roman army as mercenary soldiers. The Romans also recognized that the empire's best interests were served by developing diplomatic ties with the peoples living just beyond its borders as a defense against hostile barbarians farther afield. Meanwhile, the Germanic peoples had long viewed the Roman empire as an inexhaustible source of wealth and welcomed the gifts offered in exchange for alliance. In time, these barbarians and the Romans intermarried so frequently that by the sixth century it was sometimes difficult to tell one from the other.

The barbarians had little written history or literature, relying instead upon oral tradition. We therefore know about them from the writings of the Romans, from archaeology, and from the objects they left behind. Although they engaged in a variety of arts—woodworking, weaving, and pottery—their metalwork survived in the greatest abundance. Weaponry, jewelry, and belt buckles, valued objects used to display social status, were often elaborately decorated (image 2).

From time to time, new peoples migrated into the West. For instance, according to a Byzantine chronicler, “a totally unknown and strange people came to Constantinople in 565 who were called the Avars.” Living for more than two centuries between the lands of the

Germanic peoples and the frontiers of the Byzantine empire, these Avars, who originally came from Central Asia, acquired great quantities of silver and gold, mostly through tribute paid by Byzantium in exchange for assurances of peace. A celebrated hoard found at Vrap in Albania testifies to the Avars' wealth (image 4).

CAROLINGIAN ART AND ITS TIME (CA. 800–CA. 900)

After Constantine transferred the seat of the Roman government to Constantinople in 330, the church in Rome gradually assumed control of the Roman administrative structures in western Europe. In the mid-fifth century, the Huns, under their leader Attila, rode out from Central Asia and drove the Germanic peoples deep into the old western provinces of the empire. Among them, the Franks established themselves as a lasting political power in Roman Gaul (present-day France) and, during the reign of Clovis I (r. 481–511), converted to Christianity. In 732, at Poitiers, France, the Frankish leader Charles Martel (ca. 688–741) halted the advance of Islamic rule from Spain, although many aspects of the Muslim culture of Spain spread throughout Europe and endured for centuries. In the Museum's collection, this can be seen, first, in a small

ivory box (fig. 5) that perhaps held perfume or some other cosmetic material in Islamic Spain before traveling to the West, and also in the twelfth-century **Beatus manuscript** page (image 20), a Christian creation that shows Muslim influence in some of its colors and architectural forms.

Under the Frankish king Charlemagne (r. 768–814)—who was crowned “King of the Franks and the **Lombards**” in 774, then “Emperor of the Romans” by the pope in 800—Europe was more politically unified than it had been since the end of the Roman empire. Within a realm that included northern Italy, much of Germany, and all of France, Charlemagne initiated ecclesiastical and political reform and laid the foundation for a cultural revival of the Western Roman Empire that spread literacy and sustained Christian culture. The royal court and imperial monasteries of Charlemagne were the main vehicles for this “renewal,” in which the visual arts were one of the greatest achievements.

Charlemagne brought scholars to his court at Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle), which was considered another “new Rome,” to teach and promote his renewal of art and literature. A scriptorium, or copying center, was established there, issuing accurate, legible, and authoritative books of worship, theology, history, grammar, poetry, and law that were sent throughout the empire to be copied. At Aachen, too, book illustration, metalworking, and ivory carving (image 6) were practiced together, creating masterpieces that contributed to Charlemagne’s prestige.

OTTONIAN ART AND ITS TIME (CA. 900–CA. 1000)

The disintegration of the **Carolingian** empire rapidly followed the death in 877 of Charles the Bald, Charlemagne’s grandson. For nearly a century, the Vikings from Scandinavia had made isolated raids on the coast of England and northern Europe, while settling Iceland (860) and establishing the powerful principality of Kiev under Prince Rurik (862). After 877, the Vikings became even more prevalent in Europe. As much of England came under their control in the 880s (and there they created the stirrup seen in image 7), the Carolingian empire broke into five independent and warring kingdoms, giving the Vikings the chance to permanently settle in Normandy in 911. This situation, combined with Muslim attacks in the south and marauding Magyar horsemen from Asia in the east, all but eliminated any artistic production in much of Europe for a time. Yet the rise in Germany of the Saxon dynasty under Otto I (the Great) (r. 936–73), and his victory over the Magyars in 955, inaugurated a conversion to Christianity of many pagan areas, under an imperial monarchy modeled on the emperorship of Otto’s Carolingian predecessors. (This ensuing era in Germany has been termed “Ottonian” after several rulers there named Otto.) Like Charlemagne, Otto was crowned in Rome, and he established his “new Rome” in Magdeburg in present-day Germany. Here he built a church, using Roman columns and capitals, that served as a base to bring nearby pagan lands into the Western cultural and ecclesiastical orbit. An ivory plaque showing Otto I presenting the church (image 8) indicates the importance of this foundation to the emperor. It also demonstrates how artists during the Ottonian reign focused on the message to be conveyed by a work

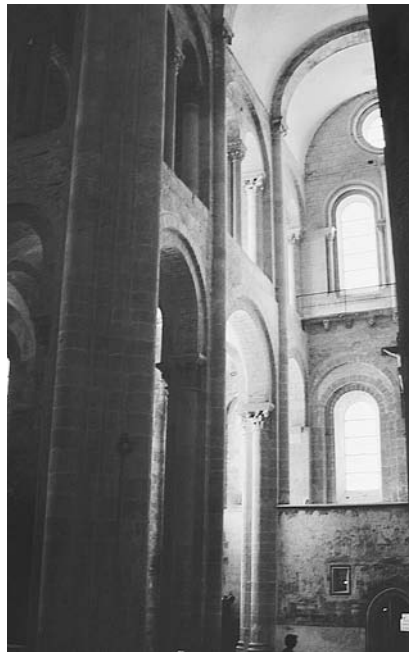


Fig. 6 (top left) Santiago de Compostela, exterior sculpture

Fig. 7 (bottom left) Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, ca. 1052–1130, exterior

Fig. 8 (right) Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, ca. 1125–1130, interior, view from the northeast

of art. By removing an event from its natural setting—as the checkerboard pattern does in the ivory—and by rendering the characters more as geometric abstractions than as naturalistic portrayals, the artist created a solemn, timeless memorial.

Major church centers and monasteries, such as those at Cologne, Hildesheim, and Reichenau, became the principal patrons of the arts under Otto and his successors. Among the most important contributions of Ottonian art was the elaboration of pictorial cycles of the life of Jesus. These narratives, based partly on models from the early centuries of Christianity as well as contemporary Byzantine manuscripts, carried a missionary message of salvation and appeared in wall paintings and **gospel** book illustrations.

BYZANTIUM AND ITS ART (843–1453)

With the restoration of **icon** worship in Byzantium in 843, and under the Macedonian and Comnenian dynasties, the churches and palaces of Constantinople began to be decorated with images of holy figures, producing an astonishing revival of manuscript illumination, ivory carving, and enamelwork (image 10). Greek, not Latin, became the official language of Byzantium, while Christianity spread from Constantinople into the Slavic lands to the north, including Russia and all

of the Balkans. The refinement and superb craftsmanship of Byzantine art, often still evoking the style of ancient Greece and Rome, were widely appreciated, and Byzantine artists, especially mosaicists, were at times employed for projects in the West and the Islamic world. The looting of Constantinople in 1204 by Western Crusaders brought a flood of antique and Byzantine art into the West. Though it recovered its capital in 1261, the weakened Byzantine empire was never again able to fully quell internal disorder or to exercise independence from outside powers. Yet Byzantine culture enjoyed a last great flowering in literature, scholarship, theology, and art, which endured beyond the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

ROMANESQUE ART AND ITS TIME (CA. 1000–CA. 1150)

Although the term “Romanesque” was coined in the nineteenth century as an architectural term for the heavy and massive medieval buildings with rounded arches that echoed Roman forms, it now has an additional aesthetic meaning. Romanesque art emphasized a simplification of form, pattern, and a lively linearity and can be seen in the Metropolitan Museum in ivories (images 11, 15); manuscripts (image 20); wood,

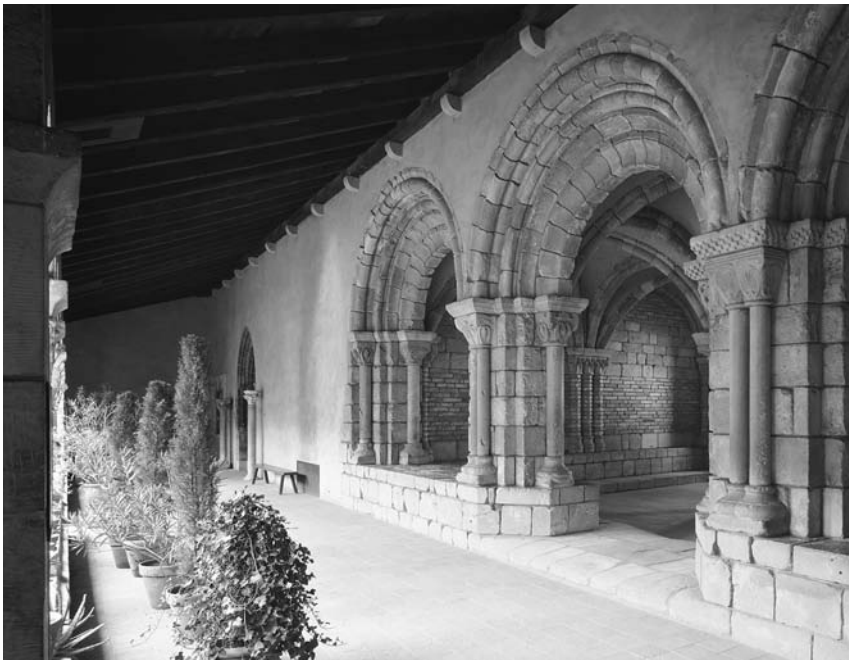


Fig. 9 Pontaut chapter house, 12th century French; made in Pontaut, Gascony (Landes), from the Benedictine abbey of Notre-Dame-de-Pontaut, south of Pontaut Limestone, brick, and plaster; 42 x 33 ft. (1 m 280 cm x 1 m 5 cm)
The Cloisters Collection, 1935 (35.50)
(Location: The Cloisters)

marble, and stone sculpture (images 12–14, 17–19, 21); and wall paintings (image 22). A superb expression is a Spanish ivory (image 11), in which the masklike faces, regular hairstyles, and patterned folds of clothing sharply contrast with the exaggerated poses and gestures of the figures.

Perhaps the most enduring expression of the international character of the Romanesque is the **pilgrimage church**. Motivated by penance or piety, pilgrimages (see p. 21) had been made since Early Christian times to Rome and to the **Holy Land**, especially Jerusalem. (The Crusades [ca. 1095–1291] began during the Romanesque period, as an attempt to bring the Holy Land under Christian control.) By the eleventh century, Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain had also become an important pilgrimage destination (fig. 6), with the tomb of James the **apostle** as its principal attraction. Many churches along the roads to this site had a distinctive cross-shaped floor plan with side aisles providing access to the many **chapels** punctuating the walls (figs. 7–8).

The travel and exchange of ideas that were a result of pilgrimages were central to the spread of Romanesque architecture and sculpture, though regions created their own interpretations of the style.

Romanesque portals could show fanciful creatures (image 14) or patterns in a variety of styles (image 9). Some of the most conspicuous innovations of this period were doorways decorated with rich sculptural programs (image 17), and capitals with a narrative running around their sides, some examples of which can be detected high up in the **apse** from Fuentidueña (image 18). All of this sculpture was part of a building's structure, bearing its share of the building's weight.

The growth of pilgrimage during this period was helped by the rapid expansion of monasticism (see p. 20); some monastic communities actively encouraged pilgrimage, even establishing shelters along the pilgrimage roads. The **rule** of a particular monastic **order** dictated its way of life and worship; this regulated life was revealed in its harmonious art and architecture. Central to the physical framework of a **monastery's** communal life were the chapter house (fig. 9)—where the monks met for prayers, sermons, and the daily business of the monastery—and the **cloister** walk, open only to the monks. The decoration of these important areas was often lavish, as is evident in the capitals from the cloister walk at Cuxa, assembled at The Cloisters (images 12–13).



Fig. 10 Amiens Cathedral (Cathedral of Notre-Dame), 1220, north elevation of the choir

Fig. 11 Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris, view of the choir with flying buttresses

EARLY GOTHIC ART AND ITS TIME (CA. 1140–1270)

Around the mid-twelfth century, a new style emerged in France that dominated the artistic landscape of northern Europe for nearly 400 years. Called Gothic—a derogatory label used by later critics to designate all art created between the Roman and **Renaissance** periods—this term now refers to art and architecture created during the “age of the **cathedrals**,” when churches were rebuilt on a massive scale. At Chartres, Paris, Amiens, Bourges, and Reims, structures rose ever higher and had ever expanding fields of stained glass (e.g., fig. 10, image 24), while beautiful objects and decoration complemented the soaring interiors (images 23, 26). Thought to illuminate the church both physically and spiritually, stained-glass windows replaced so much of the walls that the buildings had to be supported by a system of pointed arches, ribbed **vaults**, and flying buttresses outside (fig. 11). The exterior of the churches also featured organized programs of narrative sculpture that together promoted a theme such as the Last Judgment (see p. 103) or a saint’s life. The principal catalyst for this surge of building was the growth of cities, where new wealth was concentrated. In many cities, universities arose—centers of higher learning that influenced the intellectual, political, and social life of Europe. Paris, with its own university, emerged as the center of power, prestige, and artistic creativity during this era.

Western artists used the forms of ancient Greek and Roman art, shorn of its pagan meanings, to inject an element of naturalism into Gothic art, though sometimes they knew of this art only indirectly, such as by a Byzantine artwork based on classical models. Examples of work in this stylistic vein are an enameled

plaque (image 16); the tomb effigy of Jean d’Alluye (image 25); and the Taking of Jesus panel from the altar screen at Amiens (image 26). Still naturalistic, but with abstract elements too, are an **aquamanile** shaped like a rooster (image 27) and a **reliquary** in the form of a bust of Saint Yrieix (image 23).

LATER GOTHIC ART AND ITS TIME (CA. 1270–EARLY 16TH CENTURY)

The death of King **Louis IX** of France (r. 1226–70) marked the close of a reign particularly rich in achievements of Gothic art. Although Louis’ officials had aggressively expanded royal power, it was left to the strong monarchs after him to create a centralized authority. This apparatus spawned the ranks of ministers and professional bureaucrats who ultimately won power from the hereditary interests of the nobility. In ever-growing towns, merchants and tradesmen prospered, giving rise to an urban middle class. Kings were obliged, in turn, to yield to this middle class a measure of power that often took the form of representative assemblies. Meanwhile, the claim by the church that the pope ruled in all matters, temporal as well as spiritual, was successfully challenged by Louis IX’s grandson, King Philip IV (the Fair) (r. 1285–1314).

By the turn of the fourteenth century, Europe was in great ferment. Climate change—the continent was now colder and wetter—drastically altered living conditions and patterns of cultivation. Successive crop failures led to the Great Famine of 1315–22—the worst in European history—in which 10 percent of the population died. Continuing hard conditions generated unrest and occasional open conflict, such as the Flemish peasant rebellion in 1322. Another hardship

was the devastating **Hundred Years' War** between France and England, which began in 1337. Depopulation and demographic shifts brought about a redistribution of wealth, resulting in new centers of intellectual and artistic activity. An enormous increase in trade spurred the development of a standard coinage that became the common vehicle of financial transactions and the foundation of modern banking. Skilled laborers became a distinct economic class as industries expanded. The middle class, including Jewish merchants and moneylenders, brought a new attitude to the patronage of art, while still emulating the luxurious tastes of the upper classes (image 29). In such a tumultuous environment, artistic and intellectual achievement advanced with astonishing inventiveness and expressiveness. The **Black Death** of 1348, which carried off a third of Europe's population, adversely affected this dynamism. In the face of ensuing political strife, warfare, and economic recession, outmoded chivalric fictions enjoyed a new popularity—scenes of romance and courtly love, always popular (see the scenes on the fourteenth-century ivory box of image 28), now abounded in lavish manuscript illuminations, ivory carvings, and tapestries.

By the early fifteenth century, artists from the Lowlands (modern-day Belgium and Holland), coming from a tradition of naturalism in art (see images 30–31), began a radical effort to master the realistic depiction of the visible world. Beginning with the painters Robert Campin (1378/79–1444) and Jan van Eyck (d. 1441), the picture plane was conceived as an illusory window offering depth and space to the viewer. The courtly settings found in paintings of the late

fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries gave way to urban, middle-class interiors, like the one in Campin's **triptych** of the Annunciation (image 32). Not only did these new settings make holy events more tangible to medieval viewers, but medieval theology and literature often gave special symbolic meaning to the commonplace objects depicted within them.

During the same period, tapestries—the murals of the north—were woven in large workshops in Paris, Arras, Tournai, and Brussels (images 33–34). Through the rapid development of the print in the fifteenth century—whether as single-sheet **woodcuts**, book illustrations, or more refined and richly textured prints pressed from engraved metal plates—pictorial imagery of the outstanding artists of the day became widely accessible. Through the dissemination of such designs, leading artists, such as the German painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), exerted an immediate influence on the quality and variety of workshop production.

Around 1400, the Florentine chronicler Filippo Villani was the first to explicitly classify artists within the more prestigious **liberal** rather than **mechanical** arts. Since artists in Italy now worked as individuals producing art based on rational, scientific principles derived from interpretations of ancient Greek and Roman treatises, Villani's classification also implies the ending of the Middle Ages in Italy. By the early sixteenth century, these artistic principles had gained ground in northern Europe, although the sixteenth-century statue of Saint Roch (image 35), posed in the exaggerated S-shaped curve popular in the late Gothic period, shows that this acceptance was gradual.