

The Metropolitan Museum's Two Collections of Medieval Art

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Cuxa Cloister with tower to the northeast

THE MEDIEVAL ART COLLECTIONS in the Main Building of the Museum—the Medieval Department—and the collection at The Cloisters have distinct histories and offer different experiences for the visitor. This brief introduction will highlight the personalities and historical circumstances that led to the creation of a single great museum with two remarkable collections of medieval art, a process of history fascinating in its own right, while giving educators an idea of the composition and purpose of each of the Metropolitan's collections of medieval art.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was created in 1870 as growing and culturally ambitious cities across North America gave rise to major civic institutions such as art museums, museums of natural history, and zoos. With no indigenous Mediterranean antiquities, medieval or Renaissance art, these new art museums with encyclopedic aspirations generally began by displaying plaster casts of great monuments of the distant past. By 1900, the Metropolitan had the largest collection of casts and replicas in the country. Most spectacular among them was a model of the thirteenth-century Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris at a scale of 1:20—resulting in a display that towered over visitors.

The breadth and quality of the collection of medieval art housed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue owes more to J. Pierpont Morgan, born in 1837, than to any other individual. A banker and financier by trade, Morgan was a dedicated philanthropist. Among the areas in which Morgan collected on a vast scale were antiquities, medieval and Renaissance works of art, and old-master paintings. He served as a longtime trustee and president of the young Metropolitan Museum of Art prior to his death, in Rome in 1913. Masterpieces from Morgan's collection went on view at the Museum to record crowds in a special exhibition in 1914. Morgan's will left the disposition of the collection to his son, who gave a portion of the medieval objects to the Museum in 1916; the following year, some 7,000 additional objects came to the Museum. (Of course, J. P. Morgan's large collection of manuscripts, books, drawings, and a few favorite medieval and Renaissance objects from his study are at the Morgan Library in New York.)

The medieval collection, previously part of European Decorative Arts, was given its own department in 1933. Morgan's collection, along with subsequent acquisitions, was exhibited from that time in the centrally located galleries on the Museum's main level. Writing in *The Metropolitan Museum of*

Art Bulletin of 1954, the curators stated that, “whereas the smaller medieval objects have been grouped by period or material, the sculptures and tapestries have been arranged ... according to the exigencies of the architectural setting.” The Medieval Treasury today houses ivories, goldsmith work, and other small, precious objects organized chronologically and by material, but the large galleries—the so-called Tapestry Hall and the Sculpture Hall—serve to display sculptures, tapestries, and stained glass from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries much as they have been for over sixty years, “according to the exigencies of the architectural setting.” Didactic labels and, more recently, the audio guide provide information to help the visitor comprehend the collection.

The exception to the relative lack of change in the medieval galleries is the installation of the Mary and Michael Jaharis Galleries for Byzantine Art, which opened to the public in 2000. There, in two long spaces adjacent to the Great Hall and flanking the Great Stair, and in the newly created, crypt-like gallery beneath the stairs (see a view of this gallery opposite), Byzantine objects have been reinstalled chronologically and thematically along with the earliest Western works in the medieval collection. When built in 1902, the galleries were conceived as corridors, but the movement between them that is made possible by the new space under the stairs and by the elimination of walls at the western end has permitted a carefully considered arrangement of the works of art that functions as a survey of Byzantine art and as an introduction to the Western medieval collections.

At the same time that J. P. Morgan was collecting sumptuous treasures on a grand scale, the American sculptor George Grey Barnard found that he could supplement his income by picking up fragments of medieval monuments in the French countryside and reselling them at a profit. The Metropolitan’s medieval branch museum, The Cloisters, opened to the public in 1938, but its origins are in Barnard’s entrepreneurial activities around the turn of the century.

While Barnard’s early ambitions were modest—he bought sculptures (often fragmentary) in the countryside for a few francs and brought them back to Paris, where he sold them to clients for several times his purchase price—he soon found that he could operate on a large scale. The destruction of religious monuments during the wars of religion, during and after the French Revolution, and widespread poverty in much of the French



countryside during Barnard's years in France, created a hospitable environment for his increasingly more elaborate plans. By the end of 1913, he had acquired substantial sections of four major cloisters.

As early as 1906, Barnard had the notion that The Metropolitan Museum of Art might acquire what he called "a period architectural setting for Gothic statues, paintings and other church treasures." He wrote directly to J. Pierpont Morgan, then the president of the Museum, offering a number of works, but by 1910 Barnard gave up his idea of selling his collection of cloisters and other medieval monuments *en bloc*. He announced that he would build his own "Cloister Museum" in New York. Motivated in part by a French law enacted in 1913 that would have prohibited the export of much of what he had acquired, he constructed his museum quickly out of brick in northern Manhattan on Fort Washington Avenue, not far from The Cloisters' current location. The museum opened during the First World War and Barnard charged admission to raise funds to aid families of French artists.

We have seen that at the time Barnard brought his collection to New York, Americans had to rely on travel or on museum collections of plaster casts and models to form a visual impression of the Middle Ages. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was impressed with Barnard's museum, recognizing that the collection of authentic monuments could provide visitors with a personal experience of medieval monuments, and he agreed to acquire the collection for The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Rockefeller gave to New York City property—now called Fort Tryon Park—in which a new museum was to be built, and he acquired the land on the New Jersey shore of the Hudson River to preserve the unspoiled view opposite the site.

The Barnard collection came to the Museum in 1925, but it was not

View of the cryptlike space under the Great Stairs of the Museum

View from above of Cuxa Cloister

until 1938 that the Metropolitan's new medieval branch opened to the public. Charles Collens, architect of the Riverside Church in New York, which was also a Rockefeller project, was chosen to design it. Collens collaborated with Rockefeller and curators Joseph Breck and, following Breck's death, James Rorimer. Rockefeller's initial vision of the building, sitting on its high perch, was based on a medieval castle, but he came to understand that the religious nature of most of the collection called for a different approach. While *The Cloisters* was intentionally not modeled on any single medieval building, it takes its essential design from southern French monastic complexes in the region of the Pyrenees.

Photographs taken at the time of the opening of *The Cloisters* in 1938 show a series of uncluttered galleries with no small-scale works of art on view, understandable given that Barnard's collection had included only monumental architectural elements, sculptures, and frescoes dating from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. By 1938, Rockefeller had agreed to contribute his great series of *Unicorn Tapestries* to the new museum. The collection was originally lit primarily with natural light or candlelight, with electric light used for hallways, stairwells, and general ambient light.

In 1952, Rockefeller provided the Museum with an endowment for *The Cloisters* that has allowed the collection to grow. Although large-scale works have been added to the collection since its inception, the endowment has also supported the addition of many treasury objects. *The Cloisters* now rivals the collection in the Main Building in its marvelous ivories, metalwork, manuscripts, and textiles, although Byzantine works are excluded.

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *The Cloisters*, in 1988, an expanded Treasury was created on the lower level to properly house these delicate objects in a climate-controlled environment with appropriate lighting. This has allowed the main galleries on the upper level to remain consistent with the original vision of a museum that allows visitors to experience the sense of being in and around medieval monuments, while the more traditional, encyclopedic nature of the medieval art galleries on Fifth Avenue provides visitors with a virtual textbook of medieval art, within a framework of sixteen further collections of art under one roof.