THE MEDIEVAL GALLERIES

BY JAMES J. RORIMER AND WILLIAM H. FORSYTH

Curator and Associate Curator of Medieval Art

Without museums we would have a very incomplete picture of the artistic achievements of the first fifteen hundred years of our era. Their collections parallel the sculptured portals of European cathedrals, the stained glass sparkling jewel-like in great leaded windows, tapestry-hung halls, treasures filled with the smaller works of the craftsmen, and libraries with their manuscripts telling in word and picture of the church and the daily life of man. The Metropolitan Museum, in the Department of Medieval Art and at The Cloisters, has an exceptional share of the treasures yielded by churches, monasteries, and castles. They permit us to recreate the medieval scene as it was enriched by artists and artisans.

The growth of the medieval collections in the Metropolitan Museum has been continuous ever since J. Pierpont Morgan's gifts in 1907 and 1909 of the Seven Sacraments tapestry panels and the large alabaster altarpiece from Saragossa. The latter and most of the Museum's other architectural units are now exhibited at The Cloisters. The Gothic sculptures from the Château de Biron which also came here in 1907 have just been reinstalled (see p. 164) with the help of documents discovered in recent years in the Morgan files. By the end of 1917 the world-renowned medieval collections lent to the Museum by Mr. Morgan had in large part been included in the munificent gift of over three thousand objects presented by his son, J. P. Morgan.

By purchase and by gift the collections have grown. They have been studied and classified through the years, and now for the first time it has been possible to bring together in the central part of the Museum some thirteen hundred selected objects for display in chronological sequence.

Some of the principal accessions are illustrated in this article. The medieval collections have shared in the large gifts and bequests from such notable private collectors as Benjamin Altman (1913), Isaac D. Fletcher (1917), Michael Dreicer (1922), Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer (1929), Theodore Davis (1930), and Michael Friedsam (1932). In 1941 important groups of tapestries, sculpture, ivories, enamels, ceramics, and furniture were given and bequeathed by George Blumenthal. A number of selected objects was purchased from the private collection of the late Joseph Brummer in 1947. In the last two decades alone the tapestry collection, including the Unicorn and Nine Heroes tapestries given to The Cloisters by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., has been enriched by purchases and by gifts and bequests from Mrs. Daniel Guggenheim (1933), George D. Pratt (1941) and Mrs. George D. Pratt (1942), Mrs. Van Santvoord Merle-Smith (1942), Mr. and Mrs. Frederic B. Pratt (1943), Helen Hay Whitney (1943), Mr. and Mrs. Frank Jay Gould (1946), and Mrs. Harold Irving Pratt (1949). Gifts and valued loans from Alastair Bradley Martin and Mrs. Martin have brought significant pieces to the Museum.

ABOVE: Marble relief: Separating the sheep from the goats. Early Christian, 4th century. Rogers Fund, 1924
In the Medieval Gallery I there are groups
of objects representing the art of the Early Chris-
tian period, the period of European migrations, 
which coincided with and followed the break-up of the Western Roman Empire, and the period 
of the Byzantine Empire, which dominated the 
eastern Mediterranean region. Early Christian 
artists used the forms and styles current in the 
late Roman world, giving them new symbolic 
significance. The influence of classical pastoral 
subjects is shown in a representation on a sar-
cophagus lid of the separation of the sheep from 
the goats, symbolizing the Christian theme of 
the Last Judgment. Even ornamental de-
vices were significant. The grape vines entwined 
above the figures of Christ and the Apostles 
on another relief call to mind the Eucharist 
and the parables of Christ. On the other 
hand the leaves on the handles of the newly 
acquired marble vase are probably only decora-
tive and not symbolic. Nor is there any emphasis 
on symbolism in the scenes on the gold glass 
used by early Christians to mark the tombs of 
their dead buried in catacombs outside the city.

The barbarians who invaded Western Europe 
during the fifth to the seventh century disrupted 
the political unity of the Roman Empire and helped to lay the foundations of the European 
nations as we know them today. Even before 
these invasions Roman art and culture in the 
border provinces showed a blending with native 
Celtic and Germanic traditions. The ornament 
on Gallo-Roman enamel vessels and mounts 
became semibarbarized but compensated in col-
orful vigor what it lacked in classical refinement. 
Mounts found in a warrior's tomb at Vermand 
in northern France are among the richest sur-
viving examples of provincial Roman metal-
work. This ornament is Roman mainly by cour-
tesy of the fact that it decorated a lance probably 
carried by a barbarian officer hired to defend the 
empire against the attacks of other barbarian 
troops.

These semibarbarian pieces foreshadow the 
bold ornamentation of the personal and mili-
tary trappings of Franks, Goths, and other bar-
barian conquerors. Their graves have preserved 
valuable evidence of the jewelry they wore and 
the arms they bore. Their trappings, arranged 
in this gallery by cultures, combine animal and 
geometric designs, inherited in part from nomads 
of the steppes and in part from the craftsmen of 
the Roman border provinces.

In Byzantine art Christianity developed for 
the first time a style of its own. The naturalism 
of classical forms was replaced by abstract repre-
sentations expressive of a mystical rather than a 
humanistic point of view, but the transition was 
a gradual one. A series of seventh-century silver 
plates from Cyprus tells the story of David and 
Goliath very much as if David were a classical 
hero, a youthful Hercules performing his labors. 
These plates are stamped on the back with marks 
of the Emperor Heraclius (610-630) and were
probably made in the imperial workshops of Constantinople. Buried on the island of Cyprus, supposedly during the Arab invasions, they display a much higher degree of technical skill than the more provincial cups and saucers found in Albania, some of which may have been made in Cyprus and brought to Albania by native sailors.

The extraordinary collection of Byzantine jewelry, some pieces set with pearls and semi-precious stones, recalls the pomp and splendor of an oriental court. The use of stone inlays relates this jewelry to that of the Goths and other barbarians. A similar desire for color and decoration led to the development of the art of the Byzantine enameler, which is so well exemplified in the Museum. The reliquary box, dating from the eighth or ninth century, is said to have held a piece of the True Cross, brought to Italy by a crusader, and once to have been in the possession of Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254). Later Byzantine enamels, including a series of medallions from the Caucasus, are typical of the brilliant, imposing designs which were used not only on such small objects but also on large-sized caskets and mosaics. Reproductions of mosaics from Hagia Sophia in Constantinople are shown near the enamels and in the Medieval Sculpture Hall above the balcony.

Ivory had been employed as a material for decorative objects since the days of remote antiquity. Recognizing its fine-grained texture, Byzantine artists fashioned delicate carvings for religious and secular use. Panels of animated figures decorating three richly carved ivory caskets contrast strongly with the conventionalized style of most of the religious subjects. The Crucifixion scene on another ivory plaque demonstrates the austere majesty of the traditional style. Ivories and illuminated manuscripts were easily transportable and helped bring Byzantine influence to Western Europe. The impressive tenth-century German plaque of the Virgin illustrates the influence of Byzantine art, which continued for several centuries in Western art.

By the later Middle Ages the use of richly decorated liturgical objects became widespread. In Gallery 2, which is arranged as a Medieval Treasury, there are some remarkable groups of Romanesque and Gothic enamels, ivories, metalwork, textiles, and other precious objects, dating from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. A series of enamel plaques depicting the life of Christ illustrates the facile drawing and brilliant coloring of Mosan and Rhenish work. In the thirteenth century Limoges, in south central France, became the great enameling center of medieval Europe and exported its wares far and wide. Boxes, candlesticks, crucifixes, crosiers, plaques, and medallions decorated with Limoges enamel all bear a family resemblance typified by similar designs and hues of dark, light, and lapis blue, with some green, yellow, and red.

Like the enamels most pieces of medieval metalwork have survived only when preserved in churches. The Spanish silver crucifix has the dignity of life-size renderings. The boldly modeled silver head, a reliquary of Saint Yrieix, is enriched by an earlier, intricately worked filigree collar. Double cups and other table vessels give a hint of the splendor of the medieval feast. Finely carved and enameled costume accessories supplement the picture of medieval courtly life as it is portrayed in tapestries and paintings.

Ivory carving was in fashion throughout the Middle Ages. Miniature shrines and diptychs provided the wealthy with portable objects for
Byzantine necklaces, earrings, and bracelet, of gold, pearls, sapphires, amethysts, and emeralds. VI and VII centuries. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917
private devotional use and enjoyment. Such objects, like illuminated prayer books, were made to please the fastidious tastes of great princes who prided themselves on their connoisseurship. Ivory boxes carved with stories and legends held their jewelry.

Among the textile masterpieces, the large altar cloth in white linen embroidered by the nuns of the convent of Altenburg shows how, even in monochrome, variegated stitching could produce a richly textured effect. The English chasuble (opus anglicanum) embroidered in gold thread on crimson velvet gives ample support to the continental preference for English embroidery work in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Whereas the smaller medieval objects have been grouped by period or material, the sculptures and tapestries have been arranged in the Tapestry Hall, the adjoining Romanesque Chapel, and the great Medieval Sculpture Hall according to the exigencies of the architectural setting. In showing appropriate armor with the tapestries and using contemporary furniture, ceramics, and other materials for decorative effect, it has still been possible to maintain a certain chronological sequence for the major exhibits. Eventually, perhaps in Stage II of the Museum’s reconstruction program, there will be an opportunity to show more of the stained-glass collection. At present the visitor can see in one direction the thirteenth-century French window of Saint Vincent of Saragossa in the Romanesque Chapel and in the other the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century glass in the West Lounge. Both are reminders of the wealth of this decorative material and of its didactic use in the lives of those attending the daily church ceremonies.

Also in the Romanesque Chapel, the ninth-century marble relief from Sorrento, placed in a modern framework suggesting an altar, was made by a Byzantine artist or under strong Byzantine influence. The sculptured griffins on this relief, as well as the fantastic animals on the lead cistern, derive from Eastern decorative schemes. Many Eastern designs were known in the West through textiles and other objects of the minor arts readily transported in commerce.

In the Romanesque period sculpture was used wherever possible to decorate the sturdy stone architecture of Western Europe. The figure of a king at the entrance to the Chapel, recently discovered to be from Saint-Denis (see note on inside front cover), grows out of the column it decorates, its drapery folds almost as tubular and vertical as the column itself, whereas in the seated prophet, associated with the sculptural style of Chartres, the contours of the body are swathed in more voluminous drapery folds.

The evolution of medieval sculpture can be effectively seen in a series of superlative heads. The earliest, possibly a portrait of Flaccilla, wife of the emperor Theodosius, in the first medieval gallery, is still in the Roman tradition; the heads from Romanesque and Gothic statues in the Tapestry Hall are supreme examples of twelfth- and thirteenth-century church sculptures. The head of Christ belonged to an over-life-size figure and probably came from the façade of Nôtre-Dame-de-la-Couldre, in Parthenay. In its original position the figure must have been placed high above eye level, dominating the front of the church. The head of King David comes from the portal of Saint Anne on the right of the façade of Nôtre-Dame cathedral in Paris, and the head of Philip Augustus (?), now exhibited for the first time, was, as nearly as we can tell, from another columnar figure on the left portal. These heads originally were seen not as isolated heads upon pedestals but as parts of figures in a whole sculptural ensemble of a church façade. The intricate chiselwork of their carving was revealed by the changing play of light and shade on the impressive structures of which they were a part. In the case of the Nôtre-Dame sculptures the brilliant effect of their gilding in sunlight helped to make the cathedral a gleaming monument to the glory of the Christian world.

An idea of the original condition of medieval sculpture is to be derived from the monumental wood figure of Saint James the Less (?), which has kept much of its paint (a detail of this statue is shown on the cover). This is one of the most solemn and spiritual figures that have come out of great cathedrals or churches. Near it is a fourteenth-century statue of Saint Peter with vestments almost as brilliant in color as they
Ivories. **ABOVE:** Plaques of the Crucifixion, Byzantine, XI century, and the Virgin Enthroned, German, X century. **BELOW:** Byzantine box, from the parish church of Cranenburg, Germany. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917
were when the statue was made, for a small, dimly lit Catalan church.

In the Medieval Sculpture Hall with its cathedral-like scale, it has been possible to show a remarkable series of statues. In the Main Building and at The Cloisters there are over a hundred representations of the Virgin and Child, the favorite theme of the Middle Ages. They vary in size from the small ivories and boxwood statuettes to the large seated group from Poligny. This affectionate mother from Poligny, naturalistically portrayed, is so different from the stylized Romanesque Virgins in the Romanesque Chapel, in which the Mother and Child are shown in frontal position, regal and dignified but unworldly and unearthly. The Education of the Virgin, with Saint Anne as her teacher, bespeaks the artist's observation of a real mother and daughter.

A similar contrast is afforded by the large Romanesque Crucifixion group and the late Gothic Pietà, religious sculptures of very different mood and emphasis. The figure of the crucified Christ, completely clothed in the seamless *collobium*, is motionless and solemn; the Mary and John at either side express their sorrow with controlled gestures and restrained movement reflected in the uninterrupted folds of their drap-
Limestone figure of a prophet, in the style of Chartres sculpture, xii century. Bequest of Michael Dreicer, 1921. Painted wood figure, probably Saint James the Less. German (Rhenish), 1265-1280. Fletcher Fund, 1928
Painted limestone Virgin and Child, from Poligny. French (Burgundian), mid XV century. Rogers Fund, 1933
ery. In the Pietà the Christ lies prostrate, with every muscle showing the strain of his suffering; the contorted draperies of the mourners emphasize the intensity of their lamentation.

Many of the small sculptures are superb examples, culled from the Museum’s extensive collections. The standing, blue-mantled statuette of the Virgin and Child, carved in oak, has the monumentality of Gothic portal statues and at the same time the charm of more intimate small-scale sculptures. The small seated stone Virgin opposite could be enlarged many times and would lose none of the delicacy of the carving. The Visitation group, with its original gilding and polychromy extraordinarily preserved, and other sculptures in vitrines and wall cases placed at the ends of the hall afford an opportunity to study sculptures in wood (usually painted), marble, and limestone, relating biblical and other historical and legendary themes. To single out the kneeling Kings or the Saint Elzear, the two Marys or the small devotional altarpiece with the Nativity scenes arranged in miniature stage settings suggesting a medieval mystery play, would merely be playing favorites.

The medieval tapestries in the Tapestry and Sculpture Halls, together with those at The Cloisters, proclaim the pageant of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century life as it was woven in large and small wall hangings. Our tapestry collection, illustrated and described in three Museum Picture Books, is unique in scope and quality. Unlike the Spanish and Austrian royal collections it has been acquired with a view to making a representative showing and not for the decoration of royal palaces. The Crucifixion is the central part of the earliest surviving Gothic tapestry. The Annunciation, recalling a painting by Melchior Broederlam, must once have belonged to the series of Scenes from the Life of the Virgin woven in Flanders early in the fifteenth century, now in Saragossa cathedral museum. The tapestries striped with the colors of King Charles VII of France, alternating red, white, and green, show courtiers with roses, the emblem of the king. From the prolific Tournai workshops we have two Trojan War pieces, the Centaur and the Hecate, as well as the Semiramis, the Judith and Holophernes, and, finest of them all, the panels from the Seven Sacraments series, given about 1475 by Pasquier Grenier, master weaver and merchant, and his wife to their church of Saint Quentin. The two tapestries from Burgos cathedral were undoubtedly presents from the Emperor Maximilian to his son Philip when he married Joanna of Spain in 1496. Perhaps the most charming of the late medieval tapestries are those with backgrounds of flowering plants. Especially noteworthy among these is one lent by Mrs. Mellon Bruce.
Tapestry of the Annunciation. Flemish (Arras), early xv century. Related to the work of Broederlam, painter to the dukes of Burgundy. Gift of Harriet Barnes Pratt in memory of her husband, Harold Irving Pratt, 1949
Courtiers with roses, tapestry with the colors of Charles VII of France. Franco-Flemish (Arras or Tournai), second quarter of the XV century. Rogers Fund, 1909. The Baptism, part of the Seven Sacraments tapestry made for Saint Quentin, Tournai. Flemish, workshop of Pasquier Grenier, about 1475. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917
Champlevé enamel boxes. Spanish (?), xii century, said to be from Champagnat, France, and French (Limoges), late xii or xiii century. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917
Champlevé enamels. ABOVE: the Baptism of Christ, Mosan school, possibly by Godefroid de Claire, about 1150-1175. Saint John writing his Gospel, German (Rhenish), second half of the XII century. BELOW: Christ in Majesty and an apostle, French (Limoges), XIII century. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917
Staghorn saddle carved with scenes of courtship and Saint George and other knights killing dragons. German or Italian, xv century. Dick Fund, 1940.