Early Medieval Art in Europe

c. 500-1100 CE

British Isles
Scandinavia
Carolingian Europe
Ottonian Europe
The Middle Ages

• The roughly 1000 year period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century and the Renaissance in the 15th century
• Term “middle ages” reflects the view of earlier historians who believed this period in history to be a dark age of ignorance, barbarianism and decline, sandwiched between two golden ages.
• Historians now recognize the many complex innovations of the period which led to the birth of modern Europe
• The Middle Ages are usually divided into three periods, Early Medieval, Romanesque and Gothic.
Europe After the Fall of Rome

• As Roman authority crumbled it was replaced by strong local leadership, aka the **WARRIOR LORDS**.

• Various Northern tribes like the Germanic Franks, the Visgoths, the Saxons, the Celts and the Norse, had invaded or settled in Roman territories during the previous centuries.

• The Church, which remained centered in Rome also gained influence at this time.

• **1. The breakdown of central power, 2. the fusion of tribal cultures with Roman culture and 3. the unifying influence of Christianity produced new political, cultural and social forms**
Growing Influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe

- Relationships based on patronage between the powerful-nobles and church officials and the less powerful became increasingly important.
- These relationships laid the foundation for the system of feudalism.
- A system of mutual support developed between the Church and the wealthy landowners.
- These wealthy secular leaders defended the claims of the Church and in return the Church validated their power.
The Church as Patron of the Arts

• The Church in the Middle Ages emerged as a repository of learning.
• Church officials and the nobility became the principle patrons of the arts.
• Of course, the focus of their patronage was the Church: its buildings and its liturgical equipment.
• Liturgical equipment included: altars, altar vessels, crosses, candle sticks and reliquaries (containers for relics).
• In addition patrons commissioned religious vestments, paintings with religious themes and copies of sacred texts.
North meets South

- As Christianity spread north beyond the borders of the former Roman Empire, Northern artistic traditions worked their way south.
- Brilliant new artistic styles were born out of this complex and sometimes tangled mix of styles, which originated from both northern and southern people, eastern and western people, pagans and Christians, urban dwellers and rural villagers.
Early Medieval Period
c. 600-900 CE

- PAIR OF GERMANIC GILT SILVER FIBULAE
- SECOND HALF OF 5th FIRST HALF OF 6th century CE
Early Medieval breaks down into 4 periods

1. **Art of the Warrior Lords**
   - Lots of chaos and fighting after the fall of Rome
   - People were often on the move
   - Need for small portable pieces of art

2. **Hiberno-Saxon**
   - Irish-British
   - Learning and Art centered in monasteries
   - Preservation of classical texts.
   - Early book making - Illuminated manuscripts

3. **Carolingian**
   - Charlemagne's attempt to revive the arts and create a culture along the lines of ancient Rome.

4. **Ottonian**
   - 10th century lots of upheaval
   - Ottos admired Charlemagne
   - Wanted a new Holy Roman Empire
The British Isles

Section of Hadrian’s Wall built across Great Britain begun in 122 CE

• When Roman armies arrived in Britain in 55-54 CE, it was a well populated agricultural land of numerous small communities.
• The people of Britain, were Celts, an ancient European people.
• After Roman conquest in 43 CE, Britain's fortunes rose and fell with those of the Empire.
• Roman Britain experienced its final period of wealth and prosperity from 296-370 CE.
• During this time Christianity flourished and spread to Ireland, which had never been under Roman rule.
Scandinavia

- Scandinavia, which includes the modern countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, had never been under Roman control.
- In the 5th century it was a land of small independent fishing and agricultural communities.
- Most inhabitants spoke variations of language called, Norse and shared a rich mythology with other Germanic peoples.
- Some of their deities included, Odin, chief of the gods, Thor, son of Odin, and Loki, the fire god.
- Brave fallen warriors were granted entrance to Valhalla, a kind of Norse heaven.
The Animal Art Style

• By the 5th century CE the so called animal art style was prevalent.
• This style displayed an array of serpents, four legged beasts, and squat human forms.
• These works are generally symmetrical and portray animals in their entirety from a variety of perspectives.
• Animals are seen in profile, from above and sometimes with their ribs and spinal columns exposed, as if they had been x-rayed.
The Gummersmark Brooch
Denmark, 6th century

- Large silver pin, probably one of a pair used to fasten a cloak at the shoulders.
- Note the open-work around the brooch.
- Animal style is combine with abstract geometric motifs, spirals and beaded bands.
- Can you find: bird heads, humans, dogs, and dragons?
Britain after Roman Occupation

- The Roman army left Britain in 406 to help defend Gaul against invading Germanic peoples.
- There is no clear historical record for the years immediately following the Roman withdrawal.
- Various groups of Germanic Angles, Saxons and Norse competed for control of various parts of Britain.
- By the beginning of the 7th century, rival Anglo Saxon kingdoms had emerged in Britain.
- The arts, which had suffered a serious decline, made a strong recovery with Celtic, Norse, Germanic and Roman influences.
Anglo-Saxon Literature

- Full of references to splendid and costly jewelry and military equipment decorated with gold and silver.
- Leaders rewarded friends and followers with gold rings and weapons.
- The Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf, c. 7th century, vividly describes a hero’s burial with a horde of treasure in a grave mound by the sea.
- In 1938, an actual 7th century burial site was uncovered in a mound in England near the North Sea called, Sutton Hoo.
- The treasures buried with the occupant of the grave reveal that he was a rich and powerful man.
- The man was buried in an 86 foot long boat.
- Neither the man’s body nor the boat have survived.
• Purse cover from the Sutton Hoo burial ship, c. 615-30
• One of many items for the after life found in the burial ship.
• The purse was filled with coins, but the leather of the purse has not survived.
• Along with this purse clasp were weapons, armor and other items for use in the after life.
• This beautifully crafted piece is significant for the combination of style represented.
• The gold frame is set off with garnets and blue checkered enamel.
• The upper ornaments are 2 polygons decorated with purely geometric patterns flanking a design of 4 intertwined animals.
• In the lower center design large beaked hawks attack ducks.
• On either side, men are being attacked by beasts.
• The hawks are Swedish, the interlacing animals Germanic and the polychrome gem style is eastern European.
• This combination of motifs is a hallmark of the Hiberno-Saxon style that flourished in England and Ireland (Roman name Hibernia) during the 7th and 8th centuries.
• This is a very famous piece of art and is representative of the Early Medieval period.
Christian Britain

- The Anglo Saxons tribes in Britain were pagans.
- But Christianity endured thought the 5th and 6th centuries in southwestern England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- Monasteries began to appear in the region some were isolated and the monks had little contact with the outside world, and others were in local Christian communities.
- All were cut off from Rome and many developed their own liturgical practices and artistic traditions.
- In 597, Pope Gregory the Great began a rigorous campaign of conversion in Britain and dispatched a missionary group from Rome.
- The head of this group a monk named Augustine, later canonized as St. Augustine, became the first archbishop of Canterbury.
- There was conflict between Rome and the Christians in Britain, but eventually Rome prevailed and British Christianity came under Roman Catholic rule.
Illuminated Manuscripts

The Book of Kells

• Among the most beautiful pieces of art of the Middle Ages.
• Monks produced exquisitely written and illustrated texts of the Gospels which were used in the celebration of the Mass.
• One of the most famous books is the *Book of Kells*.
• Believed to have been begun in the monastery at Iona, an island off the coast of Scotland, and completed at Kells on the Irish mainland.
• This creation of the gospel of Matthew involved an enormous amount of time and expense.
• Four scribes and three illuminators worked on it, a modern scribe takes about a month to complete a single page.
• 185 calves were killed to produce the vellum, and the pigments for the ink came from as far away as Afghanistan.
The Book of Kells
Chi Rho Iota Page
late 8th early 9th century

- Animal interlace and spirals.
- Monogram of Christ, from the first three words of Matthew’s gospel.
- Each letter is outlined and then sub-divided into intricate compartments.
- Look for moths, angels, Christ, chalices, crosses and two cats.
• Page with the four evangelists
• Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
quamquam per
nobilior
angelorum
penicet
in hoc
duos plu
or exul
poro
me conanque
• The Book of Kells is currently in the collection of Trinity College, Dublin
• Man (symbol of Saint Matthew)
• Book of Durrow
• possibly from Iona, Scotland
• c 660-680.
• Ink and tempera on parchment
• 9 5/8” x 6 1/8”
• Trinity College Library Dublin

• **Ribbon Interlace**: a complex pattern of woven and knotted lines that may derive from similar border ornamentation in ancient Greek and Roman mosaics and is commonly found in Medieval painting and metal work.
Cross and carpet page from Lindisfarne Gospels
Northumbria, England, ca. 698-721
 Tempera on vellum
 11 1/2” x 9 1/4”.
The Cross Page from the Lindesfarne Gospel is a gem of Hiberno-Saxon workmanship, with delicately outlined blue and gold tendrils setting off the green and red Christian cross centered on the page.
South Cross
Ahenny, County Tipperary
Ireland. 8th c. Stone

• Typical monumental Celtic cross with circle or halo, called a Celtic Ring, intersecting the cross.

• The ring is said to symbolize a halo or a glory, a ring of heavenly light.

• Or it is there to support the heavy arms of the cross.
Carolingian Europe

- A new empire emerged in continental Europe during the second half of the 8th century forged by Charlemagne.
- Under Charlemagne the empire reached its greatest geographical size.
- Encompassed western Germany, France, parts of Italy and the low countries, modern Belgium and Holland.
- Charlemagne imposed Christianity, sometimes brutally, throughout the empire and promoted Church reform.
- Charlemagne sought to restore the Western Empire as a Christian state and to revive the arts.
- His architects, painters and sculptors turned to Rome and Ravenna for inspiration.
Europe After the Fall of Rome

• The fragmented Europe that lay in the wake of Rome's collapse was resurrected by an energetic new force on the scene.
• His name was Charlemagne and, in the year 800, he had himself crowned by the Pope in Rome as the Emperor of a new Holy Roman Empire.
• Charlemagne had long admired Justinian and Constantine; his goal was to be an emperor in their mold, and to build a political entity modeled on that of the ancient Roman Empire.
Constantine...Justinian...Charlemagne

302  527  800
The Age of Charlemagne

Born in 742, when northern Europe was still in chaos, Charlemagne consolidated the Frankish kingdom his father and grandfather bequeathed him and defeated the Lombards in Italy.

He gave his name (Carolus Magnus in Latin) to an entire era, the Carolingian period.

On Christmas day of the year 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charles the Great (Charlemagne), King of the Franks since 768, as emperor of Rome (r. 800-814).

The setting for Charlemagne’s coronation, fittingly, was Old Saint Peter’s basilica in Rome, built by Constantine, the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity.
Charlemagne ordered a permanent residence to be built at Aachen, Germany.

A palace for his children was established and the King himself studied grammar, rhetoric and dialectic with Peter of Pisa and astronomy with Alcuin of York.
For his palace chapel, Charlemagne adopted the splendid Byzantine church of San Vitale in Ravenna.

He was given decorative mosaics stripped from churches in Ravenna and marble revetments (retaining walls) and other materials gathered from Roman ruins to be used for the adornment of his imperial chapel.
When Charlemagne had traveled to Rome on an earlier occasion, he had seen the church of San Vitale, built during the reign of Justinian. Charlemagne commissioned a Palace Chapel at his capital in Aachen emulating San Vitale's octagon-within-an-octagon plan. However, it should be noted that Charlemagne's version is much cleaner in design and sturdier in appearance.
• San Vitale

Charlemagne’s Palace Chapel
Interior of the Palatine Chapel of Charlemagne, Aachen, Germany, 792-805

- This is the interior of Charlemagne's Palace Chapel at Aachen, one of the first large scale stone structures to be erected in Europe since the fall of Rome.
- Lacking the intricate interplay of chapels and side aisles of San Vitale, the interior of the Palatine Chapel appears masculine, practical and worldly.
- The chapel was damaged in WW II.
View of the westworks, Palace Chapel of Charlemagne,

- Very Northern feature
- Multi story vestibule, flanked by stair towers
- This wall traditionally faced West, hence the name.
- During the Romanesque and Gothic periods coming up next, the Westworks feature will evolve into the twin tower façade found on many cathedrals.
• Page with Mark the Evangelist
• Book of Mark,
• 781-83.
• Ink, gold and colors on vellum.
• 12 1/2 x 8 1/2 in.
Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris
Saint Matthew
Ebbo Gospels, c. 816-35

The illuminator infuses his subject with an energy that amounts to frenzy, and the frail saint almost leaps under its impulse.

His hair stands on end, his eyes open wide, the folds of the drapery writhe and vibrate, the landscape behind him rears up alive.

The tiny angel in the upper-right corner is Matthew's inspiration. The angel is dictating to Matthew what he is to write down.

Medieval expressionism depicts the saint’s inner excitement rather than his physical appearance.
• Ebbo Gospels.
• St. Luke.
• Carolingian Anonymous (750-987)
• 9th c Frankish
• Carolingian Manuscripts/Books
The golden cover of the **Lindau Gospels**, c. 870-80, is surrounded by pearls and jewels that are raised on golden claw feet so that they can catch and reflect the light even more brilliantly and protect the delicate metal relief from denting.

The figures are rendered in **repoussé**, or hammered or pressed relief. The youthful Christ brings to mind the beardless unsuffering Christ of the Roman catacombs.

By contrast, the four angels and the personifications of the Moon and the Sun above and the crouching figures of the Virgin Mary and Saint John (and two other figures of uncertain identity) in the quadrants below display life like energy.

This eclectic work displays the classical and native stylistic poles of Carolingian art.
Scandinavia: The Vikings

- Sometime in the late 8th century seafaring bands of Scandinavians began descending on the rest of Europe.
- Arriving in flotillas, with as many as 350 ships, they explored, plundered, traded with, and colonized a vast area of Europe.
- As one history book puts it, “they were an unsettling presence.”
- They settled lands ranging from Iceland and Greenland to the British Isles and France.
- A Viking group called the Rus, established colonies in the land that would become Russia.
- The Danish King, Harold Bluetooth brought Christianity to Scandinavia in the middle of the 9th century.
Memorial Stone
Swedish, 8th century

• Vikings erected large memorial stones at home and abroad.
• Some, called Rune stones, are covered with inscriptions and others with figural decorations are called Picture stones.
• This one from a Swedish island displays a common theme.
• Depicts a heroic death in battle and the journey to Valhalla.
• Typical mushroom shape
• Divide into registers, surrounded by a band of ribbon interlace
• Registers depict ritual scenes and battle scenes.
• The bottom registers shows a large Viking ship, with a large sail and intricate rigging.
• The ship symbolizes the warriors journey to Valhalla.
Burial Ship
Norway, 815-20

- 75 foot long burial ship discovered in Norway.
- Remains of two women were found inside.
- The treasure had been looted when the site was uncovered.
Post

• Animal-head post, Oseberg, Norway, ship burial, ca. 825. Wood head 5”

• Viking art also picks up the curvilinear movements of the Interlace Style, as can be seen in this wooden ship prow ornament.

• Meant to frighten enemy seamen, this toothy dragon-like creature exudes the physical vigor, adventurousness, and violence we've come to associate with the Viking culture.
Ottonian Europe

- After the death of Charlemagne, in 843 his kingdom was divided among his grandsons, only to disintegrate at the hands of Vikings and Magyars.
- A re-consolidation occurred, in the middle of the 10th century, thanks to a new line of German emperors known as the Ottonians.
- New empire corresponded roughly to Germany and Austria.
- The Ottonian period saw a new wave of influence from the Greek East (Otto II married a Byzantine princess), which resulted in one of the first monumental sculptures of the crucified Christ, the Gero Crucifix.
Otto I Presenting Magdeburg Cathedral to Christ

- c. 962-73
- Ivory plaque
- Probably part of an altar or pulpit decoration in the Magdeburg Cathedral.
- Otto is the small figure holding a model of the church.
- St Maurice, a major saint in the area, wraps his arms protectively around Otto.
- Christ sits on a wreath, which may represent the heavens and his feet rest on an arc, that could symbolize the earth.
- St Peter is across from Otto holding the keys to heaven.
- Very serious and dignified, typical Ottonian style.
St Michael’s Hildesheim, Germany
Bishop Bernward

- A bright point in the history of Hildesheim, Germany was **Bishop Bernward**, who acquired a great number of donations for the arts.
- He was a priest, politician and an artist.
- An entire art epoch in Germany is called - **the Bernwardin Era** - after him.
- He created the brass casting for the doors for St. Michael's church.
- The bronze, Bernwards doors are located now in the cathedral at Hildesheim.
- The doors that were poured in 1015 are an illustrated Bible, eight pictures the Old and New Testament are depicted.
- Paradise lost vs. Paradise gained
- Greetings
- Tree of Knowledge vs. Tree of Life
- Judgment
- Separation from God vs. Reunion with God
- First born sons of Eve and Mary poverty vs. wealth
- Abel’s sacrificial lamb vs. Jesus Lamb of God
- Despair, sin, murder vs. Hope and Everlasting life
Expulsion from the Garden

Note the emotional power in the pointing God figure and Adam and Eve’s desperate response.
This Crucifix, carved in oak and then painted and gilded, epitomizes the revival of interest in monumental sculpture during this period.

The six-foot-tall image of Christ nailed to the cross is both statue and reliquary [a shrine for sacred relics].

A compartment in the back of the head held the Host.

This dramatically different conception of the crucified Savior digresses from the Early Christian image of the youthful Christ triumphant over death in that he is represented as an all-too-human martyr in intense agony.
Though the work may seem more similar to the Byzantine representations of a suffering Christ, its emotional power is unparalleled. Blood streaks down his forehead from the (missing) crown of thorns. Christ's body sags under its own weight. The muscles are stretched to the limit - those of his right shoulder and chest seem almost to rip apart.
Annunciation to the Shepherds
Reichenau, Germany ca. 970
ink, gold leaf and colors on vellum
Although the angel is very different from the dynamic marble Nike of Samothrace of Hellenistic times, the framed panel still incorporates much that was at the heart of the classical tradition, including the rocky landscape setting with grazing animals. The golden background betrays, however, knowledge of Byzantine book illumination and mosaic decoration.
The angel looms immense above the startled and terrified shepherds, filling the golden sky, and bends on them a fierce and menacing glance as he extends his hand in the gesture of authority and instruction.

Emphasized more than the message itself are the power and majesty of God's authority. The artist portrayed it here with the same emotional impact as the electric force of God's violent pointing in the Hildesheim doors.
Of the three Ottos, Otto III dreamed the most of a revived Christian Roman Empire; it was his life's obsession.

His mother was a Byzantine princess, and he was keenly aware of his descent from both Eastern and Western imperial lines.

He moved his court, with its Byzantine ceremonies, to Rome and there set up theatrically the symbols and trappings of Roman imperialism.

Otto's romantic dream of imperial unity for Europe never materialized. He died prematurely, at age 21, and, at his own request, was buried beside Charlemagne at Aachen.
The illuminator represented the emperor enthroned, holding the sceptor and cross-inscribed orb that represent his universal authority, conforming to a Christian imperial iconographic tradition that went back to Constantine.

He is flanked by the clergy and the barons (the Christian Church and the state), both aligned in his support.

On the facing page, classicizing female personifications of Slavinia, Germany, Gaul, and Rome - the provinces of the Ottonian Empire - bring tribute to the young emperor.
In a gesture of hospitality, love and humility, Christ washed the feet of his disciples before they had the Last Supper.

At the time this manuscript was made both the Byzantine Emperor and the Roman pope practiced the ritual of foot washing once a year.

The Pope and many other priests continue this tradition today on Holy Thursday, the day before Good Friday.
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