

Phenomenons of the medieval world

4. Medieval art and culture.

A) The **medieval art** of the Western world covers a vast scope of time and place, over **1000 years of art history** in *Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa*. It includes major art movements and periods, national and regional art, genres, revivals, the artists crafts, and the artists themselves.

Art historians attempt to classify medieval art into major periods and styles, often with some difficulty. A generally accepted scheme includes *Early Christian art, Migration Period art, Byzantine art, Insular art, Pre-Romanesque* and **Romanesque art**, and **Gothic art**, as well as many other periods within these central styles.

Medieval art in Europe grew out of the artistic *heritage* of the *Roman Empire* and the iconographic traditions of the *early Christian church*. These sources were mixed with the vigorous "*Barbarian*" artistic culture of Northern Europe to produce a remarkable artistic legacy.

At the start of the medieval period most significant works of art were very rare and costly objects associated with **secular elites, monasteries or major churches**, and if religious, largely produced by **monks**. By the end of the Middle Ages works of considerable artistic interest could be found in small villages and significant numbers of **bourgeois** homes in towns.

Medieval art was produced in many media, and the works that remain in large numbers include **sculpture, illuminated manuscripts, stained glass, metalwork** and **mosaics**, all of which have had a higher survival rate than other media like fresco wall-paintings, work in precious metals or textiles, including tapestry.

B) **Romanesque art** developed in the period from **about 1000 to the rise of Gothic art in the 12th century**, in conjunction with the **rise of monasticism** in Western Europe. The style developed initially in France, but spread to Christian Europe, to become *the first medieval style found all over Europe*, though with regional differences. The arrival of the style coincided with a great increase in church-building, and in the size of **cathedrals** and larger churches; many of these were rebuilt in subsequent periods, but often reached roughly their present size in the Romanesque period. **Romanesque architecture** is dominated by thick walls, massive structures conceived as a single organic form, with **vaulted roofs** and **round-headed windows and arches**. (see pictures)



Painted ceiling of a Spanish crypt



The Romanesque tympanum of Vézelay Abbey, Burgundy, France, 1130s.

Romanesque sculpture and painting is often extremely vigorous and expressive, and very inventive. Though many features absorbed from classical art form part of the Romanesque style, Romanesque artists rarely intended to achieve any sort of classical effect.

At the same time **grotesque beasts** and **monsters**, and *fight with or between them*, were popular themes, to which religious meanings might be loosely attached. (see picture)



Judas Iscariot hangs himself, assisted by devils, always a favourite subject of carvers.

C) Gothic art - The earliest Gothic art was **monumental sculpture**, on the walls of Cathedrals and abbeys. Christian art was often showing the stories of the *New Testament and the Old Testament side by side*. *Saints' lives* were often depicted. Images of the **Virgin Mary** changed from the Byzantine iconic form to a more human and affectionate mother.

Secular art came in to its own during this period with the rise of cities, **foundation of universities**, increase in trade, the establishment of a money-based economy and the creation of a **bourgeois** class who could afford to *patronize* the arts. Increased literacy and a growing body of secular literature encouraged the representation of secular themes in art. With the growth of cities, trade guilds were formed and artists were often required to be members of a *painters' guild*—as a result, because of better record keeping, more artists are known to us by name in *this period than any previous*;



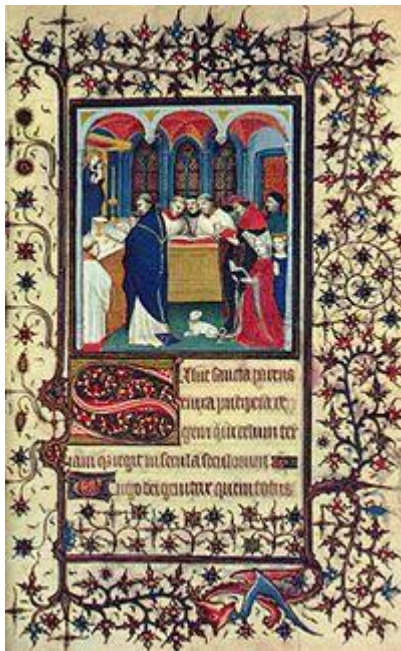
The western façade of Reims Cathedral, France; The interior of the western end of Reims Cathedral; drawing of a flying buttress

Originating in 12th century France and lasting into the 16th century, **Gothic architecture** was known during the period as "the French Style", with the term *Gothic* (barbarian, not classical) first appearing during the latter part of the **Renaissance**. Its characteristic features include the **pointed arch**, the **ribbed vault** and the **flying buttress**.

D) Illuminated manuscripts - An **illuminated manuscript** is a manuscript in which the text is supplemented by the addition of **decoration, such as decorated initials, borders (marginalia) and miniature illustrations.**

The majority of **surviving manuscripts are from the Middle Ages**, although many illuminated manuscripts survive from the Renaissance, along with a very limited number from Late Antiquity. The majority of these manuscripts are of a **religious nature**. However, especially **from the 13th century** onward, an increasing number of secular texts were illuminated. Most illuminated manuscripts were created as **codices**. A very few illuminated manuscript fragments survive on **papyrus**, which does not last nearly as long as **vellum** or **parchment**. Most medieval manuscripts, illuminated or not, were written on parchment (most commonly of calf, sheep, or goat skin), but most manuscripts important enough to illuminate were written on **the best quality of parchment, called vellum.**

Beginning in the late Middle Ages manuscripts began to be produced on paper. Very early printed books were sometimes produced with spaces left for rubrics and miniatures, or were given illuminated initials, or decorations in the margin, but the introduction of printing rapidly led to the decline of illumination. Illuminated manuscripts continued to be produced in the early 16th century, but in much smaller numbers, mostly for the very wealthy.



The decoration of this page from a French **Book of Hours**, ca. 1400, includes a miniature, initials and borders

The second picture comes from the *Très Riches Heures* showing Jean, Duc de Berry's household exchanging New Year gifts. The Duke is seated at the right, in blue.

Manuscripts are among the most common items to survive from the Middle Ages; many thousands survive. They are also the best surviving specimens of medieval painting, and the best preserved. Indeed, for many areas and time periods, they are the only surviving examples of painting.

Homework:

Find out any work of art produced in the Middle Ages in our country. There must be an example of romanesque and gothic art (paintings, architecture, metalworks, stained glass); find at least two pictures and paste them below.

(Pictures paste here)