Early Medieval Art

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KEY IDEAS

- The Migratory period of the Early Middle Ages featured portable works that were done in the animal style.
- Characteristics of Early Medieval art include horror vacui and interlacing patterns.
- Art at the court of Charlemagne begins the first of many western European revivals of ancient Rome.
- Ottonian art revives large scale sculpture and architecture.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the year 600, almost everything that was known was old. The great technological breakthroughs of the Romans were either lost to history or beyond the capabilities of the migratory people of the seventh century. This was the age of mass migrations sweeping across Europe, an age epitomized by Attila the Hun, whose hordes were famous for despoiling all before him.
Certainly Attila was not alone. The Vikings from Scandinavia, in their speedy boats, flew across the North Sea and invaded the British Isles and colonized parts of France.

Other groups of people, like the notorious Vandals, did much to destroy the remains of Roman civilization. So desperate was this era that historians named it the “Dark Ages,” a term that more reflects our knowledge of the times than the times themselves.

However, stability in Europe was reached at the end of the eighth century when a group of Frankish kings, most notably Charlemagne, built an impressive empire whose capital was centered in Aachen, Germany.

In the tenth century, a dynasty of three German kings named Otto established the Ottonian Empire, again uniting central Europe.

**Patronage and Artistic Life**

Monasteries were the principal centers of learning in an age when even the emperor, Charlemagne, could read, but not write more than his name. Therefore, artists who could both write and draw were particularly prized in the creation of manuscripts.

The modern idea that artists should be original and say something fresh or new in each work is a notion that was largely unknown in the Middle Ages. Scribes copied great works of ancient literature, like the Bible or medical treatises; they did not record contemporary literature or folk tales. Scribes were expected to maintain the wording of the original, while illustrators painted important scenes, keeping one eye on traditional approaches, and another on his or her own creative powers. Therefore, the text of a manuscript is generally an exact copy of a continuously recopied book, the illustrations allow the artist some freedom of expression.

**INNOVATIONS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL PAINTING**

One of the great advances in Medieval art is the decoration of manuscript books, called *codices*, which were improvements over ancient scrolls both for ease of use and durability. A codex was made of resilient antelope or calf hide, called vellum, or sheep or goat hide, called parchment. Hides were cut into sheets and soaked in lime in order to free them from oil and hair. The skin was then dried and perhaps chalk was added to whiten the surface. Artisans then prepared the skins by scraping them down to an even thickness with a sharp knife; each page had to be rubbed smooth to remove impurities. The hides were then folded to form small booklets of eight pages, called quires. Parchment was so valued as a writing surface that it continued to be used for manuscripts even after paper became standard.

The backbone of the hide was arranged so that the spine of the animal ran across the page horizontally. This minimized movement when the hide dried and tried to return to the shape of the animal, perhaps causing the paint to flake.

Illuminations were painted mostly by monks or nuns who wrote in rooms called *scriptoria*, or writing places, that had no heat or light, to prevent fires. Vows of silence were maintained to limit mistakes. A team often worked on one book; scribes copied the text and illustrators drew capital letters as painters illustrated scenes from the Bible. Eventually, the quires were sewn together to create the book.

Manuscript books had a sacred quality. This was the word of God, and had to be treated with appropriate deference. The books were covered with bindings of wood or leather, and gold leaf was lavished on the surfaces. Finally, precious gems were inset on the cover.
CHARACTERISTICS OF HIBERNO-SAXON ART

Hiberno-Saxon art refers to the art of the British Isles in the Early Medieval period; Hibernia is the ancient name for Ireland. The main artistic expression is illuminated manuscripts, of which a particularly rich collection still survives.

Hiberno-Saxon art relies on complicated interlace patterns in a frenzy of horror vacui. The borders of these pages harbor animals in stylized combat patterns, sometimes called the animal style. Each section of the illustrated text opens with huge initials that are rich fields for ornamentation. The Irish artists who worked on these books had an exceptional handling of color and form, with a brilliant transference of polychrome techniques to manuscripts.

Major Work of Saxon Art

Purse Cover from Sutton Hoo Ship Burial, 600–650, gold, garnet, enamels, British Museum, London (Figure 11.1)

- Sutton Hoo was the scene of a ship burial, possibly for King Raedwald of East Anglia
- Purse cover designs survive, backing of ivory or bone disintegrated, bag of leather also disintegrated
- Animal style; hawks attacking ducks
- Animals bite the heads of the men they flank
- Interlacing patterns of ornamental designs
- Legs and arms intertwined
- Cloisonné technique

Figure 11.1: Purse Cover from Sutton Hoo Ship Burial, 600–650, gold, garnet, enamels, British Museum, London

Major Works of Hiberno-Saxon Art

Saint Matthew from the Book of Lindisfarne, c. 700, tempera on vellum, British Museum, London (Figure 11.2)

- Saint Matthew is seated on a cushioned bench, book on his lap, writing his book of the Bible
- Man behind the curtain may be inspiration from God, or perhaps Moses or Christ
- Matthew’s symbolic angel is above him, Latin words “image of a man”
- Byzantine influence
  - Greek words “Saint Matthew”
  - Angel’s hand covered
- Flattened, linear elements
- Soft modeling of Byzantine art turned into crisp cusp-shaped lines in Saint Matthew’s drapery
- Painted and inscribed by Bishop Eadfrith of Lindisfarne

Figure 11.2: Saint Matthew from the Book of Lindisfarne, c. 700, tempera on vellum, British Museum, London
Chi-Rho-Iota Page from the Book of Matthew in the Book of Kells, c. 800, ink on vellum, Trinity College Library, London (Figure 11.3)

- Lavish, richly illustrated book with great complexity of design
- Interlacing patterns dominate
- Heads and figures of people appear in the elaborate patterning
- Initials are dominant motifs, pushing everything else to the margins of the page

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIKING ART

A population explosion in Scandinavia caused an expansion of Viking culture throughout northern Europe. Viking artists were inspired by prehistoric models that emphasized animals and spirals in elaborate interlacing patterns. Viking art can be characterized as mostly applied art, art that is engraved or incised onto functional objects. Typically, works are in animal style filled with horror vacui.

Major Work of Viking Art

Animal Head Post from the Oseberg Ship Burial, 834, wood, University of Oslo, Norway (Figure 11.4)

- Ship burial was for two highly placed women in the Viking court
- Snarling mouth, eyes staring wildly
- Head filled with interlacing animal patterns
- Nostrils flaring
- Unknown purpose of the head post, may have been used in a procession or on the prow of a boat

CHARACTERISTICS OF CAROLINGIAN ART

Carolingian art, the art of Charlemagne and his times, can be seen as the first revival of classical art beyond the ancient world. Charlemagne, anxious to be emperor in the new Rome, planned bath houses, theatres, and a forum at Aachen for his new capital in Germany. Roman imagery was revived on everything from coins to architecture.

Carolingian churches are characterized by elaborate westworks, consisting of a centralized entrance beneath a second story chapel, both flanked by impressive towers. Churches were sometimes accompanied by monastic buildings, which housed the religious in a self-sufficient community. Monks and nuns ate, slept, and worked around an open-air courtyard called a cloister, which was generally placed immediately adjacent to the church. All this can be seen in the plan for the ninth-century monastery at St. Gall (Figure 11.9). Buildings like the Lorsch Gatehouse (Figure 11.5) show the influence of Roman triumphal arches, and the Palatine Chapel (c. 800) (Figure 11.8) at Aachen is certainly inspired by the Byzantine building San Vitale (Figure 9.6)
Although some Carolingian murals and mosaics were created, these art forms were not in the Frankish taste. Instead they continued the medieval tradition of manuscript painting, drawing inspiration from both Roman sources and contemporary Byzantine iconography.

**Major Works of Carolingian Art**

*Lorsch Gatehouse, c. 760, Lorsch, Germany (Figure 11.5)*

- Three arched openings are divided by engaged columns, cf. the Arch of Constantine (Figure 7.16)
- Fluted pilasters on the second story
- Carolingian patterning motifs cover the walls
- Chapel on upper story, perhaps originally a reception room for guests
- Building stood in an atrium
- Turrets on left and right house stairwells

*Equestrian Statue of a Carolingian Ruler, ninth century, bronze, Louvre, Paris (Figure 11.6)*

- Stresses imperial imagery of holding the orb, a symbol of the world in the rider’s hands
- Influenced by Roman equestrian statues
- Rider much larger than the horse he sits on
- Sits bolt upright, with little attention to the natural movement of the horse

*Utrecht Psalter, 820–832, ink on vellum, University Library, Utrecht, Netherlands (Figure 11.7)*

- Richly illustrated ink drawings of the psalms of the Bible
- One color
- Small initials
- Visual richness of imagery
- Literal translation of the psalms
- Style characterized by agitated gestures, active violence

*Odo of Metz, Palatine Chapel, 792–805, Aachen, Germany (Figure 11.8)*

- Centrally planned chapel built for Charlemagne
- Superficial resemblance to San Vitale in its ground plan, Charlemagne imported capitals and columns from there
- Dome composed of spherical triangles
- Charlemagne's throne is in gallery, halfway between earth and heaven
- Unusual in that the largest arches are on the second floor, not the first; the columns that fill the arches do not support the arch, they fill in space

Plan of St. Gall, c. 820, ink on parchment, Stiftsbibliothek, St. Gall, Switzerland (Figure 11.9)
- Plan of an ideal self-sufficient monastic community of about 3000 people
- Church symbolically and literally in the center
- Cloistered monks never leave except to go into the fields
- Daily activities surround the cloister: sleeping, eating
- Workshops for making leather, pottery
- Houses made of timber, serfs live with their animals
- Carolingian church typical of the time, having two apses and an elaborate westwork
- No realization of these plans has come to light

CHARACTERISTICS OF OTTONIAN ART

Ottonian art is influenced by the Rome and the Early Christian past, as well as reaffirming the commitment to imperial imagery seen in Carolingian art. Large stone monuments dominate existing Ottonian architecture. Bronze doors were inspired by Roman and Carolingian equivalents.

A common theme of Ottonian architecture is that interior arches and windows do not line up one atop the other.

Major Works of Ottonian Art

Abbey Church of Saint Michael’s, 1001–1033, Hildesheim, Germany (Figures 11.10 and 11.11)
- Church has two transepts, each with two crossing towers and two stair turrets
- Lateral entrances through the side aisles
- Support of nave arcade alternates pairs of columns and square piers
- Windows in clerestory do not line up with arches below; ten windows placed over nine arches
- Sweeping transept arch is subdivided by two lower round arches, and four smaller second-story arches
Bishop Bernward Doors, c. 1015, bronze, Saint Michael's, Hildesheim, Germany (Figures 11.12 and 11.13)

- Two 15-feet-tall bronze doors
- Imperial overtones: Pantheon had bronze doors, now gone; Aachen has bronze doors, but with no decoration
- Subject: Fall of Man, Redemption of Man
- Rectangular panels with few figures, bare landscapes, emphasis on lively gestures
- Bony figures, vitality and liveliness
- Emphasis on extremities—hands, feet, heads

_Gero Crucifix_, 970, wood, Cologne Cathedral (Figure 11.14)

- Return of large monumental sculpture
- Life-size wooden work
- Emotional suffering
- Rounded forms
- Hanging from a cross for the first time

**VOCABULARY**

**Animal style:** a medieval art form in which animals are depicted in a stylized and often complicated pattern, usually seen fighting with one another (Figure 11.1)

**Cloisonné:** enamelwork in which colored areas are separated by thin bands of metal, usually gold or bronze

**Cloister:** a rectangular open-air monastery courtyard with a covered arcade surrounding it

**Codex** (plural: _codices_): a manuscript book (Figures 11.2 and 11.3)

**Gospels:** the first four books of the New Testament that chronicle the life of Jesus (Figure 11.3)

**Horror vacui:** (Latin, meaning “fear of empty spaces”) a type of artwork in which the entire surface is filled with objects, people, designs, and ornaments in a crowded, sometimes congested way (Figure 11.3)

**Scriptorium** (plural: _scriptoria_): a place in a monastery where monks wrote manuscripts

**Westwork:** a monumental entrance to a Carolingian church in which two towers flank a lower central entrance
Summary

The political chaos resulting from the Fall of Rome set in motion a period of migrations. The unifying force in Europe was Christianity, whose adherents established powerful centers of learning, particularly in places like Ireland.

Artists concentrated on portable objects that intermixed the animal style of Germanic art with horror vacui and strong interlacing patterns.

Two short-lived empires flourished under Charlemagne and the three Ottos of the Holy Roman Empire. Both sought to revive Roman imperial imagery in their works.

Practice Exercises

Questions 1 and 2 refer to Figure 11.15.

1. This plan reflects an ideal

   (A) palace
   (B) fortification
   (C) city
   (D) monastery

2. A key characteristic of Carolingian architecture that can be seen in this plan is

   (A) the use of pilasters
   (B) a westwork
   (C) a reliance on the post-and-lintel technique
   (D) the misalignment of windows and arches

3. Hiberno-Saxon art refers to art produced in

   (A) Scandinavia
   (B) France
   (C) Germany
   (D) the British Isles

4. A work that could be characterized as having horror vacui would be

   (A) the Book of Kells
   (B) the Equestrian Statue of a Carolingian Ruler
   (C) Bishop Bernward’s doors
   (D) the Gero Crucifix
Questions 5 and 6 refer to Figure 11.16

5. This work shows the influence of Byzantine art in the
   (A) curtain placed to the right
   (B) frame around the painting
   (C) seated evangelist
   (D) letters in Greek

6. This is a figure of Saint Matthew, who can be identified as such because
   (A) of his halo
   (B) he is writing a book
   (C) a man is hiding behind the curtain
   (D) the angel symbolizes Matthew

7. Pages from medieval books are made from
   (A) paper
   (B) wood
   (C) animal hide
   (D) papyrus

8. Ottonian art started a revival in
   (A) monumental works of sculpture
   (B) manuscript painting
   (C) using cloisters in building plans
   (D) murals and mosaics

9. Viking works are typically applied art, meaning that
   (A) frescoes were applied to walls
   (B) decoration was added to utilitarian items
   (C) enamel work was applied to wood
   (D) Viking ships were elaborately decorated

10. Aachen, Germany was
    (A) Charlemagne's capital
    (B) an Ottonian center
    (C) a Hiberno-Saxon monastery
    (D) a ship burial

Short Essay
   Identify the art historical period of the works in Figures 11.17 and 11.18. Discuss how they were inspired by, or perhaps were modeled on, ancient works of art. Use one side of a sheet of lined paper to write your essay.


**Answer Key**

1. (D)  
2. (B)  
3. (D)  
4. (A)  
5. (D)  
6. (D)  
7. (C)  
8. (A)  
9. (B)  
10. (A)  

**Answers Explained**

**Multiple-Choice**

1. (D) This is the plan for the monastery at St. Gall.

2. (B) Carolingian buildings are noted for an elaborate westwork, in this case, towers built into the entrance of the church.

3. (D) Hiberno-Saxon art refers to the art of the British Isles from the sixth to eighth centuries.

4. (A) The crowded compositions in the *Book of Kells* are the ideal representation of horror vacui.

5. (D) In a place where almost no one spoke Greek, the Greek inscription is a special homage to Byzantium.

6. (D) Saint Matthew’s symbol is the angel.

7. (C) Medieval manuscripts are painted on prepared animal hide.

8. (A) Ottonian works, like the *Gero Crucifix* and the bronze doors at Hildesheim, are examples of the revitalization of large scale works.

9. (B) Viking art specializes in decoration applied to utilitarian objects, or applied art.

10. (A) Aachen was Charlemagne’s capital.
Rubric for Short Essay

4: The student identifies the period as Carolingian and can give a Roman equivalent to the Carolingian piece. The most likely parallels are between the Carolingian ruler and Marcus Aurelius and the Lorsch Gatehouse and the Arch of Constantine. There are no major errors.

3: The student identifies the period as Carolingian and can give a Roman equivalent to the Carolingian piece. Discussion is not as full as a 4. There may be minor errors.

2: The student misidentifies the period but supplies Roman equivalents, OR supplies only one Roman work and identifies the period. There may be major errors.

1: The student names only the period, OR supplies only a Roman equivalent.

0: The student makes an attempt, but the response is without merit.

Short Essay Model Response

The style of both these works is Early Medieval from the Carolingian period. They are both inspired by Roman works of art. The piece on the left is the Equestrian Statue of a Carolingian Ruler, and may have been modeled on the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. Equestrian statues often have imperial significance; both statues have an imperial rider in a procession. The rider, however, is holding a sphere that represents the world. The building on the right is the Lorsch Gatehouse, and may have been inspired by arches such as the Arch of Constantine. Both buildings have three arches with engaged columns attached to the surface.

—Lauren J.

Analysis of Model Response

Lauren identifies the period correctly, and gives Roman parallels to the Carolingian piece. A stronger discussion of the connection between the two Carolingian and Roman inspirations would have merited a higher grade. This essay merits a 3.