



Early Medieval Art

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The Dark Ages or Middle Ages are names for the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the rebirth of Classicism during the Renaissance, beginning in the late 13th century in Italy. These names, however, are misleading, as this period was quite productive historically and artistically. This lesson covers:

1. [Time Period and Location: Early Medieval and Romanesque Art](#)
2. [Vikings and the “Dark Ages”](#)
3. [Fibulae](#)
4. [Sutton Hoo Burial Mound](#)
5. [Oseberg Burial Ship](#)
6. [Illuminated Manuscripts](#)

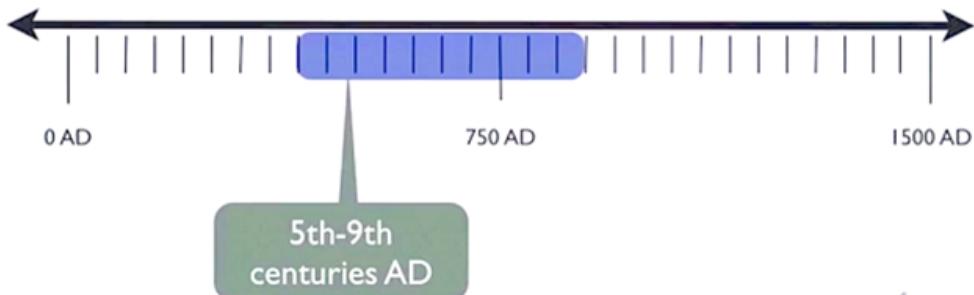


BIG IDEA

The “Dark Ages” and “Middle Ages” are misleading terms about this period. For example, the artistic metalwork and manuscript production from this time are considered some of the greatest examples of Western artwork.

1. Time Period and Location: Early Medieval and Romanesque Art

The artwork covered in this lesson originates during the fifth to ninth centuries CE, as highlighted on the timeline below. Ireland, the British Isles, and Norway, which is part of Scandinavia, are the three geographical regions we will explore as you learn about the artwork of this period.



2. Vikings and the “Dark Ages”

The “Dark Ages” and the “Middle Ages” were pejorative terms used during the Renaissance to refer to the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the rebirth of Classicism during the Renaissance, beginning in the late 13th century in Italy. What kind of values do these terms express? What are they missing in regard to the medieval period?

IN CONTEXT

Interestingly, these times were far from dark. In fact, there was much going on. The proliferation of manuscripts and the recording of information were both taking place. Because of the Christian monasteries and the proliferation of manuscripts, much of the classical knowledge that was fundamental to the emergence of the Renaissance was passed on.

It was also during this time that the doctrine of Christianity became more formalized and the familiar kingdoms of Europe were established. The Vikings, or Norsemen, were a large collection of independent groups of Scandinavian traders, as well as pirates that terrorized Christian Europe along the North Sea and in England for many hundreds of years, mostly during the eighth to 11th centuries.

It was, in fact, Norsemen—or Northmen, and later Normans—under the command of William the Conqueror that established Normandy in France and took control of the kingdom of England, as depicted in the famous Bayeux Tapestry.



DID YOU KNOW

Before the invention of the printing press around 1440, books were copied by hand predominately in **scriptoria** in monasteries throughout Europe.



TERM TO KNOW

Scriptorium (plural Scriptoria)

A room in a monastery used for writing.

3. Fibulae

As the power of the Roman Empire slowly decreased over time, different groups of people, including the Goths, Franks, and Vandals, acquired territory in the former empire. The artwork that survives to the present day is extremely limited and consists of smaller objects that indicate the status of the owner. Art historians used to pay little attention to these objects since they were not thought to be as culturally significant as paintings or sculpture. However, in recent years they have come to be appreciated for the high degree of skill that went into their creation. Here are two examples of elaborate gold, silver, glass, and enamel fibulae from the early fifth century:



Fibulae, which is the plural for **fibula**, were a type of brooch used as decoration or to hold a garment such as a cape and keep it closed. Many examples of fibulae have been discovered, and there are dozens of examples of them in museums throughout Europe. In fact, if you look closely at the mosaic of Justinian at the church of San Vitale, you will see that the government officials standing with him are both wearing fibulae.



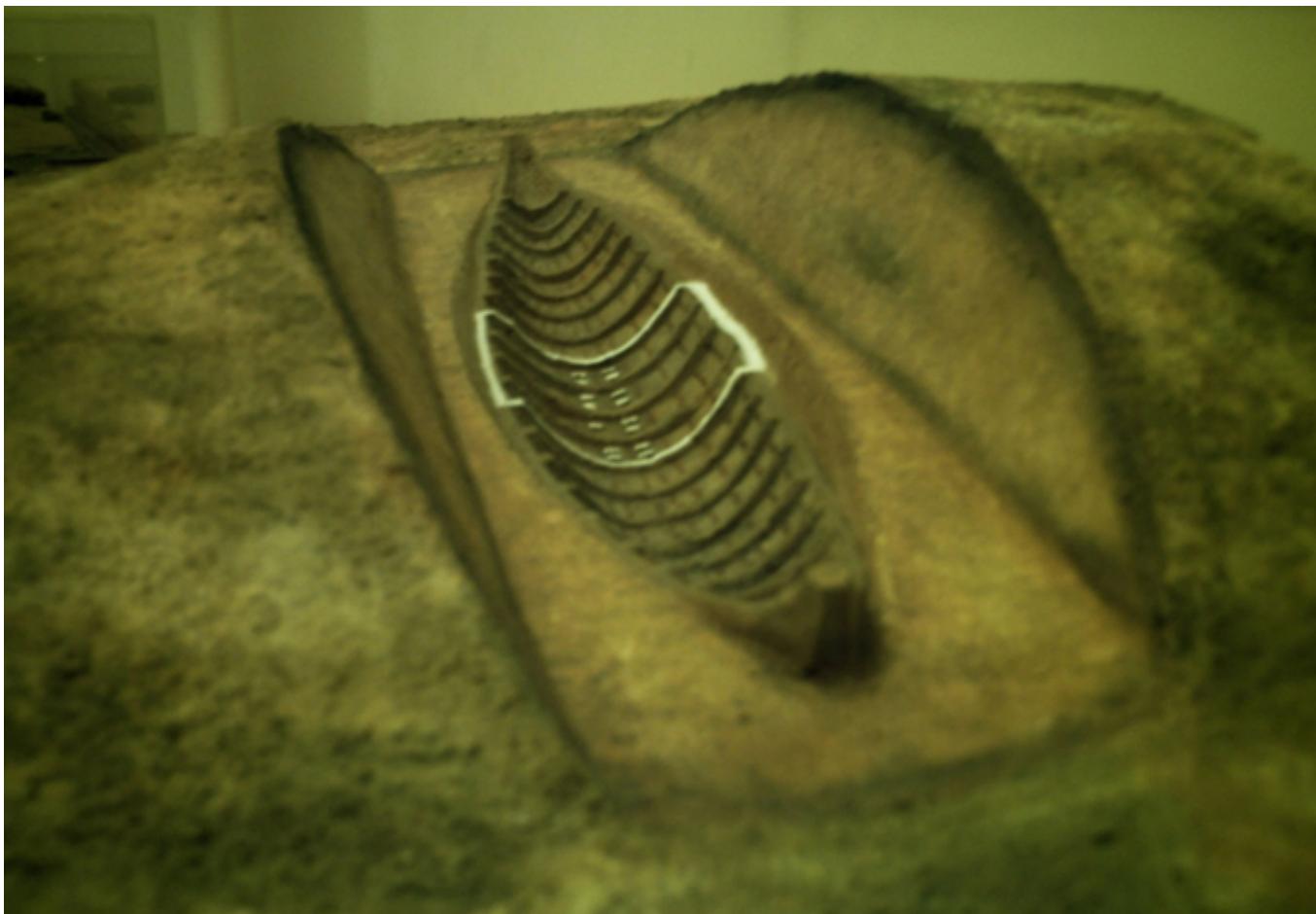
TERM TO KNOW

Fibula (plural Fibulae)

A pin used to hold together a cloak in ancient Greece and Rome.

4. Sutton Hoo Burial Mound

The ship burials of ancient kings from this area, such as the burial mound of Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, England, give us some of the best examples of artwork from this time period. When excavated, this mound contained the remains of a burial ship almost 89 feet long. It contained a burial chamber full of precious objects such as silver plates and coins from Byzantium, a sword, a helmet, and other objects covered in gold and precious gems from as far away as Sri Lanka. Clearly this was the gravesite of an extremely important person. However, the soil at this location is highly acidic and dissolved anything organic, including most of the wooden remains of the ship, fabric, leather, and any human remains. The discovery of phosphorus at this site suggests that a person was buried inside the ship, but exactly who it is, we will never know. There is some thought that the king might be Raeldwald, who died in 625. Although he converted to Christianity, he did not abandon the worship of pagan gods. He ruled during the Anglo-Saxon period, when the concept of England did not exist.



A model of the burial mound at Sutton Hoo with the burial chamber indicated in white

The people who created this burial mound put an enormous amount of effort into its creation. They dragged the ship uphill from the river and cut down trees to construct the burial chamber, filled it with precious objects and the body of the king, and then covered the ship in dirt, creating the mound.

☞ **EXAMPLE** Here is an example of a purse cover from Sutton Hoo. This would have adorned a leather pouch worn on a belt. Some Frankish coins were found inside. The objects found inside the burial mound represented the highest level of craftsmanship that was possible to achieve at that time. Jewelers and

metalworkers in the present would struggle to attain this level of quality.



Purse cover from Sutton Hoo burial mound

Suffolk, England

625 CE

The purse cover is a beautiful example of the type of metalware called **cloisonné**, in which little compartments are created with metal wire and inlaid with colored enamel, glass, or stone. It's an incredibly meticulous and detailed process. It is truly amazing how well this example is preserved; it looks almost brand new. The style is known as the **animal style** because of the combination of abstracted shapes of animals and twisting vines and vegetal shapes. These shapes created a sort of visual pun or joke that was very popular at that time. Their exact meaning has been lost to us today.

A helmet and sword were also found at Sutton Hoo. The helmet had disintegrated into around 500 pieces. The reconstruction process was painstaking and involved decades of work and research. An early example, done in 1947, was later rejected and disassembled. The Royal Armoury produced a replica that is the result of years of painstaking research reassembling the helmet's fragments in a sort of three-dimensional puzzle:



Replica of the Sutton Hoo helmet, produced by the Royal Armoury of England

Only four medieval helmets have been found in England, and this is one of them. Its mask includes a shape that looks like a bird or dragon with outstretched wings (the eyebrows) and a tail (the mustache). The helmet was made of tinned copper and iron, with garnet decorations in the eyebrows. Here is a person dressed in replicas of some of the objects found at Sutton Hoo, as we think they would have been worn and used:



A person dressed in replicas of objects found at Sutton Hoo



DID YOU KNOW

The 2021 Netflix film *The Dig* tells the story of the excavation of the mound at Sutton Hoo. Ralph Fiennes stars as Basil Brown, the amateur archaeologist who initially excavated the site.

IN CONTEXT

People exploring the countryside with metal detectors have uncovered several important hoards or collections of treasure and artifacts in Great Britain. One of the largest was the Staffordshire Hoard, which contained around 4600 objects, more than the burial at Sutton Hoo. Most of the objects found in the Staffordshire Hoard were military in nature, consisting of decorations removed from sword hilts. Some of these were made of gold and had inlaid garnets decorating them that had come from as far away as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The items in this hoard were probably buried sometime during the 7th century CE. It is considered to be one of the most important archaeological finds ever made in Anglo-Saxon history.

Searching for treasure using a metal detector is not illegal in Great Britain as long as authorities are notified when a large hoard of valuable artifacts is found. Archaeologists will then take over the excavation of the site, recording details regarding how the items were buried to learn more about the Anglo-Saxon period. During the COVID-19 pandemic, illegal excavation using metal detectors became more common, with items of value ending up being sold on the black market.



TERMS TO KNOW

Animal Style

Characterized by animal and bird designs and themes.

Cloisonné

A type of decoration consisting of colored enamel separated by bands of metal.

5. Oseberg Burial Ship

The setting to sea of a ship loaded with treasure and the body of a dead king is a tradition that is associated with the Scandinavian and northern Germanic tribes. The burial of a ship loaded with treasure and the body of a dead king is symbolic of that tradition. The burial ship at Oseberg, Norway, is a wonderful example of this.

☞ EXAMPLE Take a look at an image of the burial ship at Oseberg:



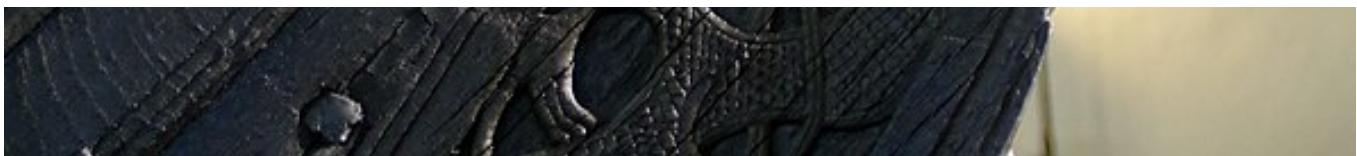
Burial ship

Oseberg, Norway

825

It is important to note that the bodies inside this particular ship were not those of kings. They were actually bodies of two women of some importance. The treasure once on this ship was stolen long ago. While no precious objects were found with the Oseberg burial, many other objects were, including four sleighs, a four-wheeled wagon, three beds, wooden chests, and a series of everyday objects, as well as the remains of fourteen horses, an ox, and three dogs. The 70-foot Viking longship is incredibly well preserved, as you can see here.





Detail of wood carving on the exterior of the Oseberg ship

⤵ EXAMPLE On the ship there were a total of five posts with animal heads decorating them. They have slots that serve as handles, but we do not know what purpose the posts themselves served. They may have been ceremonial or religious.



Carved animal head from burial ship

This object is also very well preserved. In this image, you can see the detailed woodwork, as well as the intricate curvilinear carvings that surround the head and neck.

6. Illuminated Manuscripts

With the influence of Rome, Christian missionaries, and the Christian monasteries that were established throughout Europe, Christianity eventually spread throughout Europe, even to the Vikings. The Celts were a pagan group that had settled in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Their conversion to Christianity began in the fifth century in Ireland.

The **illuminated manuscripts** produced in the monasteries during this time were beautiful synergies of Christian text and imagery. They included the intertwining vegetal, animal style, and geometric patterns that were native to this area. An illuminated manuscript is one that combines imagery, which might include enlarged letters, drawings in the margins (known as marginalia) and other small images, with text. Originally, illuminated manuscripts only referred to those decorated with gold leaf and silver, but today the term refers to any manuscript combining image and text.

The pages of illuminated manuscripts were made of **parchment**, which was a writing surface made from animal skin, usually a calf, sheep, or goat. The parchment that you can buy today is not the same thing. The skin would be scraped until all of the hair was gone and it was an ideal writing surface. The highest quality parchment was known as **vellum**.

Before the invention of the printing press around 1436, the only way to reproduce a book was to write it out by hand. Monks did this by working long hours in workshops known as scriptoria. Books were very costly to reproduce, so usually the only book reproduced was the one thought at that time to be the most important, the Bible. Wealthy patrons often commissioned copies of the Bible.

☞ **EXAMPLE** Illuminated manuscripts are famous today for the high degree of intricate detail in their imagery. You can see evidence of these details in the cross on this example of the cross and carpet page from the Lindisfarne Gospel.



Cross & Carpet Page from Lindesfarne Gospel

London, England

698–721 CE

Tempera on vellum

☞ EXAMPLE You can also see it in this example of enlarged letters from the Chi-Rho-Iota page.



Chi-Rho-Iota from Book of Kells

Ireland

Late 8th to early 9th centuries CE

Above is a page in the Book of Kells, which is the most famous illuminated manuscript from this time, if not in all history. The letters are clearly defined, yet at the same time, they blend into the intricate details of geometric and abstract patterns.

This is commonly referred to as Hiberno-Saxon style. Hibernia is Latin for Ireland, and Saxon refers to the culture of the Anglo-Saxon people who lived there. This one dates from the late eighth or early ninth century.

The manuscripts of Carolingian France and Ottonian Germany were created in scriptoria by monks. These works were produced on either vellum or parchment.

☞ EXAMPLE Take a look at the two images of Saint Matthew.



Saint Matthew from Coronation Gospels

Germany

800–810 CE

The first image is a calm, subdued image of Saint Matthew. Compare this to the next image, a frantic, hurried image of Saint Matthew.



Saint Matthew from Ebbo Gospels

France

816–835 CE

The first example is an image of the evangelist Saint Matthew from a book of gospels called the Coronation Gospels. The artist used light and shadow to suggest depth and give the figure a very realistic, three-dimensional form. Compare this more calm and subdued style to that of the Ebbo Gospels, in the second example. The Ebbo Gospels date from about 816 to 835 CE in France. Notice the frantic writing depicted in the energetic lines that form Saint Matthew's robe, hair, and the space behind him.



THINK ABOUT IT

In order to really appreciate the achievement of medieval monks, you need to imagine what it would have been like to live in a time without computers, electricity, or even the printing press. Processes of creating knowledge and exchanging it would have involved a great deal of labor and time. The amount of information that we have access to through our cell phones would have been considered miraculous by a medieval monk.



TERMS TO KNOW

Illuminated Manuscript

A type of book written by hand that combines imagery and text and usually also includes decoration in gold and silver leaf.

Vellum

Calfskin or lambskin used as a writing surface.

Parchment

A paper-like writing material made from the skin of a sheep or goat.



SUMMARY

The period of time between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the rebirth of Classicism during the Renaissance, beginning in the late 13th century in Italy, is referred to as the Dark Ages or Middle Ages. Despite the names, this period was historically and artistically active. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of early Medieval and Romanesque art**.

Starting with the **Vikings and the Dark Ages**, this lesson walked you through just how much was going on during this time. The ship burials of ancient kings from this area, such as the **burial mound of Sutton Hoo**, are examples of artwork from this period. You also looked at **fibulae**, which are pins used to hold together a cloak, and the **Oseburg burial ship**. This was an example of the symbolic tradition of burying a ship loaded with treasure and the body of a dead king.

Finally, you explored the **illuminated manuscripts**. These examples, which were produced in the monasteries during this time, were beautiful synergies of Christian text and imagery.



TERMS TO KNOW

Animal Style

Characterized by animal and bird designs and themes.

Cloisonné

A type of decoration consisting of colored enamel separated by bands of metal.

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