

Romanesque Art

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Romanesque art expresses the values of a period in Christianity in which pilgrimages to different churches to view the relics of saints held utmost importance. While the Bayeux Tapestry was produced during this period, it is unusual because its subject matter was mostly secular. This lesson will cover:

1. Period of Time and Location: Romanesque Art
2. Bayeux Tapestry
3. Last Judgment Tympanum at Autun
4. Sainte-Foy Reliquary at Conques



BIG IDEA

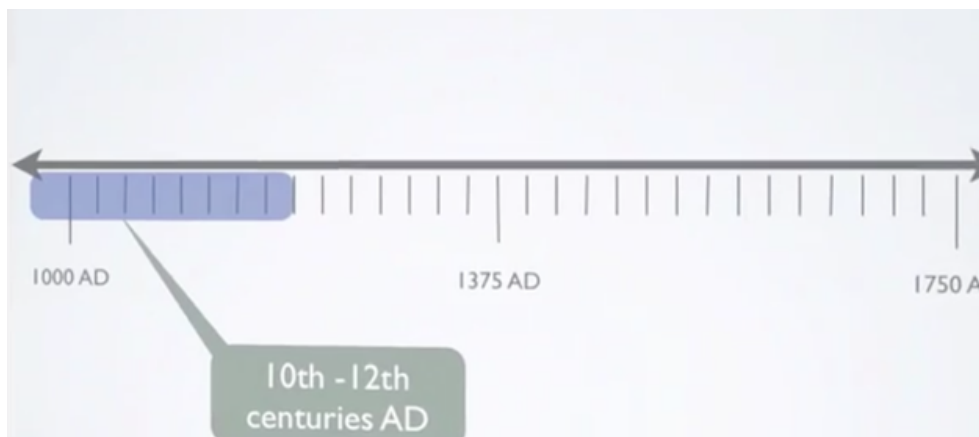
The tympanum, archivolt, and jambs located above the doorways of Romanesque churches were important areas for the display of religious art.

1. Period of Time and Location: Romanesque Art

The art covered in this lesson originates from the 10th to 12th centuries, and all of the art was located within three cities in France:

- Conques
- Bayeux
- Autun

Below is a timeline highlighting the period of time covered in this lesson:



2. Bayeux Tapestry

The first work of art that this lesson will explore is the Bayeux Tapestry. It is not a true tapestry since the visual elements have been embroidered and not woven, so a name that has started to catch on is the Bayeux Embroidery. It details the events leading up to and during the Battle of Hastings, which resulted in the Norman conquest of England and the eventual crowning of William the Conqueror as the king of England.



William the Conqueror and Harold from the Bayeux Tapestry

Bayeux, France

1066–1082

The tapestry is 200 feet long, and it is an important cultural reservoir that supplements what we know historically. It depicts distinct types of clothing and armor. Art historians think that Bishop Odo of Bayeux, who was William's half-brother, commissioned the work. It was produced within a generation of the Battle of Hastings, which occurred in 1066, so historians consider it an accurate historical source, both on the battle and everyday life at that time.

It consists of nine linen panels sewn together after each was embroidered and the joins were disguised with subsequent embroidery. In embroidery, couching and laid work are techniques in which yarn or other materials are laid across the surface of the ground fabric and fastened in place with small stitches of the same or a different yarn. The couching threads may be either the same color as the laid threads or a contrasting color. When couching threads contrast with laid threads, patterns may be worked in the couching stitches. You can see the couching and laid threads in the image below:



Bishop Odo rallying the troops from the Bayeux Tapestry

The scenes are divided into three rows: a large middle section and borders at the top and bottom. The tituli are normally in the central zone but occasionally use the top border. The borders are otherwise mostly purely decorative and only sometimes does the decoration complement the action in the central zone. The decoration consists of birds, beasts, fish, and scenes from fables, agriculture, and hunting. The scenes were embroidered onto a plain background to make them easy to see from a distance.



DID YOU KNOW

Because of its format and subject matter, the Bayeux Tapestry has been compared both to Trajan's Column and present-day comic strips. During the 18th century, it was considered to be of low quality in terms of its visual style and even was used to cover wagons during the French Revolution. In the present, we appreciate the high level of skill and time commitment that went into making it.

Many people have made replicas of the Bayeux Tapestry in different artistic media. Some of them have taken as long as 14 years to produce.



Battle of Hastings from the Bayeux Tapestry

Bayeux, France

1066–1082

An interesting scene is depicted below:



Men staring at Halley's Comet from the Bayeux Tapestry

Bayeux, France

1066–1082

The people on the left are pointing skyward and appear alarmed. Interestingly, they are pointing at the famous Halley's Comet, which would have passed by the earth during this time on its 75- to 76-year-long orbit around the sun.



DID YOU KNOW

It was taken as a bad omen, and one of the individuals ran to tell the current King Harold the terrible news. Underneath Harold's feet are the wispy-looking images of ships which foreshadow the arrival of William in the battle to come.

3. Last Judgment Tympanum at Autun

This next image is from the Western entrance to Autun Cathedral in Autun, France:



Western entrance to Autun Cathedral

Autun, France

1120–1146

IN CONTEXT

This above image is essentially an elaborate rounded archway, a series of incised rounded arches setting up on decorative **jamb**s on either side of the doorway. Artists use these spaces to create narrative, symbolic, or other types of Christian imagery that serve both religious and decorative purposes.

The artist Gislebertus created this Last Judgment scene in the semicircular area above the doorway, which is called the **tympanum**, around 1120. The decorative semicircular bands above it are called **archivolts**. The jambs are cropped out of this picture, unfortunately.

The central, largest, and most important element within this above composition is Jesus Christ in the traditional orant prayer gesture, seated within a mandorla of inscribed Latin text. To his right is the Virgin Mary, his mother, enthroned next to the angel there.

The whole idea of right as good and left as bad is a type of symbolism that itself is cross-cultural and

ancient, and even retains its significance to this day.

Saint Peter, who monitors the gates of heaven, is shown here holding keys. Notice the use of hieratic scale. More important figures like Christ, Mary, the saints, and even the angels are shown comparatively larger. They are shorter or taller, relative to each other, but all of them are larger than the human beings being judged. The righteous are being led into heaven.

There is an angel that helps to divide the composition. If you look closely, you can see how he or she is almost shoving one of the figures to the left. It is apparent that this person has been judged as unrighteous, as being directed into the unhappy line of individuals on their way to hell.

If you look closely, you can see the disembodied hands that are plucking individuals up to the next level, and the cowering souls waiting in line. The Devil is coming out of a Roman-style basilica to grab hold of the soul for the unpleasantness to come. It was this juxtaposition of good and evil, or rather, salvation and damnation, that reminded individuals coming into the church of the reward of piety and faith in Christ and the consequences of turning from him.



TERMS TO KNOW

Jamb

Pillar, frame, post, lintel on either side of a doorway, window, or arch.

Tympanum

In architecture, a semicircular space above a doorway that is often decorated with sculpture.

Archivolts

In architecture, a decorated band that forms an arch-like frame for an opening.

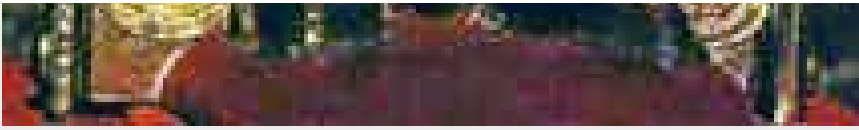
4. Sainte-Foy Reliquary at Conques

This last image is of an elaborate Christian reliquary, or container of a relic.

IN CONTEXT

Specifically, this is an image of Sainte-Foy, or Saint Faith, as she would be known in English:





Reliquary of Sainte-Foy

Conques, France

980

Wood, gold, silver, and precious stones

Sainte-Foy (Saint Faith in English) was born in the 3rd century CE in the French city of Agen. She became a martyr for the Christian faith when she was killed by the Romans for refusing to worship pagan gods. She was believed to have only been 12 years old when she died. Her relics, or her remains, remained at the basilica in Agen until the 9th century, when a group of monks stole them and took them to Conques. The Abbey at Conques was a stop along the route to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela. It became a popular pilgrimage site itself due to the miracles associated with Sainte-Foy, who was believed to be particularly good at curing blindness.

The reliquary holds the supposed head of Sainte-Foy behind the obviously gilded mask of a male, interestingly enough. The wooden core of the reliquary is gilded with gold and studded with different gems and enamels. The head is made up of a different gold from the body and is thought to have been a reworking of an earlier Roman statue. The throne, filigree, bands, and crown were all added during the 11th century. Pilgrims brought different precious and semiprecious stones to decorate it so that it continued to be embellished with other jewels until as late as the 15th century.

Relics and the reliquaries that hold them were very important objects for veneration in Christianity. In fact, possession of relics was considered so important, and the supply so limited, that shady under-dealings are as much a part of the history of relics in the church as the actual relics themselves. This also explains why the relics themselves can seem so odd or macabre with no given context.

The relics had to be a physical object of an important Christian saint. These had to be something touched by them, or a piece of them, or related to Christ, like a piece of the True Cross, for example. Examples of relics that actually exist and are considered sacred in the Christian church include:

- Teeth of a saint
- Hand of a saint
- Hair of a saint
- A piece of the True Cross
- Bones of a saint

These relics were not considered idolatry, but instead were considered the veneration of a sacred object. The object is a means of communication to God, not an object of worship itself.



SUMMARY

There are many religious aspects and components displayed in Romanesque art. In this lesson, you learned about the **period of time and location of Romanesque art**. In this lesson, you explored three Romanesque works of art:

- **Bayeux Tapestry**
- **Last Judgment Tympanum at Autun**
- **Sainte-Foy Reliquary at Conques**



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