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The Medieval Gothic Arts over the 15th Century

Medieval Gothic arts were one of the most well-known and widely collected classifications of arts that flourished in Europe during the Middle Ages. Many would argue that Gothic art was a style that developed from the 12th century in Europe and ended around the 15th century. However, there have been long-lasting arguments over if there is continuity or connection between the arts before and after 1400. Some argue that 1400 is the turning point that marks the undoubted end for the Medieval Gothic Arts. Some argue that Some even argue that the Medieval Gothic Arts lasted as late as the end of the 16th century in some parts of Europe.

Personally speaking, I have been to both the main Metropolitan Musem and the Cloister Museum. Although the main Metropolitan Musem also contains some medieval arts, it barely even fits a section. In fact, it only scarcely scatters through a few showcases. No themed galleries or events. In comparison, the Cloister Museum has a whole exhibition of Medieval Gothic arts everywhere with some lasting well into the 15th century. As evidence to what some scholars suggest, in some galleries, you can even find some Gothic-like arts from the 16th century.

Therefore, I tend to incline to the idea that arts over the 15th century still belong to the Medieval Gothic category. However, I do acknowledge some moderate discrepancies between arts before and after 1400. As a result, the “Late Gothic Medieval Arts” that many scholars suggest will perfectly match and title this time period of arts.

The focus will be on three specifically demonstrated art objects from the Cloister Museum that are arranged chronologically throughout the 15th century. This way, it can better show the continuity and discontinuity with the previous Gothic Medieval arts and the transformation within, if any. Comparison and contrast will examine every aspect of their artistic qualities such as shape or form, line, color, texture, space, mass, volume, and composition. Two of them happen to have the same composition: They are both illustrated through two-dimensional paintings, but the details, settings, and meanings vary, while the other is a three-dimensional sculpture.

1) Robert Campin, The Mérode Altarpiece (Annunciation Triptych), created c. 1425-30 (located in Gallery 19, “The Mérode Room”),

According to the Cloister Museum’s description of this painting, it depicts the scene of the angel Gabriel entering the room, about to tell the Virgin Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus. Although this is a painting, it tells the same story as the sculpture *Annunciation* and *Visitation*, Jamb Statues on the right side of the Central Doorway of the west façade, Reims Cathedral, Reims, France, c. 1230–1255.[[1]](#footnote-0)

Telling the same story, the depiction of the characters are also similar. The sues and the lighting tones are the same. The only major difference is that this is more delicately painted, probably because it is relatively more modern. Other minor differences include that the volume and spacing are different. The sculpture utilizes a lot of illusionistic volumes while the painting cannot. And the sculpture’s four characters are equally spaced from each other, while the painting is not. The Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary take the majority of space.

“The golden rays pouring in through the left oculus carry a miniature figure with a cross. On the right wing, Joseph, who is betrothed to the Virgin, works in his carpenter’s shop, drilling holes in a board. The mousetraps on the bench and in the shop window opening onto the street are thought to allude to references in the writings of Saint Augustine identifying the cross as the devil’s mousetrap. On the left wing, the kneeling donor appears to witness the central scene through the open door. His wife kneels behind him, and a town messenger stands at the garden gate. The owners would have purchased the triptych to use in private prayer. An image of Christ’s conception in an interior not unlike the one in which they lived also may have reinforced their hope for their own children”(The Cloister Museum). This painting clearly contains a huge amount of details that outweighs the sculpture, but again, the reason probably is because of its modernity. Artisans become more sophisticated and it may be better preserved than the previous Medieval Gothic arts.

Another similarity locates along the borders of the panel. The roof and architecture represent Romanesque values with rigid supporting structures as shown in the *Annunciation* and *Visitation* sculpture too. “The quintessential example of the type known as the ‘pilgrimage church,’... is characterized by a barrel vault, solid walls, and massive supporting piers. The readily apparent structural system produces a sense of security while the absence of windows, and therefore direct natural light into the nave, result in an atmosphere of mysterious darkness.”[[2]](#footnote-1) This painting indeed has “an atmosphere of mysterious darkness” and the absence of windows and the structures of the house contrast to help produce that. The skies are in fainted gray, while the character’s facial expressions correspond to that to be somehow gloomy. Such obscurity and shadow are also showcased in the *Annunciation* and *Visitation* sculpture.

2) The Unicorn Is Found (also called The Unicorn Purifies Water), created c. 1495-1503 (located in Gallery 17, the “Unicorn Tapestries Room”),

This whole gallery of arts depict the world of the unicorn, a mythic animal that inhabits a world that ensembles our real world. In this particular painting, the unicorn kneels before a tall, thin white fountain that has a pair of pheasants and a pair of goldfinches perched on its edge. The long straight shape with spheres and decorations again bring back the Romanseque elements. In the background, the flora plays a significant role as plants are usually prescribed in medieval herbals as antidotes to poisoning, such as sage, pot marigolds, and orange. The unicorn’s true magic lies in its horn’s ability to detect the presence of poison and purify the water. As the elegant beast kneels at the edge of a stream, animals and hunters gather to witness the extraordinary moment. For this moment, they seem at peace with one another, as if astonished by this spell and if only until the spell breaks. Their chasing of this mythical unicorn seems similar to the Ancient Egyptian’s chase for their own mythical animals on the grasslands. However, the idea of the unicorn seems dispatched from the Medieval Gothic arts since none of it has appeared in our readings so far.

3) Saint Anthony Abbot, created c. 1500 (located in Gallery 20, the “Late Gothic Hall”),

As the name of the gallery suggests, this sculpture of Saint Anthony Abbot was approximately created around 1500, which is by the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century, therefore a definite affiliation to the Late Gothic Medieval arts category.

“The figure in the sculpture is the legend of Saint Anthony Abbot, a fourth-century Egyptian hermit, tells of the saint’s heroic resistance to the devil’s torments. Here, he triumphs over the devil, who writhes under his feet. The saint’s staff originally would have impaled the monster’s mouth. Saint Anthony’s order was founded in Europe in the eleventh century and was dedicated to the care of the sick. The Antonites had two hospitals in the Alsace—at Isenheim and Strasbourg—and this intense, expressive, and psychologically charged figure may have been made for one of them. Carved in the round, it may have been carried in procession and placed on an altar shrine or on a bracket against a column. The exceptional carving of the face, beard, and hair suggests the authorship of Nikolaus von Hagenau, one of the most gifted Upper Rhenish sculptors working about 1500”(The Cloister Museum).

On their first encounter, most people probably cannot tell that it is from as late as 1500 or that it is Late Medieval Gothic arts because it has so many similarities to the previous Gothic arts. Obviously, we can see some classic Romanesque elements. For example, Saint Antony Abbot’s gesture in the sculpture is very similar to the one that we all tried to imitate in class - the Old Testament Prophet (Jeremiah or Isaiah?), right side of the Trumeau of the South Portal of Saint-Pierre, Moissac, France, c.1115–1130.[[3]](#footnote-2) This sculpture of Saint Antony Abbot also uses a similar shadowy hue and shades of gray, having an echoing connection to the 12th-13th century sculptures.

Although it is unclear whether this sculpture is located within a bigger sculpture or just by itself, I suspect the former because almost all the sculptures that we have studied so far in our readings stand next to a larger church as a replacement or compartment to some columns. Therefore, I suspect it stands between, or at least functions as a decoration to, the column and dome parts of the Romanesque architecture in the nave of a Roman Catholic church, another typical characteristic of Roman churches.

After all, having been through a journey from 1400 to 1500, we are all able to see that there obviously exist some continuous connections between the Late Gothic Medieval arts and the previous Medieval arts. Yet, slight differences occur sometimes, when modernity brings progress and advance in art technique.

1. Global Art of the First Half of the Second Millennium CE, Part II – The Late 12th through 13th Century pp.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. “The Romanesque as a Periodic-Style”, Janetta Rebold Bention, Art of the Middle Ages (2002), p. 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Global Art of the First Half of the Second Millennium CE, Part II – The Late 12th through 13th Century pp.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)