

# Art and Architecture in the Middle Ages

## Film lecture by John Canaday

---

(This is the basic text of the film, with links in case you want to do further exploration)

In art man leaves the most profound images of his beliefs, his way of life. The images of medieval art are Christian images, familiar to those of us who inherit the Christian tradition. The familiarity does not guarantee that we understand the images, however: ours is an age of science, whereas the Middle Ages were a time of mystical piety.

In France, between the years 1000 and 1500, occurred the great flowering of medieval art. This art centered in the cathedrals, especially in the architecture, sculpture, and stained glass art of those majestic structures. Entrance into a cathedral symbolized entrance into the Kingdom of God, and all life in the Middle Ages was viewed as life in that divine kingdom.

The sculpture at the entrance to the cathedral at [Conques](#) offers an example of early medieval art. It depicts a [very literal three-level world of heaven, earth, and hell](#). Christ is the central figure--a Christ sitting in [judgment](#). The blessed in heaven are in a most unexciting state of repose, as if idleness were a goal devoutly to be desired. Satan is a lively fellow, and the damned are represented in varying stages and forms of torment. The demons, with which the medieval world was fully populated, appear in horrible shapes.. Death, suffering, and damnation were strong in the medieval consciousness.

In the cathedral at [Autun](#) the sculpture is quite different, though it dates from about the same period as that at Conques. It is elongated, bizarre, nervous, artificial, one might even say hallucinatory--yet in its own way, it is equally expressive as its contemporary. Artists had little tradition from which to draw at this period, and most found their inspiration in the world around them (as at Conques) or in the illustrations of manuscript books (as at Autun).

The Chartres cathedral offers a fusion of the two styles represented above. The work here is generally considered the greatest since that on the Parthenon in Greece.

At [Amiens cathedral](#) one can see the climax of Gothic sculptural idealism. Here a calm faith and spiritual serenity replace the struggle and torment of Conques. It is a later development and represents the often unrecognized [variety](#) (as well as unity) of the Middle Ages.

At [Reims](#) one can notice a fusion of many styles, including a newly rediscovered classical influence. The most individualized feature of the cathedral at Reims is the appearance of the ["smiling angels,"](#) a sly group who seem to know something about the bishop or worshipers that they are not about to disclose.

Medieval art is characterized as either Romanesque (that is, "like the Romans"), a term descriptive of the art from about 1000 to 1200, or Gothic (that is, "barbaric," like that of the ancient Goths), descriptive of art from 1200 to 1500. Neither term is accurate, especially the latter, though both continue to be employed.

Much "inside" information about medieval art comes from the sketch books of one Villard de Honnecourt, a sculptor who worked on several medieval cathedrals.

Some of the medieval preoccupation with symbolism can be caught in observing a painting of the late Middle Ages, Robert Campin's The Annunciation. In this picture the lilies, the vessel of water, the seven rays of light, and even the mousetrap of Joseph's craftsmanship, among other things, have symbolic meanings.

The finest example of medieval art and architecture, the greatest of the Gothic cathedrals, is the magnificent edifice at Chartres.

Here faith, intellect, and engineering are combined in a synthesis of medieval thought and life.

The cathedral was dedicated more than seven hundred years ago, but it is very much alive today. Every detail of life in the Middle Ages is caught up in the cathedral. It is medieval thought in visible form. It at once embraces its society and town and is embraced by them.

Chartres cathedral has not the pure style of Amiens, the immediate attractiveness of Reims, or the power of Notre Dame. Its west front, indeed, seems inconsistent, though there is a "psychological" unity to its artistic shaping. The Chartres cathedral was built over a period of about 700 years and suffered a series of fires. One of the early Gothic spires was burned and was replaced with a late Gothic construction. They complement one another, do the two existing spires, by expressing in different ways the essence of medieval religious aspiration--the escape of the soul from the burden of material existence. The old spire does it in a direct, sturdy fashion, with little interruption; the later construction does it with airy artistry and many flourishes.

The Gothic cathedral is a symbol from any point of view, total or partial. Chartres has representations of Christ triumphing over the beasts of the Apocalypse, of the virtues and vices of men, of saints and sinners. But what could symbolize the all-embracing mystery of God? Only space--space, in which all exists, which embraces all, yet which is neither seen nor touched. Space, as God, is the ultimate mystery, yet the ultimate reality. The concept of space is the key concept of cathedral architecture.

Since faith and fact were one to the medieval mind, all knowledge was organized and brought into the service of God. This is represented in the statuary and stained glass artistry of Chartres. This world and the next are combined in the art, as in the mind of the worshiper; the cathedral was the Bible for the

illiterate man. The stained glass has another, more primary purpose as well: it filtered the light and augmented the mysterious sense of space on the inside of the cathedral, thus symbolizing inside as well as out the mystery of God.

Even the logic of engineering creates the sense of mystery. The pointed Gothic arch replaces the Roman arch, giving a sense of elevation. The tension created by arches and vaults pushing against the "flying buttresses" also gives a sense of mystery, symbolizing the total mystery of God. Faith, intellect, and engineering--the medieval synthesis--Chartres cathedral--all are one.

[Return to Main Page](#)