

Chapter 8 – Western Art in the Melting Pot

(Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 16th Ed., and supplementary material)

This is a chapter commentary which is the “script” for a lecture I recorded in audio file form. This summary includes coverage of the illustrations in a chapter of the 16th edition of the text *The Story of Art* by E.H. Gombrich as well as additional illustrations included in the slide set made available at www.ambriana.com at the **Visual Technology Workbook** button. This material is intended to supplement the reading of the text as assigned coursework. This is not a replacement for your reading of the full textbook chapter, which contains many facts and details not covered here.

This chapter focuses on the art of Europe in the middle ages (the “dark ages”), from 500 to 1000 AD. This was a period of instability and upset as the former Roman Empire disintegrated and was overrun by tribes from the north and east, including the Norsemen, Danes, Goths, Visigoths, Saxons, and the Huns from Mongolia. In the absence of the universal civil government that the Romans had provided, the church became major institution in Europe to carry on a part of the culture of the ancient world (additional elements of ancient culture and literature were preserved in the Islamic world, and much later made their way back into Europe through translations from Arabic to European languages.)

Slide 03 (not in textbook) – Map of Europe, Africa, and Asia

This map illustrates the two centers of power in Europe. Rome is the small yellow dot furthest west, and directly east of it is Constantinople, the capital of the Roman Empire in its later days. The bishop of Rome ultimately became the Pope of the Roman Catholic church, and the bishop of Constantinople became the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox (Byzantine) church. (The Patriarch, however, unlike the Pope, is not considered the head of the Orthodox church, but just “first among equals” of all the orthodox bishops.)

Slide 04 (not in textbook) – Historical facts

The cultures of the invaders mixed with that of the inhabitants of the area formerly called the Roman Empire, and these cultures mixed, as you will see in the examples of the artworks illustrated by Gombrich. Most of the invaders eventually became Christians, and the influx of their cultures helped shape the art commissioned by the church. Towards the 800’s this contributed to the emergence of a style of church architecture known as Romanesque, based on the classical Roman use of heavy stone walls and the circular arch.

Slides 05, Figure 101, p. 159 – Carved Dragon’s head

The invading Norsemen were pagans, who believed in good and evil spirits that affected people’s lives, and multiple gods. But they were skilled craftsmen, as indicated by the delicate carvings of small images making up this fearsome ornament for the bow of a boat. This dragon was intended to frighten away evils spirits that lurked in the sea. As Gombrich notes, towns had rules that the master of the ship had to remove this carving from the boat when the boat approached a harbor, so that it would not frighten away the good spirits that protected the town.

Slide 06, Figure 100, p. 159 – Stone church tower

This church tower is made of stone, but it is given the appearance of a structure built from wood, because of the influence of the Norse invaders who were familiar with wood-frame construction.

Slides 07, Figure 102, p. 160 – St. Luke in an illuminated manuscript

Hand-copied books are called manuscripts, and hand-drawn decorative illustrations in them are called “illuminations.” This illumination of St. Luke, the author of one of the gospels (one of the first four books of the New Testament of the Christian bible) shows several elements of interest. The border is composed of intricate patterns and shapes, similar to the way the dragon’s head ornament of Figure 101 (slide 5) is carved. The thing above the figure’s head is a winged ox, a symbol associated with Luke in some of the earliest writings of the church (see “Symbols associated with the Gospel authors”, a web link on the www.ambriana.com web site.) The figure is drawn in a very plain and simple way, in keeping with the directive of Pope Gregory the Great (about 590 AD) that images in churches and holy writings were acceptable to tell a religious story, but were to be no more “artful” than necessary to convey the story to those who could not read. The folds of the clothing are stylized into ribbons rather than the elegant folds such perfected by the Greeks (and a skill maintained by Byzantine artists).

Slide 08, Figure 103, p. 160 – Lindisfarne Gospel manuscript

This decorated page from an early middle ages manuscript shows the Norse influence of intricate interlaced patterns. The Christian symbol of the cross is drawn among brilliantly colored patterns that are carefully planned, drawn, and colored to serve as a complex but highly organized background.

Slides 09, Figure 104, p.161 – Aachen Cathedral (Charlemagne)

Aachen Cathedral was built with the massive walls, rounded arches, and Greek columns typical of Roman architecture. It marked a revival of some of the elements of building that were still known and copied from ancient times. This style of architecture, which limited the size of windows and therefore created dimly-illuminated interiors, persisted for more than 200 years during the middle ages.

Slide 10, Figure 105, p. 164) – St. Matthew in an illuminated manuscript

This illumination from a manuscript at Aachen Cathedral shows the “standard” accepted way for a monk, working as an anonymous craftsman, to draw the author of one of the Gospels. When called upon to illustrate the Gospel of Mark, the monk would depict him seated in this way, at this type of table, clothed in a robe, against a plain background. Notice that this picture, however, does introduce some degree of realism in the way that the cloth folds around the body. The monk making this illustration probably looked at the way robes fell around the other monks working with him in the *Scriptorium* of the monastery, the room where the work of copying books was done. In seeing and then attempting to draw what he saw, the person who created this illustration was in a small way breaking free from the constraint to only paint what he “knew” was there even without looking.

Slide 11, Figure 106, p. 165 – St. Matthew, in another manuscript

The painter of this illumination was, in a way, “pushing the edge of the envelope” regarding the acceptable way to depict St. Matthew. Compare this with the illumination shown in slide 10, and you’ll see some important differences. There is a background here, an attempt to show some type of a landscape which, strictly speaking, is not necessary for the “telling” of the story, and some small plants are included in the foreground. While St. Matthew is shown in the “standard” pose with a familiar table, his clothing is drawn as if to dramatize the intense effort he is expending in his writing. The monk drawing this was expressing “something extra” in his depiction, adding something in the way of his own interpretation of the moment.

Slide 12, Figure 107, p. 166 – Christ washing the apostle’s feet

This manuscript illumination follows the admonition to use no more artistry than necessary to tell a religious story: the background is plain, albeit it gold leaf (foil) behind Christ and a flat color elsewhere. Realism is sacrificed in the interest of making the picture “work” to tell the story. All of the faces in the background are the same, almost cartoon-like; the only important thing is for each to have the expression of wide-eyed surprise at the momentous action taking place. The action is that of Jesus washing his apostle’s feet, an act of supreme humility. In order to make it work, the apostle’s foot needs to be in a basin of water. But in striving to accomplish that and to still have the apostle seated, the monk creating this illumination painted himself into a corner: how does the leg with the foot in the basin join to the apostle’s body? The more you look at this the more apparent it becomes that there is no way that the lower leg could conceivably join the man’s body. That type of realism was sacrificed in the interest of making the picture do what it had to do.

Slide 13, Figure 108, p. 167 – Adam and Eve after the fall

The bible tells that Adam and Eve, the first people created by God, fell from grace and were driven out the idyllic Garden of Eden because they disobeyed God’s command not to eat the fruit of a certain tree (popular tradition names it as an apple tree). A snake, the bible says, cunningly convinced Eve to bite the fruit, and Eve then convinced Adam to also eat it. To punish Adam and Eve, he consigned men to have to work, and women to painfully bear children, and for both to eventually suffer death and a return to the dust from which they were made. This bronze door panel, placed at eye level on a bronze church door, “tells” this story against a flat background so as not to distract from the message. A large amount of finger-pointing is used to show blame being cast while Adam and Eve, now realizing their nakedness, cower in shame. God is the figure at the left; he points at Adam in an accusing way. Adam points at Eve, his gesture fairly screaming out “she made me do it!” Eve tried to pass the blame to the snake, by pointing at it.

Slides 14-15, Figure 109, p. 168 – Bayeux Tapestry

The Bayeux Tapestry is a large yarn-embroidered (not woven) linen cloth of 32 panels (a 33rd panel is now lost) created in the 1070’s AD to tell the story of the invasion of England and the killing of King Harold by William the Conqueror in 1066 AD. In this slide you see the exaggerated motion of a person on a dock scanning the horizon as he awaits the return of King Harold to England across the English Channel after swearing allegiance to William of Normandy in France.

Realism is sacrificed in the tapestry and the gesture of waiting and looking emphasized to tell the story, in the same way religious art of the time concerned itself with storytelling at the expense of realism. See an accurate reproduction of the entire Bayeux Tapestry online at a web link at the www.ambriana.com site, which points to <http://www.bayeuxtapestry.org.uk/BayeuxContents.htm> (Section 12 of this illustrations on this web site contains the person on the dock at the left side.)

Slide 16, end of slides for Chapter 8