

Chapter 9 – The Church Militant

(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 from the late middle ages to about 1150 AD. During this period the architecture of churches settles firmly on the Romanesque style, which revives the use of heavy stone walls, minimal window openings using the round arch, producing a dim interior, and the development of large rose windows as a main façade feature. Churches again begin to be decorated with statuary, with symmetry of the elements an important design goal, and symbolism playing a large role in the representation and identification of holy figures. Two-dimensional art remains dedicated primarily to depicting religious figures or events in simple ways with flat backgrounds, without much regard for realism, but stressing standard accepted “poses” for figures. Saints are often represented with identifying features such as the method of their martyrdom. Brilliant images made of stained glass, that is, pieces of glass colored by the mixing in of minerals to the molten glass when it is made, were developed to decorate the windows of churches.

Slides 04, Figure 111, p. 172 – Romanesque style church

Romanesque churches used heavy stone walls, rounded arches, and small windows except perhaps for one large rose window. Very little surface decoration was applied. These structures resembled fortresses and gave the impression of standing as holy bulwarks against the forces of evil.

Slide 05, Figure 112, p. 173 – Romanesque cathedral

A cathedral is a large church which often dominated the central area of a town or city. Tournai Cathedral in Belgium has imposing square towers and smaller round towers with conical tops, and a large rose window. As one town tried to outdo another with the construction of ever more grand cathedrals, church architects wanted to build higher structures and open more of the wall surface up for stained glass windows, to make churches brighter and more heaven-like.

Slides 06, Figure 113, p. 174 – Durham Cathedral interior

“Norman” style is the English name for the Romanesque style. This interior of a Norman cathedral shows the thick, heavy stone walls and circular arches of this style of monumental architecture, and the how well-developed the feature of the rose window had already become. Note that the crossed circular arches supporting the roof appear to have a pointed appearance. Perhaps this effect gave architects the idea of actually using a pointed arch, rather than a rounded one, to be able to increase the height of an opening for a given width. Pointed arches did in fact become a feature of the subsequent style, which is called “Gothic”.

Slide 07, Figure 114, p. 175 – Durham Cathedral exterior

As with Romanesque cathedrals on the continent, this English cathedral makes use of heavy, square tower towers, but two elements of the emerging Gothic style are also evident here: surface decoration in the form of vertical tracery, and the hint of a pointed arch in the large central window, where the opening is framed as a circular arch but the window shape is defined with a pointed peak.

Slides 08, Figure 115, p.176 – Church of St. Trophine

You can see several elements of Roman architecture in this typically Romanesque smaller church. The main door is formed with a circular arch, and Greek columns are used as decoration on either side of the door. The larger central opening flanked by a smaller door on each side is reminiscent of a Roman commemorative arch. The pointed porch roof is similar to that of a Greek temple, as are the smaller pointed roofs over the side doors. Most of the exterior surface is plain, lacking decoration. But note that statues of saints decorate the wall area at the sides of the main door and above the door.

Slide 09, Figure 116, p. 177 – Tympanum of St. Trophine main door

This is the carving above the main door to the Church of St. Trophine pictured in Figure 115. This depicts Jesus in his resurrected glory, surrounded by the symbols representing the authors of the four Gospels of the New Testament. Starting with the symbol closest to the raised right hand of Jesus and progressing counterclockwise, we find the winged divine man (often mistaken for an angel) for Matthew, the winged lion for Mark, the winged ox for Luke, and the rising eagle for John. Notice the several carved faces in the circles beneath these main figures, many of which appear to be the same face. At this point, symbols rather than facial features were often used to identify the person represented.

Slide 10, Figure 117, p. 178 – Gilded (gilt) bronze church candlestick

Churches accumulated wealth as people bequeathed land and other valuable to them, and were able to commission the creation of decorative artworks for the glory of God. This gilt (gold-coated) candlestick is made up of intricate patterns of figures in a way similar to the carved dragon's head shown in Figure 101. The figures include the apostles (evangelists) and various others for whom light serves to overcome the darkness of evil. The feet of this ornamented altar furnishing takes the shape of animal paws, further adding to the "organic" nature of this work.

Slide 11, Figure 118, p. 179 – Brass baptismal font

Baptism is a rite of the Christian church that symbolizes the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In early Christianity, a person joining the faith would be fully immersed in water, as John the Baptist conducted baptisms including that of Jesus. As the church developed traditions, it moved the point of baptism back to infancy, as adopted sprinkling with water instead of immersion. Churches were equipped with a water vessel for baptismal services, and this is a highly decorated example which was cast in brass (a mixture of copper and zinc). The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York says this about the baptismal font pictured in this slide:

"Abbot Hellinus commissions a baptismal font for the Church of Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts in Liège (now in the Church of Saint-Barthélémy) from Rainer of Huy, an artist of whom only the name is known. Cast in bronze in a single piece, the bowl

rests on twelve oxen, a reference to the apostles and to the "Molten Sea" in Solomon's Temple. The basin bears five scenes of baptism, including that of Christ, modeled in high relief, in a remarkably classical manner. The compositions are well balanced, the bodies organically structured, and the draperies arranged in harmonious rhythms." (www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/07/euwl/ht07euwl.htm, accessed 4/27/2008.)

The plain background, rather than detracting from the realism of this piece, actually makes the figures appear to leap out of the surface.

Slide 12, Figure 119, p. 180 – The Annunciation, illumination

This picture, an illumination from a manuscript of a Gospel, is typical of the middle ages in that it sacrifices reality in the interest of picturing the holy figures in an acceptable way that does not distract with elements not necessary to the purpose. This picture represents the angel Gabriel telling Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus. The angel uses a gesture of expression (the pointed fingers) to emphasize that something very important is being stated, and Mary's upraised hands signify surprise. The background is lavish (gold) but plain, and the colors are vivid, signaling that these are special individuals since only the wealthy and prominent could afford the luxury of such rich colors in clothing. The figures are drawn flat, but an unusually delicate and artful representation of folds in the cloth is shown, which, like the application of a certain degree of shading to the rounded faces, indicates a desire on the part of the artist creating this to perhaps experiment with techniques of realism that would later be refined in the Renaissance.

Slide 13, Figure 120, p. 181 – A monastic calendar for October

This calendar page tells details essential of observances in the month of October in a German monastery in picture form rather than words or numbers, all involving locally popular saints. The central picture simply shows a visit, but the top and bottom indicate how two saints were murdered along with their followers. These are not intended to be any more realistic than modern cartoons; the artists were not trying to depict realism, but just facts. The upper illustration depicts headless torsos, and the severed heads of St. Gereon and his companions thrown down a well, as according to local legend he was martyred. The lower illustration shows St. Ursula martyred by pagans shooting arrows into her. Think of these in the same way as the cartoon pedestrian figures on modern traffic lights or the icons on graphical computer screens, also intended to convey factual meaning without words.

Slide 14, Figure 121, p. 182 – Stained glass window, the Annunciation

From about 900 AD onwards stained glass began to flourish as an art form. Glass factories were set up where there was a ready supply of silica (sand), the essential ingredient for the manufacture of glass. Glass was colored by adding metallic oxides to the melted glass in a clay pot over a furnace. Copper oxides were added to produce green, cobalt for blue, and gold was added to produce red glass. Glass colored in this way was known as *pot metal*. Glass was collected from the pot into a molten ball and blown using a metal tube, while being continually rotated to form a large cylindrical bottle shape. It was then cut open and laid flat on a flat stone. This is the type of glass most commonly used for ancient stained glass windows. Once the glass for a window is cut into shape the pieces are assembled by slotting them into H-sectioned lead "comes." The joints are soldered

together and assembled into frames that fit into the window opening. From about 1300 onwards artists started using stain made from silver nitrate to paint fine designs and highlights on glass pieces, which were then heated to make the paint permanent. This stain gave yellow effect ranging from pale lemon to deep orange. It was usually painted onto the outside of a piece of glass. Yellow was particularly useful for enhancing borders, canopies and haloes, and turning blue glass into green for grass in scenes. Darker stains were useful to draw in the features of faces.

The most prominent colors in many stained glass church windows are blues and reds. Blue was often used for the clothing of holy figures, and red for backgrounds. A major goal of architects in the late middle ages was to open as much of the wall area as possible for stained glass windows to produce sparkling light effects as the outside line shone in through the stained glass.

Slide 15, Figure 121a, p. 183 – Sketch of artists at work

This small sketch is just an end-piece for Chapter 8. It shows artists at work, and is taken from a “pattern book” used at Ruen Monastery. A pattern book contains drawings of the typical ways to draw various holy figures and scenes, something like the “fake book” professional musicians use.

Slide 16, end of slides for Chapter 8