Art History

Semester 2: The Middle Ages: The Art of Christian Europe (400–1300)

This semester traces the changes in visual culture and architecture from late antiquity to the dawn of Gothic.

Thematic units:

Early Christian and Byzantine Art

Carolingian and Renaissance there

Romanesque: monastic architecture, frescoes, codices

The beginnings of Gothic: cathedrals, stained glass, sculpture

**Highlighted works:** Hagia Sophia, Aachen, Cluny, Chartres Cathedral, Book of Kells, Bernward Gate, Vézelay Portal, Chartres Cathedral Rose Window

**Weekly breakdown (14 weeks)**

Week 1: Introduction to the history of medieval art

The concept and time frame of the Middle Ages

The myth of the “Dark Ages”

The function and purpose of Christian art

Use of materials, techniques, chances of survival

“What is medieval art?” – definitions and problems

Week 2: Late Antique Art and the Beginnings of Christian Iconography

The Legacy of Antiquity

Catacombs and Symbols

The Separation of Christian Art from Roman Art

The First Christian Symbols and Their Interpretation

Week 3: Byzantine Art I. Early Byzantine Period

Foundation of Constantinople

Hagia Sophia and the Central Square

Mosaic Art and the Golden Background

Hagia Sophia and the “Meeting of Heaven and Earth”

Week 4: Byzantine Art II. Icons and Iconoclasm

The Concept and Role of the Icon

The Age of Iconoclasm and its Impact on Art

Theological Foundations of Image Veneration

The Visual and Religious Interpretation of an Icon

Week 5: Early Medieval Art in Western Europe

The Art of the Migration Period: Germanic, Celtic, Viking Influences

Illuminated Manuscripts: Book of Kells, Lindisfarne

Transition to Monumental Art

Decoration as Communication in the Early Middle Ages

Week 6: Carolingian Renaissance

Charlemagne and the Revival of Culture

Palace Chapel in Aachen

Carolingian Codex Art and Painting

Images of the Bible: The Visual Bible of the Carolingian Age

Week 7: Ottonian Art

Roman and Byzantine Influences

St. Michael's Church, Hildesheim: Bronze Gates and Column

Miniature Painting and Liturgical Objects

Seminary: Bishop Bernward's Art Program

Week 8: Romanesque I. Church Architecture

Type of Pilgrimage Church

Semicircular arches, barrel vaults, massive walls

Santiago de Compostela, Cluny, Vézelay

The Church as a Road: Space and Symbolism in the Romanesque Age

Week 9: Romanesque II. Sculpture and Wall Painting

Portal Programs: Last Judgment, Christ as Judge

Column Capitals, Column Statues, Sarcophagus Reliefs

Frescoes and Wall Paintings: Saint-Savin, Saint-Chef

The Art of Fear: Depiction of Hell

Week 10: Romanesque III. Manuscripts and goldsmithing

Codex decoration and initials

Liturgical objects: chalices, reliquaries

Workshops of Giselbertus, Rainerus

Analysis of a Romanesque gospel book

Week 11: Precursors of Gothic: Paris and the Capetians

The role of the political and religious center

The program of Saint-Denis and Abbot Suger

A new aesthetic approach: light, verticality

The theology of light and the new meaning of space

Week 12: Gothic I. Architecture

Cathedrals: Chartres, Reims, Amiens

Vaulting techniques, buttresses, rose window

The Gothic spatial experience and acoustics

Gothic cathedral in 3D – virtual analysis

Week 13: Gothic II. Sculpture and Glass Painting

Portals and the Royal Gallery

Narrative Cycles and Naturalism

Stained Glass Windows: Biblia Pauperum

Visual Interpretation of a Gothic Glass Window

Week 14: Summary and Transition to the 14th Century

Interaction and Transformation of Styles

Regional Differences

Looking Forward to the Next Semester (Gothic Flourishing, Trecento)

Medieval Art – Function or Beauty?

**Recommended readings:**

Otto von Simson: The Gothic Cathedral

Emile Mâle: The Spirit of Medieval Art

Gombrich: History of Art (Medieval Chapters)

Rolf Toman (ed.): Romanesque / Gothic (Könemann Albums)

**Exam questions (20)**

Christianity and the Late Antique Tradition

1. Characteristics of Late Antique and Early Christian Art – Catacomb Painting, Symbols, Depictions of Christ, Mosaic Art in Rome

2. The Development of Byzantine Art and the Role of Hagia Sophia – Early Byzantine Architecture, Iconography, Mosaic Programs

3. The Significance of the Icon and Iconoclasm (Image Destruction) in Byzantine Art – Theological Background, Artistic Consequences, Type and Function of Icons

Western Europe in the Early Middle Ages

4. Early Medieval (Barbarian) Art and the So-called migration style – Germanic, Celtic, Viking decorative art and symbol system

5. Christian art of the British Isles and codex painting – Book of Kells, Lindisfarne Gospel, ribbon motifs

6. Carolingian Renaissance art – Aachen palace chapel, codices, antiquarianism, renovatio imperii

7. Specific features of Ottonian art – Hildesheim: Bernward Gate and column, miniature painting, early Romanesque

Romanesque

8. Main features of Romanesque church architecture – Pilgrimage churches, vaults, ground plans (Cluny, Santiago de Compostela)

9. Romanesque sculpture and portal programs – Tympanums, biblical cycles, Giselbertus (Autun)

10. Romanesque wall painting and fresco programs – Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, Byzantine influences, iconographic systems

11. Romanesque codex art and initials – Liturgical manuscripts, function and form of initials

12. Romanesque goldsmithing and liturgical objects – Crosses, chalices, reliquaries, visual appearance of relic veneration

13. Theology and symbolism of the Christian church space in the Romanesque period – The church as the kingdom of God: orientation, levels, direction of movement

The beginnings of Gothic

14. The development of the Gothic style: Saint-Denis and Abbot Suger – Luminous language, verticality, new aesthetic principles

15. Structural and formal innovations of the Gothic cathedral – Pointed arches, cross vault, buttresses, stained glass windows (Chartres, Reims)

16. Early stage of Gothic sculpture – Portals, royal gallery, naturalizing figures (Chartres, Amiens)

17. Gothic stained glass windows and the Biblia pauperum – Storytelling in light, iconography, narrativity

Thematic and comparative topics

18. The function of medieval art: didactic and liturgical purposes – Art as a teacher and transcendent mediator

19. The representation of the body in the Middle Ages – The relationship between the spiritual body, the suffering body, abstraction and realism

20. Stylistic changes in medieval art between Romanesque and Gothic – Transition, regional differences, new sensibilities (France, Germany, England)