

Western European Art : Postclassical Period

Overview When Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire, under the Emperor Constantine's reign (306-337 C.E.), it was necessary, and at last possible, for worship to take place openly in public. The furtive structures formerly in use, when Christianity was proscribed, began to be replaced by sizeable places of worship, churches, in which large groups of celebrants could gather. At the same time, the early Christian squeamishness about idols, which had hampered a full flowering of aesthetic achievement, was giving way to a more self-confident urge toward religious self-expression. In what follows we can indicate certain landmarks that show the path the Mediaeval Church took toward the grand cathedral-building era of the thirteenth century.

Early post classical art in Europe: the Christian basilica The basilica of Roman times was a large public temple in which court matters and official urban matters could be addressed; every significant city in the Roman Empire had its basilica. From the Roman basilica slowly emerged the Christian basilica. One of the earliest Christian basilicas in Rome was Santa Maria Maggiore, built around 430 C.E. Like a Roman basilica, Santa Maria Maggiore is a long rectangular structure entered through a gate which leads into an atrium, or roofless open space. Within the Roman atrium stood a statue of the Emperor; the Christians replaced this with a 'bishop's chair,' or *cathedra*, whence eventually came the name *cathedral*, applied to the entire building. Elegant mosaics of stone and glass adorned the Christian basilica walls, and the ceilings were of polished marble. Such attention to detail befitted the long nave, which at its far end, the target point of the visitor's eyes, surrounded the altar on which the transformative actions of the mass were carried out.

An early sculptural example Wary of idol worshipping, the early Christians shied away from sculptural art or painting. There are, however, fine pieces of sculpture or relief work, in which the human body is subtly molded. A fine example is a 39" tall sculpture of Jesus the Good Shepherd, depicted in the innocence of a Roman youth, over his shoulders a lamb being carried to safety.

The Middle period of post classical Christian art The art of this period--Romanesque by name, especially as it pertains to architecture--flourished broadly throughout France, and brings us squarely into the architectural tradition which will lead to the great Cathedrals of the thirteenth century. However the Romanesque tradition stops firmly short of the vaulting and daringly lighted effects of the High Gothic, which we will see in the Cathedrals of Notre Dame de Paris or Chartres, in the thirteenth century. A beautiful instance of Romanesque is the Cathedral of Saint Sernin at Toulouse, constructed around 1070. Less lofty than the Gothic, more given to side aisles and chapels for the veneration of saints' relics, and with clearly defined spatial divisions--rather than with the fluidity of the Gothic--Saint Sernin is a classical statement of Romanesque Architecture.

The thirteenth century climax of post classical Christian art The Gothic cathedrals of the High Middle Ages--Notre Dame of Amiens (begun 1220), Notre Dame of Paris (1163-1250), Notre Dame of Chartres (1145-1220)--are familiar to us for unique features--flying buttresses, gargoyles, devotional chapels, but above all for high vaulting ceilings, ethereal mosaics that pick up every radiance from outside, and forests of brilliantly interwoven columns, each perfectly positioned to shape and pattern the worshippers' view down the nave to the altar. These are among the architectural masterpieces constructed at least in part by the labor and ardor of the people of the region, for whom the presence of such architectural exaltation made daily life meaningful.

Reading

Stoddard, Whitney, *Art and Architecture in Mediaeval France*, New York, 1972.

Madigan, Kevin, *Medieval Christianity: A New History*, New Haven, 2015.

Discussion questions

How do you explain the fact that post classical Christian culture, in the West, achieves a kind of climax of brilliance in the 13th century, after more than a thousand years of 'development'?

Why do you suppose architecture was the art form in which the mediaeval Christian Church most fully expressed itself?

Was there cultural energy even in the 'dark ages' of the 8th-10th centuries, in Western Europe. Is that moniker, 'dark ages', justified, or simply a label pasted on by a later, and uncomprehending age, like the 18th century?