Introduction to Romanesque Art

Romanesque art refers to the art of Europe from the late 10th century to the rise of the Gothic style in the 13th century.

• **Key Points**
  • The Romanesque style was the first style to spread across the whole of Catholic Europe, making it the first pan-European style since Imperial Roman Architecture.
  • Combining features of Roman and Byzantine buildings and other local traditions, Romanesque architecture is known by its massive quality, thick walls, round arches, sturdy piers, groin vaults, large towers, and regular, symmetrical plans.
  • The tympanums of important church portals were carved with monumental schemes, often again depicting iconography from Byzantine painting, but treated with more freedom than painted versions, as there were no equivalent Byzantine models for sculpture.

• **Terms**
  • **pier**
    A pier, in architecture, is an upright support for a structure or superstructure, such as an arch or bridge. The simplest cross-section of a pier is square, or rectangular, although other shapes are also common. In medieval architecture, massive circular supports called drum piers, cruciform (cross-shaped) piers, and compound piers are common architectural elements.
  • **groin vault**
    A groin vault or groined vault (also sometimes known as a double barrel vault or cross vault) is produced by the intersection at right angles of two barrel vaults. The word groin refers to the edge between the intersecting vaults.
  • **tympanum**
    A triangular space between the sides of a pediment (frontón).
  • **tympanum**
    A triangular space between the sides of a pediment; the space within an arch, and above a lintel or a subordinate arch, spanning the opening below the arch.
• **Overview**

Romanesque art refers to the art of Europe from the late 10th century to the rise of the Gothic style in the 13th century, or later, depending on region. The term Romanesque was invented by 19th century art historians, especially for Romanesque architecture, which retained many basic features of Roman architectural style - most notably semi-circular arches - but had also developed many very different and regional characteristics. In Southern France, Spain and Italy there had been architectural continuity with the Late Antique period, but the Romanesque style was the first style to spread across the whole of Catholic Europe, making it the first pan-European style since Imperial Roman Architecture. Romanesque art was also greatly influenced by Byzantine art, especially in painting, and by the anti-classical energy of the decoration of the Insular art of the British Isles, and from these elements forged a highly innovative and coherent style.

• **Architecture**

Combining features of Roman and Byzantine buildings and other local traditions, Romanesque architecture is known by its massive quality, thick walls, round arches, sturdy piers, groin vaults, large towers and decorative arcades. Each building has clearly defined forms. They are frequently of very regular, symmetrical plan; the overall appearance is one of simplicity when compared with the Gothic buildings that were to follow. The style can be identified across Europe, despite regional characteristics and materials (Figure 1).

• **Sculpture and Painting**

Aside from Romanesque architecture, the art of the period was characterized by a vigorous style in both sculpture and painting. Painting continued to follow Byzantine iconographic models for the most common subjects in churches. Christ in Majesty, the Last Judgement and scenes from the Life of Christ remained among the most popular depictions. In illuminated manuscripts, where the most lavishly decorated manuscripts of the period were mostly bibles or psalters, more originality is seen, as new scenes needed to be depicted. The same applied to the carved capitals of columns, which where never more exciting than in this period. They were often carved with complete scenes with several figures. Precious objects sculpted in metal, enamel, and ivory, such as reliquaries, also had very high status in this period. The large wooden crucifix was a German innovation at the start of the period, as were free-standing statues of the enthroned Madonna, but the high relief carvings of architectural elements were the signature work in the sculptural mode of the period.

Colors, which we can now see in their original brightness only in stained glass and well-preserved manuscripts, tended to be very striking, depending heavily on intense saturated primary colors. It was in this period that stained glass came to be widely used, although there are few surviving examples. In a significant innovation of the period, the tympanums of important church portals were carved with monumental schemes, often again depicting Christ in Majesty or the Last Judgement, but treated with more freedom than painted versions. These portal sculptures were meant to both intimidate and educate the viewer. As there were no equivalent Byzantine models Romanesque sculptors felt free to expand rather than merely mimic in their treatment of tympanums.

Pictorial compositions usually had little depth, and needed to be flexible to squeeze themselves into the shapes of historiated initials, column capitals, and church tympanums. The tension between a tightly enclosing frame and the composition which sometimes escapes its designated space, is a recurrent theme in Romanesque art (Figure 3). Figures still often varied in size in relation to their importance, and landscape backgrounds, if attempted at all, were closer to abstract decorations than realism - as in the trees in the "Morgan Leaf" (Figure 2). This abstraction could also be seen in the elongation of human forms, which were often contorted to fit the shape of the space provided and often appeared to be floating in space. Depictions of the human form tended to focus on linear details with emphasis on drapery folds and hair.
The Church
The expansion of the Church across Europe was the greatest contributing factor to the development of Romanesque art and architecture.

• **Key Points**
  - Across Europe, the late 11th and 12th centuries saw an unprecedented growth in the number of churches due to the spread of monasticism, the practice of **pilgrimage**, and the movement of peoples during the Crusades.
  - Monasteries, which sometimes also functioned as cathedrals, were major sources of political and spiritual power in Europe. The enormous and powerful monastery at Cluny was to have lasting effect on the layout of other monasteries and the design of their churches.
  - The religious fervor spurred by the Crusades - as well as the movement of peoples, **relics**, and artistic techniques between regions - inspired great building programs of newly-founded churches or additions of sculpture or gifts to established churches.

• **Terms**
  - **Crusade**
    One of a series of ostensibly religious campaigns by Christian forces from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, mostly to capture the Holy Land from the Muslims who occupied it.
  - **abbey**
    A monastery or society of people, secluded from the world and devoted to religion and celibacy, which is headed by an abbot or abbess; also, the church of a monastery.
**Clerical Culture**

The expansion of the Christian Church across Europe, through developments in monasticism, pilgrimages, and the Crusades, was the greatest contributing factor to the development of Romanesque art and architecture. Across Europe, the late 11th and 12th centuries saw an unprecedented growth in the number of churches. A great number of these buildings, both large and small, are still standing. Some remain almost intact; others were altered beyond recognition in later centuries. They include many very well known churches, such as Santa Maria in Cosmedin, in Rome; the Baptistery, in Florence; and San Zeno Maggiore, in Verona. In France, the famous abbeys of Aux Dames and Les Hommes, at Caen and Mont Saint-Michel respectively, date from this period, as do the abbeys of the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela.

Many cathedrals owe their foundation to this period, often beginning as monastic abbey churches. In England, almost all of the cathedrals of medieval foundation were begun in this period. In Spain, the most famous church of the period is Santiago de Compostela. In Germany, the Rhine and its tributaries were the location of many Romanesque abbeys, notably those of Mainz, Worms, Speyer, and Bamberg. In Cologne, which was then the largest city north of the Alps, a very important group of large city churches has survived to the present largely intact. As monasticism spread across Europe, Romanesque churches sprang up in Scotland, Scandinavia, Poland, Hungary, Sicily, Serbia, and Tunisia. Several important Romanesque churches were also built in the Crusader kingdoms.

**Monasticism**

The system of monasticism, in which individuals became members of a religious order, was established by the monk Benedict, in the 6th century. The Benedictine Monasteries spread from Italy throughout Europe. This order was always the most numerous in England. They were followed by the Cluniac order, the Cistercians, Carthusians, and Augustinian Canons. In association with the Crusades, the military orders of the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar were founded. Cathedrals, with groups of secular clergy often living in community, and monasteries, which sometimes also functioned as cathedrals, were a major source of power in Europe. Bishops and the abbots of important monasteries lived and functioned like princes.

Monasteries were also the major seats of learning. Benedict had ordered that all the arts were to be taught and practiced in the monasteries. Within the monasteries books were transcribed by hand, and few people outside the monasteries could read or write.

In France, Burgundy was the centre of monasticism. The enormous and powerful monastery at Cluny was to have lasting effect on the layout of other monasteries and the design of their churches. Unfortunately, very little of the abbey church at Cluny remains. The "Cluny II" rebuilding of 963 onwards has completely vanished, but we have a good idea of the design of "Cluny III" (1088–1130), which until the Renaissance remained the largest building in Europe (Figure 3). However, the church of St. Sernin at Toulouse (1080–1120) has remained intact and demonstrates the regularity of Romanesque design with its modular form, massive appearance and repetition of the simple arched window.

**Pilgrimage and Crusade**

The Crusades (1095-1291), which were intended to pry the holy places of Palestine from Islamic control, excited a great deal of religious fervor. This fervor further inspired great building programs. The military nobles of Europe, upon safe return from the Crusades, thanked God by the building of new churches or the enhancement of old ones. Likewise, those who did not return from the Crusades could be suitably commemorated by their families in works of stone and mortar. The Crusades resulted in the transfer of a great number of holy relics of saints and apostles, among many other things relocated through the fortunes of war. Many churches were like Saint-Front, Périgueux, and had their own homegrown saint; others claimed the remains and the patronage of a powerful saint whose relics were brought back from the Holy Land, Santiago de Compostella, for example, was host to the presumed relics of one of the Twelve Apostles, St. James (St. Iago = Santiago).

Santiago de Compostela, located near Galicia, became one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in Europe (Figure 2). Most of the pilgrims traveled the Way of St. James on foot, many of them barefoot, as a sign of penance. They moved along one of the four main routes that passed through France, congregating for the journey at Jumièges, Paris, Vézelay, Cluny, Arles, and St. Gall in Switzerland. They crossed two passes in the Pyrenees and converged into a single stream to traverse north-western Spain. Along the route they were urged on by those pilgrims returning from the journey. On each of the routes abbeys such as those at Moissac, Toulouse, Roncesvalles, Conques (Figure 1). Limoges and Burgos catered to the flow of people and grew wealthy from the passing trade.
Economics and Politics
Romanesque art was affected by shifting political powers following the Carolingian period, and the mobility of peoples during the Crusades.

• Key Points
  • The invasion of England by William, Duke of Normandy, in 1066, saw the building of both castles and churches to reinforce the Norman presence. Several significant churches built at this time were founded by rulers as seats of temporal and religious power, or places of coronation and burial.
  • The Crusades, 1095–1270, brought about a very large movement of people and, with them, ideas and trade skills.
  • The continual movement of people, rulers, nobles, bishops, abbots, craftsmen and peasants, was an important factor in creating a homogeneity in building methods and a recognizable Romanesque style, despite regional differences.
  • The period saw Europe grow steadily more prosperous, and art of the highest quality was no longer confined, to the royal court and a small circle of monasteries. Lay artists became increasingly valuable, and most masons, goldsmiths and painters were lay by the end of the period.
• Terms
  • Feudalism
    A social system based on personal ownership of resources and personal fealty between a suzerain (lord) and a vassal (subject). Defining characteristics are direct ownership of resources, personal loyalty, and a hierarchical social structure reinforced by religion.
  • Crusade
    One of a series of ostensibly religious campaigns by Christian forces from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, mostly to capture the Holy Land from the Muslims who occupied it.
  • Lay
    Not belonging to the clergy, but associated with them.
The Source of Inspiration

Romanesque architecture was the first distinctive style to spread across Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Despite the impression of 19th century Art Historians that Romanesque architecture was a continuation of Roman styles, Roman building techniques in brick and stone were largely lost in most parts of Europe. In the more northern countries Roman style and methods had never been adopted except for official buildings, while in Scandinavia they were unknown. There was little continuity, except in Rome where several great Constantinian basilicas continued to stand as an inspiration to later builders. It was not the buildings of ancient Rome that inspired the Emperor Charlemagne’s Palatine Chapel, in Aachen, Germany, built around the year AD 800. Instead, the greatest building of the Dark Ages in Europe was the artistic child of the 6th century octagonal Byzantine Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna.

A New European Empire

Charlemagne was crowned by the Pope in St. Peter’s Basilica on Christmas Day, in the year AD 800, with an aim to re-establishing the old Roman Empire. Charlemagne’s political successors continued to rule much of Europe, leading over time to the gradual emergence of the separate political states that were eventually welded into nations, either by allegiance or defeat. In the process the Kingdom of Germany gave rise to the Holy Roman Empire. The invasion of England by William, Duke of Normandy, in 1066, saw the building of castles and churches that reinforced the Norman presence. Several significant churches built at this time were founded by rulers as seats of temporal and religious power, or as places of coronation and burial. These include the Abbaye-Saint-Denis and Westminster Abbey (where little of the Norman church now remains).

At a time when the remaining architectural structures of the Roman Empire were falling into decay and much of its technology was lost, the building of masonry domes and the carving of decorative architectural details continued unabated, though greatly evolved in style since the fall of Rome, in the enduring Byzantine Empire. The domed churches of Constantinople and Eastern Europe were to greatly affect the architecture of certain towns, particularly through trade and through the Crusades. The most notable single building that demonstrates this is St Mark’s Basilica, Venice but there are many lesser known examples, such as the church of Saint-Front, Périgueux (Figure 1) and Angoulême Cathedral.

Feudalism and Warfare

Much of Europe was affected by feudalism, in which peasants held tenure from local rulers over the land they farmed in exchange for military service. The result of this was that they could be called upon, not only for local spats, but to follow their lord to travel across Europe to the Crusades. The Crusades, 1095–1270, brought about a very large movement of people, and with them ideas and trade skills, particularly those involved in the building of fortifications and the metal working needed for the provision of arms, which was also applied to the fitting and decoration of buildings (Figure 3). The continual movement of people, rulers, nobles, bishops, abbots, craftsmen and peasants, was an important factor in creating a homogeneity in building methods and a recognizable Romanesque style, despite regional differences.

Life became generally less secure after the Carolingian period. This resulted in the building of castles at strategic points. Many were constructed as strongholds of the Normans; descendants of the Vikings who invaded northern France in 911. Political struggles also resulted in the fortification of many towns, or the rebuilding and strengthening of walls that remained from the Roman period. One of the most notable surviving fortifications is that of the city of Carcassonne. The enclosure of towns brought about a lack of living space within the walls, and resulted in a style of town house that was tall and narrow, often surrounding communal courtyards, as at San Gimignano in Tuscany (Figure 2).

Growing Prosperity

The period saw Europe grow steadily more prosperous, and art of the highest quality was no longer confined to the royal court and a small circle of monasteries, as it largely had been in the Carolingian and Ottonian periods. Monasteries remained extremely important, especially those of the expansionist new Cistercian, Cluniac, and Carthusian orders of the period that spread out across Europe. However, city churches, including those on pilgrimage routes and many churches in small towns and villages, were elaborately decorated to a very high standard. Indeed, it is often these that have survived when cathedrals and city churches have been rebuilt, and no Romanesque royal palace has really survived. The lay artist was becoming a valued figure; Nicholas of Verdun seems to have been known across the continent. Most masons and goldsmiths were now lay professionals rather than monastic clergy, and lay painters like Master Hugo seem to have been the majority, at least of those doing the best work, by the end of the period. The iconography of their church work was likely arrived at in consultation with clerical advisers.