

FILM 1- ROMANESQUE ART

We meet with **Christian Gensbeitel** in the Church of Saint-Eutrope at Saintes - one of the most emblematic sites of the Romanesque heritage of Poitou-Charentes - to explore Romanesque art, its origins and its various forms of expression.

We tend to have a ready-made definition of Romanesque art. How would you define it ?

I would say that the definition is contained in the term itself. When the art historians of the 19th century defined this artform, they chose the word « Romanesque », which is derived from the term « Roman ». This goes to show that this artform was heavily influenced by ancient Roman and Gallo-Roman architecture. This artform also stands in relation to the tradition of the Upper Middle Ages from which it emerged, notably through the restructuring of places of worship. This was linked to the liturgical practices of the time, like pilgrimages, for example.

We see the emergence of ambulatories, as the one we see here. The buildings also became vaulted, this is one of the great innovations of Romanesque architecture in comparison to the previous centuries. The vaulting also led to new wall structures, with articulated pillards, columns and buttresses that reinforced the walls. Dressed stone progressively appeared in the course of the 11th and 12th century, replacing the more traditional rubble stone architecture. Another great innovation is seen in the sculpture, which became monumental and carried a spiritual message.

Does Romanesque art stem from different sources ?

We can see influences of the ancient world in the capitals of this crypt. But the style of Antiquity was revised, filtered through the prism of Byzantine art. The Byzantine Empire had disseminated its architectural models and its more refined art throughout Western Europe. Generally speaking, the « Oriental arts » traded and exported objects from one side of the Mediterranean to the other, most notably goldsmithery, textiles, fabrics and images created on different media. Also, the « Barbarians » who settled in Europe brought their own skills with them and transmitted them from generation to generation. And we see this, too, in decorative motifs, for example.

You mention the various arts, various objects...Is Romanesque art expressed in various ways ?

Indeed, this artform usually refers to architecture but the buildings were inhabited, they were furnished, they had paintings on the walls, there were sculptures. Of course, there were also furnishings which were sculpted and painted ; altar table, for example, were often sculpted. Romanesque art also includes the illuminations that were created in the scriptures of the great monasteries. It also includes all the objects of daily life...Thus, it is a complete artform.

Can you see regional variations ?

Of course there are variations. There are differences, it is an experiential art that was sometimes shaped by isolated initiatives, not all of which were developed. Here, for example, the church of Saint-Eutrope, which was consecrated in the late 11th century, arrived at a time and in a region that had very few monuments of the sort. The neighboring region of Poitou had already developed great monuments a generation earlier, that may be qualified as Romanesque. The sculptures in this crypt, here, were influenced by ancient tradition, but they evolved. In the upper levels, we found capitals inspired by a type of illumination that became prevalent throughout the region in the 12th century. We see other examples of this on the facade of Notre-Dame-la-Grande, for example.

Here we are before the facade of Notre-Dame-la-Grande at Poitiers. Was it painted at the time ?

It was indeed painted in the Romanesque period, and all of these sculptures were embellished with color. We actually found traces of this during the restoration works, twenty years ago.

And what was the role of painting during this time ?

Painting played a very important role in Romanesque architecture and throughout the Romanesque period. Here, we have a very good example of that : the painted decor includes painted images depicting the Glory of Christ and the Virgin on the vault of the apse. Color and paintings are also present inside the building, in the form of trompe-l'oeil and faux-marble. The building's surrounding decor was restored in the 19th century, perhaps excessively. And of course, there was a visual dialogue between the colors and the sculpted reliefs, as was the case on the facade. Sculpture became increasingly important, both in Romanesque architecture and in the discourse of the Church. We can see how the sculptures on this 12th century facade display an agenda meant to legitimize the role of the Church. The sculpted details on the arcades depict the incarnation of Christ and include various types of imagery, such as plant motifs and representations of monsters and animals. There are even geometric motifs that harken back to the legacy of the Ancient world.

Romanesque treasures of Poitou-Charentes, Poitou-Charentes region, 2014.

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