

FILM 2- ROMANESQUE ART

The magic of Romanesque sculpture must not eclipse the importance of the paintings that decorated a large part of the building. More than twenty churches in Poitou-Charentes have preserved their Romanesque murals. The most remarkable ones are seen at Saint-Savin, the « Sistine Chapel of the Romanesque Period », as André Malraux called it. We meet with **Marie-Anne Lacaille** to discover these famous frescoes, where the figures sometimes seem to be dancing before our eyes...

Here we are at the Abbey of Saint-Savin, known throughout the world for its frescoes...How does the story begin ?

The history of the abbey goes back very far in time. In the early 9th century, the relics of Saint Savin were discovered. This saint was apparently a miracle worker and Baidilius, who owned this site, had a Carolingian church built here in his honor. Later, in the 11th century, a Countess of the Poitou region named Aumode made a monetary donation and the monks decided to build a much more fastuous church, the Romanesque Church that we see today. They had it adorned with marvelous mural paintings which have become registered on the World Heritage List. The rest of the buildings used by the monks were unfortunately destroyed during the Hundred Years' War and the religious wars. The ones that coexist today with the Romanesque church date back to the late 17th century.

Will you show us this masterpiece ?

With great pleasure...

This church was built in record time, right ?

Absolutely. It is estimated that the construction of this Church began around 1030-1040 AD and ended around 1090 AD. So it took only about fifty years to build this Romanesque church, which is very big for the time. That is extremely fast, especially when you consider that it took about twenty years to paint it. The fact that its construction was completed so fast indicates that the monks had considerable financial means.

And it is called the « Romanesque Sistine Chapel ».

Yes. It is true that Malraux gave the Abbey of Saint Savin this name, because the Sistine Chapel is entirely covered in mural paintings, too, and everybody has heard of it. Malraux was surprised when he discovered Saint-Savin, because he had not expected to see a church entirely decorated with paintings. And God knows that this church is rife with paintings, absolutely everything is decked in color. So the comparison was easy to make, even though it is very honorific to be called the « Sistine Chapel of the Romanesque period ».

When you enter the church, you become very, very moved...and not just because it is grandiose...

That is not the only reason why. The place has a sort of soul, it can be felt in the architecture and in the mural paintings. Everything was thought out and carefully planned by the monks of the abbey, who wanted a church built in a certain way, with mural paintings placed in strategic areas to maintain a certain discourse. They run from the gallery down to the porch, along the nave, to the axis of the chapel and finish in the crypt. All of these paintings were like spiritual food for the monks of the abbey. They referred to these paintings daily to find the path to a purer soul.

I imagine that there is a scene that especially moves you, no ?

Yes. There is a scene that I find very moving, the one of Noah's Ark, which is extremely well-known. When you look at this scene, you can imagine the painter's work. I like to talk about the human component while I host tours, because we tend to forget about it in this religious context. But this painter had to be very imaginative to illustrate a ship that is not described in the Bible. He sought inspiration in the oral tradition and in the famous Viking drakkars that landed in this region in 1017. He did not know of them personally, but he remembered the shape of the hulls and the figureheads on the bows. He added an unlikely structure on top, where he placed the pairs of animals, the birds and Noah's family.

In fact, to me, this scene reflects the rest of the church. We see the creative genius of Man before our eyes, both in the form of the extraordinary, intellectual and religious minds of the monks of the abbey, who designed everything you see, and in the exemplary work of the artisans – from the stone masons to the painters – who left us such well-made buildings. This church is the exact original, and these paintings are a bit over 950 years old.

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

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