

## **FILM 2- ROMANESQUE ART**

### **Focus : The church of Saint-Savin : the « Sistine Chapel of the Romanesque Period »**

The 11th century church of the old abbey of Saint-Savin, in the Vienne region, is one of the greatest Benedictine monasteries of Poitou. It is decorated with mural paintings that have become famous since their discovery by Prosper Mérimée in the 1830s. Registered on the first list of Historical Monuments in 1840, this major edifice of the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region was named the « Sistine Chapel of the Romanesque World » by André Malraux. It has been listed a World Heritage Site since 1983.

This collection of paintings is one of the biggest in Europe, for the Romanesque period. These paintings are the work of a single team of painters, who worked here around 1100AD, soon after the church was completed.

The paintings cover the bell-tower porch, the nave, the choir and the crypt. While they embellish the « House of God », they mainly served to accompany the monks in prayer and processions.

Scenes from the Apocalypse are depicted on the bell-tower porch, on the ground floor. Above, scenes from the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ are depicted. The legendary lives of Saint Savin and Saint Cyprian are illustrated in the crypt.

The most developed program is seen on the nave, which is more than 17 m high. It unfolds over the entire vault, on a surface area of 460 m<sup>2</sup>. Except for some rare genre paintings and decorative elements (trees), it illustrates the

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most important stories of Genesis and the Exodus, the first books of the Bible : Adam and Eve, Caïn and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses...

The paintings on the vault are organized into five longitudinal friezes. A decorative central strip is surrounded on both sides by two overlapping, historiated friezes, each 2.5 m wide. So most of the figures are represented as bigger than they actually are.

This program is linked to the liturgy (for some authors, it is linked to the liturgy of Easter). Thus, the order of the scenes does not always follow the Biblical order.



Illustration 1 : *The apse of the Romanesque church and the 17th century monastic building*©  
Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine, inventaire général du patrimoine culturel / C. Rome, 2013.

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Illustration 2 : *The church's nave.*

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Illustration 3 : *The crypt at the church of Saint-Savin.*

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Illustration 4 : *Woman and dragon. Mural painting on the porch of the church.* © Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine, inventaire général du patrimoine culturel / G. Beauvarlet, 2010.

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Illustration 5 : *The Descent from the Cross. Mural painting on the tribune of the church's porch.*  
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Illustration 6 : *The Creation of the Sun, Moon and Stars. Mural painting on the vault of the church's nave .* © Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine, inventaire général du patrimoine culturel / C. Rome,

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Illustration 7 : *The Creation of Eve and the Presentation of Eve to Adam. Mural painting on the vault of the church's nave.* © Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine, inventaire général du patrimoine culturel



Illustration 8 : *Eve spinning. Mural painting on the vault of the church's nave.*  
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Illustration 9 : *Noah's Ark and the Release of the Raven. Mural painting on the vault of the church's nave.* © Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine, inventaire général du patrimoine / J. Bonneau, 2013.



Illustration 10 : *Mural painting on the vault of the church's nave. Detail on the sixth and seventh aisles.* © Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine, inventaire général du patrimoine / R. Jean, 2013.

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