

FILM 4 : A HERITAGE OF EXCEPTION

The Poitou-Charentes region is home to exceptional Romanesque monuments known throughout the world, like the church Notre-Dame-la-Grande in Poitiers, famed for the richness of its sculpted facade, and the Saint Savin Abbey, known for its splendid paintings. It also has a large number of smaller structures whose stark white stone, architectural lines and decorative details give the region a unique character.

How did this exceptional Romanesque territory come to be ?

Romanesque art emerged around the year 1,000 AD and was influenced by a variety of styles, including Ancient Roman, Carolingian, Byzantine art. It then developed its own models, leaving us with works which continue to amaze us by their creativity.

It flourished in a fast-growing society after the troubled times of the preceding centuries. During the Romanesque period, which extended from the 11th to the 12th century, the social hierarchy was divided into three distinct groups : the lords, who fought, the clergy, who prayed and the peasants, who worked.

Since the royal power was disappearing during this time, the Counts of Poitou and the Dukes of Aquitaine were among the main ruling families. They ruled over a great number of turbulent lords who shared the land. They managed to maintain political stability between the Loire and the Gironde, and thus ensured an economic boom during these two centuries.

The Lords and the Counts consolidated their power and defended their territory by building castles at strategic locations. An ever present heritage in the region ; two hundred castle mounds and thirty or so stone dungeons reveal the extent of these Romanesque castles.

Throughout the Romanesque period, the Church asserted its authority before the Lords. Many religious structures were built : cathedrals, churches and abbeys flourished.

The monk chronicler Raoul Glaber described this transformation in the year 1000AD as such : « It was as if the entire world had freed itself, throwing off the weight of the past and donning a white mantle of churches ».

The Bishops invested important resources to rebuild large-scale cathedrals. At the beginning of the 12th century, Girard II, the powerful bishop of Angoulême, headed the reconstruction works of his cathedral. He covered the nave with a row of domes and he had a richly sculpted facade erected. This cathedral is now one of the most iconic Romanesque monuments of the region.

Stone became the preferred material, replacing the perishable materials widely used in previous constructions. Vaults appeared gradually, and eventually covered most religious buildings.

From cathedrals to small, rural churches, religious Romanesque structures are varied. Most of the churches are small and built on a simple design : a long nave followed by a choir. Sometimes a transept was built between the nave and the choir. The churches of Plassac Rouffiac and Lichères are examples of the many churches that dot the countryside and towns of Poitou-Charentes.

The big churches, whether devoted to pilgrimages or linked to large monasteries, are often more complex. Chapels and corridors had to be built to accommodate the processions of pilgrims and the religious services of the monks. The Saint-Hilaire church in Melle is one of these big churches, with its three naves, its tripartite facade and its remarkably harmonious, tiered apse.

Other buildings are much more unusual, like the one at Aubeterre-sur-Dronne : entirely carved into the cliff, its monumental size is impressive. Its vaults rise nearly 20m high. A hexagonal reliquary inspired by the design of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is also carved into the rock.

Soft limestone rock is widely available in the region, and it favored the development

of sculpture. The quality of the material combined with the skill of the sculptors enabled the creation of luxuriant decors, a characteristic of Romanesque art in Poitou-Charentes. Sculpted details embellish the exterior facades and the corbels of the apse.

Inside, sculpted details are especially seen on the capitals of the columns. In some churches, the creativity of the sculptors is manifested in the smallest details, as if the stone had been embroidered.

At Aulnay, Romanesque sculpture reached its climax. The particularly well-preserved church of Saint-Pierre is a precious example of the Romanesque world. The Romanesque decor illustrates Biblical scenes, thus serving to educate the worshippers. The sculptors also drew inspiration from daily life, depicting the peasant's work, battle scenes and hunting scenes, acrobats and musicians, and the furniture and clothing of the time.

Animals are widely represented. Real animals, such as birds, horses and lions mingle with mythological creatures. Mermaids, dragons, griffins, sphinxes and centaurs nourish the collective imagination and often symbolize temptation and Hell.

The facade of the Notre-Dame-la-Grande church in Poitiers displays exceptional sculptural works. Scenes from the Old and New Testaments are depicted alongside representations of the saints and apostles, of the flora, fauna and mythical creatures. The facade constitutes one of the Romanesque treasures of Poitou-Charentes.

The Abbey Church of Saint-Savin is another jewel of Romanesque art. André Malraux called it the « Sistine Chapel of the Romanesque Period ». It contains the greatest collection of preserved Romanesque mural paintings in Europe. The paintings are displayed on the walls of the crypt and the bell-tower, and on the entire vaulted nave, over a surface area of 460 square meters.

The Abbey of Saint-Savin is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Political stability and economic prosperity, combined with the quality of local stone and the presence of large teams of artisan painters and sculptors created favorable conditions, and enabled the construction of many monuments in the region known

today as Poitou-Charentes.

Whether big or small, with luxuriant or sober decor, these Romanesque monuments are deeply rooted in the landscape and constitute an essential part of the region's identity. Through its frescoes and stone carvings, the Romanesque treasures of Poitou-Charentes continue to amaze us.

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

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