

Unboxing the Canon—Episode 4—"Swallowed Whole"
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Created by Linda Steer

(Playing: Instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod)

"Unboxing the Canon" takes a closer look at the history of Western art. We might be seduced by the pretty packaging, such as soft brush strokes, brilliant colors, grand gestures, expert carving, even traditional iconography. But what happens when we take a deeper look? When we open the packaging and see what might have been invisible, or what is a cultural blind spot? Join Professor Linda Steer and listen in for a take on art history that connects the past to the present, critiques the canon, and reveals what might not be immediately apparent in Western art and its institutions.

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)

I love a good Catholic cathedral, especially if it's a Gothic cathedral.

(Church bell ringing in the background)

I remember the first time I walked into Notre Dame cathedral in Paris many years ago...through a huge portal into expansive darkness, candles everywhere, coloured light filtering in through stained glass windows, the openness of the space, the high ceilings above me, I looked up and felt like the ground opened up and swallowed me whole.

(Church bell ringing fades to an end)

It was a visceral experience. I didn't really notice details. I noticed the affective experience of it, how it made me feel. As a lapsed Catholic woman, someone who is spiritual but cannot abide organized religion, especially an organized religion that doesn't align with my morals or beliefs, this was an interesting event. I almost felt like I believed in God again.

This is what medieval churches do - they are designed to inspire awe. For a thousand years, the Catholic Church was the largest art patron in Europe. Religion was central to European culture and much European art from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the Reformation is Christian art. If you've ever been in a museum and looked at art from that time period, you have seen many gilded paintings of the Virgin Mary enthroned and surrounded by angels as well as depictions of Christ dying on the cross.

In this episode, called "Swallowed Whole," we'll consider Gothic cathedrals as an art form and we will look at their relationship to European power structures. We

will end by considering the role and function of Western European churches today.

(Playing: Instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod)

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)

The earliest Christian art was on the walls of catacombs, the huge network of tunnels of burial sites under the city of Rome. In the first three centuries of the common era the cult of Christianity was, literally, underground as it was not legal in Rome and many Christians were killed or martyred for their beliefs. Some of these early underground paintings depict Mary with the Christ Child in her arms, which perhaps developed from representations of Isis with her son at her breast. Christ is pictured as a young shepherd, clean shaven, with a lamb over his shoulders. After the Roman emperor Constantine legalized this new religion and others in 313, and the representation of Christ changed to appeal to new converts: wealthy Romans. A shepherd was not something they could connect with, so we start to see images of Christ depicted as a king or ruler. For example, the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, one of the earliest surviving Christian churches, was built in the mid 6th century. A large mosaic shows Christ seated on the world, wearing the purple cloak reserved for Roman emperors. To his left, Bishop Ecclesius hands a model of the church to the angel - this bishop was the one who started the building of the church. The image shows that the church is a gift to Christ - an offering. Why is this important?

(Playing: Instrumental electronic music—Eternal by Brady Hoffman)

(Instrumental electronic music ends)

Well we want to think about how visual representations of holy figures change with the politics of religion. These images are not neutral. The mosaics in San Vitale depict a top-down model of power, with Christ at the top and the bishop nearby. The Emperor Justinian is also pictured in a mosaic in this basilica and he wears the same purple robes as Christ. They are visually and symbolically linked. And the angels are wearing the robes of Roman court dignitaries; they are visually connected to Roman rule. The mosaics are stunning, created with gold leaf, stone and precious gems. This church is made with wealth and power.

Now let's jump to about 600 years in the future. We're in the Middle Ages in France.

(Gregorian chanting in the background)

Christianity has become a central feature of Western European life. It has spread from Rome to the east and the west. Many people have been converted.

(Chanting fades to an end)

Power struggles caused the church to split into east and west and there was a lot of squabbling about the power of the pope, where he should be located, etc. The system of bishops has become intertwined with local power structures. The Catholic Church had become very wealthy.

The cult of saints, which worshipped those early Christian martyrs from Rome, had developed significantly. In fact, these early Christian martyrs were so significant that people believed their remains had magical healing powers. Beginning around the time the basilica at Ravenna was built, the bodies of the early Christian martyrs were exhumed in Rome and divided up to be sent to various churches. These human remains are called relics. An object that came in contact with the saint's body before or after their death also had special powers and were considered relics. In 794 Charlemagne had declared that all altars must have relics. So, in the 800s and 900s there was an explosion of relics across Europe. Devout people would make pilgrimages to be near them. Because they believed that relics had supernatural powers to heal or otherwise help them, people would travel great distances to be near the relics of specific saints. Also, saints have a special relationship to god but are closer to humans, so they can intercede to god. Bringing an offering to a saint might help.

So, what does this mean for art and architecture? Churches had to accommodate to hold large groups of people. The Romanesque style of architecture, what Smarthistory calls "the first international style in Western Europe since antiquity" emerges in the 11th century. As you can tell from the name, the style is based on Roman architecture. I'm not going to say much about the style here, but instead will address the social function of the churches.

Relics were highly precious, and had such great value, both spiritual and economic. They had an important economic function because they would draw pilgrims.

(Chanting in the background grows louder)

One of the most travelled pilgrimage routes in the middle ages went from France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain where the remains of St James were held. Thousands would make the pilgrimage to seek help or miracles or just to be near the divine presence of a relic.

(Chanting fades to an end)

Relics became such a hot commodity that towns and churches would steal them from one another. For example, monks at the abbey church in Conques in Occitane, southern France, stole the relics of St Foy, a girl who was martyred in the second century, from the neighbouring village of Agen. Having St

Foy's relics put Conques on the map, that is the pilgrimage route map, which meant economic prosperity for the village and the region. Acquiring relics through un-Christian means was not unusual. Relics were big business.

The number of Christian pilgrims grew around the year 1000 because many believed that the world would end. It was the Y2K of the first millennium! There were significant changes around that time that made these pilgrimages possible:

1. economic changes meant that people exchanged coins rather than trade goods. Coins are portable over long distances.
2. new farming practices streamlined food production and distribution across Europe meant economic stability. Trade expanded to cover longer geographical distances. More travel meant roads were repaired and in better shape for pilgrims
3. there was a rise in the belief of the power of saints, likely connected to fear of the apocalypse

We can make connections between the growth of the cult of saints and the economic recovery of France and Spain: pilgrims meant money in many different ways:

- they would purchase and make offerings to churches in honor of the saints
- large feast days coincided with market days, so pilgrims would shop in local
- people set up businesses feeding, caring for and housing the pilgrims who came from far away
- new churches were built to allow space for pilgrims to circulate and also to house those who could not afford lodgings; in today's terms, we would call this job creation
- pilgrims bought souvenirs such as badges, trinkets, replicas of reliquaries, etc. There was something for everyone regardless of economic class.

More money meant larger, grander and more beautiful churches. I happen to think the most beautiful churches were created in the Gothic style.

The Gothic style began with Abbot Suger, and his redesign of the Church of St Denis in the 1100s. Suger deliberately sought an architectural style that would function as a symbolic manifestation of Christian ideology. To that end, the Gothic style is built on the concepts of symbolic mathematics and the mystical effect of light. Let's think for a moment about the cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartes.

Chartes has one of the most important relics – the clothing Mary was wearing when she gave birth to Jesus. The original church was damaged by fires (think

about all those candles – churches caught fire). The relic, however, miraculously survived and the community raised funds to build a new church in the new Gothic style. It took about 60 years to build.

Chartes embodies the principles of light in several ways.

For instance, the weight of the walls and roof were distributed differently using ribbed vaults which were thinner and lighter than those of the heavier Romanesque style. Vertical lines were created by the use of compound piers with colonettes, allowing for a larger clerestory (a second floor that let in light) and made the nave, which is the central aisle seem taller and thinner. Pointed arches also give the illusion of height and lightness. Because weight is shifted downwards instead of out towards the walls, pointed arches, can be higher. in fact they can be stretched to any height, unlike round arches which will collapse. And the invention of flying buttresses meant that the walls could be higher with many more windows.

There are 176 stained glass windows in Chartes. Stained glass is the perfect expression of the Christian god as light, for they provided a new kind of coloured radiance, that not only filled the church with light, but also retold stories from scripture and symbolically represented elements of theology in mathematical terms. Not only is the light beautiful, but the stained-glass windows could be “read” by pilgrims who were illiterate. It is significant then that some of these windows legitimize the rule of the French kings by connecting them to Christianity. There’s that connection between religion and power again. The iconography of these windows is complex. When I visited this church in the 1990s, I met a man who had gone there to study the windows for his Master’s degree. 25 years later, he was still there studying the windows.

Let’s think about an example:

In the centre, we see the Virgin Mary holding her child, Jesus. They are surrounded by a ring of 12 decorative circular shapes with a fleur de lis in the centre of each. Next there is another circle of 12: 4 doves and 8 angels. Outside that we see 12 Old Testament kings in squares. Next, there are 12 quatrefoils in blue with gold fleur de lys. The outermost circle shows standing figures of Old testament prophets in half circles, surrounded by smaller circles with blue and red fleur de lys.

12 is the number of apostles, or followers with Christ during his lifetime. The fleur de lys is the symbol of France.

By repeating circles of 12 and encircling many of the elements in fleur de lys, the artist has symbolically connected the apostles to the France.

This also connects the old and new testament, by reiterating the number 12 and showing the prophets and kings of the Old testament. It also connects the French Kings (represented by the 12 quatrefoils) to the Old Testament kings, which are placed next to the quatrefoils.

Finally, the entire rose window seems to rest on 8 smaller windows decorated with fleur de lys that symbolize the donor of the window, Blanche the Queen mother. By donating this window, with the virgin at the centre, she is aligning herself with the mother of god and she is hoping for a good place in heaven.

The entire window, then, serves to express the divine right of the kings of France, a right that seemingly is in line with the Old Testament Kings, and equates the rulers of France with both Old Testament rulers and prophets and New Testament apostles. Barely disguised as a gift to the church, this window is a symbolic assertion of the rights and power of the French monarchy, not unlike Justinian's pious mosaic showing he and his wife as good Christians.

Gothic architecture was a powerful tool to maintain allegiance to Christianity, its power structures, and to the power structures that are connected to it.

These elements, height and light, give Gothic churches their power to create those embodied experiences like the one I had at Notre Dame in Paris. We cannot help but feel small in these huge spaces and even non-believers might wonder if there is something to this whole higher power thing.

(Chanting in the background)

So, imagine what it would've been like for pilgrims - motivated believers in a highly religious society. They would've felt transported, their believe system legitimized by these miraculous churches.

(Chanting fades to an end)

Jump forward about 800 years. I'm in a church in Amsterdam. It's called the Oude Kerk or old church, is the oldest remaining building in the city. It was founded as a Catholic church around 1213, so not too long after Chartres, and converted to a Calvinist church during the Reformation in 1578. Now it is both a church and a gallery for contemporary art. When I was there 3 years ago, the church was showing an installation piece called *"We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now"* by Sarah van Sonsbeeck. The title is a quote from Martin Luther King.

Oude Kerk isn't as large as Gothic cathedrals in France, but it has many Gothic elements, such as stained glass, pointed arches, thin columns, and it has this marvelous wooden ceiling that creates transcendent interior space. The stone floor of the church was covered with evenly spaced gold foil blankets that are

used to warm refugees as they emerge from the Mediterranean and other seas. It was a sunny day and the effect of the luminous gold with the light coming in from the windows was remarkable. It was a poignant piece at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe. This, to me, seems like an appropriate use of these age-old monumental buildings in the wake of waning Christianity in Europe.

(Playing: Instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod)

Credits:

Unboxing the Canon is hosted and produced by Linda Steer for her course “Introduction to the History of Western Art” in the Department of Visual Arts at Brock University. Brock University is located on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples.

Our sound designer and editor is Devin Dempsey, who is also reading these credits. Our logo was created by Cherie Michels. The music for this podcast has been adapted from “Night in Venice” and “Inspired” by Kevin MacLeod. Both are licensed under Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0.

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(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end).