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# *On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art*

(1947)

CRITICS of modern culture, for a hundred years already, have contrasted the place of art in our own society with its role in the Middle Ages. In the latter, they suppose, it was an essential part of social life, while today art is a "mere ornament," without utility or high spiritual ends. This judgment of the inorganic character of modern art rests on a narrow, simplified conception of the nature of art and of how art functions today. Lacking sympathy for modern art, these critics can hardly be expected to serve as guides to its qualities and aims. One could easily show that contemporary art, though unreligious—and precisely because unreligious—is bound up with modern experiences and ideals no less actively than the old art with the life of its time. This does not mean that if you admire modern works, you must also accept modern social institutions as good—much of the best art of our day is, on the contrary, strongly critical of contemporary life; in the same way, admiration of mediaeval art does not require that we accept feudalism as an ideal human order or the legends and dogmas represented in the church sculptures as true beliefs. What concerns us here, however, is not the defense of modern art, but rather the inquiry into the common view that mediaeval art was strictly religious and symbolical, submitted to collective aims, and wholly free from the aestheticism and individualism of our age. I shall try to show that by the eleventh and twelfth centuries there had emerged in western Europe within church art a new sphere of artistic creation without religious content and imbued with values of spontaneity, individual fantasy, delight in color and movement, and the expression of feeling that anticipate modern art. This new art, on the margins of the religious

work, was accompanied by a conscious taste of the spectators for the beauty of workmanship, materials, and artistic devices, apart from the religious meanings. That such attitudes and qualities existed in the Latin and vernacular poetry of that time is well known; the aestheticism of troubador poems does not have to be pointed out. But the parallel aims of the contemporary sculptors and painters are less familiar to students of the Middle Ages.

It is true, of course, that mediaeval art was closely connected with religion, and we must reject the idea that Christian art was simply secular art in the service of the church. That may hold of most religious art today, but in the Middle Ages it was in the projects of the church, and in the attempt to solve artistic problems arising from religious aims and viewpoints, that mediaeval artists created certain of their most original and imposing forms. Yet it must be said that within so highly organized an institution as mediaeval Christianity, it is often hard to distinguish between religious and secular aims. The church was not simply a religious organ, outside material affairs. It claimed a temporal power and was subject to all the solicitations of social and economic development and the changing forms of community life. As a great landholder possessing, it has been estimated, almost one-third of the landed property in France, the church exercised feudal authority over vassals and serfs, and its bishops carried arms, made war, and engaged openly in the political struggles of the time. Like the kings and nobles of the same feudal world, the high dignitaries of the church assumed a corresponding style of life, whatever their spiritual duties within the system of feudal relations.

On a lower social level, too, material conditions affected the established religious forms, either by provoking reactions against the power and corruptness of the clergy or by promoting new religious ideals more in accord with the needs of secular life. The urban development, the social relationships arising from the new strength of the merchants and artisans as a class, suggested new themes and outlooks to religious thought and thereby helped to transform religious art, even while the framework of Christianity remained broadly the same. Originating within these lower strata, the artists and often the lower clergy were more open to the secular currents of their time.

But the relationship of religion and art is independent of the question whether the artists themselves were laymen or monks. The style of Louis XV, in the wonderfully refined and elegant rococo objects of that manner, whether buildings, furniture, textiles, porcelain, or sculpture and painting, instantly conveys to us the quintessence of the aristocratic spirit of that moment; yet much of this was created by artisans who lived another life than their patrons and had other ideals. At least, it was not their own thoughts and outlook that they wished to express, but the



thoughts and outlook of the dominant group which could scarcely produce such works. In a similar way, the creation of mediaeval art did not require deeply religious artists, but rather artists who had been formed within a stable religious milieu, and whose craft had been developed in tasks set by the church. They grasped intuitively its requirements of expression and were selected accordingly by the bishops and abbots. Giotto, the author of a great cycle of Franciscan paintings in Florence, indeed the artist often admired (perhaps mistakenly) as the one who made the final and perfect statement of the Franciscan content, was critical of Franciscan ideals and the life of the order; the single literary work of his that has come down is an attack on the commitment to poverty. Hegel said very justly that in an age of piety one does not have to be religious in order to create a truly religious work of art, whereas today the most deeply pious artist is incapable of producing it. This discrepancy between the personal religious aim and the present condition of art was expressed in another way by Van Gogh, a man of passionate Christian insight, when he wrote that one could not paint the old religious subjects in an Impressionist style.

The widespread idea that mediaeval art was the work of monks or of profoundly religious lay artisans inspired by a humble attitude of selfless craftsmanship and service to the Church rests on the assumption that this art is through and through religious and that the people of the Middle Ages esteemed art only as it was useful, devotional, and directly imbued with spiritual conceptions in accord with the traditional teachings of the church. The monuments and the writings, especially of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, tell us otherwise.

In the buildings there is an enormous quantity of elements which, from a religious-didactic and structural viewpoint, are entirely useless. It would be unnecessary to labor this point, which is evident enough from the profusion of ornament in mediaeval churches. But the vicissitudes of taste and theory of art have blinded many students to the significance of all that decoration. Two centuries ago mediaeval architecture, and especially the Gothic, was judged to be inartistic because of the extraordinary caprice and irrationality of its forms, the multiplied details that could not be justified by any practical norm. A hundred years later, this view was converted into its opposite: Gothic was held up as the paragon of a completely functional art. In the opinion of the Catholic convert, Pugin, and the free-thinking rationalist architect, Viollet-le-Duc, every element in the stone fabric of the Gothic cathedral, even the ribs, shafts, moldings, pinnacles, gargoyles, crockets, etc., was structurally necessary. Gothic architecture thus became the model of a functional style and the notion that the greatest, most deeply stirring architecture created in the western world was of this kind helped to stimulate the growth of a modern secular style

closely allied to engineering, and of which two of the basic tenets were, remarkably enough, the elimination of all ornament and the abandonment of stone as a building material. Even the Catholic Church has been sympathetic to this new mode; a recent writer, a canon of the Church, has recommended the new architecture of reinforced concrete as most in accord with the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and as the only possible style for the Church today.[1]

Modern scientific study of construction has refuted that conception of Gothic. The inspired technological interpretation of Viollet-le-Duc now appears to be mechanically incorrect. The Gothic church does not form, as he supposed, an ideal system of equilibrium, in which the thrusts of self-adjusting vaults are transmitted by the ribs to the flying arches and thence to the outer buttresses which are poised through the weight of the pinnacles. The building is an aesthetic creation and certain parts once declared to be constructive are now seen to be expressive and ornamental.[2]

But even if his theory were acceptable for the core of the structure, there would remain in the mediaeval buildings much that could not be derived from constructive or religious intentions. A simple example is the variety of capitals in the Romanesque arcade. This is no "organic" variety, for the members can obviously be interchanged without affecting the stability or general appearance of the building. These varied members of a common series have identical functions. In a Greek temple, they would be undistinguishable, like the Doric columns or capitals of the Parthenon. But the Romanesque artist thought it better to individualize the parts, regardless of their functional identity. In certain works this variation seems to be occasioned by a didactic aim; the capitals are sculptured with different incidents from the life of Christ or the saints or the figures of the Old Testament. But only a small fraction of capitals are historiated, and such variety occurs still earlier in foliate and animal capitals and in regions, like Normandy and Belgium, where religious themes are rarely applied to these members.

The fact, moreover, that the variation often appears on bases and on the pillars themselves, and even on the barely visible modillions under the high cornices, shows how deeply rooted is this tendency of the artists which goes beyond the requirements of a fixed religious program of didactic or symbolic imagery.

It might be asked whether we do not exaggerate the aesthetic significance of such variation; perhaps it is simply a by-product of a piecemeal method of work, each mason or sculptor having particular capitals to carve in his own way, unconcerned with the total effect and unhampered by the paper designs of an architect regulating all the details in advance. Even then it would be significant to us as a fruitful instance of liberty of



individual conception such as we meet only rarely in the corresponding members in classical buildings; and we would ask in turn whether this is not also the training ground of the audacious authors of the great Romanesque tympana who were so original and personal in their designs. I shall cite, however, one text, among many, which conveys the enthusiasm of contemporaries for this kind of variation, their awareness of it as an aesthetic accomplishment pervading the whole of a work. It is a passage from a chronicle of the abbots of St. Trond, near Liège, and concerns the abbot Wiricus in 1169.

"So much care did the industrious architect devote to the decoration of the monastery that every one in our land agrees that it surpasses the most magnificent palaces by its varied workmanship (*operosa varietate*). Tastefully and artfully he inserted distinct alternating courses of white and black stone and beautified the entire structure of the chapel in an extraordinary manner on the interior and exterior by an original revêtment of black and speckled columns with finely polished bases and sculptured capitals of a wonderful variety. By the beauty of the work he gave immortality to the author of the enterprise."[3]

This variety occurs equally in an art that is no work of hired artisans, but a domestic product of the most pious groups, the illumination of religious manuscripts. Besides the miniatures which illustrate a religious text and in which we discern a connection with doctrine and rite, there are innumerable initials of a fantastic nature, elaborations which smother or lose the initial form in entanglements with a complex play of human figures, beasts, and vegetation, often aggressive and brutal and suggesting a masochistic preoccupation of the author. It is characteristic of this engrossing art that the ornament of the initial, proliferating freely, not only oversteps the boundaries of the letter, but also has in most cases no apparent connection with the meaning of the text. Here, as in the capitals in the buildings, the same element, an initial letter, assumes a different form and a different decorative filling, highly spontaneous, in each recurrent example.

Was this thought perhaps inspired by an underlying Christian conception of human individuality, expressed through the uniqueness of the forms of members in a common group?

It is an attractive idea, though difficult to test. But we are forced to reject or at least to qualify it because such individualization is rare or undeveloped in Christian architecture before the Romanesque period and is more marked in the Romanesque than in the Gothic style; it precedes by two centuries the scholastic ideas about form as a principle of individuation in living creatures. In the interiors of churches of the thirteenth century there is a greater uniformity of parts, an approach to the Renaissance, at the expense of that exuberant fantasy which delights us in

Romanesque art. If the fantasy persists in Gothic exteriors, these are more secular in spirit and are addressed to the outer world, to the man in the streets and the market square, the active civil community which was, I believe, the ultimate ground of the growth of individuality in the Middle Ages.

An important testimony of the twelfth century allows us to grasp the essentially aesthetic and secular moment in these Romanesque carvings and the individuation of members. It is the often-quoted diatribe of Saint Bernard against the Cluniac art of his time, in a letter to the abbot William of St. Thierry.

"In the cloister," he writes, "under the eyes of the brethren who read there, what profit is there in those ridiculous monsters, in that marvellous and deformed beauty, in that beautiful deformity? To what purpose are those unclean apes, those fierce lions, those monstrous centaurs, those half-men, those striped tigers, those fighting knights, those hunters winding their horns? Many bodies are there seen under one head, or again, many heads to a single body. Here is a four-footed beast with a serpent's tail; there, a fish with a beast's head. Here again the forepart of a horse trails half a goat behind it, or a horned beast bears the hind-quarters of a horse. In short, so many and so marvellous are the varieties of shapes on every hand, that we are more tempted to read in the marble than in our books, and to spend the whole day wondering at these things rather than in meditating the law of God. For God's sake, if men are not ashamed of these follies, why at least do they not shrink from the expense?"[4]

The whole of this letter calls for a careful study; every sentence is charged with meanings that open up perspectives of the Romanesque world. We can consider here only a few points that belong more intimately to this paper.

It should be noted first of all that in his powerful criticism of the cloister sculptures, Bernard does not attack religious art, but profane images of an unbridled, often irrational fantasy, themes of force in which he admits only a satisfaction of idle curiosity. He cannot be answered by the argument of iconodules that man as an imperfect creature requires the tangible image of Christ and the saints in order to reach them in spirit. These cloister sculptures are wholly without didactic meaning or religious symbolism. If the physically demonic is an essential part of their repertoire, the monsters are not regarded by Bernard as symbols of evil; nor is there reason to suppose that the sculptors conceived them deliberately as such.

On the contrary, the new art is condemned precisely because it is unreligious and an example of a pagan life-attitude which will ultimately compete with the Christian, an attitude of spontaneous enjoyment and curiosity about the world, expressed through images that stir the senses



and the profane imagination. This artistic tendency was latent even among the Cistercians in the heroic period of the foundation of the order, when it was most subject to the double discipline of ascetic piety and hard work. We can understand that the monks and lay brethren who were active in draining swamps, clearing forests, and building dams, and who wrote admiringly of their great technical enterprises, their canals and water-power, should despise the useless arts of decoration. Hence the puritanical tone, both moralizing and functionalist, in Bernard's letter which terminates with regrets for the vain expense of labor and gold. Yet in one of the earliest monuments of Cistercian art, made in the decade before Bernard's spiritual influence, the great manuscript of the Homilies of Gregory on Job in the library of Dijon, the initial letters are painted with remarkable images of everyday life, the monks at work, cutting trees, threshing wheat, preparing wool, etc., but also with a wild involvement of monstrous aggressive beasts and human figures that would surely have aroused the indignation of the saint.[5] These spirited, fascinating pictures, entirely independent of the accompanying text, are astoundingly modern in their freedom of conception and precise drawing, rich in finely observed details, perhaps the first observations of their kind in mediaeval art. It is the appeal of such works that Bernard and the later Cistercians condemned as "curiosity."

"Curiositates" and "curiosum" are most frequent terms in the polemic against art at this time; they recur in the Rules of the Cistercians and Carthusians, and in the next century among the Dominicans and Franciscans, with a monotonous regularity.[6] These criticisms and prohibitions, which were enforced by inspectors who were empowered to remove the offending works from the churches and the buildings of the monks, give us to understand what such images meant to the contemporaries who enjoyed them. Sometimes the monks resisted the condemnation of these objects; in the abbey of Vicogne, near Valenciennes, they defended their paintings with some violence and the visits of inspection had to be dropped.[7] In a litany of the arts in the famous dialogue with a Cluniac monk, the Cistercian says, "Beautiful pictures, varied sculptures, both adorned with gold, beautiful and precious cloths, beautiful weavings of varied color, beautiful and precious windows, sapphire glass, gold-embroidered copes and chasubles, golden and jeweled chalices, gold letters in books: all these are not required for practical needs, but for the concupiscence of the eyes."[8]

Bernard concedes at one point in his letter that the beauties of art might be justified in the cathedrals if not in the monasteries, since they served to attract the people whose devotion is excited more by material than by spiritual ornaments. But even this concession will not stand. The beautiful objects, wherever found in a church, are finally a distraction

from worship and an un-Christian indulgence and extravagance. "They attract the worshipper's gaze and hinder his attention. . . . They are admired more than holiness is venerated. . . . The funds for the needy are consumed for the pleasure of the eyes of the rich. The curious find things to amuse them, but the poor find no relief."

Bernard is aware also of the sacred and didactic aspect of the imagery of the church, but with cunning rhetoric he observes it overtly only in the pavements where holy figures are trodden under foot. "Often they spit on the face of an angel, often the passers-by step on the faces of saints. If you do not spare these sacred images, why not at least spare the precious colors? Why beautify what must soon be fouled? Why decorate what will have to be stepped on? Of what good are these beautiful forms in places where they are continually spoiled by dirt?"

A surprising solicitude for the arts in a monk who, in his own words, has abandoned all the beauties and delights of the senses for the sake of Christ and regards them as dung.

Yet, recalling the monstrous sculptures of the cloisters, we are impressed by the fact that although Bernard condemns these works as meaningless and wasteful, he has written so vivid an inventory of their subjects and characterized them with such precision; every theme he mentions may be found in surviving Romanesque churches and cloisters. The saint has perused these capitals no less attentively than have the monks whom he reproaches for meditating the sculptures instead of the Bible or the Fathers. Only a mind deeply drawn to such things could recall them so fully; and only a mind with some affinity to their forms could apply to these carvings the paradoxical phrase: "that marvellous deformed beauty, that beautiful deformity (*mira quaedam deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas*)," which resembles in its chiasmic, antithetic pattern a typical design of Romanesque art.[9] The concept of a beautiful deformity reminds one of the unclassical aesthetics of the nineteenth century, of Baudelaire and Rodin; but this juggling phrase should not be interpreted in a modern sense or even as an attempt of Bernard to define a Romanesque aesthetic. More likely, it is a justification of Bernard's hostility to these works as belonging to an inferior order of the beautiful and reproduces a thought of his beloved Augustine that "there is a beauty of form in all creatures, but in comparison with the beauty of man, the beauty of the ape is called deformity."[10] This reminiscence of the early father accounts, perhaps, for the inception of Bernard's list of the cloister sculptures with "the unclean apes."

No doubt Bernard was intensely fascinated by these useless and spiritually dangerous works. Ordinarily he turned his eyes away from the distractions of art and could not remember the simplest details of his surroundings. His biographer records some examples of that remarkable indifference. "He had spent a whole year in a novice's cell without knowing, when he left, whether the house had a vaulted ceiling. He had often frequented the church, going in and out, and yet he supposed that there was but one window in the chevet, which really had three. Having mortified his sense of curiosity, he had no perceptions of this kind; or, if by chance he happened to see something, his memory, occupied with other things, did not advert to it. . . ."[11]



He remembered, however, with a surprising fullness, the details of cloister decoration. We may interpret this psychologically by supposing that Bernard responded with excitement to images of living creatures as kindred to his own feelings, but was cold to the lifeless geometrical forms of windows and vaults. This would agree with his hostility to the dialectic of Abelard and to all systematic theologizing of faith. He is a man of passion rather than reason who transposes an enormous energy of desire into love of Christ and his virgin mother. When he attacks the art of the cloisters, he is reacting against the concupiscence of his own eyes and the irrationality of his own impulses. Bernard's writings are rich in figures of movement and life; he appeals constantly to metaphors of sensory delight for religious expression: "Jesus is honey on my lips, melody in my ears, jubilation in my heart."[12] He loves striking contrasts, violent and astounding oppositions, the monstrous-grotesque, the antithetic and inverted. Thinking of his double life as monk and statesman of Christendom, he called himself: "the chimera of my age."[13] The great heretic, Arnold of Brescia, he characterized with the fantasy of a Romanesque *imagier*: "head of a dove, tail of a scorpion."[14] And when he had to speak of his own religious order, he imagined the Cistercians as acrobats and jongleurs of the spirit who provide a most beautiful spectacle to the angels, although they incur the contempt of the proud and worldly. "All that they [*i.e.*, the worldly] desire, we, on the contrary flee, and that which they flee, we desire, like those jugglers and dancers, who, with head down and feet up, in an inhuman fashion, stand or walk on their hands and attract the eyes of everyone."[15]

This is an authentic image from Romanesque art. How often on the portals of southern and western France are there carved just such figures juxtaposed to holy personages—acrobats and dancers among fantastic beasts! They occur in liturgical manuscripts too, in tropers and breviaries, and in other religious books.[16] The elders of the Apocalypse who appear beside them with their viols or zithers acquire from this proximity a profane connotation; we are led to wonder if they too have not been chosen because of their appeal as virtuosi of music.

The sculptures that Bernard denounced so fervently, unrolling their vanity and monstrousness, are a considerable field of Romanesque art. What he rejects is no particular work or school, but a widespread, essential tendency manifest in thousands of examples that still survive. At one time, scholars thought to win these sculptures for the unity of religious

rt by discerning a hidden theological or moral symbolism in their grotesque, profane types. Bernard's letter discredits such an approach, although in certain works the context allows us to suppose that they were conceived in a symbolic mode. But is it right to call the others "purely decorative" because they have no religious sense? Are the religious and the ornamental the only alternatives of artistic purpose? Apart from the elements of folklore and popular belief in some of these fantastic types, they are a world of projected emotions, psychologically significant images of force, play, aggressiveness, anxiety, self-torment and fear, embodied in the powerful forms of instinct-driven creatures, twisted, struggling, entangled, confronted, and superposed. Unlike the religious symbols, they are submitted to no fixed teaching or body of doctrine. We cannot imagine that they were commissioned by an abbot or bishop as part of a didactic program. They invite no systematic intellectual apprehension, but are grasped as individual, often irrational fantasies, as single thoughts and sensations. These grotesques and animal combats stand midway between ancient and modern art in their individualized, yet marginal character, as feudalism occupies a place between ancient and modern society. The Romanesque initial or capital does not exist fully in itself, like a modern work; it belongs to a larger whole of the building or the book. But neither is it rigidly subservient in meaning or form to the whole of which it is a part, like old Asiatic and Greek ornament. The initial is often unframed or breaks through its frame and encroaches on the adjacent parts. Itself a part, it has a special, pronounced physiognomic and completeness, its own axis and expression.

Very little that is comparable to this aspect of Romanesque art exists in the Byzantine Church. A letter like Bernard's is inconceivable in the East. And the fact of this difference illuminates the western peculiarity and development. Imagery has a different status in the two Christianities: in Byzantium, created for worship, whether defined as veneration or homage; in the West, since the Libri Carolini, officially restricted to decoration and instruction, whatever the popular or clerical trends toward an image-cult. Hence the church imagery in the East can hardly admit types which are so secular in spirit; the image as such is already an object of cult and is therefore submitted more stringently to tradition and dogma than in the West, where the image is in principle equally an object of decoration. But the positive content acquired by the "decorative" in the West cannot be deduced directly from religious problems and needs. The everyday profane world has its say here, and its evolution in the course of the Middle Ages toward an urban secular spirit and individuality penetrates the monasteries and churches, which are parts, and often most active ones, of this great development.

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If Bernard's letter is a negative testimony of Romanesque aesthetic, there is also a body of contemporary statements which express the positive reactions to art in this time. We should not expect, of course, an aesthetic literature like our own in the twelfth century; art had not yet become a central sphere of culture or way of life through which men as lay personalities might freely shape their ideals and intuitions of things. The statement of individual response to art and the reflection on its aesthetic were still unproblematic, incidental, and summary. But we encounter in scattered passages in chronicles, biographies, letters, and sermons—sometimes pieces of considerable length—expressions of admiration and even of aesthetic insight that surprise us by their resemblance to the more developed critical awareness of later periods when art criticism and the theory and history of art have emerged as distinct fields. The random texts of this kind have never been excerpted and collected as a group; these reactions to art in the Middle Ages have still to be investigated with the same care as the documents of the feeling for nature. I can cite only a few of the passages that I have come upon by chance or have found in the collections of texts made for other purposes, like Mortet's *Recueil* for the history of mediaeval architecture in France. Contrary to the general belief that in the Middle Ages the work of art was considered mainly as a vehicle of religious teaching or as a piece of craftsmanship serving a useful end, and that beauty of form and color was no object of contemplation in itself, these texts abound in aesthetic judgments and in statements about the qualities and structure of the work. They speak of the fascination of the image, its marvellous likeness to physical reality, and the artist's wonderful skill, often in complete abstraction from the content of the object of art. There is, no doubt, a strong current of aestheticism in the culture of the twelfth century, flowing through different fields, the plastic arts no less than the Latin and vernacular poetry. It affects the forms of religious life in ritual, costume, and music, as well as church building and decoration. The moralists and chroniclers of this period, especially in England and France, have much to say about the elaborateness of dress and the new self-consciousness concerning the aesthetics of the clothed body.

A text of that time offers a remarkable evidence of this sensibility to forms and colors as values in themselves. It is the account written toward 1175 by Reginald, a monk of Durham, of the translation of the remains of St. Cuthbert into the new cathedral in the year 1104, and was evidently based on the testimony of an eye-witness.[17] The body of the saint was wrapped in decorated textiles which evoked the highest enthusiasm of the writer. To the description of these ancient objects belonging to another age and culture than his own he devotes a discerning, warm, and personal appreciation beyond the necessities of the religious record. He admires the ornament, the animal images, the color, and the workman-

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A text of that time offers a remarkable evidence of this sensibility to forms and colors as values in themselves. It is the account written toward 1175 by Reginald, a monk of Durham, of the translation of the remains of St. Cuthbert into the new cathedral in the year 1104, and was evidently based on the testimony of an eye-witness.[17] The body of the saint was wrapped in decorated textiles which evoked the highest enthusiasm of the writer. To the description of these ancient objects belonging to another age and culture than his own he devotes a discerning, warm, and personal appreciation beyond the necessities of the religious record. He admires the ornament, the animal images, the color, and the workman-

ship, even the texture of the materials, for their own sake, without inquiring into their possible symbolism; they are splendid artistically and therefore worth this extended notice.

". . . He was clad in tunic and dalmatic, in the manner of Christian bishops. The style of both of these, with their precious purple color and varied weave, is most beautiful and admirable. The dalmatic, which as the outer robe is the more visible, offers a reddish purple tone, quite unknown in our time even to connoisseurs. It still retains the bloom of its original freshness and beauty throughout, and when handled it makes a kind of crackling sound because of the solidity and compactness of the fine, skilful weaving. The most subtle figures of flowers and little beasts, very minute in both workmanship and design, are interwoven in this fabric. For decorative beauty its appearance is varied by contrasted sprinklings of rather uncertain color that proves to be yellow. The charm of this variation comes out most beautifully in the purple cloth, and fresh contrasts are produced by the play of scattered spots. The random infusion of yellow color seems to have been laid down drop by drop; by virtue of this yellow the reddish tonality in the purple is made to shine with more vigor and brilliance. . . .

"Above the dalmatic the holy body is covered with other precious silks of an unfamiliar style. Over these was placed a sheet about nine cubits long and three and a half in width, in which the whole collection of sacred relics had been most reverently wrapped. On one side were long fringes of linen thread the length of a finger; for the sheet itself was undoubtedly linen. But all round the edges of this rectangular sheet the weaver had ingeniously worked a border an inch in breadth. On this material may be seen a most subtle relief standing out in considerable elevation from the linen warp and bearing the forms of birds and beasts, inserted somehow into the border. Yet between every two pairs of birds and beasts there emerges a certain definite pattern, like some leafy tree, which here and there separates these motifs and isolates them distinctly. The figure of the tree is finely drawn and appears to bud forth its leaves, however tiny, on both sides. Under them, in the bounding adjacent row, arise again figures of animals woven in relief; and both patterns stand out in high relief in the same way up to the very edges of the robe throughout the entire border."

What a surprise to come upon these observations on the nuancing and mutual effect of colors in a writing of the twelfth century! And this desire for exactness in describing the structure of a decorative pattern! It makes us think of the preeminence of the English literature on ornament at the end of the nineteenth century. The same Reginald has still other acute remarks on the objects of art in Cuthbert's tomb. I cite only one which is interesting as a rare instance of an empirical aesthetic statement about proportions.



Of an ivory comb of great antiquity he observes that its size is "finely proportioned to the breadth, for the length is almost equal to the breadth, except that for artistic effect the one differs a little from the other"[18]—a judgment of the deliberate and necessary deviation from a perfect square that is often made by modern painters and designers.

What is so remarkable in these texts is not the admiration for the beautiful objects—this is often a primitive taste for the rare and costly, the golden and jeweled—but the keen observation of the work itself, the effort to read the forms and colors and to weigh their effects.

Parallel to this objective attitude are statements about the observer himself as a responding sensibility. They do not inform us about the deeper content of fantasy or feeling provoked by the contemplation of art, but they convey the spectator's excitement and fascination as an experience of its own kind, sometimes so intense as to recall descriptions of religious ecstasy.

There is such a document in the history of the bishops of Le Mans in an extended account of the constructions of the bishop William in his episcopal manor toward 1158. He built himself a private chamber, finely illuminated by windows of which "the workmanship surpassed the quality of the materials; their execution and the arrangement of the room were a proof of the artist's ingenuity which they reflected in a beautiful and subtle way. Next to this room and continuous with it he constructed a chapel; and if this chapel was beautifully resplendent as a work of architecture, the pictures painted on its walls, conforming expressly, with an admirable skill, to the appearances of living creatures, held enrapt not only the eyes of the spectators, but also their minds, and so attracted their attention that in their delight with the images they forgot their own business; those for whom tasks were waiting, were so entranced by the paintings that they seemed almost idlers. On a third site, beside the chapel, he built a chamber of which the entire composition (and especially the windows) was so beautiful that it seemed to have been designed by a more skillful artist than the other two constructions; or one might suppose that the same artist had surpassed himself in this new work. Moreover, below, on the sites of houses that he had purchased, the bishop set out a garden with exotic fruit trees; they were also beautiful to the eye, so that men looking out from the windows of the building and others standing in the garden might delight in the mutual aspect, those in the building enjoying the beauty of the trees, those in the garden, the view of the beauty of the windows."[19]

This text is one of the most precious we have. It combines in a single description so many sides of the experience of art in that time: the appreciation of the architect and his craft, the love of light and of fine fenestration, the response to painting as a rapture that takes the beholder away

from his normal cares; finally, the deliberate planning of views in buildings and gardens for the eye's delight. All these are common interests in the twelfth century and can be documented by other texts. There is the famous account of his new church of St. Denis by Suger, in which the abbot proudly tells how the enchantment of the beautiful building, with its incomparable treasure of precious stones, disposes him to a high mood of spiritual contemplation.[20] But more often the experience of the decoration of the church is described as a pure ecstasy without religious content or consequence. An English writer, William of Malmesbury, employs as a formula of artistic power this rapture of the eyes and heart. "In the multicolored paintings an admirable art ravished the heart by the alluring splendor of the colors and drew all eyes to the ceilings by the charm of its beauty."[21] That is how he conveys the effect of the pictures in Lanfranc's new cathedral of Canterbury; the language reminds us of a great modern critic, Fromentin, on a painting by Rubens: "Elle charme l'esprit, parce qu'elle ravit les yeux; pour un peintre, la peinture est sans prix." But in the same passage, William, speaking of the other half of the ornaments of the cathedral, the cloths and sacred vestments, knows only the skill of the craftsmen, "surpassing the preciousness of the materials" —a distinction which anticipates the future divergence of the status of artisanship and fine art.

But whether paintings or jewels or textiles, they call out alike the same admiration for their surface qualities. In these statements of the twelfth century we are struck by the intense enthusiasm for color, light, lustrousness, and rich contrast, an enthusiasm incredible today, since the old buildings have lost, for the most part, the objects that evoked this sentiment. The great treasures of gold and silver vessels, often jeweled, the glowing windows and the deeply colored textiles that hung from the walls, have disappeared; for us the art of that time emerges chiefly in the naked stone and its carvings. When William of Malmesbury describes the church of Rochester, the stone pillars and walls fall away; we see only a blaze of colored lights. The bishop Ernulf, he says, rebuilt the church "with such splendor that nothing like it could be seen in England for the luminosity of the glass windows, the glistening marble pavement, the multicolored pictures."[22] In similar terms, another monk of Malmesbury, in a poem on the abbot Faricius of Abingdon, praises the radiance of his new building:

> He transferred to the inside all the church's splendor;
> The pomp of beauty glistens throughout the golden ceilings;
> Metallic shell, gemmed fabric, inspiring wonder.[23]

Without these texts, we could scarcely conceive the original quality of the buildings and the dazzling spectacle that the church offered to the



eyes of the people. The aesthetic appeal of the precious substances of high reflecting power or translucence is something elementary and instantaneous and, for the naive beholder, independent of spiritualistic notions on the affinities of light and the divine nature. The secular rulers of the Middle Ages, whether in the West or in Byzantium, in the Christian world or the Moslem, never failed to exploit this attractive power of gold and jewels in order to overwhelm the rustic and provincial or the foreign envoys. The church aspired to be a model of the divine palace, the heavenly Jerusalem, which mediaeval poets saw as an architecture of gold and jewels.[24]

There were other visions of the church beside this one of jewels and light. Certain minds, disposed to hidden meanings and symbolism, interpreted every part of the building in a mystical or allegorical sense. But the greater mass of statements about new churches by chroniclers, travelers, and hagiographers is free from such interpretation. Instead, they dwell on the beautiful construction, the preciousness of the materials, the decorative carvings, the wonderful lifelikeness and variety of the images. The same terms: *pulcherrimum, subtilissimum, splendidum, mirum, mirificum, decus*, recur throughout this literature in the mention of buildings. There is, however, also a perception of form by writers of a more modern sensibility to architecture, who feel the space and proportions and the beauty of the masonry. The author of the Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago concludes his detailed account of the interior structure of the church of Compostela with these words: "In this church you will find no crack or defect. It is marvellously wrought. Large, spacious, clear, suitable in size, well-proportioned in breadth, length and height, it is considered a wonderful and ineffable work, which is even built in two storeys, like a royal palace. Whoever walks through the upper galleries, if sad when he ascended, becomes happy and joyful at the sight of the exceeding beauty of the temple."[25]

The effect of architectural beauty upon feeling, its refreshment of the eye and the spirit, is more commonly noted in descriptions of refectories, chapter-houses, and the private chambers of bishops and abbots, that is, in buildings not destined for worship. I mentioned before an example in the manorial buildings of the bishop of Le Mans. There is another in the history of the abbots of St. Trond which was quoted earlier in this article. "The abbot built a very beautiful room where the provost of the church enjoyed himself in the company of his friends and where he reckoned the budget for the brothers of the monastery. Above it, the abbot laid the foundations for a higher building where he himself was to dwell and to rest; and putting his whole mind to the job, he gave distinction to this house by its wonderfully fine workmanship. For he constructed in it large and airy windows that provided a long vista to anyone standing in the

house, and offered to the beholder's eyes a full view of almost half the city. And this building, which was completely and marvellously perfected by the architect's ingenious art, he enhanced further with a fireplace and a system of water supply flowing through the middle of the chamber."[26] The combination of advanced equipment, comfort, beauty, and the delights of air and outdoor perspectives is scarely monastic in spirit; it pertains to secular architecture in the modern sense and entails a new aesthetic viewpoint.

A century later, the author of the history of the abbots of Auxerre justified this extravagance by its contribution to human well-being. "Since the joyous beauty of buildings sustains and refreshes the bodies of men and delights and comforts the heart, the abbot John built in the monastery for himself and his successors a most beautiful hall with galleries above the court. From it one can see the entrances of the abbey and almost all its buildings and enjoy the loveliness of the atmosphere."[27]

Writers of the twelfth century condemned such constructions as an un-Christian luxury and display. Hugo of Fouilloi singled out in his criticism the bedroom of a bishop with paintings of pagan themes, the Homeric tales and classic myths.[28] The perfection of these buildings was not for the glory of God, nor was it required by the functions of the church. The chronicler of St. Bertin, writing toward 1180, makes this unequivocally clear; of a new refectory in his abbey he says: "It is like a mirror and an ornament, yet considering its great cost, it is more beautiful than useful."[29]

* * *

Nothing in our culture has seemed to its critics so evident a sign of decadence as the taste of artists for works of different times and places and the miscellaneous collecting of objects of many styles. Both have been contrasted with the closed character of mediaeval taste, which was free from exoticism. Yet there is in western art from the seventh to the thirteenth century an immense receptivity matched in few cultures before that time or even later; early Christian, Byzantine, Sassanian, Coptic, Syrian, Roman, Moslem, Celtic, and pagan Germanic forms were borrowed then, often without regard to their context and meaning. A great part of research has been occupied with this process of incorporation of foreign motifs in mediaeval art; it is too well known to require an extensive list of examples. But I shall cite two striking signs of the prevalent curiosity about non-Christian arts. One is the taste for classical gems, of which many have been preserved in mediaeval church treasures and on reliquaries and the covers of liturgical manuscripts. The abbot or craftsman who inserted an antique engraved jewel in a sacred object rarely asked what the carving meant; it was enough that the stone was precious,



that it sparkled wonderfully with luminous color and was cut in a mysterious way on an incredibly minute scale to represent with exactness the form of a beautiful human being, whatever its pagan significance. If the figure suggested a Christian type, so much the better; but this was an exceptional, fortunate chance.[30]

The second evidence is the frequent practice of western artists—in stone, wood, enamel, and paint—to reproduce bits of Arabic writing as an ornament on the borders of their own works, without consulting the possibly un-Christian sense of these inscriptions. They were excerpted from Moslem objects, mainly textiles and ivories, on which the Cufic letters form either an inscribed text, often with invocations of Allah, or a stylized, repeated pattern of the *lam* and *alif* of the holy name. Such pseudo-Cufic writing occurs on the impost of a capital in the cloister of Moissac, on a wooden door of a church in Le Puy, and in the Beatus manuscript from St. Sever.

Not only small details, but complete objects of Saracenic origin were adopted for Christian works at a time when the two peoples were bitter enemies. In the *Liber Miraculorum Sanctae Fidis* it is told that the local count, Raymond II of Rouergue (961–1010), presented to the monks of Ste. Foy in Conques a Saracen saddle which was admired as a work of incomparable fineness. According to the contemporary author, no native goldsmith could equal it in skill and knowledge; it was incorporated in its totality (*salva integritate*) in a silver cross for the church,[31] like the ancient engraved gems of which I have spoken.

The same admiration for the Moslem's art obtained among the Byzantines, who also reproduced as ornament the forms of Cufic writing. The booty brought from conquered Crete to the imperial capital in the tenth century, the textiles and precious objects displayed in triumph, were praised as marvels of the highest art by the Greek chronicler.[32]

This is a common sentiment among the mediaevals in face with the workmanship of neighboring and distant peoples. Reading such texts, we are less astounded by Dürer's admiration for the primitive American objects that he saw in Antwerp in 1520.[33] The treasures of the great churches were once immensely rich in accumulations of exotic handicraft, like the cabinets of modern collectors.

The literature of the twelfth century also abounds in passages concerning the beauty and artistic superiority of the older native arts, of styles which had long before been replaced. The text of Reginald of Durham concerning the vestments of Saint Cuthbert is an example. Equally interesting is his appreciation of the wooden coffin of the saint, a work that modern students believe to be of the end of the seventh century; it is decorated with incised forms of a style much less cultivated than the art of Reginald's time. Seeing its surface of black oak, he speculates whether

this blackness is due to age or to artifice or is the natural color of the wood. But concerning the quality of the carvings he has no doubts; they are of a minute and subtle workmanship that fills him with amazement and that he can hardly credit to the knowledge or skill of the artist.[34]

In his readiness to admire the ancient objects, there is surely an element of religious feeling. Everything that belongs to the venerated relics —the wrappings, the coffin, the metal objects—is touched with the virtue of the saint, which manifests itself in these material things in their beauty of substance, their artifice and patterns. We detect also an antiquarian piety, an absorbing interest in the fact of antiquity itself, which is shown in the repeated observations on the evidences of time, the changes effected by the passage of the centuries. On the ivory comb he remarks that "its natural appearance of white bone is changed by its great age into a reddish tint."[35] But the inclination to exalt the secondary human works that have enclosed or accompanied the sacred body remains an example of the aesthetic viewpoint we are considering, for it is applied to ornament, artistic skill, and imagination. The author of the description of the coffin ignores the content of the images; he does not even record the incised Latin names; the forms and surfaces impress him more than the meaning of the religious figures which are still visible in the wood today.

A similar attitude appears in judgments of old architecture, even of the pagans. Remains of classical antiquity were standing throughout western Europe in greater number than today, and Christians of the twelfth century could hardly be indifferent to them. By their strange unused presence they invited fantastic interpretation, taking their place in the web of folklore and magical belief, or they evoked the curiosity and admiration of artists who saw in these works the hand of the craftsman and the force of a powerful will. The same William of Malmesbury described "the wonderful constructions of the Romans" in the ruined walls of York, and he remembered in Carlisle "a triclinium vaulted in stone, which had never been shaken by any storm." Of the finely preserved buildings at Hexham, he wrote that there was nothing comparable on this side of the Alps; "those coming from Rome, who see Hexham, swear that they see the walls of Rome."[36]

The small objects of Roman art excavated from time to time called out a similar emotion. The chronicle of St. Peter's at Oudenburg, near Bruges, composed toward 1084, speaking of the fortifications of the abbey built of materials from different sites, including Roman remains from the region of Cologne, remarks on the ancient objects discovered in these classic sites: "Very beautiful and shapely vases, cups, dishes and other utensils, cleverly fashioned and sculptured by the ancients, have been found there recently; these could scarcely be formed and sculptured so elegantly today by clever artists in gold and silver."[37]



By this time, the sculptors were beginning to copy details of classic ornament and to observe the pagan statues as models for their own art. They were preceded by the writers who studied Ovid and Virgil as masters for imitation in poems of a profane content, and read the Roman theoreticians of prose and verse for rules of art.

This is not the place to consider the deeper reasons for the responsiveness to classic art. It is enough perhaps to say that if in the ninth century it was promoted by the political aims of the northern rulers who wished to assume the role of the Roman emperors, and if in later centuries the consciousness of Roman antiquity was intensified by the ambitions of empire, the conflicts between papacy and state, and by the strivings for a secular culture in the growing urban society, the interest in the ancient remains supported an aesthetic attitude. During the Romanesque period a distinction was already made between the worth of a pagan sculpture as a finely proportioned object with intrinsic aesthetic value, and its unacceptable religious sense. The French abbot, Guibert of Nogent (1053–1124), could write then in his autobiography: "We praise the rightness of proportion in an idol of any material, and although, where faith is concerned, an idol is called a thing of naught by the apostle (I Cor., viii, 4), nor could anything be imagined more profane, yet the true modeling of its members is not unreasonably commended."[38] A contemporary bishop, Hildebert of Le Mans, regretting the ruins of pagan Rome, expressed the same judgment with less reservation:

> What faces have these divinities! They are worshipped rather for
> Their makers' skill than for their godliness.[39]

Dante, in describing the region of the Proud in Purgatory (Canto X), conceives of the sinners and their punishment in an elaborate and beautiful artistic metaphor, in which the contrasts of mediaeval and classical styles and the various levels of reality in art and nature supply the terms. He beholds first a bank of pure white marble adorned with sculptures "which put to shame not only Polykleitos, but nature itself." These sculptures are of ideal figures of Humility, beginning with the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation; "the angel before us appeared so veraciously carved there in gentle mien that it seemed not an image which is dumb." Dante was aware, no doubt, of the ancient definition of sculpture as a mute poetry, but he plays here also on the theme of the speaking angel rendered in stone. This marvellous power of representation of reality is then discovered in a still more amazing form in the singing choir in a relief of King David humbly dancing before the Ark; this sculpture, addressed to both ear and eye, made the first say, "no," the other, "yes, they do sing." Dante comes then to the proud who, in contrast to the humble with their ideal forms and harmonious erect postures like beautiful classic statues,

are described as uncertain, bent, agonizing creatures, struggling to support great burdens of stone. They recall to him in their unhappy servitude the crouching corbel figures in mediaeval churches who carry a ceiling or roof, joining knees to breast in a posture which "though unreal begets real discomfort in him who sees it."[40]

This original expression of insight into opposed styles has its forerunners in the twelfth century, although none approaches the depth of Dante. Confronted by the surviving works of different lands and ages in literature and art and occupied constantly with tradition, good minds were bound to observe the varying styles and to reflect upon them. The chronicler speaks of a church as being in the Roman or the native mode. The novelty of style of building in the historically crucial moments of architectual invention was often remarked.

William of Malmesbury, discussing the works of Aldhelm who wrote in a precious, ornate style some four hundred years before, defends his admiration for his hero by reminding the importunate, but ignorant critics that "the styles of writing vary according to the customs of peoples. For the Greeks are wont to write in an involved way, the Romans with splendor, the English pompously. . . ." But Aldhelm knows how to unite all these: "if you read him thoroughly, you will think him a Greek for his acumen, you will swear he is a Roman for his brilliance, you will know he is English from his pomp."[41]

Through such comparisons and the experiences of taste in different lands, mediaeval writers came to recognize the relative aspect of aesthetic judgments, even if they admitted that the beautiful resides in properties of the admired object. The philosopher and physicist Witelo, who traveled much and was interested in the sciences of several peoples, Arabs, Greeks, and his European contemporaries, could not help remarking the variations of taste. His aesthetics, sometimes quoted as an evidence of the ideas and tastes of the Christian West in the thirteenth century, is for the most part a literal translation of an earlier writer, Alhazen. But after repeating the Arabic scholar's examples of particular beautiful objects and appearances (the heavenly bodies, almond-shaped eyes, the sphere and the cylinder, a green meadow, the textures of various cloths, the symmetry and variety of the human form, distant views), he adds that custom and personal inclination affect aesthetic judgment: Moors and Danes prefer other colorings and proportions of the human body and the German taste lies between theirs.[42] Yet, just as the West, divided into opposing philosophical camps, could appreciate the philosophies of Arabs, Jews, and ancient Greeks in which might be found solutions of problems actual to mediaeval European thought, so foreign artistic forms were judged and adopted with a considerable latitude.[43]

By the twelfth century historians were concerned enough with the differences between various periods in their arts to specify them concretely through comparison of corresponding parts of works of the same type, much as a modern student of art. Gervase of Canterbury, in his unusually full account of the building of the new cathedral of Canterbury after 1175, not only reports the progress of the work step by step, the decisions and plans and method of construction, but he enters into a lengthy description of the previous buildings, the Saxon church which he knew only from old accounts and perhaps a drawn plan, the Romanesque church of Lanfranc and his successor which he had seen himself; the latter especially he compares with the new structure in plan, proportions, vaulting, and decoration in a manner which surprises us by its anticipation of the modern literature on mediaeval building.[44] He avows that such a verbal account, addressed to the mind, is less clear and less delectable than would be a direct experience of the forms. But he writes "in order that the difference between the new building and the old might be recognized," although the latter has been destroyed. And he describes the earlier choir of Conrad to preserve "the memory of so great a man and so splendid a work."



Gervase's account appeals to us most of all, however, because it is the first report of a mediaeval building in which the architect appears as a living power, a creative personality whose existence is fatefully bound up with his work. In the earlier narratives of building enterprise the abbot or bishop was the hero. The monks of Canterbury invite architects from England and France to submit their ideas for the repair of the church which has been ruined by fire. These architects disagree, and the monks despair of seeing the church reconstructed during their own lifetime by any human skill. They choose finally a foreigner, the Frenchman William of Sens. He has carefully examined the ruined building in the company of the monks, and with great astuteness, by his tact and long silence and by his cogent reasoning, he has won the monks to his plan. He is a man of extraordinary ability, energetic and ingenious, gifted as designer, organizer, and craftsman. He makes drawings or models for the stone cutters to follow; he prepares a program for successive stages of the building campaign; he moves about on the high scaffold supervising the great enterprise. And one day he falls and is grievously hurt. He tries to continue the supervision from his bed, directing the work through a young monk whom he has chosen for his industry and intelligence. But this is too difficult. The local doctors are unable to help him. He returns to France a sick man, and his role is given to another William.

From this early account of an architect at work one fact is important to retain for the understanding of the growth of an autonomous artistic taste: a foreigner was called to design the most important cathedral in England, the seat of the primate of the country. Sometimes artists were

lacking in a town or region and one had to look for them abroad. Seventy-five years before, Hildebert of Le Mans wrote to the English king for artists he could not find at home.[45] But this was hardly the case in Canterbury in 1175. Then it was a sign rather that architecture was an art of invention and individual power, and not simply a craft with fixed rules of practice. In spite of the local schools and traditions and the barriers created by language, customs, and the relative isolation of communities in feudal society, the universal character of art was sufficiently recognized to permit such invitation of foreigners in great domestic projects of building, and even the competitive selection of an architect. Building workers, sculptors, craftsmen were accustomed then to long journeys and carried their observations and inventions with them, helping in this way to diffuse styles from one region to another on their route. The authorities charged with the task of rebuilding, the men who originated the projects, accepted the work of foreigners and even solicited their help. Every student knows the passage in Suger's account of his building of St. Denis, in which he tells how he called together artists from different parts of Europe. The study of the sculptures and windows, in revealing elements from various regional styles, confirms his statement. In the next century the architect Villard de Honnecourt, who worked on the cathedral of Cambrai, served also as a master in Hungary. Around 1400 at the cathedral in Milan, German, French, Italian, and Flemish architects were consulted by the council of the fabric of the Duomo.

In this religious society, the respect for the artist sometimes outweighed fundamental religious rules. If a Renaissance prince or prelate was said to have protected an errant monk or layman because he was an artist, so did a Romanesque bishop. At Le Mans Hildebert, contrary to his promise, supported an architect-monk, John, who had abandoned his monastery and vows. The abbot protested and importuned the bishop continually, until in despair he excommunicated the errant monk.[46] This is the same Hildebert who wrote with pathos of the grandeur of the Roman ruins and the beautiful faces of pagan statues.

We are not surprised then that so many mediaeval artists signed their works in spite of their humble social status as artisans, often inscribing their names prominently on church portals in a manner unknown to classical art. In some inscriptions the name is followed by a verse or phrase which celebrates the artist's power and fame. The Romanesque sculptor of the chapter-house of the cathedral of Toulouse signs himself: *Gilabertus vir non incertus*. The meaning of *non incertus* here is of a calculated ambiguity; the artist is not only "renowned," but also a "sure" master. He applies to his "mechanical" art the same term that the leading contemporary vernacular poet of his region, the first of the troubadors, William of Aquitaine, employs for himself: "*Maistre certa.*"[47] In Italy



since the early twelfth century the sculptors are glorified in inscriptions beside their works as worthy of the highest honor and fame.

Reading these texts, we sense that we are in a European world that begins to resemble our own in the attitude to art and to artists. There is rapture, discrimination, collection; the adoration of the masterpiece and recognition of the great artist personality; the habitual judgment of works without reference to meanings or to use; the acceptance of the beautiful as a field with special laws, values, and even morality.

To all these evidences of the value assigned in the Middle Ages to the visual as an experience independent of religious content or utility and the standards of local practice, might be added in confirmation the writings of scholastic philosophers. The beautiful, according to Thomas Aquinas, is what gives pleasure to the eye, a doctrine which is not far from the too easily maligned aesthetic of Gautier and Wilde. This pleasure, he goes on to say, is due to the completeness, proportions, and color of the object. Nothing is said here of expression, character, ideality of content, or of a metaphysical communication through a symbolic language of forms. Nevertheless, I shall not appeal to this testimony of the philosopher, which is less pertinent to mediaeval art than is commonly believed. The formula of Thomas concerns natural beauty, the physical charm of men and women and animals and plants. When he speaks of art, he has nothing to say about the beautiful; art is for him skilled work of any kind, whether of the carpenter or logician or surgeon, and its perfection lies in the achievement of a practical end. The modern concept of fine art, which we have seen emerging in the Middle Ages, is apparently unknown to him. The beautiful is not artistic, but natural, and the work of art is not beautiful, but useful. If Bonaventure remarks on the beauty of a work of art in the aesthetic sense, he scarcely undertakes to explore in depth its grounds and problems. But even if we accepted Thomas's definition of the beautiful as adequate to painting, sculpture, and architecture—and some modern writers have claimed for scholasticism a complete aesthetic applicable to all art, including the art of our own time—it can hardly be adduced for the interpretation of mediaeval art. It is exceedingly doubtful that Thomas had in mind the art of the cathedrals when he defined the beautiful; is there a single large church that satisfies his rationalistic definition? Does Chartres cathedral, with its Romanesque facade surmounted by one Romanesque spire and by a second in filigree, flamboyant Gothic, with its early Gothic nave, Romanesque crypt, late Gothic choir screen, and glass windows of many different generations, does this amalgam of forms possess "*integritas*" and "due proportion"? And what shall we say of Reims cathedral and Notre Dame in Paris of which the exteriors without spires are incomplete and the original proportions indeterminate? These are extreme examples, but the fact that mediaeval art is

full of such incongruities, accidental and designed, and can tolerate the unfinished and the partial, points to a conception of the beautiful in art fundamentally different from the ancient. Even that "*claritas*" which is equated sometimes with radiance, sometimes with bright, sweet, or fresh color, according to whether a metaphysical or empirical attitude presides over the context, can be applied only with difficulty to the discrimination of the beautiful in mediaeval color. All three criteria of Thomas come ultimately from the classical definitions of the beauty of natural creatures, above all, of man, and designate the perfection of a fixed type with a definite structure and proportioning of limbs and a certain characteristic coloring. Whenever we encounter such terms in mediaeval writing about art, we suspect that the author has read the classical writings or their Christian commentators. How shall we apply these criteria to Romanesque sculpture, so rich in distorted bodies, interlacings, and unnatural proportions? Several canons of the human figure exist in this art, even within the same work. And if the requirements of this classical-scholastic theory of the beautiful are transformed into a more subtle view of the internal coherence and expressive unity of an imaginative work, individual and independent of the canons of natural beauty, the criteria of Thomas become still more difficult to apply, especially to an art like the Romanesque in which there are often no fixed boundaries—I have in mind the unframed, freely projecting imagery of the margins of buildings and manuscripts.

No, the aesthetic of Thomas is inadequate for characterizing or judging the beauty of mediaeval art; and his theory of art, on the other hand, admirable as an account of what is involved in fabrication in general, offers little to an understanding of the mediaeval work designed for aesthetic, expressive ends. He does not know or seem to know that there is a making that aims at beauty and expression. From other parts of his writing—his account of being and becoming, of form and substance, of the potential and actual, and his social ideas—one can derive perhaps some concepts for the ideological interpretation of mediaeval forms as a mode of seeing and composing inspired by a particular world view. But here Thomas becomes a witness or document of his time rather than a direct illumination. He himself nowhere hints at the connection of his metaphysics and contemporary art.

His classic definition of the beautiful remains a valuable sign. It points to or reflects the developing taste for nature and the curiosity about its forms, which are apparent already in the Gothic images of his time. But this recognition of the beautiful as an end or good in itself was well established in the Middle Ages long before Thomas, and was formulated more radically and more concretely by other writers with respect to works of fine art. The difference between the practical and the aesthetic



in art is stated with a striking conciseness in the twelfth century by a German theologian and polemist, Gerhoh of Reichersberg (1093–1169): "If a column is moved, the whole building is threatened with ruin. If a picture is destroyed, the eye of the beholder is exceedingly offended."[48] The value of the constructive member is therefore in the static function, the value of the painting lies in the visual effect. This aesthetic conception of the painting as an object for the eye, contrary to the tradition of painting as mainly a vehicle of doctrine or Bible of the illiterate, had the powerful support of Augustine, who wrote in his commentary on the gospel of John some sentences which might serve as a slogan of the modern schools opposed to "literary" or symbolic painting. "When we see a beautiful script, it is not enough to praise the skill of the scribe for making the letters even and alike and beautiful; we must also read what he has signified to us through those letters. With pictures it is different. For when you have looked at a picture, you have seen it all and have praised it."[49]

## NOTES

1. G. Arnaud d'Agnel, *L'art religieux moderne,* Grenoble, 1936, 2 volumes. See also *Review of Religion,* New York, May, 1939, pp. 468–473.

2. See Pol Abraham, *Viollet-le-Duc et le rationalisme médiéval,* Paris, 1934, and the discussion by various writers in the *Bulletin de l'office international des Instituts d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art,* Paris, II, 1935. Several German writers, notably Gall and Frankl, had insisted before on the expressive and plastic aspect of the Gothic forms, although they accepted the older constructive interpretation of the developed ribs.

3. See Victor Mortet and Paul Deschamps, *Recueil de textes relatifs à l'histoire de l'architecture et la condition des architectes en France au moyen âge, XIIe–XIIIe siècles,* Paris, 1929, p. 12.

4. See Migne, *Patrologia latina,* CLXXXII, cols. 914–916, and V. Mortet, *Recueil de textes, XIe–XIIe siècles,* 1911, pp. 360–370 for the entire text. I borrow here, with a few changes, the translation of G. Coulton, *Life in the Middle Ages,* 3rd ed., New York, 1935, IV, pp. 174 ff.

5. They are reproduced by C. Oursel, *La miniature du XIIe siècle à l'abbaye de Citeaux d'après les manuscrits de la bibliothèque de Dijon,* Dijon, 1926, plates XXII–XXIX.

6. See Mortet and Deschamps, *XIIe–XIIIe,* p. 38 (Cistercians), 265 (Carthusians), 247 (Dominicans), 236,286 (Franciscans). On curiosity as the lowest step of the ladder of pride, see Bernard, *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae,* Migne, P. L., CLXXXII, col. 941 ff., where he treats curiosity at greater length than any of the other steps of pride. See also Bernard's *Liber de modo bene vivendi,* on curiosity as a dangerous presumption which provokes heresy and sacrilege.—In the same period, the Carthusian prior-general, Guigo, speaks of the aesthetic attitude as psychologically harmful: "those beauties and worldly (*forenses*) graces quickly enervate the man and render the masculine heart effeminate" (Mortet and Deschamps, p. 40).

7. Mortet and Deschamps, *op. cit.,* p. 214. See also pp. 36–38 for statutes ordering removal or destruction of particular works of art in other monasteries of the order.

8. See Martène and Durand, *Thesaurus novus anecdotorum,* Paris, 1717, V, col. 1584.

9. I have analyzed examples of this form in Moissac (*Art Bulletin,* XIII, 1931, pp. 473 ff.), Silos (*ibid.,* XXI, 1939, p. 347) and Souillac (*Medieval Studies in Memory of Arthur Kingsley Porter,* Cambridge, Mass., 1939, pp. 359 ff.) [reprinted below, pp. 56–57, 87n. 116, 106, 108, 114ff., 187, 207, 217, 250].

10. See his *De natura boni*, Migne, P.L., XLII, col. 555, cap. xiv. Augustine in other passages speaks of beauty in antithetic terms, e.g., in *De civitate Dei*, XI, 18, where God is an artist who employes antitheses of good and evil to form the beauty of the universe, and in *De ordine*, I, 2 (Migne, P.L., XXXII, col. 979), where beauty is a compound of opposites, including ugliness and disorder. On his aesthetic ideas, see K. Svoboda, *L'esthétique de Saint Augustin et ses sources*, Brno, 1933.

It is interesting that at the same moment as Bernard's letter, an English writer, William of Malmesbury, independently (I imagine) addresses Christ as an artist who is able to give form to our deformities: tu, Domine Jhesu, . . . bone artifex, multumque potens formare nostra deformia . . ." (*Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, V, 251, ed. N. E. Hamilton, London, 1870, p. 403).

11. Migne, P. L., CLXXV, col. 238; Mortet and Deschamps, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 24.

12. *Sermo in Cantica*, XV, 6.

13. *Epistola*, 250: "clamat ad vos mea monstruosa vita, mea aerumnosa conscientia. Ego enim quaedam chimaera mei seculi, nec clericum gero, nec laicum." In an earlier letter he says of his great opponent Abelard: "sine regula monachus . . . nec ordinem tenet, nec tenetur ab ordine. Homo sibi dissimilis est, intus Herodes, foris Joannes; totus ambiguus . . ." (*Ep.* 193).

14. *Ep.* 196.

15. *Ep.* 87, 12.

16. For examples, see *Art Bulletin*, XXXI, 1939, pp. 339 ff. [see pp. 42 ff. below].

17. See *Reginaldi monachi Dunelmensis Libellus de admirandis beati Cuthberti virtutibus*, ed. James Raine: Surtees Society Publications, I, London, 1835, cap. xlii, pp. 87 ff. Also Charles Eyre, *The History of Saint Cuthbert*, 3rd ed., London, 1887, pp. 173 ff. It is possible that Reginald also had direct access to the tomb and saw the textiles himself.

18. *Op. cit., Reginaldi*, p. 89.

19. Mortet, *Recueil, XIe–XIIe siècles*, p. 166, for the Latin text.

20. *De Rebus in Administratione sua gestis*, XXXIII, now admirably translated and edited by Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger*, Princeton, 1946, pp. 62 ff.

21. *Op. cit.*, I, 43, pp. 69, 70; a similar passage on Tewkesbury abbey, IV, 157, p. 295. (Cf. also the same writer's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, II, 10, on Roman art.)

22. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

23. *Ibid.*, II, 88, p. 193.

24. For a fine example see the sequence for the feast of Mary Magdalene by the eleventh-century poet Hermannus Contractus, beginning "Exsurgat totus almiphonus" (Clemens Blume, "Sequentiae ineditae. Liturgische Prosen des Mittelalters," in *Analecta Hymica Medii Aevi*, 9te Folge, vol. 44, 1904, p. 205); on the church building as a model of the heavenly Jerusalem, cf. also the prologue to book III of Theophilus Rogerus, *Schedula diversarum artium*—there is an English translation by G. Coulton, *op. cit.*, IV, pp. 194 ff.

25. Mortet, *Recueil, XIe–XIIe siècles*, pp. 400, 401, and now the edition with French translation by Jeanne Vielliard, *Le guide du Pèlerin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*, Mâcon, 1938, pp. 90 ff.

26. Mortet and Deschamps, *Recueil, XIIe–XIIIe siècles*, p. 14.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 76. See also Mortet, *XIe–XIIe siècles*, p. 95 for an earlier construction of a bishop's palace (c. 1116–1136) with a loggia and a beautiful view.

28. Mortet and Deschamps, *Recueil, XIIe–XIIIe siècles*, p. 92.

29. Mortet, *Recueil, XIe–XIIe siècles*, p. 122.

30. For examples of such preservation of classic carved gems in the Middle Ages and their Christian interpretation, see E. Babelon, *Guide illustré du Cabinet des médailles*, Paris, 1900, p. 61 (no. 2101), amethyst bust of Caracalla inscribed O PETROS in Greek in the Middle Ages, and preserved on the cover of an evangeliary in the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris; p. 85 (no. 1), sardonyx from Chartres; p. 96 (no. 42), sardonyx of Venus, nude, regarded as the Virgin Mary—from a mediaeval reliquary arm; p. 102 (no. 98), sardonyx, with Sacrifice to Priapus, from the Châsse of the Virgin's shirt in the cathedral of Chartres; p. 104 (no. 128), agate, with the goddess Roma, from the cover of an evangeliary in the church of St. Castor in Koblenz; etc.

31. *Liber Miraculorum S. Fidis*, 1, 12, ed., Bouillet, p. 42.



32. Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, *Migne, Patrologia graeca*, CXVII, col. 699.

33. "In all my life, I had never seen things that delighted my heart as much as these. For I saw among them wonderful artistic objects and I marvelled at the subtle ingenuity of the men in foreign lands. Yes, I can hardly say enough about the things that I had before me."—*Dürers Briefe, Tagebücher und Reime*, übersetzt von Moritz Thausing, Vienna, 1872, p. 90.

34. *Op. cit.*, p. 90; on the wooden coffin, see G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, London, 1921, V, pp. 397 ff.

35. *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

36. *Gesta Pontificum*, III, 99, 117, pp. 208, 255.

37. Mortet, *Recueil, XIe–XIIe siècles*, p. 172. Cf. also in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum*, II, 6, the description of an onyx vase, carved with highly realistic figures in a landscape; it was a gift of the German ruler Henry I to Athelstan (Migne, *Pat. Lat.*, CLXXIX, col. 1102).

38. Migne, *Pat. Lat.*, CLVI, col. 840 (I, 2); and the translation in the Broadway series: *The Autobiography of Guibert*, tr. by C. C. S. Bland, London, 1925, p. 9.

39. Migne, *Pat. Lat.*, CLXXI, col. 1409 (De Roma); the entire poem is quoted by William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, IV, 2.

40. I quote for the most part the translation by T. Okey, in the Temple Classics edition, pp. 118 ff.

41. *Gesta Pontificum*, V, 196, p. 344.

42. See Clemens Baeumker, *Witelo, ein Philosoph und Naturforscher des XIII.* Jahrhunderts, 1908, p. 175, for the Latin text, pp. 203, 204, 639, on its relation to Alhazen.

43. Cf. the corresponding appreciation of early Gothic art from France by the Mongol rulers of Central Asia, recently studied by Leonardo Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher, a French artist at the Court of the Khans*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1946, pp. 26–28.

44. For the text, see Mortet, *Recueil, XIe–XIIe siècles*, pp. 206–228.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 292–294.

47. Poem VI, 36, ed. Jeanroy. On the relationship of Romanesque art of Southern France and troubador poetry, see *Art Bulletin*, XXI, 1939, p. 347 [reprinted, p. 46 below].

48. Liber de aedificio Dei, Migne, *Pat. Lat.*, CXCIV, cols. 1242, 1243.

49. In Joannis evangelium tractatus XXIV, 2, Migne, *Pat. Lat.*, XXXV, col. 1593.