HOW TO READ

MEDIEVAL ART

Wendy A. Stein

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London
CONTENTS

7
Director’s Foreword

9
Introduction

19
FOUNDATION STORIES
OF CHRISTIAN ART

45
THE HEBREW BIBLE
AND JEWISH ART

65
SAINTS AND THEIR ATTRIBUTES

87
CHANGING IMAGES OF THE VIRGIN
AND THE CRUCIFIXION

119
SECULAR THEMES

133
Suggested Reading

135
Acknowledgments
Director’s Foreword

Manuscripts and icons glistening with gold, stained glass and enamels saturated with jewel-like colors, statues beautifully modeled from wood and stone: treasures of the Middle Ages fill The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s galleries of medieval art in our main building on Fifth Avenue as well as our extraordinary landmark, The Met Cloisters, in Fort Tryon Park. Together the two venues constitute one of the world’s most comprehensive collections of medieval art, spanning many centuries and ranging from the British Isles to Syria.

_How to Read Medieval Art_ provides an easy entry point into the richness of these holdings. World-famous masterpieces such as the Unicorn Tapestries and the Merode Altarpiece appear in this book along with less familiar but no less fascinating works—some acquired within the last decade—providing a broad and vivid view of the art of the Middle Ages. The vibrant figures that fill these pages seize our imagination with their torments, their aspirations, and their transformative faith.

The author, Wendy A. Stein, focuses on the stories depicted in these works of art, many of them drawn from the Bible. To modern readers and museum visitors, the narratives of the Judeo-Christian tradition may be as unfamiliar as those of Egyptian gods, yet those narratives are fundamental to understanding medieval art. This book explores the iconographic themes that recur throughout art of the period so that they become clearly recognizable, and reveals how the differing representations of the subjects open vistas onto history and literature, faith and devotion.

Like other books in the How to Read series, this volume seeks to provide the general reader with a deeper understanding of a group of related objects and the era in which they were made. I hope it will inspire readers to visit the galleries on Fifth Avenue and at The Met Cloisters, and enhance their appreciation of medieval art in monuments and museums around the world.

We gratefully acknowledge the generosity of the Mary C. and James W. Fosburgh Publications Fund, The Peter Jay Sharp Foundation, the Estate of Thomas Hoving, and The Levy Hermanos Foundation, Inc., for making this publication possible.

Thomas P. Campbell
Director
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
The art of the Middle Ages is an art of storytelling. These works of glittering gold, brightly colored enamel, intricately carved ivory, and skillfully modeled wood and stone were all created to convey meaning. Although the art of the medieval world can be admired for its beauty, expressive intensity, and linear dynamism, understanding its narrative content is essential to experiencing its full resonance. The stories depicted, frequently drawn from the Bible and other religious literature, were universally known in their time but are often obscure today. Learning to recognize the most frequently shown subjects and characters (entries 1–3, 7, 14–20) and the visual signs and conventions used to represent them provides access to the art’s deeper meaning and purpose. Understanding how these objects were regarded and used in their own time affords penetrating insights into the medieval world and an appreciation for the power of its art.

The Middle Ages spanned more than a millennium in a vast area ranging from the British Isles to Syria. Historical eras do not begin and end on precise dates, but the period is commonly defined as the interval between the ancient world and the Renaissance (roughly from the fifth to the fifteenth or sixteenth century). That tripartite view of history originated in fifteenth-century Italy, and the term “Middle Ages” gained currency in the seventeenth. The period can be said to have begun earlier, however, with the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire in the fourth century, and to have roots extending to the earliest centuries after Christ. Indeed, even older Celtic and Germanic traditions influenced the Middle Ages, as seen in medieval echoes of their non-representational, pattern-based art. The dynamic spirals of an ancient ring (fig. 1) exemplify curvilinear Celtic motifs and foreshadow the
animated whorls of the abstracted drapery in a manuscript illumination made more than a thousand years later (fig. 2).

The art and culture of the Middle Ages emerged from that of those and other migrating “barbarian” tribes and from the Greco-Roman traditions established across the wide expanse of the Roman Empire, which encircled the Mediterranean Sea. The empire had been pagan, but in the fourth century Constantine the Great (ruled 306–37) adopted and legalized Christianity and moved the capital east, from Rome to the city then called Byzantion, which he renamed Constantinople. As Christianity developed and spread, both Constantinople (present-day

Figure 1. Ring. Celtic, 4th–5th century b.c. Gold, 1 x ¾ in. (2.6 x 1.6 cm). Gift of Josef and Brigitte Hatzenbuehler, 2009 (2009.532.3)

Figure 2. Christ in Majesty with Angels (detail), Leaf from a Beatus Manuscript. Spanish, Castile-León, Burgos, ca. 1180. Tempera, gold, and ink on parchment, folio overall 17¾ x 11¾ in. (44.4 x 30 cm). Purchase, The Cloisters Collection, Rogers and Harris Brisbane Dick Funds, and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1991 (1991.232.3)
Istanbul) and Rome flourished as major Christian bishoprics, drawing from a shared history and faith. By the ninth century, however, distinctions in doctrine and liturgical protocols had emerged, separating the Orthodox Church centered in Constantinople from the Latin Church centered in Rome. The commonalities and gradual divergence were political and cultural as well as religious. Constantinople, also called New Rome, ruled an empire that saw itself as the true descendant of the ancient Roman Empire. After the loss of western provinces to invading Germanic and other tribes in the fifth century, and the loss of African and eastern provinces with the seventh-century rise of Islam, the extent of what came to be called the Byzantine Empire was reduced to an area approximating modern Greece, much of the Balkans, and Turkey.

During the medieval era, followers of the Jewish religion coexisted with Orthodox and western Christians as well as with Muslims, though they were always a minority population. Jewish characters and stories drawn from the Hebrew Bible frequently appear in medieval art made for Christian patrons (entries 8–12), but Jews themselves were often persecuted, and art made for them is notably underrepresented in surviving material culture. Two objects must suffice here to represent their patronage in the Middle Ages, a beautiful manuscript from the end of the period (entry 13) and, from a much earlier time, a small, broken, but important object (fig. 3).

This glass fragment, formerly the base of a drinking bowl, conveys volumes about both the wealth and status of Jews and the cultural and religious cross-currents in the later Roman Empire. Circular glass objects with designs in gold leaf sandwiched between two layers of glass are well known from that time. Manufactured with an intricate technique and of an intrinsically valuable material, they signal their patrons’ prosperity. Gold glasses are most commonly found with pagan or Christian iconography; this rare example depicts a full range of Jewish liturgical objects, including two menorahs (candelabras),

Figure 3. Bowl Fragments with Menorah, Shofar, and Torah Ark. Roman, 300–350. Glass and gold leaf, 2⅜ x 2⅜ x ⅛ in. (6.9 x 7 x 0.7 cm). Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.145.1a, b)
a Torah ark with scrolls inside, and a shofar (ram’s horn). This precious piece of glass testifies to the proximity of and exchange among Jews, pagans, and Christians, who were all employing the same pool of artists and artisans to manufacture similar objects with identical technique. Likewise the Mishneh Torah (entry 13) provides evidence of an artist working in both the Jewish and Christian communities at the end of the Middle Ages.

Cross-cultural exchanges also continued between the art of the Eastern and Western churches, even as their congregations and artistic traditions diverged. Trade, diplomatic gifts, mendicant preaching orders, and pilgrimage (see entry 18) helped disseminate objects across the continent throughout the period. In addition, starting in the late eleventh century, crusaders from western Europe traveled to the Holy Land to win Jerusalem from Islam and came home with Byzantine icons (see entry 6) and relics. Through many such channels, the art that had developed in the Byzantine East spread to the Latin West and came to influence western European imagery. Byzantine pieces were incorporated into objects made in western Europe, such as the ivory icon embedded in the center of a liturgical book cover (fig. 4). Western artists also adopted Byzantine figural conventions, as can be seen in an affectionate Virgin and Child (fig. 5) based on the Eleousa, one of the Orthodox representations of Mary (see entry 27).

In both the Byzantine East and the Latin West, the art of the Middle Ages was not made by artists concerned with personal expression. It was made because patrons caused it to be made, in many cases specifying the details
the artist should include. Art was created at the behest of people and institutions of power and wealth. In the early centuries of the period, the majority of items in all media were produced for the monastery or church: chalices for use in the service, book covers for liturgical manuscripts, and works made to adorn ecclesiastical architecture. Kings, queens, and other aristocrats also had the means to order art and architecture to their specifications. In the later Middle Ages, individual patrons became more numerous, extending beyond royalty into the higher nobility and even to the newly wealthy classes of townspeople (see the donor portraits in entry 29).

The artist crafting a commissioned piece did not create a wholly new vision of the subject but rather based the work on the long history of representations of a given scene or character. But even though medieval art draws upon a consistent set of subjects and well-established conventions, the results are wonderfully diverse. While certain elements were essential to a subject’s depiction, stories could be embellished with additional details taken from a familiar repertoire. The Annunciation (entries 1, 29), for example, always includes the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin, but they are often joined by a dove representing the Holy Spirit (who arrives through an opening in the ceiling in fig. 6). Representations were also modified by artistic capacity and invention and by patrons’ special concerns, as well as by period and local style, as seen in two treatments of the Throne of Wisdom type of the Virgin in Majesty. Made only a few decades apart in France, one in Burgundy (fig. 7) and the other in
the Auvergne (entry 22), they project different personalities. The slightly elongated figure and face of the Burgundian Mary accord with her gently sorrowful expression, a contrast to the Auvergne Virgin’s stoic steadfastness. Their distinct local styles emerge especially in the rendering of drapery, with flattened zigzags and incised ridges in the former and rhythmic curves in the latter.

Notwithstanding variations in style, the taste of the age tends to glitter, color, and shiny materials, as exemplified by the dazzling Reliquary Shrine (entry 1). Made of gilded silver and enamel in highly saturated colors, its reflective surfaces would have been further enlivened by candlelight. Stained glass, painted statues, and brilliant golden and silver vessels (fig. 8), sometimes inlaid with gemstones, awed the worshipers who saw them in church and appealed to the sensibility of the wealthy who commissioned them for private devotion. But the taste for luminosity has deeper meaning and associations. The preciousness of gems, gold, and silver is meant to convey the object’s power and to honor that which is represented.

Figure 7. Enthroned Virgin and Child. French, Burgundy, ca. 1130–40. Birch with paint and glass, H. 40½ in. (102.9 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1947 (47.101.15)

Figure 8. Chalice. German, Upper Rhineland, ca. 1230–50. Silver, gilded silver, niello, and jewels, 8 x 6⅞ in. (20.3 x 17.5 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1947 (47.101.26)
Likewise, reliquaries glorify the sacred remains they contain with costly materials and skilled workmanship (see entry 16); they sometimes take the form of body parts, as does this arm reliquary (fig. 9), perhaps to associate the object more vividly with the saint whose bone fragment lies within.

The brilliant surfaces were also imbued with a more abstract theological resonance. Abbot Suger of Saint Denis (1081–1151) was only the most famous of the many churchmen who preached brightness as a metaphor for divine light, and advocated for its use in material things to lead the mind to the immaterial light of the divine. When medieval poets describe the Heavenly Jerusalem as a jeweled and golden city, they recall the Book of Revelation: “Jerusalem . . . shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.”

The art of the Middle Ages also reflected the evolution of devotional practice over the centuries, which can generally be described as a shift from ritual observance dictated by and practiced in the institutional church and monastery to more individual worship, and from viewing Christ as a distant divinity to seeing Jesus as human. Those changes and the associated preaching that urged the faithful to empathize with Mary and her son contributed to the increasingly emotional tenor of medieval art, which can be read in the formal qualities of images of the Virgin (entries 22–29) and Crucifixion (entries 30–33). The church’s encouragement of a more personal form of worship extended to granting permission to individuals to take up some of the practices once reserved for the clergy. The monastic liturgical tradition of reciting a set of prayers at eight canonical hours of each day was adopted in the later Middle Ages by literate laypeople, giving rise to a new type of manuscript, the Book of Hours (see entries 5, 19). Used by wealthy and even middle-class readers for their private prayers, the Book of Hours was the most popular type of book from the fourteenth through the fifteenth century. These devotional manuscripts all include a particular set of prayers variously augmented with other texts, and were often customized for the client with the addition of decoration, from a few highlighted initials to many lavish illuminations.

The Power and Purpose of Medieval Art

Both Judaism and Christianity are religions of the Book, and teaching biblical narratives, including through visual means, is central to their practice. Biblical scenes and characters recur frequently in the art of the period, distilled to readily recognizable components that enabled them to communicate powerfully. Through repetition, these motifs, poses, and iconography became a familiar shorthand that allowed the stories in their many manifestations to be easily “read.” Of course, images tell stories differently from words; they not only illustrate and interpret the text, they inform the reader’s mental image,
fleshing out the kings of the Hebrew Bible (entry 10), the disciples in the Gospels (entries 17, 18), and the saints in the liturgy (entries 19–21) as vibrant characters. The concept of reading art played a crucial part in developing Christianity and echoed through the centuries. An early pope, Saint Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604), wrote of art’s important didactic role in about 600: “To adore images is one thing; to teach with their help what should be adored is another. What Scripture is to the educated, images are to the ignorant . . . who read in them what they cannot read in books.” While Gregory’s statement can be difficult to interpret precisely and does not address the fact that much medieval art was made for a literate audience, such as the clergy and educated noble classes, his assertion that images were not idolatrous and could be important tools in religious practice became a fundamental argument for allowing them.

The permissibility of images has been repeatedly contested throughout the history of all three monotheistic religions, with recurring periods of iconoclasm. Christianity had inherited from Judaism the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, including the prohibition against figural representation; the underlying concern was that the images themselves would be worshiped, as were pagan idols. The debate raged for centuries in the early church, culminating, within the sphere of the Byzantine Empire, in the Iconoclastic Controversy. From 726 to 787, figural imagery was banned, and only the cross, an abstract image, was permitted in churches. Hundreds of works of art were destroyed, plastered over, or defaced. In 787, the Second Council of Nicaea set forth a clear statement of doctrine favoring the veneration (as distinct from the adoration) of images (see entries 6, 32). However, a second period of iconoclasm began with the accession of a new emperor in 814. Only in 843, with another change in power, was icon veneration restored. From that time on, Orthodox practice recognized that the honor given to images passed on to the prototype in heaven. Both sides of the controversy underscore the awesome power ascribed to art, whether it was feared as seductively idolatrous or revered as a devotional tool.

Most art of the period served that powerful purpose. None of it was made “for art’s sake,” not even the secular art (entries 34–38). Every work had a function, not just containers and vessels (entries 35, 36) and objects with a specific use in liturgy or other ceremonial context (entries 3, 4), but each painting and carving. An object depicting a sacred scene had an active role in religious practice. It had many purposes: to recall to the viewer a larger story; to provide the believer with guidance; to embody and exalt that which is holy; to link the past with the present; to connect the worshiper to heaven. The powerful function of art, moreover, did not only inhere in the object; it also depended upon the direct involvement of the viewer. The intense gaze of an icon or reliquary head (fig. 10) was returned by the worshiper’s passionate contemplation. This art was made in expectation of a profound relationship between the object and the observer.
Art in the Middle Ages had agency; as a conduit to the sacred person represented, it was deemed able not only to listen to a supplicant’s prayers (see entry 22) but also to win battles and cure illness. As a stand-in on earth for its prototype in heaven, an image of a saint or of the Virgin Mary would be treated as a person in its own right, honored with gifts and carried reverently through a town or from altar to altar within a church. Harming an image was considered an offense to the holy person represented, just as desecrating the flag is illegal in our own time. In the Orthodox Church, certain icons were understood to be palladia, protectors of a specific locale or city. The theologically sanctioned uses for images were at times exceeded in the popular imagination to foster legends about their miracle-working capacity. Medieval manuscripts in Ireland were scraped to make potions to cure the illness of cattle. Statues of the Virgin and Child inspired an entire genre of miracle stories about images that could bleed, speak, turn pale, weep, or even lactate, as in a legend concerning the great twelfth-century theologian and saint, Bernard of Clairvaux. It was said that when Bernard, reciting a hymn while fervently praying before a statue of the Virgin, intoned the words “show me you are mother,” the statue issued a stream of milk into the saint’s mouth. The miracle legend enjoyed wide circulation and was frequently depicted visually (fig. 11), evidence of contemporary belief in art’s exalted potency.

For this is unquestionably an art of power. The intensity with which it was regarded at the time of its creation is hard to imagine today, yet medieval art has universal resonance. We do not have to be Christian to respond to images of the Virgin and Child or Christ’s Passion, to be touched by a mother’s joys and sorrows or to empathize with the pain suffered by an innocent man. When the intensity of a figure’s gaze compels us to draw near, we sense the power that those eyes held for the medieval viewer, a power that links us, human to human, across a gulf of time.

Figure 11. Lactation Miracle (fol. 38v), MS Douce 264. French, early 16th century. Tempera, gold, and ink on parchment, 7½ x 5⅜ in. (18.9 x 13 cm). The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
FOUNDATION
STORIES OF
CHRISTIAN ART
Attributed to Jean de Touyl (French, died 1349/50)

Reliquary Shrine

French, Paris, ca. 1325–50
Gilded silver, translucent enamel, and paint, 10 x 16 x 3¾ in. (25.4 x 40.6 x 9.2 cm)
The Cloisters Collection, 1962 (62.96)
This sumptuous miniature shrine, meant to inspire private reflection and devotion, opens to reveal a golden Virgin nursing her child; on either side stands an angel holding a box of relics (see entry 16). The figures are set in an architectural fantasy that resembles a cathedral, including arches, tracery, and vaulting, soaring features of ecclesiastical Gothic architecture that evoke heaven. Colorful enamel as brilliant as stained-glass windows illuminates the wings of the shrine with scenes that relate the Nativity story. These episodes, based on Gospel accounts and also collectively called the Infancy cycle, represent key theological concepts and are among the most recognizable events depicted in medieval art. Here, each of the scenes is reduced to its essentials and contained within a space less than two inches across.

The story begins on the left wing of the shrine, in the upper central square panel. A winged angel points to an unfurled scroll, and a seated woman raises one hand in acknowledgment, their enlarged hands emphasizing the communication between them. This is the Annunciation, when the Archangel Gabriel, acting as God’s messenger, tells Mary she will give birth to Jesus. Theologically, the Annunciation is regarded as the moment of the incarnation, the instant Jesus is believed to have taken on flesh with Mary’s womb. That miracle is represented in many portrayals of the scene by the dove of the Holy Spirit.

Immediately to the right, the scene of two women tenderly embracing depicts the Visitation, when the pregnant Virgin Mary met with her cousin Elizabeth, who was also with child. That child was to become John the Baptist, Jesus’s forerunner (see entry 14), who is said to have miraculously leapt within Elizabeth’s womb in the first acknowledgment of Jesus’s divinity.

The story continues in the square panel below the Annunciation with the Nativity, the birth of Jesus in a stable in the town of Bethlehem. Mary is reclining; Joseph, her husband, is nearby; and three farm animals look at the baby Jesus, who is tightly wrapped in crisscross swaddling clothes. The Gospel according to Luke specifies that the infant was placed in a manger, as seen here; most representations of the Nativity include livestock to signify the setting’s rusticity. The depiction of Jesus’s human birth and modest origins is the prime scene of the Infancy cycle.

Immediately to the right of the Nativity, an angel holding a scroll approaches simply clad figures, one playing a horn, the other leaning on a staff, in a landscape with sheep. In this, the Annunciation to the Shepherds, the angel brings news of the birth of the Savior to humble people, instructing the surprised shepherds to seek a child in a manger. The narrative continues on the right wing’s top register with the Adoration of the Magi, which encompasses two panels. On the left, two crowned men bear vessels; in the scene next to it, an elderly man kneels as he deferentially sets his crown on the ground and presents a similar vessel to a baby on a woman’s lap. Like the shepherds, the Magi (kings or wise men) had heard about the miraculous birth and sought out the Child. They brought gifts of great value (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) and knelt in homage before the baby, signifying the Child’s sovereignty over worldly wealth and rule. The message of the Nativity cycle is thus clearly directed to the meek and powerful alike.

In the left panel of the lower register is the Presentation in the Temple. In this Jewish ritual involving the first-born son, Mary presents her infant to a bearded man, who extends his covered hands to receive him. The elderly priest, Simeon, recognizes the Child’s divinity—another revelation, this time to the authorities of the Hebrew temple, and thus another theologially important event.

In the final scene, the Flight into Egypt, Joseph leads a donkey as he looks back at his wife, Mary, who carries her swaddled son. Joseph had been warned in a dream that he should flee with Mary and Jesus, because the Roman governor Herod would seek to destroy the Child.

These vibrant and meticulously crafted scenes epitomize how efficiently medieval art recounted Christianity’s complex foundation stories. Lending meaning as well as beauty, they adorn a shrine that is not merely an exquisite object but a functional reliquary with a moral purpose: to serve as an exemplar for the worshiper’s behavior and as a focus for prayer enhanced by the relics’ power.
The artist who made this triptych, or work in three panels, showed exceptional technical skill in a demanding medium, crisply rendering the facial features, the drapery, the anatomy of the crucified figures, and even the wood grain of the crosses in carved mother-of-pearl, a particularly brittle material. Equally remarkable is how deftly the artist conveyed the pathos of the Passion cycle, this triptych’s subject, inspiring the viewer to empathize with Christ’s suffering and sacrifice. This intricate piece is even smaller than the previous shrine and like it was used for private prayer and contemplation.

The Passion cycle is a series of events as important in Christian belief as the Nativity cycle (entry 1). As told in the Gospels, the drama begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem accompanied by his disciples, continues with his arrest and torture, and ends with his death on the cross. Here, eight key episodes are depicted in panels, each only about one inch square, on the two wings, with the large Crucifixion scene in the center.

The sequence begins with the second square from the top on the left-hand wing and proceeds clockwise. In the first scene, the Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus rides on a donkey toward a city gate, suggested here by a fortified arch with a raised portcullis. Two of his disciples follow him, with an extra halo behind them to indicate others. Jesus is distinguished by the cross in his halo (a cross nimbus) and the first two fingers of his right hand extended in a gesture of blessing.

The next image, at the top left, represents the Last Supper. Jesus sits behind a table surrounded by his apostles, with whom he shared a Passover seder, his last meal before his betrayal by his disciple Judas and his arrest. The minuscule size of the openwork panel prevented the carver from including all twelve apostles; six suffice to indicate the group. One of them, John, sleeps on Jesus’s lap. The traitorous Judas, smaller than the other figures, sits isolated on the near side of the table; he is often singled out this way. The event is crucial in Christian theology, for it was at this meal that Jesus blessed bread and wine and said they were his body and blood, thereby instituting the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Mass in which consecrated bread and wine are ritually consumed in remembrance of his sacrifice.

Next, the top square of the right wing illustrates the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, Jesus asks three of his apostles to stay awake while he prays to God the Father to take away the chalice (shown in the upper left corner), a metaphor for the ordeal he faces. The apostles sleep, demonstrating their weakness. The panel below, in which two men grasp Jesus by his arms, depicts the Arrest. The figure sheathing his sword is the apostle Peter (see entry 17), who has cut off the ear of Malchus, a servant of the Jewish high priest Caiaphas and a participant in the arrest; the two often appear in images of the incident.

The third scene on the right shows Jesus, who was judged by both religious and civil authorities, standing before a seated figure dressed in the manner of a high priest. (The high priest Caiaphas sentenced him to crucifixion; Pontius Pilate, a Roman official, is often shown symbolically washing his hands of the condemnation.) On the bottom of the right wing is the Flagellation, also known as the Scourging of Jesus. Jesus is tied to a column, stripped of his robes, and clad only in a loincloth. One figure raises a bundle of switches to whip him; another appears to cradle a club.

The Passion continues on the bottom of the left wing with the Crowning with Thorns. Jesus, attired in a long robe, sits holding a reed as if a scepter, and two