

## Reading Medieval Art

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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 see through them what they must accept; they read in them what they cannot read in books.<sup>1</sup>

These words, written by Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century, introduce us to an idea about art which may at first seem very strange. The quote comes from a letter written by Pope Gregory in which he argues for the usefulness of artistic images as teaching devices. The unlettered person who cannot read books, he says, can read art instead. This may seem like an odd idea. We do not normally think of *reading* art. We *look at* art; we may *appreciate* art; but we don't *read* art. Or do we?

“Reading art” is, in fact, much of what art history is all about. When art historians study and write about the art of the past, they are primarily interested in describing works of art within their historical and cultural contexts. They are concerned with understanding the arts of the past as visual reflections of historic time periods, cultures, interests, and ideas. Studying art in this way requires that the viewer learn the language of art, a

non-verbal language. The language of art is a visual language; one must learn to *listen* with the *eyes* and to *read* without words.

But, just as any language may change through history, the visual language of art will change as well. We may find the Middle English of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* quite confusing today. It is not the same English language that we now use. We can certainly recognize some of it, but there are unfamiliar words and spellings which are quite baffling. Once we get used to those words and spellings however, it all becomes clearer. The same is true of art history. The art of the medieval period differs significantly from the art of the Renaissance period and the art of the modern period, as Wood Lockhart has discussed in his essay in this volume. When we learn the visual language used in the art of the past, we are able to understand it better. Although we may never be able to understand it as well, or in the same way, as the contemporary audience, we certainly come closer to understanding the art of the past when we become informed viewers.

Let us return to Pope Gregory's letter, and his description of the usefulness of artistic images. Pope Gregory's idea that art is able to teach the viewer has often inspired historians to stress the didactic function of medieval art. Historians of medieval art frequently write that the sculpture, stained glass windows, and objects of precious metalwork which adorned medieval churches functioned partially as teaching tools for the largely illiterate medieval population. The sculptured portals of churches, carved with Old and New Testament figures and scenes, and the stained glass windows, filled with elaborate narrative stories, are thus understood as *visual* substitutes for *written* descriptions. As the major percentage of medieval society (especially the non-clerical classes) is assumed to have been illiterate (and books, or rather hand-written manuscripts, were precious and unavailable for the common people, in any case), the *visual reading* of art served as a substitute for book learning and as a supplement to verbal description, such as sermons and oral readings from the Bible in church services. We thus tend to imagine medieval church-goers understanding, and explaining to each other, the figured doorways and colored windows of their hometown cathedral, perhaps proudly explaining the significance of a window for which they might have helped pay.

This may be an acceptable, modern vision of the medieval situation, to a point. The point at which one may begin to question this notion, however, is when one actually passes through the portals of a great Gothic cathedral like Chartres or Reims, or when inside the building, one stands transfixed by the glow and play of colored light from the magnificent stained glass windows. The doorways of Chartres and Reims are extremely elaborate, carved with hundreds of figures and scenes both large and small. Twentieth century art historians have written volumes simply describing portions of these sculptured programs.<sup>2</sup>

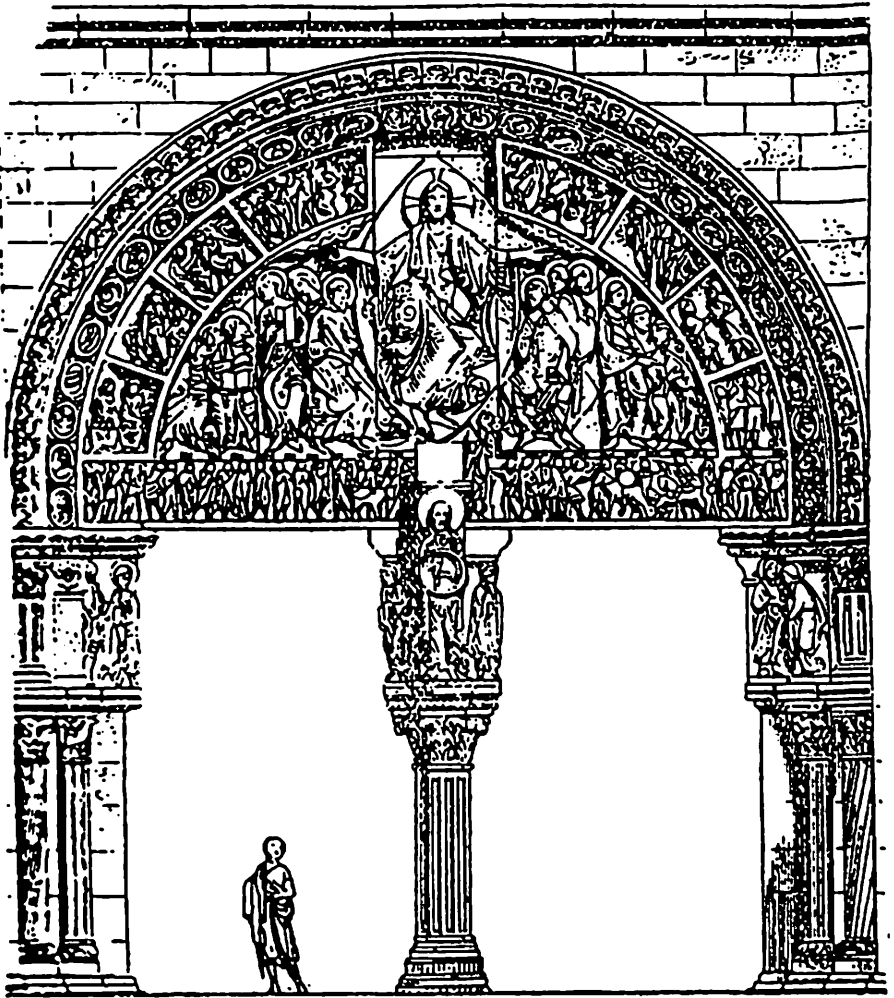


Figure 1. The Portal of Vézelay.

And it is not simply the Gothic cathedrals which have complicated windows and doorways, but the earlier Romanesque churches as well. In France, the churches of Autun, Moissac, and Vézelay (figure 1) all have sculptured portal programs of immense and overpowering complexity.

When we visit these places today, we may feel quite dwarfed and also quite baffled by all the visual imagery. Annoying amounts of neck-craning, and even the use of binoculars may not bring the total picture into focus. It all may seem like “too much” to the modern viewer, all “bits and pieces.” We may just not get the picture at all.

This confusion is especially surprising when one considers the visual sophistication of the twentieth century. As modern people, we are constantly bombarded by visual imagery—in newspapers, magazines and on television. We cope with, and filter, this imagery on a daily basis. We may look at magazines *and* watch television at the same time. If our television set is equipped with a remote control device, we may change television stations at an incredibly rapid pace—based on a quick and succinct reading of visual imagery.

But when we stand in front of a medieval doorway—which isn’t even moving around or going anywhere—we find it hard to understand. The visual language is quite different from what we are used to, and we may certainly find it hard to understand why Pope Gregory thought that illiterate people would be able to “read” these images so clearly. Or, why St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in the early twelfth century, actually complained that monks (among the literate) may be too “tempted to read in the marble than in . . . [their]books.”<sup>3</sup>

It may be interesting to consider whether the “visual literacy” of the common person in the Middle Ages was on a more or less advanced level than our own; however, what we can say for certain is that their visual language was quite different from ours. But it was not a totally foreign language; just as Chaucer’s Middle English is recognizable to some extent to the modern reader, the visual language of medieval art can be understood by the modern viewer, provided he stops and looks long enough (and is not tempted to too quickly “change the channel!”).

Reading medieval art requires patience; but the patience will be well-rewarded because the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle will fall rapidly into place, once one knows how to read the clues. And the clues (as in any good mystery story) are always quite obvious, in retrospect.

*Clue A: What looks important is important*

One of the operative principles behind medieval imagery is much the same as in modern advertising imagery; the simpler and bolder the image, the more clearly it will be perceived. Figure 2 shows a page from a mid-eleventh century manuscript written and illustrated at the Norman



Figure 2. Avranches, *Bibliothèque Municipale* MS 72, f. 97.

abbey of Mont St. Michel (Avranches, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 72) (figure 2).<sup>4</sup> The book is a collection of treatises by various Church Fathers (e.g., St. Jerome, St. Augustine) against various early Christian heresies and heretics. The illustration specifically depicts St. Augustine engaging in a conversation with one of these heretics. Whether or not this episode took place, historically, is not what is important for the audience and the artist. What is important is that St. Augustine's ideas were correct. How do we know this? By a correct reading of the visual clues.

The picture itself is divided into two parts, framed by an arch, with columns on either side. Curtains are pulled aside in the lower section of the page to reveal the disputing figures. St. Augustine is not only identifiable by the halo around his head but also by the fact that his physical size dwarfs the other figure. St. Augustine is seated on a fancy chair with pillows, and if he stood up, he would fill the whole page. But he is not standing up; he is seated; and even seated his presence overwhelms the figure approaching him from the right.

St. Augustine is gesturing towards the other figure; it looks as if he is pointing at him—or, more accurately, he is “making a point.” This raised-finger gesture is, in fact, an important clue to understanding the meaning of the illustration. This particular gesture is part of an understood repertory of images in medieval art; it means that the figures are talking to each other and that a point is being made. That St. Augustine's point is the right one is clear when we move to the upper section of the illustration.

There, framed in an arch, a haloed figure appears holding a book and gesturing. This is the figure of Christ. How do we know this? We know this not only from the elevated position of the figure but also from the special type of halo the figure bears. There is a cross inscribed in the halo; and it is another aspect of the standard repertory in medieval art that only Christ is depicted with a cross-inscribed halo. He is raising his hand in a gesture of benediction, and so we know that St. Augustine's ideas are sanctioned by God and the church.

### *Clue B: A part may tell a whole*

Figure 3 shows another illustration from another eleventh century manuscript, also from France, probably from the Norman abbey of St. Ouen at Rouen (Rouen, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 467) (figure 3).<sup>5</sup> This illustration is not a full-page picture but an illustration within an initial letter. This letter (*P*) is part of the text of the book and introduces a new chapter in this Biblical commentary of St. Augustine on the Gospel of St. John.

The illustration inside this initial letter depicts five people in back of a horizontal line which has objects drawn on it. From what we know already about medieval art, we can determine that the larger figure in the center of



Figure 3. Rouen, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 467, f. 121.

Photo courtesy of Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.

the picture is Christ. The illustration focuses upon this figure—by his central placement and enlarged size, not to mention the cross-inscribed halo which only Christ can wear. We can “read” this illustration outwards from the most prominent figure.

Christ is holding objects—a cup and a round item. Suddenly it becomes clear. This is a picture of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist—the bread and the wine. We can now read the horizontal line in the picture as a table behind which the figures are seated. There are fish—in dishes—on the table, and cross-inscribed loaves.

But, if this is the “Last Supper,” where are the rest of the Apostles? There are only four other figures here besides Christ, and there should be twelve (says the modern mind). In fact, it doesn’t matter. We figured out that this was the Last Supper because of the presence of Christ and his gestures and the table and the objects depicted. The four other people depicted there are just enough to *imply* the presence of others. The space is too crowded anyway to admit more figures, but crowded enough to suggest the presence of others.

We see depicted in this medieval illustration only enough visual information to clearly tell us the basics of the story. The rest of the story we know by implication. The visual information is condensed—an abbreviated version—we mentally supply the “missing persons” in our own imagination. We could also call this a type of “visual shorthand.”



Figure 4. Durham, Cathedral Library MS A.II.14, f. 87v.

Photo courtesy of Dean and Chapter, Durham Cathedral.



*Clue C: There is more than meets the eye*

An additional enrichment to the imaginative condensation of imagery in medieval art is the fact that these abbreviated images may contain a wealth of readings. Witness Figure 4, an illustration in a late eleventh century Bible from Durham, England (Durham, Cathedral Library MS A.II.4)<sup>6</sup>

This is again, an initial letter signaling a chapter opening in the text, in this case, the opening for the Gospel of St. Matthew in the New Testament. In the Latin text, the Gospel of St. Matthew begins with the words, "*Liber generationis . . .*" (the book of the generations . . . or, the genealogy . . . of Christ). The illustration here is not *contained within* an initial letter (as in the example above) but cleverly *forms* the initial letter *L* for *Liber*. The vertical bar of the letter is an angel with wings, and the horizontal bar of the letter consists of a winged dragon.

These pictures are nice, but do they have any relevance to the text—in terms of illustration? Indeed, another standard convention in medieval art is that the authors of the gospels—the Four Evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are each identified artistically by a certain *symbol*. This imagery derives from a variety of references within the Bible itself, and is a standard feature in medieval art—just like Christ's cross-inscribed halo.<sup>7</sup>

The symbol of St. Matthew is the *man* or the *angel*, and the winged angel represented here is holding a scroll which reads, "*Liber generationis . . .*" This is the symbol of St. Matthew holding the opening words of the gospel of St. Matthew.

But what about the dragon? Is the dragon simply a convenient form used by the medieval artist to make the bottom horizontal bar of the "L" initial? Indeed, no. We are most likely dealing here with the conflation of two images. Not only can this angel-with-the-scroll be "read" as the symbol of St. Matthew, but the image can also be "read" as the depiction of the Archangel Michael—the chief fighter against evil/Satan/the serpent and dragon—the guardian of high places.

The image of the Archangel Michael trampling on, or battling with, the dragon is another one of those common conventions in medieval art, an image which occurs so frequently that it becomes a standard symbol—just like the symbols of the Four Evangelists. A medieval audience, visually versed in these conventions, would likely have no difficulty recognizing the form and the meaning. The modern mind, however, may have some logistical difficulties with this. "Does the figure represent St. Matthew or St. Michael?" we may ask, "How can it represent *both*?"

Now I do not mean to suggest that such "logistical difficulties" would never have occurred to a medieval audience—we really don't know this information—but what I would like to suggest is that the merging of these two images (the angel-with-the-scroll: St. Matthew, and the angel-

trampling-on-the-dragon: St. Michael) contributes greatly to the symbolic power of *both* readings. But more importantly, the individual images then become subsumed into a much larger meaning: the triumph of Good over Evil. And whatever else one might say about this concept, for the medieval Christian, the birth of Christ (which is what the opening part of St. Matthew's gospel deals with) would seem quite appropriately illustrated with an image that implies this idea. The medieval artist conflates two images, and the medieval audience (accustomed to such symbolism) recognizes the power of these images in terms of an overall concept—the “big picture.”

A further iconographic type might also be cited here which reinforces these ideas. Christ appears in many guises in medieval art, but one very popular image depicts Christ trampling on beasts—snakes and dragons especially. This idea is derived from Psalm 91:

. . . thou shalt tread upon the adder and the basilisk and trample  
under foot the lion and the dragon.

*Psalm 91:13*

Later Biblical commentators (such as St. Augustine) interpreted this reference to mean the triumph of Christ over Satan, the triumph of the powers of Good over the forces of Evil. And, when medieval artists illustrated Psalm 91, they often depicted the reference quite literally, by an image of Christ treading on evil-looking animals. So it is not simply the Archangel Michael who treads on the dragon of evil, but Christ also does this in medieval art. And the image appears so frequently, and looks so similar to the images of St. Michael (except for the fact that Christ has a cross-inscribed halo, you recall) that *any* image of a dragon-trampling figure in medieval art would, we imagine, necessarily call into mind a whole wealth of symbolic meaning. This richness of meaning goes far beyond the individual context or specificity of one given image, and implies deep and related levels of meaning and association.

Understanding that there is often “more than meets the eye” in medieval art marks an important stage in our visual literacy. When we realize that our surface-level reading of medieval art *only* “scratches the surface” of implied or symbolic meaning, we come a little bit closer to understanding the richness of medieval art as perceived by contemporary viewers. Obviously we need to be careful in doing this as correctly as we can, and not reading twentieth century meanings *into* medieval art. And this is where art historians must rely, if at all possible, on written texts and contemporary accounts which tell us what the symbols meant in their own time.

The three examples chosen above—from medieval manuscript illumination—are selected samples of individual visual schemes common

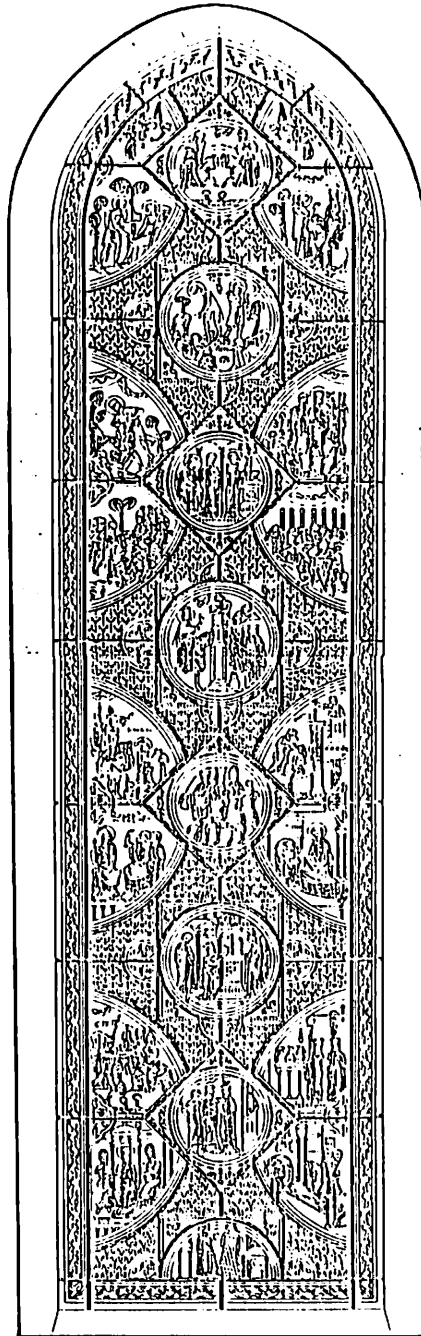


Figure 5. Chartres Cathedral, Charlemagne window, ca. 1225.

in medieval art. If we now look back to the problematic situation with which we originally began this study—standing, for example, in Chartres Cathedral and looking at the stained glass windows—let us see if we can now apply some of our new visual literacy to a larger and more complicated example of medieval art.

Chartres, among the first cathedrals to be built in the High Gothic style (ca. 1200), is quite dark inside. Chartres is famous for retaining a significant number of twelfth and thirteenth century stained glass windows—176 windows to be exact—which create glowing visions of dominant blue and red tones. These windows contribute significantly to the supernatural atmosphere inside the building, rather than actually throwing an immense amount of light into the building's interior. Ongoing restoration efforts on the windows at Chartres are today clearing away some of the dirt and grime of modern air pollution (a problem typical of all medieval stained glass), and the windows are slowly being brought back to at least an approximation of their medieval appearance.

If we walk up the north aisle (the left side of the cathedral), almost as far as the easternmost end of the building, and pause beneath one of the many stained glass windows there, we will find the “Charlemagne window”—created in the thirteenth century, probably ca. 1225.<sup>8</sup> The window is tall and narrow, pointed at the top: a typical lancet window. The window (see figures 5-7) is divided up into many small panels. Down the center of the window are seven full panels—round alternating with rectangular—and a half-circle at the very bottom. There are also eight additional half-circles on the sides of the window, each half-circle divided into two scenes. If we stop to count all the panels (there are twenty-four separate scenes depicted in just this one window), our first impulse may be to simply regard this window as indeed a very pleasing and beautiful thing, but also a real “visual overload.” How possibly are we to make order of this seeming chaos? Is there any way that we can understand the stories depicted here? Is there any organizational principle at work?

Indeed, there are several organizational principles here and the first one to understand is that generally speaking, one reads a stained glass window from left to right (like most books), and one begins at the bottom. Let us begin then with the lower-most half-circle, noting immediately that it is smaller than any of the other panels and appears even a bit oddly isolated. This small semicircle doesn't seem to “fit” with any design sequence—running either up or across the window—and in fact, the subject depicted in this panel does not “fit” iconographically with any of the other narrative story lines in the window. This is a representation which symbolizes the donors of the window—the people who paid for it. In this case, it was the guild of furriers—makers of fur garments. One can see a furrier holding up a fur robe (to a prospective customer?). In fact, many of the windows at

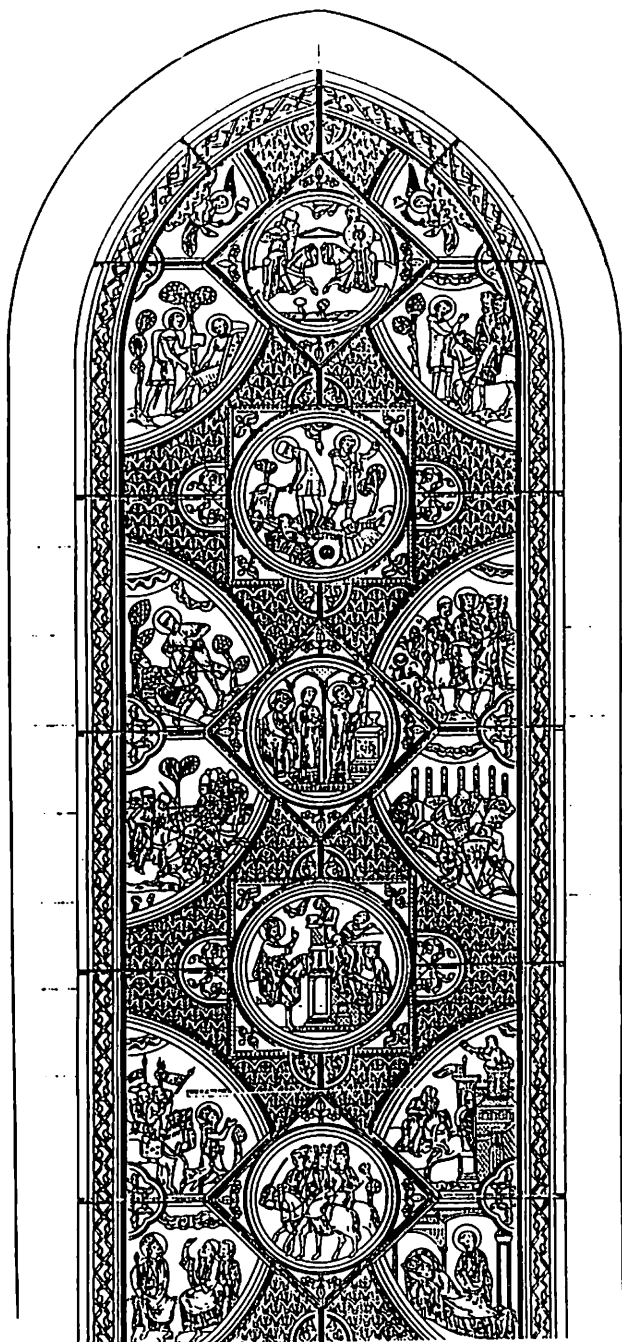


Figure 6. Chartres Cathedral, Charlemagne window, ca. 1225.

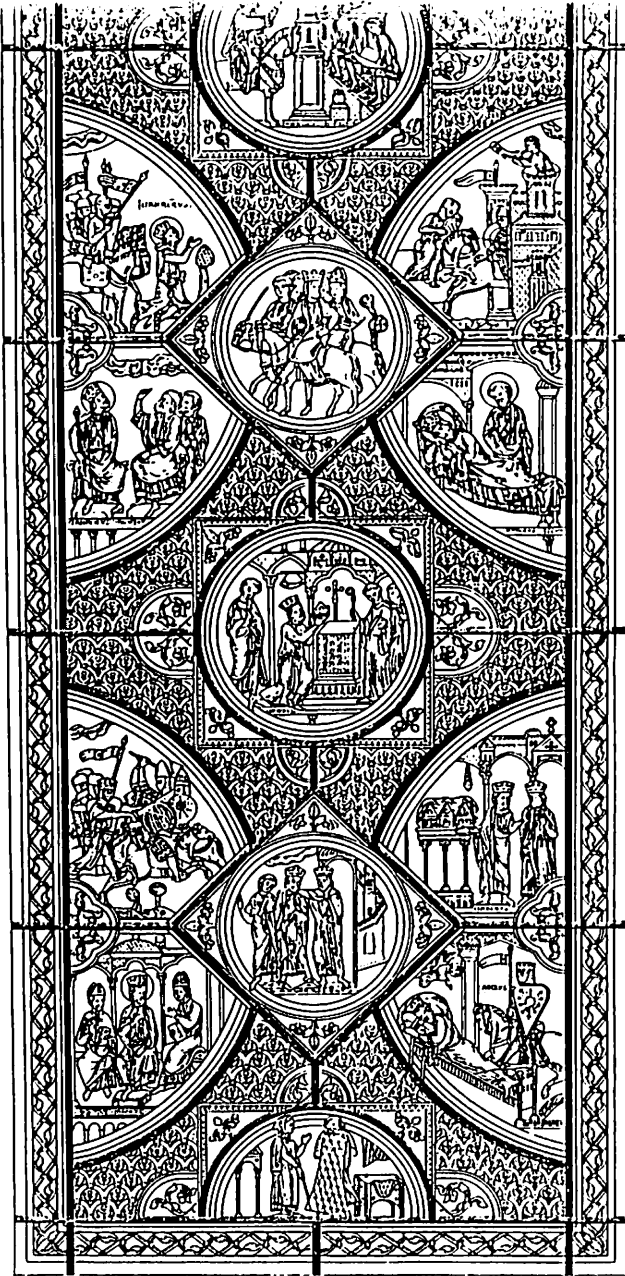


Figure 7. Chartres Cathedral, Charlemagne window, ca. 1225.

Chartres were collectively paid for by the guilds (members of certain trades) of the city of Chartres. Having contributed to the finances of the cathedral, the guilds then wished to have credit for doing so; thus the explanation for this particular scene.

Having passed this hurdle, let us continue now with the main narratives of the window. These episodes deal with the life and deeds of Charlemagne—an historic figure raised to legendary status in the medieval period—the prototype of the good, wise, just, and fearless Christian ruler. If we study the lower group (figure 7) of five scenes in panels—two semi-circles connected by a rectangle—we are immediately introduced to the most historically ridiculous but also the most symbolically significant aspect of the medieval Charlemagne mythology. Charlemagne, in the lower left vignette, identified by his crown and the Latin inscription (*Carolus*), is being visited by two messengers. Their raised-hand gestures indicate that a conversation is taking place. What are they talking about?

To find this out, we turn to the lower right vignette. Here we see the fourth-century emperor, Constantine, sleeping while an armed soldier on horseback appears in his bedroom. Constantine's sleep is not at all disturbed by this looming warrior on horseback, and in fact, this represents a dream-vision of Constantine's in which the (eighth century) Christian warrior-king Charlemagne appears as a solution to his problems with the infidels. The infidels, one understands, were attacking the Holy Land, an event of less historic relevance for either Constantine or Charlemagne but quite specifically relevant to the thirteenth century—when the window was created. Anyway, Constantine sends his messengers to summon Charlemagne for help. Charlemagne responds to Constantine's request for aid and is welcomed by Constantine—we see their meeting taking place in the middle linking medallion. Charlemagne battles successfully against the pagans in the next left-side vignette (the pagans are identified by their round shields, in contrast to the heart-shaped or triangular shields of the Christians), and Constantine, in gratitude, gives him precious relics (including, incidentally, relics which later came to Chartres) in the next right-side vignette.

Moving up one more segment, a single medallion provides vertical linkage—in terms of design and in terms of subject matter—to the next cluster of episodes. This roundel depicts Charlemagne bringing the relics to his chapel at Aachen, an episode which marks a transition to more coherently eighth-century events.

The next cluster of episodes deals with Charlemagne's struggles with the pagans on his own territory. The lower left vignette in this sequence shows Charlemagne, again crowned and enthroned, looking up at the sky and clouds. He is accompanied by two other seated people who are also looking up at, and pointing out, these clouds. Something is important about these clouds. What is it?

As in the sequence below, we look to the right-side medallion for explanation. And here we find a scene which provides an extremely close parallel with the “Dream-Vision of Constantine” episode below. The scenes look very similar, although here it is Charlemagne sleeping, and St. James who appears in his dream. St. James is telling Charlemagne to follow the Milky Way to Spain, and to free his shrine at Compostela from the pagans. This explains why Charlemagne and his courtiers in the opposite panel are so interested in the clouds in the sky. But it also explains a lot more than that.

Recall the discussion above of the St. Matthew—St. Michael—Christ-trampling-on-evil-beasts image conflation. We saw that the use of standard conventions or easily-recognized images in medieval art can often imply a wealth of symbolic meanings far beyond the specific context. The same thing is happening here. The fact that both Constantine and Charlemagne are depicted experiencing dream-visions does not mean that they both were somehow especially prone to this type of sleep-troubling experience. Supernatural visions appear to them in both cases telling them specifically to fight against the pagans. The image of Charlemagne is thus also imbued with the symbolic power of Constantine—the first Christian Emperor, after all. Both images participate in, and contribute to, the evocation of powerful symbolic meaning; they contribute authority and justification to each other. The level of implied meaning far surpasses the particular story in each case. And finally, it doesn’t take too much imagination to think of another important image of dream-vision in Christian art: the angel appearing to the three Magi, with instructions to “follow the star” to the birth-place of Christ. As we might imagine, artistic representations of the Dream of the Magi in medieval art<sup>9</sup> bear a great deal of similarity to the dream-vision conventions we are concerned with here. It is not that medieval artists, when they needed to depict a dream-vision, made use of the same old type of picture over and over again. But the repetition of conventional types conjures up powerful associations and deepens the levels of meaning to be read in any given image.

Back to the story. Charlemagne follows the Milky Way to Spain; we see him doing so in the central linking rectangle in this image cluster. In the upper left vignette we see him praying before a (victorious) battle against the pagans, which takes place in the upper right vignette. This battle scene (the successful storming of a city held by pagans) is another good example of medieval visual shorthand—only two soldiers are actually depicted engaging in battle here, but the rest we understand by implication. The specific identification of this city is not particularly important either; the architectural forms imply a typical medieval walled city, and this one city “stands for” the many other cities successfully taken by Charlemagne and his army during the Spanish campaign.<sup>10</sup>



On the next level up, we again find an isolated roundel which provides a transition to the subsequent tier of scenes and also provides a visual and narrative resting point in this ongoing story of courage and conflict. Here Charlemagne, on horseback and with raised-finger gesture, is directing the construction of a church.<sup>11</sup> The scene provides a respite from the business of battle, but also, and more importantly, reinforces the reasons for this warfare. Charlemagne's piety and Christian dedication are reinforced in this image and are paralleled in the other isolated roundel one stage below—Charlemagne's bringing of holy relics from Constantinople to Aachen.

The next tier of scenes (figure 6) also combines images of battle with images of piety. A Christian knight fights against a pagan king (lower left), and a miracle is depicted (lower right). This miracle—of the flowering lances—shows Charlemagne's soldiers asleep while their spears burst into flowers. This does not mean that their weapons became useless; it signifies that these soldiers will die as martyrs; they will lose their lives in battling for the Christian faith. (Martyrs are normally depicted in medieval art with some type of foliage, usually palm branches. This is another standard iconographic clue: a saint holding a palm branch is probably a martyr.) Finally, we are introduced to the great hero Roland, and the remaining scenes of the window focus on his activities. He kills a giant (upper left), and remains behind in Spain with a small but valiant group of warriors—the rearguard of Charlemagne's army. Charlemagne crosses the Pyrenees in the upper right panel here.

From the medieval epic *The Song of Roland*, we know what happens next. The rearguard is attacked, ambushed, and many lives are lost. The medieval audience certainly knew this, so the medieval artist left it out and concentrated upon the most thrilling and anguishing moment of the story—everyone's favorite part. Roland is depicted twice in the next single roundel. He tries to break his sword on the rock, and he finally blows his great horn, Oliphant, to summon help from Charlemagne. The fact that Roland is depicted twice in the same medallion, standing right next to himself, is another one of those common features in medieval art which may trouble the modern mind. What looks important *is* important, however; both of these scenes are important and are easily understood as separate episodes in a continuing narrative structure. Seen together, the images tell of Roland's bravery, and the appearance of the sanctioning hand of God in the sky adds a cosmic dimension to the imagery—making any question of historical or design coherency quite irrelevant in the infinite scheme of things.

Roland dies in the final large medallion on the upper left, and the sad news is brought to Charlemagne in the last scene on the upper right. These scenes are linked by the rectangular panel at the very apex of the window depicting Roland battling with the Saracen king. Obviously, this battle

preceded the death of Roland as depicted in the previous vignettes, and this chronological glitch doubtless partially contributed to the rearrangement of this panel during a restoration of the window in 1921.<sup>12</sup> Our diagram shows the window before this restoration took place. When one visits Chartres today, one will find a different panel located in the apex of the window—the rectangular panel depicting the celebration of Mass (in our diagram, correctly placed as the third central panel down from the top).

This depiction of a church service is identified as a rather problematic episode in the life of Charlemagne—the Mass of St. Gilles—in which an angel appears bearing a scroll upon which is written a sin committed by Charlemagne, as well as the pardon for this sin. This was a sin which Charlemagne found too horrible to confess, but for which he was granted forgiveness by the intercession of St. Gilles.

The exact nature of this sin is not clearly described in the early texts of the Charlemagne legend, although in the thirteenth century it was generally understood to have involved an incestuous relationship between Charlemagne and his sister, with the birth of Roland as the result. The placement of this panel as an introduction to the “Roland episodes” in the window thus makes logical narrative sense, while also reinforcing the themes of sacrifice and martyrdom, salvation and victory (over sin and evil) so dominant in the overall meaning of the window. The censuring angels flanking the upper panel of the battling warriors (Christian versus pagan) again reinforce the spiritual meaning of these carefully chosen “historical” episodes and images.

Finally, it is time to step back from this in-depth reading of details in the “Charlemagne window” at Chartres, and ask ourselves whether or not this process has contributed to our appreciation and understanding. Our previous situation—of appreciation combined with bafflement—has been replaced by appreciation plus knowledge, and a deep knowledge, at that. We have used our visual skills to read the symbolic shorthand of medieval art and have found a wealth and depth of meaning far beyond the surface level.

The “worst” thing that could happen to us now is that we may need more than the tourist’s 45-minutes-or-less to visit Chartres Cathedral. In fact, we may begin to feel that forty-five minutes is not even enough time to look at one window. And, with 175 more windows to look at in this one building (not all of such complexity, admittedly) we may begin to feel that even a lifetime is not long enough to read all that there is to be read in medieval art. We may become like the monks mentioned by St. Bernard: “. . . more tempted to read in the marble than in our books.”<sup>13</sup>

But might it not also be possible that in learning to read the visual language of medieval art, we might also be learning new ways of looking at our own visual language? What “clues” can we think of—which we *must* be

using, albeit unconsciously—when we filter, process, and cope with the bombardment of visual imagery in the twentieth century? How is it that we are able to “flip through” magazines? Change television stations so quickly with our remote control device? How can we sometimes do these things simultaneously? How do we “read” the images of the modern world?

There is no doubt that the visual language of the twentieth century differs radically from that of the Middle Ages. Our ways of looking, habits of perception, and familiarity with standard conventions are different as well. The richness of understanding that results from the patient and informed viewing of the art of the past will enrich our general visual literacy enormously. In learning to look carefully at the art of the past, we become more perceptive viewers of the art of the present. We will become informed *listeners* with our *eyes*, knowledgeable readers of the non-verbal languages of imagery which constantly surround us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> C. Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art: 300-1150, Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1971, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> A. Katzenellenbogen, *The Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral*, New York, 1959.

<sup>3</sup> C. Davis-Weyer, p. 170. Letter of St. Bernard of Clairvaux to William of St. Thierry, c. 1125.

<sup>4</sup> F. Avril, *Manuscrits Normands XI-XIIème Siècles*, (exhibition catalogue), Rouen, 1975, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Manuscrits Normands*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>6</sup> R. A. B. Mynors, *Durham Cathedral Manuscripts to the End of the Twelfth Century*, Oxford, 1939; H. Swarzenski, "Der Stil der Bibel Carilefs von Durham," *Form und Inhalt, Kunstgeschichtliche Studien für Otto Schmidt*, Stuttgart, 1951, pp. 89-95.

<sup>7</sup> The traditional symbols for the Four Evangelists are: the man, or angel for Matthew; the lion for Mark; the ox, or bull for Luke; and the eagle for John. These symbols derive from references in the Old and New Testaments: Ezekiel 1:5-14, and Revelation 4:6-8. The symbols were adopted in the early Christian period as standard representations of the authors of the Gospels. See; J. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, New York, 1974, pp. 128-29.

<sup>8</sup> C. Maines, "The Charlemagne Window at Chartres Cathedral: New Considerations on Text and Image," *Speculum* LII/4, 1977, pp. 801-23, with extensive bibliography; see also: E. Male, *The Gothic Image*, New York, 1958, pp. 347-52; and S. Nichols, *Romanesque Signs: Early Medieval Narrative and Iconography*, New Haven, 1983, pp. 95-105.

<sup>9</sup> One of the most charming examples of the Dream of the Magi in medieval art is of course the early twelfth-century capital at Autun, attributed to the Burgundian sculptor Gislebertus. See: D. Grivot and G. Zarnecki, *Gislebertus, Sculptor of Autun*, New York, 1961; also E. Male, *The Gothic Image*, pp. 212-16.

<sup>10</sup> Maines, p. 811.

<sup>11</sup> The specific identification of this church is a matter of scholarly dispute. However, it does seem more than likely that this representation of "church construction" is another type of "generic" image—symbolizing not *one* church in particular, but *many* churches founded, enriched, or dedicated by the pious Charlemagne.

<sup>12</sup> Maines, p. 814 ff.

<sup>13</sup> C. Davis-Weyer, p. 170.

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Scale of Miles  
0 50 100 150  
**ENGLAND**