

Art and the Medieval Pilgrimage for Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture (Oxford, 2012) [2000 words]

Pilgrimage art is visual culture intended to enhance or direct a pilgrim's experience at a particular sacred site. The artwork is quite varied, but it tends to fall into broad categories including reliquaries and shrines, architectural settings and decoration, and pilgrim costumes and souvenirs. Whether adorning massive, international centers (Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela) or tiny parish churches, works of art were used to direct pilgrims into specific areas of the church and to focus their attention on significant features. The architectural forms, shrines, altars, wall paintings, stained glass, and sculpture coalesced, dignifying and enhancing the sacred spaces. Sculptural capitals directed a pilgrim's view, canopies were lifted to reveal sparkling shrines, and carved doorways framed a pilgrim's view of a miraculous sculpture. The movement, music, and smells of incense and beeswax burning merged to make pilgrimage an extraordinary event.

Reliquaries

The idea of pilgrimage was to travel to a sacred place where earthly rules were superseded by miracles. Such places were created by relics: physical remains of saints whose holiness lingered in their bones, hair, or clothes. Reliquaries preserved the relic from the elements and thieves, and displayed and symbolized the sanctity within.

Although the contents were more valued than the reliquaries themselves, a luxurious exterior was a necessary component, for legends warned of dire consequences when a saint's relics were not properly housed. So, artisans created reliquaries of gold, silver,

gems, enamels, and crystal. Early Christian cofferet or box reliquaries made of ivory or silver were decorated with scenes of Christ or various saints. Later reliquaries were shaped like purses or small churches, while others framed their relics, most common in reliquaries of the True Cross. If sufficiently large, the reliquary could depict complex narratives of the life of the saint contained within.

By the 10th century, reliquaries sometimes approximated body shapes: heads, arms, and feet. Known as “speaking reliquaries,” they often contained the illustrated skulls, finger or foot bones. Head or arm reliquaries commonly contained all kinds of bones because reliquary shapes had more to do with the symbolic power of the head and hand. Indeed, arm reliquaries were often raised up and used to bless the congregation. Many relic cults focused on the physical aspects of Christ, including drops of blood collected at the crucifixion and images of Christ’s sweaty face seared miraculously onto St. Veronica’s handkerchief. Most revolutionary was the mystery of the Eucharistic sacrament. The consecrated host was transubstantiated into Christ’s flesh and the wine into Christ’s blood. Wafers were placed into their own reliquaries (monstrances), which were built like miniature cathedrals or shrines, displaying the host through rock crystal windows or cylinders.

Shrines

Sometimes particular relics were so revered that they were preserved in something more imposing than a reliquary: a shrine. The shrine had to provide both security and access. Relic theft or damage by over-eager pilgrims could ruin a sacred site, yet if the relic were completely hidden, it would frustrate pilgrims who needed its help,

so artists invented ways to keep the relics safe while still allowing access to pilgrims. In the early medieval period (4th-6th century), shrines were placed over the saints' graves. But people began to question whether it was appropriate for a saint to be placed in the ground like ordinary people, leading to their elevation in altars or in containers placed on altars. For instance, St. Cuthbert was moved in 698 from a typical grave to a tomb-chest placed next to the main altar at Lindesfarne, England.

By the 10th century, reliquary caskets were moved onto their own base, usually a slab on pillars. In 1104, Cuthbert's relics were moved again and placed into a shrine supported by nine columns. This made the reliquary more visible to the pilgrim while keeping it away from thieving hands. Thieves were tempted by massive shrines like the Shrine of the Three Magi, Cologne Cathedral (1180-1206), composed of jewels, enamel, gold, and silver. Such media were believed to have intrinsic power which, when combined with potent imagery, became an object for intense worship. These large reliquaries were protected by wooden or cloth covers which were lifted by hand or a winched chain.

The foramina shrine type became popular during the twelfth century in imitation of Christ's tomb found in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem. Covered by marble slabs, it featured three round openings through which pilgrims could touch or kiss the rock on either side, allowing pilgrims access to the tomb while preventing them from defacing it in their eagerness to touch it. This type of shrine was transformed in the 13th century to a tall stone base carved with niches for pilgrim prayer.

Many medieval shrines were refurbished in the mid to late 13th century in response to the growing number of pilgrims and their increased prestige, as reflected in

visits and gifts from royalty. Because of this, artists and their patrons found ways to interlace issues of legitimacy, identity, and nationalism with the more traditionally pious meanings of these objects. The intricate iconography of many reliquaries and shrines were designed by scholarly clerics who used them to explicate complicated mystical ideas: on one level the imagery spoke to clergy and on another level it educated neophytes about the mysteries inherent in their manifold symbolism.

Shrines did not always sit loftily upon an altar; rather they were commonly paraded around the church, the town, and the countryside in lively processions. These included liturgical equipment, costumes, and banners to celebrate pilgrimages to other saints, to express fraternity, and to mark many special occasions.

Churches, Decoration

Nonetheless, the reliquary's home was the church, and pilgrimage architecture facilitated the visit of the devotee. The space allowed visitors to move through the church without interfering with the processional liturgy, endangering other pilgrims by being crushed together, or accidentally causing damage to the fabric of the building or the treasures displayed on the altars therein. It also focused the attention of the pilgrims on certain altars, shrines, and experiences. A popular plan included wide or double side aisles so that the crowds could be shunted off to the side away from the nave (where the mass was performed). Following the aisles, pilgrims walked into an ambulatory which directed them around the choir area. Many churches, wishing to allow access to as many important relics as possible, developed radiating chapels which contained separate altars.

There, a smaller number of visitors could more closely approach the reliquaries displayed without fear of being crushed.

Other churches focused the devotion onto a single altar or shrine, placing it in the crypt or behind the main altar. Many of these were surrounded by lockable iron gates and some were protected by watching chambers, allowing clergy to keep an eye on the shrine below. From there, the clergy could assist pilgrims in prayer, receive donations, and minister to the sick. Some churches were designed to lead visitors on a mini-pilgrimage through the church, encouraging worshippers to go from altar to altar. At Canterbury Cathedral, England (11th-15th century), the pilgrims visited no less than four separate stations which took them from the main floor to the crypt and back up to the choir area. At the Jerusalem Chapel, Bruges (15th century), the devotee recreated the Holy Land pilgrimage by ascending the stairs to Golgotha, then descending and moving to a door which was so small they were forced to stoop. Once through, the pilgrim stood up in the claustrophobic space only to be confronted with an image of the dead Christ buried in the sepulcher.

Decoration guided movement through the church and explicated its peculiar mysteries. Images made the inaccessible, accessible; they illustrated the ethereal and the infinite. Pictorial programs differed among cult centers, even when illustrating similar religious truths. These distinctive presentations helped the viewer apprehend the peculiar aspects of a given saint or the specific message of local theology.

Now mostly faded or absent, brilliant wall paintings once adorned pilgrimage churches. Pilgrims marched beside the saints depicted on columns (as at St. Albans Cathedral, England, 13th century) and gazed at murals that portrayed the life and miracles

of the saint whose ministrations they sought. Stained glass windows also engaged pilgrims with their colorful examinations of saintly miracles. Specific altars and shrines were commonly placed near specific windows allowing the visitors' gaze to make the connection between the story and the objects set before them. Images of devotees like themselves receiving divine assistance (St. William Window, York Minster, England, 15th century) promised similar succor.

Sculpture decorating the exterior and interior of churches sought to engage the pilgrim in the ongoing story of salvation. At St. Lazare, Autun, France, 12th century, pilgrims were shown joining the line of the blessed at the Last Judgment. These sculpted pilgrims wore caps, carried walking sticks, and sported shoulder bags, one decorated with a cross and the other with a large scallop shell pilgrim souvenir. Sculpture also commented on spaces through which pilgrims walked or through which they were allowed to only gaze. The St. Esprit Chapel, Rue, Picardy, France, early 15th century, framed the miraculous Volto Sancto with a portal opening decorated with images of the passion of Christ, emphasizing the emotional context of the main image.

Even floor decoration directed devotees' thoughts. Large-scale walkable labyrinths, for example, at Chartres Cathedral, France (*c.* 1220), replicated the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The devotee traced the lines of the labyrinth, turning round and losing sense of a particular place, which focused them on the journey until the center was reached.

Imaginative Pilgrimage Art

The loss of the Holy Land with the Muslim conquest challenged the idea of the sacred tied to a specific place, spurring symbolic or imaginative pilgrimage from the 13th

century onward. Through contemplation of particular imagery, devotees hoped to conjure glimpses of God. Visualizing Christ, particularly his suffering, was part of affective piety. The laity, responding to such prompts, went on mystical pilgrimages through images of contiguous landscapes which manipulated imaginative space. Sometimes paintings illustrating the life of Christ deliberately mixed up the scenes, forcing the viewer to gaze in multiple directions as if following a more arduous pilgrimage route visually. This is also seen in manuscripts that trace the route to the Holy Land by encouraging clerics to fold out strips of vellum in order to take their personal meditative journey.

Pilgrims' Costumes & Souvenirs

The pilgrims' journey through art was reflected in their depiction. They were shown garbed in comfortable clothing, wearing sturdy shoes and a broad-brimmed hat, while carrying a walking stick (for support), a bottle (to drink from), and a shoulder bag (to carry their belongings). This can be seen in a 12th-century illumination from St. Albans, where Christ appears to his disciples on the way to Emmaus. On his bag is a pilgrim badge in the form of a cross. Most often badges took the form of a scallop shell. Initially associated with St. James at Santiago de Compostela, scallop shells were copied by other pilgrimage shrines, and eventually became the symbol of the completed pilgrimage itself.

Other images were soon adopted by pilgrimage sites. From the late 11th -16th centuries, to prevent pilgrims from chipping off portions of shrines, churches commissioned pilgrim souvenirs in the form of pewter badges and tin and lead vials.

Mass-produced, they varied from geometric plaques to intricate openwork. Many badges were painted, embellished with elaborate borders, or backed with colored paper.

Pilgrims believed that the souvenirs transmitted the power of the relic or sacred image which they honored. People dipped pilgrim badges in wine to be drunk as medicine or daubed them on body parts. Badges were cast into church bells and baptismal fonts to ward off evil spirits and harsh weather. They were buried in the foundations of houses, sewn into the margins of manuscripts, and placed in fields to guard against vermin infestations. Ultimately, most pilgrim souvenirs were tossed into rivers, rather like modern-day wishing wells because their owners hoped for even greater rewards.

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