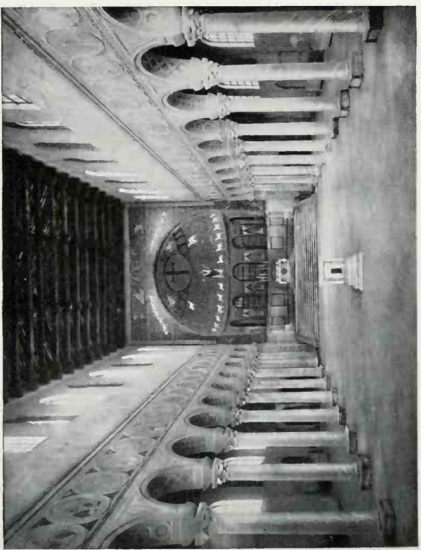


CHAPTER 6 · A PARTING OF WAYS
Rome and Byzantium, Fifth to Thirteenth Century A.D.



84. An early Christian Basilica: S. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, built about A.D. 530

WHEN, in the year A.D. 311, the Emperor Constantine established the Christian Church as a power in the State, the problems with which it saw itself confronted were enormous. During the periods of persecution there had been no need, and indeed no possibility, of building public places of worship. The churches and assembly halls that did exist were small and inconspicuous. But once the Church had become the greatest power in the realm, its whole relationship to art had to be reconsidered. The places of worship could not be modelled on the ancient temples, for their function was entirely different. The interior of the temple was usually only a small shrine for the statue of the god. **Pro-cessions and sacrifices took place outside. The church, on the other hand, had to find room for the whole congregation that assembled for service when the priest read Mass at the high altar, or delivered his sermon.** Thus it came about that churches were not modelled on pagan temples, but on the type of large assembly

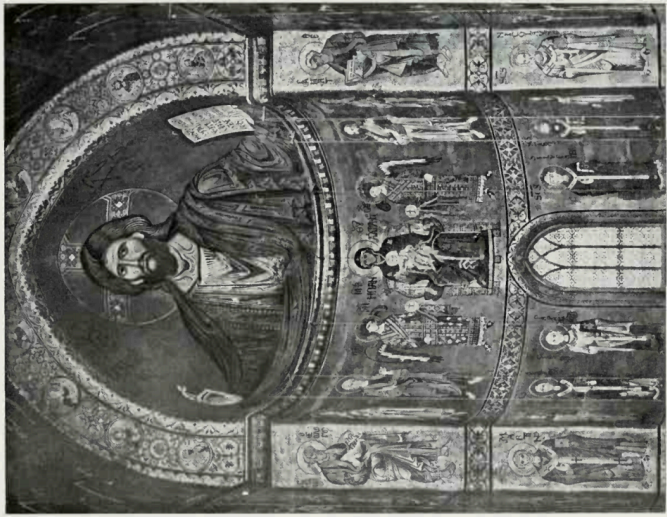
Mac OS dock with various application icons including Finder, Mail, Safari, and social media apps.



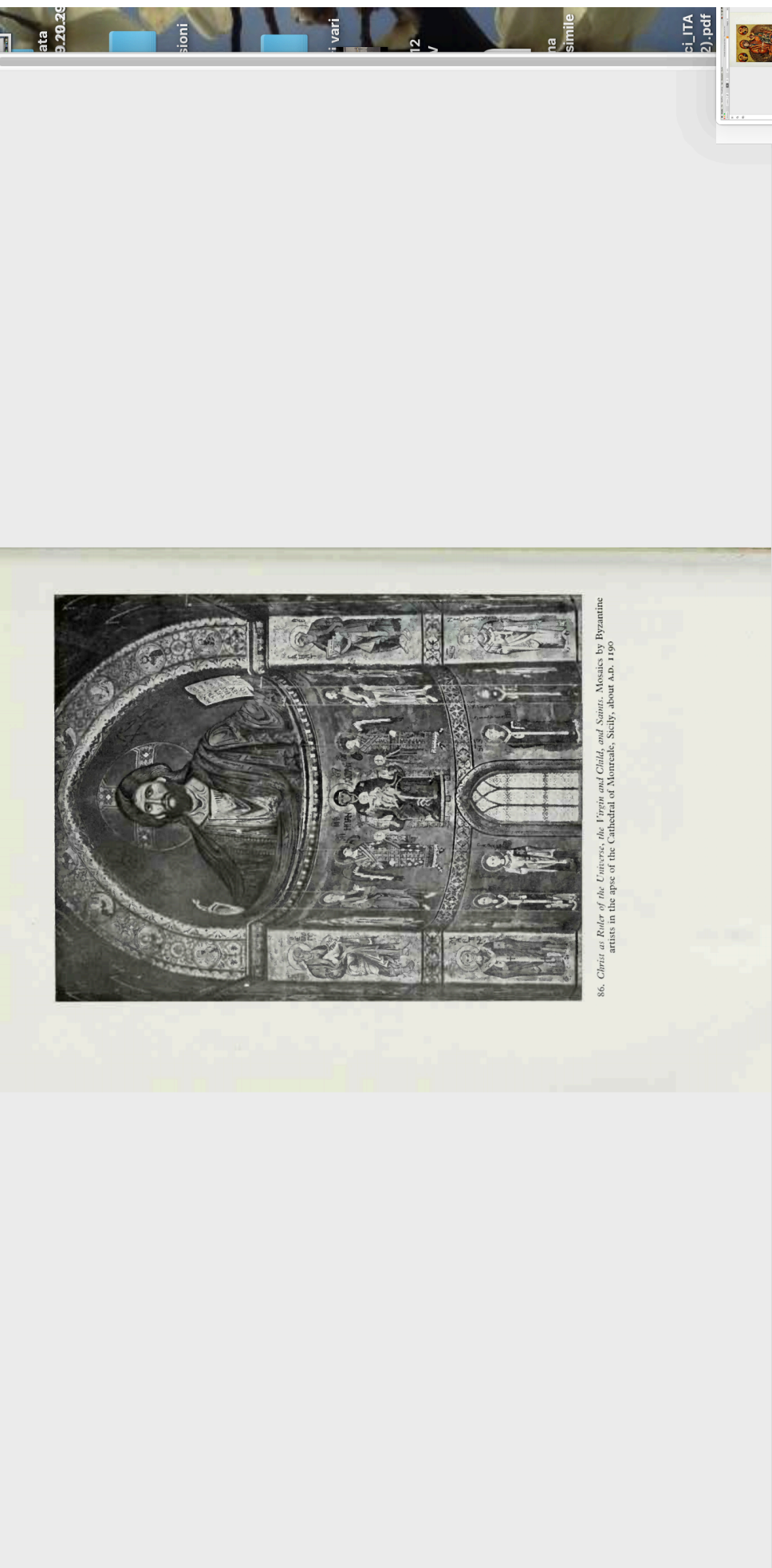
85. *Enthroned Madonna and Child*. Probably painted in Constantinople about A.D. 1200
Washington, National Gallery of Art, Mellon Collection

Navigation and utility icons: back, forward, search, and a 'Mostra Blocco Note' button.

System dock with various application icons: Messages, Photos, Calendar (NOV 4), Reminders, Notes, Safari, Mail, App Store, and others.



86. *Christ as Ruler of the Universe, the Virgin and Child, and Saints*. Mosaic by Byzantine artists in the apse of the Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily, about A.D. 1190



A vertical dock of application icons including: a smiley face, a rocket, a calendar showing 'NOV 4', a document, a speech bubble with '100', a speech bubble with '2', a speech bubble with '1', a colorful wheel, a bar chart, a presentation screen, a magnifying glass, a book, a globe, a compass, a speech bubble with '1', a speech bubble with '2', a speech bubble with '1', a person icon, a PDF icon, a trash can, and a 'nuovo-c...di-dante' icon.

A Parting of Ways



87. *The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes*. Mosaic from the Basilica of S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, about A.D. 520

children. **Painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read,** he said.

It was of immense importance for the history of art that such a great authority had come out in favour of painting. His saying was to be quoted again and again whenever people attacked the use of images in churches. But it is clear that the type of art which was thus admitted was of a rather restricted kind. **Gregory had, in fact, the idea about art which, as we saw, generally prevailed at that time. If his purpose was to be served, the story had to be told as clearly and simply as possible, and anything that might divert attention from this main and sacred purpose should be omitted.** At first, artists still used the methods of story-telling that had been developed by Roman art, but gradually they came to concentrate more and more on what was strictly essential. Fig. 87 shows a work in which these principles have been applied with greatest consistency. It comes from a basilica in Ravenna, then, round about A.D. 500, a great seaport and the capital city on Italy's east coast. It illustrates the story from the Gospels in which Christ fed five thousand people on five loaves and two fishes. A Hellenistic artist might have seized the opportunity to portray a large crowd of people in a gay and dramatic scene. But the master of these days chose a very different method. His work is not a painting done with deft strokes of the brush—it is a **mosaic**, laboriously put together, of stone

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or glass cubes which yield deep, full colours and give to the church interior, covered with such mosaics, an appearance of solemn splendour. The way in which the story is told shows the spectator that something miraculous and sacred is happening. The background is laid out with fragments of golden glass and on this gold background no natural or realistic scene is enacted. The still and calm figure of Christ occupies the centre of the picture. It is not the bearded Christ known to us, but the long-haired young man as He lived in the imagination of the early Christians. He wears a purple robe, and stretches out His arms in blessing on both sides, where stand two apostles offering Him the bread and fishes in order that the miracle may be accomplished. They carry the food with covered hands, as subjects bringing tribute for their rulers used to do at that time. Indeed, the scene looks like a solemn ceremony. We see that the artist attached a deep significance to what he represented. To him it was not only a strange miracle which had happened a few hundred years before in Palestine. It was the symbol and token of Christ's abiding power which was embodied in the Church. That explains, or helps to explain, the way in which Christ looks steadfastly at the beholder: It is he whom Christ will feed.

At first glance, such a picture looks rather stiff and rigid. There is nothing of the mastery of movement and expression which was the pride of Greek art, and which persisted until Roman times. The way in which the figures are planted in strict frontal view may almost remind us of certain children's drawings. And yet the artist must have been very well acquainted with Greek art. He knew exactly how to drape a cloak round a body so that the main joints should remain visible through the folds. He knew how to mix tones of differing shades in his mosaic to convey the colours of flesh or of the sky. He marked the shadows on the ground, and had no difficulty in representing foreshortening. If the picture looks rather primitive to us, it must be because the artist wanted to be simple. The Egyptian ideas about the importance of clarity in the representation of all objects had returned with great force because of the stress which the Church laid on clarity. But the forms which the artists used in this new attempt were not the simple forms of primitive art, but the developed forms of Greek painting. Thus Christian art of the Middle Ages became a curious mixture of primitive and sophisticated methods. The power of observation of nature, which we saw awakening in Greece about 500 B.C., was put to sleep again about A.D. 300. Artists no longer checked their formulae against reality. They no longer set out to make discoveries about how to represent a body, or how to create the illusion of depth. But the discoveries which had been made were never lost. Greek and Roman art provided an immense stock of figures standing sitting, bending down or falling. All these types could prove useful in the telling of a story, and so they were assiduously copied and adapted to ever-new contexts. But the purpose for which they were used was now so radically different that we cannot be surprised that, superficially, the pictures betray little of their classical origin.

Mac OS dock area containing various application icons such as Finder, Mail, Safari, and system utilities.

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This question of the proper purpose of art in churches proved of immense importance for the whole history of Europe. For it was one of the principal issues on which the Eastern, Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire, whose capital was Byzantium or Constantinople, refused to accept the lead of the Latin Pope. One party there was against all images of a religious nature. They were called iconoclasts or image-smashers. In 745 they gained the upper hand and all religious art was forbidden in the Eastern Church. But their opponents were even less in agreement with Pope Gregory's ideas. To them images were not just useful, they were holy. The arguments with which they tried to justify this point of view were as subtle as those used by the other party: 'If God in His mercy could decide to reveal Himself to mortal eyes in the human nature of Christ,' they argued, 'why should He not also be willing to manifest Himself in visible images? We do not worship these images themselves as the pagans did. We worship God and the Saints through across their images.' Whatever we may think of the logic of this plea, its importance for the history of art was tremendous. For when this party had returned to power after a century of repression the paintings in a church could no longer be regarded as mere illustrations for the use of those who could not read. They were looked upon as mysterious reflections of the supernatural world. The Eastern Church, therefore, could no longer allow the artist to follow his fancy in these works. Surely it was not any beautiful painting of a mother with her child that could be accepted as the true sacred image or 'icon' of the Mother of God, but only types hallowed by an age-old tradition.

Thus, the Byzantines came to insist almost as strictly as the Egyptians on the observance of tradition. But there were two sides to this question. By asking the artist who painted sacred images to keep strictly to the ancient models, the Byzantine Church helped to preserve the ideas and achievements of Greek art in the types used for drapery, faces or gestures. If we look at a Byzantine altar-painting of the Holy Virgin like Fig. 85, it may seem very remote from the achievements of Greek art. And yet, the way the folds are draped round the body and radiate round the elbows and knees, the method of modelling the face and hands by marking the shadows, and even the sweep of the Virgin's throne, would have been impossible without the conquests of Greek and Hellenistic painting. Despite a certain rigidity, Byzantine art therefore remained closer to nature than the art of the West in subsequent periods. On the other hand, the stress on tradition, and the necessity of keeping to certain permitted ways of representing Christ or the Holy Virgin, made it difficult for Byzantine artists to develop their personal gifts. But this conservatism developed only gradually, and it is wrong to imagine that the artists of the period had no scope whatever. It was they, in fact, who transformed the simple illustrations of early Christian art into great cycles of large and solemn images that dominate the interior of Byzantine churches. As we look at the mosaics done by these Greek artists in the Balkans and in Italy in the Middle Ages, we see that this

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Oriental empire had in fact succeeded in reviving something of the grandeur and majesty of ancient Oriental art, and in using it for the glorification of Christ and His power. Fig. 86 gives an idea of how impressive this art could be. It shows the apse of the church of *Monreale*, in Sicily, which was decorated by Byzantine craftsmen shortly before 1190. Sicily itself belonged to the Western or Latin Church, which accounts for the fact that among the Saints arrayed on each side of the window we find the earliest representation of St. Thomas Becket, the news of whose murder some twenty years earlier had resounded throughout Europe. But apart from this choice of Saints the artists have kept close to their native Byzantine tradition. The faithful assembled in the church would find themselves face to face with the majestic figure of Christ, represented as the Ruler of the Universe. His right hand raised in blessing. Below is the Holy Virgin, enthroned like an Empress, flanked by two archangels and the solemn row of Saints.

Images such as these, looking down on us from the golden, glimmering walls, seemed to be such perfect symbols of the Holy Truth that there appeared to be no need ever to depart from them. Thus they continued to hold their sway in all countries ruled by the Eastern Church. The holy images or 'icons' of the Russians still reflect these great creations of Byzantine artists.



88. *Byzantine Icons*, depicting an image of Christ. From the Chladov Psalter, a Byzantine manuscript painted about A.D. 960. Moscow, Historical Museum

+ Carte flash
Esporta

Annotazioni ed evidenziazioni

Filtra per Tutti gli elementi

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Aggiungi una nota...

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Aggiungi una nota...

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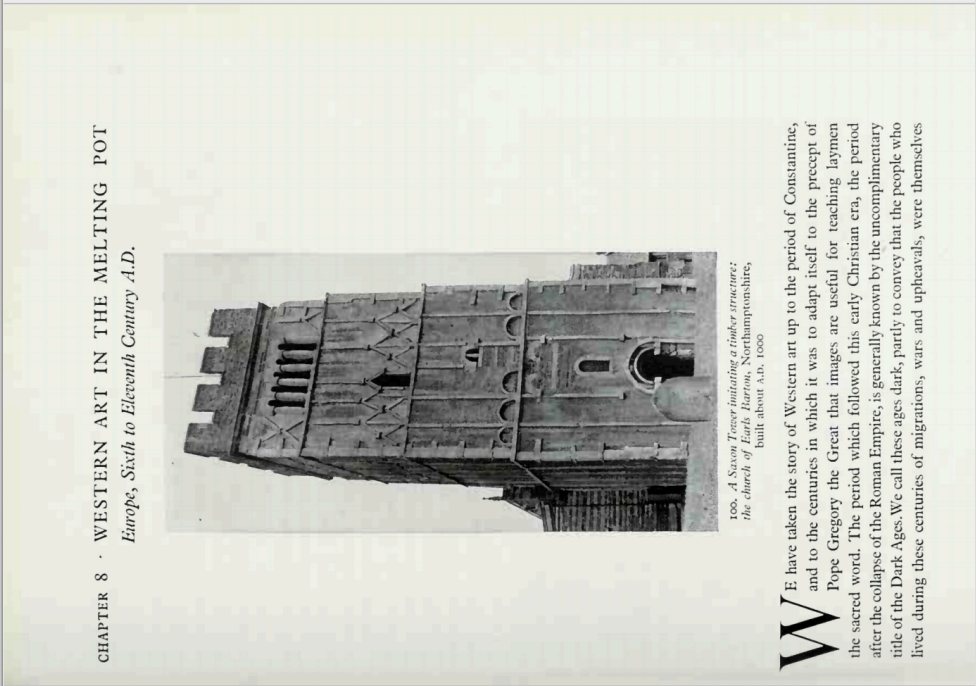
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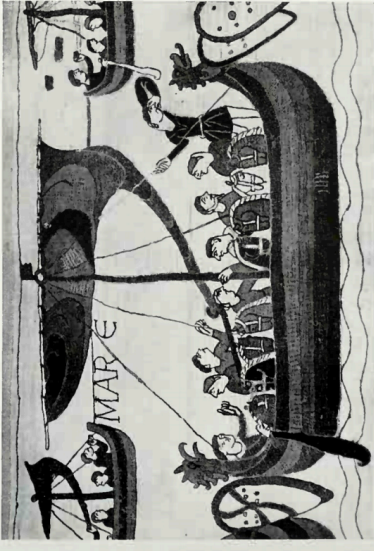
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and excellent wood-carvers, comparable to those of the New Zealand Maoris (p. 25, Fig. 23). They loved complicated patterns which included the twisted bodies of dragons or birds mysteriously interlaced. We do not know exactly where these patterns originated in the seventh century of what they signified, but it is not unlikely that the ideas of these Teutonic tribes about art resembled the ideas of primitive tribes elsewhere. There are reasons for believing that they, too, thought of such images as a means of working magic and exorcizing evil spirits. The carved figures of dragons from Viking sledges and ships give a good idea of the character of this art (Figs. 101-102). One can well imagine that these threatening heads of monsters were something more than just innocent decorations. In fact, we know that there were laws among the Norwegian Vikings which required the captain of a ship to remove these figures before entering his home port, 'so as not to frighten the spirits of the land'.
The monks and missionaries of Celtic Ireland and Saxon England tried to apply the traditions of these northern craftsmen to the tasks of Christian art. The most amazing monuments to their success are some of the manuscripts made in England and Ireland during the seventh and eighth centuries. Fig. 103 is a page from the famous Lindisfarne Gospel, made in Northumbria shortly before A.D. 700. It shows the Cross composed of an incredibly rich lacework of intertwined dragons or



103. A 'Longship' of the Viking type with dragons' heads, as used by the Normans in the Invasion of England, from the Bayeux Tapestry, made about A.D. 1186. Bayeux, Cathedral

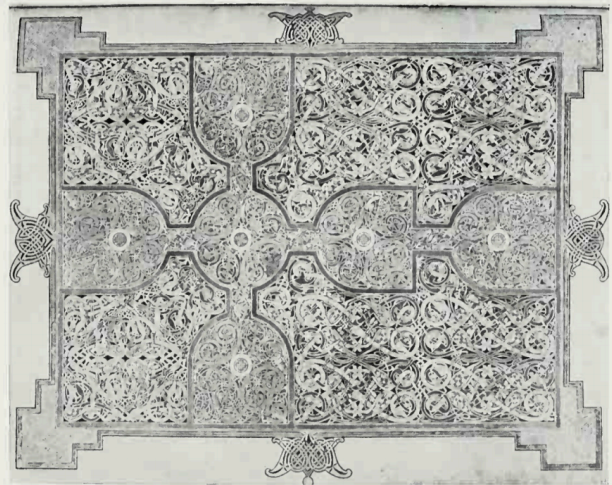
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103. *Place of the Luminiferous Aether*, probably painted shortly before A.D. 700. London, British Museum

serpents, standing against a background of an even more complicated pattern. It is exciting to try to find one's way through this bewildering maze of twisted shapes, and to follow the coils of these interwoven bodies. It is even more astonishing to see that the result is not confusion, but that the various patterns strictly correspond to each other and form a complex harmony of design and colour. One can hardly imagine how anyone could have thought out such a scheme and had the patience and perseverance to finish it. It proves, if proof were needed, that the

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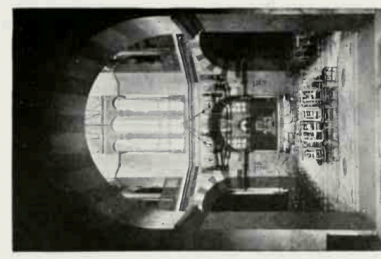
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Western Art in the Melting Pot



dedicate a new shrine for a holy relic of his patron saint, not only tried to procure the most precious material he could afford, he would also seek to provide the master with an old and venerable example of how the legend of the saint should be correctly represented. Nor would the artist feel hampered by this type of commission. There remained enough scope for him to show whether he was a master or a bungler.

Perhaps we can best understand this attitude if we think of our own approach to music. If we ask a musician to perform at a wedding we do not expect him to compose something new for the occasion, any more than the medieval patron expected a new invention if he asked for a painting of the Nativity. We indicate the type of music we want and the size of the orchestra or choir we may be able to afford. It still remains up to the musician to produce a wonderful performance of an ancient masterpiece or to make a mess of things. And just as two equally great musicians may interpret the same piece very differently, so two great medieval masters might make very different works of art of the same theme and even of the same ancient model. An example should make this clear:

Fig. 106 shows a page from a Bible produced at the court of Charlemagne. It represents the figure of St. Matthew writing the gospel. It had been customary in Greek and Roman books to have the portrait of the author represented on the opening page and this picture of the writing evangelist must be an extraordinarily faithful copy of this type of portrait. The way the saint is draped in his toga in the best classical fashion, the way his head is modelled in many shades of light and colour, convinces us that the medieval artist had strained every nerve to give an accurate and worthy rendering of a venerated model.

The painter of another manuscript of the ninth century (Fig. 107) probably had before him the same or a very similar ancient example from early Christian times. We can compare the hands, the left hand holding an inkhorn and resting on the lectern, the right hand holding the pen; we can compare the feet and even the drapery round the knees. But while the artist of Fig. 106 had done his very best to copy the original as faithfully as possible, the artist of Fig. 107 must have aimed at a different interpretation. Perhaps he did not want to represent the evangelist like any

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106. *St. Matthew*. From a Gospel manuscript, probably painted at Ais-la-Chapelle, about A.D. 800. Vienna, Scharzhammer

serene old scholar, sitting quietly in his study. To him St. Matthew was an inspired man, writing down the Word of God. It was an immensely important and immensely exciting event in the history of mankind that he wanted to portray, and he succeeded in conveying something of his own sense of awe and excitement in this figure of a writing man. It is not mere clumsiness and ignorance which made him draw the saint with wide open, protruding eyes and enormous hands. He intended to give him **that expression of rapt concentration**. The very brushwork of the drapery and of the background looks as if it had been done in a mood of intense excitement. This impression, I think, is partly due to the evident enjoyment with which the artist seized on every opportunity to draw scrolly lines and zigzagging folds. There may have been something in the original to suggest such a treatment, but it probably appealed to the medieval artist because it reminded him of those interlaced ribbons and lines which had been the greatest achievement of northern art. In pictures like these we see the emergence of a **new medieval style which made it possible for art to do something that neither ancient nor classical art had done: the Egyptians had largely drawn what they knew to exist; the Greeks what they saw; in the Middle Ages the artist also learned to express in his picture what he felt**.

One cannot do justice to any medieval work of art without keeping this purpose in mind. For these artists were not out to create a convincing likeness of nature or to make beautiful things—they wanted to convey to their brothers in the faith the content and the message of the sacred story. And in this they were perhaps more successful than most artists of earlier or later times. Fig. 108 shows part of a bronze

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108. Adam and Eve after the Fall. From the bronze doors of Hildesheim Cathedral, completed in A.D. 1015

door which was commissioned for the German church of Hildesheim shortly after the year A.D. 1000. It shows the Lord approaching Adam and Eve after the fall. There is nothing in this relief that does not strictly belong to the story. But this concentration on the things which matter makes the figures stand out all the more clearly against the plain background—and we can almost read off what their gestures say: God points to Adam, Adam to Eve, and Eve to the serpent on the ground. The shifting of guilt and the origin of evil is expressed with such forcefulness and clarity that we soon forget that the proportions of the figures are perhaps not strictly correct and the bodies of Adam and Eve not beautiful by our standards.

We need not imagine, though, that all art in this period existed exclusively to serve religious ideas. Not only churches were built in the Middle Ages, but castles as well, and the barons and feudal lords to whom the castles belonged also occasionally employed artists. The reason why we are inclined to forget these works when we speak of the art of the earlier Middle Ages is simple: castles were often destroyed when churches were spared. Religious art was, on the whole, treated with greater respect, and looked after more carefully, than mere decorations of private apartments. When these became old-fashioned they were removed or thrown away—just as happens nowadays. But, fortunately, one great example of this latter type of art has come down to us—and that because it was preserved in a church. It is the famous Bayeux Tapestry, which illustrates the story of the Norman Conquest. We do not know exactly when this tapestry was made, but most scholars agree that it

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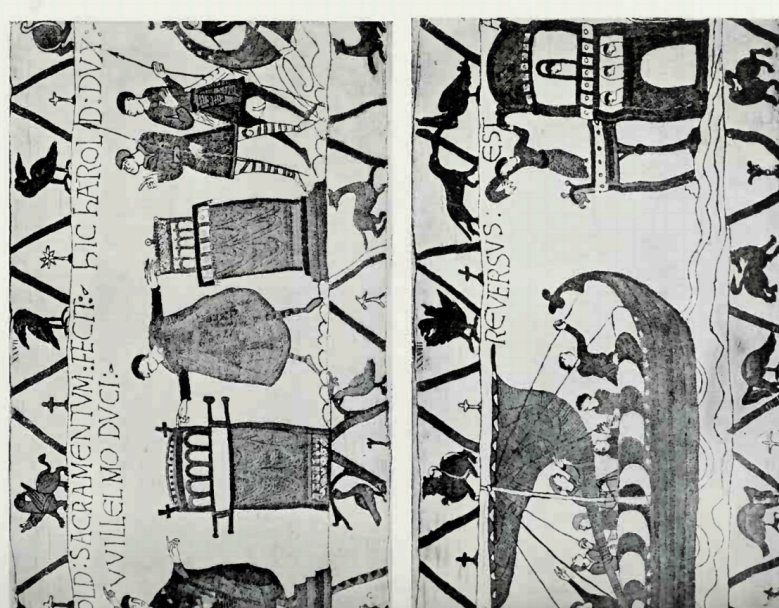
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the Byzantine came to insist almost as stric



109-110. King Harold swears an Oath to Duke William of Normandy, after which he returns to England.
From the Bayeux Tapestry, made about A.D. 1086. Bayeux Cathedral

Annotazioni ed evidenziazioni

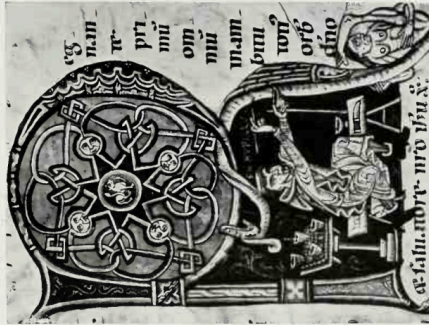
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was within living memory of the scenes it illustrates—perhaps round about the year 1080. The tapestry is a picture-chronicle of the kind we know from ancient Oriental and Roman art—the story of a campaign and a victory. It tells its story with wonderful vividness. On Fig. 109 we see, as the inscription tells us, how Harold swears his oath to William and on Fig. 110 how he returns to England. Nothing could be clearer than the way in which the story is told—we see William on his throne watching Harold laying his hand on the sacred relics to swear allegiance—it was this oath which served William as pretext for his claims on England. I particularly like the man on the balcony in the next scene, who holds his hands above his eyes to espy Harold's ship as it arrives from afar. It is true that his arms and fingers look rather quaint and that all the figures in the story are strange little mannikins which are not drawn with the assurance of the Assyrian or Roman chroniclers. When the medieval artist of this period had no model to copy, he drew rather like a child. It is easy to smile at him, but by no means so easy to do what he did. He tells the epic with such an economy of means, and with such concentration on what seemed important to him, that the final result is possibly more impressive than the accounts of our own war reporters and newscast met.



111. A Monk (*Præter Rapheus*) writing the letter R (his table with colours and his pen-stand he holds him). From an early thirteenth-century manuscript. Signaingen, Library

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