Carolingian Art

By Carolingian art we refer to the art which was produced under the direct influence of the court of Charles the Great or Charlemagne who became king of the Franks in 768 and Emperor of the West in 800. Carolingian art marks an important chapter in the history of art because it may be said to mark the dawn, (or true beginning) of the art of western Europe.

In our previous lectures we have traced the origin and development of the Graeco-Roman traditions in art: idealism, naturalism and illusionism; and have watched this art as it was gradually incorporated within and transformed by Christianity into the transcendental art of the Byzantine world. It is to be noted* that all this process took place in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East; in the long triangle whose base lies between Egypt and Mesopotamia and hose apex is Rome.

But Carolingian art takes us well out of this ancient cultural ambit; to the rural and barbaric Western frontiers of the ancient world. In order, then, to grasp the nature and significance of Carolingian art it will be desirable to look first for a moment at the social and political conditions of Western Europe before Charlemagne came to power.

Politically, the Western Roman Empire ceased to exist in 476 with the sack of Rome by Odacer the Ostrogoth. But the real wealth of Rome lay in her Eastern provinces and so long as North Africa, Egypt and Syria were held and the ancient routes by sea maintained; European gold mined by the Romans continued to be exchanged for the silk, papyrus and spices of the East; and Roman and the great urban centres of the East such as Alexandria and Antioch continued to be fed from African granaries.

By AD 700 this ancient trade, the urban economy of Rome had ceased; the gold currency disappears. In the 8th century Western Europe is reduced to a rural, survival economy, lacking towns, trade and an organised system of communications.

Look at a map of Europe at this time and we realize the reason for the impoverishment.* To the south and the east, the Moslems threatened to overwhelm Europe. In 711, they crossed the straits of Gibraltar and destroyed the short-lived Visigothic Kingdom of Spain; at the other end of the Mediterranean, they were besieging Constantinople in 717 only six years later. And to the north the Viking Sea-nomads were taking their long boats along the northern coasts and up the navigable rivers, collecting furs, kidnapping human beings for slaves to be traded to the rich Islamic Empire to the south.

It was Charles Martel, Charlemagne’s grandfather, the king of the Franks, and founder of the Carolingian dynasty who saved Western Christendom from Islam at the Battle of Poitiers (or Tours) in 720; stopping the thousand mile advance of the Arabs from
Gibraltar, on the banks of the Loire. Martel stopped the Arabs by adopting a Persian cavalry method of warfare: the mailed warrior with a great long lance seated upon a mailed draughthorse. The great European historian, Henri Pirenne, has argued that Martel was also the founder of European feudalism, which was, at bottom, an economic device to keep the armed equestrian warrior ready and available for the field. Church property was confiscated and secularised extensively and given to landlords, on the strict understanding that they perform knightly service when called upon, or provide knights for the field; and the knight was required to bring his tenants into the field with him. The aristocratic art of the feudal courts and their complex codes of chivalry were to grow during the later middle ages from an economic device which gave Europe in the 8th century a military weapon to turn back Islam and the Vikings.

Charlemagne himself, building on what his grandfather had begun, carved out a new western kingdom, defeating the Lombards and occupying northern Italy; conquering and Christianising the Saxons to the east of the Rhine. Turning to the Spanish frontier in 778, he tried but failed to turn back the Moors. On his return journey his army was attacked by the wild but Christian basques in the pass of Roncevaux. From this ambush and defeat was to emerge, of course, the song of Roland, the most famous of the Chansons de geste—the epics of chivalric valour sung by minstrels in the feudal courts.

Having stabilized his military position, Charlemagne turned to the support of Rome; and was crowned Charles Augustus, great and pacific Emperor of the Romans, on Christmas day 800 by Leo III. The Empress of the Eastern Empire, Irene, protested at this assumption of the imperial throne by a barbarian; but she, an ambitious and vicious woman had just had the eyes of her own son stabbed out in the very chamber in which she had born him; and was not looked on with much favour in the west, though she wanted to marry Charlemagne, for political reasons. The Eastern Church canonized Irene, because she was a religious zealot and had restored the worship of icons and built many churches. During her reign, for five years between 797 and 802 the ban on images in churches was temporarily lifted. The western church, by contrast had excommunicated Charles Martel, who had saved western Christendom from Islam, because he had confiscated church property in order to do it.

Charlemagne’s coronation as Christian Roman Emperor of the West in 800 was the central act of his life from where his whole subsequent policy flowed. Basically, this meant two things, the Christianisation of the still half-barbaric pagan or heretic west. The Teutonic barbarians—the Ostrogoths, Visigoths and the Franks too before 496) had been Arians—a Christian sect who did not believe in the equal divinity of God the son and the father, but claimed that Christ was the instrument whereby God had created the world, thus Christ’s nature was changeable, not one with the divine. And the Irish Church, by means of which learning had survived in the west, its monastic
organization based on Egyptian monasticism, with different religious rites and different liturgy from Rome, which did not acknowledge the supremacy of the Papal see.

Charlemagne thus set himself to restore and develop religion, education and learning. At Aachen, now in Western Germany, between the Rhine and the Meuse and at the centre of gravity of his kingdom, Charlemagne established his palace school, placing the Englishman Alcuin of York, as its superintendent. Here manuscripts were written and illuminated; gospels, books of hours, translations and new copies of the writers of antiquity; writing, palaeography, itself was transformed, the Carolingian uncial (upper case) and Carolingian minuscule (lowercase) scripts providing the ancestry to our own upper and lower case Roman types.

Charlemagne supported the growth and development of the Benedictine monastic order within his kingdom. The Benedictines, supporters of the Papal supremacy against Irish monasticism and Irish rites, stressed the separation of the regular, that is, the monastic clergy from the lay clergy under the control of a bishop Both monasteries and cathedrals are founded in Charlemagne’s kingdom; the effective limits of which spread from the river Loire, in central France, along which we may note the important Carolingian centres such as St Benoit sur Loire, St Germiny de Prés, Tour, ad St Philibert de Grandlieu. Then away to the East on the River Weser in Saxony, lately conquered and Christianised by Charlemagne, we see Hikdesheim, Coreye, the monastery of Fulda and between these limits such important centres as St Riquier, near Abbeville, St Denis, near Paris, Rheims, Aachen, Lorsch, and to the south Reichenau, Conques, and a most important group of centres in northern Spain, Val de Dios, Naranco, and Orviedo.

Having regard for Charlemagne’s expressed political and religious policies we might well assume that Carolingian art would be inspired both by early Roman art, that is, by the Roman basilican church and by late Roman styles of painting, and also by the dominant contemporary Christian style, that is, Byzantine architecture and painting. And this is indeed so. However, in order to understand the nature of Carolingian art we must first turn to its third major source, the art of the northern barbarian and early Christian Europe.

This art forms a startling contrast to the idealistic, naturalistic, and illusionistic art of the Graeco-Roman world which was centred upon a human-human and a god-human iconography.

The qualities of this northern art are brilliantly revealed for us by the Lindisfarne Gospels, now in the British Museum, but probably written and illuminated under the direction of Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne, in Northumbria, shortly before the year 700, that is, a hundred years before Charlemagne’s coronation. It is one of the
masterpieces of art which is known as Hiberno-Saxon art which flourished in the Irish monasteries and its northern English foundations. It is, as you see an art of intricate interlaced linear forms, which creates a writhing curvilinear, surface pattern. On closer observation it will be seen that the writing band patterns, so beautifully interwoven, are in fact* animal monsters biting each other.* Upon this field of interwoven biting animals the all-powerful symbol of the cross has been implanted. This plate illustrates the cruciform which proceeds the Book of St Matthew.

A detail of the cruciform of St Luke.]

Now what, we might well ask, was the origin of this highly abstract decorative style of interlace and animals? Its origins may be traced back step by step to the earliest art of the middle east. [Art of the Oseberg Ship, c 821 AD, ?]

Consider this alabaster vase, a masterpiece of early Sumerian art, dating to between 3,500 and 3,000 BC. It not only depicts nude priests bearing offerings to the gods, but an animal frieze also. It may almost be taken as a prophecy of two great historical traditions, both of which flow from the ancient East. The Graeco-Roman art based upon perfecting the nude; and the animal style which became the animal style favoured by the nomads of the Iranian plateau of Persia, of the Scythians, whom the Greeks knew, herdsmen settled on the northern shores of the Black Sea, and of the Teutonic tribesman of the northern European plain who harried Rome for so many centuries and at last helped to destroy her.

We have noticed how* this animal style affected Greek art in the seventh century BC; but how it declined with the narrative and humanizing art of the archaic period. To the north of Greece however it developed a more vigorous life. It may be seen, for example in the well known series of bronzes known as the Luristan bonzes from the eighth to seventh centuries BC in the Iranian highlands on the eastern flank of the Tigris Euphrates valley. It is a bronze pole ornament perhaps for the shaft of a chariot; and again we note that well-known oriental device, rearing and confronting animals.

The further stylization of this animal art is to be seen in the art of the Sythias, here is a stag in chased gold, a harness of bridle piece. In this art we note the growth of pierced, open-work design, in which the voids are as much a part of the pattern as the motifs. But the old motifs persist. Here* the motif of fighting and biting animals which can be traced back to this early Sumerian ewer from Warka dating to about 3000 BC. Now this art with its combination of interlace and animal shapes became the dominant element in the Celto-Germanic art of the Dark Ages. We see it for example in the famous hoard discovered at Sutton Hoo, on the Suffolk coast in 1939, in a large Saxon ship, and is believed to date to AD 655.Here is a gold and enamel purse lid which combines the interlace ornament we have already seen in the Lindisfarne
gospel with animal-style motifs of a very old ancestry. We may trace the man-
between-two-monsters motif back to Sumerian art, on, for example, the sound-box on
the harp from Ur. If we note the design in the centre, we see that it is a close prototype
of the Lindisfarne interlaced fighting animal motif.

Although interlace pattern does appear in Roman and early work and plays an
important role in Islamic art, the combination of interlace and animal was already
worked out in the bronze age cultures of northern Europe, (of Hallstadt and La Tene)
and developed largely out of open-work bronze ornament. It strongly influenced Irish
Christian art and Viking art (and Visigoth art). The animal-headed prow from the
Oseberg Ship-burial of c.825, a Viking masterpiece, reveals the high degree of
imaginative freedom and fantastic expression the style was capable. And when we
turn to Irish Christian art, a book cover in bronze of the eighth century, we may note
the curious incongruity of the conjunction of the humanistic and symmetrical Graeco-
Roman art imposed upon the native interlace style with which the surface is covered.

Let us turn now to Carolingian art itself; and consider first, Carolingian architecture.

Few actual Carolingian churches have survived, all have been altered considerably.
Excavations on the foundations of many churches destroyed in World War II have
considerable added to our knowledge of the plans of Carolingian churches.

In the first place we must remember that Carolingian Europe was poor and based on a
rural survival economy. The king and his court moved from centre to centre, so that
the greatest art treasures which have survived are small and portable, illuminated
gospels and books of hours, ivories for portable shrines, portable alters, reliquaries
with relics of saints, and church furnishings often in gold, chalices, crosses, patens,
altar frontals. [Silver ornaments… ? slide descriptions]

In many places, especially in Saxony and Northern Spain, churches were being built
for the first time. Recent excavations have revealed the existence of many small Hall
churches, that is, churches without aisles and transepts but possessing at the eastern
end one or more apses, usually cusped but sometimes rectangular. In many centres it
is this simple, hall church which testifies to the introduction of Christianity to the
region.

The architectural innovations of the Carolingian period are not to be found in these
small parish hall churches bit in the large basilica with which Charlemagne ennobled
his reign.

The first was the great abbey church of St Denis begun in 754 in the reign of
Charlemagne’s father, Pepin, and consecrated before Charlemagne and his court in
775. St Denis was the first Bishop of Paris and said to have been martyred there in the
time of the Emperor Domitian, c. 250AD. But after being beheaded the saint miraculously took up his head in hands and walked 10 miles to a small hill since called Montmartre, where his body was buried. In 625 the Benedictine Abbey of St Denis was founded four miles north of Paris and the saints relics transferred there by Dagobert, the last of the Merovingian kings. The Abbey became the richest and most important in France, and was for many centuries the burial place of the French Kings. The Carolingian Basilica of the Abbey stood from the eighth until the twelfth centuries. In four hundred years, when it was replaced by a gothic building.* The foundations of the Carolingian church were revealed partly by the French Gothic revivalist Viollet DeDuc* in the nineteenth century, and more recently by Sumner Crosby, the American archaeologist. As might be expected the plan here is Crosby’s drawing of it) was inspired by Constantine’s first great Basilica built in Rome between about 323 and 326. Compare it with Conant’s reconstructive drawing of Old St Peters. Both are three aisled buildings with transept, with as St Denis an apse which opened directly into the transept. Beneath the apse an annular crypt was excavated around the tomb containing the saint’s relics for pilgrims and others coming to the shrine. It must be emphasized that in these large Abbey churches the position of the martyrs tomb with its relics beneath the high altar, and the need to provide direct access to the tomb, is the key fact which governed the whole development of the eastern and of the great abbey churches and cathedrals of Carolingian, Romanesque and Gothic times.

At the western end of the Carolingian basilica you will notice several extremely heavy and fortress-like piers in plan. This reveals what is called a ‘westwork’. The westwork appears to be a Carolingian innovation into ecclesiastical architecture. Thus old St Peters contains an atrium or for-court before the west-end where the unbaptised might foregather and this feature was widely copied but it contains no towers, no fortress-like masonry structure at the west-end. Charlemagne’s father was buried at the west end of St Denis, and to give it greater sanctity an apse was added at this end also: so that St Denis became a double-ender church, a form frequenting Carolingian and Romanesque architecture.

One of the most important churches constructed under Charlemagne’s direct patronage was the Abbey church of St Riquier (also called Centula) near Abbeville. The plan reveals the Carolingian development of the Roman basilican plan.* Note the large atrium, followed by a west work, then the basilican nave and two aisles, a large transept, a choir plaed between apse and transept and two planking towers placed in the re-entrant angles of choir and transept. […] the west work had tremendous influence on later Romanesque architecture, especially in Germany: Cathedral of Manz(?).

What was the propose of the westworks? The two flaking towers gave access to a rased gallery or tribune, from which the Emperor and his entourage could witness the service. Carolingian Europe was poor; the chief buildings in stone were ecclesiastical;
the court moved from one country to another and in the westwork of the large churches, the emperor held his ecclesiastical court. The western towers are thus best seen as symbols of power and justice; [Correy weies, mid ninth Cent.] and they are probably closely connected as architectural symbols to the towered city gates of Roman cities [Roman gate at Trier], which so often appeared on Roman coins and symbols of the city and of Roman power and justice. Many westworks, it should be remembered, were the safest refuge from Viking raids and civil disturbances. Doubtless they performed a direct protective function. Another reason which has been advanced for the development of the westwork I the increased use of bells, in the litany, and for calling the faithful to service. And we must note that these westworks began to introduce a vertical element into the essentially horizontal lines of the roman basilican church; but the development of this verticality as architectural religious symbolism lay in the future.

Few westworks remain but that at the Abbey of Corvie, in Germany on the Weser will give an idea of the fortress like character, the twin towers, the connecting gallery used as a [T..] by the Emperor on his visits. The upper storeys are 12th century Romanesque.

We have been [con…] basilican aisled churches. Carolingian builders also made use of the centrally planned church. For this, too, there was an ultimate Roman and indeed Constantinian justification. Sta Constanza, the mausoleum built by Constantine for his daughter was circular. Another frequent early type is the Greek cross in a square plan, such as the tob of Galla Placidia in Ravenna mid 4th century. By 800BC there were many examples of smallish cenally planned churches at both extremes of the Chrhistian world, particularly in Armenia, the first nation, incidentally, to officially accept Christianity as the State religion, in 294 AD, and also in the Asturias in Northern Spain.

When Charlemagne built a palace and chapel for himself at Aix la Chapel, Aarchan, from 790 to 805, he chose a centrally planned design for the Chapel. It was both his personal chapel and his tomb. St Vitale at Ravenna is usually regarded as the prototype. Ravenna, which was the last capital of the Roman Emperors in the west, held a special importance for Charlemagne. The chapel is a vaulted octagon surrounded y a vaulted ambulatory with a galley above. This stone vaulting is important for architectural development in the west. The large Roman basilicas, Carolingian St Denis, St Riquier had wooden roofs over there large naves and aisles. The art of Roman stone vaulting, tunnel vaulting and groined vaulting survived only in roofing small areas, in crypts and in the galleries of west-end atria. Charlemagne's chapel was designed by Odo of Metz and despite its similarity of plan the internal visual and spatial effect is different. In San Vitale the glitter and all over patterning of the mosaic suppress the dominant lines of structure, of the architectural articulation of the building; at Aacen, the lines of the cornices, of the archivaults, of capital and column are prominent. rheeling is more Roman than Byzantine, and the gallery
displays well-cut Corinthian capitals. The plan however reveals that Carolingian innovation, the Westwork, with its twin access lower to the gallery where the imperial throne was installed. And directly across the body of the church, facing Charlemagne on his first story throne a special altar was installed above the chancel altar. The tall proportions of the building, its compactness, its centralized form and sense of compartmentation suggests, as Conant has observed, that Odo of Metz, conceived it as primarily a tomb than a church.

In stabilising the economy and government of an impoverished Europe, Charlemagne very wisely championed Benedictine monasticism. The Benedictine Rule, by St Bernard, compiled for his own monastery of Montecassion (between Rome and Naples) in 529. Here is a reconstruction of the monastery as in 1075. Note the galleried atrium, the basilican church, cloisters and surrounding offices. Charlemagne, with the help of his good friend St Benedict of Aniane, reformed the Benedictine Rule and revived it in the west, imposing it on all monks and thus regularizing monastic life within the Emperor’s Kingdom. Fortunately the plan of a Carolingian Benedictine monastery, probably prepared under the influence of Benedict of Aniane himself c 819-830AD has survived in the chapter library of the monastery of St Gall, in Switzerland. Visitors came in from the west, and were given lodgings in the hostel, the church is a double ender, there was a special house for important guests, school, abbots house and physician herbs and hospital to the north east, a cloister surrounded by dormitories, refectories, cellar.

Carolingian architecture is of interest mainly for what it foreshadows, today little remains. The finest artistic remains of Carolingian art are of course the illuminated manuscripts with which Charlemagne and his successors sought to Christianise, to educate and to revive the glories of ancient Rome.

Charlemagne and his successors, especially Charles the Bald, promoted the accurate copying of both the sacred texts and ancient secular authors. In this he was ably assisted by the Englishman Alcuin, superintendent of the Palatine School at Aachen; and by Einhard, Charlemagne’s commissioner of works and director of the Imperial workshops. Einhard too came within the ambit of the older Hiberno-Saxon learning, for he have trained under the Englishman St Boniface at Fuldo and later under Alcuin at Aachen. But both Alcuin and Einhard, like Charlemagne himself, were inspired y the memory of Rome’s vanished glory. It was Alcuin himself who Ift one of the first of the many medieval laments to Rome’s past greatness.

“Rome, once head of the world, the world’s pride, the city of gold, stands now a pitiful ruin, the wreck of its ancient glory”. And Einhard tells us in his biography of Charlemagne that the Emperor owned a round silver table on which was inscribed a map of Rome. Einhard modeled his biography of Charles on a Roman model: The Life of Augustus by Suetonius and in one of his letters he refers to…
Notes and texts:

a Carolingian

b Pre-Carolingian

The Mixture of Styles


The importance of Narrative.

d The Story of St Jerome. From the Bible of Charles the Bald. ca 850

Variety of Regional Styles.

Mansuscript of the School of Rheims. The Loisel MS. ca 850 Shows St Mark reading his gospel. Ecstatic line.

St John on Patmos. MSS of the Isle de France School.

The presentation of the Bible of Charles the Bald ca 850

The Utrecht Psalter. The most important Carolingian MS of the Narrative type. Written near Rheims about 832

line drawings of a distinctive style. rapid scrawly pen strokes. Probably based on a Roman classical original of about 400 AD.

Warriors in Defeat.

Ilustration to Psalm 44. Literal illustration of psalms. Awake why sleepest thou o Lord

The faithful ‘beelys cleaving to the earth’ and in front of the city gate they are killed as ‘sheep to the slaughter’


Evans, Joan, *Art in Medieval France*, Oxford, 1948

Meiss, Millard, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, Princeton, 1951

Carolingian Art:

Architecture:
- Carolingian Abbey of St Denis
- Abbey Church of St Riquier (Centula)
- Germiny-des-Prés, Oratory.
- Aachen. Palace and Palatine Chapel.
- Plan of a Monastery. St Gall.

Manuscripts:
- The Utrecht Psalter
- The Drogo Sacramentary.
- The Lothair Psalter
- The Ada Gospels
- Soissons Gospels. (St Medard de Soissons)

Ivory Reliefs
- Diptyh with Passion Scenes, Milan, Cathedral Treasury
Library Digitised Collections

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