Carolingian Art

‘The Christian religion, in which he had been brought up from infancy, was held by Karl as most sacred and he worshipped in it with the great piety. For this reason he built at Aachen a most beautiful church, which he enriched with gold and silver and candlesticks, and also with lattices and doors of solid brass. When columns and marbles for the buildings could not be obtained elsewhere, he had them brought from Rome and Ravenna.

‘As long as his health permitted, he was most regular in attending church at matins and evensong, and also during the night, and at the time of the Sacrifice; and he took especial care that all the services of the Church should be performed in the most fitting manner possible, frequently cautioning the sacristans not to allow anything improper or unseemly to be bought into, or left in, the building.

‘He provided for the church an abundance of sacred vessels of gold and silver and priestly vestments, so that when the service was celebrated it was not necessary even for the doorkeepers, who are the lowest order of ecclesiastics, to perform their duties in private dress. He carefully revised the order of reading and singing, being well skilled in both, though he did not read in public, nor sing, except in a low voice and only in the chorus.’

This pen-portrait of Karl, or Charles, or Charlemagne, was written by his close friend and advisor, Einhard, in his Life of Charlemagne, one of the first and most interesting of the biographies to come down to us from the Middle Ages. Einhard was in an excellent position to know his friend the king. He had come at the age of twenty, a brilliant young Benedictine monk from the monastery at Fulda, in southern Germany, to join Charlemagne’s palace school which Charlemagne had set up under his other great and personal friend, the Englishman, Alcuin, from York, who was Charlemagne’s tutor, spiritual advisor, and librarian.

To these three men: Charles, the military leader and administrator; Alcuin, the scholar devoted to the memory of the lost learning and art of Rome; and to Einhard, who became the king’s commissioner of works and the director of his workshops, we owe, if we owe to any men, the revival of learning and art in Europe, after four hundred years during which the West lay defenseless spiritually, materially and militarily—open to every predator.

It is therefore, it seems to me, this revival of art in the West under Charles the Great in the ninth century, a moment in history that should be of special interest to us today. Because at this time we may glimpse the beginnings of Western art: and it is in the beginnings of things, surely, that one so often finds their true and continuing character.
When Charles became king of the Franks in 768, Europe was impoverished and besieged. Rome’s ancient trade, her gold currency and her towns had withered away. To the south and east the Moslems threatened to overrun Europe; to the North, the Vikings raided along the northern coasts, collecting furs and white slaves which they sold to Islam in the south.

It was Charles’s grandfather, Charles the Hammer, Charles Martel, who struck the first successful blow against the Moslems. In 732 he defeated a massive Arab invasion of Southern France at Tours. He managed it so we are told by developing a Persian military technique: warriors in heavy mail and long lances on the backs of huge draught horses, with saddles and stirrups—perhaps it was the stirrups that did it—they helped to keep you on your horse.

It was upon the base of his grandfather’s victories that Charles the Great established his own Western Empire which extended from the Pyrenees and south of Rome, to the British Channel, the North Sea and the river Weser. And he followed up Martel’s military check to the Arabs with a political check to the Byzantine Empire, by having himself crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Rome on Christmas Day 800. By this act he revived the idea of a Western Roman Empire and challenged the claims of the Eastern Empire to suzerainty over the West.

This then is the background out of which Carolingian art, the first truly western art emerges: and it takes much of its character from that background: for the art of the Viking invaders, of Islam, and of Charlemagne’s dream of a new Roman Empire rising out of the ruins of the old, all play their part in the creation of Carolingian art.

The northern barbarian tribes that descended upon the Roman Empire during the fifth and sixth centuries destroyed an enormous amount of Roman art—but they possessed an art—or fine craft if you like—of small portable objects of great beauty and superb craftsmanship: for personal adornment, for sword-handles, shields, and belts. A particularly fine example of this art, the Anglo-Irish art of the 6th century, was found in the Royal ship burial which took place in 654 at Sutton Hoo, in East Anglia. Here is a purse-lid from the treasure:* it is of ivory, with a golden frame, and plaques sunken into the ivory. It is a fine example of the skill the Saxon goldsmiths at cloisonné enameling techniques. It is decorated with garnets and mosaic glass. The style of course is characteristic of the barbarian nomads of the north European plain from Ireland to Siberia: from the Celts to the Scythians: a zoomorphic, or animal interlace style. The purse lid is of interest because it already reveals the presence of a decorative style of pure interlace, and of a figurative art of heroes and animals. The strong man hero who wrestles with pairs of animals may be traced back to Sumerian art where it occurs frequently,* as in this inlay piece, on the sound box of a harp from Ur, dating to about 3000 BC.
And here * is a fine gold clasp decorated with garnet, mosaic cloisonné [Sutton Hoo burial].

It was this animal-interlace style which the Anglo-Irish church used to illustrate their gospel books such as the Lindisfarne Gospel and the Book of Durrow. The Book of Durrow is dated to about 680 and that is only 30 years after the Sutton Hoo burial: bit the old animal interlace art is now being put to a new Christian purpose. Here is a carpet page* devoted entirely to abstract ornament which was inserted at the beginning of each gospel in these Anglo-Irish gospels. This one, from the Book of Durrow, now in the Trinity College Library, Dublin, shows the intricate system of ornament composed of animals and birds with elongated bodies and limbs, clawed feet, and prolonged tongues, tails and ears.

The Lindisfarne Gospel,* dated to 700BC, 20 years after the book of Durrow follows its interlace style bi is even more intricate in its interlace style.

This style could serve the new Christian religion in several ways. It could be used as a background against which to place new symbols:* such as the cross in the famous cross page of the Lindisfarne Gospel. Or a picture of an Evangelist could be placed at the introduction to his gospel. Here for example is St Mark, from an Irish Gospel book in the monastery of St Gall dating to the th century. He acs us square on, holding his gospel. He is clad in the toga of a Roman philosopher. H has nice long hair and a very curly beard, and exquisite eye-penciling. And those wild pagan animals which we saw in the Book of Durrow a moment ago biting one another’s private parts have been converted into the symbols of the evangelists: and they sit up sedately in their frames: there we have them, he eagle of St John, the angel of St Matthew, and the winged lion of St Mark and the winged ox of St Luke. But despite the new figurative elements we feel that the style of the whole—its flatness, its curvilinearity—is still governed by the ornamental style that we first saw in the Sutton Hoo treasure.

So far we have been looking at Anglo-Irish manuscripts of the 7th and 8th centuries. I want no to turn to Carolingian art of the late 8th and 9th centuries. And here too I must confine my attention to illuminated manuscripts, because although a good deal o wall painting was carried out under Charlemagne, most of it was disappeared, or been so restored and re-restored as to leave us with little indication of the original.

The reason for this efflorescence of illuminated manuscripts is quickly explained. As we have seen, Charlemagne was a pious Christian, and politically the support of the Bishop of Rome was of immense importance to him. He sought therefore to spread gospel books and the bible through out his kingdom. The scriptoria of his palace school, which was resided over by Alcuin and Einhard, was the centre during the king’s lifetime for the manufacture—in the original sense of he word—o fine
manuscripts. Most of them were precious objects given as gifts from the king to a Bishop, or to a godson at a baptism, or as a marriage gift.

They were not a popular art in the way that the wall paintings of the day were. Wall paintings in churches were for the unlettered. Gregory the Great, the last of the 4 doctors of the Church had put it 300 years before: ‘Painting is admissible in churches, or order that those who are unlettered may yet read by gazing at the walls what they cannot read in books’. But manuscript illuminations be their very nature were for the literate, which meant a small educated class; so that we find the meaning of the manuscript illuminations often more recondite, more allusive, written for a class that could not only understand the events of a gospel story but could interpret a theological symbolism.

Well, now, let us turn to some of the Carolingian manuscripts. There were two main types of manuscript to come from Charles’s Palace School at Aachen. The first is known as the Ada school: because of a reference in one of the MN of the group to a certain Ada ancilla Dei: Ada handmaiden of God—and the second group is, somewhat confusingly called the Palace school.

Here is an illuminate page from the earliest o the Ada Manuscripts. It depicts Christ as lawgiver, in the act of Benediction. The manuscript ha a most interesting history. It was commissioned by Charlemagne and his Queen Hildegard, and it commemorated to events: the 14th year of the king’s reign as king of the Franks, and secondly the baptism of their so Pippin, by Pope Hadrian in Rome. The manuscript was written by a monk called Godescale: and so it is known as the Godescale gospel.

This page shows us clearly the diversity of influences acting around 781, its date, upon the Palace school. The interlace border immediately recalls the Anglo-Irish styles of the Book of Durrow and the Lindesfarne gospels, and remember that Alcuin was an Anglo-Saxon by birth and grew up among the Northumbrian school of illumination, in the cathedral school at York. But Alcuin was also a man, like his master Charlemagne, greatly in love with the lost glory of Rome. His lament for the loss of Rome’s greatness is the first of the many medieval laments of this kind. ‘Rome’, Alcuin wrote, ‘once head of the world, the world’s pride, the city of gold, stands now a pitiful ruin, the wreck of its ancient glory,’ when he visited the city as a young man to obtain the pallium from the pope, the vestment which was a symbol of papal authority. Alcuin, we might say was a classicist. It is therefore not surprising to find Roman influence in this illumination. Christ is depicted as a beardless young man: and this is the way he was depicted in Roman catacombs of the 4 and 5th centuries: the Christ-Helios figure: or Christ Apollo the god of light. Behind him are the rays of his halo of light. The disposition of the drapery is drawn from Greek and Roman philosopher type figures—well known in Hellenistic and Roman sculpture. And the
naturalistically drawn plants and flowers beside the throne remind us of the flowers one may still see on the walls of the House of Livia on the Palatine, in Rome.*

We may note this classical influence upon Carolingian art by comparing two pages: one from the Lindesfarne Gospel (700), and another from another Ada manuscript from Charles’s school (Gospel of St Medard of Soissons, 800). They are both illustrations for a canon table. Many of these early manuscripts possess canon tales. They were simply a table of concordances: by looking the up a priest could ascertain where similar events in the gospel story were written down in different gospels. Quite useful for preparing sermons. Now the interesting thin here is that the tables are enclosed by arcades: column and arch: an indisputable sign of the impact of classical architecture. Here too we may see something of the hand of Alcuin. In a letter to pupil, e refers to the model of an ancient temple with ivory columns, which were constructed according to the laws of Vitruvius, which he sent to his pupil as an example of good architectural design.* I do not know whether you would want to call the columns here examples of good architectural design or not: bit they do reveal a closer acquaintanceship with the Corinthian capital and the base. There is an attempt too here to give an effect of three dimensions. Indeed the whole effect is that of the entrance to a temple. In the tympanum of the arch we see again the symbols of the evangelists: and the peacock the symbol of immortality, derived from the medieval belief that peacock flesh did not decay.

The attempt to grapple with three dimensions may be seen clearly from another page in the Soissons Gospel. Here we see St John the Evangelist seated upon his throne, with his eagle displaying the first words of his gospel: ‘In the beginning was the word, and word was with god and the word was god’. He sits with his feet on a kind of magic flying carpet in a topsy turvy world.

Another page from the Soissons gospel is of special interest. It depicts The Fountain of Life. And the illustration is clearly that of a baptismal font. The stags on either side illustrate the 42 psalm: ‘As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee O Lord’. The bells are symbols of piety calling the faithful to devotion. Here again we see the influence of Roman wall painting in the House of the Bicoreale at Herculaneum. Such Fountain of Life illustrations are to be found in all the Ada manuscripts. Here is the one from the earlier Godescalc gospel. It was particularly appropriate in this case, because as I mentioned earlier, Charlemagne had the book made to celebrate the baptism of his son Pippin.

The Ada group of manuscripts are sumptuous books made as gifts for princes and bishops. They reveal the impact of both Anglo-Irish art and of late Roman art upon the emergence of the Carolingian art.
I want to turn now to the second group of manuscripts produced at Aachen directly under Charlemagne’s influence: the so-called Palace group.

Here is an example of the Palace school type. Unfortunately I have only a black and white illustration. You will immediately note the difference. It is an evangelist author portrait of St Matthew. The decorative, ornate effect has gone. Here we are in the presence of the Greek tradition of naturalistic art, and it came to Aachen via Byzantium. Matthew is drawn like an Hellenistic philosopher bent to his task of writing. It goes back firstly to the illusionistic art of antiquity. The three-quarter position; the perspective is much more confidently handled than in the Ada manuscripts. Now we know at this time that there were many Greek artists in Italy, and there may have been some working at Charlemagne’s court. This gospel contains in one of its margins the name of Demetrios, a Greek name, and he may have been the scribe or painter—it is not certain. What is certain is the Hellenistic inspiration of the Palace School Art.

Here is another evangelical Palace School author portrait. In it we can catch something of his personal liveliness of the confidence of the brushwork of the ancient illuminator as he sets his evangelists in a spatial setting. It is this sense of curiosity and adventure in delineating space, and movement and character, that provided a dynamic to Carolingian art which it handed on to the west—and which became, I think we an saw, its leading characteristic for a thousand years—from the ninth to the nineteenth century.

In short, when the west had to choose between (a) beauty of pattern and (b) figurative 3D. It chose the latter.

And this was no accident. When Charlemagne was still only king of the Franks and not yet Holy Roman Emperor he was confronted with a direct attack upon artistic expression from Byzantium in the form of the iconoclastic controversy. During a period of 60 years from 726 to 787 religious pictures were officially condemned in Byzantium: that is to say during the 40 year before Charles became king of the Franks, ad during the first 20 years of his reign. And the important question as to whether the western Christian church was to permit representational painting as a part of Christian worship was directly raised with Charlemagne shortly after 787. Charlemagne’s views were expressed in the *Libri Carolini* and they were of immense importance for the future of western art. In the East at this time image worship was proscribed because of the fear that magic was entering religion, because the east gave their icons the sanctity of holiness and venerated them as sacred objects in themselves. Charlemagne steered a sensible middle course in the issue: and asserted in the Caroline books that to adore pictures is to confuse the material picture with the immaterial thing it represented. But to destroy them was to show a lack of sensitivity to their beauty and value as a
religious teaching aid. And this viewpoint enunciated clearly and authoritatively in the *Libri Carolini* became the traditional one for the Middle Ages.

So far we have discussed two kinds of paintings which emanated from the Court at Aachen: the so-called Ada Group, with its Anglo-Irish and Roman influences; and the Palace Group, with its Byzantine, Greek Influences.

I want to turn now to another Carolingian school of manuscript illumination: the School of Rheims (in modern France), or let us Anglize it, since Daniel Jones tells us that that is what the best southern English speakers do, and call it “Reems”. The Rheims School owed its development to a Bishop called Ebbo. Ebbo had been Charlemagne’s librarian at Aachen, (after Alcuin let hum to become the Bishop of Tours. I shall talk about Tours a moment). Then Ebbo left Aachen in 816 to become the Bishop of Rheims.

Here is another author-evangelist portrait. It is of St Mark, and it is from Archbishop Ebbo’s own gospel book. The difference between the style of the Palace School and the Rheims School may be seen most vividly. The palace evangelists are calm, tranquil, absorbed in their work of writing the gospel. The Rheims’ evangelists are ecstatic, filled with ecstasy of the mission. Roger Hinks, one of the first art historians to turn his attention to Carolingian art has contrasted them well; ‘Whereas the Evangelists of the *Schola Palatina* were tranquil and absorbed in their work, their successors at Rheums behave as though possessed with a demon of self-consciousness: they are either furiously busy, or gaze wildly around; their clothes are all crumpled and awry, as though to signify their inner conflict and *agon*, and the landscape upheaves itself in sympathy. Here then we already have in the ninth century an approach to art that over one thousand years later men began to apply to the work of van Gogh and Edvard Munch. One is reminded of the proverb: ‘The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.’

The masterpiece of the Rheims school and perhaps the most important of all the Carolingian manuscripts is the *Utrecht Psalter*. It was written near Rheims in 832 and is illustrated throughout with some 166 pictures. They are not in colour but are pen drawings in a most distinctive and remarkable style* ‘built up with rapid, scratchy swirling pen-strokes which give an impression of vigorous life’.

The illustrations illustrate the psalms in a most literal way. In these drawings even the landscapes seem to possess an inner excitement, everything whirls and moves. Everything moves to an inner ecstasy. Here again it seems clear that the illusionistic style of late Antiquity was here channelled through Byzantine sources.
One interesting manuscript which is influenced by the Rheims School is the Drogo Sacrementary. It is unusual in that the illustrations are all within large initial letters. They are in the windswept style of the Rheims school. Here they are all concerned with the act of sacrifice The Îgitur being the first words of the mass. The T was often developed in these missals into a crucifix form—it is otherwise classical and symbolic of the vine. This magnificent sacrementary was designed for the Bishop of Metz, who was a close relative of Charlemagne—his illegitimate son in fact.

There remains one more school of Carolingian manuscript illumination to consider: the school of Tours. This brings us back to Charlemagne’s great friend and teacher, the Englishman, Alcuin: in 796 he felt Aachen and became the Bishop of Tours, where he set up a kind of Anlgo-Saxon centre, and developed a highly productive scriptoria from which many bibles and gospels issued: may royal presentation manuscripts were made at St Martin, Tours. It was here that Alcuin revised the 4th century Vulgate version of the Bible.

One of the finest of the illuminated manuscripts from Tours is the Grandval Bible now in the British Museum. Here is one of its illustrations: it shows Moses receiving the tablets of the law in the fiery bush, with Aaron waiting at the side for him. And below Moses giving the tablets to the Israelites. Now the perspective is quite well developed; and the feet almost portrayed in correct foreshortening. All this reflects the early Christian style of the 5t century. And it has been argued skilfully (by Professor Dodwell of Manchester) that the actual illustrator was using a lost fifth century manuscript, because of both the style and the subject matter.

The finest of all the Carolingian portraits is to be found in one of the Tours illuminated manuscripts. This is the Gospel book of the Emperor Lothar, the grandson of Charlemagne. With one hand he holds his sceptre and other is pointing to the dedication poem on the other page of his gospel. There is a classical air in the gravity of the portrait and the two soldiers who guard hum on either side of his throne. But the psychological concentration upon the face of the Emperor: the lines of his cloak leading towards it, and the two soldiers looking towards him; this is essentially Carolingian. A kind of dynamic, expressive power which is pre-eminently western. The perspective of the throne has already reached a state reminiscent of the Madonnas of Cimabue and Giotto. Here too may be seen the royal regalia of the Frankish kings who modelled themselves on the Kings of Israel: the crown, sceptre, throne and royal purple behind.

Most Carolingian manuscripts that have come down to us consist of gospels, psalters, or sacramentaries. But there are a few manuscripts of a secular origin: the plays of Terence, or calendars with palntary deities. Here for example is an illustration of Andromeda chined to her rock from an illustration to one of Cicero’s plays. She adopts the pose of the Venus de Milo, her drape falling from her has she is about to
take her bath. This too is clearly copied from a classical source, including the modelling.

Here are some illustrations* from a treatise on astronomy, which presents the constellations; the water carrier of the signs of the zodiac is drawn directly from the recumbent god figure which Greeks used to represent their river gods.

Such illustrations were strongly attacked by the clergy of Charlemagne’s time: although they permitted the didactic use of paintings to teach the Christian story: they took the Platonic view that painting was thrice removed from reality. In one of the Caroline Books we read: ‘Truth perceiving always pure and undefiled is one. Images however, by the will of the artist seem to do many things while they do nothing. For since they seem to be men when they are not, to fight when they do not fight, to see when they do not see—and so on—they are artist’s functions and not that truth of which it is said ‘And the truth shall make you free’. The writer then goes on to list a whole inventory of classical images that are as he says ‘alien to Scriptures.

‘Or is it not alien to scriptures’, he proceeds ‘that Venus is represented embracing Mars and being discovered by the Sun and caught by Vulcan and by him together with Mars in adamantine chains [?]. These and similar things painful to recount, but to the poets and the philosophers of the Gentiles sweet to sing and recondite to expound, and to the painters suitable for their compositions, are utterly alien to Holy Scripture. For to be silent about other matters, if any painter dares to paint two heads on one body or one head on two bodies, or the head of one creature on the body of another, like a centaur, who has the body of a horse and the head of a man, r the Minotaur who is half bull and half man, is not this admittedly contrary to the Scriptures?’

Well, it may have been contrary to the Holy Scriptures, and damned the artists to hell bit they went on painting the classical gods and goddesses under all kinds of astrological and mythological disguises. These survived as morals and fables: and in Carolingian art we may trace the beginnings by which classical mythology was vast into a western Christianised form—but that of course is a long story and another one.

What we can say—to bring this short introduction to some Carolingian manuscripts to a conclusion—and I have not sort to do more—is that during the ninth century—western art took the fatal decision that it was to pursue for over a thousand years, to be a figurative, expressive, and often a didactic and narrative art—which involved it in the depiction of such things—space and depth, movement, and so forth—instead of an art exclusively of great decorative beauty—two dimensional patterns—the path of Islam and of Jewish art—the kind of art expressed in say this beautiful carpet page from the *Paslater of Folchard*—[??] of about 870.
It chose to take the way of narrative—as in this depiction of the Ark in the Desert*—from the Bible of Charles the Bald. When we look at it and its ceaseless animation its registers of animated crowds—it is easy to see evolving from it a painting like Michelangelo’s last judgment—the damming ad judging Christ where the Ark of the Covenant is—the blessed above and the damned below—the art of the Renaissance is nascent in Carolingian art.

Which is why perhaps many art historians see Carolingian art as the first of the renaissances—the first attempt to wed a dynamic contemporary art to the art of antiquity.

In its strange and curiously primitive way of course it was also an art of ecstasy and transcendence as we can see in this Gospel of Book of the year 1000. The nervous spiritual energy of the West—our curse, you might say, and our glory.

One of his contemporaries wrote of Charles the Great: ‘He made his kingdom, which was dark and almost blind when God committed it to him… radiant with the blaze of fresh learning hitherto unknown to our barbarism.’ It might also be said of the art that came to birth under his rule.

Carolingian lettering—the beauty of the upper case—majuscule and the lower case—Psalter of Corbie.

Unashamed advertising.
500 years later—one young artist in Venice could paint like this—Girogione—perhaps the first artist to paint as a painter and not as a draughtsman to labour the edges and fatten the texture and dissolve the tone—to discover the art of painterly painting.
Dr Jaynie Anderson: The Image of Gerogione.