

Catalan Medieval Art: A Heritage Read Politically

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The contemplation of art reveals to us one of the greatest gifts of human genius: the expression of feeling by means other than vocal or bodily language, often fixing the moment through which the artist's society is passing. Medieval societies did not escape that tendency.

To understand it better, those who can should visit the National Art Museum of Catalonia, in Barcelona. Situated on the boundary between what had been the Visigothic Kingdom and the Holy Roman Empire, Catalonia was well placed to capture the artistic emotion of those who lived under the feudal and seigneurial regimes — though the works of the exponents of both sides are divided into Romanesque (to the eleventh century) and Gothic (from the eleventh to the fifteenth).

The Middle Ages have, in their works, a necessarily religious theme, Romanesque art being what gave identity to the Early Middle Ages: a period in which feudal and seigneurial societies were taking form, and in which there was hope that the Christian Messiah would bring light, and an end to hunger and plague, to those who converted — willingly or by force — and who sought in the great estates (embryos of the future fiefs in what would be the Holy Roman Empire, or seigneurial properties if we speak of the Iberian Peninsula) the stability they dreamed of, in the face of the immense decentralization and consequent ruralization of what had been one of the greatest empires in the world. Those who converted willingly, as Christians and as artists, used dark and scarcely defining tones to depict, constantly, castles and medieval knights, clerics, feudal lords and seigneurial leaders, the Pope, and even Christ. So long as hope was not restored, so as to quell the uncertainty of hunger and plague, the art of compulsory Christianity served all the more as a catalyst that allowed the anguish of those living in submission to the continental theocracy to be set out — a theocracy then installed in a most violent reality of interests, inevitably portrayed by the artists of the Romanesque style, steeped in a hopelessness that made their paintings obvious records of a collective sadness, through images and figures in somber contexts: not only in the colors of the paint but in the indefiniteness of the protagonists, at times scarcely distinct, depicted as any slaves or serfs whose instability of food and health was proportional to the loyalty owed to the brutal caprices of the systems in which they survived.

But it is a consensus among historians that by the year 1000 AD what we now call the Late Middle Ages had already been reached, with the consolidation of the feudal system (in the Holy Roman Empire) and the seigneurial system (in the Iberian Peninsula, part of which was moreover occupied by the Umayyad Caliphate of Córdoba). Religion, in one region and the other, stood consolidated, reducing — though not eliminating, as the history of later decades and centuries shows — the existence of inter-religious feudal wars, or restricting them to combat against the Arabs. Together with a moderate increase in food production, the oppression of the feudal and seigneurial systems did not seem so evident (though it remained extremely violent), since the enemies of the moment were the Muslim invaders of Iberia, who also occupied a Jerusalem that would come to be besieged by the Crusades.

Thus the artistic standard of the makers of that time changed into what we today perceive as Gothic art. The controllers of the land — feudal lords and seigneurs — together with the Roman Catholic Church, financed in the places of greatest population great cathedrals whose towers might reach the highest possible altitudes, maximizing any contact with the Almighty; and in the same way their lower flanks

were graced with colored stained glass that cast a multicolored light, denoting the comfort and the presence of God. The paintings, reproducing the same religious themes as the Romanesque aesthetic and with added contexts of heroism, came to use lighter and clearer paints, supporting the general belief in the imminent salvation of Christendom.

All of this, be it said, within a political reality objectively oppressive, resting as it did on totalitarian and imposing theocratic beliefs — not always visible, but at times unconsciously assimilated through those beautiful tactics of psychological manipulation that used art as bread and circuses, to the detriment of any struggle for liberation from an empirically submissive way of life. So much so that, in 1231, the political conditions existed for the installation of the Inquisition, inaugurating the greatest period of state fanaticism ever recorded in the history of the West.

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