16.3: The Carolingians

Carolingian Painting in the Early European Middle Ages

Carolingian artwork consists of frescoes and mosaics that reached a pinnacle of production under the reign of Charlemagne.

Learning Objectives

Describe Carolingian mosaics and paintings

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- Carolingian art comes from the Frankish Empire from about 780 to 900 CE, during the reign of Charlemagne and his immediate heirs. This period is popularly known as the Carolingian Renaissance.
- Carolingian paintings show an attempt to conform to Charlemagne’s desire to revive the Roman Empire under a Christian banner.
- Some fragmentary frescoes have survived, allowing art historians to theoretically conceptualize Carolingian painting. Examples of surviving fragments include those at the Abbey of Saint John at Müstair and Saint Benedikt at Mals.
- Mosaics, created by assembling small pieces of colored glass, stone, pigments, and other materials, were created in Charlemagne’s Palatine Chapel. Examples of well-preserved surviving frescoes can be found at Charlemagne’s Palatine Chapel at Aachen and Germigny-des-Prés.
**Key Terms**

- **mosaic**: A piece of artwork created by placing colored squares (usually tiles) in a pattern so as to create a picture.
- **fresco**: A technique of mural painting executed upon freshly laid lime plaster. Water is used as the vehicle for the pigment and as the plaster sets, the painting becomes an integral part of the wall.

**Background**

Carolingian art comes from the Frankish Empire from about 780 to 900 CE, during the reign of Charlemagne and his immediate heirs. This period is popularly known as the Carolingian Renaissance. The art was produced by and for the court circle and a group of important monasteries under imperial patronage.

Surviving examples of painting from this era consist mainly of frescoes and mosaics produced in present-day France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, northern Italy, and the Low Countries. These sites have allowed art historians to theoretically conceptualize Carolingian paintings. Paintings show an attempt to conform to Charlemagne’s desire to revive the Roman Empire under a Christian banner. The figures in the frescoes, although relatively flat and posed in a stylized manner, display a degree of modeling and an acknowledgement of the body beneath the clothing. Their facial expressions and body language imply a sense of interaction, although few stand in profile and none turn their backs to the viewer. Surviving frescoes show a greater degree of modeling, a variety of poses, and a relatively naturalistic rendering of draperies and acknowledgement of the bodies beneath. Outside the elite circle that produced these works, however, the quality of visual art was much lower.

**Frescoes**

Various forms of Carolingian painting include frescoes, which reached a pinnacle of production under the reign of Charlemagne. A villa that featured the oratory of the Palatine Chapel belonged to Bishop Theodulf of Orléans, a key associate of Charlemagne. It was destroyed later in the century, but contained multiple Carolignian frescos of the Seven Liberal Arts, the Four Seasons, and the *Mappa Mundi* (Map of the World). Art historians have found numerous other Carolingian frescoes in churches and palaces that have since been nearly completely lost.

The Abbey of Saint John at Müstair, Switzerland is the site of exceptionally well-preserved Carolingian art. The original church has several significant early medieval frescoes from around 800 CE. The paintings are organized in five rows that stretch from the southern wall across the west wall to the northern wall. The top row features scenes from the life of King David of the Old Testament. The next three rows show scenes from the youth, life, and Passion of Christ. The bottom row contains scenes from the crucifixion of Saint Andreas. On the western wall the rows are tied together with an image of the Last Judgment. The palette consists of a limited range of colors including ochre, red, and brown.
Fragments of Carolingian-era frescoes (early ninth century), St. John at Müstair: Art historian Dr. Bernd Schälicke examines the Carolingian frescoes on the north wall of the Benedictine Monastery Church of St. John at Müstair.

The frescoes at Saint Benedikt at Mals, Italy are contemporary with those at neighboring Saint John at Müstair. They belong to a limited set of surviving frescoes of the Carolingian period. The frescoes are mostly distributed in three niches in the altar wall, showing Jesus Christ flanked by pope Gregory the Great and Saint Stephen. On the walls separating the niches are donor portraits below a troop of 12 angels, and scenes showing Gregory writing his *Dialogi* and disputing with Paulus Diaconus (Paul the Deacon) alongside scenes showing Paul of Tarsus and a fragment of a scene from the life of Saint Benedict.
Saint Gregory Disputing with Paulus Diaconus (c. 825).: Church of St. Benedict, Mals, Italy.

Mosaics

Mosaics were created by assembling small pieces of colored glass, stone, pigments, and other materials. The mosaics were created in Charlemagne’s Palatine Chapel at Aachen, whose interior remains adorned with arch-to-dome mosaics. Like the Byzantine mosaics that influenced their design, those that adorn Charlemagne’s chapel feature floral motifs and classicized figures in various poses against largely gold backgrounds.
**Palatine Chapel at Aachen, interior view:** The surviving mosaics begin above eye level at the piers or arches and span upward into the dome.

The most famous mosaic in Charlemagne’s chapel showed an enthroned Christ worshiped by the Evangelist’s symbols and the 24 elders of the Apocalypse. This mosaic no longer survives, but a restored one remains in the apse of the oratory at Germigny-des-Prés (806), discovered in 1820 under a coat of plaster and depicting the Ark of the Covenant adored by angels.
Ark of the Covenant, Germigny-des-Prés (c. 806): Restoration of the original that once adorned the Palatine Chapel. The subject seems drawn from illuminated Jewish bibles and relates to the *Libri Carolini*, possibly written by Theodulf, where the Ark is cited as divine approval of sacred images.

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**Carolingian Architecture in the Early European Middle Ages**

Carolingian architecture is characterized by its attempts to emulate late Roman classicism, early Christian, and Byzantine styles.

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**Learning Objectives**

Locate Carolingian architecture as it relates to pre-Romanesque, Roman classicist, Late Antique, early Christian, and Byzantine styles

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**Key Takeaways**

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**Key Points**

- Carolingian churches are generally basilican like the Early Christian churches of Rome, and commonly incorporated westworks.

- The gatehouse of the monastery at Lorsch, built around 800 CE in Germany, exemplifies classical inspiration for Carolingian architecture built as a triple-arched hall dominating the gateway. The arched façade is interspersed with attached Roman-style classical columns and pilasters above.

- Charlemagne’s Palatine Chapel at Aachen combines the styles of the Western Roman and Byzantine Empires with contemporary innovations to create a unique Carolingian architectural style.

- The exterior of a westwork consists of multiple stories between two towers, while the interior includes an entrance vestibule, a chapel, and a series of galleries overlooking the nave. The westwork of the Corvey Abbey is one of the few intact surviving examples from the Carolingian period.
Key Terms

• **spolia**: The repurposing of building stone for new construction or the reuse of decorative sculpture on new monuments.

• **westwork**: The main entrance of a church, named for its (usually) west-facing orientation.

• **Carolingian architecture**: A style of northern European pre-Romanesque architecture belonging to the period of the late eighth and ninth centuries. It was a conscious attempt to emulate Roman architecture and thus borrowed heavily from early Christian and Byzantine architecture. However, innovations make this a distinct style all its own.

Carolingian architecture is the style of northern European pre-Romanesque architecture belonging to the Carolingian Renaissance. During the eighth and ninth centuries, the Carolingian dynasty (named for Charlemagne) dominated western Europe politically, culturally, and economically.

Carolingian architecture is characterized by its conscious attempts to emulate Roman classicism and Late Antique architecture. The Carolingians thus borrowed heavily from early Christian and Byzantine architectural styles, although they added their own innovations and aesthetic style. The result was a fusion of divergent cultural aesthetic qualities.

The gatehouse of Lorsch Abbey, built around 800 CE in Germany, exemplifies classical inspiration for Carolingian architecture, built as a triple-arched hall dominating the gateway, with the arcaded façade interspersed with engaged Corinthian columns and pilasters above. In addition to the engaged columns and arcades, the apse-like structures on either side of the gatehouse recall the ancient Roman basilicas, which were the sites of important government events.

Lorsch Abbey: Lorsch Abbey (800 CE) demonstrates the Roman classical inspiration the Carolingians took for their architecture, with a triple arch hallway dominating the gateway and interspersed with engaged classical columns.

By contrast, the Palatine Chapel in Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle), with its sixteen-sided ambulatory and overhead gallery, was inspired by the Byzantine-style octagonal church of San Vitale in Ravenna. The chapel makes use of ancient spolia, conceivably from Ravenna, as well as newly carved materials. The bronze decoration is of extraordinarily high quality, especially the doors with lion heads and the interior railings with Corinthian order columns and acanthus scrolls. Like San Vitale, the Palatine Chapel is a centrally-planned church whose dome serves as its focal point. However, at Aachen, the barrel and groin vaults and octagonal cloister vault in the dome reflect late Roman practices rather than the...
Byzantine techniques employed at San Vitale. Its round arches and massive supporting piers draw from Western Roman influence. A multicolored marble veneer creates a sumptuous interior. A monumental western entrance complex called the westwork is also drawn from Byzantine architecture.

Palatine Chapel in Aachen, interior view: The Palatine Chapel in Aachen (792-805) demonstrates the Byzantine influence on Carolingian architecture, evidenced by its octagonal style.

Carolingian churches are generally basilican like the Early Christian churches of Rome, and commonly incorporated westworks, arguably the precedent for the western façades of later medieval cathedrals. A westwork (German: westwerk) is a monumental west-facing entrance section of a medieval church. This exterior consists of multiple stories between two towers, while the interior includes an entrance vestibule, a chapel, and a series of galleries overlooking the nave. The westwork first originated in the ancient churches of Syria.

The westwork of Corvey Abbey (873-885), Germany, is the oldest surviving example. Like the gate house from Lorsch Abbey, the westwork of Corvey consists of a symmetrical arcade of three round arches at the base. This arcaded pattern repeats in the windows on the second and third stories. The heavy masonry throughout the façade recalls the massive appearance of the interior of the Palatine Chapel. On the upper stories of the center and towers of the westwork, a range of modified classical columns divide and accent the windows, also round arches.
Corvey Abbey: The westwork is the only surviving architectural component of the original Carolingian monastery.

Carolingian Illustrated Books in the Early European Middle Ages

The most common surviving works of the Carolingian era are illuminated manuscripts, which further developed the Insular book style.

Learning Objectives

Identify the major Carolingian manuscripts, the workshops and schools they were created in, and the traditions they drew from

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- Carolingian manuscripts were likely produced largely by clerics in a few workshops around the Carolingian Empire. Each of these workshops developed its own style based on the artists and influences of that location and time. Among the most influential centers of production were the Court Schools of Charlemagne and Charles the Bald, as
well as the Touronian and Rheimsian Schools.

- As the earliest producer of Carolingian manuscripts, the Court School of Charlemagne initiated a revival of Roman classicism yet maintained Migration Period art (Merovingian and Insular) traditions in their linear presentation, with no concern for volume and spatial relationships.
- The *Drogo Sacramentary* introduced the historiated initial to manuscript illumination. It became standard in manuscripts for the remainder of the Middle Ages.
- The *Utrecht Psalter* was perhaps the most important of all Carolingian manuscripts because of its innovative and naturalistic figurine line drawings. These became the most influential innovation of Carolingian art.
- The *Ebbo Gospels* introduced expressive and energetic lines that were unprecedented in illumination and influenced the art form for decades.

**Key Terms**

- **historiated**: Decorated with designs representing scenes from the text.
- **illuminated manuscripts**: A book in which the text is supplemented by the addition of decoration, such as decorated initials, borders (marginalia) and miniature illustrations. In the most strict definition of the term, this refers to books decorated with gold or silver, but in both common usage and modern scholarship, the term is now used to refer to any decorated or illustrated book from the Western traditions.

Illuminated manuscripts are the most common surviving works of the Carolingian era. This includes a number of luxury manuscripts, mostly Gospel books. They are decorated with a relatively small number of full-page miniatures, often including evangelist portraits and lavish canon tables drawn from Insular art in Britain and Ireland. Carolingian narrative images and cycles are rare but do exist. They tend to be mostly of the Old Testament, while New Testament scenes are typically found on the ivory reliefs on the covers.

**Early Carolingian Manuscripts**

Carolingian illustrators adopted the oversized, heavily decorated initials of Insular art and developed the historiated decorated initial to produce small narrative scenes. These were seen for the first time toward the end of the period, most notably in the *Drogo Sacramentary* (850-855). The historiated initial, a harmonious union of classical lettering with narrative scenes, had influence into the Romanesque period.
**Drogo Sacramentary**: Drogo Sacramentary (c. 850) depicts a historiated initial "C" which contains the Ascension of Christ. The text is in gold ink.

Carolingian luxury manuscripts were given treasure binding, rich covers with jewels set in gold and carved ivory panels. As in Insular art, these were prestige objects kept in the church or treasury. By contrast, working manuscripts featured a few decorated initial and pen drawings and were kept in libraries. One exception is the *Utrecht Psalter*, a heavily illustrated library version of the Psalms done in pen and wash and almost certainly copied from a much earlier manuscript. This was perhaps the most important of all Carolingian manuscripts for its innovative and naturalistic figure line drawings that became the most influential innovation of Carolinian art.
Ultrecht Psalter: From the Utrecht Psalter, ninth century. Naturalistic and energetic figurine line drawings were entirely new and became the most influential innovation of Carolinian art in later periods.

Carolingian Manuscript Workshops

Carolingian manuscripts are presumed to have been produced largely or entirely by clerics in a few workshops around the Carolingian Empire. Each of these workshops practiced its own style that developed based on the artists and influences of that particular location and time. The earliest workshop was the Court School of Charlemagne, then the Rheimsian workshop (which became the most influential of the Carolingian period), the Touronian style, the Drogo style, and the Court School of Charles II (the Bald).

The Court School of Charlemagne

The Court School of Charlemagne (also known as the Ada School) produced the earliest manuscripts, including the Godescalc Evangelistary (781–783), the Lorsch Gospels (778–820), the Ada Gospels, the Soissons Gospels, the Harley Golden Gospels (800–820), and the Vienna Coronation Gospels. The Court School manuscripts were ornate and elaborate, reminiscent of sixth-century ivories and mosaics from Ravenna, Italy. The Court School of Charlemagne initiated a revival of Roman classicism, yet maintained Migration-Period artistic (Merovingian and Insular) traditions in their linear presentation, with no concern for volume and spatial relationships.
Lorsch Gospels: Ivory book cover with carvings. The Lorsch Gospels reflect its origin in the Court School of Charlemagne with its Late Antiquity Imperial scenes adapted to a Christian theme.

The Rheims School

In the early ninth century, Archbishop Ebbo of Rheims assembled clerical artists and transformed Carolingian art. The expressive animations of the Rheims School would have influence on northern medieval art for centuries to follow, far into the Romanesque period. One example was the Gospel Book of Ebbo (816–835), painted with swift, fresh, vibrant brush strokes that evoked an inspiration and energy unknown in classical Mediterranean forms. This emotionalism was new to Carolingian art. Figures in the Ebbo Gospels are represented in nervous, agitated poses. The illustration uses an energetic, streaky style with swift brush strokes. The style directly influenced manuscript illumination for decades, as seen in the Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram. The evangelist portrait of Matthew in the Ebbo Gospels is similar to the illustration of the psalmist in the first psalm of the Utrecht Psalter.
Saint Matthew, from the Ebbo Gospels (816-835): Portrait of Matthew, depicting him sitting and writing in the foreground. The wavy lines that form the details on Matthew's clothing and the diagonal lines adding detail to the background and foreground are examples of the energetic subject matter in the Ebbo Gospels.

Other books associated with the Rheims school include the Utrecht Psalter and the Bern Physiologus (825-850), the earliest Latin edition of the Christian allegorical text on animals. Many of its miniatures are set unframed into the text block, which was a characteristic of Late-Antique manuscripts. For this reason, it is believed to be a copy of a fifth-century manuscript. This is one of the oldest extant illustrated copies of the Physiologus.
Bern Physiologus, Folio 12v (825-850).

Image of the text and drawings from the *Bern Physiologus*, showing the miniatures drawn unframed into the text block. This is typical of late Antique manuscripts, leading scholars to believe that it is a copy of a fifth-century original.

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**St. Martin of Tours**

Another style developed at the monastery of St. Martin of Tours in which large Bibles were illustrated based on late Antique Bible illustrations. Three large Touronian Bibles were created. One of the best examples was the *Vivian Bible* (c. 846), commissioned by Count Vivien, the lay abbot of St. Martin of Tours, and presented to Charles the Bald. The Tours School was cut short by the invasion of the Normans in 853, but its style had already left a permanent mark on other centers in the Carolingian Empire.

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**Charles the Bald Court School**

Charles the Bald established a Court School that fused Touronian, Rheimsian, and Charlemagne Court School styles. Several manuscripts are attributed to this institution, and the *Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram* (870) was the last and most spectacular. The school’s location at the time is unknown as its previous base at St Martin’s Abbey in Tours was destroyed in 853, but it had probably moved to the Basilica of St. Denis outside Paris by the time of the production of the *Codex*. Seven full-page miniatures show the four evangelists, Charles the Bald enthroned, the Adoration of the Lamb,
Charles the Bald, from the Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram (c. 870): Depiction of Charles the Bald enthroned, surrounded by angels and saints. The Hand of God reaches down from beneath the red canopy, hovering over the emperor’s head.

Carolingian Metalwork in the Early European Middle Ages

Carolingian metalworkers primarily worked with gold, ivory, gems, and other precious materials.

Learning Objectives

List the prominent examples of metalwork during the Carolingian era

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- Metalwork subjects were often narrative religious scenes in vertical sections, largely derived from Late Antique paintings and carvings. Those with more hieratic images were derived from consular diptychs and other imperial art.
Important Carolingian examples of metalwork came out of Charles the Bald’s “Palace School” workshop.

Carolingian-era metalwork produced large statues cast entirely in gold that would influence the development of monumental, elaborate sculptures and altars made from precious materials in northern European medieval art.

**Key Terms**

- **Metalwork**: The process of working with metal to create individual parts, assemblies, or large-scale structures. The term covers a wide range, from large ships and bridges to precise engine parts and delicate jewelry, and a corresponding range of skills, processes, and tools.

Carolingian-era metalworkers primarily worked with gold, gems, ivory, and other precious materials. For instance, luxury Carolingian manuscripts were given treasure bindings and elaborately ornate covers in precious metals set with jewels around central carved ivory panels. Metalwork subjects were often narrative religious scenes in vertical sections, largely derived from Late Antique paintings and carvings. Those with more hieratic images, such as the front and back covers of the Lorsch Gospels, were derived from consular diptychs and other imperial art.

**Charles the Bald’s Palace School Workshop**

Important Carolingian examples of metalwork came out of Charles the Bald’s Palace School workshop, and include the cover of the Lindau Gospels, the cover of the *Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram*, and the *Arnulf Ciborium*. All three of these works feature fine relief figures in repoussé gold. Another work associated with the Palace School is the frame of an antique serpentine dish, now located in the Louvre.
Cover of the *Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram* (870): Gold and gem-encrusted cover of the *Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram*, 870. Produced by the Carolingian Palace School.

Under Charlemagne, there was a revival of large-scale bronze casting in imitation of Roman designs, although metalwork in gold continued to develop. For example, the Aachen chapel’s figure of Christ in gold (now lost) was the first-known work of this type and became a crucial inspiring feature of northern European medieval art. Another one of the finest examples of Carolingian metalwork is the *Golden Altar* (824–859), also known as the *Paliotto*, in the Basilica of Sant’Ambrogio in Milan (since damaged by World War II bombings). The altar’s four sides are decorated with images in gold and silver repoussé framed by borders of filigree, precious stones, and enamel.

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An Imperial Portrait

Charlemagne’s personal appearance is known from a good description by a personal associate Einhard, whose biography of the emperor describes him as tall and well-built with a round head and wide eyes. This written portrait is confirmed by contemporary depictions of the emperor, his exhumed body, and sculptures believed to depict his likeness. One possibility is a bronze equestrian statuette once housed in Aachen Cathedral. Typical of sculpture in the round produced during the Carolingian period, the statuette is small, approximately eight inches high. The rider is depicted with a mustache, an open crown on his head, and a riding cloak fastened with a fibula. Like the architecture and painting of the time, this sculpture reflects Charlemagne’s desire to recreate the Roman Empire, as it bears similarities with a large-scale bronze equestrian portrait of Marcus Aurelius from the second century. Similar to the ancient Roman emperor, the mounted Carolingian ruler wears a calm expression as he rides without holding the reins. Rather, he holds a sword (now lost) in his right hand and an imperial orb in his left. Unlike its ancient predecessor, the horse does not pounce on a missing enemy but calmly prances, reflecting the stateliness of the rider.
**Equestrian Statuette of a Carolingian Ruler, Possibly Charlemagne (c. 870):** Statuette of Charlemagne (?) mounted on a horse holding a sword on marble base. 8 inches high. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Several gold reliquaries, including one in the form of a portrait bust of Charlemagne, were produced under later dynasties, especially after his canonization in the 12th century.

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**The Wolf’s Door**

Bronze also features in many decorative elements in Carolingian westwork of Aachen Cathedral. Known as the Wolf’s Door, the main entrance consists of heavy bronze leaves. Each leaf is divided into eight rectangles—a number that had religious symbolism in Christianity, as a symbol of Sunday, the day of the Resurrection. These boxes were framed by decorative strips, which are made of egg-shaped decorations. The egg was considered a symbol of life and fertility from antiquity. In Christian belief it was imbued with the even wider symbolism of Eternal Life. The door-rings in the shape of lions’ heads are wreathed by 24 stylized acanthus scrolls—again to be understood at the deepest level through numerology. The Wolf’s Door’s imitation of the shape of the ancient Roman temple door signifies Charlemagne’s claim to have established a New Rome in Aachen with the Palatine Chapel as the distinctive monumental building.

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