The Moissac Portal: Masterpiece of Romanesque Sculpture

n the 9th and 10th Centuries CE, Europe began to awaken from the has come to be known as the Dark Ages. Imposing churches were erected and many of these were decorated with sculptures. This new style of art and architecture, thought to be derived from that of the Roman Empire, has been called “Romanesque.” The sculpture from this time is full of a tremendous vitality and marked by a rich imagination. Some of the most impressive examples adorn the portal of the Abbaye de Saint Pierre in Moissac in southwestern France.

History of the Abbey

Moissac, situated on the confluence of the Garonne and Tarn rivers in southwest France (see map below), is surrounded by rich agricultural land. Legend has it that a monastic community was founded there in the 6th Century CE by Clovis, the first king of the Franks, though the monastery likely began a century later (Vidal et al., 1979). Over the years the monastery was pillaged by various invaders: the Arabs in the 8th Century, the Normans in the 9th Century, and the Hungarians in the 10th Century. In the 11th Century, as more and more pilgrims began to travel to Santiago de Compostella in Spain (Oursel, 1970), Moissac became an important way-station on the route from Geneva (dotted purple line):

Atlantic Ocean
La Rochelle
Limoges
Cluny
Geneva
Lyon
Le Puy
Rhone
Dordogne
Bordeaux
Garonne
Lot
Conques
Moissac
Tarn
Arles
Toulouse
Pamplona
Mediterranean Sea
100 km

In 1047, Saint Odilon, the 4th Abbot of Cluny, arranged for the monks in Moissac to be affiliated with the Benedictine Abbey at Cluny. In 1059, Durand de Bredon, archbishop of Toulouse, was installed as its first abbot. He arranged for the abbey church and cloisters to be rebuilt, and in 1063, the Abbaye de Saint Pierre de Moissac was reconsecrated. Abbot Durand is commemorated in a bas-relief sculpture in the east gallery of the cloisters (see illustration on the right adapted from Vidal et al, 1979). The sculptures adorning the portal and the porch were created under the direction of abbot Ansquitil (Franzé, 2015) during the years from 1100 to 1115 (Forsyth, 2010).

The Concept of "Romanesque"

The architecture and sculpture of the middle of the 10th to the

beginning of the 13th Centuries is usually considered "Romanesque," a term (*roman* in French) first used by Charles de Gerville (1769-1853) in the early 19th Century (Charles & Carl, 2012). He proposed that the style was a revival of the art and architecture of the Roman world before the Barbarian invasions. In England, Romanesque architecture is often called "Norman" since it came with the Norman Invasion in the 11th Century.

The key characteristic of Romanesque architecture was the use round arches (Toman, 2004, pp 24-30; Charles & Carl, 2012, p 17). The transition to pointed arches in the late 12th Century marked the onset of "Gothic" architecture. Both terms are inaccurate: Romanesque architecture has little to do with the Romans, and Gothic architecture has nothing to do with the Goths.

The period of time between the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE and the rise of the Romanesque after 1000 CE has often been considered a time of ignorance and violence – the European "Dark Ages." However, such a concept is inappropriate. Multiple separate kingdoms existed during this time, and each of these fostered its own learning, art and architecture. The Visigothic kingdom ruled much of Spain until the Arab Conquest in the 8th Century. The Merovingian dynasty governed France from the 5th to 8th Century. The Carolingian Empire (the precursor of the Holy Roman Empire) controlled much of France and Germany in the 9th Century. The kingdom of Asturias ruled northwest Spain in the 8th to 10th Centuries. The Vikings established the Duchy of Normandy in northwest France the 10th Century. Celtic monasteries in Ireland sent their missionaries and their artists back to convert and teach the people of the old Roman Empire. And Europe could not help but be affected by the Islamic art of Moorish Spain, and the magnificent art of

the Byzantine Empire and Ravenna. The period of the so-called Dark Ages was actually a time of intense artistic ferment, wherein different styles came together and interacted (Busch & Lohse, 1966; Oursel, 1973, pp 13-86; Fleischer, 2004).

Romanesque architecture differs from Roman architecture in its use of steeples and towers. Christian churches differ from Roman temples in their concentration on interior teaching rather than external show. Romanesque sculpture differs from Roman sculpture in its vitality and imagination, characteristics that it learned from Celtic and Norse carvings, in an iconography that follows Byzantine precedents, and in an ornamental geometry that largely comes from Islam.

The French language is particularly confusing in its description of artistic styles. “Romanesque” is *roman* in French, and “Roman” is *romain*. The word *romanesque* in French actually means “romantic” or “novelistic.” In French, the noun *roman* meaning “novel” derives from an earlier word *romanz,* meaning “story” (or “romance”). Another use of the French term *romanesque* is to describe the European languages that derived from Latin, equivalent in English to “romance” The only word that is equivalent in French and English is *romantique*, “romantic”

The Portal

The following diagram shows the south portal of the Abbaye de Saint Pierre. Sculpture adorns all parts of the portal as well as the walls of the porch in which it is located:

Tympanum

The tympanum represents the vision of John as described in *Revelation* (80-100 CE). Though some have proposed that the author of the Gospel of *John* also wrote this Apocalypse, most scholars now believe that *Revelation* came from a different person: a Christian prophet who retired to meditate and write on the island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor near Ephesus (Koester, 2014, pp 65-69; Pagels, 2012, pp 2-3). The first of John's visions is striking:

> And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.
>
> And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.
>
> And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of

gold.

And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind.

And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. (*Revelation* 4: 2-7)

Christ in majesty (*Maiestas Domini*) is the focus of this vision. This type of representation – a bearded Christ, wearing a crown, seated on a throne, holding a book, his head surrounded by a halo that usually incorporated a crucifix – had developed over the preceding centuries in illuminated manuscripts. The following illustration shows examples from the Codex Amiatinus (700-720), the Godescalc Evangelistary (783) and the Bamberg Apocalypse (1000-1020).

The following is a bas-relief sculpture of Christ in Majesty from the 7th-Century sarcophagus of Saint Agilbert in Jouarre, about 70 km east of Paris.

The Moissac tympanum represents in monumental stone the words of the prophet John.

In the center, Christ in Majesty is surrounded by four creatures and two angels (Schapiro & Finn, 1985, pp 77-104; Vidal et al., 1979, pp 95-99). The feet of Christ rest upon a crystalline sea, as described in the passage from *Revelation*, but not in the illuminations illustrated above. Bede's interpretation (early 8th Century) of this is that it represents the baptism that is necessary for Christian salvation (Wallis, 2013, p 134).

The setting for Umberto Eco's 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose* is a monastery loosely based on the Sacra di San Michele, an abbey on Mount Pirichiano in Piedmont, Italy. However, the portal of the fictional abbey church is clearly based on that in Moissac (Geese, 2004, p 259). The young monk Adso describes his impression of the Christ in Majesty:

> I saw a throne set in the sky and a figure seated on the throne. The face of the Seated One was stern and impassive, the eyes wide and glaring over a terrestrial humankind that had reached the end of its story; majestic hair and beard flowed around the face and over the chest like the waters of a river, in streams all equal, symmetrically divided in two. The crown on his head was rich in enamels and jewels, the purple imperial tunic was arranged in broad folds over the knees, woven with embroideries and laces of gold and silver thread. The left hand, resting on one knee, held a sealed book, the right was uplifted in an attitude of blessing or—I could not tell—of admonition. The face was illuminated by the tremendous beauty of a halo, containing a cross and bedecked with flowers, while around the throne and above the face of the Seated One I saw an emerald rainbow glittering. Before the throne, beneath the feet of the Seated One, a sea of crystal flowed, and around the Seated One, beside and above the throne, I saw four awful creatures—awful for me, as I looked at them, transported, but docile and dear for the Seated One, whose praises they sang without cease.

Surrounding the central figure of Christ are four creatures. Although there are other interpretations, most scholars suggest that these creatures represent the writers of the four gospels since each is holding a book:

> Matthew has the human face because he begins his gospel with Jesus' human genealogy; Mark is the lion because he begins with a voice roaring in the desert; Luke is the ox because he begins with offering in the temple; and John is the eagle because of the book's soaring opening lines. (Koester, 2014, p 353).

Each of the creatures has six wings. Bede considered the number six auspicious because it is both the sum and product of the first three numbers (Wallis, 2013, p 135). The sculptural representations of the four creatures, with their wings and books, are marvelously dynamic – they twist

themselves toward the focus of their praise. There is a striking contrast between the immobility of the central Christ and the movement of the surrounding creatures: one exists in eternity whereas the others try to portray this in human time. Beside the creatures are two angels, each holding a scroll, unopened on the left and open on the right.

Surrounding the central group are 24 “elders” arrayed in white gowns and wearing golden crowns. No one knows who they represent. They may be: the elders of the Christian Church in Jerusalem; the Christian Apostles and the leaders of the tribes of Israel; the whole church composed of both priests and people; or those who have already died and been

resurrected (Quispel, 1979, p 49; Koester, 2024, pp 360-363; Wallis, 2013, p 136). Twenty-four is another auspicious number: the product of the first four integers.

Hearn (1981, pp 170-172) stresses the remarkable variability of the elders, who differ in the posture of their legs or arms, in the way they hold their instruments, in the shape and ornamentation of their crowns, and in the decorations of their robes. Yet all the elders are the same in that they are looking at Christ.

Each of the elders holds a stringed instrument (probably a version of the vielle or medieval fiddle) but the number of strings and the shape of the sounding body vary from elder to elder. Only one appears to be actually playing his instrument with a bow (see right). Most of the elders also hold a goblet in their hand.

In *The Name of the Rose*, Adso is completely entranced by the elders:

> Around the throne, beside the four creatures and under the

> feet of the Seated One, as if seen through the transparent waters of the crystal sea, as if to fill the whole space of the vision, arranged according to the triangular frame of the tympanum, rising from a base of seven plus seven, then to three plus three and then to two plus two, at either side of the great throne, on twenty-four little thrones, there were twenty-four ancients, wearing white garments and crowned in gold. Some held lutes in their hands, one a vase of perfumes, and only one was playing an instrument, all the others were in ecstasy, faces turned to the Seated One, whose praises they were singing, their limbs also twisted like the creatures', so that all could see the Seated One, not in wild fashion, however, but with movements of ecstatic dance—as David must have danced before the Ark—so that wherever their pupils were, against the law governing the stature of bodies, they converged on the same radiant spot. Oh, what a harmony of abandonment and impulse, of unnatural and yet graceful postures, in that mystical language of limbs miraculously freed from the weight of corporeal matter, marked quantity infused with new substantial form, as if the holy band were struck by an impetuous wind, breath of life, frenzy of delight, rejoicing song of praise miraculously transformed, from the sound that it was, into image. Bodies inhabited in every part by the Spirit, illuminated by revelation, faces overcome with amazement, eyes shining with enthusiasm, cheeks flushed with love, pupils dilated with joy: this one thunder-struck by a pleasurable consternation, that one pierced by a consternated pleasure, some transfigured by wonder, some rejuvenated by bliss, there they all were, singing with the expression of their faces, the drapery of their tunics, the position and tension of their limbs, singing a new song, lips parted in a smile of perennial praise. (p 42)

The following photographs of some of the elders and their ecstasy:

The Trumeau

Carved from one piece of stone, the *trumeau* (deriving from the Germanic root *thruma*, trunk, stump) of the Moissac portal is one of the most striking pieces of Romanesque sculpture (Vidal et al, 1979, pp 99-100; Schapiro, 1931, pp 525-529; Schapiro & Finn, 1985, pp 128-132). On the front of the pillar are arrayed three pairs of lions. The lions are similar in style to the lion of Mark in the tympanum. Each lion is definitely sexed with either female breasts or male genitalia. The iconography of lions harkens back to the Ishtar gate of Babylon, and to Coptic sculptures. Their intertwining owes much to the complex patterns of Islamic imagery. Behind the lions is a pattern of vines and rosettes.

On the sides of the trumeau are carved sinuous and elongated representations of the prophet Jeremiah with an open scroll and the apostle Paul with a book of his letters. Jeremiah looks downward in melancholy as he laments the state of Jerusalem and foresees the Babylonian captivity. Paul looks upward with hope for the redemption offered to those who elect Christ as their savior. My intuition is that the sculpture of Paul may be a portrait of the abbot Ansquitil, who devised the iconography of the portal and supervised its construction.

The Birth and Childhood of Jesus

The walls of the porch portray two narratives related to salvation and damnation (Schapiro & Finn, 1985, pp 107-126; Forsyth, 2002). On the east wall are represented episodes from the birth and childhood of Jesus. In the lower section of the wall are the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the Adoration of the Magi. Though these were damaged during the French Revolution, the upper panel of the wall is well preserved.

It represents from right to left: the presentation in the temple (*Luke* 2; 23-32), the angel warning Joseph that Herod is planning to massacre the infants of Bethlehem and the flight to Egypt (*Matthew* 2: 13-23), and the fall of the idols of Heliopolis.

The last episode may derive from a prophecy of the Messiah in *Jeremiah* 43: 11-13:

> And when he cometh, he shall smite the land of Egypt, and deliver such as are for death to death; and such as are for captivity to captivity; and such as are for the sword to the sword.
>
> And I will kindle a fire in the houses of the gods of Egypt; and he shall burn them, and carry them away captives: and he shall array himself with the land of Egypt, as a shepherd putteth on his garment; and he shall go forth from thence in peace.
>
> He shall break also the images of Bethshemesh, that is in the land of Egypt; and the houses of the gods of the Egyptians shall he burn with fire.

Heliopolis (Greek) and Bethshemesh (Hebrew) both mean “city of the sun.” A passage in one of the apocrypha describes the

destruction of the idols and temples of Egypt when the Holy Family arrived for their sojourn there (Forsyth (2002; Franzé, 2015). The fall of the idols may also relate to the success of the First Crusade which had recently liberated Jerusalem in 1098 (Franzé, 2015).

Dives and Lazarus

The upper sculptures of the west wall of the porch recount the parable of Dives and Lazarus (*Luke* 16: 19-26).

> There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:
>
> And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,
>
> And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.
>
> And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried;
>
> And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.
>
> And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.
>
> But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.
>
> And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you

cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

Dives is the Latin word for a rich man, and Lazarus is the name of a beggar, derived from the Hebrew Eleazar or “God is my help” (Lazarus in this parable is not the Lazarus that Jesus later raised from the dead. Their common name is just coincidence).

During his life, Dives enjoyed his luxury and took no notice of Lazarus. After they died, Lazarus was taken to Abraham’s bosom whereas Dives went to hell. Justice was served. The parable has always been popular. The poor are more numerous than the rich.

The right side of the Moissac tableau shows Dives eating a sumptuous meal. He pays no heed to Lazarus, who lies on the ground in the lower center part of the panel, beset by dogs. At his death Lazarus is taken by the angel to the bosom of Abraham. This is in accord with the law as personified on the far left of the sculpture. The fate of Dives is played out in a separate representation lower down on the wall (not illustrated). Devils take both his soul and his accumulated riches. Like Dives, this sculpture has not survived well.

An old English ballad, dating from medieval times, retells the

story with the refrain

> Then Lazarus laid him down and down
> And down at Dives' door
> "Some meat, some drink, brother Dives,
> Bestow upon the poor"

Ralph Vaughan-Williams composed *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus for Harp and String Orchestra* (1940), based on various versions of the ballad.

Henderson (1972, p 90) points out that the parable of Dives and Lazarus follows appropriately from the warnings of the prophet John that come immediately before his vision of Christ in Majesty:

> Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:
>
> I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.
>
> As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. (*Revelation* 3:17-19)

The Artists

The overall conception of the portal and the cloister of the Abbaye de Saint Pierre has long been attributed to the Abbot Ansquitil. The chronicle of Aymeric de Peyrac, an abbot of Moissac in the 14th Century wrote:

> *Dictus Ansquitilus fecit fieri portale pulcherrimum* [The said Ansquitil arranged for the most beautiful portal to be made] (quoted by Vidal et al 1979, p 96)

The central pillar of the west gallery of cloister (illustrated on the right) has an intricately carved epigraph that reads

> ANNO AB INCARNATIONE ÆTERNI PRINCIPIS MILLESIMO CENTESIMO

> FACTVM EST CLAUSTRVM ISTVD TEMPORE DOMNI ANSQUITILII ABBATIS AMEN VVV MDM RRR FFF

De la Haye (2023, p 133-135) suggests that the final abbreviations might have represented

> VIR VITÆ VENERABILIS / MOYSSIACENSEM DOMUM MELIORAVIT / RESTITUIT RESTAURAVIT REXIT / FAUSTE FORTUNATE FELICITER,

Thus, a full translation would read

> In the year 1100 following the incarnation of the Eternal Lord, this cloister was erected, in the time of the Abbot Ansquitil: a man of venerable life who improved, rebuilt, restored and governed the house of Moissac, favored, fortunate and felicitous

He also suggests that the fish scale (*écaille* in French, *escata* in the old Occitan language) ornamentation at the top of the pillar is a punning reference to the name Ansquitil.

The names of the sculptors who worked under the direction of the learned abbot remain unknown. Vidal et al (1979, p 96, my translation), however, notes

> By a detail, usually unnoticed or forgotten, we know their person, if we do not know their name; because we can see them represented to the left and right of the tympanum, under the second arch: one in a working position, tools in hands, a bearded man in the prime of life; the other, young and beardless with a broad and blissful face, identifiable by the secret sign of initiation of the bare foot. They contemplate their work.

Doorway to Eternity

The doorway to a church marks the boundary between the problems of the world and the peace that comes with salvation. Just before he describes his vision of Christ in Majesty, John of Patmos conveys Christ's message:

> Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. (*Revelation* 3: 20)

Vernery (2019) comments on how the doorway is the threshold between a world wherein time and mortality hold sway and a life attuned to the mysteries of eternity. The sculptural representations provide material images of a spiritual idea:

> La perception sensible des sculptures donne lieu à la construction d'une image mentale rendue une par la contemplation. Une fois cette forme conceptuelle mise en place en l'esprit, l'homme est amené à se détacher de la sensation corporelle. Laissant les images matérielles sur le parvis de l'abbatiale en en franchissant physiquement

> l’espace, il conserve mentalement ce qu’elles ont éveillé en lui.
>
> [The perception of the sculptures creates a mental image that becomes unified by contemplation. Once this conceptual form becomes established in the mind, one becomes detached from bodily sensation. Leaving the material images on the square in front of the abbey church while physically crossing the space, one mentally preserves what they awakened]

The spiritual idea is the concept of Christ in Majesty. This is what separates the temporal from the eternal

Vernerey (2020) also remarks about how the very process of sculpting, wherein matter is removed to reveal the hidden form, is analogous to the crossing from the outer world into the inner mysteries. Just as the process of sculpture extracts images from raw material, so the entry into the church extracts the soul from the temporal world.

The present is much different from the days when a hundred monks led lives of prayer and ritual in Moissac. In 1793 the mobs of the French Revolution drove the monks from the abbey and damaged many of the statues that were easily accessible. Years later, the abbey church became a simple parish church. The cloister and other remaining monastery buildings became a museum.

In our secular age we no longer believe in the specifics of salvation that Ansquitil arranged to be displayed in stone. Yet the portal still makes us think of processes beyond the flow of time, that we can write about and wonder at.

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