Localizing the Sacred: Medieval Christian Architecture and Art
Four-lecture series

Instructor Biography

Laura Hollengreen is Associate Professor and Associate Director of the School of Architecture at the University of Arizona. Since 2019, she has also served as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture. Trained as a medievalist art historian (Ph.D., UC Berkeley), Dr. Hollengreen has published on Gothic architecture, sculpture, and manuscript illumination. She has also edited a book on the medieval culture of translation and co-edited another on world's fairs. Her teaching and advising have ranged even more widely, broaching such topics as museum design and cultures of display, urban public space, environmental behavior and design for dwelling, and modern landscapes of war.

Course Introduction

Why were saints so important in the early centuries of Christianity and how did architecture and art condition interaction with them? One important facet of saints' shrines—whether sites of martyrdom, witness, burial, or the preservation of remains—was that they served to localize the sacred and make it accessible and perceptible in a precarious world. Moreover, building on late antique models of socio-political patronage, the cult of saints was a major spur to architectural innovation and art-making, in both dedicated religious communities (like monasteries) and in the public realm (as in cathedrals and in other settings).

The course will focus on the role played by a variety of man-made artifacts, ranging across scales from buildings and even cultural landscapes to tiny, portable, personal works of art. I will introduce you to four medieval sites, from different sub-periods and places of the Middle Ages, all of them associated with new conceptions of sanctity and new practices in honor of the saints; all four are also rich in innovative architecture and in the works of art that animated and interpreted the holy sites for their visitors.

The course should provide fascinating and provocative material with respect to who saints were, how they came to be, how experience of them evolved over time, and what they did for medieval Christians. In addition, it will endow students with fundamental vocabulary and concepts for the description and interpretation of works of medieval art and architecture.

Lecture 1: Models of Sanctity and Saintly Power in the Early Christian Period

Early medieval saints existed outside, but were still shaped by, late antique cultures of power and self-discipline. From hermits in the Egyptian and Syrian wilderness to communities of the dead in catacombs to well-known victims of gruesome martyrdoms, a striking spectrum of sanctity springs from the pages of "passion" (death) narratives, saints' lives, collections of miracle accounts, and the liturgies that honored the saints.

We will begin in the late fifth-century in the Syrian desert at a church that commemorated the life and death of St. Simeon, a stylite or column saint who lived an ascetic life for decades perched atop a tall Roman column. Simeon's church, located on a landscape ridge amid scattered villages near Aleppo, created a permanent focal point for the circulation of local populations and distant travelers. The adjacent monastery housed pilgrims who visited the church, as well as the monks who ministered to them. The church is regarded as one of the most significant late Roman buildings between the earliest Christian basilicas in Rome and Justinian's buildings in sixth century Constantinople, synthesizing several aspects of late Roman and early medieval architecture.

As thrilling as the site and building design are (and the material artifacts associated with them), their main interest lies in how they crystallized socio-political and religious change in the late Roman Empire. Indeed, they performed culturally by making visible the dynamic opportunities when long-standing institutions and social hierarchies break down and new people emerge to formulate new methods for achieving peace and prosperity.

Despite Simeon's efforts to isolate himself from daily life on the ground, the better to dedicate himself to God, he was repeatedly sought out: people came to venerate him; they asked him to settle social, political, and economic disputes; they witnessed him work miracles; he dispensed advice. In the end, Simeon's desired exile from the world was not possible, especially when the traditional powers of that world were weakening and new forms of adjudication and guidance were needed.

Readings: Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.

Peter Brown, "The Holy and the Grave" and "Praesentia," in *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1-22, and 86-105.

Lecture 2: Sensory Immersion and the Perception of Divinity in the Byzantine Empire

In his capital city of Constantinople in the early sixth century, Byzantine Emperor Justinian commissioned a palace chapel and cathedral that established a new paradigm for church architecture throughout the Orthodox world of Eastern Europe, Western Asia, and beyond. Dedicated to "Holy Wisdom," Hagia Sophia provided a glorious setting for the liturgy of the church. As we shall see, the stunning surfaces, spaces, sights, and sounds of the church invited a complex and contemplative, even mystical, encounter with the divine. The church was the instrument through which abstract conceptions of a transcendent God were brought down to earth.

The dual nature of Christ lay at the center of both early medieval doctrinal disputes and the early medieval cult of images. Indeed, theology and art were intertwined in the evolution of the Byzantine icon and of the theory and theology of images that sought to defend it before, during, and after the Iconoclastic Controversy. This lecture will focus on the role and status of architecture and art as a translation of the holy for human perception.

R: Robert Ousterhout, "The Holy Space: Architecture and the Liturgy [excerpt]," in *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*, ed. Linda Safran (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998): 81-91.

         Bissera Pentcheva, "Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics," *Gesta* 50/2 (2011): 93-111.

Rec: Fabio Barry, "Cosmic Floors in Antiquity and the Middle Ages," *Art Bulletin* 89/4 (2007): 627-56.

Lecture 3: Saints' Relics, the Practice of Pilgrimage, and Romanesque Architecture

Saints' shrines made the holy accessible, but sometimes the most important ones necessitated special travel. The "status" of a pilgrim was itself sacred and distinct for the duration of a pilgrimage, which could take days, weeks, or months. How did pilgrims regard the journey itself? How was final approach to the shrine choreographed? What did the pilgrim take home? How was he or she changed in the process? A look at the landscapes, architecture, art, and material culture of pilgrimage will help us imagine this transformative spiritual exercise.

The twelfth-century monastic Church of Ste.-Foi (St. Faith) at Conques in the region of France's Massif Central is a Romanesque site that lay on one of pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The church honored a little girl who was martyred in the early Middle Ages. A relic of her head was preserved in a reliquary, a container adorned with jewels that were donated over time and that helped to project a sense of the glorified body of the saint in heaven. St. Faith's power on earth as a mediator, protector of monks, and patron of pilgrims and warriors for Christianity radiated from the relic through the reliquary to the church and beyond, and is represented on the famous sculpture of the west facade.

Readings: Georges Duby, "The Monks," in *The Age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980-1420*,
                     trans. Eleanor Levieux and Barbara Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago
                     Press, 1981), 54-74.

                     Jonathan Sumption, "The Saints and Their Relics," in *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval
                     Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975; repr. 2003), 50-68.

                     Conrad Rudolph, "Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages," in *Pilgrimage to the End of the World:
                     The Road to Santiago* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004),
                     1-16.

Rec: Rudolph, "The Pilgrimage to Santiago and to the End of the World," in *Pilgrimage to the End
                     of the World* (as above), 17-49.

Lecture 4: The Evolution of the Virgin Mary in Gothic France

During the Gothic period of the High Middle Ages, veneration of both Christ and the Virgin Mary became increasingly personal with reflection on their human experience of joy and suffering. Indeed, meditation on their lives became the guide to proper conduct of one's own life. New forms of individual, empathetic devotion began to supplement earlier discourses focused on Mary as queen of heaven. At the same time, artistic representations of Christ and Mary continued to change, even as new media like stained glass and new genres of art like the book of hours became part of the visual world of many medieval Christians.

The final lecture will be on the pivotal French Gothic Cathedral at Chartres, exquisitely preserved with most of its sculpture and stained glass intact. This church honored Notre Dame—i.e., "our lady," the Virgin Mary—and it and its decoration are emblematic of the growing personalization of the cults of Jesus and his mother Mary, focusing on their human experience and bond as mother and son. Dating to the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the cathedral offers us the opportunity to cycle back to Byzantine relics and icons and to see the role they played in relaying new conceptions of sanctity to the West at the time of the Crusades.

Readings: Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Theotokos, the Mother of God" and "The Face That Most Resembles Christ's," in Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 55-65, 139—51.

Penny Schine Gold, "Religious Image: The Iconography of the Virgin Mary," in *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 43-75.

Michael Camille, "Introduction: New Ways of Seeing Gothic Art," in *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 9-25.