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The Index of Medieval Art

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The screenshot shows the homepage of the Index of Medieval Art website. At the top, there is a dark navigation bar with the text "THE INDEX OF MEDIEVAL ART" on the left, a search bar with a magnifying glass icon and the word "Search" in the center, and a user profile icon on the right. Below the navigation bar, there are icons for "Home" and "Browse". The main content area features a large heading "Welcome to the Index of Medieval Art" followed by a paragraph of introductory text. Below this, there is a section titled "Featured Works of Art" which displays three image thumbnails. The first thumbnail shows a manuscript page with the caption "Preparation of Pitch and Wax from Old Ships, Dioscorides, De M..." and "System Number: 174631". The second thumbnail shows a manuscript page with the caption "Musician, from the Silos Beatus, London, British Library, MS Ad...". The third thumbnail shows a stone cameo with the caption "Constantine I the Great, possibly, agate cameo, Dumbarton Oaks...".

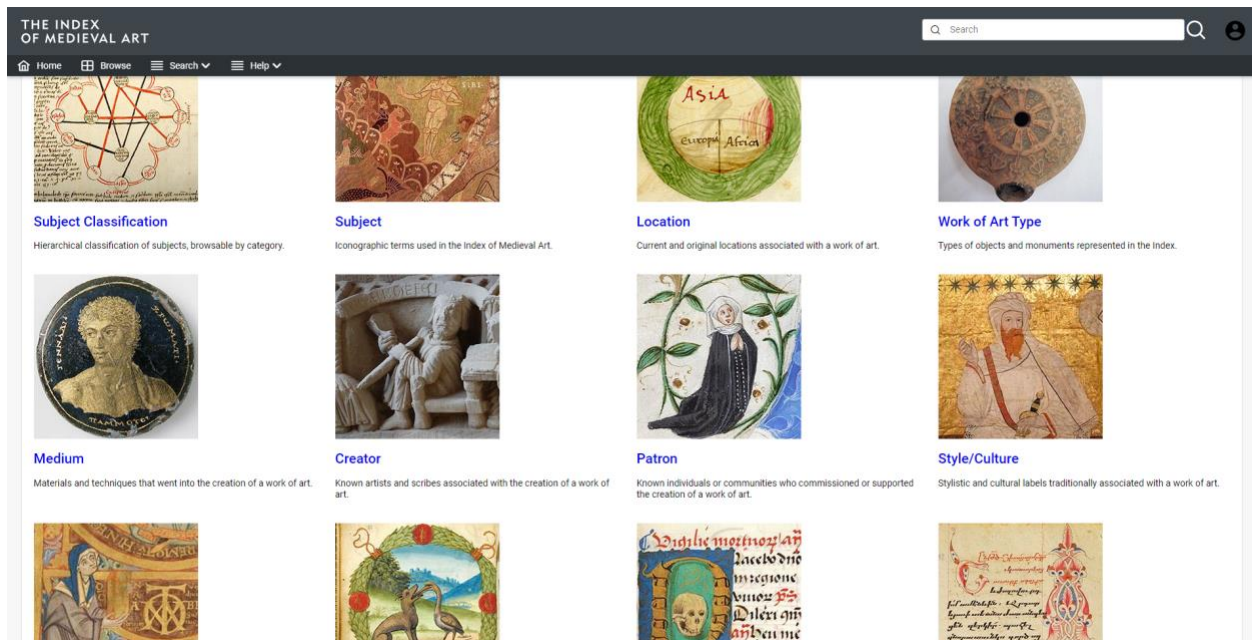
The online *Index of Medieval Art* is a specialized tool for finding images from the Middle Ages

[The Index of Medieval Art](#), maintained and hosted by Princeton University, is a comprehensive database of iconography from the Middle Ages that has been cataloged and indexed to allow users to browse and search images based on subject, location, medium, and other facets. In addition to the

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digital database, the Index co-publishes an annual journal titled *Studies in Iconography* and hosts conferences and symposia on medieval visual culture.

The *Index* was founded in 1917 by Professor Charles Rufus Morey of the Department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton. Helen Woodruff, director of the Index from 1933 to 1942, developed the framework for the collection's local cataloging standards still in use today. The project was initially called the Index of Christian Art and comprised physical cards kept in two shoe boxes that covered works dated up to 700 CE. In over a century's time, the *Index* has increased its holdings drastically, migrated to a primarily digital manifestation (first in the form of the integrated library system ALEPH, then, since 2017, as a bespoke online database), and undergone a title change to reflect its increasingly interdisciplinary and cross-cultural scope. While the *Index's* original emphasis on the Western European canon of early Christian art is evident in the collection's relative strength in that area, its scope now encompasses the entirety of the long Middle Ages, up to the mid-sixteenth century. The *Index* editors have also been actively supplementing their holdings of art from Coptic Egypt, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Syria, Armenia, and the Near East, taking a cue from medieval art history's recent turn toward the global Middle Ages.



A selection of the browse listings providing access points to the *Index's* extensive holdings

Arguably more so than other areas of art historical research, the study of the medieval period is bolstered by iconographic interpretation of recurring motifs and narratives, which are often religiously

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inflected. The *Index's* granular metadata supports image-led research of this type, aided by the ability to discover images originating from a shared locale, commissioned by a particular patron, or depicting a specific figure or episode. For example, a search for “Virgin Mary, Visitation,” in the “subject” browse list returns a collection of roughly 800 images of this scene, as well as suggestions for additional sub-subjects, such as “Virgin Mary, Visitation, Children Type.” An advanced search can help one sift through these results with greater specificity regarding medium, time period, location, and more. This tool may be most fruitful for researchers who have already identified a path of inquiry, because the specialized classification scheme and wealth of access points could be overwhelming to peruse without direction.

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of 'THE INDEX OF MEDIEVAL ART' with a search bar and a user profile icon. Below the navigation bar, the 'Subject List' section is displayed. It features a dark header with pagination controls: '(1 of 1)', '<<', '<', '1' (highlighted in a red circle), '>', '>>', and a dropdown menu set to '25'. Below the header is a search filter box containing the text 'Virgin Mary, Visitation'. Underneath the filter, a list of subject suggestions is shown, including 'Virgin Mary, Visitation', 'Virgin Mary, Visitation, Abiding', 'Virgin Mary, Visitation, Children Type', 'Virgin Mary, Visitation, Departure', 'Virgin Mary, Visitation, Fetus Type', and 'Virgin Mary, Visitation, Journey'. At the bottom of the list, there is another dark bar with identical pagination controls.

Example of a search for “Virgin Mary, Visitation” in the subject browse list

The *Index* editors continue to add previously print-only records created prior to the initial development of the online format in 1991. This significantly enhances those records’ access and discoverability, and increases the value of the Index as a comprehensive resource. Records take full advantage of the flexibility of linked data, providing links between related works of art and themes. This web of interconnected data improves user experience and introduces an element of happy

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coincidence to the experience of browsing the *Index*, allowing researchers to discover images they were not explicitly searching for.

Despite its depth of data, the *Index* has a clearly articulated web interface and informative help pages with tips on utilizing the browse, search, and advanced search options. Users ranging from undergraduate art history students to advanced career scholars of medieval art can find value in the extensive holdings and robust metadata. While the *Index* is an invaluable resource for identifying images of interest, the editors note that any use of images other than for study purposes must be cleared with the original sources. Copyright information is displayed in the image reproductions themselves, making it fairly easy for a researcher to determine whom to contact with rights and reproductions inquiries.

The *Index* has progressively reduced subscription costs since its transition to a more affordable platform in 2017, and a recent grant from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation will support an open-access policy as of July 1, 2023. This is a refreshing counterpoint to the landscape of ever-increasing subscription fees for databases that librarians typically contend with. *The Index of Medieval Art* deserves kudos for making a deliberate choice to prioritize access over profit, and consequently clearing the way for use by a wider community than ever before, including independent scholars and researchers from smaller institutions that are disproportionately left on the other side of the paywall.