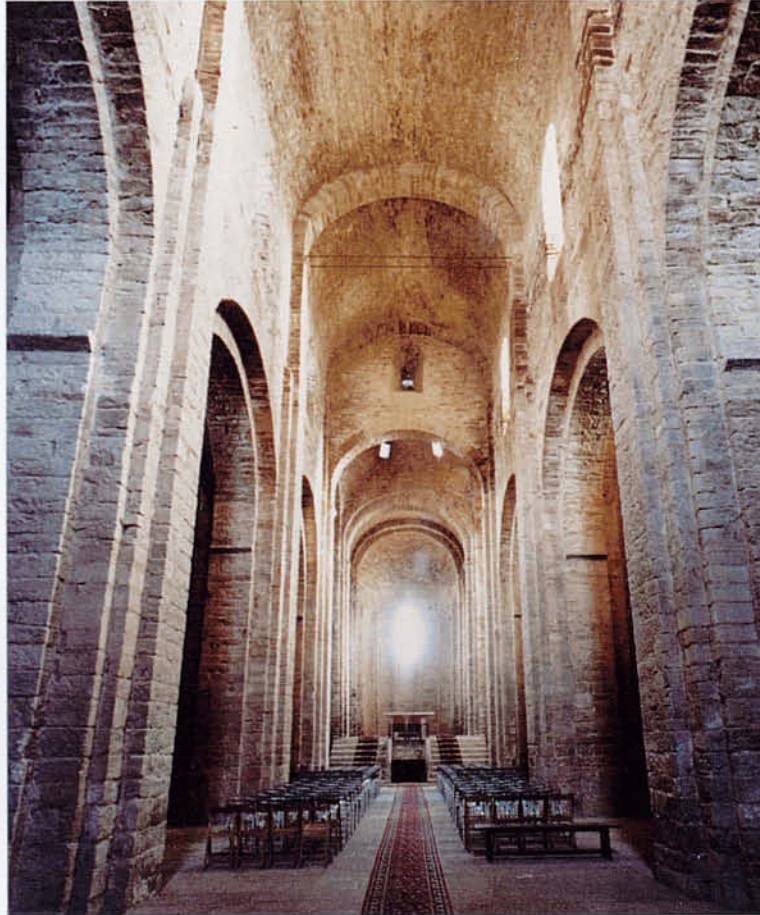


CATALAN ROMANESQUE ART



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CATALAN ROMANESQUE ART, WHICH GOES BACK INDIRECTLY TO AN EVOLVED CLASSICAL TRADITION, HAS SOME UNMISTAKABLE CHARACTERISTICS.

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When we speak of the Romanesque period we are referring to the moment in history when the nations of Europe were being formed and consolidated after the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire and when there was a revival of the cultural traditions rooted in the ancient provinces of the Roman Empire. However, this did not imply a total return to late-Roman antiquity so much as a base from which to evolve and create a national language which is considered the first real manifestation of the young Europe. Of course, we do not know what dimensions art would have reached in the area between the River Tet and the Gaià (an area loosely referred to as "Old Catalonia" and which corresponds to the Catalan counties) had it not been for the Saracen invasion from the year 711 on and the upheaval—throughout the eighth century in some places and up to the twelfth in others—in cultural links and the constructive, artistic tradition itself. The Christian conquest of the territories occupied by the Moslems, starting in the second third of the ninth century, also conditioned the artistic situation. There was a conscious wish and need to fully recover a tradition that had been interrupted. This awareness and this feeling shaped the art of the ninth and

tenth centuries. However, this recovery did not come about in what had been the Roman province of Tarragona before the Saracen invasion. Tarragona itself, episcopal metropolis of the province, remained under Moslem control until the twelfth century. For this reason, the centre of gravity of ecclesiastic power shifted, as did that of the political power, and Narbonne became the head of the diocese which had previously depended on Tarragona. This shift in the ecclesiastic centre of gravity—far more than the political change, which remained remote—was vitally important in the development of the art of the ninth and tenth centuries. The area closest to Narbonne—the Rosselló—played a decisive role in the art of these centuries.

The recuperation of territory brought with it the recuperation of traditions, of art. Art in the region of Narbonne, as in Tarragona, was of a classical tendency (also stagnant), and this tendency can be seen in the works of the ninth and tenth centuries. The materials and techniques, the architecture, painting and sculpture tried to revive the earlier examples. But it became evident that the art (in the widest sense of the word) they were trying to resuscitate was shut off, repetitive, stagnant, the same as the country's history itself, until

the second half of the tenth century. All this period is what we call one of "beginnings" because it was then that social and religious foundations were laid which would allow art to flourish in the second half of the tenth century and the first years of the eleventh.

The artistic history of the eleventh and twelfth centuries is different from that which precedes it. The change is not one of gratuitous substitution of one art for another. The change was the consequence of opening up to the world—in Cordoba, in Rome—and of the Mediterranean, southern option, integrated in a community of realities, and stretching from the Adriatic to beyond the River Isàvena. The Catalan counties, first through the Benedictine abbeys (end of the tenth century to first half of the eleventh) and then through the ecclesiastical reform (second half of the eleventh century and a good part of the twelfth), as well as through other contacts, absorbed an art which was common to many countries, an international art which belonged to Mediterranean Europe. It was precisely this international community that formed the basis of Catalan Romanesque art, because it showed the reality of openness to the world and of maturity from the second half of the tenth century onwards.



Catalan Romanesque art, which goes back indirectly —through other countries— to an evolved classical tradition, has some unmistakable characteristics. The influence of the Benedictine monasteries dominated during the second half of the tenth century and a good part of the eleventh. Abbeys, sculpture—in the abbeys of Roselló— and painting—illumination of manuscripts in Ripoll— established the lines of an art which when imitated—sculpture and painting— lost part of its strength and initial characteristics. On the other hand, the extramonastic element, which we could call canonic or even parochial, influenced a great part of the art of the last third of the eleventh century and all of the twelfth (except for the Cistercian monks, who were then beginning their activities), replacing the monastic artistic culture with one which was more widely spread—mural painting and painting on wood—, although one must accept the fact that the Benedictine monasteries dominated the greater part of the best sculpture (as in the eleventh century). While the architecture was connected with the north of Italy from the very beginning—with Lombardy—, the sculpture had its origins in Narbonne, in the north of Italy, in Catalonia itself or in Toulouse in the Languedoc. All of the

painting of the period shows evidence of its derivation from the Carolingian miniature—the illumination of manuscripts during the eleventh century—and of its origins in the north of Italy and Poitou.

These different forms of the art did not all flourish simultaneously. The eleventh century was the great century for architecture, illumination of manuscripts and sculpture (until the middle of the century). The twelfth century was also a great period for architecture and also saw painting and sculpture flourish. The evolution of these last two forms was different. The former became established in the first third of the twelfth century. The latter, which started later, developed continuously until the end of the century and can be considered a bridge with the sculpture of the early thirteenth century. Although documents show that the Romanesque period produced many splendid works of art, the surviving examples are only partial and some are of little significance. We cannot relive all aspects of the period; many things have disappeared, swallowed up by the events of history. In Catalonia, the art-form present in the episcopal sees, for example, is more Gothic than Romanesque.

What is left, then, of this past, loosely termed Romanesque, which through the

studies of Josep Puig i Cadafalch (1) has gained international recognition? The simple fact is that the growth and the impetus of the country in expansion towards what is known as the "New Catalonia" was so great that many creative assimilations and solutions were made necessary. Because of this, although we cannot contemplate it all today, Catalan Romanesque occupies an outstanding position, quantitatively, within the European context. Nevertheless, it must be made clear that, qualitatively, as has been stated earlier, it is varied, because of the existence of many secondary centres and derivations from early models. These imitations lose a great part of the strength and basic characteristics of the originals. It is possible to contemplate simultaneously primary and secondary examples, without being able visually to appreciate the evolution through the absence or ignorance of the primary or intermediary points of reference. (2)

(1) Josep PUIG I CADAFALCH, Antoni de FALCUERA, Josep GODAY I CASALS, *L'arquitectura romànica a Catalunya*, Institut d'Estudis Catalans, Barcelona, 1909.

(2) To follow up the contents of this brief article see: Núria de DALMASES, Antoni JOSÉ I PITARCH, *Els inicis i l'art romànic, segles IX-XII*. Història de l'Art Català, vol. I. Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1986.

