

THE ROMANESQUE

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Romanesque art is the visual expression of a very important era in the history of Western Civilization. The feudal and monastic age that created it resembles our own in many ways. It was a time when diverse cultures were gradually coalescing, and a new civilization was emerging. Our own century is witnessing the disintegration of great nations and the emergence of new states; traditional systems of government have all but disappeared. Long established values are rapidly changing; ancient social structures are dissolving; and electronic technology is reshaping our lifestyle.

The Romanesque period, also a time of tremendous cultural change, roughly spans the age from the eighth-century Carolingian Renaissance to the twelfth-century flowering of monasticism embodied in the Order of Cluny.¹ Romanesque art was the first artistic style to emerge in the West after the disappearance of the Roman world. Thus its development was part of what Christopher Dawson termed "the making of Europe."² Medieval artistic expression was a genuine representation of the society of its time, unlike modern art today, which tends to oppose society. Romanesque art truly grew out of the gradual integration of classical and Nordic elements, both infused by the Christian spirit.

Two high points in the history of Romanesque art represent periods when different groups of recently arrived tribes had become integrated into Western culture. The first—in the eighth and ninth centuries—emerged after the Gothic and Germanic peoples, who had invaded the Roman Empire at the time of its disintegration, had become permanent members of Christendom. A fusion of the classical inheritance with the Celtic background of the Northwest, Gothic and Germanic native traditions, and Christianity resulted in the Carolingian Renaissance.³ Charlemagne and his advisors saw their role in history as reviving the grandeur that was Rome under the auspices of the Frankish monarchy and the Catholic Church.⁴ Theirs was the first conscious attempt to fulfill the intuitions expressed by St. Augustine and Orosius: Christianity would transform and elevate all that was good in the classical world, and this projection into the future would be undertaken by the formerly barbarian tribes.⁵ This vision of a united Europe formulated during Charlemagne's reign was not to be forgotten.

The second phase in the history of Romanesque art—in the eleventh and twelfth centuries—marks the age when the Norsemen, Slavs, Bulgars,

and Magyars, who had entered the Carolingian world in the ninth and tenth centuries, had become a vital part of the West. It bears the stamp of a society fashioned by the Holy Roman Emperors, the papacy, and the great monastic leaders. The Carolingian vision was taken up in Germany by Otto I in the tenth century and reached fruition several generations later under Otto III. During the Ottonian Renaissance, Charlemagne's ideals were restated. Christendom was no longer understood as a great political empire ruled by the king of the Franks, but as a vast society of independent peoples who shared the same world view and respected the power of the emperor and the authority of the pope.⁶

These developments were paralleled by Romanesque art, which retained many elements of the pagan outlook. The barbarian peoples who had made their home in northern and central Europe had not yet come to conceive of man's world as a reflection of the divine order. Hence the buildings do not soar up reaching toward the heavens like Gothic cathedrals; they do not attempt to capture the luminosity pouring forth from one divine spirit, nor do they seek to deny the chthonic realm as did later Gothic art. Romanesque architecture rests solidly on the ground. It represents a faith that is anchored in the depths of the soil. In popular belief the natural spirits of the earth had not yet completely yielded to the supernatural spirit residing in heaven above.

Medieval men were assured that Christianity was their future, but in this early period they had not entirely forgotten their pagan past in which they had been deeply rooted for centuries. Forms of the old faith and ancient traditions lingered on in the new Christian structures, at first almost unchanged. Like the Indians in the Spanish colonies centuries later, who built Christian churches on the sites of pagan temples, newly converted European Christians tended to erect their sanctuaries on top of massive rock formations or near sources of water, sites where the old deities of the earth were still venerated. They created compact edifices that emphasized the concrete aspect of life and affirmed the materials yielded by the soil. And like the converted Indian artisans, Romanesque sculptors and painters incorporated their ancestral pagan imagery into Christian themes as a security measure, in order not to offend the ancient gods and provoke their wrath.⁷ Gradually many of these old symbols found new interpretations in the medieval church. Awe-inspiring monsters, whose original task had been to ward off evil and danger, were given new meaning as symbols of sin, the Devil, or the punishments of Hell.⁸

Toward the end of the Romanesque period, when Christianity had become thoroughly established in the medieval world, St. Bernard reacted vehemently against the grotesque aspect of Romanesque expression and hence pointed toward the Gothic style and spirit. In a letter to William, Abbot of Thierry, a Cluniac monastery, he exclaimed:

What excuse can there be for these ridiculous monstrosities in the cloisters where the

monks do their reading, extraordinary things at once beautiful and ugly? Here we find filthy monkeys and fierce lions, fearful centaurs, harpies, and striped tigers, soldiers at war, and hunters blowing their horns. Here is one head with many bodies, there is one body with many heads. Over there is a beast with a serpent for its tail, a fish with an animal's head, and a creature that is horse in front and goat behind, and a second beast with horns and the rear of a horse. All round there is such an amazing variety of shapes that one could easily prefer to take one's reading from the walls instead of from a book. One could spend the whole day gazing fascinated at these things, one by one, instead of meditating on the law of God.⁹

This criticism contributed to a new concentration on biblical themes and lives of saints.

When the American traveler first confronts Romanesque art in Europe, he is usually impressed by both its originality and its crudeness, traits that are characteristic of an age of transition and experimentation. For several centuries during the Great Migration, artistic expression had tended to concentrate on small artifacts (brooches, buckles, armor, weapons) that could be taken on raids and marches. Early Romanesque architecture was the first manifestation of strong cultural forces in the Middle Ages. It demonstrated that the newly converted Christians were no longer wandering tribes, but had settled down and had become an essential part of the Western World. The crudeness found in all artistic endeavors of this time (architecture, sculpture, painting) is counterbalanced by honesty and vitality of expression.

Romanesque craftsmen were aware of Rome's past architectural and technical excellence, but the ancient skills were either lost or disregarded and had to be newly developed in the course of many generations of artisans.¹⁰ Although the Romans had invented mortar, it was not used in the construction of early Romanesque buildings; rather, stones were cut into blocks and precisely set to form the first barrel vaults. This technique was later developed into cross vaulting on piers, which provided the basis for the construction of the pointed arch and led to the inspiring achievements of the Gothic builders.

Typical of all facets of Romanesque art throughout Europe is its great diversity.¹¹ This diversity is partially due to the variety of stones found in different regions, but to a large extent to differing local traditions and talents. Between the eastern regions of Europe and the western coast of the Iberian Peninsula, there is a wealth of original interpretations of the Romanesque style.¹² And yet there are certain general characteristics by which all Romanesque architectural expression can be identified. The most outstanding are: successful use of the round arch (in vaulting, arcades, doorways, and windows); low stone barrel vaulting and cross vaulting; thick walls pierced by small windows; churches with three or more massive towers; alternate bands of dark and light stone wherever the materials permitted (especially in Italy); interior walls and ceilings virtually covered with fresco mural painting or mosaics; exterior walls decorated with relief carvings and bands of blind arches. Late Romanesque floor plans of

churches became very elaborate, adding an ambulatory (aisle behind the main altar) and radiating chapels to the east end. Tribunes (second story galleries) were added to the side aisles, and outside, the walls were reinforced with heavy buttresses.¹³

While small portable ivory carvings had been created throughout the centuries and the metal casting craft was skillfully practiced, large scale sculpture began to be revived slowly in the Romanesque period. For a long time it was closely adapted to the framework of architecture. The heavy capitals of columns provided modest space for stone reliefs. At first they were stylized geometric or foliated motifs, later figurative scenes representing themes from Scripture, heroic tales from ancient lore, or the above mentioned monstrous beasts harking back to the pagan past. The exterior of buildings, especially the doorways, supplied an opportunity for more elaborate carvings. The tympanum (semicircular panel created by the arch above the rectangular entrance door), the archivolt surrounding the tympanum, and the variegated jambs (columns) flanking the recessed portal were natural places for medieval man to express his rich imagination. Frequently, the doors themselves were cast in bronze with panels representing scenes from Scripture.¹⁴ In the last quarter of the twelfth century, the skill of stone carving had developed to such an extent that figures were no longer executed in relief only. Statues in the round had become almost independent of their architectural background.

The visual form and expression of Romanesque art have been thoroughly studied, but less research has been done on its religious interpretation. Gothic buildings, a few centuries later, challenge the faithful to *sursum corda* or "lift up the hearts" by means of their fragile structures which direct the soul to heavenly eternity. Not so the Romanesque buildings. Here, man is burdened and overpowered by the weight of massive stone which forces him to his knees, trembling with fear. An equal contrast exists between Gothic and Romanesque sculpture. The former involves the observer in a mystic experience; agitated postures, dynamic draperies, arouse compassion for the tortures of Jesus and the sufferings of the motherly Madonna. The Romanesque Christ, however, is aloof; his gaze is aimed toward eternity. He is fierce, strict, and just. This Lord of Creation reigns with sovereign power, demanding man's complete surrender. As in the ninth century *Heliand*, Christ is a noble king and leader of men; the Apostles are his vassals.

An outstanding example of this interpretation is the tympanum of the French cathedral of Autun,¹⁵ which bears the intriguing signature "Gislebertus" (figures 1 and 2). The mural character of Romanesque sculpture is evident in this early twelfth century façade. However, some details of the figures within the relief have become full round, although they still do not protrude from the bounding planes of the stone walls which surround the recessed tympanum. The whole area, though divided into various scenes

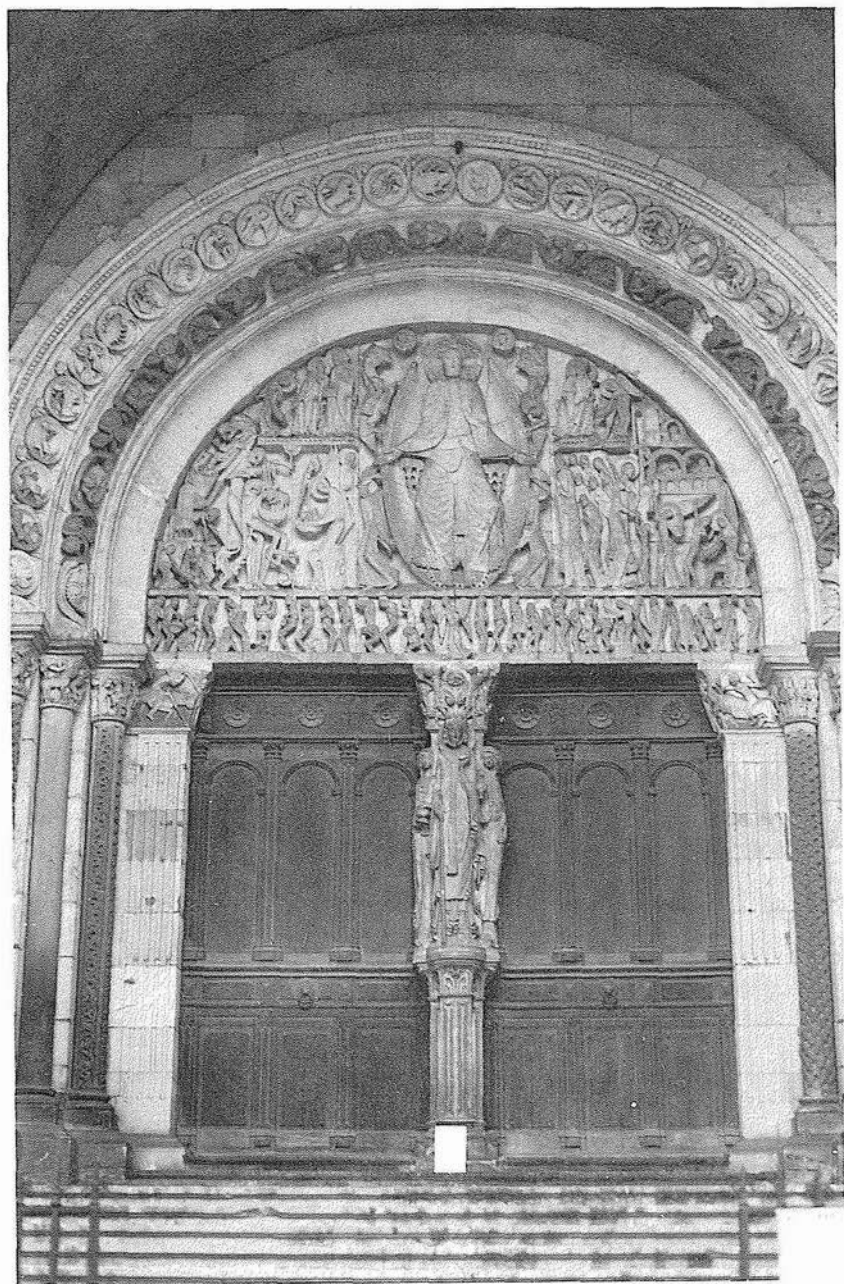


FIG. 1. WEST PORTAL, AUTUN CATHEDRAL (1130-1135). Photo by Philip Oliver-Smith.

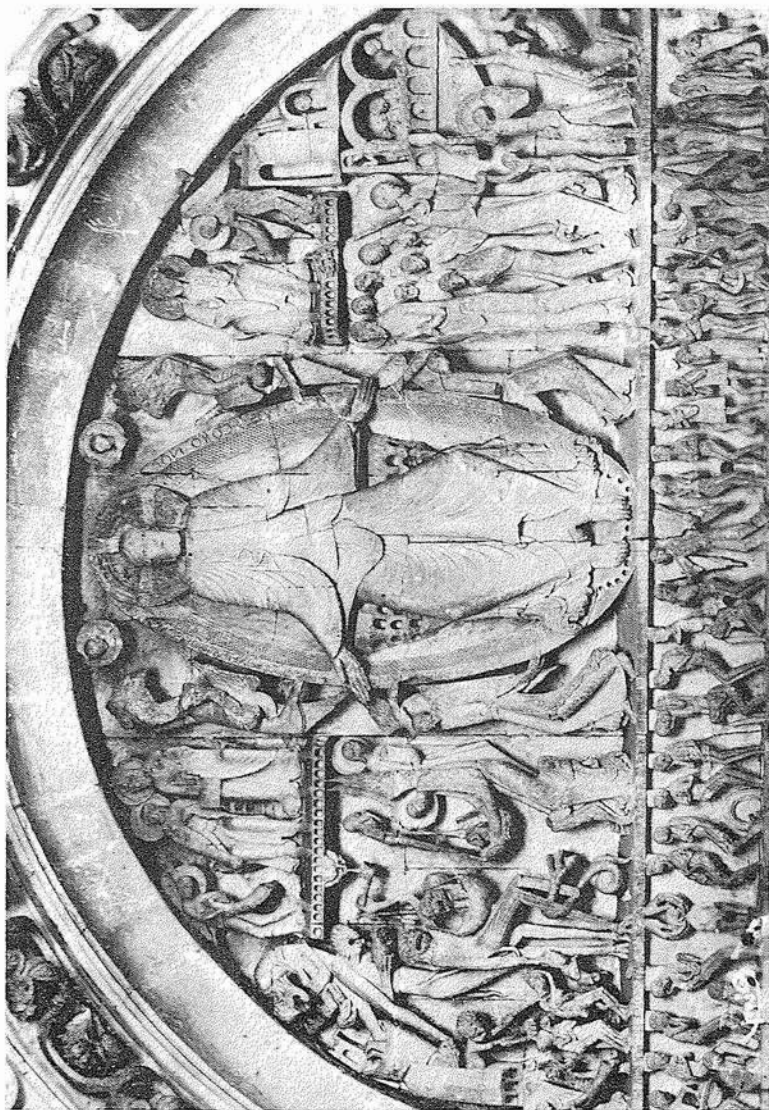


FIG. 2. CHRIST IN MAJESTY AT THE LAST JUDGMENT. Tympanum of west portal, Autun Cathedral.

representing the Last Judgment,¹⁶ is unified into one large composition. Christ's symmetric contour, produced in filigree lines, forms no longer a distorted and threatening figure, but seems to embody transcendent eternity. This figure, surrounded by the almond shaped mandorla so typical of the Middle Ages, dominates the center of the tympanum. In most medieval representations, the mandorla is interpreted as a glorious halo, emanating from the divine figure of Christ. At Autun, the mandorla becomes ambiguous: It could also be interpreted as the outline of the sarcophagus in which the body of Christ rests solemnly. There are indications of human anatomy under the delicately executed garment. The limbs are thin and fragile like those of an ascete devoured by the spirit. The hands point down in a gesture of blessing and forgiveness. A serene monumentality permeates the entire composition. But this portrayal is not merely a monument to death. It bears witness to the eternal life of the risen Christ, and it carries the predominant message of Romanesque art: the Last Judgment, the Resurrection of the Dead. At Autun cathedral, the royal Son becomes the judge. This representation of Christ, to whom supreme reigning power is delegated as the ultimate judge over goodness and evil, is a transformation of the anthropomorphic deities who decided over victory and defeat on the temple reliefs of ancient cultures. The left side of the tympanum represents those who died in the faith of Christ; they are aided by angels to reach salvation. On the opposite side, demons wield complete power over those who failed to accept divine grace.

Another one of the most beautiful Romanesque sculptural compositions is to be found in the remote area of northwestern Spain, in the great cathedral at the end of the long pilgrim road to the burial site of the Apostle St. James at Santiago de Compostela.¹⁷ It was built, carved, and painted under Master Mateo's supervision in the late twelfth century. The portico of this cathedral marks both the culmination and the end of Romanesque sculpture (figure 3):¹⁸ At Santiago the carving has taken on a new dimension. It is no longer conditioned by the architecture. It has become important in itself; it has a life of its own.

The closed porch that provides access to the cathedral at Santiago takes its name—*Pórtico de la Gloria*—from the theme represented within it: the glorification of Christ and the Church triumphant. The wall dividing the portico from the nave has three doors leading into the church itself. The figures adorning this wall are radiant with joy. The central portal is crowned by a tympanum and separated by a *troumeau* (pillar dividing the doorway into two sections). The *troumeau* is covered with relief carving representing the Tree of Jesse (Christ's family genealogy), dominated by a large statue of St. James. The Apostle is portrayed as a pilgrim, resting from the long journey to his own tomb. The celestial kingdom, as depicted on the tympanum, seems to prefigure Dante's vision of Paradise. Christus Rex presenting his wounds for adoration is enthroned in the center. He is surrounded by

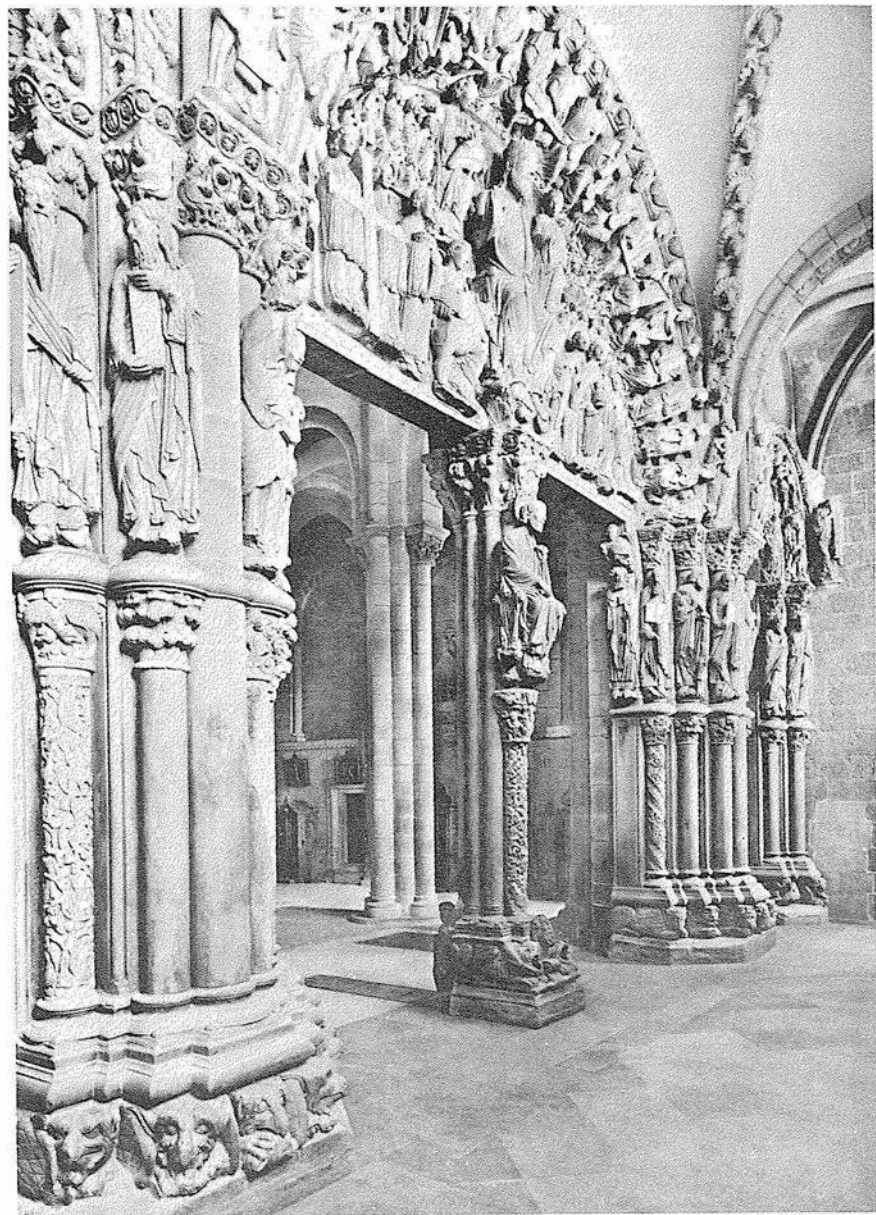


FIG. 3. PÓRTICO DE LA GLORIA, CATHEDRAL OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA (1168-1188). Hirmer Fotoarchiv München. Reprinted with permission from *Early Medieval Art in Spain* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., n.d.).



FIG. 4. CHRIST ENTHRONED. Central figure of tympanum, Pórtico de la Gloria. Photo by Studio Yan. Reprinted with permission from *Cathedrals and Monasteries of Spain* (London: Nicholas Kaye, Ltd., 1966). This book, originally written in French by Friedrich Rahlves (trans. James C. Palmes), discusses the development of Christian architecture in Spain during the medieval period, with many fine photographs to illustrate its theses.

the Tetramorphos (symbols of the Evangelists) and four angels (figure 4). On each side, four young men bear the symbols of the Lord's Passion, and the background is filled with small figures of the blessed in Heaven. The archivolt frames the scene with the twenty-four Elders of the Apocalypse, playing different musical instruments. The jambs flanking the doorway are populated by large sculptures that spill over to the columns surrounding the two side doors. On the left are the Prophets and on the right the Apostles. The Romanesque beasts have almost disappeared from this late portico, where several roaring lions are reduced to supporting the bases of columns. And, finally, the artist who dedicated the last years of his life to creating this glorification of the heavenly kingdom also reserved a space for himself. Master Mateo is very modestly placed against the inner side of the *troumeau*, at the base. He presented himself to posterity as one of the first pilgrims to reach Santiago and he faces the burial site of the Apostle St. James above the main altar. Master Mateo, the last great Romanesque artist, was also one of the first men to leave the ranks of anonymous artisans to record vividly his individual achievement, thus pointing to a new interpretation of man's position in the Universe.

From the days of Master Mateo to our era, individualism ran its full course from the sacramental collectivism of medieval Christendom to the isolation of secularized modern man. From this fragmentation new trends toward collectivism and unity are now developing, in some respects similar to those in the Romanesque period. The new secular collectivism, however, would seem to threaten the individual person instead of protecting him as did its medieval antecedent. In the Romanesque era the Greco-Roman view of the world as a finite entity was expanded by faith in a Christian God who is infinite and eternal. Modern science, whether physics or astronomy, is also expanding our world toward an infinite time and space.¹⁹ In this age of rapid scientific and technological development we are faced with a choice: Will we allow Western civilization to succumb to continuing secularism and atheism or will we opt for the power whose symbolic representation we see enthroned over the portals of Romanesque cathedrals?

NOTES

1. Werner Weisbach does a thorough study of the impact of the Order of Cluny on Romanesque art in his *Reforma Religiosa y Arte Medieval (La Influencia de Cluny en el Románico Occidental)*, Helmut Schlunk and L. Vázquez de Parga, trans. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1949).

2. Christopher Dawson provides one of the best introductions to the early Middle Ages in his well known *The Making of Europe (An Introduction to the History of European Unity)* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1945).

3. Harald Busch and Bernd Lohse, eds., *Pre-Romanesque Art* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966), p. iv.

4. For discussions on Charlemagne's political thought see Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire (The Age of Charlemagne)*, trans. Peter Munz, Harper Torchbooks

(New York: Harper and Row, 1964), ch. III; and Giorgio Falco, *The Holy Roman Republic (A Historic Profile of the Middle Ages)*, trans. K. V. Kent (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1964), ch. 8.

5. For an introduction to this theory, known as the "*translatio imperii*," see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series XXXVI (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Inc., 1953), pp. 28-30.

6. For a general outline of Ottonian political thought see Falco, *Holy Roman Republic*, ch. 10.

7. Harald Busch and Bernd Lohse, eds., *Romanische Plastik in Europa* (Frankfurt am Main: Umschau Verlag, 1961), p. xi.

8. *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

9. St. Bernard's Apologia to Abbot William, trans. Michael Casey O.C.S.O. in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Cistercian Fathers Series (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1970), p. 66.

10. Busch and Lohse, *Pre-Romanesque Art*, p. vi.

11. Wilhelm Lübke, *Die Kunst des Mittelalters*, revised by Max Semrau (Stuttgart: Paul Neff Verlag, 1905), p. 146.

12. Busch and Lohse, *Pre-Romanesque Art*, p. xxxiv.

13. *Ibid.*, p. vii.

14. Although bronze is easily destroyed by fire, seven original doors are still extant in Europe. The most famous are in Pisa, Hildesheim, and Novgorod.

15. Among the many short descriptions of the portal at Autun, see Weisbach, ch. V; and José Pijoan, *Summa Artis (Historia General del Arte)*, 5th ed. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1966), vol. IX, pp. 197-210.

16. For a study of the medieval artistic representation of the Last Judgment, see Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image (Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century)*, trans. Dora Nussey, Harper Torchbooks (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), ch. 6.

17. Walter Starkie describes the medieval pilgrimages and the pilgrim road or Camino de Santiago in his *The Road to Santiago (Pilgrims of St. James)* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1957).

18. For discussions on the Pórtico de la Gloria see J. Gudiol Ricart and J. A. Nuño, *Arquitectura y Escultura Románica, Ars Hispaniae (Historia Universal del Arte Hispánico)*, vol. V (Madrid: Editorial Plus-Ultra, 1945), pp. 346-352; and see Pijoan, pp. 576-583. Lavish illustrations can be found in *Santiago de Compostela: La Catedral*, Marqués de Lozoya (Zaragoza: García Garrabella y Cía., n.d.).

19. See C. F. von Weizsäcker, *The World View of Physics*, trans. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), ch. v.