

Arth 334/Hist 388
Early medieval art and culture

Sam Collins
Robinson B377B
Office hours: TBA
scolline@gmu.edu

Description and goals

This course offers a survey of important monuments, themes, and developments in the art of early medieval Western Europe from Constantine's Roman empire of the fourth century to the empire of Charlemagne in the ninth. Through careful consideration of objects and texts we will explore the emergence of a distinctly medieval visual culture and its relationship to the Roman past. Topics include the function of art and architecture as a means of imperial self-representation among both Romans and Franks, the troubled cultural exchange between eastern and western empires, the rise of the cult of relics and its architectural legacy, and the production, dissemination, and decoration of late ancient and medieval books.

By the end of the course students will be familiar with a range of representative moments of early medieval visual culture, and have a sense of the context in which these works of art were produced, and how the distinctive political and religious pressures of the moment shaped artistic production. In addition, students will have developed a set of skills for reading medieval images, allowing them to interact with the objects of this period with a new, richer understanding of how such images work and communicate meaning.

Important enrollment information

- Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class.
- Schedule adjustments should be made by the deadlines published in the Schedule of Classes. (Deadlines each semester are published in the Schedule of Classes available from the Registrar's Website registrar.gmu.edu.)
- Last Day to Add: 1/31
- Last Day to Drop: 2/24
- After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires the approval of the dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons.
- Undergraduate students may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See the Schedule of Classes for selective withdrawal procedures.

Students with disabilities

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Resources at 703.993.2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

Honor code

- George Mason University has an Honor Code, which requires all members of this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Cheating, plagiarism, lying, and stealing are all prohibited.
- All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee.
- See honorcode.gmu.edu for more detailed information.

Blackboard

For better or for worse blackboard plays an important role in this course as a repository for many of our readings. Please ensure that you have access to our blackboard page: mymason.gmu.edu

Email

Please ensure that you have access to your GMU email account. I will occasionally communicate with the class via email, and the course email lists depend on your GMU mail account. NB: it is not uncommon for student mailboxes to fill up after a few terms on campus; please be sure there is plenty of free space in your inbox so my mail can get through to you.

Required book: Nees, Early Medieval Art (Oxford, 2002)

Recommended: While not a hard and fast requirement, everyone would do well by reading a general account of the early middle ages as we move through our material. Along these lines, I recommend either the first seven or so chapters of Norman Cantor, Civilization of the Middle Ages (cranky, opinionated, well-written and engaging) or the entirety of Chris Wickham, Inheritance of Rome (absolutely the best overall treatment of the period, without rival). Alternately, you can do nearly as well with the shorter treatment to be found in one of the general medieval textbooks. The relevant chapters of any of the following will do, and they're all in the library: Winks and Ruiz, Medieval Europe and the World; Rosenwein, Short History of the Middle Ages; RHC Davis, A History of Medieval Europe.

Artstor: Each week I will post selected slides from the lectures to the images folder on our blackboard page for you to review. The images will be available in .shw format, and to view them you will need to 1) create an account with Artstor (library.artstor.org) and 2) download and install their "Offline Image Viewer" (a.k.a. OIV) from the tools menu on their main page. Accounts and OIV are free, but you will have to create your account and log in for the first time from a campus IP address. I am happy to provide assistance/advice if you have any trouble.

Grading:

two source assignments: 15% each
museum project: 25%
exhibition project: 45%

Source assignments: These are short (3-4pp) papers in which you discuss in detail an object or site plan. Full details in our assignments folder on blackboard. NB: I've assigned three source assignments, but you need only write two. If you write all three, I'll count only your two best grades.

Museum project: We've an embarrassment of good early medieval art within short striking distance, and this project asks you to take advantage of it. Full details in the assignments folder on blackboard.

Exhibition project: As the culmination of the course, this project asks you to create a virtual exhibition of objects gathered together by criteria of your own devising. Full details in the assignments folder on blackboard.

Important dates:

F 2/10: source assignment 1 due at noon
F 3/10: source assignment 2 due at noon
F 3/30: museum project: do this assignment at any point, but it is due no later than this date at noon
F 4/20: source assignment 3 due at noon
W 5/9: exhibition project due at noon

The Staffordshire Hoard

A ninth-century hoard of aristocratic gold from England and one of the most important archaeological finds in a generation is on display through March 4 at the National Geographic Museum. Don't miss this, the hoard's lone US stop. The exhibit is very well put together, right in the middle of our time period, and the subject of one option for the museum project. details: <http://events.nationalgeographic.com/events/exhibits/>

Medieval events at CUA

As ever our neighbors to the east at Catholic University have a nice looking series of public events lined up for the term. I call your attention in particular to the events on 2/2 (gold bracteates from early medieval Scandinavia) and 3/30 (digitizing the early medieval libraries of St. Gall and Reicheneau). Full details at: <http://mbs.cua.edu/news/index.cfm>

Schedule of topics and reading

NB: items marked with a star (*) are available in on our blackboard page

Part I: Negotiating the classical tradition in the late and post-Roman west

Week 1

M 1/23 introduction
no reading

W 1/25 Modes of visual representation in the later Empire
read: Nees, c. 1

Week 2

M 1/30 Looking for the origins of Christian art I: Dura Europos
read: Nees, c. 2

W 2/1 Looking for the origins of Christian art II: subterranean Rome
read: *Selections from Tertullian, On Idolatry and Minucius Felix, Octavius

Week 3

M 2/6 The emperor and the divine between Diocletian and Constantine
read: Nees, c. 3; *Documents on the tetrarchs and Constantine

W 2/8 Constantine's Rome
read: *Lactantius, On the deaths of the persecutors (selections)

→F 2/10 source assignment 1 due at noon by hardcopy to my mailbox in Robinson B359

Week 4

M 2/13 Constantine in the east
read: *Eusebius, Life of Constantine (selections); *two accounts of the discovery of the True Cross

W 2/15 Religious strife in Milan at the end of the fourth century
read: *Ambrose, Ep. 77 (on the discovery of the relics of Gervasius and Protasius) and Ep. 75 (to the emperor Valentinian)

Week 5

M 2/20 Architecture and the end of empire: Rome c. 400-500
read: *Selections from the works of Leo I

W 2/22 Roman books
read: Nees, c. 5

Week 6

M 2/27 Visual culture on the frontier
no reading

W 2/29 The architecture of asceticism
read: *Rule of Benedict (selections)

Week 7

M 3/5 Justinian's Constantinople and Ravenna
read: Nees, 6

W 3/7 The age of Gregory the Great
read: *Gregory, Libellus responsionum

→F 3/10: source assignment 2 due at noon by hardcopy to my mailbox in Robinson B359