

What is Romanesque?

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Romanesque sculpture flourished in Britain and Ireland from the Norman conquest of 1066 to the end of the 12th century AD. Often known in this country as 'Norman' (or more correctly, 'Anglo-Norman'), it adorns monumental buildings – churches, castles, houses – and such smaller pieces as screens and fonts.

'Romanesque' names a style rather than a specific period, since it began earlier in some places than in others and lasted longer. The term was devised initially to define a style of church building that seemed to revive aspects of Roman antiquity: e.g. aisled basilicas with round-headed arches and windows, columns with decorated capitals and bases. Associated with Roman Catholic western Europe rather than the Orthodox east, its beginnings are much debated; but this manner of building developed from the late 10th century in stone and timber in southern Europe, spreading through (modern) Italy, Spain, France and Germany, reaching Britain and Scandinavia by the late 11th.

With these buildings came sculptural adornment: lively, abstract carvings of foliage, beasts and geometric designs on doors, windows, capitals, columns and arches. In the past, Romanesque sculpture has been regarded as primitive, even crude, belonging to an era when people had forgotten the skills of carving naturalistic figures; but thanks to 20th-century developments in abstract and conceptual art, it is easier now for us to understand what Romanesque sculptors were doing, and to appreciate the sophistication that they brought to their task.

Naturalism is only one way of exploring artistic ideas. Romanesque decoration seeks to express ideas about the world around and within us, both its joys and its fears in a non-naturalistic way. It rationalises and celebrates the nature of both God and worldly reality, as well as, in the mysterious and awe-inspiring monsters that often appear, the fear of the unknown and unknowable. It does not do this through minutely detailed, naturalistic observation of forms, but takes those forms and turns them into pattern. Essentially an architectural sculpture, the carving always respects the shape of the feature that it adorns, clinging to flat surfaces in shallow relief, or following the line of an arch moulding. Such work imposes immense discipline on the sculptor, demanding that the craftsman set aside much individuality in pursuit of the work as a whole.

Although in Britain there is some overlap with Anglo-Saxon work, the Romanesque manner of expressing these intangibles came properly with the Normans after 1066 and lasted for about a hundred years before being gradually superseded by new forms of engagement with the classical world in the style that we call Gothic. By about 1200 the process was mostly complete, but our beginning and end dates are more permeable than they may seem.