Review Essay: Emile Mâle, *Art and Artists of the Middle Ages*

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early modern was a period of significant change in all major social institutions.

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This collection of essays by the great French art critic Emile Mâle was first published in 1927; a fourth revised edition appeared in 1947. This handsomely produced and well-illustrated edition offers the first English translation, excellently done by Sylvia Stallings Lowe. The collection provides a helpful supplement to the new Princeton edition of Mâle’s *Religious Art in France*, published now in three volumes as part of the Bollingen series.

The first essay gives the reader an informative summary of Mâle’s major insights into the history of Christian artistry. “The Stages of Christian Art” traces the influence of Greek culture on catacomb iconography, especially in the image of the beardless Christ as the Good Shepherd. The essay then turns to the independent tradition of Syrian art in the early Church, epitomized by the bearded Christ. The confluence of these two strains into the medieval period follows. The fourfold division of the universe by Vincent of Beauvais in his *Speculum Majus* into the Mirrors of Nature, Science, Morality and History supplies Mâle with the matrix of his analysis of medieval art. He concludes this overview with an appreciation of the Italian Renaissance artists Raphael and Michelangelo. For Mâle, the Sistine Chapel echoes the imagery of the catacombs and of the stained glass windows of the cathedrals. Through the centuries, the tradition has remained true to itself and its inspirations.

In the next two essays, Mâle discovers similarities between Christian and Arabic art. The study leads him back on a pilgrimage through France to Spain, from Vezelay to Saint John of Compostela. The mosque at Cordoba, with its horseshoe-shaped arches, bicolored vault, and decorated cornices recalls the churches of Auvergne and Velay. Other strikingly similar patterns are found in Le Puy, Valence, Vienne, and back on the pilgrimage road to Vezelay again. The accumulated evidence is convincing, and the illustrations clinch the argument.

In the essay that follows, Mâle expands his study of architecture to the Gothic churches of the Midi, with special attention to the construction of the single nave under Cistercian influence. Mâle’s search again takes him to Spain and remote rural churches to end with the design of the Jesuit Gesu
in Rome. Mâle’s ability to see connections is amazing; he remembers everything he has seen and becomes a walking encyclopedia of architectural details. Mont-Saint-Michel next merits his attention as the epitome of the developing styles from Romanesque to Gothic. The choir, completed in 1521, is the crowning achievement of the great examples of the past surrounding it. This one site offers a compact history of almost five hundred years of architecture, resulting in a work of harmony and beauty greater even than its separate parts.

Studies on other details of architecture follow: Mâle compares the tympana of Notre-Dame of Paris and Chartres; he traces the influence of the Senlis portal; and he recalls the contrast between Rheims Cathedral before and after the bombardments of World War I. The art critic’s originality appears in his reconstruction of the lost frescoes on the life of St. Louis in the church of the Cordeliers through the miniatures in the Book of Hours by Jean Pucelle, now in the Cloisters Collection in New York City. His reclamation of Jean Bourdichon as an important late Gothic painter is convincingly argued through parallel images in various manuscripts. From illumination, Mâle turns in his final essays to stained glass and works of ivory.

In his artistic journey, Mâle covers a lot of ground, but the panoramic nature of this collection becomes its chief attraction. Here are the discoveries of an alert, acute observer as he first published them, full of enthusiasm, scholarship, and personal insight. The author’s expression never falters in this translation; he creates buildings, paintings, and works of art through well-chosen words, and he evokes the landscapes of France, its valleys, hills, and towns, in vividly poetic language.

This book is worthy of its author. The only slips I noticed in an otherwise impeccable edition were in captions to several plates: an inverted listing of the apostles on page 177 and reversed captions on pages 196 and 197. (These mistakes occur in the original French edition of 1968.) The black-and-white illustrations are clear and, like the printed text, appealingly presented.

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RENAISSANCE


Lauro Martines is a historian of the Italian Renaissance who likes English poetry. He writes for two audiences: social historians who ignore the