Definition: *Romanesque* from *Collins English Dictionary*  

*adj*

1 denoting, relating to, or having the style of architecture used in W and S Europe from the 9th to the 12th century, characterized by the rounded arch, the groin vault, massive-masonry wall construction, and a restrained use of mouldings. See also Norman1 (sense 6).

2 denoting or relating to a corresponding style in painting, sculpture, etc.

[C18: Roman +-esque]

Summary Article: *Romanesque architecture and art*  
From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

the artistic style that prevailed throughout Europe from the 10th to the mid-12th cent., although it persisted until considerably later in certain areas. The term *Romanesque* points to the principal source of the style, the buildings of the Roman Empire. In addition to classical elements, however, Romanesque architecture incorporates components of Byzantine and Eastern origin.

**Romanesque Architecture**  
The specific character of the Romanesque style can be understood only in the light of the development of early medieval architecture in the West, notably its Carolingian and Ottonian phases. Certain of the most characteristic features of Romanesque structures—the massive west facade crowned by a tower or by twin towers, the complex design of the eastern part housing the sanctuary, the rhythmic alternation of piers and columns in the nave—represent only the advanced stages in a lengthy and complex formal evolution marked by considerable trial and error.

The development of Romanesque architecture owes much to the primacy accorded to vaulting. Masonry vaulting (see vault) since the beginning of Christian architecture had been confined to buildings of relatively small scale and to crypts. Large basilican structures, in a continuation of a tradition inaugurated by the early Christian basilica, were topped by wooden roofs. Romanesque churches, on the other hand, with notable exceptions in Normandy and Italy, sustained massive barrel vaults, making mandatory the reinforcement of load-bearing walls in order to parry the lateral outward thrust. The frequent presence of galleries above the aisles, sometimes with half-barrel vaults, is in all probability rooted in structural considerations connected with the problem of abutment. The limitation of wall openings to a minimum, related to the same concern, contributed to the sober yet somberly impressive character of the light.

The major share of architectural activity was sponsored by the great monastic communities. The Cluniac order, at the peak of its power, played a primary role in the patronage of construction. Thus a number of significant Cluniac churches connected with great 12th-century pilgrimages—St. Martin in Tours, St. Sernin in Toulouse, and Santiago de Compostela in Spain—show great similarity in plan and overall design. This sameness is especially notable in the presence of spacious ambulatories with radiating chapels designed to facilitate the pilgrims' access to the precious relics. The design of the

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third church of Cluny, dedicated in 1095, is reflected in a number of Burgundian churches. The basilica of San Marco in Venice and other Byzantine structures help to account for the presence of domed vaulting in a group of churches in French Aquitaine. German Romanesque architecture on the other hand remained strongly tied to the heritage of Ottonian art.

The following structures are noted works of Romanesque architecture: France—the abbey churches of St. Madeleine Vézelay (c.1090–1130) and Paray-le-Monial (early 12th cent.); Germany—the Cathedral of Speyer, dedicated in 1060, but largely reconstructed after 1082, and the Church of St. Mary on the Capitol in Cologne (1049); Italy—the cathedral (1063–92) and baptistery (1153) in Pisa, the Church of San Miniato al Monte (c.1070) in Florence, and the Cathedral of Monreale in Sicily (1174). From the last third of the 12th cent. certain features of the churches in N France and in England began to point toward the development of the Gothic (see Norman architecture). Similarly, architecture in the Ile-de-France, particularly the ambulatory (1140) of the abbey of St. Denis, reveals such an advance in unified design and construction as to be considered the first monument of Gothic architecture.

Romanesque Art
The art of the Romanesque period was characterized by an important revival of monumental forms, notably sculpture and fresco painting, which developed in close association with architectural decoration and exhibited a forceful and often severely structural quality. At the same time an element of realism, which parallels the first flowering of vernacular literature, came to the fore. It was expressed in terms of a direct and naive observation of certain details drawn from daily life and a heightened emphasis on emotion and fantasy. For many aspects of its rich imagery Romanesque art depended on the heritage of antiquity and of earlier medieval art, while the prestige of Byzantine art remained high in Western eyes. The pilgrimages and Crusades contributed to an unprecedented expansion of the formal vocabulary through the development of closer contacts between regional cultures and distant peoples.

Sculpture
The first important monuments of Romanesque sculpture were created in the last decade of the 11th cent. and the first decades of the 12th cent. The primary source of artistic patronage was provided by the monastic institutions, for whom sculptors executed large relief carvings for the decoration of church portals and richly ornate capitals for cloisters. Romanesque sculpture produced an art of extraordinary ornamental complexity, ecstatic in expression, and abounding in seemingly endless combinations of zoomorphic, vegetal, and abstract motifs.

In France themes portrayed on tympanums of such churches as Moissac, Vézelay, and Autun emphasized the awesome majesty of Christ as ruler and judge of the universe. They often depicted terrifying spectacles of hell. English sculpture showed a tendency toward geometric ornamentation. However, with the introduction in England of continental influences in the mid-12th cent. there also appeared gruesome renditions of the Last Judgment, e.g., at Lincoln Cathedral. In contrast with the demonic nature and animated quality of sculpture in France and in England, there was an assertion of more massive and ponderous figures in N Italy, with the narrative reliefs from Genesis designed by Wiligelmo in Modena and by Niccolò in Verona.

Metalwork
Another aspect of the Romanesque revival was the production of metalwork objects, of which many outstanding examples, such as crucifixes, reliquary shrines, and candlesticks, are still preserved in church
treasuries. The most productive centers of this art were the regions adjacent to the Rhine and the Meuse rivers, where the art of bronze casting reached a level of technical mastery sufficient to permit the execution of works of considerable dimension. An outstanding example of Mosan bronze casting is the baptismal font of St. Barthelemy in Liège, a large vessel supported by 12 oxen and decorated with scenes in high relief, executed by Rainer of Huy between 1107 and 1118. It was during this same period that Limoges, in central France, became an extremely active center of metalwork production, specializing in enamels.

**Fresco**

Fresco painting has been more adversely affected by the accidents of time, but several large cycles, as well as numerous other fragments of Romanesque wall painting, have survived. The large and relatively unbroken expanses of wall space within Romanesque buildings presented an excellent ground for the work of the painter, and the basic forms of Romanesque fresco painting are typically monumental in scale and bold in coloristic effect. Among the foremost examples of this art still largely extant are the cycles of Saint-Savin in western France and Sant'Angelo in Formis in S Italy.

**Manuscript Illumination**

Manuscript illumination of the Romanesque period was characterized by a vast enlargement of the traditional fund of pictorial imagery, although in terms of overall execution and calligraphic quality Romanesque illuminated books often show a certain carelessness and lack of refinement. The Psalter, as in the early Middle Ages, continued to be the most widely read volume for religious use, and numerous sumptuously illuminated copies of this work were executed. The Romanesque scriptorium also produced large editions of the Bible, often extending to several volumes. A splendid example of such a work is the Winchester Bible, executed in the course of several generations and decorated with numerous scenes from the Old and the New Testaments. Romanesque manuscripts are enlivened by elaborate and highly inventive initial letters, on which the artists of this period lavished their bent for rich ornamental display.

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