

From the 6th to the 12th century: Merovingian and Romanesque art at the Musée Unterlinden

The Merovingian period, at the dawn of the Middle Ages

This was a complex period, because as well as continuity with Gallo-Roman civilisation, we also see the introduction of a different model, due to the gradual incursion of the Alemanni from the 4th century. Over the course of the 5th century, they at least partially colonised Alsace, before the region was integrated into the Frankish kingdom in around 496. The Frankish kings of the Merovingian dynasty then ruled for three centuries, from 457 to 751.

Although very little is currently known about settlements in Alsace, we do have a great deal of information about funerary customs, due to the particular abundance of Merovingian cemeteries. The dead were laid out on their backs, often outside inhabited areas, in the heart of the countryside. It was only in the 8th century that the systematic practice of placing cemeteries next to churches emerged. Bodies were arranged in more or less regular rows, usually with their heads facing west, and with their upper and lower limbs extended.



Three Merovingian glasses,
Merovingian period, early 7th
century, blown glass, Colmar
(Haut-Rhin), Place Haslinger,
1994

The main necropolises in the Colmar region were located at Herrlisheim and in Colmar itself, in the Place Haslinger. The former site, which was destroyed by the operation of a gravel pit in the second

half of the 19th century, yielded an abundance of grave goods, including dozens of intact ceramic pieces, weapons (the long swords known as *spathas*, seaxes and spearheads), military equipment (shield bosses, spurs, parts of harnesses) and male clothing (belt ornaments, fibulae*), as well as a great many items of women's jewellery (necklace beads, fibulae, etc.).



Damascened harness parts, Merovingian period, middle/2nd
half of the 7th century, iron and silver, Herrlisheim-près-
Colmar, chance discovery, 19th century

The most prestigious iron objects were adorned with damascene motifs produced by inlaying silver wire. The necropolis in Colmar, which was established in the early 6th century, yielded 38 tombs containing reasonably similar grave goods, although the presence of several glasses sets them apart, including a remarkable glass with a foot, which is the only object of its kind to have been found in Eastern France to date. An extremely rare 7th century gold pyxis accompanied by a ring adorned with an engraved glass paste stone was discovered in an exceptional grave found in Horbourg.



Merovingian pyxis, Late 7th century, gold, Horbourg (Haut-
Rhin), Rue des Écoles, 1884

Cloître E Merovingian and Romanesque art

Romanesque art at the Musée Unterlinden

The museum's works in stone are merely the rare remnants of buildings that have sadly been destroyed. To undertake a more exhaustive study of Romanesque art in Alsace would mean taking to the region's roads in order to visit its Romanesque churches, chapels and belltowers.



Upper Rhine, (Strasbourg?), *Capital, Childhood and Passion of Christ*, Priory of St Mark in Guebenschwihr, c. 1150, Vosges sandstone

So the holy water basin from Schwarzenhann and the capital from the cloister of the priory of St Mark in Guebenschwihr are the only vestiges of these two Romanesque religious buildings. The capital from the priory, which dates from around 1130, is the work of a skilled sculptor, but any study is complicated by the deterioration it has suffered, particularly in the lower register. Once again, the sculpture has been worked in flat relief*, inspired by ivory work and illumination. The narrative scenes show the *Presentation of the Infant Jesus at the Temple* beneath a small tiled roof intended to represent the building, the *Baptism of Christ*, whose torso emerges from the waters of the River Jordan, and finally *Christ's Entrance into Jerusalem*, with its crenelated city walls.

Alongside these isolated sculptures, the museum is lucky enough to possess a

group of stone works from a single site: the abbey of Alspach within the municipality of Kaysersberg (Haut-Rhin), where the church was rebuilt in the 12th century and consecrated in 1149 by Bishop Ortlieb of Basel. The capitals and consoles are adorned with symbols of the Evangelists, animals, and scenes taken from the Bible or the legends of the saints. The sculptor adapted his work to the format imposed by the shape of these architectural elements, for example the capitals that were placed at the top of pilasters to support the vaulted ceiling. The sculpture is still formal and static in appearance, but is gradually becoming detached from the background, and the taste for ornamental detail persists.



Upper Rhine, *The Last Communion of Saint Mary of Egypt*, Abbey of Alspach, c. 1150, Vosges sandstone

The capital bearing the inscription *S. MARIA* shows the last moments of the life of St Mary of Egypt, the former courtesan who withdrew to the desert and received her last communion from the monk Zosima.

Fibula: accessory used as a clasp to fasten a garment, but also as a decorative item.

Flat relief: form of low relief in which the design is cut into the surface, producing a result similar to engraving