



Full de sala

Espai Columba

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Govern d'Andorra

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Museus i
Monuments
Nacionals
d'Andorra

The museum

1. L'Espai Columba

We invite you to travel back in time to the Middle Ages via Romanesque art, the art of the feudal kingdoms of Western Europe, between the late 10th century and the early 13th century.

Throughout Christian Europe, from Fisteria to the Holy Land, and from Scandinavia to much of Mediterranean Europe, artistic production has a common visual language. However, the fact that it shares a well-established style does not mean that it is unified; on the contrary, Romanesque art is highly varied and offers very diverse solutions with multiple dialogues. It is therefore a regional expression of an international movement.

Romanesque art signifies both a break with the past and continuity. It was nourished by traditions of the past, by Late Rome and by Carolingian Europe, while posing new questions, presenting new challenges, and seeking originality in a vibrant, special way. Deeply rooted in its time—that of the Middle Ages—it illustrated medieval identity and developed alongside philosophy, liturgy, music and poetry.

Moreover, it is the art form of a feudal society in which religion was an integral part of daily life and, as a result, the religious world actively participated in artistic activity. The presence of spirituality and Christianity, of faith, is a fundamental part of Romanesque art.

2. Brush strokes of Romanesque Andorra

The small country of Andorra has managed to preserve numerous isolated churches scattered across the land, as you can see in the projection.

Romanesque art originates from a particularly active and important moment in the history of Europe, in which a new model of society was beginning to develop and establish itself: feudalism. A time when the feudal lords of the valleys of Andorra spearheaded the construction of churches and the network of parishes, which, in addition to Christianising peasant communities, allowed them to externalise authority, as well as facilitating the collection of taxes, tithes and the payment of first fruits.

Andorra's churches are small, simple and functional, built by small rural communities using local stone bound with lime mortar. Decoration is restrained featuring Lombard forms and bell-gables or bell towers.

What remains today is an unadorned, austere and monochrome form of Romanesque architecture with exposed stonework, which blends into the surrounding nature. However, the reality couldn't be more different: Romanesque buildings were exuberant, boasting Baroque-style features and brimming with all manner of embellishments, sparkling lights and bright colours. To give you more of an idea, we invite you to enter a Romanesque church.

3. The sign of the cross

Making the sign of the cross with holy water from the font is the first step in the ritual upon crossing the stone threshold, allowing you to travel back in time 1,000 years and to feel like an inhabitant of medieval Andorra.

Going through the church entrance meant entering another dimension, an alternate universe and a symbolic world in which things were not seen through your eyes but through your heart, your imagination or your fear. A world inhabited by fantastical beasts that guarded the way between heaven and earth, God and man.

A place where time stands still, because everything conveyed a sense of alpha and omega, the origin of time and the end of days, where your senses transported you: through sight, with paintings that filled every nook and cranny with mysterious and fascinating scenes; through touch, with masterfully carved stone and wood; through hearing, with the liturgy officiated by the rectors; and through smell, with exotic incense from the East.

4. The ecclesiastical space

Mural paintings were the main feature of ecclesiastical spaces, but they were not alone; they were accompanied by liturgical furniture and an array of other pieces of art. To evoke the atmosphere of the time, one must imagine everything that adorned the church's interior, setting the stage and giving it meaning, in order to transport believers to another realm: the divine universe.

Liturgical furniture, which was often polychrome, such as the surface of the wooden altar painted with religious scenes or to imitate sumptuous fabrics—more cost-effective than purchasing rich textiles, gold altar frontals or embroidered fabrics—was only within reach of the most opulent places of worship. Such spaces would also boast sculptures on capitals and doors, mosaics on both the walls and the floors, stucco, tapestries, large images of parchment paper and the earliest stained-glass windows.

They also housed liturgical and devotional objects: tables, carvings, chalices, patens, candelabras, crosses and censers, among others, which made the space resplendent. Censers, which filled the space with the fragrant smoke of unfamiliar aromas wafting up to the heavens, played a part in ceremonies, but they also helped transform them into sensory experiences by creating a special atmosphere that enveloped and captivated the believer.

5. Relics

The cult of the relics, fostered by pilgrims, was of great importance during the Middle Ages. Although they had less of a connection with the liturgical event itself, the objects in which the relics were kept had great social significance in medieval religious life; reliquaries themselves took on a certain degree of the spiritual value attributed to the objects they contained.

Lipsanoteca were reliquaries that were placed in the church for its rite of dedication ceremony, together with a copy of the record of the dedication. They were kept beneath the altar stone, as is the case with our altar.

6. The altar

The church is oriented east to west, from where the sun rises to where it sets, in a symbolic sense from the beginning to the end, and from light to darkness. The apse on the east side, where the sun rises, marks the place where the altar stands, thus becoming the centre of the church.

Several liturgical objects, such as chalices, patens, crosses and candelabras were placed on the cloth-covered altar. On top of our altar is the mystic book, testament to the importance of the manuscript as a sumptuous object. In terms of illiteracy, reading ability was limited to part of the nobility and the clergy, and so the written word carried great authority. The book was valuable, not only because of the techniques and materials used but especially due to the religious content of most of the texts, illustrated with miniatures, which helped to enhance the message.

Pieces associated with Christian worship, such as wood carvings of the Virgin Mary or of Christ, were also displayed around the altar.

The Christ seen here is an unusual object, demonstrating how approaches change and how art is a means to express a moment in time. Thus, a Romanesque piece is subsequently transformed due to changes in the religious and artistic approaches of the Gothic style. A triumphant crucified Christ (dressed, frontal, with his eyes open, triumphant in the face of death, indicating his divine nature) is transformed into the Gothic-style suffering Christ (naked, feeble, with his eyes closed, enduring a humiliating sacrifice, indicating his human nature).

7. Lighting

Christian celebration was accompanied by a number of objects, some of them especially for worship and others to complement it. They were all given a truly extraordinary level of attention, creative effort and economic means. In general they were made using noble metals—or if funds were low, cheaper metals—and other sumptuous materials, such as glass.

The same is true of the oil lamps that illuminated the inside of churches; through the glass the light distorted shapes, cast moving shadows and gave life to inert objects and spaces. Lamps and candelabras were integral to mystifying the church's interior: light was a divine element, filling the church with a sense of clarity and shutting out a world of darkness.

8. The cross

The array of objects placed within a church included several crosses, both for altars and processions. The cross is one of the oldest symbols of humanity; it appeared as early as prehistoric times, as well as being used by religions, sects, organisations, governments and people of all kinds of creeds, perhaps because it is a symbol that is easy to make and quickly identified. Although there are various types, the most basic and most well-known symbol of the cross is the constant reminder of the death and crucifixion of Christ.

Due to its shape, this thorny polychrome wooden cross recalls the crown of thorns that Christ wore on his way to Calvary.

9. The mural painting

Paintings and images can have diverse functions: decorative, narrative, as a way to reassert their beliefs or to complement liturgical and devotional practices, or even all of them at once. They may also have an evocative purpose to remind us of past events. None of these functions, however, are exclusive.

Romanesque mural painting has long been considered a pedagogical tool, a form of art designed to educate an illiterate viewing public by means of flat content with an educational, as well as aesthetic and evocative purpose. However, Romanesque art is a profoundly intellectual, conceptual and abstract art form, abounding in subtle connotations and deeper meaning. A refined art, in terms of the message and the content, which was aimed at an equally sophisticated, knowledgeable and well-educated audience—the noble elites and ecclesiastical hierarchies—who were able to understand the images and to find symbolic interpretations and true meaning with ease.

However, the painted space should be appraised as a whole, together with the architecture that houses it, as a 'ritual space', as the stage on which the liturgy is conducted, which helps us understand one of its main functions: the expression of religious ideology through images.

10. The paintings of the Church of Sant Esteve in Andorra la Vella

Far from representing a monolithic artistic style, Romanesque art developed over time in its own particular way. The paintings in the church of Sant Esteve in Andorra la Vella that are shown here have a style and iconography that are unique in Andorra. This marvellous pictorial cycle is a perfect illustration of the evolution of Romanesque art as it moved towards Gothic art through the so-called 1200 style.

In front of us we have two fragments, which were located in the lower part of the apse of the church.

The first of these scenes is *The Judas Kiss* which depicts Judas Iscariot revealing the identity of Jesus to the Roman authorities through a kiss. We see Judas embracing Jesus while two soldiers, who are wearing helmets and carrying spears, hold him by the wrists. Peter is cutting off Malcus' ear in an attempt to avoid arrest. The expression on the face of Jesus is a bitter one and the position of his body reveals his self-sacrifice.

The arrest of Jesus led to a series of martyrdoms which culminated in the crucifixion. One of these is the *Scourging of Christ* that is depicted here. Jesus, tied to a pillar, is being whipped by servants who are being closely observed by Pontius Pilate. The position of Christ's hands carry a strong symbolism of surrender and acceptance of his sacrifice and punishment.

These two fragments were part of a larger ensemble in which the themes were adapted to the architectural space according to their significance. The faithful who entered the church of Saint Stephen were able to admire the imposing and solemn Christ in Glory in the apse, accompanied by the four evangelists. Below, they would see his Passion, with scenes that included the Maundy, the Judas Kiss, the Scourging at the Pillar and the Solemn Reproaches with the crown of thorns. To their left, they would find the lateral apsidiole with baptismal-related scenes.

The 1200 style

The 1200 style is heir to Romanesque art, but it expresses its messages with far greater naturalness, realism and depth, leaving aside the frontality and rigidity of the previous figures in order to inject life into the characters that occupy the walls. This transitional style between Romanesque and Gothic is nourished by Byzantine artistic influences, which reached Andorra through various European artistic centres, such as Italy, France, England and the Mediterranean area. As was customary in Romanesque art, the Sant Esteve ensemble includes ornamental motifs which, apart from decorating the scenes and making them more solemn, also order and frame them. The friezes with architectural motifs refer to the city of Jerusalem, although the round domes are reminiscent of Byzantine architecture.

The colours used are another aspect that favours the evolution in terms of the artistic past with the use of a very warm chromatic palette and fine white lines lending liveliness and depth to the figures. This form of representing volumes marks a transition from what would be developed in a fully Gothic style in later decades.

11. The paintings of Santa Coloma's church

The layout of ecclesiastical buildings was designed with symbolism in mind: the apse marks the most important place in the church, where the altar is situated, facing east together with the wonderful window that looks towards Heavenly Jerusalem; above it, the vault represents heaven, and in the midst of heaven is the mandorla or mystic almond, which symbolises two worlds coming together: heaven and earth, the divine and the human, and alpha and omega.

On the left side of the vault of the apse of Santa Coloma church we see Christ in Majesty within the mystic almond, surrounded by the tetramorph, the symbol of the four Evangelists: Matthew, the man, John, the eagle, Luke, the ox, and Mark, the lion. On the right side the Apostolic College is depicted. And, on the front wall, Saint Coloma, the Virgin Mary, the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul, and a dove, most likely representing the Holy Spirit. Behind you, on the outer curve of the arch, are two unidentified saints. The rest of the paintings can be seen in their original place. Later on, we will discuss those situated on the inner curve of the arch.

These paintings are traditionally attributed to the group of the Master of Santa Coloma. In this case, the term 'master' need not be understood as one person but rather as a 'way of doing' shared by various artists from workshops that disseminated Lombard Romanesque tradition and waves of Byzantinism, on both sides of the Pyrenees, based on an extensive network of relations with affiliates and other monasteries.

The wall paintings from the churches of Sant Miquel d'Engolasters and Sant Romà de les Bons, which can be seen in Barcelona's Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, and those of Anyós, whose whereabouts are currently unknown, are also attributed to the group.

12. The process

Painters worked in workshops in teams, like builders, consisting of a master as the main artist together with a group of assistants and apprentices of a lower rank who prepared both the scaffolding and the wall surfaces, as well as mixing the colours and painting less complicated sections.

The master received instructions from the sponsor on the symbolic programme and the scenes to be depicted, which had to be designed and produced in his own style.

Medieval artists based their work on copying, shaping the final piece by interpreting and reviewing pre-existing models. Their creations were not envisaged nor defined without a preceding guide to follow. They formed their pieces from memory, supported by notes and small sketches, from which sketchbooks derive.

Once at work, artists would have to work quickly without being distracted for even an instant, employing confident brush strokes so as to avoid mistakes. Such were the risks of working with a mixed paint technique that was executed on freshly applied plaster with finishing touches added once the surface was dry. The wall surface had to be saturated with water, primed, plastered, polished, drawn onto, painted while still wet, retouched when dry, tempered, decorated and finished.

On the panel you can see the different stages of the process and the materials used.

13. *Strappo*

The Italian *strappo* technique is used for the detachment of wall paintings. *Strappo* literally translates as 'rip', 'extract' or 'tear'. It involves the removal of only the superficial pictorial layer of a mural painting.

In this video you can see the detachment procedure and subsequent transfer to another support.

14. The journey of the wall paintings

Throughout history, peoples and civilisations have expressed themselves artistically in very different and varied ways. Artistic currents have followed one after the other and fashions have been renewed, expired and revived. Medieval art enjoys significant prestige today. But this was not always the case, and in many cases, it was progressively replaced by other styles, with the paintings being covered up and hidden. In contrast, the 19th century witnessed the emergence of a renewed interest in medieval art. Driven by the *Renaixença* - a cultural movement which, nourished by the ideas of Romanticism, promoted the revival of Catalan language and literature - Romanesque and Gothic art were rediscovered and seen as key elements of a national identity. This renewed popularity aroused the interest of antique dealers and collectors, and many of the wall paintings in the churches of the Catalan and Andorran Pyrenees were bought, removed and resold.

Once removed, each set experienced a different adventure; some of them were even fragmented and divided up. Since this time, the paintings have been part of the history

that marked the 20th century in Europe and the United States far from the humble and sheltered walls of their church. Their journey was and continues to be one incredible adventure.

The journey of the wall paintings of Santa Coloma

In 1933, the Barcelona art dealer Josep Bardolet bought the mural paintings of Santa Coloma from the diocese of Urgell. The Italian technician Arturo Cividini was entrusted with the task of removing them using the *strappo* technique. In order to get the maximum benefit from the sale, Bardolet divided the ensemble into two parts, and they started their journey apart. On the one hand, there were the paintings of the interior of the apse while on the other, there were those from the soffit of the arch. The latter mentioned – which depict saints Gregori and Silvestre – spent time in Madrid before being brought to New York, where they were exhibited at the Brummer Gallery. The two saints were then separated. The Sant Silvestre fragment was sold to the Mead Art Museum in Massachusetts, where it is currently located. The Sant Gregori fragment spent time in Missouri and New Jersey before being auctioned in Paris, where it remained, *a priori* until the 1970s, after when its whereabouts became unknown.

On the other hand, the fragments from the interior of the apse – those of Christ in Majesty and the Twelve Apostles– were purchased directly by Baron Van Cassel, a Belgian banker, a great art lover and passionate collector, who moved them to his residence in Cannes. In 1939, the baron, a descendant of a Jewish family, decided to emigrate to the United States because of the pre-war climate that had had taken hold in Europe. From there, he distributed his significant art collection among several repositories with the help of people that he trusted. Despite these precautions, all his possessions were eventually confiscated by the Nazi authorities. The murals, which managed to survive amidst all the chaos between France, Austria and Germany, ended up in the salt mines of Altaussee. They were not returned to the Baron at the end of the conflict but rather remained in Munich and then Berlin until they were restored and exhibited at the Gemälde Galerie in Berlin after 35 years of obscurity. Their journey culminated with their definitive return to Andorra in 2007, thanks to the recovery policy of the Government of Andorra and the commitment of the German Executive to fulfil the commitments made at the Washington Conference of 1998, which established the restitution of all property that had been plundered during the Second World War. The paintings were returned to the heiresses of Baron Van Cassel, and they finally decided to sell them to the Government of Andorra.

The journey of the paintings of Sant Esteve in Andorra la Vella

As in Santa Coloma and much of the Catalan Pyrenees, the murals of Sant Esteve in Andorra la Vella were removed during the last century using the *strappo* technique, at a time when medieval art was attracting great interest among collectors. In the 1920s, Josep Bardolet i Solé bought them and then sold them to Ròmul Bosch i Catarineu. Later, and at different times, the Bosch family, which kept the two fragments we have in the museum today, sold the rest to different collectors and the ensemble was broken up. On the one hand, several fragments, including those from the apsidiole (the small secondary apse) entered

the Museu d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC) after their purchase by Julio Muñoz i Ramonet. These fragments, which travelled to Olot and Paris during the Spanish Civil War, are currently housed in the MNAC. On the other hand, the *Maundy* fragment was purchased by José Luis Várez-Fisa from Madrid and his family donated it to the Prado Museum in Madrid in 2013.

After a long process initiated in 2008, which was held up for a number of years, the fragments that had remained in the possession of the Bosch family returned to Andorra in 2024. The ensemble is now exhibited in three different museums, all of which are managed by public institutions.

Exteriors

15. Santa Coloma church

Santa Coloma church is one of the jewels in the crown of Andorran Romanesque architecture and, with its round bell tower, it constitutes one of the country's most emblematic images. It is also one of the oldest, since it was built at an undetermined date in the 10th century, although the building that we see today is the result of additions and alterations spanning the 12th century through subsequent centuries.

From here we have a good vantage point of the part that corresponds with the original Pre-Romanesque construction: the quadrangular apse and a large part of the nave, as well as the walls constructed using the rammed-earth technique based on compacting earth between formwork, reinforced with longitudinal wooden beams.

Like all of Andorra's Romanesque churches, Santa Coloma church is small, simple and free from ornamentation. Due to the fact that villages were small and poor, religious buildings were adapted to inhabitants.

Nevertheless, the fact that many small Romanesque churches and rural hermitages have been preserved, such as ours, does not mean to say that Romanesque architecture was essentially rustic, enamoured of remote mountains, possessing an ascetic spirit and connected through a natural sense of spirituality; Romanesque architecture also sought out urban environments and was an art form with enormous monumental ambition and significant technical expertise. It is the art form behind the great cathedrals and urban canons as well as monastic complexes.

16. Santa Coloma church

The church's most significant renovations took place in the Romanesque period and during the 20th century. In the 12th century the bell tower, the barrel vault of the apse and the porch were built, the latter intended as a privileged burial area, among other functions.

The circular bell tower is the most characteristic feature of Santa Coloma church. Important religious centres in the vicinity influenced its architectural forms and both Santa Coloma church and that of Sant Vicenç d'Enclar, situated at the top of the mountain that rises in front of you, took on the circular shape of the now non-existent bell tower of Sant Serni de Tavèrnoles, which served as a model.

The bell towers could also be used as watchtowers and to warn of danger and disasters, as they provided visibility from one bell tower to the next. They could also act as conjuratories, where non-religious ceremonies that couldn't be held inside the church could be conducted, such as to plead for rain in times of drought or to ward off rain in times of deluge.

In the bell tower remains of paintings have been preserved under the cantilever of the roof and around the windows on the top floor. The small fragments of murals are of Romanesque origin, serving to remind us that churches were completely plastered and painted on both the inside and outside, and that their stonework was not exposed as it

is these days. Instead, the plaster has been gradually lost over the centuries in order to adapt to modern tastes, corresponding with what is a present-day architectural trend.

Beneath the roof is also a stone carving of a human head, one of the few examples of monumental sculpture in Andorra, together with the saw-tooth frieze above the entrance. The sculpture at the entrance framed the passage between the outside world and the sacred space of the church.

17. The porch

Churches were not only places in which religious services were held, they were also meeting places for village folk, who congregated at both the porch and within the sacred space around the church to do business, to discuss social and communal issues and to hold village meetings.

To local people, churches were 'the most important place in our world'. 'It was where we met, where we learnt, where we were presented when we were born, and where we were bid farewell when we departed this life. The place where we were told what was happening in the world, and beyond the world. The place where we paid our taxes and the place that made us feel part of where we came from'.

We invite you to cross the stone threshold, which signified entering a place that transcended reality: another dimension.

18. The church's interior

It is difficult to imagine the interior of the church as a mystical medieval space, since its current appearance does not reflect a particular era but is instead the result of diverse experiences throughout the centuries.

The Pre-Romanesque period bequeathed us with the single nave with a rectangular plan, along with the walls, which, now that the outer coating has been chipped off, reveal the irregularity of the wall facing and the timber reinforcements, as well as the quadrangular apse and the small chancel arch consisting of a semi-circular arch.

From the Romanesque period is the baptismal font, the barrel vault of the apse and the remains of the mural paintings. We can also see the polychrome wood carving of the Virgin of Remei, which dates from the late 12th and early 13th centuries.

From subsequent eras is the polychrome tabernacle, dating from the 15th century, and the Baroque altarpiece dedicated to Saint Coloma, the patron saint of the church, which was originally positioned so as to cover the apse, hiding the Romanesque mural paintings of the Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God, inside a medallion held by two angels, framed by a border featuring geometric shapes.

If you allow the stones to talk to you, one can still imagine the teams of builders and painters and the inhabitants of medieval Andorra hidden beneath each stone, within each church and in the midst of each painting, such as those that you will see shortly.

19. The Baroque altarpiece

Built around 1741 and 1742, its creator has been identified as the sculptor known by the pseudonym Mestre d'Adrall, and the gilder Simó Ruaix.

The altarpiece is presided over by Saint Coloma, the patron saint of the church, who holds a book and the emblematic dove. Below her is Saint Stephen and Saint Francis Xavier, and above her, Saint Anthony of Padua and Saint Isidore stand on either side of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, together with the holy souls in purgatory, which appear below the Everlasting Father at the top.

These days, it is not in its original position, since it was designed to have pride of place, presiding over the church, placed against the chancel arch. It remained there until the discovery of the murals that it had concealed, in the early 20th century. Later on, when the decision was taken to return the church to something more similar to its original appearance, towards the late 1980s, the altarpiece was repositioned at the bottom of the nave, where it remains today.