A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe

Edited by
Conrad Rudolph
A Companion to Medieval Art
BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO ART HISTORY

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A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe

*Edited by*

Conrad Rudolph
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Notes on Contributors

Tina Waldeier Bizzarro is Professor of the History of Art at Rosemont College, Pennsylvania, where she has taught the history of art since she received her Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr College in 1985. She has also been attached to Villanova University for the last 20 years – in the Irish Studies Program, teaching courses on the Art of Ireland and also in the Russian Studies Program, having designed courses on the meaning and making of icons. She has lectured widely and published on the history of medieval architectural criticism through the second decade of the nineteenth century (Romanesque Architectural Criticism: A Prehistory [1992]) and is preparing a second, pendant critical volume dealing with concepts of the medieval through World War I. She has been a Commonwealth Speaker for the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, and also annually directs and teaches in her month-long Summer Program in Sicily, based in Messina. She has been a Fulbright Scholar in Sicily from February through June 2006, working on a book on the Roadside Shrines of Sicily.


Michelle P. Brown, FSA, was Curator of Illuminated Manuscripts at the British Library, London, for more than 17 years and now fronts its regional outreach program. She is Visiting Professor at the Institute of Medieval Studies at Leeds University and a Senior Research Fellow at the Courtauld Institute and the School of Advanced Studies at the University of London. She is also a Lay Canon and Member of Chapter at St Paul’s Cathedral. She has lectured and published widely on medieval history, art history, and manuscript studies, has curated several major exhibitions, and had co-responsibility for setting up the

**Martin Büchsel** is Professor of Art History at the Kunsthistorisches Institut of the University of Frankfurt, a member of the Mediävistischen Arbeitskreises of the Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, and Chair of the “Historische Emotionsforschung” project. He has published on early Christian art, early medieval art, and Gothic art (most recently, *Die Entstehung des Christusporträts. Bildarchäologie statt Bildhypnose* [2003–4]), as well as in the area of philosophy (doctoral dissertation, “Die Kategorie der Substanz in der Kritik der reinen Vernunft”).

**Brigitte Buettner** is Priscilla Paine Van der Poel Associate Professor of Art History at Smith College. Her areas of research include late medieval secular manuscripts, Valois court culture, female patronage, and, now, medieval precious arts. In addition to various articles, she is the author of Boccaccio’s “Des clercs et nobles femmes”: *Systems of Signification in an Illuminated Manuscript* (1996), and is currently preparing a translation of Guillebert de Mets’ description of Paris (with Michael T. Davis) as well as a study on the meanings and uses of precious stones in the Middle Ages.

**Jill Caskey** is Associate Professor of Fine Art at the University of Toronto. She is the author of *Art and Patronage in the Medieval Mediterranean: Merchant Culture in the Region of Amalfi* (2004), as well as numerous articles that have appeared in European and North American publications. Recently, she has received research grants from the Getty Grant Program and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She is also a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome.

**Madeline Harrison Caviness** is Mary Richardson Professor and Professor of Art History at Tufts University. Among her numerous books and articles are: *Medieval Art in the West and its Audience* (2001); *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle and Scopic Economy* (2001); and *Reconfiguring Medieval Art: Difference, Margins, Boundaries* (2001). She is currently President of the International Council of Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (CIPSH), and a past President of the International Academic Union (UAI, 1998–2001).

**Adam S. Cohen** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Fine Art at the University of Toronto. His research has focused on Northern European art of the tenth and eleventh centuries, with publications that include *The Uta Codex: Art, Philosophy and Reform in Eleventh-Century Germany* (2000) and articles in *Speculum*, *Gesta*, and *Scriptorium*. He is currently writing a book on twelfth-century visual exegesis and ritual practice.

entitled *Romanesque Corporealities: The Body as Image and Dissimilitude in European Art, ca.1050–1215*.

**Peter Fergusson** teaches in the Art Department at Wellesley College, where he holds the Theodora and Stanley Feldberg Chair in Art History. Aside from his interests in the Cistercians, he has also published on the architecture of the reform movement in England, and on nineteenth-and twentieth-century garden history. His *Architecture of Solitude: Cistercian Abbeys in Twelfth Century England* (1984) was awarded the Charles Rufus Morey Book Award of the College Art Association, and his *Rievaulx Abbey: Community, Architecture, Memory* (1999; with Stuart Harrison) was awarded the Alice Hitchcock Prize of the Architectural Historians of Great Britain, and the Haskins Medal of the Medieval Academy of America.

**Eric Fernie** is Professor and Director Emeritus of the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. His books include: *The Architecture of the Anglo-Saxons* (1983); *An Architectural History of Norwich Cathedral* (1993); *Art History and its Methods* (1995); and *The Architecture of Norman England* (2000). He has also published more than 50 papers in refereed journals.

**Jaroslav Folda** is N. Ferebee Taylor Professor of the History of Art at the University of North Carolina. He has published on the art and architecture of the Crusaders in the Holy Land in a series of studies, which have appeared as books and articles, and essays and entries in exhibition catalogues. His book, *Art of the Crusaders in the Holy Land: 1098–1187* (1995), was awarded the Haskins Medal by the Medieval Academy of America. His new book, *Crusader Art in the Holy Land, from the Third Crusade to the Fall of Acre: 1187–1291* was published in 2005.

**Paula Gerson** is Professor and Chair of the Department of Art History at Florida State University. Her many years of research on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela have resulted in three collaborative volumes: *The Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela: A Gazetteer*, with A. Shaver-Crandell and A. Stones (1995), and *The Twelfth-century Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, translation and critical edition, 2 vols., with J. Krochalís, A. Shaver-Crandell, and A. Stones (1998). She has also worked extensively on issues related to the abbey church of St Denis. She was a contributor and the editor of the fundamental volume *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis, A Symposium* (1986). She is currently completing an article on Abbot Suger’s Great Cross.

**Cynthia Hahn** is Gulnar K. Bosch Professor of Art History at Florida State University. She has published two books on saints’ lives in manuscripts, including *Portrayed on the Heart* (2001). She is presently preparing a study of Medieval Reliquaries to c. AD 1204.

**Anne D. Hedeman** is Professor of Medieval Art History at the University of Illinois. Her research centers on French thirteenth- to fifteenth-century illuminated manuscripts and has concerned royal patronage, illuminations of Mirrors of Princes, and the relationships between the first French humanists and the arts around 1400. Her books include: *The Royal Image: Illustrations of the Grandes chroniques de France, 1270–1422* (1991); *Of Counselors and Kings: Three Versions of Pierre Salmon’s Dialogues* (2001); and a book to be published by the Getty Center, *Boccaccio in Context: Laurent de Premierfait and the “De cas de nobles hommes et femmes.”*

**Colum Hourihane** is Director of the Index of Christian Art at Princeton University. He received his Ph.D. in Art History from the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1984 for a study on Gothic Irish art, which was subsequently published as *Gothic Art*.
Christopher G. Hughes is a Research Associate at the Getty Research Institute. He received his Ph.D. in English from Princeton in 1995 and his Ph.D. in Art History from Berkeley in 2000. He taught art history at UCLA and USC before taking his current position at the Getty. He is currently preparing a book-length study on biblical typology and early Gothic art.

Laura Kendrick, Professor at the Université de Versailles, is the author of Animating the Letter: The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance (1999) and several shorter studies on the relationship between medieval texts and the visual aspects of their manuscript contexts.

Herbert L. Kessler is Professor of the History of Art at Johns Hopkins University. He has written more than 125 articles and reviews and has published the following books: The Illustrated Bibles from Tours (1977); The Cotton Genesis (with Kurt Weitzmann; 1986); The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art (with Kurt Weitzmann; 1990); Studies in Pictorial Narrative (1994); The Poetry and Paintings in the First Bible of Charles the Bald (with Paul E. Dutton; 1997); The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation (with Gerhard Wolf; 1998); Rome 1300: On the Path of the Pilgrim (with Johanna Zacharias; 2000); Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art (2000); Old St. Peter’s and Church Decoration in Medieval Italy (2002); and Seeing Medieval Art (2004).

Dale Kinney is Professor of History of Art and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Bryn Mawr College. She has published numerous studies of *spolia* as a critical concept and as an architectural practice in medieval Italy. Other recent publications include essays on the semiotics of the early Christian basilica (*Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia*, n.s. 1, 15 [2001]); the medieval reception of the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius (*Word & Image*, 18 [2002]); and a visual analysis of the apse mosaic of Santa Maria in Trastevere (*Reading Medieval Images* [2002]).

Brigitte Kurmann-Schwarz is a research fellow at the Swiss Center for Research and Information on Stained Glass in Romont, Switzerland, and teaches at the University of Zürich. She is currently President of the International Committee of the Corpus Vitrearum, a member of the Swiss National Committee of the Corpus Vitrearum, and an associate member of the French National Committee. She is the author of many books and articles, which include studies on medieval and modern stained glass, late medieval sculpture, and more general problems such as conservation and restoration, courtly art, and issues of research policy.

Suzanne Lewis is Professor Emerita at Stanford University, and a Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America. She is the author of many articles and reviews, as well as several books: *The Art of Matthew Paris in the Chronica Majora* (1987); *Reading Images: Narrative Discourse and Reception in the Thirteenth-Century Illuminated Apocalypse* (1995); *The Rhetoric of Power in the Bayeux Tapestry* (1998); and *Apocalypsis Gulbenkian* (with Nigel Morgan; 2002). As Andrew Mellon Research Fellow, 2004–6, she is currently working on a new book, *Illuminating the End in Thirteenth-Century*
Apocalypses, which will be followed by Picturing Visions: The Illustrated Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages, c.800–1200.

Pierre Alain Mariaux is Assistant Professor at the Institut d’histoire de l’art at the Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland. He is the author of “Warmond d’Ivrée et ses images. Politique et création iconographique autour de l’an mil” (2002) and of “Deo operante. Le travail de l’art à l’époque romane. Études sur l’image de l’artiste, IXe-XIIe siècle” (forthcoming). He is currently working on a book-length study of church treasure, its history and functions.

Robert A. Maxwell is Assistant Professor of the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania. He has published articles on illuminated manuscripts, Romanesque sculpture, and architecture, as well as on medieval art’s historiography (Art History, 2003). A forthcoming book, titled The Art of Urbanism in Medieval France, examines the role of monumental art in shaping the Romanesque cityscape.

Stephen Murray is Professor of Medieval Art History at Columbia University and currently serves as Director of the Media Center for Art History, Archaeology, and Historic Preservation. His publications include books on the cathedrals of Amiens, Beauvais, and Troyes; his current work is on medieval sermons, story-telling in Gothic, and the Romanesque architecture of the Bourbonnais. His field of teaching includes Romanesque and Gothic art, particularly involving the integrated understanding of art and architecture within a broader framework of economic and cultural history. He is currently engaged in projecting his cathedral studies through the electronic media using a combination of three-dimensional simulation, digital imaging, and video.


Elizabeth Carson Pastan is Associate Professor of Art History at Emory University. Her scholarship includes numerous articles on medieval stained glass and its reception, and these have appeared in such periodicals as Speculum, Gesta, Word & Image, and the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians. In addition, she has worked extensively in museum collections and has contributed entries to Gothic Sculpture in America, the Museums of the Midwest as well as Stained Glass before 1700 in the Collections of the Midwest States. Her book, Les Vitraux du choeur de la cathédrale de Troyes (XIIIe siècle), co-authored with Sylvie Balcon, is the first study of stained glass by an American scholar solicited for publication by the French Corpus Vitrearum (2006).

Conrad Rudolph is Professor of Medieval Art History at the University of California, Riverside. He has held Guggenheim, J. Paul Getty, and Mellon research fellowships. He is the author of: The “Things of Greater Importance”: Bernard of Clairvaux’s Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art (1990); Artistic Change at St-Denis: Abbot Suger’s Program and the Early Twelfth-
Century Controversy over Art (1990); Violence and Daily Life: Reading, Art, and Polemics in the Cîteaux Moralia in Job (1997); “First, I Find the Center Point”: Reading the Text of Hugh of Saint Victor’s The Mystic Ark (2004); and Pilgrimage to the End of the World: The Road to Santiago de Compostela (2004) (the latter being an account of his experience undertaking the grueling medieval pilgrimage on foot from Le Puy in south-central France to Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain, a journey of two and a half months and a thousand miles). He is currently at work on The Mystic Ark: Hugh of Saint Victor and the Multiplication and Systematization of Imagery in the Twelfth Century.

Linda Seidel is Hanna Holborn Gray Professor Emerita in the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago. Her books include: Songs of Glory: The Romanesque Facades of Aquitaine (1981); Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait: Stories of an Icon (1993); and Legends in Limestone: Lazarus, Gislebertus and the Cathedral of Autun (1999).

Series Editor’s Preface

Blackwell Companions to Art History is a series of edited collections designed to cover the discipline of art history in all its complexities. Each volume is edited by specialists who lead a team of essayists, representing the best of leading scholarship, in mapping the state of research within the sub-field under review, as well as pointing toward future trends in research.

This Companion to Medieval Art presents a challenging set of essays that give a clear analytical survey of what is happening in this major area of Western art history. Attention is paid to the historiography of the period; theories of the image, reception, and vision; architectural design; and the concept of revival with particular reference to a broad range of Northern European examples. Together, these themes combine to provide an exciting and varied study that will be essential reading for students and teachers of Medieval Art.

As one of the first volumes to appear, A Companion to Medieval Art sets the tone and pace for new and innovative approaches offered in this series.

Dana Arnold, 2005
In a work specifically devoted to the theory and practice of learning, Hugh of St Victor, the great Parisian scholar and polyhistor, wrote in around 1125: “The number of books is infinite – don’t chase after the infinite.” A few pages later, however, this ally of Bernard of Clairvaux and apparent advisor to Abbot Suger on his famous art program at St Denis also said: “Learn everything . . . nothing is superfluous!” Herein lies the sometimes almost overwhelming challenge to the scholar. To say that scholarship has grown a bit since the early twelfth century would be facetious. We all know that there is too much to read, that it is impossible to keep current with the vast output of a given field, something that is no less true for the medieval art historian than it is for the scholar of any other field. (Cf. the words of the exceptionally well-read Willibald Sauerländer in The Cloisters, ed. E. Parker, p. 29.) Yet, as scholarship grows, it seems as if there has never been a greater desire, even necessity, to understand the issues and arguments that have contributed to the formation of the current state of the field. The present book is an attempt to respond to this dilemma for the medieval art historian, to help strike a balance between the desire to have a broad and informed historiographical grasp of the field and the near impossibility of achieving this.

There have been a number of good historiographical studies on medieval art in the past, both overviews and more narrowly focused pieces. But there has been nothing in English that has attempted the breadth of this work, nothing that has approached the subject through such a wide variety of discrete themes and media, topics both that have been of concern for many generations and that are of more recent interest. This volume is one of the first in an ambitious new series whose goal is “to map the state of research” throughout world art history. It has as its geographical and chronological limits Northern Europe during the Romanesque and Gothic periods (c.1000–1300). It will later be joined by a volume covering the Early Christian through Ottonian and Byzantine periods,
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as well as by one that incorporates the later Middle Ages. It is aimed at both scholars and advanced undergraduates.

Aside from the series’ limits on chronology, geography, and the number and length of the essays, there were very few other restrictions imposed on this volume. I conceived of it in a way that I hope will address the needs of the field as broadly as possible. After a broad introduction are a number of chapters on current methodological or conceptual issues (vision, reception, narrative, etc.). These are followed by several thematic pieces that might be thought of as unconnected to any specific media (image theory, patronage, collecting, etc.), some presentations of long-established sub-fields (architecture, sculpture, painting, the sumptuous arts, the Crusader states), a few thematic studies that are either sub-sets or groupings of the sub-fields (architectural layout, sculptural programs, pilgrimage art, etc.), and finally two chapters on medieval art in the modern era (modern revivals of medieval architecture and the modern medieval museum). In all this, there has been a conscious mix of older and younger scholars.

Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, not every topic that I would like to have had covered was able to be included. And while it is my belief it is virtually impossible to have a truly satisfying organization with this particular material because of the fundamental conceptual unity of so much of medieval art and the resultant interlocking nature of much of its scholarship, I certainly might have conceived of the selection of essays differently after having gone through the experience of participating in this project, an undertaking with its own challenges. In the same way that I was given nearly complete freedom as editor, so I used this as a guiding principle for the contributing authors, believing that it is not only impossible to impose universal standards on independent-minded scholars in a case like this, but that it is wrong to try. I asked them to trace out past issues, current trends, and, when possible, what might seem to be future directions. I also asked them to find a balance between a “factual” recounting of the previous literature and their own scholarly opinions, so that the essays would be both of value to students and of interest to scholars. This was not an easy charge, especially given the strict length limits imposed by the series. Nor were the basic parameters of each essay similar. Some authors were heavily burdened with nineteenth-century precedent, while others dealt with topics that have not yet found headings in the periodical indexes. In the end, one chapter may approach its subject in such a way as to be a model of analysis of the secondary literature, another may give a great deal of attention to the establishment of crucial formative institutions, and another still may approach the topic from the angle of the work of art. Some pull the literature together in a way not done before, contributing a dimension of additional analysis and so take the subject further than before. All reveal how generation after generation of scholars approached the subject — archaeological strata of understanding that have shaped our conception of the field today. As a group, they exemplify perhaps every mindset (and combinations of mindsets) that can be applied to the subject:
traditional and innovative, pragmatic and creative, clinically analytical and broadly reflective. Ultimately, this is not a systematic historiography of medieval art – something that could only be written by a single author – but a collection of essays covering a broad number of topics and taking a varied number of approaches. But it is also one that, I hope, will help build bridges between the different sub-fields of medieval art history for those of us who are increasingly forced to pursue our own areas of study in seeming isolation.

Finally, while scholars have always recognized the importance of a historiographical understanding of the field, there seems to be an increasingly strong feeling today that such an understanding also helps facilitate learning on the part of students. Many of the concepts and issues that run throughout this book represent, for me, some of my earliest memories of the study of art history. Working with these concepts and issues in the course of producing this volume has underscored for me the excitement of studying medieval art history, reminded me why I got into the field in the first place – something I hope will also be the case with the younger scholars who use this book.

A work like this is the result of many debts. I would first like to thank the authors of this volume themselves. I know that each one of them had his or her own research waiting when I first approached them, research that was set aside in order to take on this work as a service to the field. Three, in particular, worked on through personal adversities of the most trying kind. Another, the late Harvey Stahl, courageously took up his essay though he knew he might be unable to complete it. I would also like to express my gratitude to those colleagues who generously suggested potential authors for some of the essays in this book, including Dana Arnold, Stacy Boldrick, Michelle Brown, Caroline Bruzelius, Brigitte Buettner, Annemarie Weyl Carr, Paul Crossley, Eric Fernie, Jaroslav Folda, Roberta Gilchrist, Christa Grössinger, Cynthia Hahn, Anne D. Hedeman, Anne Higonnet, Herb Kessler, Peter Kurmann, and Elizabeth Pastan. And I would most particularly like to thank the tireless and supportive series editor, Dana Arnold, for the important role she played in the production of both the series and this volume.

Conrad Rudolph
Introduction: A Sense of Loss: An Overview of the Historiography of Romanesque and Gothic Art

Conrad Rudolph

Little Jack Horner
Sat in the corner,
Eating a Christmas pie;
He put in his thumb
And pulled out a plum,
And said, What a good boy am I!

So began for Glastonbury, as it had for countless other monasteries, the destruction of the ancient, wealthy, and powerful institution of monasticism – or, according to a different view, the defeat of an oppressor, or, according to another still, the transition of Christianity into the modern age. But it was also, in a way, the birth of medieval art historiography, a birth with a very long period of labor. When Jack (or Thomas) Horner (as the nursery rhyme is popularly and probably correctly understood to relate) rode into London from Glastonbury in 1539, three years after the Dissolution of the Monasteries had begun and one before it would end, he carried with him a gift from Abbot Richard Whiting of Glastonbury for King Henry VIII. The gift was a mince pie and, apparently having a sweet tooth, Horner, the abbot’s steward, extracted one of twelve manorial deeds (the one for Mells Manor, a real “plum,” as we still say today)
hidden in the pie before delivering it in accord with the abbot’s intention of sweetening Henry’s decision regarding Glastonbury in the Dissolution process.\(^1\) A man of prodigious appetite, Henry’s hunger was not so easily satisfied and – even before Horner had served on the jury in a sham trial that condemned the abbot, his master, to death – he consumed Glastonbury as well, perhaps the oldest and one of the wealthiest abbeys in England. Among the last monasteries to hold out during the Dissolution – a great pilgrimage place with legendary associations with the beginnings of Christianity in the British Isles, Joseph of Arimathaea, St Patrick, King Arthur, and Dunstan – Glastonbury’s riches were plundered, its lands sold, and its great buildings demolished. (Little Jack Horner’s descendants still live in the manor at Mells.) In all, 577 religious houses were suppressed by Henry – 200 of them great institutions with substantial holdings – their buildings torn down, their artworks destroyed, and their libraries dispersed.\(^2\) With this, one of the great cultural institutions of Britain ceased to exist. Around the same time, the medieval patrimony of Northern and Central Europe suffered irreparably from a series of wars, uprisings, and acts of iconoclasm that took place following the momentous posting of Luther’s 95 theses at Wittenberg in 1517. And in France, the Wars of Religion (1562–98) were virtually unrivalled in their destruction of the French artistic inheritance.

The breadth and finality of this destruction would bring about a sense of loss that combined with a number of other vital factors such as incipient antiquarianism, the early development of national identity, and a general spread of education that would lead, eventually, to the formation of the field of medieval art history as we have it today. This field, however, can be a multifaceted one, and the times since the Reformation have been no less complex than those in which the very first “medievalists” worked. In the hope that the chapters in this book might be better understood by those readers unfamiliar with the general history of the writing of medieval art history, this introduction will attempt to give a brief overview of this history, a basic narrative, to explain, as best it can, how we got here from there.

The Pre-History of Medieval Art Historiography

Already in the midst of the wreckage that followed in the wake of the Reformation, the first steps were taken to preserve from total loss the vestiges, both documentary and physical, of a rapidly disappearing culture, a culture seen as both compelling and threatening, even at the same time. This spontaneous and erratic rescue arose first in Britain and only later elsewhere in Western Europe, originally always the result of individuals operating on their own initiative, whatever their professional positions and institutional support may have been. But, in a sense, the historiography of medieval art began long before its writing, and the rescue of medieval culture’s remains in the formation and continuation of the authority of Classical art. This was an authority so overwhelming that it acted as
an almost insurmountable barrier to an acceptance of the standards of medieval artistic culture in general and of the aesthetic basis of medieval art in particular. It was also an authority that had a long and venerable ancestry in the historiography of Western art.

Not long after what is now called the Late Classical period, the first known history of Greek art was written by Xenocrates (fl. 280 BC), a history that is believed to have taken as its basic theme the systematic progress toward the perfection of naturalistic or illusionistic rendering through the solving of formal problems by a succession of famous artists. Xenocrates’ writing has not survived, nor have those of his contemporaries, such as Douris of Samos (c. 340–260 BC), who is thought to have put the history of art that he wrote into the form of a series of biographies. However, both Xenocrates and Douris, among others, were heavily used by Pliny the Elder in his great *Natural History* (71–7 AD). Pliny continued the concept found in their work of a clear trajectory of phases of broad stylistic development from initial formation to perfection, and from perfection to decline, this perfection being seen as reaching its high point in the High and Late Classical periods. He also generally followed the biographical format, which was a very popular one. Unlike most of the other early writings on art, Pliny’s did survive and served as an enormously influential model in the first centuries of early modern art historical writing. In no small part because of this, from the very beginning of early modern art history and for more than two hundred years to come, the standards by which art was judged were those of naturalism, and the format in which the history of art was presented was typically that of the biography. Or, put another way, the paradigm of art historical writing was that of the historically known individual advancing the naturalistic and illusionistic standards of the Classical period. Equally as critical for the historiography of medieval art was the stylistic developmental model of initial formation, naturalistic perfection, and eventual decline. From the very beginning, the deck was stacked against the art of the Middle Ages with a standard that was generally foreign to medieval culture, which, for much of its history, privileged the abstract and the iconic over the naturalistic and illusionistic; and which saw the role of the artist as that of a craftsman, irredeemably below those individuals within medieval culture – saints, great ecclesiastics, and the most important nobles – who were thought of as worthy of having their lives and deeds recorded.

The changes that the naturalistic and biographical paradigms underwent in the beginning of early modern art historical writing were, for the purposes of this introduction, moderate. But the stylistic developmental model of initial formation, perfection, and decline was to be reconceived in a way that Pliny and his contemporaries could never have imagined at the height of the Roman Empire. In the mid fourteenth century, with Petrarch, an awareness arose in Italian humanist circles not only of the decline of civilization that accompanied the fall of Rome, which had never been in question, but also of a Classical (that is, “Roman”) cultural revival in their own time. Petrarch referred to the decline
as a time of “darkness,” a time of almost unrelieved ignorance – this first articulation of the idea of “the Dark Ages” being, clearly, a negative one (1337–8). Soon, Boccaccio (1348–53) and others applied this concept to the history of art, although in an unsystematic way, most notably in regard to Giotto (1267/75–1337). It was only a matter of time before historians such as Flavio Biondo came to see the interval between the Empire and their own time as a distinct period (posthumous 1483), something Biondo’s contemporaries and immediate followers gradually formalized with terms such as media tempestas (1469), media aetas (1518), and media tempora (1531). (The actual term medium aevum, the direct Latin of “the Middle Age” or “the Middle Ages” as the source of the word “medieval,” is first found at least by 1604; with the English equivalent appearing immediately afterwards with “the Middle Age” being used by William Camden in 1605 and “the Middle Ages” by Henry Spelman in 1616.) By the early fifteenth century, Niccolò Machiavelli presented a flexible cyclical theory of history (posthumous 1531), largely based on the work of the Greek historian of ancient Rome, Polybius.

In regard to the historiography of medieval art, these developments took their definitive form in the work of Giorgio Vasari, considered by some to be the founder of modern art history. There had been earlier writings on the history of art from Italian humanist circles, including by the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti (begun c.1447), but Vasari’s Le vite de più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori (1550; rev. edn. 1568) is regarded as the first modern history of art because of its broader, more synthetic, and more critical nature. Following the authority of Pliny, Vasari presents a history of (largely Italian) art employing a standard of naturalistic progress and a format based on biographies of the artists. On the one hand, his emphasis on technical knowledge and aesthetic judgment gave an enormous impetus to the practice of connoisseurship with its estimation of quality and the determination of attribution that was to dominate art historical discourse for so long. On the other, the biographical format, encouraged by the Italian humanist affinity for the individual, opened the biographical paradigm to the new topos of the artist as genius. (This realm of genius was apparently open only to practitioners of painting, sculpture, and architecture; Vasari is considered to be the source of the distinction between the so-called major and minor arts, a distinction that every period potentially faces but that is particularly disadvantageous to the medieval, whose book painting was considered a “minor art” until the late nineteenth century.) At the same time, in also employing a variation of Pliny’s stylistic developmental model of initial formation, perfection, and decline, Vasari was forced to address something Pliny never was: the millennium and a half of artistic activity since Pliny’s death in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

If Pliny could interpret a few hundred years of what he saw as an artistic decline in his own time simply as the result of an essentially moral decline, Vasari was compelled to explain more than a thousand years of what he saw as an artistic decline of morally superior Christian culture with reference to both the Classical period and his own time – as well as in light of recent developments in
the Italian humanist view of history. He did this by accounting for artistic decline in general not in moral terms but by conceiving of the pattern of artistic change as a biological cycle (birth, growth, old age, and death) superimposed on the history of the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Thus, the periods of initial formation and naturalistic perfection of the Classical world were followed by that of the decline of the arts of the Middle Ages (begun before the fall but fully realized through the destruction and culture of the Germanic invaders); the cycle then beginning again around the time of Giotto and others who strove toward the ideal of naturalistic perfection with a new sequence of initial formation, increasing perfection, and, finally, perfection itself (embodied in the work of Michelangelo). Vasari describes this process of the re-establishment of naturalistic standards as a “rebirth” (rinascita), our “Renaissance” – a concept that not only recognizes a self-conscious view toward the present and future, but also signals a consciousness of a break with the Classical past, any sense of continuity irrevocably ruptured by the Middle Ages. In an attempt to account for major artistic change as something more than technical advances, Vasari attributes this change to “the very air of Italy,” a very unphilosophical and conceptually unrelated predecessor of Hegel’s Zeitgeist and Riegl’s Kunstwollen, mentioned below. Vasari is, perhaps, most notoriously known among medievalists for his characterization of what is now called Gothic architecture as an invention of the Goths (or Germans), who “filled all Italy with these damnable buildings”; the reference to the Goths – including through the use of the adjective – being one that had been made by other writers earlier (and by Vasari himself) to indicate a much broader variety of forms of medieval architecture with which Italian humanists were out of sympathy. But his great importance for the historiography of medieval art lies in the fact that his work was so enormously influential throughout Europe that it gave the impression there was only one methodology, only one way of looking at art. This was a way that, in the emulation of Vasari’s own particular naturalistic and biographical paradigms and cyclical model of stylistic development, removed art from its cultural context and relegated medieval art to the low point of Western culture for more than two hundred years to come.

The Reformation and its Aftermath

What was to Vasari only too ubiquitous, Gothic, was – in the broader sense of medieval culture – to many others now in danger of being lost. Since the mandate of this volume is Romanesque and Gothic art and architecture in Northern Europe, let’s return to England of the Dissolution to look at John Leland, the person who is generally described not as the first medieval art historian, but as the first modern English antiquary.

In 1527, after eighteen years of marriage without a male heir to the throne, Henry VIII began a series of efforts aimed at having his marriage with Catherine
of Aragon annulled and his association with Anne Boleyn legitimized. Unable to achieve this end after seven years of contesting the issue (including a great deal of public pressure on the Church in England), he broke with Rome in 1534, and began preparations for the Dissolution of the Monasteries mentioned at the opening of this introduction in that same year. The “visitations” began in 1535 and the monasteries were incrementally suppressed from the weakest to the strongest from February 1536 to March 1540. (In the end, the monasteries lasted longer than Anne, the second of the king’s six wives, who was beheaded in May 1536.) It was in the midst of this gradually escalating state of affairs, from 1534 to 1543, that John Leland undertook a project with the king’s support to research the libraries of all the monasteries and colleges of England, so that “the monuments of auncient writers as welle of other nations, as of this yowr owne province mighte be brought owte of deadely darkenes to lyvely lighte” (the latter possibly being a reference to Petrarch). Leland, who had been in Holy Orders and had been appointed Henry’s librarian around 1530, was an antiquarian (antiquarianism being a form of the study of the past that is based on physical as well as literary remains, typically with an aim toward classification rather than a comprehensive historical view). His antiquarian proposal, however, seems to have received an urgent impetus from the Dissolution, of which he approved but whose destruction of the ancient libraries he deeply regretted (even as he contributed to it himself in his acquisition of books for the king’s library). In the end, this already daunting project expanded its goals to include everything from libraries to inscriptions, important buildings, artistic remains, coins, and geography, in both England and Wales. The result is considered to be a significant innovation in antiquarian method, even if an uncritical one. Far less a study of art and architecture than it was a broad review of the topography and antiquities of the kingdom, Leland’s project remained unfinished when he was declared insane in 1547 at the age of around 44, dying five years later. His extensive notes, however, were widely known to the next generation of antiquaries who used them, cited them, and even indexed them. These were finally published in nine volumes from 1710 to 1712 as the *Itinerary*; further notes were published in six volumes in 1715 as the *Collectanea*. Some scholars believe that Leland’s insanity was the result of distress at the equivocal role he played in the destruction of his beloved libraries. However this may be, what is not in doubt is that the impetus for this seminal work was Leland’s strong sense of nationalism, and that its purpose was to contribute to an awakening of English national identity.

This sense of nationalism and of a need for a more clearly defined national identity in the face of an irrevocably changing world was a common factor in much of the work (from both sides of the aisle) on British antiquities and topography that followed Leland. It was a time of first beginnings, and the progress – however much erudition and initiative was involved – gives, in historiographical retrospect, something of the impression of intellectually feeling around in the dark. Two scholars who emerge most strongly from this challenging