

# The Sacred and the Secular: An In-Depth Analysis of Medieval Humanistic Art

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## Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between art and religion, focusing on the analysis of artistic emotions and aesthetic experiences in the context of medieval religion, and the influence and evolution of Christianity on medieval music. The article aims to re-examine the interplay between religious beliefs, cultural practices and artistic creations, emphasising their profound influence on the structure of society. It first describes the close relationship between art and modes of production, social order and. Then, the emotional changes in the aesthetic of medieval art under the intertwining of different cultural, philosophical and religious ideas were analysed, emphasising the profound influence of religion on artistic expression, especially the understanding of beauty within the theological framework of Christianity. Finally, taking the field of medieval music as an example, the evolution of medieval music from monophony to polyphony is discussed, and how Christianity promoted the development of music and its important role in church services is analysed. The research results show that Christianity has had a profound influence on shaping Western culture, moral systems and art forms. In the main, this study, which is based on the fields of art history and philosophy, provides a new academic perspective on the period by re-examining the way in which religion and culture shaped medieval art. The research methods include literature review, text analysis and theoretical re-construction, combined with the study of medieval religious texts and works of art, to analyse their role in artistic creation.

## Keywords

Art History, Medieval, Religion, Aesthetic, Gregorian Chant

## 1. Introduction

During the medieval period, Western society underwent tremendous religious and cultural transformations. Christianity, as the core of the social structure, pro-

foundly influenced artistic creation and philosophical thought at that time. During this period, art was not only a tool for the expression of religious beliefs but also a comprehensive embodiment of social change, philosophical thought, and cultural practice. Medieval works of art, such as sculpture, frescoes, and religious music, not only conveyed reverence for the sacred but also reflected the socio-political, philosophical, and everyday life concepts of the time. Although we have traditionally viewed the Middle Ages as the “Dark Ages” of culture, this view overlooks the complexity and innovation of the art and thought of the period.

This study aims to re-examine the deep relationship between medieval art and religious thought and to explore how Christianity shaped the form and content of medieval art, which in turn influenced the direction of Western philosophy and culture. By analyzing the intertwined roles of religious texts, artworks, and philosophical ideas, the paper reveals the multidimensional impact of religious beliefs in artistic creation, especially in music and visual arts. The study not only focuses on how religion influences the form and style of art but also delves into how it shapes the artist’s conception of creativity through philosophical and theological thought.

In addition, this paper also highlights the important role of Christian music in medieval society, reveals how music in this period developed from monophonic to polyphonic forms, and analyses how this musical transformation corresponded to the religious and social changes of the time. By re-examining these artistic and intellectual interactions, this study expects to provide new scholarly perspectives to understand the medieval influence on Western thought and culture.

## **2. The Relationship between Art and Religion**

Art and religion have been inextricably linked throughout history, especially during the medieval period, when the influence of Christianity permeated the creation and expression of every art form. Art is the external expression of human aesthetics and the condensation of social consciousness, belief systems, and philosophical thought. In the Middle Ages, the deep intertwining of religious beliefs and culture led art to become a significant means of spreading Christian teachings, shaping religious worldviews, and expressing sacred imagery. Through the interpretation of works of art, we can get a glimpse of the society’s spiritual outlook, moral concepts, and cultural values at that time.

In his book *The Beginnings of Art* (Grosse, 2019), Grosse said: “The origin of art lies where culture begins”. Grosse believed that culture could be defined objectively and precisely, and secondly, its meaning could be used to characterize an entire cultural form. The mode of production encapsulates these two points perfectly. In other words, the mode of production is the most fundamental cultural phenomenon, and compared to it, other cultural phenomena are merely derivatives. And while it is true that religion, as an idea, does not emerge from the mode of production, when we trace its regional religious forms from the dominant state of production, we can see that the religious form is a mapping of its mode of pro-

duction.

This can also be reflected in some funerary practices, for example, some of the objects buried in caves in the Neanderthal Valley in Germany are most likely to indicate tools of production, implying that the deceased could continue to produce material goods after death, and that graves surrounded by slabs and stones indicate that the body is not allowed to be destroyed, probably because it is thought that it cannot go on with its life after it has been destroyed.

Therefore, religious awareness at this time was most likely born out of a lack of understanding of death and probably the belief that the world after death was still a world where people made a living through labor. Therefore, religious beliefs and artistic expressions during this period reflect human ideology and people's deep dependence on and understanding of the social order and mode of production.

In Grosse's theoretical framework, art should also be considered an essential part of culture. Art has a very long development history, and its origins are also closely related to the mode of production. For example, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato used dialogue to explore the issues of art and beauty. On the other side of the globe, simultaneously, the *Yue Ji* (Record of Music), born during the Warring States period in China, is a monograph that systematically discusses the art of music.

Thus, art is not only an extension of society's productive activities but also recreates and reinterprets the social significance of production methods through forms, symbols, and representations. Whether murals, sculptures, music, or dance, they are all profound reflections and expressions of human beings on their living environment, mode of production, and social order.

Therefore, art is more than a superficial aesthetic form; it is deeply rooted in human social practices and cultural contexts. In the Middle Ages, the close intertwining of religious beliefs and cultural practices made art an important medium for transmitting sacred concepts, shaping the morals of society, and exerting a profound influence on people's thoughts and behaviors. Whether through the symbolic expression of images or in the form of music and architecture, art reflected at different levels the human understanding of life, death, order, and the sacred at that time. This interaction between art and religion shaped the unique landscape of medieval art. It provided an important perspective for us to understand the structure and ideas of the society of that time. Therefore, art in the Middle Ages was not only a tool for religious teachings but also a transmitter of deep social and cultural values, and it became a profound exploration and expression of humanity's understanding of the world and faith.

### **3. Artistic Emotions and Aesthetic Experiences in the Religious Context of the Middle Ages**

In the third century AD, Europe underwent significant ethnic changes, known as the "barbarian invasions". These invading "barbarians" often granted the land they plundered to their loyalists or followers after occupying an area (Zhu, 2012).

At the same time, the residents of the conquered regions were reduced to serfdom, thus gradually forming some feudal states. On the other hand, the Germanic Angles, Saxons, and Celts were forced to migrate to the British Isles; the Germanic Goths and Franks were forced to migrate westward and to survive, they began to invade the Western Roman Empire. The geographical changes undoubtedly led to the gradual formation of different artistic sensibilities among various cultures.

In Taine's view, art aesthetics has the three-element theory of "Race, Environment, and Era." Race is regarded as the permanent instinct and natural "cultural foundation" of a nation (Pan, 2021). Even if some people think that the role of this racial difference has been exaggerated, under the influence of this difference, it will undoubtedly grow into different "cultural genes" in the process of social expansion. Therefore, even two countries that are geographically close to each other may have different artistic expressions.

In AC476, the Western Roman Empire collapsed after years of attacks by the Germanic peoples. Subsequently, various Germanic tribes successively established the Visigothic Kingdom, the Ostrogothic Kingdom, the Frankish Kingdom, the Suebian Kingdom, the Burgundian Kingdom, the Vandals Kingdom, the Lombard Kingdom, the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom, etc., in the former territory of the Western Roman Empire. Europe gradually entered the Middle Ages with clashes between ethnic groups and the diversification of ideas.

There are many such cliched views in medieval studies advocating the absolute darkness of medieval history, the spread of the Black Death, and the root cause of this darkness being Christianity. However, once we abandon past prejudices and re-examine this history, it becomes clear that if we make subjective assumptions about medieval composers, we will form a distorted impression of medieval art (Wegman, 1995) Because the questions we ask and the answers we expect are expected in our cultural environment, we examine the Middle Ages based on our cultural background.

The mysterious content described in the Bible has not been deleted or amended to this day. Is this telling people that the significance of the mysterious content of religious beliefs does not lie in whether they can be confirmed by scientific means (Gao, 1998) but rather in the philosophical revelation they contain, which can reflect the way of thinking and values of people in that period? This is also reflected in other religious products. For example, the symbolic elements of the Tarot cards, such as the robe with pomegranate printed on it worn by the Empress, reflect the importance of the society at that time on the reproduction of many children and its cultural significance, thus conveying deeper symbolic meaning and values. Therefore, many factors determine the direction of things. We must abandon stereotypes and discover the more profound meaning hidden beneath the surface of things. Thus, an analysis of medieval culture, religion and philosophy is essential to explore what form art in a medieval context takes and what emotions and aesthetic experiences it contains.

There were indeed several movements in the history of the Christian church to

suppress literary and artistic activities. For example, Emperor Theodosius launched a vigorous campaign to suppress “heresy” in the Roman Empire, destroying Greek and Roman temple buildings in Greece as well as relics such as carvings and paintings. There was also the Byzantine iconoclasm movement. However, the Christian church still wanted to use literature and art to serve religious affairs. As an essential form of expressing faith, prayer, and worship, Medieval music is widely found in spiritual traditions. It was deeply influenced by the philosophical thinking of the time, especially the influence of ancient Greek and Christian philosophy. These philosophical ideas shaped medieval music’s aesthetics, function, and application. Medieval Europe was dominated by Christian thought, which was called “scholasticism.” All issues were considered from a religious perspective, supported by religious authorities in the service of faith, but the logic was not constrained by religious theology. Its philosophical ideas have a connecting link between the preceding and the following features.

Most of Augustine’s aesthetic statements during this period came from his theological work: *The Confessions*. On the one hand, he combined Aristotle and Cicero to define beauty in general as “unity” or “harmony” and beauty in objects as “the proper proportion of the parts, plus one pleasing color” (Augustine, 1998). On the other hand, he combined this form with medieval theology. He believed that God himself is unity, and the reason why harmony is beautiful is that things can achieve a unity that is close to God’s.

The aesthetic of art during this period was almost always influenced by Pythagoreanism. For example, according to Boethius, music is not only a human artistic expression but also a reflection of the harmony of the universe. His concept of “musical mundane (the music of the universe)” illustrates the close connection between music and the universe. The universe’s operation contains an inherent harmony, and music is a symbol and epitome of this harmony.

Augustine attempted to find beauty in quantitative relationships, believing that beauty has a sense of scale and quantity. He also raised the issue of ugliness, in which he also demonstrated a certain simple dialectical thinking. He believed that beauty is absolute, but ugliness is relative. Ugliness is a factor in the formation of beauty. Ugliness and beauty complement each other in harmony, as in a poem. The beauty of the whole cannot be seen in a single syllable full of life and emotion. And in the relationship between faith, reason, and beauty. He believes that faith is above all else, that reason is the tool for understanding faith, and that worldly sensory beauty is only a shadow of divine beauty and quickly arouses desire. These ideas reflect his skepticism about worldly senses and his admiration for divine beauty. In his eyes, true beauty should be understood and experienced through reason rather than directly perceived through the senses. He emphasizes that reason is the necessary path to beauty. His thinking significantly impacted medieval Christian thought, the philosophical transition of the Renaissance, and modern existentialism and psychology.

Therefore, the artistic emotions and aesthetic experiences of the Middle Ages

were an expression of religious beliefs and a synthesis of philosophical ideas, social changes, and cultural backgrounds. Works of art reflected the profound thinking of the people of that era about the universe, life, death, and divinity and conveyed inner harmony and sacred aesthetics through visual and musical forms. Both Augustine's aesthetics of harmony and the influence of Pythagoreanism on music show the close connection between medieval art and philosophical thought. Art was an expression of the spirit of the age. During this period, artists' creations were limited by religious concepts but also incorporated profound reflections on beauty, harmony, and reason within them. An in-depth exploration of this period's artistic emotions and aesthetic experiences can help us better understand the multidimensionality of medieval culture and its profound influence on the art, philosophy, and thought of later generations.

#### **4. The Evolution of Medieval Music and the Influence of Religion: An Exploration from Mono-Phony to Polyphony**

Many factors influenced the development of medieval aesthetics. The Middle Ages was not an era of affluence, invention, and hedonism like the Romans, but rather one of uncertainty, war, plague, and poverty. As a result, in terms of architecture, people in the Middle Ages believed that buildings should be more protective, and the manor system emerged.

Thomas Aquinas' philosophical and theological thinking also indirectly influenced the direction of medieval artistic aesthetics. Medieval church music tended to be simple and harmonious in structure, avoiding overly complex melodies or rhythms that might provoke excessive emotional fluctuations (McKinnon, 1989). The harmony of music was seen as a reflection of the divine order, and music was supposed to help believers concentrate and enhance their piety rather than satisfy worldly sensory needs.

There are clear traces of ancient Greek music in the earliest church music, which means that Greek music was the theoretical basis for music in medieval Europe. The early Greek practice of "Magadizing" (the superimposition of octaves) continued in the Latin Church (Taruskin, 2005). They regarded the simultaneous singing of the melody by the boys and the adult men as a unique musical effect from a series of octave repetitions. "Magadizing" does not just mean that the voices of men and children occasionally blend to produce an octave harmony, but rather implies a conscious process with an aesthetic purpose. Its name comes from the ancient Greek instrument "Magadis," which is a harp-like instrument with many strings that can repeat a melody, and striking each note of the melody in an octave is most likely a conscious use of it as a unique aesthetic device. We can still find old music in Christian music, and art continues to develop even among different ethnic cultures.

Aristotle explained in his book *Problems*: why the octave is considered a suitable interval for singing and why it is widely used. In his view, the two notes of the octave are highly consistent in terms of consonance. When sung, one sound can

audibly evoke another sound's presence, so the octave's consonance is considered natural and complete. Whether two sounds are simultaneously produced from different sources (such as a human voice and a flute), or a single note is sung alone, the aural effect is almost the same. However, the fact that an octave has different parts singing the same note was not considered permissible at the time, even though the notes could technically be the same. Therefore, the Greeks who used and defined polyphony did not even have a concept of polyphony in the true sense of the word.

This traditional understanding of intervals gradually changed during the Middle Ages, when new religious and cultural demands drove music towards more complex polyphonic forms.

From a contemporary perspective, the dominant factor in music history during this period was undoubtedly the use of musical resources in public worship by the church (Hoppin, 2000). Music that stays at the level of world entertainment is likely to be directionless and stagnant. However, music during this period did not lose its direction. The existence of Christianity provided a "yardstick" for the development of music, and the principle of emotional expression in Christian music in the church became an internal driving force.

Under Christian leadership, music was widely used in public church worship, leading music in a new direction—music conveys emotions to believers. The design and expression of music focus on collectivity and participation, expressing the feelings of the entire group or congregation, rather than individual expression. Innovations and changes are constantly emerging in religious music. In particular, exploring polyphony music prompted the later Renaissance of music as one of the first reformed art forms.

From the 9th century, Organum appeared as an early form of polyphony, which consisted of multiple voices singing in harmony, usually adding more than one vocal part to Gregorian chant. These additional voices can be performed in parallel or counterpoint to the main melody, enriching and diversifying the music. Also appearing was "Diaphony," a type of music that allows different harmonies and the alternation of harmonies and dissonances. The strict Organum or Diaphony form is a logical extension of the ancient Greek period's Magazine. In addition, the understanding of harmony has been firmly established and further developed; harmony exists more between simultaneously sounding sounds than between successive sounds. These harmonies were called "Symphonies," and this new concept and naming came from the practice of singing in harmony, a musical form known as "Organum" or "Diaphony."

With the emergence of polyphonic music, the structure and expression of music underwent profound changes. Early monophonic music gradually shifted to polyphonic chorus, and the use of polyphony made the music show more layers and complexity. The interweaving and counterpoint of different voices made the music more colorful, enhancing the auditory impact and introducing new artistic expression methods. Polyphonic music technically requires higher collaboration and

coordination and, at the same time, gives the music more room for emotional expression.

This shift also marks the beginning of a more refined and systematic direction of music creation. Polyphonic music extends music from a single melody to multiple sound effects through the harmony and counterpoint between voices. This innovation not only promotes the development of music theory but also the enrichment of music practice. As musical forms continued to expand and evolve, artists began to explore more complex structures and means of expression, making music a more independent art form. The introduction of polyphony provided the basis for later musical development and played a vital role in promoting the innovation of Renaissance music.

Nietzsche criticized Christianity in *The Beyond of Good and Evil* and *The Twilight of Idols*. Still, he also had to admit the formative influence of Christianity on Western values and moral systems. He believes Christianity is a “powerful” cultural phenomenon that has profoundly impacted human moral values and philosophical thinking. Although he questioned Christian doctrine, he thought that Western ethical concepts were primarily the result of Christianity’s long-term influence. In *Totem and Taboo* and *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud analyses religion as a collective psychological phenomenon and, despite being an atheist, believes that religion significantly influences social behavior and shapes morality and culture. Therefore, the influence of religion should be given due attention in the study of Western culture, which provides a new perspective for us to explore the philosophical ideas and social norms behind artistic forms.

## 5. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of medieval art and religious thought, this study reveals how Christianity shaped artistic creation and philosophical thought during this period and how they reflected and shaped the social structure and cultural values of the time. By exploring the development of artistic expression, religious music, and the evolution of philosophical concepts, we find that medieval art was more than just a reflection of religious teachings; it was a response to the time’s social, political, and cultural changes. Religious beliefs provided the central framework for artistic creation, but the works demonstrated complex multidimensional influences that profoundly reflected people’s explorations of life, death, morality, and divinity.

Research has shown that the relationship between religion and art in the medieval period went far beyond what has traditionally been recognized as “sacred expression.” Art was an expression of doctrine and a mirror image of the society’s deep spiritual, philosophical, and moral values. Especially in music, the evolution from monophony to polyphony reflects the profound changes in the concepts of emotional expression, collective participation, and harmony in medieval religious music. These art forms pursued the expression of the sacred and contributed to the diversity and development of artistic creation through complex philosophical

and theological reflections.

In addition, this study revisits the traditional cultural label of the “Dark Ages,” pointing out that despite the many challenges of the Middle Ages, such as wars, plagues, and political upheaval, the development of art and thought during this period underwent important cultural and philosophical transformations under the influence of Christianity. This study challenges traditional prejudices by analyzing the interaction between religion and art. It presents the Middle Ages as a period of transmission of religious teachings and an important era of intellectual and artistic innovation.

In summary, the deep intertwining of art and religion in the Middle Ages provides an important perspective for understanding the historical development of Western thought and art. An in-depth exploration of this period’s artistic emotions and aesthetic experiences can help us better understand how Christianity shaped the cultural landscape of the period and laid the foundation for the philosophical and artistic creations of later generations. Medieval art was not only a tool for religious expression but also a profound reflection of the time’s social, cultural, and philosophical thinking, and its influence on the subsequent Renaissance and modern Western thought remains of historical significance that cannot be ignored.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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