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10 The Church triumphant

The thirteenth century

126. A Gothic cathedral: Notre-Dame of Paris. *Built from 1163 to 1250*

WE HAVE JUST COMPARED the art of the Romanesque period with the art of Byzantium and even of the ancient Orient. But there is one respect in which Western Europe always differed profoundly from the East. In the East these styles lasted for thousands of years, and there seemed no reason why they should ever change. The West never knew this

immobility. It was always restless, groping for new solutions and new ideas. The Romanesque style did not even outlast the twelfth century. Hardly had the artists succeeded in vaulting their churches and arranging their statues in the new and majestic manner, when a fresh idea made all these Norman and Romanesque churches look clumsy and obsolete. The new idea was born in northern France. It was the principle of the Gothic style. At first one might call it mainly a technical invention, but in its effect it became much more. It was the discovery that the method of vaulting a church by means of crosswise arches could be developed much more consistently and to much greater purpose than the Norman architects had dreamt of. If it was true that pillars were sufficient to carry the arches of the vaulting between which the other stones were held as mere filling, then all the massive walls between the pillars were really superfluous. It was possible to erect a kind of scaffolding of stone which held the whole building together. All that was needed were slim pillars and narrow 'ribs'. Anything in between could be left out without danger of the scaffolding collapsing. There was no need for heavy stone walls—instead one could put in large windows. It became the ideal of architects to build churches almost in the manner in which we build greenhouses. Only they had no steel frames or iron girders—they had to make them of stone, and that needed a great amount of careful calculation. Provided, however, that the calculation was correct, it was possible to build a church of an entirely new kind; a building of stone and glass such as the world had never seen before. This is the leading idea of the Gothic cathedrals, which was developed in northern France in the second half of the twelfth century.

Of course, the principle of crosswise 'ribs' alone was not sufficient for this revolutionary style of Gothic building. A number of other technical inventions were necessary to make the miracle possible. The round arches of the Romanesque style, for instance, were unsuited to the aims of the Gothic builders. The reason is this: if I am given the task of bridging the gap between two pillars with a semicircular arch, there is only one way of doing it. The vaulting will always reach one particular height, no more and no less. If I wanted to reach higher I should have to make the arch steeper. The best thing, in this case, is not to have a rounded arch at all, but to fit two segments together. That is the idea of the pointed arch. Its great advantage is that it can be varied at will, made flatter or more pointed according to the requirements of the structure.

There was one more thing to be considered. The heavy stones of the vaulting press not only downwards but also sideways, much like a bow which has been drawn. Here, too, the pointed arch was an improvement over the round one, but even so pillars alone were not sufficient to withstand this outward pressure. Strong frames were needed to keep the whole structure in shape. In the vaulted side-aisles this did not prove very difficult. Buttresses could be built outside. But what could be done with the high nave? This has to be kept in shape from outside, across the roofs of the aisles. To do that, the builders had to introduce their

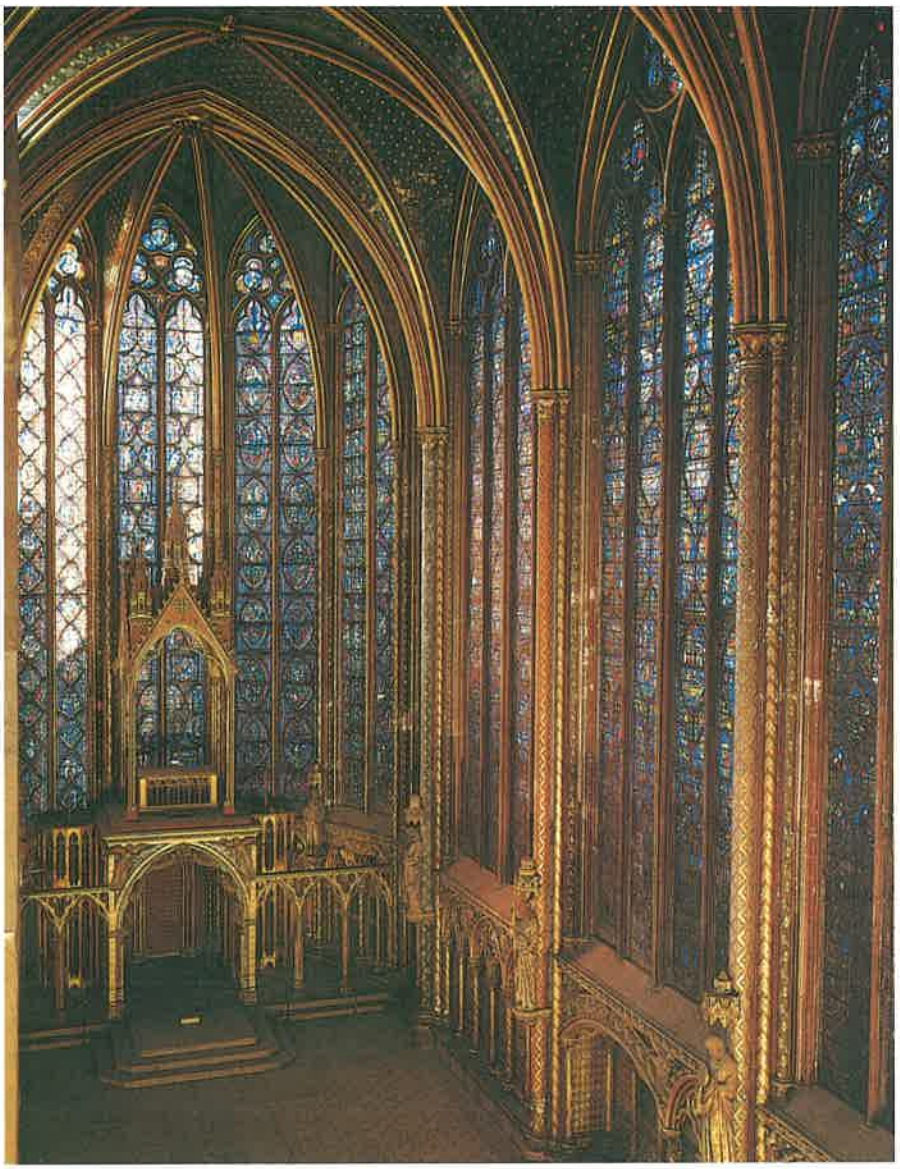
127. Notre-Dame of Paris from the air (*see Fig. 126*). *A view showing the cross form of the building and the 'flying buttresses'*

'flying buttresses', which complete the scaffolding of the Gothic vault (Fig. 127). A Gothic church seems to be suspended between these slender structures of stone as a bicycle wheel, held in shape by its flimsy spokes, carries its load. In both cases it is the even distribution of weight that makes it possible to reduce the material needed for the construction more and more without endangering the firmness of the whole.

It would be wrong, however, to look at these churches mainly as feats of engineering. The artist saw to it that we feel and enjoy the boldness of their design. Looking at a Doric temple (p. 46, Fig. 45) we sense the function of the row of columns which carry the load of the horizontal roof. Standing inside a Gothic cathedral (Fig. 129) we are made to under-

stand the complex interplay of thrust and pull that holds the lofty vault in its place. There are no blank walls or massive pillars anywhere. The whole interior seems to be woven out of thin shafts and ribs; their network covers the vault, and runs down along the walls of the nave to be gathered up by the pillars, which are formed by a bundle of stone rods. Even the windows are overspread by these interlacing lines known as tracery (Fig. 128).

The great cathedrals, the bishops' own churches (cathedra = bishop's throne), of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century were mostly conceived on such a bold and magnificent scale that few, if any, were ever completed exactly as planned. But even so, and after the many alterations

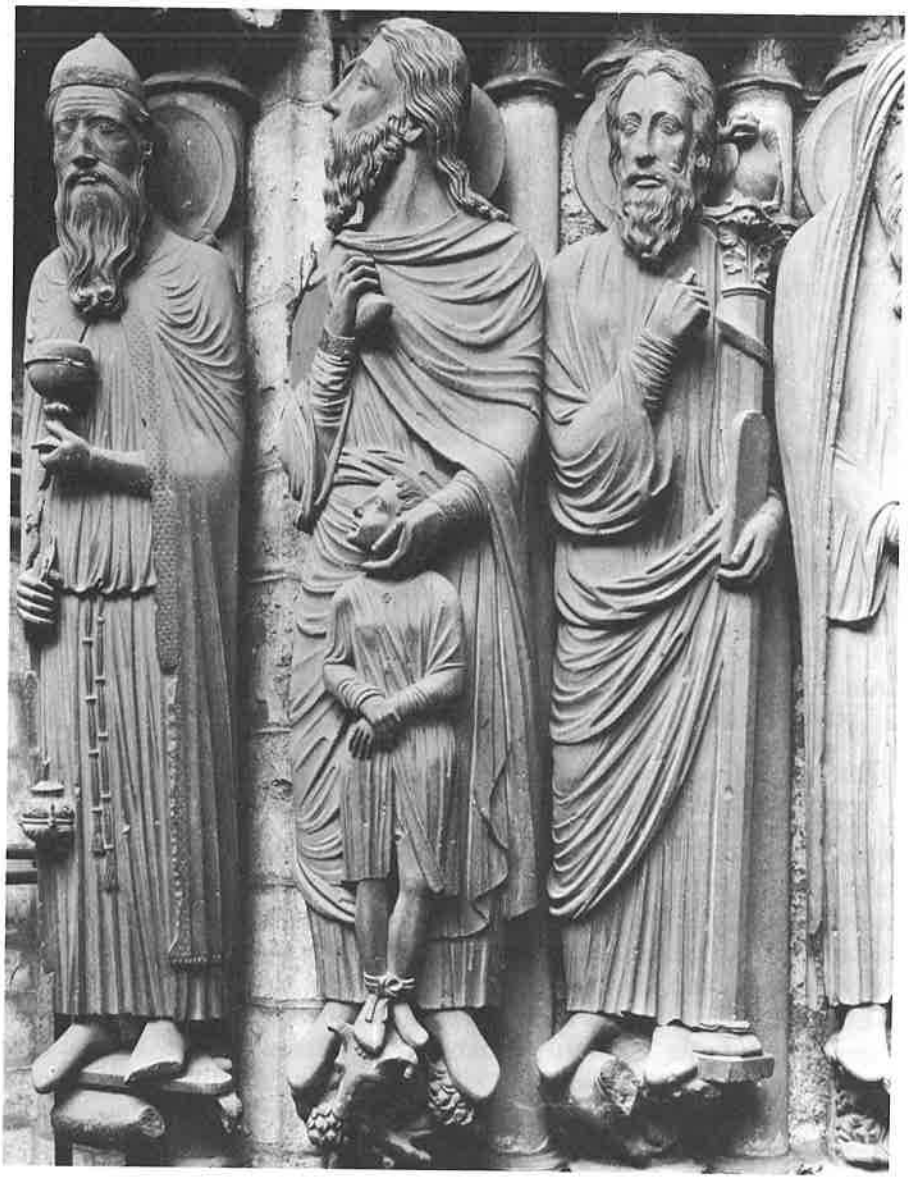


128. Gothic church windows: Sainte-Chapelle, Paris, completed in 1250

129. A Gothic interior: the Cathedral of Amiens. *The nave built by Robert de Luzarches, 1218–36, the apse completed in 1247*

which they have undergone in the course of time, it remains an unforgettable experience to enter these vast interiors whose very dimensions seem to dwarf anything that is merely human and petty. We can hardly imagine the impression which these buildings must have made on those who had only known the heavy and grim structures of the Romanesque style. These older churches in their strength and power may have conveyed something of the 'church militant' that offered shelter against the onslaught of evil. The new cathedrals gave the faithful a glimpse of a different world. They would have heard in sermons and hymns of the Heavenly Jerusalem with its gates of pearl, its priceless jewels, its streets of pure gold and transparent glass (Revelation xxi). Now this vision had descended from heaven to earth. The walls of these buildings were not cold and forbidding. They were formed of stained glass that shone like rubies and emeralds (p. 135, Fig. 124). The pillars, ribs and tracery were glistening with gold. Everything that was heavy, earthly or humdrum was eliminated. The faithful who surrendered himself to the contemplation of all this beauty could feel that he had come nearer to understanding the mysteries of a realm beyond the reach of matter.

Even as seen from afar these miraculous buildings seemed to proclaim the glories of heaven. The façade of Notre-Dame in Paris is perhaps the most perfect of them all (Fig. 126). So lucid and effortless is the arrangement of the porches and windows, so lithe and graceful the tracery of



130. Melchisedek, Abraham and Moses. *From the porch of the northern transept of Chartres Cathedral. Probably begun in 1194*

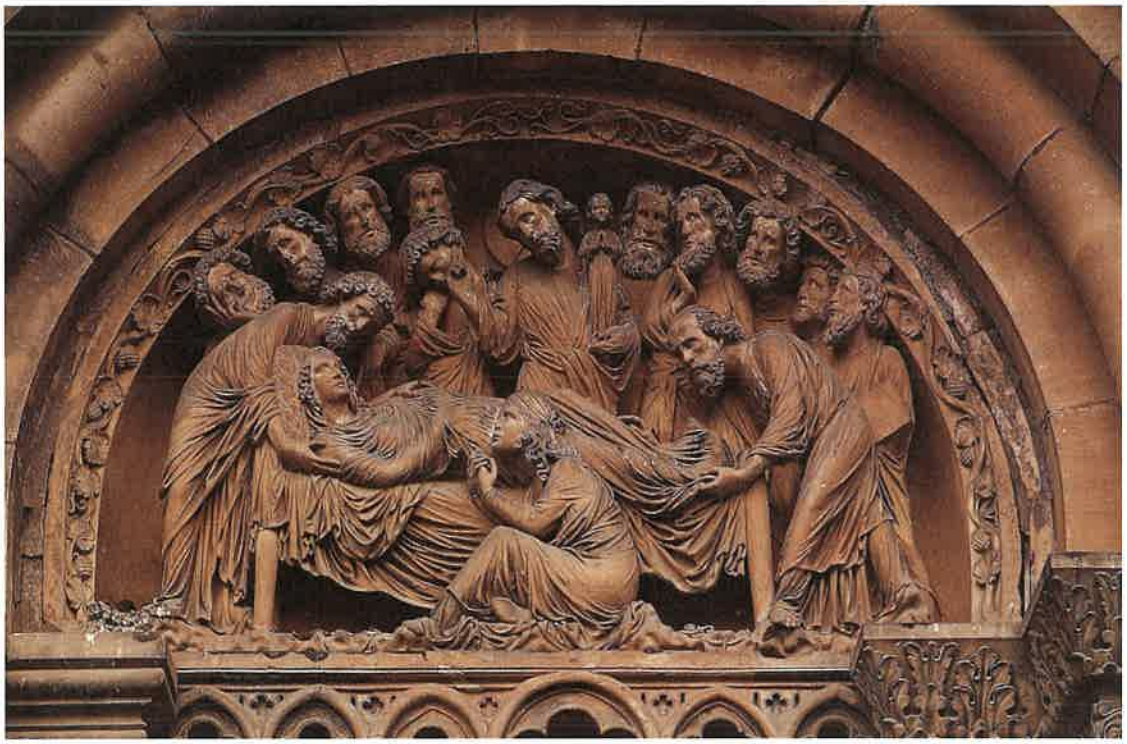
the gallery, that we forget the weight of this pile of stone and the whole structure seems to rise up before us like a mirage.

There is a similar feeling of lightness and weightlessness in the sculptures that flank the porches like heavenly hosts. While the Romanesque master of Arles (p. 129, Fig. 119) made his figures of saints look like solid pillars firmly fitted into the architectural framework, the master who worked for the northern porch of the Gothic cathedral of Chartres (Fig. 130) made each of his figures come to life. They seem to move, and look at each other solemnly, and the flow of their drapery indicates once more that there is a body underneath. Each of them is clearly marked, and should have been recognizable to anyone who knew his Old

Testament. We have no difficulty in recognizing Abraham, the old man with his son Isaac held before him, ready to be sacrificed. We can also recognize Moses, because he holds the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed, and the column with the brazen serpent by which he cured the Israelites. The man on the other side of Abraham is Melchisedek, King of Salem, of whom we read in the Bible (Genesis xiv. 18) that he was 'A priest of the most high God' and that he 'brought forth bread and wine' to welcome Abraham after a successful battle. In medieval theology he was therefore considered the model of the priest who administers the sacraments, and that is why he is marked by a chalice and the censer of the priest. In this way nearly every one of the figures that crowd the porches of the great Gothic cathedrals is clearly marked by an emblem so that its meaning and message could be understood and pondered by the faithful. Taken together they form as complete an embodiment of the teachings of the Church as the works discussed in the preceding chapter. And yet we feel that the Gothic sculptor has approached his task in a new spirit. To him these statues are not only sacred symbols, solemn reminders of a moral truth. Each of them must have been for him a figure in its own right, different from its neighbour in its attitude and type of beauty and each imbued with an individual dignity.

The cathedral of Chartres still largely belonged to the late twelfth century. After the year 1200 many new and magnificent cathedrals sprang up in France and also in the neighbouring countries, in England, in Spain and in the German Rhineland. Many of the masters busy on the new sites had learned their craft while working on the first buildings of this kind, but they all tried to add to the achievements of their elders.

Fig. 131, from the early thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral of Strasbourg, shows the novel approach of these Gothic sculptors. It represents the death of the Virgin. The twelve apostles surround her bed, St Mary Magdalene kneels before her. Christ, in the middle, is receiving the Virgin's soul into His arms. We see that the artist was still anxious to preserve something of the solemn symmetry of the early period. We can imagine that he sketched out the group beforehand to arrange the heads of the apostles around the arch, the two apostles at the bedside corresponding to each other, and the figure of Christ in the centre. But he was no longer content with a purely symmetrical arrangement such as the twelfth-century master of p. 134, Fig. 123, preferred. He clearly wanted to breathe life into his figures. We can see the expression of mourning in the beautiful faces of the apostles, with their raised eyebrows and their intent look. Three of them lift their hands to their faces in the traditional gesture of grief. Even more expressive are the face and figure of St Mary Magdalene, who cowers at the bedside and wrings her hands, and it is marvellous how the artist succeeded in contrasting her features with the serene and blissful look on the face of the Virgin. The draperies are no longer the empty husks and purely ornamental scrolls we see on early medieval work. The Gothic artists wanted to understand the ancient for-



131. The Death of the Virgin. *From the porch of the southern transept of Strasbourg Cathedral. About 1230*

mula for draped bodies, which had been handed down to them. Perhaps they turned for enlightenment to the remnants of pagan stonework, Roman tombstones and triumphal arches, of which several could be seen in France. Thus they regained the lost classical art of letting the structure of the body show under the folds of the drapery. Our artist, in fact, is proud of his ability to handle this difficult technique. The way in which the Virgin's feet and hands and Christ's hand appear under the cloth shows that these Gothic sculptors were no longer interested only in what they represented, but also in the problems of how to represent. Once more, as in the time of the great awakening in Greece, they began to look at nature, not so much to copy it as to learn from it how to make a figure look convincing. Yet there is a vast difference between Greek art and Gothic art, between the art of the temple and that of the cathedral. The Greek artists of the fifth century were mainly interested in how to build up the image of a beautiful body. To the Gothic artist all these methods and tricks were only a means to an end, which was to tell his sacred story more movingly and more convincingly. He does not tell it for its own sake, but for the sake of its message, and for the solace and edification the faithful could derive from it. The attitude of Christ as He looks at the dying Virgin was clearly more important to the artist than skilful rendering of muscles.

In the course of the thirteenth century, some artists went even further in their attempts to make the stone come to life. The sculptor who was given the task of representing the founders of Naumburg Cathedral in

Germany, round about 1260, almost convinces us that he portrayed actual knights of his time (Fig. 132). It is not very likely that he really did—these founders had been dead for many years, and were nothing but a name to him. But his statues of men and women seem to be ready at any moment to step down from the pedestals and to join the company of those vigorous knights and gracious ladies whose deeds and suffering fill the pages of our history books.

132. Ekkehart and Uta. *From the series of 'founders' in the choir of Naumburg Cathedral. About 1260*

133. The Entombment of Christ. *From a Psalter manuscript from Bonmont. Probably painted between 1250 and 1300. Besançon, Bibliothèque Municipale*

To work for cathedrals was the main task of the northern sculptors of the thirteenth century. The most frequent task of the northern painters of that time was still the illumination of manuscripts, but the spirit of these illustrations was very different from that of the solemn Romanesque book pages. If we compare the 'Annunciation' from the twelfth century (p. 133, Fig. 122) with a page from a thirteenth-century Psalter (Fig. 133) we gain a measure of this change. It shows the entombment of Christ, similar in subject and in spirit to the relief from Strasbourg Cathedral (Fig. 131). Once more we see how important it has become to the artist to show us the feeling of his figures. The Virgin bends over the dead body of Christ and embraces it, while St John wrings his hands in grief.

As in the relief, we see what pains the artist took to fit his scene into a regular pattern: the angels in the top corners coming out of the clouds with censers in their hands, and the servants with their strange pointed hats—such as were worn by the Jews in the Middle Ages—supporting the body of Christ. This expression of intense feeling, and this regular distribution of the figures on the page, were obviously more important to the artist than any attempt to make his figures lifelike, or to represent a real scene. He does not mind that the servants are smaller than the holy personages, and he does not give us any indication of the place or the setting. We understand what is happening without any such external indications. Though it was not the artist's aim to represent things as we see them in reality, his knowledge of the human body, like that of the Strasbourg master, was nevertheless much greater than that of the painter of the twelfth-century miniature.

It was in the thirteenth century that artists occasionally abandoned their pattern books, in order to represent something because it interested them. We can hardly imagine today what this meant. We think of an artist as a person with a sketchbook who sits down and makes a drawing from life whenever he feels inclined. But we know that the whole training and upbringing of the medieval artist was very different. He started by being apprenticed to a master, whom he assisted at first by carrying out his instructions and filling in relatively unimportant parts of a picture. Gradually he would learn how to represent an apostle, and how to draw the Holy Virgin. He would learn to copy and rearrange scenes from old books, and fit them into different frames, and he would finally acquire enough facility in all this to be able even to illustrate a scene for which he knew no pattern. But never in his career would he be faced with the necessity of taking a sketchbook and drawing something from life. Even when he was asked to represent a particular person, the ruling king or a bishop, he would not make what we should call a likeness. There were no portraits as we understand them in the Middle Ages. All the artists did was to draw a conventional figure and to give it the insignia of office—a crown and sceptre for the king, a mitre and crozier for the bishop—and perhaps write the name underneath so that there would be no mistake. It may seem strange to us that artists who were able to make such lifelike figures as the Naumburg founders (Fig. 132) should have found it difficult to make a likeness of a particular person. But the whole idea of sitting down in front of a person or an object and copying it was alien to them. It is all the more remarkable that, on certain occasions, artists in the thirteenth century did in fact draw something from life. They did it when they had no conventional pattern on which they could rely. Fig. 134 shows such an exception. It is the picture of an elephant drawn by the English historian Matthew Paris in the middle of the thirteenth century. This elephant had been sent by St Louis, King of France, to Henry III in 1255. It was the first that had been seen in England. The figure of the servant by its side is not a very convincing likeness, though we are given his name, Henricus de Flor. But what is interesting is that in this

134. MATTHEW PARIS: An elephant and its keeper. *Drawn in 1255. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College*

case the artist was very anxious to get the right proportion. Between the legs of the elephant there is a Latin inscription saying: 'By the size of the man portrayed here you may imagine the size of the beast represented here.' To us this elephant may look a little odd, but it does show, I think, that medieval artists, at least in the thirteenth century, were very well aware of such things as proportions, and that, if they ignored them so often, they did so not out of ignorance but simply because they did not think they mattered.

In the thirteenth century, the time of the great cathedrals, France was the richest and most important country in Europe. The University of Paris was the intellectual centre of the Western world. In Italy, which was a land of warring cities, the ideas and methods of the great French cathedral builders, which had been so eagerly imitated in Germany and England, did not at first meet with much response.

It was only in the second half of the thirteenth century that an Italian sculptor began to emulate the example of the French masters and to study the methods of classical sculpture in order to represent nature more convincingly. This artist was Nicola Pisano, who worked in the great seaport and trading centre of Pisa. Fig. 135 shows one of the reliefs of a pulpit he completed in 1260. At first it is not quite easy to see what subject is represented because Pisano followed the medieval practice of combining various stories within one frame. Thus the left corner of the relief is taken up with the group of the Annunciation and the middle with the Birth of Christ. The Virgin is lying on a bedstead, St Joseph is crouching

in a corner, and two servants are engaged in bathing the Child. They seem to be jostled about by a herd of sheep, but these really belong to a third scene—the story of the Annunciation to the Shepherds, which is represented in the top right-hand corner, where the Christ Child appears once more in the manger. But if the scene appears a little crowded and confusing the sculptor has nevertheless contrived to give each episode its proper place and its vivid details. One can see how he enjoyed such touches of observation as the goat in the lower right-hand corner scratching its head with its hoof, and one realizes how much he owed to the study of classical and early Christian sculpture (p. 91, Fig. 82) when one looks at his treatment of heads and garments. Like the master of Strasbourg who worked a generation before him, or like the master of Naumburg who may have been about his age, Nicola Pisano had learned the methods of the ancients to show the forms of the body under the drapery and to make his figures look both dignified and convincing.

Italian painters were even slower than Italian sculptors in responding to the new spirit of the Gothic masters. Italian cities such as Venice were in close contact with the Byzantine Empire and Italian craftsmen looked to Constantinople rather than to Paris for inspiration and guidance (see p. 7, Fig. 8). In the thirteenth century Italian churches were still decorated with solemn mosaics in the 'Greek manner'.

135. NICOLA PISANO: Annunciation, Nativity and Shepherds. *From the marble pulpit of the Baptistery in Pisa. Completed in 1260*

It might have seemed as if this adherence to the conservative style of the East would prevent all change, and indeed the change was long delayed. But when it came towards the end of the thirteenth century, it was this firm grounding in the Byzantine tradition which enabled Italian art not only to catch up with the achievements of the northern cathedral sculptors but to revolutionize the whole art of painting.

We must not forget that the sculptor who aims at reproducing nature has an easier task than the painter who sets himself a similar aim. The sculptor need not worry about creating an illusion of depth through fore-shortening or through modelling in light and shade. His statue stands in real space and in real light. Thus the sculptors of Strasbourg or Naumburg could reach a degree of lifelikeness which no thirteenth-century painting could match. For we remember that northern painting had given up all pretence of creating an illusion of reality. Its principles of arrangement and of story-telling were governed by quite different aims.

It was Byzantine art which ultimately allowed the Italians to leap the barrier that separates sculpture from painting. For all its rigidity Byzantine art had preserved more of the discoveries of the Hellenistic painters than had survived the picture-writing of the dark ages in the West. We remember how many of these achievements still lay hidden, as it were, under the frozen solemnity of a Byzantine painting like p. 99, Fig. 88; how the face is modelled in light and shade and how the throne and the footstool show a correct understanding of the principles of foreshortening. With methods of this kind a genius who broke the spell of Byzantine conservatism could venture out into a new world and translate the lifelike figures of Gothic sculpture into painting. This genius Italian art found in the Florentine painter Giotto di Bondone (1266?–1337).

It is usual to start a new chapter with Giotto; the Italians were convinced that an entirely new epoch of art had begun with the appearance of that great painter. We shall see that they were right. But for all that, it may be useful to remember that in real history there are no new chapters and no new beginnings, and that it detracts nothing from Giotto's greatness if we realize that his methods owe much to the Byzantine masters, and his aims and outlook to the great sculptors of the northern cathedrals.

Giotto's most famous works are wall-paintings or *frescoes* (so called because they must be painted on the wall while the plaster is still *fresh*, that is, wet). In or about the year 1306 he covered the wall of a small church in Padua in northern Italy with stories from the life of the Virgin and of Christ. Underneath he painted personifications of virtues and vices such as had sometimes been placed on the porches of northern cathedrals.

Fig. 136 shows Giotto's figure of Faith, a matron with a cross in one hand, a scroll in the other. It is easy to see the similarity of this noble figure to the works of the Gothic sculptors. But this is no statue. It is a painting which gives the illusion of a statue in the round. We see the foreshortening of the arm, the modelling of the face and neck, the deep shadows in the flowing folds of the drapery. Nothing like this had been

THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT

136. GIOTTO: Faith. *Wall-painting in the Cappella dell'Arena in Padua. Probably completed in 1306*

done for a thousand years. Giotto had rediscovered the art of creating the illusion of depth on a flat surface.

For Giotto this discovery was not only a trick to be displayed for its own sake. It enabled him to change the whole conception of painting. Instead of using the methods of picture-writing he could create the illusion as if the sacred story were happening before our very eyes. For this it was no longer sufficient to look at older representations of the same scene and adapt these time-honoured models to a new use. He rather

followed the advice of the friars who exhorted the people in their sermons to visualize in their mind, when reading the Bible and the legends of the Saints, what it must have looked like when a carpenter's family fled to Egypt or when the Lord was nailed to the cross. He did not rest till he had thought it all out afresh: how would a man stand, how would he act, how would he move, if he took part in such an event? Moreover, how would such a gesture or movement present itself to our eyes?

We can best gauge the extent of this revolution if we compare one of Giotto's frescoes from Padua (Fig. 137) with a similar theme in the thirteenth-century miniature in Fig. 133. The subject is the mourning over the dead body of Christ, with the Virgin embracing her Son for the last time. In the miniature, as we remember, the artist was not interested in representing the scene as it might have happened. He varied the size of the figures so as to fit them well into the page, and if we try to imagine the space between the figures in the foreground and St John in the background—with Christ and the Virgin in between—we realize how everything is squeezed together, and how little the artist cared about space. It is the same indifference to the real place where the scene is happening which led Nicola Pisano to represent different episodes within one frame. Giotto's method is completely different. Painting, for him, is more than a substitute for the written word. We seem to witness the

137. GIOTTO: The Mourning of Christ. *Wall-painting in the Cappella dell'Arena in Padua. Probably completed in 1306*

138. Detail of Fig. 137

real event as if it were enacted on a stage. Compare the conventional gesture of the mourning St John in the miniature with the passionate movement of St John in Giotto's painting as he bends forward, his arms extended sideways. If we try here to imagine the distance between the cowering figures in the foreground and St John, we immediately feel that there is air and space between them, and that they can all move. These figures in the foreground show how entirely new Giotto's art was in every respect. We remember that early Christian art had reverted to the old Oriental idea that to tell a story clearly every figure had to be shown completely, almost as was done in Egyptian art. Giotto abandoned these ideas. He did not need such simple devices. He shows us so convincingly

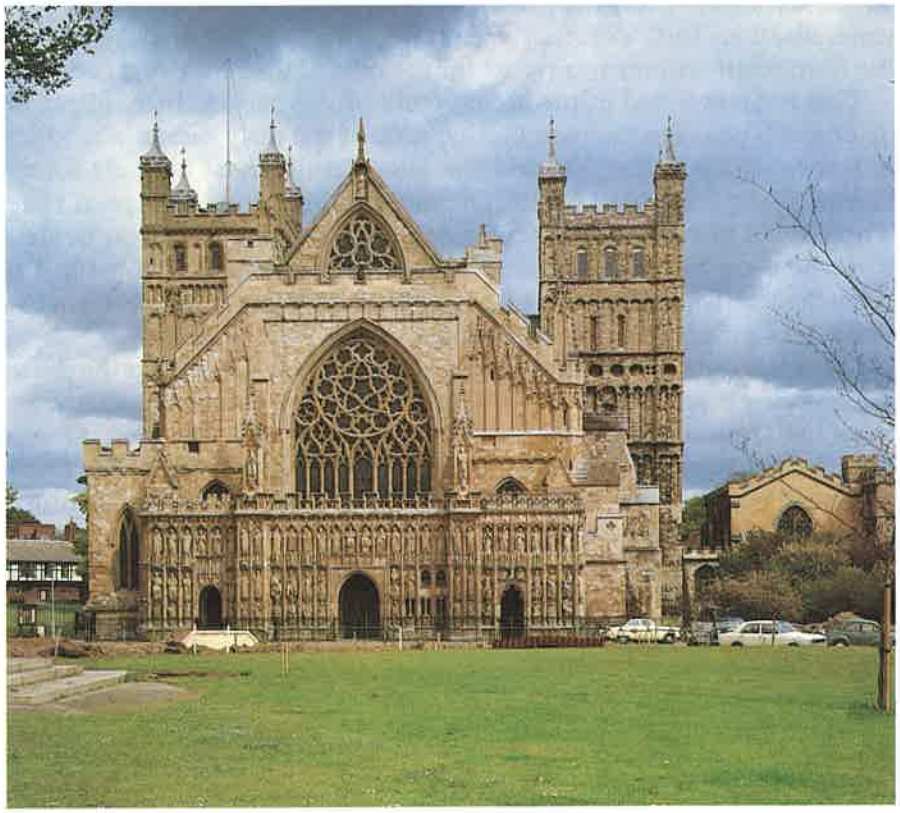
how each figure reflects the grief of the tragic scene that we sense the same grief in the cowering figures whose faces are hidden from us.

Giotto's fame spread far and wide. The people of Florence were proud of him. They were interested in his life, and told anecdotes about his wit and dexterity. This, too, was rather a new thing. Nothing quite like it had happened before. Of course, there had been masters who had enjoyed general esteem, and been recommended from monastery to monastery, or from bishop to bishop. But, on the whole, people did not think it necessary to preserve the names of these masters for posterity. They thought of them as we think of a good cabinet-maker or tailor. Even the artists themselves were not much interested in acquiring fame or notoriety. Very often they did not even sign their work. We do not know the names of the masters who made the sculptures of Chartres, Strasbourg or Naumburg. No doubt they were appreciated in their time, but they gave the honour to the cathedral for which they worked. In this respect too, the Florentine painter Giotto begins an entirely new chapter in the history of art. From his day onwards the history of art, first in Italy and then in other countries also, is the history of the great artists.

139. The King and his architect (with compass and ruler) visiting the building site of a cathedral (King Offa at St Albans). *From an English manuscript of the Life of St Alban probably painted by* MATTHEW PARIS *about 1260. Dublin, Trinity College*

11 Courtiers and burghers

The fourteenth century



140. The 'Decorated' style: the west front of Exeter Cathedral. *About 1350–1400*

THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY had been the century of the great cathedrals, in which nearly all branches of art had their share. Work on these immense enterprises continued into the fourteenth century and even beyond, but they were no longer the main focus of art. We must remember that the world had changed a great deal during that period. In the middle of the twelfth century, when the Gothic style was first developed, Europe was still a thinly populated continent of peasants with monasteries and barons' castles as the main centres of power and learning. The ambition of the great bishops' sees to have mighty cathedrals of their own was the first indication of an awakening civic pride of the towns. But a hundred and fifty years later these towns had grown into teeming centres of trade whose burghers felt increasingly independent of the power of the Church and the feudal lords. Even the nobles no longer lived a life of grim seclusion in their fortified manors, but moved to the

cities with their comfort and fashionable luxury, there to display their wealth at the courts of the mighty. We can get a very vivid idea of what life in the fourteenth century was like if we remember the works of Chaucer, with his knights and squires, friars and artisans. This was no longer the world of the Crusades, and of those paragons of chivalry, which we remember when looking at the founders of Naumburg (Fig. 132). It is never safe to generalize too much about periods and styles. There are always exceptions and examples which would not fit any such generalization. But, with that reservation, we may say that the taste of the fourteenth century was rather for the refined than for the grand.

This is exemplified in the architecture of the period. In England we distinguish between the pure Gothic style of the early cathedrals, which is known as Early English, and the later development of these forms, known as the Decorated Style. The name indicates the change of taste. The Gothic builders of the fourteenth century were no longer content with the clear majestic outline of the earlier cathedrals. They liked to show their skill in decoration and complicated tracery. The west window of Exeter Cathedral is a typical example of this style (Fig. 140).

Churches were no longer the main tasks of the architects. In the growing and prosperous cities many secular buildings had to be designed—town halls, guild halls, colleges, palaces, bridges and city gates. One of the most celebrated and characteristic buildings of this kind is the Ducal Palace of Venice (Fig. 141), which was begun in the fourteenth century, when the power and prosperity of that city were at their height. It shows that this later development of the Gothic style, for all its delight in ornament and tracery, could yet achieve its own effect of grandeur.

141. The Doges' Palace, Venice. *Begun in 1309*

142. The Virgin and Child. *Silver statue dedicated by Joan of Evreux in 1339. Paris, Louvre*

The most characteristic works of sculpture in the fourteenth century are perhaps not those of stone, which were still made in great numbers for the churches of the period, but rather the smaller works of precious metal or ivory, in which the craftsmen of the period excelled. Fig. 142 shows a little silver statue of the Virgin made by a French goldsmith in 1339. Works of this kind were not intended for public worship. Rather were they to be placed into a palace chapel for private prayer. They are not meant to proclaim a truth in solemn aloofness, like the statues of the great cathedrals, but to excite love and tenderness. The Paris goldsmith was thinking of the Virgin as a real mother, and of Christ as a real child, thrusting His hand at His mother's face. He took care to avoid any impression of rigidity. That is why he gave the figure the slight bend—she rests her arm on her hip to support the child, while the head is bent towards Him. Thus the whole body seems to sway slightly in a gentle curve, very much like an S, and Gothic artists of the period were very fond of this motif. In fact the artist who made this statue probably

did not invent either the peculiar posture of Our Lady, or the motif of the child playing with her. In such things he was following the general trend of fashion. His own contribution lay in the exquisite finish of every detail, the beauty of the hands, the little creases in the baby's arms, the wonderful surface of silver and enamel, and, last but not least, the exact proportion of the statue, with its small and graceful head on a long and slender body. There is nothing haphazard in these works of the great Gothic craftsmen. Such details as the drapery falling over the right arm show the infinite care the artist has taken to compose it into graceful and melodious lines. We can never do these works justice if we just pass them by in our museums, and devote no more than a quick glance to them. They were made to be appreciated by real connoisseurs, and treasured as pieces worthy of devotion.

The love of fourteenth-century painters for graceful and delicate details is seen in such famous illustrated manuscripts as the English Psalter known as 'Queen Mary's Psalter'. Fig. 143 shows Christ in the Temple, conversing with the learned scribes. They have put Him on a high chair, and He is seen explaining some point of doctrine with the characteristic gesture used by medieval artists when they wanted to draw a teacher. The Jewish scribes raise their hands in attitudes of awe and astonishment, and so do Christ's parents, who are just coming on to the scene, looking at each other wonderingly. The method of telling the story is still rather unreal. The artist has evidently not yet heard of Giotto's discovery of the way in which to stage a scene so as to give it life. Christ, who was twelve at the time, as the Bible tells us, is minute in comparison with the grown-ups, and there is no attempt on the part of the artist to give us any idea of the space between the figures. Moreover we can see that all the faces are more or less drawn according to one simple formula, with the curved eyebrows, the mouth drawn downwards and the curly hair and beard. It is all the more surprising to look down the same page and to see that another scene has been added, which has nothing to do with the sacred text. It is a theme from the daily life of the time, the hunting of ducks with a hawk. Much to the delight of the man and woman on horseback, and of the boy in front of them, the hawk has just got hold of a duck, while two others are flying away. The artist may not have looked at real twelve-year-old boys when he painted the scene above, but he had undoubtedly looked at real hawks and ducks when he painted the scene below. Perhaps he had too much reverence for the biblical narrative to bring his observation of actual life into it. He preferred to keep the two things apart: the clear symbolic way of telling a story with easily readable gestures and no distracting details, and, on the margin of the page, the slice of real life, which reminds us once more that this is Chaucer's century. It was only in the course of the fourteenth century that the two elements of this art, the graceful narrative and the faithful observation, were gradually fused. Perhaps this would not have happened so soon without the influence of Italian art.

In Italy, particularly in Florence, the art of Giotto had changed the

143. Christ in the Temple; a hawking party. *Page from* Queen Mary's Psalter, *painted in England about 1310. London, British Library*

whole idea of painting. The old Byzantine manner suddenly seemed stiff and outmoded. Nevertheless it would be wrong to imagine that Italian art was suddenly set apart from the remainder of Europe. On the contrary. Giotto's ideas gained influence in the countries north of the Alps, while the ideals of the Gothic painters of the north also began to have their effect on the southern masters. It was particularly in Siena, another Tuscan town and a great rival of Florence, that the taste and fashion of these northern artists made a very deep impression. The painters of Siena had not broken with the earlier Byzantine tradition in such an abrupt and revolutionary manner as Giotto in Florence. Their greatest master of Giotto's generation, Duccio, had tried—and tried successfully—to breathe new life into the old Byzantine forms instead of discarding them altogether. The altar panel of Fig. 144 was made by two younger masters of his school, Simone Martini (1285?–1344) and Lippo Memmi (died 1347?). It shows to what an extent the ideals and the general atmosphere of the fourteenth century had been absorbed by Sienese art. The painting represents the Annunciation—the moment when the Archangel Gabriel arrives from Heaven to greet the Virgin, and we can read his words coming out of his mouth: '*Ave gratia plena*'. In his left hand he

144. SIMONE MARTINI and LIPPO MEMMI: The Annunciation. *Painted in 1333 for an altar in Siena Cathedral. Florence, Uffizi*

holds an olive branch, symbol of peace; his right hand is lifted as if he were about to speak. The Virgin has been reading. The appearance of the angel has taken her by surprise. She shrinks away in a movement of awe and humility, while looking back at the messenger from Heaven. Between the two there stands a vase with white lilies, symbols of virginity, and high up in the central pointed arch we see the dove, symbol of the Holy Ghost, surrounded by four-winged cherubim. These masters shared the predilection of the French and English artists of Figs. 142 and 143 for delicate forms and a lyrical mood. They enjoyed the gentle curves of the flowing drapery and the subtle grace of slender bodies. The whole painting, in fact, looks like some precious goldsmith's work, with its figures standing out from a golden background, so skilfully arranged that they form an admirable pattern. One can never cease to wonder at the way in which these figures are fitted into the complicated shape of the panel; the way in which the angel's wings are framed by the pointed arch to the left, and the Virgin's figure shrinks back into the shelter of the pointed arch to the right, while the empty space between them is filled by the vase and the dove over it. The painters had learned this art of fitting the figures into a pattern from the medieval tradition. We had occasion, earlier, to admire the way in which medieval artists arranged the symbols of the sacred stories so as to form a satisfying arrangement. But we know that they did so by ignoring the real shape and proportion of things, and by forgetting about space altogether. That was no longer the way of the Sienese artists. Perhaps we may find their figures a little strange, with their slanting eyes and curved mouths. But we need only look at some details to see that the achievements of Giotto had by no means been lost on them. The vase is a real vase standing on a real stone floor, and we can tell exactly where it stands in relation to the angel and the Virgin. The bench on which the Virgin sits is a real bench, receding into the background, and the book she holds is not just the symbol of a book, but a real prayer book with light falling on it and with shade between the pages, which the artist must have studied from a prayer book in his studio.

Giotto was a contemporary of the great Florentine poet Dante, who mentions him in his *Divine Comedy*. Simone Martini, the master of Fig. 144, was a friend of Petrarch, the greatest Italian poet of the next generation. Petrarch's fame today rests mainly on the many love-sonnets he wrote for Laura. We know from them that Simone Martini painted a portrait of Laura which Petrarch treasured. We remember that portraits in our sense had not existed during the Middle Ages and that artists were content to use any conventional figure of a man or woman, and to write on it the name of the person it was intended to represent. Unfortunately, Simone Martini's portrait of Laura is lost, and we do not know how far it was a real likeness. We do know, however, that this artist and other masters in the fourteenth century painted likenesses from nature, and that the art of portraiture developed during that period. Perhaps the way in which Simone Martini looked at nature and observed details had some-

145. PETER PARLER THE YOUNGER: Self-portrait *in Prague Cathedral. Between 1379 and 1386*

thing to do with this, for the artists of Europe had ample opportunity of learning from his achievements. Like Petrarch himself, Simone Martini spent many years at the court of the Pope, which was at that time not in Rome but at Avignon in southern France. France was still the centre of Europe, and French ideas and styles had a great influence everywhere. Germany was ruled by a family from Luxemburg who had their residence in Prague. There is a wonderful series of busts dating from this period (between 1379 and 1386) in the cathedral of Prague. They represent benefactors of the church and thus serve the same purpose as the figures of the Naumburg Founders (p. 145, Fig. 132). But here we need no longer be in doubt. These are real portraits. For the series includes busts of contemporaries including one of the artist in charge, Peter Parler the Younger, which is in all probability the first real self-portrait of an artist known to us (Fig. 145).

Bohemia became one of the centres through which this influence from Italy and France spread more widely. Its contacts reached as far as England, where Richard II married Anne of Bohemia. England traded with Burgundy. Europe, or at least the Europe of the Latin Church, was still one large unit. Artists and ideas travelled from one centre to another, and no one thought of rejecting an achievement because it was 'foreign'. The style which arose out of this mutual give-and-take towards the end of the fourteenth century is known among historians as the 'International Style'. A wonderful example of it in England, possibly painted by a

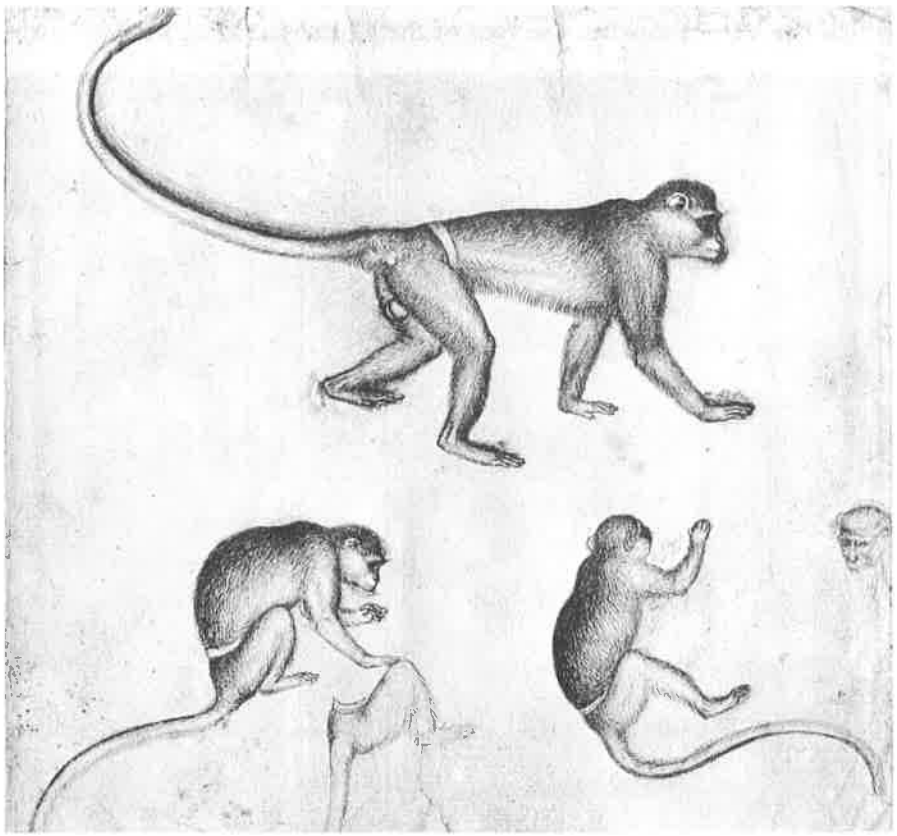
French master for an English king, is the so-called Wilton Diptych (Fig. 146). It is interesting to us for many reasons, including the fact that it, too, records the features of a real historical personage, and that of no other than Anne of Bohemia's unlucky husband—King Richard II. He is seen kneeling in prayer while St John the Baptist and two patron saints of the royal family seem to commend him to the Holy Virgin, who seems to stand on the flowery meadow of Paradise, surrounded by angels of radiant beauty, all of whom wear the badge of the king, the white hart with golden antlers. The lively Christ Child is bending forward as if to bless or welcome the king and assure him that his prayers have been answered. Perhaps something of the ancient magical attitude towards the image still survives in the custom of 'donors' portraits' to remind us of the tenacity of these beliefs which we have found in the very cradle of art. Who can tell whether the donor did not feel somehow reassured in the rough and tumble of life, in which his own part was perhaps not always very saintly, to know that in some quiet church or chapel there was something of himself—a likeness fixed there through an artist's skill, which always kept company with the saints and angels and never ceased praying?

It is easy to see how the art of the Wilton diptych is linked with the works we have discussed before, how it shares with them the taste for beautiful flowering lines and for dainty and delicate motifs. The way in which the Virgin touches the foot of the Christ Child and the gestures

146. St John the Baptist, St Edward the Confessor and St Edmund commend Richard II to the Christ Child. *The Wilton Diptych. About 1400. London, National Gallery*

of the angels, with their long and slender hands, remind us of figures we have seen before. Once more we see how the artist showed his skill in foreshortening, for instance in the posture of the angel kneeling on the left side of the panel, and how he enjoys making use of studies from nature in the many flowers which adorn the paradise of his imagination.

The artists of the International Style applied the same power of observation, and the same delight in delicate and beautiful things, to their portrayal of the world around them. It had been customary in the Middle Ages to illustrate calendars with pictures of the changing occupations of the months, of sowing, hunting, harvesting. A calendar attached to a prayer book which a rich Burgundian duke had ordered from the workshop of the brothers Limbourg (Fig. 148) shows how these pictures from real life had gained in liveliness and observation, even since the time of Queen Mary's Psalter of Fig. 143. The miniature represents the annual spring festival of the courtiers. They are riding through a wood in gay attire, wreathed with branches and flowers. We can see how the painter enjoyed the spectacle of the pretty girls in their fashionable dresses, and how he took pleasure in bringing the whole colourful pageantry on to his page. Once more we may think of Chaucer and his pilgrims; for our artist, too, took pains to distinguish the different types, so skilfully that we almost seem to hear them talking. Such a picture was probably painted



147. PISANELLO: Monkey. *Leaf from a sketch-book. About 1430. Paris, Louvre*

148. PAUL and JEAN DE LIMBOURG: May. *Page from the Très Riches Heures, painted for the Duke of Berry about 1410. Chantilly, Musée Condé*

with a magnifying glass, and it should be studied with the same loving attention. All the choice details which the artist has crowded on to his page combine to build up a picture which looks nearly like a scene from real life. Nearly, but not quite; for when we notice that the artist has closed the background with a kind of curtain of trees, beyond which we see the roof-tops of a vast castle, we realize that what he gives us is not an actual scene from nature. His art seems so far removed from the symbolic way of telling a story which earlier painters had used, that it needs an effort to realize that even he cannot represent the space in which his figures move, and that he achieves the illusion of reality mainly through his close attention to detail. His trees are not real trees painted from nature, but rather a row of symbolic trees, one beside the other, and even

his human faces are still developed more or less out of one charming formula. Nevertheless, his interest in all the splendour and gaiety of the real life around him shows that his ideas about the aims of painting were very different from those of the artists of the early Middle Ages. The interest had gradually shifted, from the best way of telling a sacred story as clearly and impressively as possible, to the methods of representing a piece of nature in the most faithful way. We have seen that the two ideals do not necessarily clash. It was certainly possible to place this newly acquired knowledge of nature at the service of religious art, as the masters of the fourteenth century had done, and as other masters were to do after them; but, for the artist, the task had nevertheless changed. Formerly it was sufficient training to learn the ancient formulas for representing the main figures of the sacred story and to apply this knowledge in ever-new combinations. Now the artist's job included a different skill. He had to be able to make studies from nature and to transfer them to his pictures. He began to use a sketchbook, and to lay up a store of sketches of rare and beautiful plants and animals. What had been an exception in the case of Matthew Paris (p. 148, Fig. 134) was soon to be the rule. A drawing such as Fig. 147, made by the North Italian artist Pisanello (1397?–1455?) only some twenty years after the Limbourg miniature, shows how this habit led artists to study a live animal with loving interest. The public which looked at the artist's works began to judge them by the skill with which nature was portrayed, and by the wealth of attractive details which the artist managed to bring into his pictures. The artists, however, wanted to go one better. They were no longer content with the newly acquired mastery of painting such details as flowers or animals from nature; they wanted to explore the laws of vision, and to acquire sufficient knowledge of the human body to build it up in their statues and pictures as the Greeks and Romans had done. Once their interest took this turn, medieval art was really at an end. We come to the period usually known as the Renaissance.

149. A sculptor at work. *One of* ANDREA PISANO'S *reliefs from the Florentine Campanile. About 1340. Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo*