

Symbolism in medieval art



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EVE IN MEDIEVAL ART

Symbolism in the Medieval period had both theological and social meanings, and the figure of Eve demonstrates how these two kinds of meanings coexisted in a single symbolic form. Medieval symbolism almost always occurred in art that was commissioned by or for the churches. In religious terms, the art of the Middle Ages was meant to instruct people of all classes and to be an aid to prayer and the contemplation of religious ideas. But, as art historians have begun to point out, this art was also a system of visual signs that can be viewed in terms of “role models, social practices, and an encoded value system of social mores” (Alexander 1). In strictly theological terms, the character of Eve, the first woman, was used to symbolize the Fall of the human race. Eve ate the fruit of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” and persuaded Adam to eat it as well (Hall 4). This caused the human race to experience sin and evil. But Eve was also used as a symbol of the nature of women, seen as temptresses trying to lead men into sin. On seeing the figure of Eve as she was presented in Romanesque art, the viewer was reminded of the Fall, but, depending on how she was depicted, the viewer could also be reminded that women are weak-willed, deceitful seducers who are not to be trusted.

The works that will be investigated to support this thesis, is Eve at the tympanum (c. 1125-1150)

The theological and the social meanings of the symbol were not completely separate. The Church also seemed interested in promoting this misogynistic idea of women as a social value. But the meanings were separable, in the sense that, when Eve was used as the basic theological symbol of the Fall, <https://assignbuster.com/symbolism-in-medieval-art/>

the implications about the behavior of women in general did not have to be part of the symbol.

In one sense, Medieval art consisted of a kind of “ sacred writing” in which the identity or uses of certain pictorial elements were widely understood (Mâle, “ Medieval” 267). Mâle gives the example of a halo which, when placed behind a person’s head, indicates sainthood or holiness. In a more complicated example, a naked woman, with or without a snake or a tree, and holding a piece of fruit, would be known to be Eve. These particular attributes would be given to her when the temptation of Eve by Satan (and/or Eve’s temptation of Adam if he was present) was the subject being shown—but Eve could be shown in other situations as well.

Medieval art is also a “ symbolic code,” and, since the earliest times, Christian art had “ spoken in figures, showing men one thing and inviting them to see in it the figure of another” (Mâle, “ Medieval” 272). This means that, once the viewer identified Eve’s Temptation by her attributes of nakedness, the tree, the snake, and the fruit, then the viewer could move on to the understanding of what Eve, in this situation, symbolized. She symbolized the Fall of the human race, which was, because of her actions, condemned to suffering, pain, death, and sin. The human race could not be redeemed until Jesus suffered and died for all humanity and provided the means of obtaining, through the Church, eternal salvation. Thus, in its plain theological use, the figure of Eve was connected to the mission of the Church because her actions were responsible for making the Church necessary. For this reason, Medieval artists (or the people who planned the art of the churches) “ saw the Temptation as a foreshadowing of the Annunciation in <https://assignbuster.com/symbolism-in-medieval-art/>

which the Virgin Mary, as the ‘ New Eve,’ redeemed the sin of the old” Eve (Hall 5).

Petzold provides an example of this symbolic pairing of Eve and the Virgin Mary in Romanesque art. This is the sculpture on the tympanum (c. 1125-1150) over the doorway at the church of Neuilly-en-Donjon in France, where “ three interrelated scenes from the Bible” show the three main archetypes of women: Eve, Mary Magdalen (a reformed adulteress), and the Virgin Mary (Petzold 123). The three women are all shown in relation to a man. In the bottom section of the sculpture (the lintel), Eve turns from the tree to tempt Adam with the fruit, and Mary Magdalen kneels in front of Jesus and “ anoints his feet and wipes them with her hair” (Petzold 123). Above them, the main sculpture shows the Magi worshipping Jesus, who sits on Mary’s lap. Around Mary and Jesus, angels blow horns celebrating Mary’s triumph over sin. Mâle, commenting on this same sculpture, says that symbolically the work meant that “ woman, through whom sin came into the world [Eve] and by whom it was perpetuated [Mary Magdalen], is at last and forever rehabilitated by the Virgin” (Religious 431). The same connection is made in another French church at Anzy-le-Duc, where the main tympanum sculpture shows the worship of the Magi on one side and Eve tempting Adam on the other. In the lower, lintel portion of the sculpture, heaven is shown beneath the Virgin’s side, and hell is shown beneath Eve (Mâle, Religious 432).

These examples make clear Eve’s purely theological importance as a symbol clear. But, as Mâle’s explanation indicated, the Eve-Mary Magdalen-Virgin Mary symbolism had a message about women in general. Women as a group were believed to be prone to sin and to causing sin, especially sexual sin

because they tempted men. St. Bernard (1091-1153), who was one of the most influential and “eloquent orators and writers of his age,” emphasized that Eve’s sin was the sin of all women. He said in a sermon that Eve was “the original cause of all evil, whose disgrace has come down to all other women” (quoted by Kraus 42). But St. Bernard was also a great promoter of the cult of the Virgin Mary, which was becoming very popular in the twelfth century. And, on the connection between Eve and Mary, he said, “Rejoice, Eve, rejoice in such a daughter . . . Opprobrium has been wiped out; never again can woman be accused” (quoted by Mâle, Religious 431). But, in actual practice, though they praised Mary, this did not much change the Church’s view of ordinary women as being sinful like Eve: “In the glorification of the Virgin, it was the Woman-Without-Sin, the non-woman Woman, the anti-Eve that was revered” (Kraus 46). The extent to which Mary was not like a real woman was considered worthy of praise.

Petzold notes that, since this misogynistic view of women was often part of the Church’s message, the symbolism of Eve was expanded so that “images of her in art frequently stress her role as a sexual temptress” (124). In this role, Eve becomes a symbol of the sinful nature of all women. Her role in theologically important events does not require this interpretation at all (although her feminine weakness was always implied by the Bible story). But, in the Middle Ages, this interpretation of Eve was quite popular. Petzold points out the representation of Eve in this character in another Romanesque church in France, the Autun Cathedral. In a fragment of sculpture by Gislebertus from around 1130, Eve is shown naked and nearly lying down, supported only by her knees and one elbow. The position may refer to the

story that God punished her by making her crawl on the ground like the snake who tempted her. But what is most striking about the Autumn Eve is that, at a time when nudity was rare in art, “ the sinuous figure of Eve, with her rounded breasts, is one of the most erotically charged images in Romanesque art,” and she is portrayed “ not so much as [a] sinner but as [a] temptress who invite[s] Adam, and by implication men in general, to commit sin” (Petzold 125).

At this time, the Church was trying to enforce strict celibacy on priests and monks, and stressing the sinfulness of sexual relations and of women in general probably was part of that effort (Petzold 125). But, as Kraus shows, the figure of Eve was the model for the various sculptures of the vice of Unchastity, or Lust, “ which one finds on so many church facades of the twelfth century” and is “ invariably a woman,” while the “ typically ‘ male’ vice, on the other hand, is either Pride or Avarice” (42). The overall impression of women was of their complete inability to resist their sexual urges and their deep desire to draw men into sin. But, while all this did aid the Church in its attempt to induce celibacy in priests, “ it was hardly the kind of teaching calculated to spread affection for the wives and mothers in the audience” (Kraus 44).

This is what is meant by the social meanings of Medieval symbolism. As Alexander explains it, these images “ functioned to provide role models to sections of the Christian community,” and the Church used various artistic means to intervene in the society “ in a variety of contexts” (1). One of the methods that was used was repetition. Mâle pointed out how repetition of images ensured that every member of the potential audience would be

sufficiently familiar with the various figures and their attributes to recognize an Eve with her apple or a saint with her halo (“ Medieval” 267). But, in addition to familiarity with the elements of the stories, the “ visual messages were hammered home by their iconographical similarity until they were taken for granted and thus became an unquestioned part of everyday experience” (Alexander 1).

One of the most shocking images of Eve is found in a series of relief sculptures showing the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Paradise (from the twelfth century, at the French church of Notre-Dame-du-Port, at Clermont-Ferrand). In these sculptures, “ Adam hurls wailing Eve to the ground, kicks her, and drags her by the hair in a series of realistic gestures that” may Maghave been inspired by a religious play, *Le Jeu d’Adam et Eve*, that was performed “ both inside and outside of many churches” (Kraus 44). The connection between such representations of Eve-Woman as deserving of this kind of treatment and an official sanctioning of such behavior by men toward their wives is not difficult to make. Some lines of the Adam and Eve play read, “ Oh, evil woman full of treason / Forever contrary to reason, / Bringing no man good in any season: / Our children’s children to the end of time / Will feel the cruel whiplash of your crime” (quoted by Kraus 44).

St. Bernard’s sermons, a popular play, and repeated artistic representations of Eve as the source of evil all combine to show how this symbol had a clear social meaning as well as a theological meaning. Though the Church was not the only source of such misogyny, it was an active promoter of the feeling,

and the effects of the social meaning of the Eve symbol are, in part, still present today.

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