

ART MARKET

DAMS (L-3)

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*III LESSON – RELIC MARKET
IN THE MIDDLE AGES*

THE MARKET OF RELICS AND ART IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The relic market in the Middle Ages was a widespread and complex phenomenon, with religious, economic and cultural implications. Relics were objects considered sacred because they were associated with the saints, Christ or the Virgin Mary, and could include bones, hair, clothing, instruments of the Passion of Christ or fragments of the cross.

Origins and Diffusion

Relics have become objects of veneration since the first centuries of Christianity. In the Middle Ages, their importance grew enormously, especially in Europe, where relics were often used to consecrate churches and attract pilgrims.



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- **First Class Relics:** body parts of saints, such as bones, blood, hair.
- **Second Class Relics:** personal items of the saints, such as used clothing or tools.
- **Third Class Relics:** objects that have been touched by a first- or second-class relic.

Relic of San Crisostomo, Asola (Mantova)

- **Santo Stefano:** the bones of Santo Stefano were found in the fourth century and transferred to Constantinople. Later, some of these relics were sent to various parts of Europe.
- **San Marco:** the relics of San Marco were stolen from Alexandria in Egypt and transported to Venice in the ninth century, where they became the foundation of San Marco's Basilica.
- **Santiago de Compostela:** the alleged bones of San Giacomo Maggiore were discovered in the ninth century in Spain, and the sanctuary of Santiago de Compostela became one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in medieval Europe.



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The trade in relics was very active. Relics could be bought, sold, exchanged, or donated. This market was often regulated by the Church, which sought to ensure the authenticity of the relics, although forgeries were common. The possession of relics could bring considerable economic benefits to cities and churches. Pilgrimages generated income through the offerings of the faithful, the reception of pilgrims and local trade. A significant example is the cathedral of Chartres, which became a pilgrimage destination thanks to the relic of the veil of the Vergine Maria. The authenticity of the relics was often disputed. The proliferation of fake relics was a recognized problem, so much so that in the IV Concilio Lateranense of 1215, the Church sought to limit the abuse of relics and to guarantee their authenticity.



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- **Eginardo**, biographer of Charlemagne, he recounts in his writing "Translatio et Miracula SS. Marcellini et Petri" as Charlemagne received relics from Rome and distributed them in his territories.

- **Guglielmo di Rubruck**, a Franciscan missionary, described on his trip to Asia in the thirteenth century how the relics were venerated even outside Christian Europe.

The market for medieval relics was a complex and widespread phenomenon, intertwined with the religious practices and economic dynamics of the time. Relics were not only objects of faith, but also instruments of power and wealth for the churches and cities that owned them.



Rome, Catacombs of SS. Marcellino e Pietro

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The art market in the Middle Ages was very different from the modern one. During the Middle Ages, art was primarily commissioned by the Church, nobles, and monarchs, rather than produced for the open market. However, there was still a market for artwork, which included the production, trade, and distribution of artistic artifacts.

Hans Memling, Reliquary of Sant'Orsola, carved wood with pictorial inserts, 1489, Bruges, Memling Museum



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Commissioning: Most of the artworks were commissioned. The Church was the main patron of works of art, which were used to decorate churches, monasteries and cathedrals. Nobles and monarchs commissioned works to show off their wealth and power.

Crafts and Guilds: Medieval artists often belonged to guilds, which regulated artistic production and ensured quality standards. Guilds controlled apprentice training and trade rights.

Monasteries and Scriptoria: In monasteries, monks produced illuminated manuscripts, which were in high demand and expensive. The scriptoria were laboratories where these manuscripts were copied and decorated.

Production Centers: cities such as Florence, Paris and Bruges were important centers of artistic production, where artists and artisans could find customers and collaborators.

Markets and Fairs: Medieval fairs were important places for the sale of works of art and crafts. Here, merchants and artists could exhibit and sell their products.



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- **Illuminated manuscripts:** Illuminated manuscripts were books decorated with miniatures, elaborate borders, and ornate initials. Famous examples include the "Libro di Kells" and the "Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry".
- **Sculptures and Altars:** wood, stone and ivory carvings were common, as were inlaid and decorated altars. An example is the Grünewald altar in Isenheim.
- **Fabrics and tapestries:** Tapestries were highly prized for their ability to tell stories and decorate large halls. The famous Bayeux Tapestry is an example.
- **Painting on Wood and Frescoes:** panel painting and frescoes decorated churches and palaces. Giotto, for example, created famous frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua.
- **Goldsmithing:** The production of sacred objects in gold and silver, often enriched with gems, was a highly developed art. An example is the *Iron Crown*, preserved in the Cathedral of Monza.



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•**Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337):** Cappella degli Scrovegni (1305)

•**Simone Martini e Lippo Memmi (1284-1344):** Annunciation (1333)

•**Claus Sluter (1340-1405):** Pozzo di Mosé nella certosa di Champmol (1395)

•**Hubert e Jan van Eyck (1390-1441):**
Polyptych of Agnello Mistico (1426-1432)

Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, Annunciation with Sant'Ansano e Santa Massima, 1333, tempera on panel, Firenze, Uffizi (già cattedrale di Siena)



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- **Merchants and Shops:** i mercanti d'arte medievali fungevano da intermediari tra artisti e committenti. Le botteghe erano luoghi dove gli artisti lavoravano e vendevano le loro opere.
 - **Exports:** medieval works of art were exported to other regions of Europe, contributing to the spread of artistic styles.
 - **Contracts and Payments:** Contracts between artists and clients were detailed and specified materials, techniques and delivery times. Payments could be made in cash or in kind.
- The art market in the Middle Ages was strongly influenced by the patronage of the Church and the nobles, with production regulated by guilds. Despite the lack of an open market as we know it today, there were still forms of trade and distribution that allowed artists to sell their works. The quality and variety of works of art produced in this period bear witness to the cultural richness of the Middle Ages.



Monza, *Iron Crown*