

“THE ART OF THE COURT” IN *THE LONG MIDDLE AGES* – A STRING OF RENAISSANCES

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From Late Antiquity to the Renaissance, forms and ideas of Antiquity were repeatedly used in monumental arts, in arts and crafts (along with all artistic forms such as literature, music along with philosophy...). It seems that Antiquity, not only Classical Antiquity, but mere Christian Antiquity, was never neglected or forgotten to be reinvented in the period we call the Renaissance. We can really enumerate so many renaissances from the 4th to the 15th century, all of them being part of the arts of the elites – the art of the court. In this paper, I am trying to affirm the term of court art as the carrier of numerous medieval renaissances in European art of the Middle Ages.

Key words: *Renaissance and renaissances, Late Antiquity, Middle Ages, art of the court*

The last book Jacques Le Goff has written, *Must we divide history into periods?* (Faut-il vraiment découper l’histoire en tranches?), can be perceived as a sort of “ego-histoire”, so cherished lately by the French, or as a sort of testament - the legacy of Jacques Le Goff, a great historian who dealt with the Middle Ages all his life. In any case, it is an intriguing book. One of its main goals, stated already in the Preface was to “examine” the alleged novelty of the Renaissance in relation to the Middle Ages”.¹

Using the term *a long Middle Ages*, as Le Goff did, including the period we call Renaissance, we, art historians, face the problem of jumping over the questions of periodizations, the questions of style in arts, the questions of terminology.² Was then Le Goff right trying to avoid dividing history into periods? The answer is of course ambiguous.

To understand his position in the matter, let us start with the final passage of J. Le Goff’s book: a “true” historical period usually lasts a long time. It is not free of change, of course, because history never stands still. As it evolves, it experiences renaissances, more or less great, more or less brilliant. These rebirths often depend on the past, for they grow out of a certain nostalgic fascination felt by the people of a particular time. But this past is a peculiar sort of inheritance. It is what makes it possible to leave one period behind and leap forward to the next.³

If we consider this statement true, or nearest to the truth, we should try to show how this subdivision of *a long Middle Ages* functions in art history. From the point of view of a historian, Le Goff has no doubts. He explains it treating the historiography of the period, as follows.

¹ J. LE GOFF, *Must We Divide History into Periods?*, Translated by M. B. DeBevoise, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, p. x.

² I not trying here a thorough analysis of J. Le Goff’s book. For the purpose of this paper I am just extracting a few of his points that suit the topic I am dealing with.

³ J. LE GOFF, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 112.

The first attempts at periodization happen during the 14th and 15th centuries, at the end of the Middle Ages, and, the Middle Ages where the first period to actually be defined – curiously, as Le Goff writes, antiquity has not been marked of as a separate period, rather signified the condition of aging. And, in the 14th and 15th century, a growing number of poets and writers of mostly Italian origins wanted to mark an old world which they have left behind, which they have, in a pejorative way, called “middle age” (*media aetas*) that stands between the ideal age of art and culture and themselves.⁴ This notion of the dull and dark middle ages caught on in other parts of Europe and, it was not until the romanticism movement in the first half of the 19th century when the Middle Ages became a period of a certain radiance and mystery. However, this newly found interest was based on the earlier presumptions and connotations, although now they have gained a certain appeal. Misconceptions stayed misconceptions, regardless of their positivity. The Middle Ages remained the dark period, a period of obscurity, a period between the two brilliant worlds of antiquity and modernity.

The idea that there existed a previous era from which Middle Ages came forth, the age of brilliance and learning that was a model and a source of nostalgia for the medieval intellectuals, did not arise before the 16th century.⁵ Before explaining his own views on the relationship between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, Le Goff gives an overview of the most important publications on this subject, from Burckhardt to contemporary historians. To me, an art historian, the most interesting is his critique of Erwin Panofsky (to whom I will return later), in his claims that before the great period of Renaissance, there were forerunners, “renascences” with a small *r*. Le Goff dismisses completely the idea of the Renaissance as a separate period, defining it instead as the last renaissance of the long Middle Ages, hereby agreeing with Panofsky’s idea of more than one Renaissance, but reversing it completely.⁶

Le Goff continues to argue that the culture of antiquity was carried on and looked up to during the Middle Ages; moreover, the Middle Ages were more Latinized than the Renaissance and the culture of reading and writing was more common than in antiquity. He concludes that: “no fundamental changes occurred in the sixteenth century, nor indeed at any time before the middle of the eighteenth century, that would justify our marking off the Middle Ages from a new and different period, the Renaissance.”⁷ Moreover, Le Goff concludes his “testament” by stating that the periodization of history is necessary, as history evolves and to explain its events, we require a combination of continuity and discontinuity, but we have to bear in mind that periods are usually long and marked by phases of significant change – and the long Middle Ages had many sub-periods, called renaissances.⁸

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Panofsky has also, more than half a century ago, raised his doubts about the traditional periodization of history, stating that we should probably never agree as to precisely when and where one period or “megaperiod” (as he calls classical, medieval, renaissance and modern periods) stops and another starts. The characterization of periods must be “carefully qualified according to time and place and must be constantly refined according to the progress of scholarship.”⁹ Panofsky, interestingly, compares a period to a human individual with a distinct physiognomy who, although we cannot say in

⁴ J. LE GOFF, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 14.

⁵ J. LE GOFF, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 18.

⁶ J. LE GOFF, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 58.

⁷ J. LE GOFF, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 79.

⁸ J. LE GOFF, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 115.

⁹ E. PANOFSKY, *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art*, 2nd edition, Westview Press, 1964, p. 3.

what moment did his life begin or end, when does he transition from a child to an adult, how many of his characteristics are inherited from his mother or his father, we can definitely distinguish him from other individuals and “form an impression of his total and unique personality”.¹⁰

However, Panofsky definitely recognizes the period of the Renaissance with a capital *R* as unique and distinguishable from “renascences”, as he calls them, with a small *r*. A splendid writer, he illustrated his vision of the two periods by stating that: “The Middle Ages had left antiquity unburied and alternately galvanized and exorcised its corpse. The Renaissance stood weeping at its grave and tried to resurrect its soul. And in one fatally auspicious moment it succeeded.”¹¹

Panofsky does emphasize an interesting fact, however, when he says that the art of the Renaissance and its connection to the Middle Ages was *defined* by the elites.¹² In his critique of Vasari, he claims that, although today we have a more clear view of the period, the leading men of the Renaissance, in their infatuation with classical antiquity, could not help but to regard the period between them and the ideal age as dull and dark. Here, Panofsky states the fact that is later repeated by Le Goff, which forms the core of the problem of the periodization of stylistic periods – the fact that *style* is created, disseminated and terminated by the elite circles in relatively narrow geographical spaces and does not really coincide with the chronology set by historians.

* * *

Panofsky’s book has left a lasting impression on me when I have read it for the first time, then only an art history student to whom the works of this great art historian were one of the canons of our profession. However, I could never agree with his view of the relations between the Middle Ages and antiquity, and the illustration of the medieval period galvanizing and exorcizing the corpse of antiquity. It seemed certainly too strong and too pejorative.

As I have continued my professional path in the academia, during my research and many scientific challenges I have faced, the idea of medieval renaissances and their different aspects was forming in my mind, and I was continuously drawn to that subject, speaking of it several times¹³ (although never publishing those thoughts). Finally, in 2009 I dedicated the whole colloquium of the International Research Centre for Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages to the medieval renaissances.¹⁴ The results headed towards resolving (globally or partially) the problems of renewal, revival, reflexes and, on the other hand, the *Kunstwollen* opposed to the will of the commissioners. The approach common to all of the presented papers, with various topics and various methodologies used to investigate them, was in the insistence on research done in diachrony from the 4th to the 15th century, the research in “*the longue durée*”; the approach that I cherished long before it became the norm, following of course the legacy of Fernand Braudel. Today we know that without this perspective we cannot completely understand and evaluate the Middle Ages.¹⁵

To undertake this colossal task, we need to start with chronology and terminology. Are we happy with the periodization of *the Long Middle Ages*: Late Antiquity, early middle ages, central middle

¹⁰ E. PANOFSKY, op. cit. (n. 9), p. 4.

¹¹ E. PANOFSKY, op. cit. (n. 9), p. 113.

¹² E. PANOFSKY, op. cit. (n. 9), p. 8.

¹³ I have first spoken about medieval Renaissances at the colloquium *Renesansa i renesanse u umjetnosti Hrvatske*, Dani Cvita Fiskovića, Orebić, 2003 (Renaissance and Renaissances in Croatian Art), widening my approach in the lecture *The Art of the Court from Late Antiquity to the Romanesque – perpetual Renaissances*, held at the Institute for Art History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and Arts, Bratislava, on April the 27th, 2011.

¹⁴ The proceedings are published in the 16th volume of *Hortus Artium Medievalium* (2010).

¹⁵ M. JURKOVIĆ, *Quo vadis Late Antiquity? Quo vadis Middle Ages?*, *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 25/1, 2019., pp. 137-139.

ages, late middle ages, the Renaissance; or, with the stylistic differentiation and terminology – early Christian or late antiquity; early Middle Ages or preromanesque or Carolingian (with all of the previous: Merovingian, Lombard, Visigoth, early Byzantine...); Ottonian or premier art roman or proto-romanico; Romanesque; Gothic. Are we happy with their chronology or is it in constant changing? Well, my opinion is, to start dealing with those problems we need to come to a consensus of what each of the denominations really means; if we do not, I believe that we are witnessing a parallel life and interpretation of not two or three different Middle Ages, but hundreds of them.

The next problem that jumps out from our “stylistic drawers” is that we are always able to find out the common denominator for the average artistic practice from a certain period – and then we call it a style -, but exceptions always exist. And when we start a thorough analysis, we always become aware of the fact that the only different (or outstanding) works of art (scaling from architecture to arts and crafts of a certain style), are those commissioned by the wealthiest and the mightiest. And here I completely agree with Le Goff and Panofsky: style is created, disseminated and terminated by the elites as they implicated; but let us improve those thoughts. Indeed, it is my belief that we can call these exceptions “the art of the court”, and it is a *terminus technicus* that I would like to introduce here. It is of course nothing new, it has been used many times, but I would like to make of it a paradigm to define processes evident on a regular basis in different times.

To do so, first we need to enumerate the medieval renaissances, see how many are detected until now and what exactly defines them. It is of course a task for a whole book, not a brief paper. Therefore, I will here use just a few examples to illustrate my point.¹⁶ In enumerating the medieval renaissances the list (at least those that are already approved) becomes very long (Renaissance of Constantine, Sixt’s renaissance, Justinian’s renaissance, or the golden age of Byzantium as it was often called, Liutprand’s renaissance, Carolingian renaissance, Ottonian renaissance, the renaissance of the 11th century or the Gregorian renaissance or the premier art roman, the renaissance of the 12th century, the Gothic renaissance or the Gothic revolution, the Style 1200, to enumerate just the most evident and discussed ones) and so on. It seems finally that a renaissance is emerging every seventy – eighty years.

Who are the carriers, the protagonists of those renaissances? It is, I believe, the most important question to develop, because, as Panofsky and Le Goff had already stated, it was the decision makers, the educated elites that were financing and dictating the fashions of a certain period. Or were they not? Is it true for all periods? The actors were never the same if we consider different periods in the *longue durée*. Let us take into consideration only the examples of the 12th century and the Renaissance. For example in the 12th century, it was not the creators or the artists, but the decision makers who themselves found men capable to reproduce in reality the new order: “the responsibility of the decision maker was to choose the artist and, by that, to impose on him his own sensibility, more precisely – *style*.”¹⁷

Therefore, we should now follow Panofsky in his conclusion that we should constantly refine the characterisation of periods according to the progress of scholarship. He, as an intelligent scholar, clearly stated that scholarship evolves, so why are we still taking his own accounts, or statements of anyone else as a given? So, as he has given us the permission to evolve our thinking, let us just do it. Le Goff did it and countered Panofsky’s thesis with good arguments. Now we are

¹⁶One of the results of the project should be the analysis of these renaissances. This work has been fully supported by the “Research Cooperability“ Program of the Croatian Science Foundation funded by the European Union from the European Social Fund under the Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources 2014-2020, within the project GLOHUM.

¹⁷A. E. BRANDENBURG - M. JURKOVIĆ, *L’artiste a la Renaissance, La Renaissance en Croatie*, exhibition catalogue, 2004, p. 17.



*Fig. 1. What is such a beauty doing in a small town if not because of political decision
(Basilica of Bishop Euphrasius, mid-6th century)*

going to take into account the point on which they both agree, and, - I am here repeating myself - they agreed on the fact that style is created, disseminated and terminated by elite circles. Let us use just a few examples:

Is the Golden Age of Justinian, the flourishing of building projects adorned with richly ornamented architectural sculpture, liturgical furnishings, all following the patterns set in Constantinople, visible on the astonishing projects such as SS. Sergius and Bacchus and, of course, Hagia Sophia, communicating to us a new style in arts or a will of the state policy? I will not elaborate here in detail the main stylistic parameters of the arts and architecture of Justinian's age, all the more so as the artistic production of this period has been the subject of a vast number of studies and is standing out from the rest of the production typical of the Late Antique Mediterranean, which is why it has earned in historiography a new term: early Byzantine art.¹⁸ However, does the art commissioned from the centres of the Eastern Roman Empire really define a completely new style? Justinian's commissions on a grand scale encompassed the whole of his vast and renewed Roman Empire with distinctive features, such as the central plan churches with a double-shell system or the typical impost capitals (and other works of sculpture) done in imperial workshops. But I cannot stress enough the clear political agenda of the unification of the Christian Roman world that Justinian was trying to achieve, that connected the far away areas, from Crimea to Iberian Peninsula. The elites of those periods, such as Maximian in Ravenna, Euphrasius in Parenzo (Poreč) (Fig. 1) were stating their political affiliations by adopting certain (not all) features

¹⁸ A. GRABAR, *L'âge d'or de Justinien: de la mort de Théodose à l'Islam*, Gallimard, 1966.



Fig. 2. Examples of Liutprand's renaissance and its afterlife. Are these examples of the art of the 8th century, the court art of the 8th century and to what style do they belong? (Ciborium from Valpolicella, Ciborium of Calixtus, Ciborium of bishop Mauritius in Novigrad)

that were fashionable in the centres of the Empire.¹⁹ The rest of the Mediterranean world just carries on with the traditional ways that we have labelled early Christian or Late Antique (talking about the period, and unfortunately, not having a real denomination for the style). Moreover, every art historian is embarrassed with the need of labelling the outstanding works of art, inventing terms like the Golden Age of Justinian, following Grabar,²⁰ early Byzantine, as many would want, and so on.

Choosing another example – the Liutprand's renaissance of the 8th century, topic dear to Nikola Jakšić, to whom I dedicate these thoughts, the *Kunstwollen* is completely different.²¹ This renaissance develops in circumstances when relatively wealthy and educated Lombard elite wants to affirm its presence on the territory of the former Western Roman Empire and to express their own *romanitas*. One example will suffice to explain my point: the ciborium from Valpolicella and the ciborium of patriarch Calixtus. They have represented a problem for scholars because they did not enter any of the established "stylistic drawers". They are not pre-Romanesque (in the meaning Spanish and Croatsians define the period lasting from the late 8th until the end of the 10th century), nor Carolingian (as North-western Europe defines it); they are earlier, not belonging to any known style, because we cannot today accept the term Lombard art. Is it Late Antiquity or is it something new? Is it a revival of Christian Antiquity? In my point of view, it is neither (Fig. 2). These (and other) works of art are a delicate remembering of the elite – the commissioners – in their struggle to forge their own name and their own continuity and their own identity.

¹⁹ M. JURKOVIĆ - P. KRLEŽA, „Adrio-Byzantinism” and/or Byzantine Influence on Croatian Cultural Heritage – a reconsideration, in: *Voprosy vseobščej istorii arhitektury / The Questions of the History of World Architecture*, (ed.) Armen Yu. Kazaryan, 10/1, Nestor-Istorija, Moskva - Sankt-Peterburg, 2018, pp. 104-120.

²⁰ M. JURKOVIĆ - P. KRLEŽA, Terminologies at Stake: Is the Time of Justinian I Early Byzantine, the Golden Age of the Byzantine Empire, or Merely Late Antiquity?, *Third International Conference on Byzantine and Medieval Studies (CBMS)*, Nicosia Municipal Multipurpose Centre, 17-19 January 2020.

²¹ We have both written several times about this topic but the most relevant is: N. JAKŠIĆ, *Riflessi della “rinascenza liutprandea” nei centri urbani della costa Adriatica orientale*, *Hortus Artium Medievalum*, 16, 2010, pp. 17-26.

The afterlife of Liutprand's renaissance is embedded in what we call pre-Romanesque style (not in every country, with different meanings in different countries) or Carolingian (meaning only the art of the Empire), but difficulties always emerge when we need to elaborate in detail. The fact is that after the conquest of the Lombard kingdom by Charlemagne, new ideas from the Carolingian state expanded to the conquered areas, but the fact is also that the conquered centres gave a huge input into what we now call Carolingian art.²²

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Starting to make my points in this brief account of the long Middle Ages, I would like to deal with three main issues of interest. The first is why are the medieval renaissances emerging every seventy-eighty years. The second is can we connect those renaissances to a term that is very suitable to me, "the art of the court", and third, how does this art match the stylistic terminology that we today have. Will the answer be that the styles as we have learned about and worked on really do exist or not?

The answer to the first question is fairly easy to provide. It is the state of the art at the moment. I am pretty sure that in ten years from now more medieval renaissances will be invented and we will end up with a new renaissance practically every thirty-forty years; will we end up with renaissances matching every human generation? This has, of course, nothing to do with art history, but art history needs to take into account the everyday growing list of exceptions to what we call a style. This connects us to the second question, the defining of the existence of "the art of the court", which is never matching our conception of a style, being always an exception.

Why is that so? The answer, to me at least, is obvious – the power, which the members of the elite circles hold is asserted in subtle ways, expressed through the works of art and architecture. Why it is always slightly different from the rest of the production while in the meantime bearing the basic characteristics of a period or style? The answer is that there is always the reflection on Antiquity. Not the classical one but the Christian one.

To summarize all that has been said, I can, probably boldly, state that style in art, as it is perceived in a traditional way set in 19th century, does not exist. What we can speak of when we try to determine the parameters of architectural and artistic production of a certain period in a certain location is the rhythms of ideas, innovations, traditions – or, plainly, fashions that can be seen as global ideas. However, anomalies from these established rhythms do exist and can be traced on the examples of the commissions from highest circles – courts, such as the Palatine Chapel in Aachen, which used to form an integral part of Charlemagne's palace, the oratory of Theodulf in Germigny-des-Prés, the abbey church of Fulda – or earlier, Constantine's octagonal church in Antioch, his Holy Apostles in Constantinople, Justinian's SS. Sergius and Bacchus and Hagia Sophia.

I am very willing to consider art history not as a succession of styles, but as a succession of renaissances generated by the elites, for the long Middle Ages always repeating and recreating Christian Antiquity.

²²M. JURKOVIĆ, *Forms as Signs of Representation of Power: Carolingian Transmission of Longobard Architectural Models. The Case of Istria, u: Teodolinda. I Longobardi all'alba dell'Europa*, (ed.) Gabriele Archetti, Centro studi longobardi. Convegno 2, Milano - Spoleto, 2018, pp. 545-572.

“Dvorska umjetnost” u dugom srednjem vijeku – niz renesansi

Kada je, ne tako davno, Jacques Le Goff objavio svoju zadnju knjigu, svojevrsan testament, ona u prvom naletu nije polučila velik interes znanstvenika zbog svoga pomalo kontroverznog sadržaja. Le Goff je naime finom, minucioznom razradom problema pokazao – dakako kao svoje osobno viđenje – kako ono razdoblje u povijesti koje zovemo renesansa ne bi trebalo biti početak novog doba, već kraj jednog starog – srednjeg vijeka. Le Goff je u svoj tekst uključio kritičku misao u odnosu na teze iznesene u knjizi *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, velikog povjesničara umjetnosti Erwina Panofskog.

Čitajući Panofskoga još kao student – a knjiga je bila jedan od zakona povijesti umjetnosti onog vremena – nekako se s njezinim glavnim tezama nisam slagao. Stoga sam desetljećima posebno odvajao tekstove i misli o srednjovjekovnim renesansama, čekajući da sazriju. Sazrijevale su postupno, iznesene u dva navrata, jednom lokalno, na simpoziju *Dani Cvita Fiskovića*, a drugi put predavanjem pri Slovačkoj akademiji znanosti i umjetnosti. Ni jedno ni drugo nisam objavio jer još uvijek nisam bio zadovoljan rezultatima. Budući da smo upravo u tijeku provođenja projekta *GLOHUM- Globalni humanizmi: novi pogledi na srednji vijek (300.-1600.)*, čini se da je vrijeme sazrelo da se počne ozbiljnije istraživati problem, ne samo na teorijskoj osnovi. I ništa mi nije draže nego posvetiti ovaj tekst svom dragom prijatelju Nikoli Jakšiću, jednom od ključnih suradnika ovog projekta, znanstvenika koji je u svojoj karijeri višekratno propitivao srednjovjekovne renesanse.

Vratimo se temi. Akumulirajući ne samo znanja dobivena iščitavanjem obimne literature, a u stvarnosti upravo suprotno, gledajući spomenike *in vivo*, stvarajući u glavi imaginaran muzej spomenika u dugom trajanju, učinilo mi se ključnim sljedeće (a što sam već iznio na dva navedena simpozija): stilovi ne postoje onako kako su zamišljeni i definirani u vrijeme definiranja, uglavnom u 19. stoljeću, nego u umjetnosti postoje isključivo ritmovi ideja, inovacija i tradicija koje se isprepliću. Ono što danas prepoznajemo kao stilove i koje tradicionalno imenujemo, zapravo je samo moda jednog vremena i može proći kao globalna ideja. Međutim, unutar svakog od tih tako lijepo definiranih stilova pronalaze se anomalije, a te anomalije su uvijek i baš uvijek rezultat najjačih, najvećih investicija. Dakle, rezultat su volje pripadnika elita (crkvenih, društvenih...), koje god one bile.

Ako se prati samo ono što bih želio nazvati “dvorskom umjetnosti”, dakle, umjetnost koju financiraju, žele i konzumiraju pripadnici najviših elita, onda se svaki put uredno vidi kako ta umjetnička djela (od arhitekture do umjetničkog obrta, a i svih drugih umjetničkih vrsta), makar se dijelom i uklapaju u opće trendove onoga što zovemo stil, imaju svoj vlastiti razvojni put i svoju vlastitu prepoznatljivost.

U tekstu se razglaba, dakle, o nizu renesansi koje počinju s Konstantinovom i završavaju s renesansom u punom značenju te riječi, a pokazuje se nekoliko činjeničnih stanja: u dvorskoj umjetnosti antika nikad nije zanemarena. Ona je uvijek prisutna, a ta antika nije klasična nego ranokršćanska antika.

Ključne riječi: renesansa i renesanse, kasna antika, srednji vijek, “dvorska umjetnost”