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By Janetta Rebold Benton

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The Middle Ages have received their name based on the impression of a relative lack of progress and productivity in the length of time between antiquity and the Renaissance. Despite the early widespread belief that these were "Dark Ages", the art that remains testifies to a devout and creative people, more innovative than often credited. Unlike contemporary art practice when pieces are meant to be displayed in a museum or gallery, art in the Middle Ages was almost exclusively commissioned by the church. As a significant percentage of the population was illiterate, Middle Ages art became necessary for didactic purposes. Windows can be organized to relate biblical narratives such as the crucifixion or last judgment. Though the Middle Ages neither begin nor end neatly at any particular date, art historians generally classify medieval art into the following periods: Early Medieval Art, Romanesque Art, and Gothic Art. Early Medieval Art. Mosaics on the floor of The Torcello Cathedral in Venice, Italy. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, it was very expensive to commission a work of art or architecture, which made it accessible only to large institutions, like the Church, or the wealthiest of patrons. As time went on, however, a considerable number of pieces could be found in small villages. The period as a whole lacked the knowledge and resources necessary to preserve older works, and the Renaissance and Baroque periods that followed did little to help.