

# The “School” of Saint Denis and the French Craftsmen of the Twelfth Century from the Writing of Émile Mâle

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**ABSTRACT.** *Nowadays, scholars' research on Émile Mâle is mostly focused on iconography, while he himself puts the return of medieval French religious art to the public eye as the top priority. This article attempts to analyze the characteristics of Émile Mâle's writing, reinterpret his “school” of Saint-Denis in the context of the French society in the 12th century, and explore the influence of Saint-Denis artisans on the development of French handicrafts.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Émile mâle, Saint denis church, Middle ages, Craftsman*

## 1. Introduction

In Émile Mâle's works, each work is his collection of fragments from a fixed period of history. He tries to summarize the artistic characteristics of each era through the commonality of these fragments. Therefore, merely using iconography or image to view his works may lose the original charm and diversity of Mahler's works.

## 2. Émile Mâle's Writing Characteristics

In Mahler's view, the characteristics of French medieval art are dominated by theologians, not by artists or craftsmen. He challenged Viollet-le-Duc's view of the time that the sculptures and images in the Gothic churches are encyclopedic, that the Gothic sculpture is great because of the result of artists imagination. Mahler's views made his era go out of romantic fantasy, but the historical concept that carried his strong views was completely traditional.

### 2.1 Chronological Works

As Stephen G. Nichols said when he talked about the purpose of writing history around 1000 AD: “... is to prove how well the world and society are in line with the Bible when they are truly understood. “, Mahler's writing is also looking for a unity

in line with the historical division for the artistic style in the chronicles. This is consistent with the historical concept of many scholars born in the 19th century, which is to divide history into individual pieces. In this life cycle, the description is based on the Renaissance. Petrack and Vasari et al. saw the phenomenon that the naturalistic art in the Greco-Roman concept was replaced by medieval symbolism, which made naturalism as the main body protagonist's concept of rise and fall is particularly obvious. Although Mahler has stepped out of the predecessors' evaluation of the "darkness" of the Middle Ages and realized the unique charm of medieval art and the extent of its composition, he still nested the development process of medieval religious art in the pattern of alternating rise and fall.

Each of Mahler's works is basically divided into a specific time or place, and put them in the life course of "style". For example, his work accurately divides the rise and fall of Gothic art according to time, and regards the 13th century Gothic art as the pinnacle of this style, while the 12th century is a foretell of this great style. In "French Religious Art in the Twelfth Century", the themes of the entire text include monasteries, pilgrimages, saint worship, various aspects of liturgical rituals, and factors of eastern influence. Finally, he had an important discussion on Suger and Saint-Denis and everything played a role in the 13th century. He concluded by saying: "...The 13th century beautified and expanded everything; it brought form and thought to perfection, but it forgot that this should be attributed to the 12th century...". Here, although he framed his style in a life-like historical concept, he did not allow his research to proceed with the birth, prosperity, and decline of the life course. He first regarded the 13th century as a "golden nail" for his study of medieval religious art style. From this point on, the Gothic art style continued to the 18th century, and then looked back to the 12th century to explore its roots. In Mahler's research sequence, the chronological arrangement used by chronicler writers is avoided. And this time sequence change in his writing inevitably brings some troubles to readers who have a view of the sequence of chronicles.

## ***2.2 Emotional Factors in the Work***

Another reason for Mahler's writing out of tradition may be related to his personal life experience. His previous profession and ideals made him great and also contributed to the staged characteristics of his writing, which enabled Mahler to carry out the topic of medieval art throughout his life.

In Mahler's biography, Andre Grappa described his schooling process and linked his achievements with the trajectory of his life. Mahler's biographies have been written several times before this biographer, but Mahler was written as a 19th century contemporaneous generation. These biographies can reflect the details of Mahler's life and personality very well, narrating his achievements and past like a memoir, and this author is looking at the past with the eyes of the 20th century after studying various aspects of Mahler.

Grappa implies that Mahler's writings always retain his youthful dreams, but his passing by has confirmed the emotional factors in Mahler's works. Mahler began

painting when he was studying at the Louis the Great High School. At the age of 21, he was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure de Paris and traveled to Flanders because of his interest in Nordic painting, hoping to find inspiration. However, his ambition first changed there. Perhaps it was because his words were accepted by others faster than his paintings. He put down his paintbrush and started writing, but still maintained his interest in northern art. But as a former artist, the sensibility in his writing comes from the heart. For example, in the concluding part of “13th Century French Religious Art”, Mahler described emotionally the sensual and emotional impact brought to him by the Gothic church, which seems to be a passion and religion for reviving the great creation of the French nation emotional mixed empathy. Mahler’s nationalist enthusiasm for the promotion of French medieval art and culture led him to write his doctoral dissertation into a highly literary work, with the intention of returning the artistic traditions of medieval France to the people’s memory, just like his teaching career from beginning to end. Andre Grappa once hailed his approach as “a Winkelman who studied medieval history.” Decades later, he realized that the world he entered because of passion was so easy to get lost. At the beginning of the preface of “French Religious Art in the 12th Century”, he admitted that he was full of emotion at the time:

“From this book, I should begin this medieval religious art story. Fortunately, when I started these studies with the enthusiasm of a young man 30 years ago, I did not expect to write it. An instinct made me Brought to the 13th century, where everything is order and light. If I want to climb higher and venture into the first darkness, I will definitely get lost.”

This kind of complex emotions may seem to him irrational 30 years later. It belongs to the passion and instinct of the painter rather than the calmness of a theoretical researcher.

### ***2.3 The Reproduction of Archaeological Ideals***

The abundant emotions brought by medieval art may be derived from intuitive feelings when he was young, but the way he writes came from his dreams when he was young. In Grappa’s narrative, Mahler then traveled to Greece and Italy, where archaeology ignited his enthusiasm. He once wanted to go to Greece to study archeology but it was not realized because of his mother. In 1891 Mahler wrote the first thesis on French archaeology in the Middle Ages. He transferred this unrealized ideal to his writing. In his writing, he kept digging into the sources of medieval art documents and Gothic style, seeming to compensate for his failure to start his archaeological career. Or maybe there are too many unknown ruins waiting for archaeological excavation in Mahler’s time. This is the most direct evidence to confirm the speculation. In the preface of his doctoral dissertation, Mahler also realized that the poor restoration in the 18th century cannot be a strong illustration of the medieval image rules, so he prefers to look for ancient documents as support, and the evidence brought by archaeology will become the actual proof of Mahler’s argument through the literature, and it will also bring him more conjectures. He has

always believed that, with more archaeological excavations, there will be different interpretations of the origin of the medieval art style.

Therefore, his writing is largely closely related to the progress of archaeology. The restoration movement of French monuments between the 19th and 20th centuries provided Mahler with the most powerful evidence for continuous exploration. New discoveries and viewpoints continued at the turn of the century and appear. Therefore, Mahler continued to integrate and update his views with the continuous integration of archaeology. Until 1945, "Religious Art from the 12th to 18th Centuries" covered the results of previous research and made a generalization of French religious art.

Émile Mâle's shock by medieval art may stem from his youthful emotions and intuitive feelings, but his writing characteristics are inherited from his early dreams. Archaeology has always been his longing for discipline. His unique writing style and archeological research style may be attributable to this.

### **3. The "School of Saint Denis" in "French Religious Art in the 12th Century"**

In the fifth chapter of "French Religious Art in the 12th Century", Émile Mâle proposed the concept of "l'école de Saint-Denis" when he talked about the stained-glass windows built in the 12th century in the Saint-Denis church. Although the meaning of the word "l'école" in French in the 19th or 20th century is not different from that in modern times, it has the meaning of "school" or "sect", Émile Mâle did not explain the special social background of France in the 12th century, his concept did not receive the attention it deserves at the time. In addition, he placed more narratives on the tracing and dissemination of images and styles, making the "St. Denis School" often It is simply understood as a reference to a style.

#### ***3.1 The Social Background of the "School" of Saint Denis***

The "school" described by Émile Mâle was established in the first half of the 12th century from the perspective of its composition and social background. It is not just a church school for training monks. This "school" is built by a group of monks and craftsmen in the monastery. This "school" is completely different from the "colleges" of the Roman period. The "school" of Saint Denis is composed of employers, that is, a group organized by the abbot, who manages the masters of various craftsmen and supervises their work. Most of these craftsmen are free people rather than slaves. They are hired without performing mandatory obligations and getting paid through work. The historical development of different regions is not as consistent as the chronicles. Therefore, the time of the rise of handicraft guilds in different parts of Europe in the Middle Ages is also different, but the economy and population are the decisive factors for their development. Before the expansion of the Saint-Denis Church in 1125, the Dennis region of France was in an economic downturn. According to the description in "Ordinationes" written by the Abbey leader Suger in 1140, during his predecessor's tenure, the economy of this area was

very declining. Almost all the tenants left, the land was not cultivated, the merchants detoured, and the church was ruined. Perhaps there was a craftsmen's guild in this area, but when the church was expanded, the excellent craftsmen with skilled craftsmanship came from outside the Diocese of Dennis, and Suger had to personally invite them to build the church. Therefore, the group formed by Suger at the time was not a "medieval guild" in an accurate sense. The "School of Saint Denis" described by Mahler is most likely built in such a social background.

Under this social background, the "School of Saint Denis" proposed by Émile Mâle has more complex and special meanings. He believes that in terms of the function of the school, whether it is from the 12th century iconography or the monastic education at that time, it is creative. Émile Mâle elaborated from two aspects.

### **3.2 *Monk's School***

Émile Mâle believes that the images in these glass windows convey the ideas of the church and also produce a new teaching method, that is, contemplation through images. He quoted Suger's words to prove the rationality of this teaching method, "...our dull minds can only obtain the truth through matter...", and believes that the content of the scriptures can be conveyed through images to make the 12th-century portrait mysterious feeling disappeared. Émile Mâle's view on the use of images for education in the Church of Saint Denis was groundbreaking at the beginning of the 20th century, but unfortunately, he did not explore this topic any further, making this conclusion only a speculation at the time. This conjecture has been refined and verified smoothly in subsequent research.

In another work, "Administrative Management Manual", Suger stated that only "litteratis" can understand the art in glass windows. In this passage, the Latin "litteratis" is translated as "literate" in Panofsky's translation, the vocabulary itself refers to a person who has the ability to read and write. Conrad Rudolph believes that the "litteratis" referred to by Suger is a pun. He not only refers to a person who can read and write Latin, but that person is also trained in Bible interpretation, and the standard is to be able to read well. And be able to carry out the affairs of the Union of Gods based on the text.

Therefore, as Émile Mâle said, the image-based form of exegesis created by Suger in the Church of Saint-Denis, but this kind of teaching method can only be effective within the monastery. That is, a person must be a "Hongru" who has read scriptures in order to further understand the spiritual connotation in Suger's art works. For the "Hongru" who have memorized the meaning of the "Bible" and use this to think more closely about the revelation, the effect of meditating in front of the image is the same as that of the text, because the "Hongru" has passed professional theological training. With a deep accumulation of reading a large number of written texts, they can use the non-traditional way of reading the allegories in artistic works to think about the deep meaning, and use it as a part of

spiritual practice without misinterpreting the teachings of the Bible or indulging in them For the sensory enjoyment of images.

### ***3.3 Style School***

The “School of Saint Denis” described by Émile Mâle refers to the Church of Saint Denis spreading its unique style to all parts of Europe. Eventually this style was called “Gothic” in history. Regarding the dissemination of style, Mahler has repeatedly proved the role of craftsmen. In Chapter 5, he used two sections to discuss how the craftsmen of Saint Denis spread this style, because the traces of the thoughts of Suger Found from the copied work.

One of the important evidences is the golden cross built by Suger for Saint Denis. This golden cross was built to commemorate the martyrdom of Saint Denis and his two partners. According to Émile Mâle’s description, this seven-meter-high cross overlooks the arch of the choir. On the cross hangs a golden Christ. His wounds are represented by dazzling rubies. At the bottom of the cross is a tall square pillar as support. The pillar itself is a miracle. Seven words are written on each face of the pillar, linking the life of Jesus with the scenes of the Old Testament. On the base, there are four preachers writing gospel stories; at the top, four mysterious figures are thinking about the death of the savior.

Starting from the description of the symbolic image on the base column of the golden cross, Mahler found a cross base that originally belonged to the Saint-Bertin Monastery in the Saint-Omer Museum, although it was a piece of degenerate and reduced imitation, this work is very similar to the description of the golden cross, enough to provide some clues about the builder. Mahler discovered that the craftsman was probably a metal craftsman that Suger got from Lorraine. It was the Latin “ayrifabros Lotharingos” written in Suger’s pen and was named “Godefroid de Claire”. The cross imitated by Saint Betim came from his studio.

Here, Émile Mâle’s proof is very bold. He inferred from the source of the craftsman that Claire’s studio inherited the unique local Mosan art style and culture. It is believed that the works of Claire Studio contain strong classical elements to a large extent and draw on the subject matter of the “Bible”. Some of their works often use metaphors to show the death and resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, in the golden cross produced by Claire’s studio, the symbolic image is most likely inspired by Suger. The pedestal of the cross copied by Claire in the Saint-Omer Museum clearly shows the traces of Suger’s participation. There are four busts on the stigma of the base of the cross. Their names are engraved on the sides of them. Even the craftsman’s mistakes when copying the inscriptions are exactly the same.

In this way, Émile Mâle proved very successfully how the craftsmen who built the church of Saint Denis spread their works of art to another area, and also proved the possible source of the symbolic images in the church of Saint Denis through the works of these craftsmen and the mode of transmission. At present, no one in academia is going to overturn his iconographic arguments, but these fascinating reasonings constitute another aspect of the “St. Denis School”. The “school”

referred to by Émile Mâle is a school for the monks and a “school” in the European “Gothic” style.

#### **4. Craftsman in the Church of Saint Denis in the 12th Century**

Émile Mâle’s description of artisans in his writing provides a glimpse of the craftsmanship of Saint-Denis in the first half of the 12th century in France. These details, in his view, are examples of medieval images and styles. Based on the written records of the monastery in the 12th century, it will be found that the foreign craftsmen hired during the construction of the church played a role in promoting the development of the handicraft industry in the Saint-Denis region and even France.

##### ***4.1 Craftsmen from Different Regions***

In Mahler’s description, since the construction of the Saint-Denis Church, skilled craftsmen from all over Western Europe have gathered in France, which undoubtedly laid the foundation for the prosperity of the French handicraft industry. Suger once mentioned the recruitment for the Saint Denis church. According to him, these craftsmen came to “*Artifices peritiores de diversis partibus convocavimus.*” in different regions. It is certain that Suger has hired some craftsmen from northern nations. The first time I mentioned that these craftsmen were building the golden cross. In order to quickly build this exquisite cross with expensive materials, Suger used seven craftsmen at most. He was proud of the speed at which the cross was built. “Within two years, we will be able to complete a pedestal decorated with four preachers from a few goldsmiths in Lorraine-sometimes five, another time seven. “The source of the goldsmiths here is very clear. The second mention is when talking about the panels on the back of the altar,

“*Uteriore vero tabulam, miro opere sumptuque profuso, quoniam barbari et profusiores nostratibus erant artifices...extulimus.*”

Suger admires the exquisite workmanship and extremely luxurious style of the savage artist, because its form is as admirable as its materials. The “barbari” in this sentence refers to people in those areas that are currently controversial. Some scholars once thought that Suger speaks people who do not speak Romance languages and come from countries outside the Rhine. It may have been influenced by Mahler recently, and academics generally believe that this refers to artisans from the Lorraine region. Finally, “nostratibus” should refer to “comrades from our own country.” Suger proudly believes that the luxurious French sculptures are noble. This term clearly distinguishes artisans from other regions and refers to French goldsmiths.

#### **4.2 Church Employee**

Some of these craftsmen no longer wander around Europe in search of job opportunities, they become long-term residents of French soil. It can be seen from the records of Suger that glass artisans and goldsmiths first became permanent employees of the church, although it is not known whether Suger signed specific contracts with these craftsmen. The purpose of this record of "Administration" is the monastery. The internal publicity of the employment contract, then the remarks about the heat will be the validity of the employment contract. According to Xu, these excellent craftsmen who have been hired for a long time will also get very generous profits. In addition to a fixed allowance, they will also receive a part of the church's dividends, including gold coins donated by the altar and flour in the religious public warehouse. Such generous remuneration is exchanged for the "indispensable duty" of glass artisans.

The long-term hired craftsmen are very significant to the development of the Saint-Denis regional handicraft guild, and the rapid development of the Saint-Denis glasssmith industry verifies this from a factual perspective. In the 13th century, although the craftsmen responsible for maintenance by Saint Denis were still paid more generously than other craftsmen, they no longer participated in the dividends of the church's income. Their income includes rent, robe, annual salary and other different types, but no matter what title is used in the accounts, these incomes are paid annually. The slight decline in salary and the annual salary system can show the increase in the number of craftsmen and the formation of industry rules.

And the production methods of glass craftsmen have also changed significantly. A special phenomenon can be observed in the Paris tax bill of Saint Denis in 1284. The tax separately listed "pro vitro albo et colorato" meaning "fluorescent and stained glass", which means that it was used the stained-glass panels were purchased separately in the church of Saint Denis in the 13th century, and the artisans who had been hired to maintain the church for a long time did not produce glass materials themselves like the artisans in the Suger' era. This shows that due to the increase in demand and output, the glass craftsman's industry has begun to divide labor. These changes are inseparable from the recruitment of the Saint Denis Abbey, and the artisans have gradually expanded to Paris since then.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Émile Mâle used extremely literary and emotional writing to present a new perspective to 20th century scholars to understand early medieval art. Unfortunately, his contribution did not receive the attention it deserves. In this perspective, small people who have not been recorded in history have achieved the famous "Gothic" art style due to social changes, which was gradually unearthed by Mahler. Similarly, in this perspective, Mahler's own writings and his life experience, as well as the society at the time, have also become parts to be explored. The "Gothic" style named by history has a unique texture in Émile Mâle's writings. When these unique



cultures, individuals and times are flattened by the historical narrative of the past, the perspective he proposed may be will provide more possibilities for the future.

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