

## **Romanesque murals**

The Diocesan Museum of Urgell's collection of Romanesque murals joined its holdings throughout the 1960s. They are fragments from seven churches in the Pyrenees, five of which are also represented at the National Art Museum of Catalonia (MNAC) and other museums abroad.

Romanesque murals are entwined with their architecture; their support was the actual church walls, usually indoors. This gave the liturgical space a symbolic clout above and beyond the building, given that the church was where sacraments were celebrated and the story of salvation came to fruition. At the same time, in a society where only a small minority of people knew how to read and write, the images painted on the walls, despite their apparent aesthetic simplicity, helped parishioners to better understand the word of God and could even be referred to by priests when preaching.

## **How were the walls painted?**

The technique used the most in Catalan Romanesque painting is mixed wet and dry fresco. The wall was coated with several layers of lime mortar and sand, each less rough than the one under it. The preparatory drawing or sinopia was transferred onto the wall while the last layer, the finest and smoothest one, was still wet, and later it was painted with natural pigments diluted with water. When it dried, the lime crystallised and set the pigments on the surface. After a fresco was painted and dried, it was retouched wherever needed.

Given that the basic design and part of the final execution could only be done while the last layer of mortar was still wet, just the part of the wall to be worked on each day was prepared. This is why these frescoes are said to be painted '*per jornades*', or 'by the day'.

## **How were murals removed from walls?**

They were removed using a technique called *strappo*, which was invented in Italy in around 1850. It consisted of applying long, wide strips of cotton cloth soaked in warm animal glue over the paintings. Once the glue had dried and contracted, the wall was carefully tapped to release the top layer of the painted coating, which adhered to the cloth. At the destination, the back side of the cloth strips was glued to the support where the fresco was going to be displayed, which was usually made of wood. Once the glue had dissolved and the cloth strips removed, the original surface of the mural was once again

exposed. This is a traumatic technique because it cracks the paint, but in some cases it was the only way to save the frescoes from destruction or pillage.

**The Urgell Beatus** is a codex or large book with 239 parchment pages written in tiny Visigothic lettering and decorated with around 90 illustrations. It is called 'Beatus' because the main part of the text is a commentary on the Apocalypse written by Abbot Beatus from the San Martín de Liébana monastery (Cantabria) in the late eighth century. The text was very popular in the northern Christian realms of the Iberian Peninsula; 24 illustrated Beatus are still conserved, most of them from the tenth century, although they continued to be made until the thirteenth century.

The style of the miniatures in the Urgell Beatus is linear and simple; they are lacking perspective and reveal a fondness for bright colours, which are ideal for visually expressing the incredible feats recounted in the Book of the Apocalypse. Even though we are uncertain of the exact date, they are assumed to have been made in the late tenth century in a monastery in La Rioja or Navarra. The Urgell Beatus was in the library of the cathedral of Urgell by 1147, but we do not know how or when it got there. It was stolen in September 1996 and recovered four months later.

**The Bull of Sylvester II** dates from the year 1001. It is an extensive document in which the pontiff confirms to Bishop Sal-la a long list of the bishopric of Urgell's possessions, which was very important because it could serve as a deed of ownership in the face of attempted usurpation. Only two papal bulls on papyrus are conserved in Catalonia. Papyrus comes from an aquatic plant from the banks of the Nile River which the ancient Egyptians started using as a writing surface. The Greeks and Romans also used it, and in the Middle Ages, the Chancellery of the popes of Rome continue to use it as a sign of prestige.

**The chasuble of Saint Ermengol, or Hermengaudius**, was erroneously believed to be a cope for many years. It is made of Samite, a highly prized silk fabric probably crafted in central Asia between the eighth and tenth centuries. Its only decorative motif, which is repeated throughout the entire piece, is a circle with two birds facing each other. According to tradition, it was wrapped around Saint Hermengaudius's body, and this is why it has always been associated with this holy bishop. It is a work of incalculable value due to the rarity of its backstory,

given its extraordinary conservation over so many centuries and the lack of any parallels in our country.