

V&A Academy

FROM PAGAN TO
CHRISTIAN: THE
ARTS OF EARLY
MEDIEVAL
EUROPE 300-800



Introduction

Chart the dramatic changes of this turbulent period which witnessed the rise of Christianity and the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire; from the Arch of Constantine to Hagia Sophia and Sutton Hoo. On this twelve-week course we will cover the period between 300 and 800, with the V&A's abundant medieval collections as our inspiration.

In 313 the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, thereby granting Christianity tolerated status for the first time. As the Roman Empire collapsed, Christianity flourished, and a specifically Christian visual iconography evolved, relying heavily, for inspiration, on the weakening tradition of pagan Antiquity. This is the period when purpose-built churches began to be constructed, and the codex, or book, gradually replaced the roll as a means of storing text and accommodating illustrations.

In the Byzantine Empire, beliefs specific to the Eastern church, combined with the tenacious persistence of Classical Antiquity and exotic influences borrowed from neighbouring states, produced a distinctive artistic aesthetic. Theological concerns, provoked and enhanced by fear of Islam's dramatic territorial gains in the early 7th century led to Iconoclasm (726-843). Figurative Christian images were destroyed and artists from the Byzantine Empire moved west seeking work, thereby effecting artistic exchange between East and West.

In Western Europe, the collapse of the Roman Empire resulted in a transfer of political power to initially peripatetic, illiterate, and pagan, and subsequently, settled, literate, and Christian peoples. A patchwork of kingdoms was established by, amongst others, the Visigoths in Spain, the Ostrogoths and Lombards in Italy, and the Anglo-Saxons in England; 2

and in 800, Charlemagne, the Frankish king, unified his possessions in present-day France, Germany, and northern Italy, attempting to recreate the Roman Empire. Buildings and artefacts produced in these regions from 600-800, demonstrate distinctive regional styles, complex intellectual agendas, and considerable skill on the part of craftsmen.

Information

Tuesdays, 23 September – 25 November, 11.00-15.30. Onsite and Online.

Watch lecture recordings on demand, available at the end of each day, until 3 February 2026.

Your course leader

Dr Sally Dormer is a specialist medieval art historian and lecturer, with an M.A. in Medieval Art History and Ph.D. on Medieval manuscript illumination from the Courtauld Institute, University of London. Sally teaches, or has taught, for the Courtauld Institute of Art, ARTscapades, the Arts Society, Art Pursuits, Cox & Kings, Swan Hellenic, and Gresham College, and was Dean of European Studies, a study abroad semester for two university in Tennessee, USA, from 1999-2019.

Note: V&A Academy programmes are subject to change without notice.

Week 1 – 23 September

From Pagan to Christian

- 10.45 Introduction **Sally Dormer**
- 11.00 The Historical Background 300-800 **Sally Dormer**
- 12.30 Boundaries of Belief: Pagan Philosophy, Heresy, and Islam in Early Christianity **Alessandro Scafi**
- 14.30 Christian Art before the Edict of Milan **Sally Dormer**

Week 2 – 30 September

The Birth of Christian Art

- 10.00 Gallery Talk (Group A): Introduction to the V&A's Medieval Galleries **Michaela Zoschg**- *additional tickets only*
- 10.15 Online Meet and Greet with **Sally Dormer**
- 11.00 Case Study: The Arch of Constantine **Steve Kershaw**
- 12.30 Constantine and Constantinople **Steve Kershaw**
- 14.30 Icons before Iconoclasm **Sally Dormer**
- 15.30 Gallery Talk (Group B): Introduction to the V&A's Medieval Galleries **Michaela Zoschg**- *additional tickets only*

Week 3 – 07 October

Early Christian Architecture

- 10.00 Gallery Talk (Group A): The Symmachi Panel **Sally Dormer**- *additional tickets only*
- 11.00 Ivories **Sally Dormer**
- 12.30 Goldsmith's Work **Sally Dormer**
- 14.30 Sarcophagi **Sally Dormer**
- 15.30 Gallery Talk (Group B): The Symmachi Panel **Sally Dormer**- *additional tickets only*

Week 4 – 14 October

Early Christian Architecture

- 11.00 Early Christian Architecture in the 4th and 5th centuries
Richard Plant
- 12.30 Case Study: Sant Sabina, Rome **Richard Plant**
- 14.30 Images of the Virgin 313-800 **Sally Dormer**

Week 5 – 21 October

Mosaics and Painted Walls

- 10.00 Gallery Talk (Group A): Coptic textiles in the V&A **Helen Persson**- *additional tickets only*
- 11.00 Floor Mosaics **Sally Dormer**
- 12.30 Wall and Vault Mosaics **Sally Dormer**
- 14.30 Case Study: Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome **Cecily Hennessy**
- 15.30 Gallery Talk (Group B): Coptic textiles in the V&A **Helen Persson**- *additional tickets only*

Week 6 – 28 October

The Birth of the Book

- 11.00 From the Codex **Sally Dormer**
- 12.30 Early Christian Gospel Books **Sally Dormer**
- 14.30 The Ostrogoths and Ravenna **Sally Dormer**

Week 7 – 04 November

Justinian and Theodora

- 10.00 Gallery Talk (Group A): A mosaic head in the V&A **Cecily Hennessy** - *additional tickets only*
- 11.00 Constantinople **Cecily Hennessy**
- 12.30 Case Study: Hagia Sophia and St Catherine's Monastery, Siani **Cecily Hennessy**
- 14.30 Case Study: San Vitale, Ravenna and Maximian's ivory throne **Sally Dormer**
- 15.30 Gallery Talk (Group B): A mosaic head in the V&A **Cecily Hennessy** - *additional tickets only*

Week 8 – 11 November

The Anglo-Saxon World

- 11.00 Migration Period Jewellery **Meg Boulton**
- 12.30 Case Study: Sutton Hoo **Meg Boulton**
- 14.30 Visigothic Spain **Rose Walker**

Week 9 – 18 November

The Insular World

- 10.00 Gallery Talk (Group A): Islamic Art in Europe **Mariam Rosser-Owen** - *additional tickets only*
- 11.00 Insular Manuscripts **Meg Boulton**
- 12.30 Case Study: The Lindisfarne Gospels **Meg Boulton**
- 14.30 Case Study: *The Franks Casket* **Meg Boulton**
- 15.30 Gallery Talk (Group B): Islamic Art in Europe **Mariam Rosser-Owen** - *additional tickets only*

Week 10 – 25 November

Early Anglo-Saxon and Visigothic Art

- 11.00 Early Anglo-Saxon Architecture **Meg Boulton**
- 12.30 Anglo-Saxon Stone Crosses **Meg Boulton**
- 14.30 Images of the Trinity **Teresa Lane**
- 15.45 Online Meet and Greet with **Sally Dormer**