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The Benedictine Convent of St John at Müstair

The Benedictine Convent of St John at Müstair in the upper valley of the Canton of Grisons bears exceptional testimony to a Carolingian civilisation and art which has disappeared. It is one of the most coherent examples of traditional architecture and paintings of the Carolingian period and the early Middle Ages.

This convent was most likely founded around 780 by the Bishop of Chur, at the behest of Charlemagne. It is noted as being an establishment of Benedictines from the beginning of the 9th century. It did not become a convent until 1163.

The most important element of the monastic complex is the church which is dedicated to St John the Baptist, including two cloisters. Formed by a simple rectangular hall some 20m long, it is closed in the east by three tall semi-circular apses and adorned on the exterior by blind arcades.

In the church, the removal of the Gothic ceiling (1908-9) and of the whitewash (1947-51) brought to light important vestiges of frescoes dating from the Romanesque period (approximately 1150-70) and, more important still, from the Carolingian period. This is, in fact, the most important cycle of painting which is currently known dating from around 800.

The figurative paintings include scenes from the Old and New Testaments and are of a fine aesthetic quality. Painted in a limited range of ochres, reds and browns, they postdate the frescoes of Castelseprio and San Salvatore in Brescia. They are particularly important to understanding the evolution of Christian iconographic themes, such as the Last Judgement. The panels are framed with painted strips of garlands and ribbons, and culminate at the top into a large cornice.



Benedictine Convent of St John at Müstair

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Benediktinerkloster_St._Johann.JPG (Wladyslaw Sojka at the German language Wikipedia)

Sadly, the cycle has suffered considerable damage, both because of ill-conceived restorations and because of the repainting of the apses, which probably took place between 1165 and 1180. The frescoes on the side walls, with the Stories of David, were removed and placed in the Landesmuseum in Zürich.

Other precious artworks preserved in the Benedictine complex date from successive centuries. Originating from the Romanesque period are frescoes preserved in the church's apse area, and in the choir, a large statue in painted stucco depicting Charlemagne (1165) and a fine relief depicting the Baptism of Christ (1087).

Within the enclosure walls of the monastery, there are a number of other key historical elements, in particular, the residence of Bishop Norbert with its remarkable decor of frescoes in the north-west quarter and stucco-work in the two-storey chapel (11th and 12th centuries).

Other rooms in the Convent date for the most part from the 18th century. These are located around the main cloister and are used for the storage of documents, models related to the religious complex, reliquaries, robes, and objects of sacred art dating from the 13th to the 18th centuries.

During the Gothic and Baroque periods, the church was subjected to major modifications: two rows of columns divided the interior into three aisles, a matroneum (interior gallery) was installed, and the original wooden ceiling was replaced by a vaulted roof. Outside, a tower-house was built for the Abbess of the convent in the 15th century, adjoining the right-hand side of the church.

Source: UNESCO/CLT/WHC, www.whc.unesco.org/en/list/269



Central apse of the Church

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:St_Johann_-_8.jpg (James Steakley)