

The exhibition offers a remarkable journey through the Middle Ages, guided by the early-fourteenth-century secular paintings in the castle of Cruet in Savoie (France), now in the Musée Savoisien in Chambéry.

This Gothic series of paintings is of great importance, because it is the only one of its kind in the area straddling the Alps. Based on the chivalrous poem *Girart de Vienne*, the scenes tell the story of how the young Girart arrives at the court of Charlemagne, how he is dubbed a knight, enters conflicts and war, and lastly how the two protagonists make peace, thanks to the providential arrival of the heroes Roland and Oliver. The grand finale evokes the famous expedition of Charlemagne to Spain, which would end in the defeat at Roncevaux Pass.

Together with the wall paintings, the exhibition also brings together a series of works that illustrate the interests, leisure activities, readings, material needs, devotions, and artistic tastes of the knights and ladies who lived in the castles in Savoy, Piedmont, and the Valle d'Aosta between 1200 and 1300, at the time of Count Amadeus V of Savoy and Prince Philip of Acaia.

CASTLES

The castle was an integral part of the feudal system. The most powerful lords, at the top of the social pyramid – sovereigns, dukes, and counts – had several of them, dotted around their lands. This was true of the Counts of Savoy, who built castles at strategic points around the county – on the borders and along the main roads – in order to control and defend the territory.

Those with a small fiefdom, on the other hand, would have just a single castle, like the lords of Cruet, or they would live in simple fortified houses, which were aristocratic residences equipped with defensive structures such as a tower, but without the external fortifications typically found around a castle.

As well as being of military importance, since it offered protection to the lord, his family, and his knights and vassals in times of war, the castle was the centre for the administration and accounts, and for administering justice. In times of peace, it was the centre of court life.

CHARLEMAGNE (ABOUT 742 - 814)

Charlemagne was the son of Pepin the Short, King of the Franks. After the death of his brother Carloman, he acquired the territories that the latter had inherited from his father. In 773 he defeated the Longobards and annexed northern Italy.

In the following years he organised several expeditions against the **Muslims in Spain**: after suffering a bloody defeat at **Roncevaux Pass** in **778**, he headed victorious military campaigns that led to the creation of the *Marca Hispanica*. On the eastern borders, he fought against the Germanic peoples, with victories against the Avars, the Bavarians and the Saxons. A staunch defender of the Christian faith, he received the Imperial crown from Pope Leo III in Rome, on Christmas night in the year 800. His empire, with its capital in Aix-la-Chapelle (now Aachen, in Germany), included what is now France, part of Germany, Bohemia, Belgium, the Netherlands, northern Spain (Pyrenees) and central-northern Italy.

The architect of the so-called **Renovatio Romani Imperii**, he likened himself to the Christian emperors of antiquity, such as Constantine and Theodosius. He was very active in the field of culture, constructing churches, buildings, and public works, setting up many diocesan schools, introducing a new form of script that was more uniform and legible (the “Carolingian minuscule”), and setting up scriptoria, where ancient manuscripts were copied.

I THE WALL PAINTINGS IN CRUET

This important series of paintings comes from the **castle of Verdon-Dessous in Cruet**, in Savoie (France). It adorned the four walls of the main hall, which was used in the Middle Ages for banquets and for administering justice. The hall was later partitioned and the paintings plastered over until some interior maintenance work in 1985 brought to light the mediaeval works. The paintings were detached, restored, and donated to the **Musée Savoisien in Chambéry**, where they have remained since 1988.

The narrative is inspired by **Girart de Vienne**, a *chanson de geste* set in Carolingian times and written in about 1180 by Bertrand de Bar-sur-Aube. It tells the story of **the conflict between Charlemagne and his vassal Girart**. The wealth of the imagery in the scenes suggests that the paintings may have been based on a lavish illuminated codex of this poem.

The series is one of the most important examples of Gothic art in the states of Savoy under Amadeus V (1285-1323), of whom the Lords of Verdon were vassals.

CHARLEMAGNE WITH VASSALS HUNTING IN A FOREST

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

Before the episode we see here, the poem *Girart de Vienne* introduces the protagonists of the story: Girart and his three brothers, sons of the valiant Garin of Monglane, a lord in the lands of Gascoigne, in south-west France. Garin has been reduced to poverty and stripped of all his assets – castles, horses, and weapons – by the Saracen Emir Sinagon.

The story starts when the four brothers decide to leave their family home and seek their fortune in distant lands. Milon heads towards Italy, where he becomes Duke of Puglia and Sicily. Hernaut goes to Beaulande, in France, and Renier and Girart set off towards the north, heading for the court of Charlemagne, for whom they want to become knights. The Emperor invests Renier with the fief of Geneva, while Girart, who is too young, is invited to remain in the service of Charlemagne as a squire, with the task of accompanying him while hunting, at tournaments, and on the battlefield, looking after his horses and weapons, and serving him at table.

A MESSENGER ANNOUNCES THE DEATH OF THE DUKE OF BURGUNDY TO CHARLEMAGNE

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

The hunting scene continues on the left, where a stag can be made out, with a dog attacking a wild boar. The messenger announces his arrival by sounding a horn, which is an ivory olifant (a specimen is on display in the exhibition in showcase 2). The poem tells us how, upon hearing the news of the death of the Duke of Burgundy, Charlemagne decides to express his gratitude to his faithful Girart by offering him the hand of the now widowed duchess, thus making him Lord of Burgundy. The sovereign replies to the messenger that he will meet the lady at Sens on Saint John's Day.

THE INVESTITURE OF GIRART

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

On the left is Girart, in a pointed hat, riding towards Sens, where the investiture will take place – in other words, where he will be made a knight. On the right we see the investiture of Girart: this was required so that he could then take the title as Duke of Burgundy. The emperor, who is only partly visible, rests his right hand on the head of Girart, who kneels before him. This is the accolade ceremony, also known as the adoubement, a central event in chivalric society. It could be performed directly on the battlefield or, in peacetime, during the main religious festivals such as Easter, Pentecost, or the Ascension. In these cases, it took place in a castle courtyard or beneath the porch of a church. The future knight first confessed his sins and took the Eucharist, and then received his military accoutrements from his lord, who performed the symbolic gesture of resting his hand or the blade of his sword on his neck, pronouncing a ritual formula. The glove that can just be made out in Girart's hand refers to another type of ceremony, which is that of the vassal's homage, when the glove, a symbol of power, was given by the lord to his vassal during the investiture of a fief. In other words, the painter here combines elements from the two main ceremonies of feudal society.

GIRART ENCOUNTERS THE DUCHESS OF BURGUNDY AND REFUSES TO MARRY HER

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

Before coming to this encounter, the poem Girart de Vienne tells of the meeting between the Duchess of Burgundy and Charlemagne. The king, who wishes to see the lady to tell her that he has found a groom who is "cortois et avenant, fier et hardi", is greatly struck by her beauty: "les euz ot verz...la face plus blenche que n'est noif sor gelée" ("her eyes are green and her face whiter than snow upon ice"). He therefore regrets having promised her to Girart and hopes to marry her himself.

Shortly after, the duchess meets Girart and is very favourably struck by him. She makes advances towards him and declares that she wishes to marry him. But the young man feels offended by her conduct, which is not in line with the rules of courtly love, according to which it should be the knight, not the lady, who makes such a request. He therefore rejects the lady and solemnly swears before God that he will never take her as his bride (the oath is expressed by his raised hand with the palm facing forward). The text notes that the duchess had never been so humiliated (she had never received "si grande honte").

THE WEDDING NIGHT OF CHARLEMAGNE AND THE NEW QUEEN: GIRART, SURROUNDED BY MANY COURTIERS, KNEELS TO KISS CHARLEMAGNE'S LEG

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

The story of Girart de Vienne tells us how the Duchess of Burgundy, offended by Girart's rejection, decides to marry Charlemagne. At the end of the wedding ceremony, the courtiers ask the emperor to compensate the faithful Girart, to whom he had promised the Duchy of Burgundy, and who now deserves a new fief. Charlemagne agrees and assigns the rich city of Vienne to him, in the Dauphiné, with the surrounding lands. This is why Girart chooses the moment of the "coucher royal" to thank his sovereign in accordance with the customary vassalic gesture of kissing his foot: "il s'agenoille, por sa gembe embracier". But the Queen, who is as though roused by the devil ("si com deables la voloit engingnier"), takes advantage of this gesture and, in the darkness, slips her own foot into Girart's hands, who plants his kiss without realising how he has been insulted.

SPECTATORS WATCHING A FIGHT BETWEEN TWO KNIGHTS

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

This may be an episode described in verses 1711-1751 of the poem, and that comes later in the narrative. Aymeri, the son of Hernaut of Beaulande, and thus the nephew of Girart, arrives at his uncle's court after he has been dubbed a knight. Accompanied by two squires, the young man later departs for the court of Charlemagne, as we see in the group of riders on the left. However, while they are on their way, between Paris and Saint-Denis, they come across a band of brigands, who have long infested the area around the capital: Aymeri routs them (in the battle on the right) and captures them.

GIRART STAYS AT CLUNY ABBEY AND THEN GOES ON TO VIENNE

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

Girart stops for a night at the Abbey of Cluny while on his way to Vienne, where he is going to take possession of his fief. On the left, we see him meeting the abbot, whom he had met fifteen years previously when travelling the same route, but in the opposite direction, on his way to Reims and the court of Charlemagne. The abbot does not recognise him but, to express his gratitude for the help he had given him and his brother Renier on that occasion, Girart donates silver coins and embroidered silk cloths to the monastery. On the right, we see the arrival of Girart in Vienne, where he is joyfully welcomed by the inhabitants of the city.

GIRART AND HIS BROTHERS BEFORE CHARLEMAGNE

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

The artist has inverted the position of this scene and the next one, which in the tale of Girart de Vienne comes earlier. After the events at Saint-Denis (as explained in the next panel), Girart and his brothers (Milon, Hernaut of Beaulande, and Renier) – who have learnt about the queen's deed from Aymeri – gather together a large army to wage war against the emperor and thus avenge Girart for the offence he has received. Before the battle, however, upon the advice of their aged father Garin, they ask the emperor for an audience (the crowned figure on the right, of whom only the head remains) and explain to him the reasons for their anger.

THE COURT BANQUET: AYMERI, NEPHEW OF GIRART, ATTEMPTS TO ASSASSINATE THE WIFE OF CHARLEMAGNE

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

Aymeri, the son of Hernaut of Beaulande, one of Girart's brothers, arrives in Vienne and is dubbed a knight by his uncle. He then goes to Paris to enter the service of Charlemagne and thus complete his chivalric education. He fights valiantly against certain robbers who infest the capital and, as a result, is invited to a banquet at Saint-Denis. This is not attended by the emperor but only by the empress and a number of courtiers. When the empress finds out who Aymeri is, she reveals her secret to him, so as to make public the affront to Girart and thus complete her vendetta. Aymeri is filled with rage and attempts to stab her with a knife, but she manages to evade the blow.

CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS TROOPS BESIEGE THE CITY OF VIENNE

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

The four brothers had asked the emperor to mete out severe punishment on the queen, or to grant them Burgundy or new fiefs in order to make reparations for the affront to Girart. Charlemagne rejects all their requests and complains that, in the five years that have passed since the enfeoffment, he has never received any sign of gratitude from his vassal, to whom he donated Vienne and its donjon. Hostilities break out between Girart and the emperor, who besieges the city of Vienne for seven long years with his troops. The ox we see in the foreground alludes to the raids in the countryside around Vienne carried out by the sovereign's troops, who destroy the fields and vineyards, and kill the livestock ("...les vignes gastent, ...et bués et vaches").

THE FINAL BATTLE: THE JUDICIAL DUEL BETWEEN ROLAND AND OLIVIER

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

To put an end to the long war between Girart and Charlemagne, their nephews – Roland for the emperor and Oliver, the son of Renier, lord of Geneva – who are both valorous commanders, decide to face each other in a judicial duel. According to the rules of this combat, God will decide the victor and thus award definitive victory to one of the two sides. The two knights are shown to the right of this scene: their valour is so great that neither of them manages to prevail over the other, and the fight drags on (“molt par sont fier enbedui li baron et plus hardi que liepart ne lion, contre loro cous n’as nule arme foison”). The chanson de geste tells us that God is dismayed to see such champions hate each other so much, when they should be fighting together against the infidels, and he intervenes with a miracle, causing a cloud to appear above the two knights to blind them and separate them (this is the dark red cloud near their heads).

An angel, whom we do not see here, then appears from the cloud and explains the will of God, urging Roland and Oliver to go to Spain and defeat “la gent mescreue” – the misbelievers. This divine intervention thus marks the end of the war, and peace at last between Charlemagne and Girart.

CHARLEMAGNE'S ENCAMPMENT

1295-1315

painting on dry plaster

Chambéry, Musée Savoisien - Département de la Savoie

Here we see the tents in Charlemagne's encampment, each bearing a shield with the heraldic insignia of the owner. Once again, the painter refers to a previous passage in *Girart de Vienne* (verse 2588), which mentions the pavilion-type tents of the emperor's army beneath the walls of Vienne.

The presence of the crests of the Count of Savoy (gules with a silver cross) and of the Duke of Burgundy (bends or and azure, bordure gules) suggests a "political" interpretation of this series. This has it that the conflict between *Girart de Vienne* and Charlemagne really alludes to the differences in the early fourteenth century between Humbert de la Tour-du-Pin – who inherited the Dauphiné by marrying the daughter of Guigues VII, Dauphin of Vienne – and Amadeus V of Savoy, who supported the Duke of Burgundy, the Dauphin's cousin, in his claim to inherit the territory of Vienne.

II PATRONS

Amadeus V ruled the County of Savoy from 1285 to 1323. At the time, together with Savoy, the county included Bresse, Vaud (now in Switzerland), the Valle d'Aosta, and the Susa Valley as far as Rivoli. The domain of Piedmont, on the other hand, was in the hands of his nephew Philip, who by marrying Isabella of Villehardouin, the daughter of a French crusader in the Holy Land, became Prince of Acaia.

Amadeus V, Philip of Acaia and their spouses – all of whom are portrayed in the seals on display – were the main patrons during the period covered by the exhibition. It was they who built and enlarged their **castles** (**Chambéry**, **Bourget**, and **Thonon** in the case of Amadeus; **Turin** and **Pinerolo** in that of Philip), commissioned secular decorative cycles, and purchased exquisite illuminated manuscripts, ivories and goldwork. Their vassals emulated their actions in the field of art and thus, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, northern Gothic art spread throughout the territories on both sides of the Alps.

1

Equestrian seal of Amadeus V, Count of Savoy

1314

Red wax, round, attached by a red silk cord
National Archives, Turin, Materie politiche per
rapporto all'estero, Trattati, Trattati antichi,
mazzo 3, fascicolo 27

In the Middle Ages, seals were used to validate documents and guarantee the authenticity of the deeds they were affixed to: in this case, an important peace treaty between Amadeus V and John II, Dauphin of Viennois. The Count of Savoy is depicted as a knight dressed in chain-mail, galloping towards the right. His helmet is surmounted by a fan-shaped plume, which also appears on the head of the horse. He holds his sword in his right hand and shield in his left. The shield, the saddle and the saddle-cloth all bear his insignia: a cross. The metal die for this seal may be the one commissioned by Amadeus from a London goldsmith in 1292.

2

**Seal of Sibilla di Baugé (Bâgé),
Countess of Savoy**

1289

Brown wax, navette-shaped,
attached by parchment with forked end
National Archives, Turin, Baronìa di Vaud,
mazzo 36, Romont, fascicolo 2

Sibilla is shown standing, with her head covered by a veil. In her right hand she holds a flower and in her left the strap of her mantle, which is lined with miniver (obtained from the two-tone fur of the red squirrel). Her garment bears the cross of Savoy. She is shown with two lions, the symbol of the lords of Bâgé. The plant volutes in the background recall those of many contemporary miniatures.

3

**Seal of Philip of Savoy,
Prince of Acaia and Lord of Piedmont
Seal of Isabella of Villehardouin,
Princess of Acaia**

1303

Red wax, round, attached by yellow silk thread
National Archives, Turin, Materie politiche per
rapporto all'interno, Principi del sangue diversi,
mazzo 3/1, fascicolo 1

III WAR, TOURNAMENTS AND HUNTING

According to the rules of feudal institutions, the vassal was always allied to a more powerful lord, who granted him the rights to land (the fief) in return for military assistance.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the vassal had to pay for his **equipment**, which included a hauberk or shirt of mail (made of iron or steel rings, sometimes double or triple), which covered the body from head to knees; a cylindrical helmet, with side plates over the ears and an opening at eye level; and a shield, made of wood with metal reinforcements, about one and a half metres tall, almond-shaped, ending in a point and often painted with the knight's heraldic insignia.

Offensive **weapons** included a sword, a spear, a bow, and a crossbow. The same weapons, normally without tips and with blunted edges, were used in **tournaments**. These were three-day events that were organised by the feudal lords in the open country, allowing the knights to put their courage and fighting skills to the test. They were also a leisure activity for many spectators.

Some monarchs organised tournaments in which the contestants dressed up as the knights of the Round Table: this happened at the court of King Edward I of England, where Amadeus V spent eight years before inheriting his title as a count.

Hunting was one of the favourite pastimes of medieval knights. It procured the game needed for the table of the lords and it also destroyed the wild animals, such as bears, wolves and foxes, that threatened their crops. After a complex training course for the animal, falconry made it possible to hunt both birds, such as quails, turtledoves, and magpies, and ground animals.

1

**Sword known as the Sword of Saint Maurice,
with scabbard**

European manufacture

First half of the 13th century

Steel, iron, wood, and fabric (sword);
wood, parchment, and iron (scabbard)

From the Abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune
in Valais (Switzerland)

Royal Museums of Turin - Royal Armoury,
inv. G. 25

2

**Sword in steel and remains of scabbard
Equestrian accoutrements: pair of rowel spurs**

Western Europe

First half of the 14th century

Two-component steel alloy, beech wood
(sword); bronze, wash-gilded (spurs)

Regional Archaeological Museum of the Valle
d'Aosta (MAR), Aosta,

inv. 3992 AZ

The sword and the spurs were found in 1995 in a tomb in the north aisle of the collegiate church of Santi Pietro e Orso in Aosta. The tomb contained the mortal remains of a knight, who may have been Guglielmo Sarriod, a vassal of the Count of Savoy, or possibly one of his successors.

3

Spearhead

Local production

14th century

Iron

From the castle of Montaldo di Mondovì
(Cuneo)

Royal Museums - Archaeological Museum, Turin,
inv. 71703

4

Three arrow heads for a bow

Local production

14th century

Iron

From the castle of Montaldo di Mondovì
(Cuneo)

Royal Museums - Archaeological Museum, Turin,
inv. 50676; 50678; 50679

5

Three arrow heads for a crossbow

Local production

14th century

Iron

From the castle of Montaldo di Mondovì
(Cuneo)

Royal Museums - Archaeological Museum, Turin,
inv. 71710; 71711; 71712

6

Olifant

North-eastern France or Meuse region

Mid-13th century

Ivory, copper perforated, engraved, and gilded

Church of Saint-Roch, Treasury, Sallanches
(Savoy)

The olifant (a French term derived from the Latin term *elephantus*) is a wind instrument in the form of a horn made from an elephant tusk: they were sounded during the Middle Ages as signals during hunting or in battle. Some olifants were then reused as reliquaries and kept in church treasuries. The specimen we see here was donated by the Count of Geneva or the Count of Savoy to the priory of Chamonix in Haute-Savoie, the assets of which were transferred to the collegiate church of Sallanches in 1520.

KNIGHTS

Knights formed a social class of their own in the feudal system. In theory, any soldier could become a knight, provided he was baptised. In practice, however – in view of the high cost of the horse and military equipment – it was mainly the nobles who rose to this rank. In particular, the position was for the sons of lords – when they were still young and waiting to inherit the fiefdom – and for younger brothers, who were destined to remain without land.

The life of a knight started as a squire, at the castle of his father or another family member, where he would be trained in the use of weapons. Then came the actual investiture, by the lord who took the knight into his court, and life would consist of fighting in the service of the lord, tournaments, participation in the crusades and various other undertakings, all of which, according to the code of chivalry, were based on particular values: “largesse”, that is, liberality and generosity, nobility of heart, loyalty, courage, piety, obedience to the Church and “courtoisie”, in other words breeding and elegance of manner.

IV GOTHIC INTERIORS

The works on display here illustrate the furnishings of castles and forts in the County of Savoy and in neighbouring areas during the early fourteenth century. In these **castles**, the floors would have been in beaten earth, wood, decorated terracotta, or stone, and the windows would not have been closed with glass, which was an expensive material reserved for churches, but with oilcloths or sheets of oiled parchment, which let the light filter through, and with wooden shutters on the inside for protection.

The walls were decorated with geometric motifs, tapestries or, more rarely, narrative cycles of paintings. There was little furniture, which always made of wood, consisting of chests (which were used to contain not only crockery and clothes, but also money and documents, as in the case of the chest from Sion on display here), sideboards, trestle tables, benches, stools covered with straw and cloth, and beds on raised platforms.

Lighting was provided by resinous torches, tallow candles and oil lamps, and the rooms were heated with fireplaces and ceramic stoves.

1

Coffer (used as a safe)

Valais

Late 13th century

Stone pine wood and fir, carved; forged iron

Musée d'histoire du Valais, Sion, permanent loan from the Chapter of Sion Cathedral

2

Stove tile with courtly figures

Geneva workshop (?)

c.1350

Terracotta with brown glaze

From the castle of Chillon (Lausanne)

Musée Cantonal d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de Lausanne, Lausanne

3

Five specimens of glazed stove ceramics

Geneva workshop (?)

About mid-14th century

Terracotta with brown-green glaze

Maison Tavel, Geneva

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the stove was a domed cubic structure that was entirely covered with terracotta tiles. These could be smooth or decorated, but on the back they always had a cylindrical opening that allowed the heat to pass through.

The heat normally came from a fire in an adjacent room and it was then irradiated by the ceramic tiles. Documents show that in 1341 there was a stove also in the castle of Turin, in the vicar's room on the first floor.

4

Key

Western Alps

16th century (?)

Iron, forged, engraved, and chased

From the castle of Castellengo (Biella)

Palazzo Madama – Museo Civico d'Arte Antica,
Turin

5

Sixteen floor tiles

Late 13th – first third 14th century

Terracotta with moulded decoration, partly glazed
Maison Tavel, Geneva

The tiles come from one of the medieval floors found in the Maison Tavel, the oldest surviving town dwelling in Geneva, which was owned by the lords of Granges, in the Valais. The decoration, made with a mould, has a circular composition with birds facing each other, next to a palm-tree, dragons and plant volutes: this is a Gothic version of late-antique and early-Christian decorations.

CHANSONS DE GESTE

These often anonymous French poems, written between 1000 and 1200, consisted of stanzas with assonant decasyllable lines (*laises*), which minstrels, troubadours and trouvères sang at feudal courts. They celebrate the feats of war of individuals or entire families, who distinguished themselves for their military valour, particularly against the Saracens. Historic events and legend blend together in these epic stories.

There are three main cycles of chansons de geste. The first of these have **Charlemagne and his knights** as the protagonists, fighting against the Saxons, Longobards, or Muslims (the Carolingian cycle). These include the famous *Chanson de Roland*, which tells the story of the defeat at Roncevaux Pass and the death of the Christian hero Roland. Then there are the poems that describe **the exploits of Garin of Monglane** and his descendants against the infidels in Provence, Languedoc, and Catalonia. The third cycle, of Doon de Mayence, tells of the **wars between the Carolingian barons**.

V CHIVALRIC POEMS AND ROMANCES

The most popular forms of literature in courtly circles during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were the **chivalric poems** of the Carolingian *chansons de geste*, such as *Girart de Vienne*, which was the source for the paintings on display here, together with romances in verse or prose.

These drew either inspiration from the classical world (as in the case of the *Roman d'Alexandre* and the *Roman d'Enéas*), or they tell of contemporary events in France and England, which are known as Matter of Britain, around which the romances of the famous Chrétien de Troyes revolve. Here the protagonists are no longer Christian Carolingian heroes, but Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. **These romances of love and adventure** were strongly influenced by courtly songs of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of which richly illuminated copies circulated throughout Europe.

Amadeus V owned some of these manuscripts, which probably came to Savoy through his wife **Marie of Brabant**, the daughter of a prince-trouvère who was educated in a court of erudite literates, or the count may have purchased them himself during his frequent trips to northern France.

1

The Bute Master **Roman de Cassidorus,** **d'Elkanus et Peliarmenus**

Flanders, 1270-80

French parchment work, ff. 231

(preserved as separate sheets)

Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, Turin, MS
1011/L. III. 8

- a) Helcana, Empress of Constantinople, prays in the forest of Vulgus disguised as a hermit;
- b) Novella of the Count of Brittany;
- c) Novella of the Viscount of Puglia;
- d) Cassidorus, Emperor of Constantinople, condemns the twelve treacherous princes to the stake.

The *Roman de Cassidorus* is a third sequel to the *Roman de Sept Sages de Rome*, an early thirteenth-century French translation of an older legend from the East. This is a roman à tiroirs, an episodic novel in which the “frame story” – of

battles and conspiracies at the court of Cassidorus, Emperor of Constantinople – contains secondary narratives told by the protagonists of the romance, which act as exempla in particular circumstances during the tale.

2 **Studio of the Maître d'Alexandre**

Roman de Merlin

Arras, 1290-1300

French parchment work, ff. 102

(preserved as separate sheets)

Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, Turin, MS

1011/L. III. 12

The Roman de Merlin by Robert de Boron, which was written in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, tells of the birth of Merlin, his arrival at the court of Vortigern, who has usurped the throne of England, and his support for the legitimate King Uther Pendragon. The story continues until the birth of Arthur and his acclamation as King of England after he famously pulls the sword from the stone. The miniature shows Arthur chasing King Rion of Ireland.

3

Maître de la Vie de Sainte Benoîte d'Origny and illuminator from Picardy

*Vengeance de Jésus-Christ par Vespasien,
Chanson des Loherens, Roman d'Auberon,
Chanson de Huon de Bordeaux [...]*

Picardy, 1311

French parchment work, ff. 583 (currently bound
in four separate volumes)

Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, Turin, MS
1011/L. II. 14

The complete codex contains nineteen separate texts, all dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They include apocryphal Christian legends, a French translation of the Bible adapted in verse, chansons de geste of Carolingian matter, and fabliaux. The style – which is plain, graphic, elegant, and full of descriptive details – allows for comparisons with the mural paintings at Cruet. The folio on display contains part of the prologue of the *Vengeance de Jésus-Christ par Vespasien*. In this legend, Emperor Vespasian falls sick with leprosy (he appears on the left with red spots on his face) and sends his seneschal Guy from Rome to the Holy Land to find the relic of Veronica (the veil bearing an impression of the face of Christ), which will miraculously heal him. After he recovers, he and his brother Titus lay siege to Jerusalem in order to avenge the death of Christ. On the left we see a hare hunting scene.

VI COURT EXPENSES

The first counts of Savoy to mint **coins** with their own names were Peter I, Humbert II and Amadeus III, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The mint was in Susa and it produced silver *denari segusini*. New mints later opened in Saint-Maurice-d'Agaune (Valais) and Chambery. Under Amadeus V came first the *denier Viennois* (minted in Vienne, in Isère, no. 1) and later the *denaro grosso* made of silver. This was heavier and of higher quality than the previous coins, with a double-headed eagle with outspread wings and a small globe between the heads on the obverse, and a double cross intersecting the legend on the reverse (no. 2-15). The expenses and revenues in the accounts held by Amadeus V's chancellery were registered in these two monetary forms.

1
Denier Viennois
c.1285-95
Alloy
Palazzo Madama -
Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,
inv. 9574

2 (2-6)
Denaro grosso
c.1285-95
Silver
Palazzo Madama -
Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,
inv. 9554, 9556, 9557, 9559, 9579

3 (7-15)
Denaro grosso
c.1295-1306
Silver
Palazzo Madama -
Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,
inv. 9561, 9562, 9564, 9565, 9566, 9567,
9568, 9578, 9580

4 (16-17)
Denier Viennois
c.1295-1306
Mixture
Palazzo Madama -
Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,
inv. 9570, 9572

5 (18-19)

Obolo or bianchetto

c.1295-1306

Mixture

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 9576, 9577

6 (20)

Denier Viennois

c.1306-23

Mixture

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 9575

7

Comptes de Bernard de Mercato des dépenses de l'hostel du comte de Savoie faites en Angleterre et en France

14 May 1302 – 29 June 1303

Parchment roll (consisting of 6 sheets of parchment sewn together)

AST, Camerale Savoia, inv. 38, f. 21, Comptes de la dépense de l'hostel des comtes et ducs de Savoie, mazzo 2, rot. 14.

The *Comptes de l'hôtel* ("household accounts") were drafted by the *maître de l'hôtel*, who saw to the needs of the prince and to securing

provisions for the court. The proceeds of the count's agricultural estates and loans from merchants are thus included among the revenues. Costs included ordinary expenses (such as for meals, banquets, the making of garments, and the purchase of furnishings) and extraordinary expenses (such as travel, messengers, gifts to illustrious personalities, and the purchase of works of art). Bernard de Marché, who drafted this document, was a notary public in Yenne (Savoie). He meticulously noted down the expenses made in France and England, some of which are of extraordinary artistic interest: they include the purchase in London of a gold seal die for Amadeus (perhaps the one used for the equestrian seal on display in showcase 1), a painted panel with a *Contrast between Three Dead and Three Living Men* and figured gold cloths to cover the tombs of English queens in Westminster, who were related to the Counts of Savoy.

8

Ceramic moneybox

13th century

Terracotta, unglazed

From Alba (Cuneo)

Royal Museums - Archaeological Museum, Turin,
inv. 71604

VII PRECIOUS OBJECTS AND GAMES

Castles contained many **precious objects**. Some were kept in the bedrooms of the lord and members of his family – these would include caskets in painted wood, ivory or worked leather for jewellery or coins (nos. 4, 6); and ivory dressing-table sets consisting of a comb (no. 5), mirror case (no. 1, 2) and a gravoir (a stylus used by women and men to trace the parting in their hair, no. 3). The tableware, made of gold, silver and mother-of-pearl, sometimes with enamel decorations, was kept under lock and key in the storage room of the castle, which in Turin was on the top floor of the north-east tower of Palazzo Madama. It would be taken out when an important banquet was being put on.

At the turn of the fourteenth century, the household accounts of Amadeus V (showcase 5, no. 2) record the purchases, in Lausanne, Geneva, Lyon, Paris and London, of many precious objects for Savoy castles. The documents also record the presence of **board games**, such as the ivory chessboard that the Count of Savoy gave to his son Edoardo in 1302. The popularity in Piedmont of the game of chess, as well as of Nine Men's Morris and tic-tac-toe, can also be seen in a number of archaeological finds (nos. 8, 9, 10).

1

Wing of a mirror case with amorous scenes

Paris

1300-30

Carved ivory, wood

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 152/AV

Portable ivory mirror cases were much appreciated by the elite in the fourteenth century. They consisted of two wings joined with a bayonet clasp; the outer sides were carved and the plate that acted as a mirror, which was generally made of polished metal, was inserted into a cavity inside. A silver chain or a silk lace was used to tie the case to one's belt. The four scenes we see here – and in particular the one with the lady crowning the knight kneeling in front of her, as a sign of devotion – is a reference to the rules of courtly love, or *fin'amor*, based on the sublimation of the lady, as sung by troubadours in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

2

Wing of a mirror case with amorous scenes

Paris

c.1340-50

Carved ivory

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 151/AV

3

**Handle of a gravoir
with Tristan and Isolde at the Fountain**

Paris

1300-30

Carved ivory

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 158/AV

4

Wedding casket

Paris

c.1350; partly reworked at a later date:

late 15th-early 16th century (handle, corner reinforcements and feet), 19th century (lock)

Bronze, gilt copper, wood; leather embossed, impressed, carved, punched, painted and gilded

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 105/CU

Made in Paris in about 1350, the casket arrived in the fourteenth or fifteenth century in Piedmont as the property of the family of Marquis Falletti of Barolo, who applied four metal shields with their coat of arms on the lid. Before entering the museum (1924), it was documented in a monastery in Susa. The work has a remarkable wealth of imagery, with all the subjects of courtly Gothic art: the chess game, lovers conversing, players of the lute, rebeck and portative, the Castle of Love (from the *Roman de la Rose*), and wild men. The polymorphous, fantastical and hybrid figures on the corners of the leather panels are taken from the marginal decorations of early fourteenth-century illuminated codices from Paris.

5

Comb with amorous scenes

Northern Italy

c.1360-80

Ivory, carved, painted, and gilded

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 150/AV

6

Casket

France or Western Alps

14th-15th century

Wood with plaster-primed and painted canvas;

copper alloy, chased and engraved

Museo del Tesoro della Cattedrale, Aosta,

Bm 2469

7

Doll or statuette

14th-15th century

Terracotta

Musée Cantonal d'Archéologie et d'Histoire

de Lausanne, Lausanne,

inv. LCA98/16702-2

Unearthed in an archaeological excavation in the Cité district of Lausanne, it is an extremely rare example of a medieval terracotta doll.

8

Chess pawn, castle figure

14th century

Ox bone

From the castle of Montaldo di Mondovì (Cuneo)

Royal Museums - Archaeological Museum, Turin

9

**Plate engraved with boards for Nine Men's
Morris and tic-tac-toe**

14th century

Quarzite from Ponte Nava or similar lithotype,
engraved with a metal tip

From the castle of Montaldo di Mondovì (Cuneo)

Royal Museums - Archaeological Museum, Turin,
inv. 74914

10

Two game pieces

14th century

Terracotta

From the castle of Montaldo di Mondovì (Cuneo)

Royal Museums - Archaeological Museum, Turin,
inv. 74915, 74916

VIII

THE PRINCE'S TABLE

The everyday tableware used in castles was made of pewter, tin and pottery. In particular, **pottery** was used for storing and serving food and for drinking.

Gold and silver tableware was used only on special occasions, such as religious festivals and weddings, and for diplomatic missions and banquets held for important guests. **Glass** beakers and bottles were either imported (from Venice or the Middle East), or produced in local furnaces.

All the items in this showcase come from **archaeological sites** in Piedmont, with the exception of the aquamanile and the base of a candlestick, which are from the Savoy collections and may perhaps have come from one of the Savoy castles of Amadeus V or his successors.

Most of the ceramics and glass items on display here were found in Palazzo Madama in 1884 in a space used for waste next to the north-west tower.

The excavations, which were coordinated by the architect Alfredo d'Andrade, were designed to gather useful information to help with the restoration of the building, which consists of centuries of superimposed archaeological layers: the medieval castle of Porta Fibellona was built around the structures of the Porta Decumana from the time of the Roman Empire, and was in turn modified and enlarged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ultimately acquiring its new name as Palazzo Madama.

1

Lower Saxony or Meuse region

Aquamanile with knight

Mid-13th century

Copper alloy, cast, chased and engraved

Royal Museums - Royal Library, Turin

Aquamaniles, which are always in metal, are containers for water in the form of animals (dogs, roosters, lions, horses, centaurs, dragons, griffins, or unicorns) or of knights. Accompanied by a basin, they were used for washing one's hands both during banquets in the homes of aristocrats and powerful merchants, and in church, for the priest's liturgical ablutions before celebrating the Mass.

2

Lower Saxony or Meuse region

Base of a candlestick

Mid-13th century

Brass, cast and chased

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 1022/B

3

Tankards

14th century

Painted slip-coated ceramic

From the castle of Santa Vittoria d'Alba (Cuneo)

Royal Museums of Turin -

Archaeological Museum, Turin,

inv. 71326, 71327

4

Small jug

Second half of the 14th century

Glazed, painted ceramic

From an excavation in Via San Tommaso, Turin

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 679/C

5

Bowl

Second half of the 14th century

Ceramic, sgraffito, painted

From the castle of Porta Fibellona in Turin

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 1031/C

6

**Ceramic basin, monochrome,
with three intertwined fish**

Second half of the 14th century

Sgraffito ceramic

From the castle of Porta Fibellona in Turin

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 1042/C

7

Basin in sgraffito ceramic

Second half of the 14th century

Ceramic, slip-coated underglaze,
painted in verdigris and rust yellow

From the excavation of the moat around the
castle of Porta Fibellona

Royal Museums of Turin -

Archaeological Museum, Turin,

inv. 78953

Almost all of the tableware used in the castle in Turin was in sgraffito and painted slipware - in other words, covered in a cream or greyish engobe, then scratched with a fine point to create geometric motifs inspired by plants or animals, then painted and, lastly, covered with a thin layer of transparent glaze and fired again.

8

**Bowl in sgraffito ceramic
of the archaic Po Valley type**

Second half of the 14th century

Glazed, painted ceramic

From an excavation in Vercelli

Royal Museums of Turin -

Archaeological Museum, Turin,

inv. 63761, 71318

9

Jug with "cannon" lip

Second half / late 14th century

Glazed ceramic

From the castle of Moncalieri

Royal Museums of Turin – Archaeological

Museum, Turin, inv. 64477, 64478

These were found together with coins, organic remains of food, and fragments of glass and ceramic in the west tower of the castle in

Moncalieri, which was the residence of Prince

Philip of Acaia and his wife Isabella of

Villehardouin (showcase 1, no. 2) in the first half of the fourteenth century. They were used for wine by the garrison soldiers, who were there to defend the castle.

10

Two glasses

Mid-14th century

Blown glass, light yellow and blue-green

From the castle of Porta Fibellona in Turin

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

not inventoried

The accounts of the Hospicium of the princes of Acaia mention the purchase in 1295 of "centum vitris planis", of a type similar to the ones we see here. There were also "centum vitris operatis", which were more expensive and probably decorated with blue fillets or with protuberances made with pincers, or possibly with enamel decorations. Some fragments of these more precious glasses have been found in the tower of the castle in Moncalieri.

11

Two glasses

Mid-late 14th century

Glass, light green and light yellow with relief decoration, blown in a mould

From the castle of Porta Fibellona in Turin

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

not inventoried

12

Bottle

Mid to late 14th century

Yellow glass with relief decoration,
blown in a mould

From the castle of Porta Fibellona in Turin

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,
not inventoried

IX

PRIVATE DEVOTION

Small religious sculptures, particularly those showing the Madonna and Child enthroned, were made from the beginning of the thirteenth century. In carved wood, ivory or gold, they were made by the same artists who also made very large statues.

These small items were made for secondary altars in churches (as is possibly the case for items 3 and 5), and for the altars of private oratories (nos. 2 and 4). Sometimes they were made for wooden tabernacles with little carved, painted doors. In the latter case, the sculptures were destined for a new type of customer – people who were princely and secular, and who wanted small sculptures for their **private prayers**. The objects needed to be suitable for the cramped spaces of castle chapels and for a personal and intimate form of devotion. At the time these works were being made, Psalters and small Books of Hours, which were used by lords and ladies for meditation and private prayer, began to spread across Europe.

Private chapels were often closed by elaborate forged iron gates, like the one from the Valle d'Aosta, which was made in the early years of the thirteenth century by travelling craftsmen from Catalonia. It is now shown on the moat level of Palazzo Madama, in the Medieval Stonework Collection.

1

Fragments of painted plasterwork

Valle d'Aosta

1200-50 (first and second group);

1250-60 (third group)

From the chapel of the castle of Quart (Aosta)

Regione Autonoma Valle d'Aosta Collection

The fragments, which number in the hundreds, were found in 2000 when the internal floor of the chapel in the castle of Quart was raised. The chapel was built in the seventeenth century after the previous Romanesque one was demolished. They all come from the original thirteenth-century decoration. There are three separate groups: the first (1200-50) includes fragments with white plasterwork and decorations with red-tipped stars; fragments of plaster with black and red circles make up the second group, which comes from the same period but slightly later, while the third group (1250-60) is the one with figurative parts, with fragments of the faces of apostles or saints.

2

Madonna and Child Enthroned

Valle d'Aosta

1250-75

Wood, sculpted, painted, and gilded

From the chapel the castle of Quart (Aosta)

Museo del Tesoro della Cattedrale, Aosta

The sculpture bears later colours, which were placed over the medieval ones after the wooden support had been replastered.

3

Studio of the Master of the Madonna of Oropa Madonna and Child Enthroned

Early 14th century

Stone pine wood, carved and painted with pastiglia decorations, hollow at the back.

Palazzo Madama -

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 30

The Madonna appears stylistically comparable to the famous Virgin of Oropa (Sanctuary, Oropa), which was commissioned in 1294-5 by Aimone di Challant, Bishop of Vercelli, from an artist from Aosta working in a French-like style. This is a particularly exquisite work: part of the throne, the rounded neckline of the tunic, the hem of the mantle and the crown all have pastiglia

decoration with rhomboidal motifs and countless little hemispheres (similar to those on the garments of the wooden Madonna of Oropa). The mantle was originally adorned with gold leaf.

4
**Follower of the Master
of the Madonna of Oropa
Madonna and Child Enthroned**

1330-40

Stone pine wood, carved and painted
Private collection, Aosta

5
**Follower of the Master
of the Madonna of Oropa
Christ Enthroned**

1330-40

Stone pine wood, carved and painted
Palazzo Madama -
Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin

X WARRIOR SAINTS

The so-called **warrior saints** were particularly popular in medieval castles from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. Ancient Roman commanders, who converted to Christianity and were martyred for their faith, appeared to feudal lords as the perfect models for the Christian knight.

Examples included Maurice and the other soldiers of the Theban Legion – Victor, Candidus, and Exuperius – who were massacred in Agaunum, in Valais, in the third century AD.

And Eustace, a cavalry commander at the time of Trajan, who had a vision of Christ while out hunting in a forest. There was also George, a tribune under Diocletian, who managed to kill a fierce dragon, protecting himself with a cross and invoking the Lord, thus liberating the princess and the city of Silene from the monster. Lastly there was Martin, a soldier at the time of the emperors Constantius and Julian.

Of all these saints, **Saint Maurice** in particular was revered in Piedmont and Savoy during the Middle Ages as the protector of the Savoy dynasty. His relics are kept in the Abbey of Saint-Maurice-d'Agaune, in canton Valais (Switzerland). The sword on display in showcase 2 (no. 1) is also said to have been his.

1

Comb with scenes from the legend of Saint Eustace

Paris

c.1350

Carved ivory

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,

inv. 149/AV

On the front: Eustace blows his horn while hunting a stag, which is being chased by his dog in the forest. On the right, kneeling, he has a vision of the face of Christ between the horns of his prey, and he converts to Christianity. On the back: Eustace and his family are baptised by a bishop; Eustace has landed on the shores of Egypt, and he watches the ship he has travelled on as it sails away with his wife, who has been kidnapped by the sailors; he then looks on helplessly as a wolf and a lion carry off his children, who are on the two opposite banks of the Nile. We do not see the end of the story, when Eustace is reunited with his family and together they face martyrdom by being burnt to death inside a bronze statue of a bull. This work may be a liturgical comb, with which the priest arranged his hair before celebrating Mass, or, more likely, an object for secular use, since the imagery is perfectly suited to the ideals of chivalry.

2

Saint Victor

Val d'Aosta sculptor

1340-50

Stone pine wood, carved,
with traces of the original colours

From the parish church of San Vittore in Roisan
(Aosta)

Museo del Tesoro della Cattedrale di Aosta, Aosta,
inv. BM528

The saint is dressed as a medieval knight: a sword with a circular pommel and a dagger with a forked handle hang from his belt. His shoes with elegant spurs are decorated with plaques that are comparable to those found in a tomb in the collegiate church of Santi Pietro e Orso in Aosta (showcase 2, no. 3). Recent restoration has shown that the tunic and shoes were originally painted red, and that the mantle was green, the hair blond, and the beard black.

3

Saint Victor

Master of Saint Victor

1340-50

Stone pine wood, carved

From the parish church of Challand-Saint-Victor
(Aosta)

Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin,
inv. 1011/L