art and architecture: Serbian

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From the 9th-century conversion to Christianity until the 11th century, the ecclesiastical art and architecture of the Serbs, both Orthodox and Roman Catholic, shared the concurrent accomplishments of the Croats, Latins, and Greeks. All of these groups cohabited the territories between the rivers Bojana and Cetina in Duklja (Zeta, Montenegro), Zahumije (Herzegovina), and their littoral. Wall *paintings, donor *portraits, inscriptions in Greek and Latin, and architectural *sculpture on *windows, portals, capitals, *chancel screens, *ciboria, and baptismal fonts, reveal influences of pre-Romanesque, Romanesque, and Byzantine models. Instructive examples come from the 9th-century *rotunda of St Peter at Ras, in central *Serbia; the cross-in-square church of St Triphon at Kotor (809?), replaced by a Romanesque *cathedral in the mid 12th century; the 11th-century single-aisled church of St Michael in Ston; and the 11th-century *basilica of Archangel Michael in the fortified town Martinici, near Skadar Lake.

The best preserved, studied, and most comprehensive Serbian artistic achievements are related to churches and monasteries built from the period of the Nemanjić dynasty founded by Jovan Stefan Nemanja (r. 1169–96) until the Ottoman conquest in 1459. Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic influences on Serbian arts were continuous and of various extent. Stefan Nemanja founded three churches built in three different building idioms. The Byzantines built the all-brick church of St Nicholas (1169) at Kuršumlija, while local builders used stone for St George (or Djurdjevi Stupovi, 1170–71) near Novi Pazar. Stefan Nemanja’s mausoleum, the church of the Mother of God (begun in 1183) at Studenica monastery, revetted in high-quality marble, blends Romanesque *corbel-tables and architectural sculpture with Byzantine spatial concepts and *domes into a new, ‘Raška School’, architectural style.

The use of Serbian language on *frescoes and distinctive local features such as the cult and image of Stefan Nemanja (St Symeon of Serbia) is first acknowledged at Studenica.
Comparable only to the *Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos founded by Stefan Nemanja and his son Rastko (St *Sava of Serbia), Studenica remained of the greatest spiritual importance for the Serbs. Unique in its circular plan with the *katholikon in the very centre, Studenica became the ultimate model for 13th-century monasteries at Ziča, Mileševa, Sopočani, Morača, Gradac, Arilje, and their *katholika. Their frescoes introduced classifying elements of Late Byzantine art, exemplified by the paintings from the Holy Trinity church at Sopočani (1273/4). Monumental and rhythmical compositions, harmonious colour-schemes, and oversized saints painted as antique heroes recurred during the Italian Renaissance period.

Under King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282–1321) the churches of Bogorodica Ljeviška at Prizren, Kraljeva crkva at Studenica, St George at Staro Nagoričino, the Dormition of the Mother of God at Gračanica, and Hilandar katholikon reveal the major shift towards a 'Serbo-Byzantine' style in both monumental painting and architecture. Materialized by builders and painters, mostly trained in Thessalonian and Epirote idioms, these churches reach the best Late Byzantine achievements. Sculptural decoration and building techniques of some other early-14th-century churches, like at Banjška and Dečani monasteries, show western influences.

Byzantine influences continued to prevail in 14th-century Serbian icons (for example, the icon of the Presentation of the Virgin, Hilandar monastery), *embroidery (for example, *King Milutin's epiphanies, Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade); *manuscripts (for example *Serbian Psalter, Munich, Bayer. Staatsbibliothek, Cod. slav. 4), and wall painting. The largest extant painting programme in the Balkans, that from Dečani church, has more than 1,000 compositions, including the Nemanjić Family Tree (cf. 'Tree of Jesse'), and exemplifies the finest artistic accomplishments under Serbian patrons. The churches of the Holy Archangels near Prizren and of the Mother of God at Matejić built under Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (r. 1331–46; emperor 1346–55) and the churches of Archangel Michael at Lesnovo and St Demetrius in Markov Manastir, founded by the Serbian aristocracy, reflect the different tastes of their patrons and the presence of various builders and artists who drew their inspiration from *Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and the Adriatic coastal regions.

After the battle on the river Marica (1371) the Serbian state shrank in the north to the Morava valley, where an idiosyncratic national style, the so-called 'Morava School', emerged. The style is typified by a triconch church at Kalenić monastery (1407–17) and its rich stone and ceramo-plastic decoration. Its frescoes of the parables of Christ represent figures dressed in the costumes of contemporary Serbian *nobility.

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