Medieval Europe

Today we are going to explore what life was like for noble men and women—those who belonged to powerful, wealthy families—in the Middle Ages, or medieval period, in Western Europe. The term Middle Ages usually refers to the years between 476 and 1500.

In many stories from the Middle Ages, people go on quests, or adventures, to search for something important. Today, we will go on a quest to search for objects in the Museum that depict noble men and women of the court in medieval Europe. All of the objects are located in the gallery of Medieval, Byzantine, and Islamic Art, which is on the upper level of the Art Museum.

Courtly Life in Medieval Europe

The court was the household of a king, or other noble person, in medieval society. A medieval king often traveled from castle to castle, and his court would travel with him.

Life in a castle was not always comfortable; castles could be cold and drafty, especially in the winter. Various forms of entertainment—including storytelling, songs, great feasts, tournaments, and games—made life more pleasant for the members of the court.

French (Alsace) or German (Black Forest): *Game box*, 1440–70. Bone, tortoiseshell, and wood, 9.7 x 14 x 15.7 cm. Museum purchase, gift of the National Forge Foundation at the behest of Duane Wilder, Class of 1951 (y1959-11). Photo: Bruce M. White

Medieval Stories: Sir Gawain and the Magic Bed

Telling stories was a popular form of entertainment at court. Scenes from some of the more popular stories were depicted on small, expensive art objects that would have been owned by the nobility.

Find the case in the center of the gallery with this small ivory panel, shaped like a square. It depicts a quest undertaken by one of King Arthur's knights.

French (possibly Paris), *Panel from a Casket: Sir Gawain on the Marvelous Bed*, 1300–50. Ivory, 10.7 x 12 x 0.5 cm. Museum purchase, Carl Otto von Kienbusch Jr. Memorial Collection Fund and Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund (2009-23). Photo: Bruce M. White

According to legend, Arthur was the king of the Britons in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Sir Gawain was Arthur's nephew, and there are many stories about him and the various quests that he undertook.

In one story, Gawain and his assistant come upon an enchanted castle where a group of noble ladies and their queen are being held captive.

Can you find them?

Medieval Games and Courtly Love

Find this panel to the left of the one we just saw. It depicts men and women courting and playing games.

French (Paris or Northern France): *Relief from a Casket: Scenes of Lovers and Game-Playing*, 1340–60. Ivory, 10.5 x 25 x 4 cm. Museum purchase, John Maclean Magie, Class of 1892, and Gertrude Magie Fund (1996-153). Photo: Bruce M. White.

At the left of the panel are four courting couples, or couples declaring their love for each other. In one scene (a detail of which is shown here), a man gives a lady a present.

Can you tell what it is?

It's a squirrel, which the lady will keep as a pet! A squirrel as a pet was a sign of the woman's ability to tame wild nature.

Next, can you find two groups playing games? One group is playing a game called "frog in the middle." A man sits in the middle of a circle and tries to catch the people around him.

We now turn from our exploration of stories and games to another aspect of medieval life: warfare and crusade.

Warfare and Crusade

Life at court often revolved around war. Kings and other high-ranking members of the nobility fought for control of land. Some kings also went on crusade, or religious war. The men who assisted the king as he waged war or went on crusade were known as knights.

Find this stained glass window. This scene depicts King Louis IX of France fighting the Saracens, a word that medieval Europeans used for Muslims who lived in Egypt.

The top of the window is filled with gold fleurs-de-lis, or lily flowers, the symbol of the French king. The fleur-de-lis looks like this:

Look at the men fighting. There are two groups, one on the left and one on the right.

What are some of the differences in their armor and weapons?

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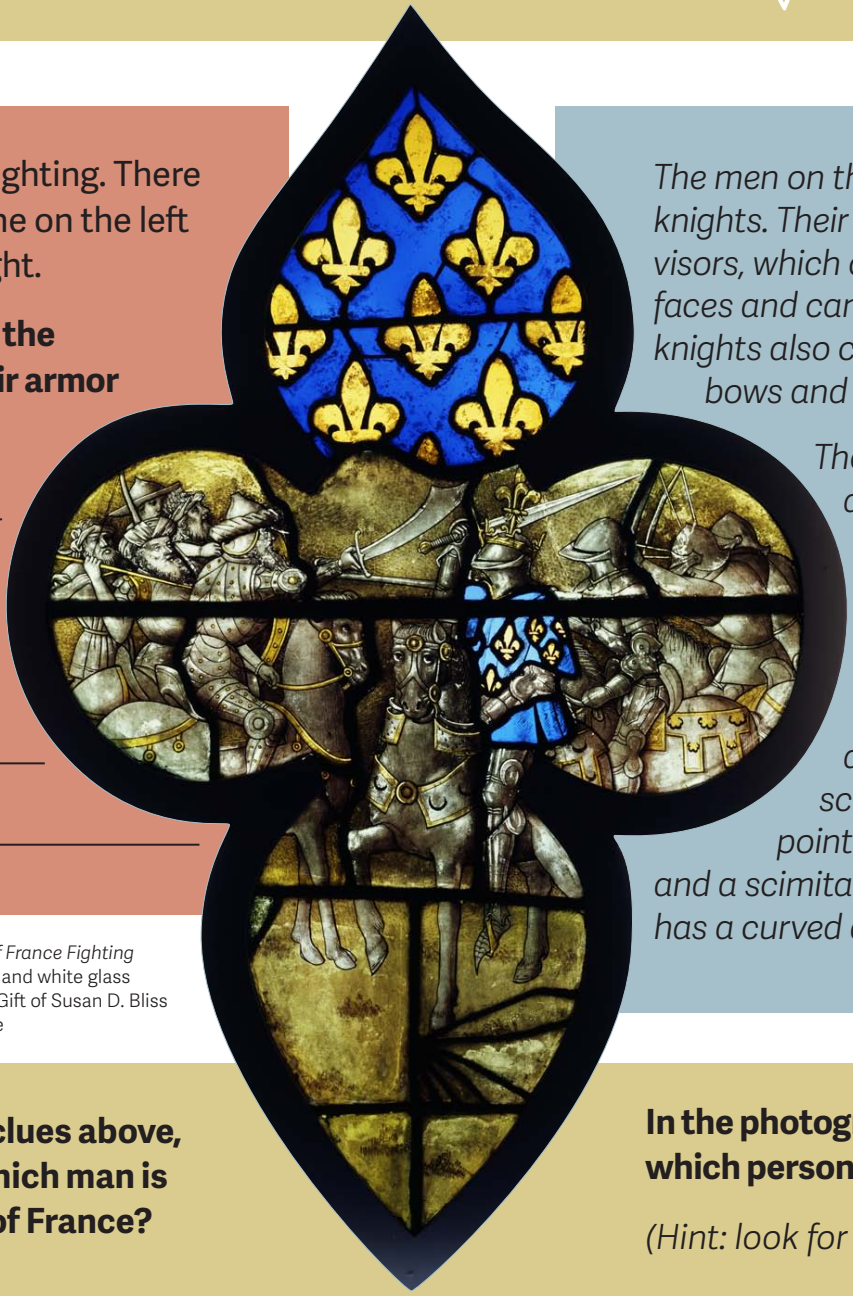


French (Auvergne): *Saint Louis of France Fighting the Saracens*, 1465–75. Pot metal and white glass with silver stain, 101.9 x 68.9 cm. Gift of Susan D. Bliss (y1950-26). Photo: Bruce M. White

The men on the right are French knights. Their helmets have visors, which cover the knights' faces and can be flipped up. The knights also carry swords and bows and arrows.

The men on the left are Saracens. They wear pointed helmets over turbans (fabric that is wound around the head) and carry javelins or scimitars. A javelin is a pointed throwing spear, and a scimitar is a sword that has a curved and pointed blade.

Based on the clues above, can you tell which man is King Louis IX of France?

In the photograph here, circle which person you think he is.

(Hint: look for the fleurs-de-lis!)

Spanish Knight

We continue our quest in the same gallery.
Find this sculpture of a Spanish knight:

Spanish, probably Castille, Toledo: *Gisant: knight in armour*, ca. 1500. Stone, h. 63.5 cm., l. 189.9 cm. Gift of Baroness Cassel van Doorn (y1955-3277). Photo: Bruce M. White.

This sculpture was made for the top of a knight's tomb. It includes many details of the man's armor. Instead of a helmet, the man wears a soft hat. Can you find the following details of the knight's armor?

• **hauberk**	*mail shirt, made out of tiny rings of metal*
• **gauntlets**	*metal gloves*
• **handle of a battle axe**	*the blade is missing*

This figure would have been on top of the knight's sarcophagus, a stone container that held his body after he died. The knight's family coat of arms would have been on the side of the sarcophagus. A coat of arms was a unique combination of pictures and colors that had different meanings.

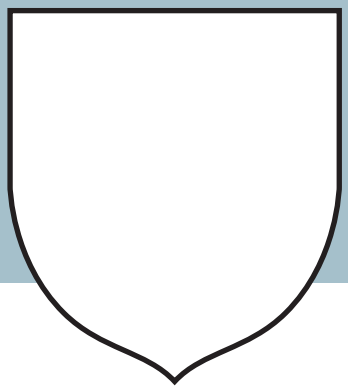
Unfortunately, the sarcophagus is now lost, and we have no clues to tell us who this man was.

Make Your Own Shield

Here are some suggestions for continuing your medieval adventure at home.

You will need: a large piece of cardboard or tag board; scissors; glue or tape; colored pencils, crayons, or markers.

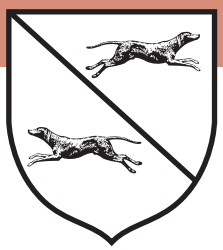
To make your shield, cut out a large piece of cardboard or tag board in the shape shown here:



You can draw lines across the shield to divide it into two or four parts, like this:

Next, draw pictures of things that you like or like to do in the different sections. For example, if you have a pet dog, you could draw a dog.

Or, you can use some of the traditional symbols from the Middle Ages on the right.



Colors

	Silver or white	peace
	Red	strength
	Blue	truth and loyalty
	Green	hope and joy
	Purple	royal majesty (king)

Pictures

	Apple (or other fruit)	peace
	Bear	strength
	Bee	hard-working
	Crown	king
	Deer	peace and harmony
	Dog	loyalty
	Dragon	defender of treasure
	Griffin (head and wings of an eagle, body of a lion)	bravery; defies death
	Helmet	wisdom and protection
	Lion	courage
	Rose (or other flower)	hope and joy
	Ship	ancient sea voyages
	Unicorn	courage and strength

Thank you for joining us today to explore the art of Medieval Europe. Don't forget to stop at the information desk to collect a sticker for your ***Artful Adventures Passport***. We hope that you enjoyed your visit to the Princeton University Art Museum and that you will come back again to join us for another Artful Adventure!

Suggested Reading

Magic In The Margin: A Medieval Tale of Bookmaking
by Nikola-Lisa
illustrated by Bonnie Christensen
In this picture book set in a medieval monastery, Simon dreams of the day he can create his own pictures, but he must first complete an unusual assignment. (Gr 1–4)

A Medieval Feast
by Aliki
This story describes the preparation and celebration of a medieval feast, with royal guests, held at an English manor house. (Gr 2–6)

Archers, Alchemists, and 98 Other Medieval Jobs You Might Have Loved or Loathed
by Priscilla Galloway
illustrated by Martha Newbigging
This book describes some of the jobs performed by people living in Europe during the Middle Ages. (Gr 3–6)

Medieval Tales for Kids to Tell
by Lorna MacDonald Czarnota
This book presents stories about the Middle Ages, along with tips for storytellers. (Gr 3–6)

Knights & Castles: 50 Hands-on Activities to Experience the Middle Ages
by Avery Hart and Paul Mantell
This book introduces the history and culture of the Middle Ages through activities and crafts that are representative of medieval life: for example, creating an hourglass, a catapult, a coat of arms, and a code of honor. (Gr 3–6)

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales
by Marcia Williams
A retelling in comic strip form of Geoffrey Chaucer's famous work, in which a group of pilgrims in fourteenth-century England tell each other stories as they travel on a pilgrimage to the cathedral at Canterbury. (Gr 4–8)

Front cover: German, *Annunciation to the Virgin*, late 15th–early 16th century. Pot metal and white glass with silver stain, 125.7 x 66 cm. Museum purchase (y1936-5)

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