Gothic Art: Jamb Figures, Chartres

Although Medieval artists participated in a wide variety of works, including metalwork, book illumination, architecture and tapestry, sculpture was one of the most important artistic formats. The Last Judgment—with God deciding who would go to Heaven and who would go to Hell was a favorite topic. Makes sense for a doorway of a church, right? Here is the doorway of beautiful Chartres Cathedral in France (which dates from the late Medieval period, the 12th century).

Above the doorway, we see a scene of the Apocalypse, with Christ in the center.
Here is a close up of the figures on either side of the doorway (portal), called **jamb figures** because of the position they occupy by the side of the portal. As you can see, jamb figures are not freestanding. Unlike the sculptures of saints and angels within the church itself, jamb figures were attached directly to the architecture of the church. They are a metaphor for the way that saints were thought to provide the church’s foundation and structure. In fact, most medieval art (and especially church art) has double, and sometimes triple meanings, even down to the number of columns and windows included in the church. This made for a very thoughtful experience for the church-goer, who could choose to contemplate the obvious as well as the more subtle, even abstract meanings of every part of the church.

Of course, it is immediately apparent that the artist did not place a priority on depicting the human body in the Greek or Roman style, as a naturalistic and three-dimensional object. Like many modern artists, he or she was concerned primarily with the abstract *idea* that could be communicated, rather than with naturalistic reproduction. When you look at medieval art, keep in mind that these artists made the choice not to create realistic human figures—it is not an accident or oversight.

Text by Victoria Valdes