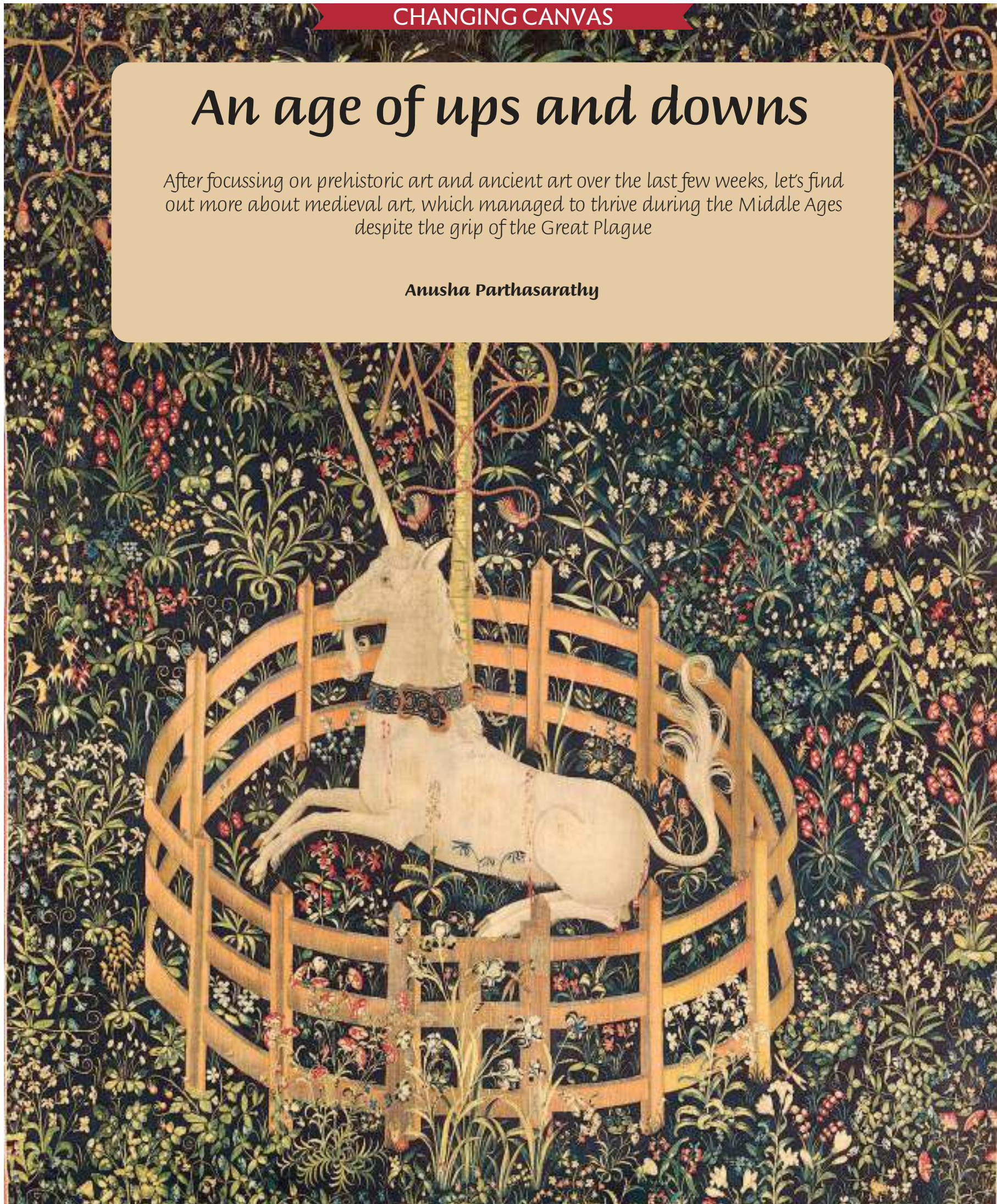


CHANGING CANVAS

An age of ups and downs

After focussing on prehistoric art and ancient art over the last few weeks, let's find out more about medieval art, which managed to thrive during the Middle Ages despite the grip of the Great Plague

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The Unicorn is in Captivity and No Longer Dead, one of the seven tapestries in The Hunt of the Unicorn. PHOTO: THE CLOISTERS MUSEUM, NEW YORK / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Medieval art (500 to 1550 AD)

After the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD, there was a lull in Europe, the Middle East and northern Africa that lasted about 1,000 years. What happened during this time? Nothing. People were poor, and there weren't that many of them to make the economy thrive. Then, around 1350, the Black Death (or the Great Plague) wiped out a large part of the population in Europe and Asia (together believed to be close to 200 million people!), and the countries needed a few hundred years to get their life back together.

But, even when there wasn't a lot happening, art thrived. There were sculptures, frescos, stained glass paintings, ceramics, mosaics... So who created these and for whom? Institutions such as churches and monasteries had money and encouraged religious art, which began to grow and thrive. This is how Christian art came to the forefront at this time. Other popular forms of art prevalent were Gothic art, Byzantine art and Romanesque art.

By the end of the Middle Ages, more people began to explore the arts and commission paintings and other art forms. Sadly though, a lot of the personal art created during this time is lost in the realms of history. The Middle Ages lacked the concept of preserving art for future. Churches have survived for centuries, and some palaces, perhaps. But many homes and other structures that housed invaluable paintings and frescos have been lost, leaving behind an impression that the Middle Ages predominantly had religious art.

Another feature of this era is the use of precious metals and other valuable resources in arts – such as gold, lapis lazuli (which could be bought only in Afghanistan) and so on. Even though paper was available by the end of the era, it was too expensive to be used freely.



The citizens of Toumai bury their dead during the black death. Miniature from manuscript, Belgium, 14th Century. PHOTO: PIERART DOU TIELT / SODABOTTLE / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Examples of medieval art

- **The Hunt of the Unicorn:** This tapestry is one of the greatest feats and mysteries of the Middle Ages. These seven tapestries were first recorded in 1680, belonging to a French family. They are painted in the Renaissance style and tell the story of noblemen and hunters pursuing a unicorn. It is still unknown who made it and for whom, though many theories about it have been floating around for years. They are currently in The Cloisters museum in New York.

- **The Pyxis of al-Mughira:** This ivory container, carved intricately, dates back to the Spanish Umayyad period, during which time the Umayyad caliphate expanded to include the Hispanic kingdom (711 to 788 AD). The container is supposed to have been a coming-of-age present to al-Mughira, the prince of Abd al-Rahman III.

- **The Wilton Diptych:** Dating back to 1399 AD, this rare survivor of the Middle Ages' religious art is a portable two-panel painted piece depicting King Richard II of England being presented to the Virgin and Child. The painting uses lapis lazuli, vermillion and other expensive pigments. It is currently housed in the National Gallery, London.



The Pyxis of al-Mughira. PHOTO: MARIE-LAN NGUYEN / JASTROW / LOUVRE MUSEUM / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



The Wilton Diptych. PHOTO: SAILKO / THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Wow facts

- The Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Abbey, a monastery in Sunderland, England, had planned on creating three single-volume Bibles in 692 AD. Since this was a project planned during the pre-paper era, it required quite a bit of preparation. One of the initial steps, for instance, was to breed enough cattle to make up the 1,600 calves that had to be skinned to provide the vellum (parchment made from calf skin) for it. One of these Bibles survives today as the "Codex Amiatinus".

- There are so many Islamic influences in the mainstream Western medieval art of the Middle Ages. Sample this. In Moissac in southern France, the scalloped doorways, the circular patterns above the arches, and depicting Christ surrounded by musicians were all elements derived from the East.



Folio 5r from the "Codex Amiatinus", showing Ezra the scribe PHOTO: Dsmdgold / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



PHOTO: SUMMER MALIK FROM PIXABAY

Fun experiment

The Medieval art period was a time new elements and pigments were used to make art. Form a group with friends and zero in on different everyday items you can use to make colour (turmeric and beetroot juice, to name a couple). Now try painting with these and see what shades you get.