

## Chapter One: Eve

Eve. Naked, realistic and provocative!

My astonishment was beyond words. Could this really be the only sculptured nude to have been displayed in public over a period of five hundred years? And in a church of all places! I had known that Eve was here but I must admit that the actual confrontation was a remarkable experience.

I reached Vézelay in Burgundy, France, on a miserable, drizzly cold day in May. However, as I approached the historic town, my spirits rose. There, in the scenic Burgundy countryside, perched on a hill, the highest spot overlooking the small ancient township, beckoned the Basilica Church of St. Mary Magdalene. The remarkable site was nothing less than inspiring.

Undoubtedly, the thousands of pilgrims and crusaders reaching this same spot almost one thousand years ago had been overcome with similar uplifting emotions.

Ignoring the overcast sky I focused on my upcoming rendezvous with the special abbey church I had come to see. For me, this masterpiece of Romanesque architecture represented a model in microcosm of medieval life, the place where its art and religion converged. I climbed the last hundred meters on foot, just as tens of thousands before me had done in the Middle Ages, while stopping over on their pilgrimage to the holy site of Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain.

I could have spent hours enjoying the impressive western façade of the church and the intricate sculpture work on the tympanum above the central portal depicting the Last Judgment. But that wasn't why I was here. Entering the church I was surprised to find myself standing, not in the porch facing the nave, but enclosed within the narthex (entry hall). Another series of three closed portals were facing me, the middle one of which was adorned above with another superb sculpture. This theme was fairly unusual because it was a striking sculpture of Christ's mission to the Apostles; rays of light or lightning emanated from his hands touching the Apostles' heads. The Apostles were receiving the spirit before setting out on their mission to preach and convert.

Conscious of my own personal mission, I pushed open the huge central wooden door of the narthex and at last found myself in the vast central nave. It was magnificent and cool, bathed in a soft glow of natural light. I remained motionless for several minutes simply taking in the vast panorama of this Romanesque architectural wonder of heavy masonry, sturdy compound pillars and high-ribbed vaulted ceiling. The

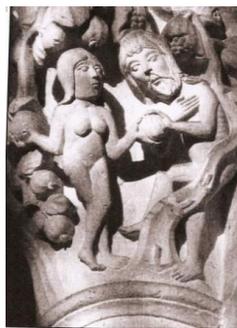
weak light filtered through marvelous, colored lancet windows creating an eerie timeless atmosphere. The medieval ambience was overpowering.

Impatiently I began my search. Although the image was framed in my mind I simply couldn't find the special Eve sculpture. Walking up and down the vast nave I examined each and every sculptured capital nestling on elegant compound columns. Each of the scores of huge columns bears a magnificent, sculptured capital depicting either a biblical story or any number of Christian iconological themes. I studied them all meticulously.

Where was she hiding? Becoming ever more impatient, I began circling the lateral naves. This was a huge basilica and I must have made these rounds at least four times as, each time, growing doubts gnawed at my belief that she was here. Had she been removed? Was it mere rumor? I needed help. In desperation I looked around me and sought out the only possibility of assistance – the souvenir shop. Expressing my disappointment to the lady behind the cash register in my poor French, I explained that I couldn't find the elusive Eve. She smiled understandingly (had others asked her the same question?) and to my great joy she seemed to know all about Eve. She pointed out that close to the apse, on the right hand side of the central nave, if I raised my eyesight to a second level of columns, I would find her.

And so it was.

Not far off, where the central nave separates from the chancery, I raised my head and looked up, setting my sights on the second level of columns and in the forefront of the church's nave I could just about make out the famous nude of the Middle Ages.



Eve: Vézelay Church

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