

The image features a decorative border on the left and right sides. The border is composed of intricate black scrollwork, gold dots, and various colored flowers (blue, purple, pink, yellow). A blue dragon with wings and horns is depicted on the left side of the border, facing right. The background is a light beige, textured surface.

Positively Medieval

**Constructing the Middle Ages in Literature and
the Museum**

Emily Voneman
English and Anthropology
Class of 2025



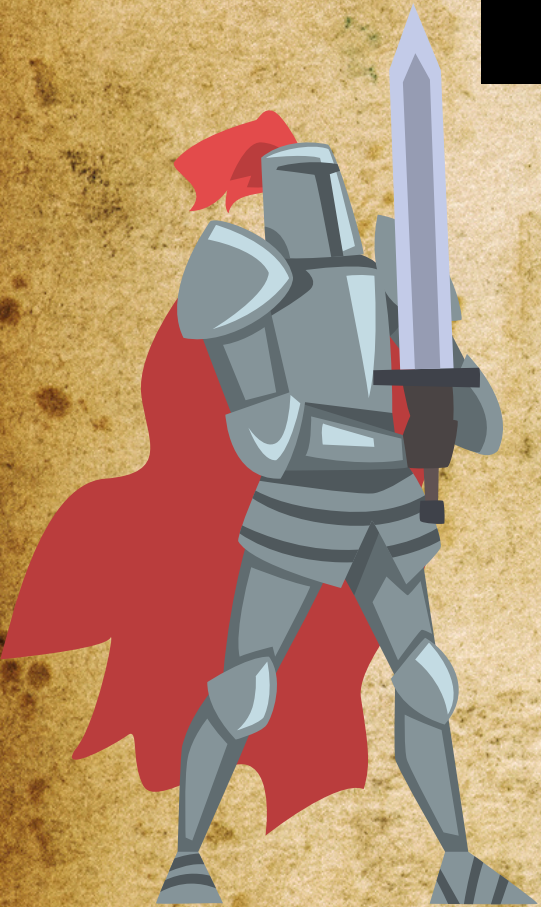
Cultural Memory and the Middle Ages

When we represent the past, we are constructing it according to our thoughts/needs/values in the present

We make sense of the present by constructing narratives about the past

Grotesque vs. Romantic

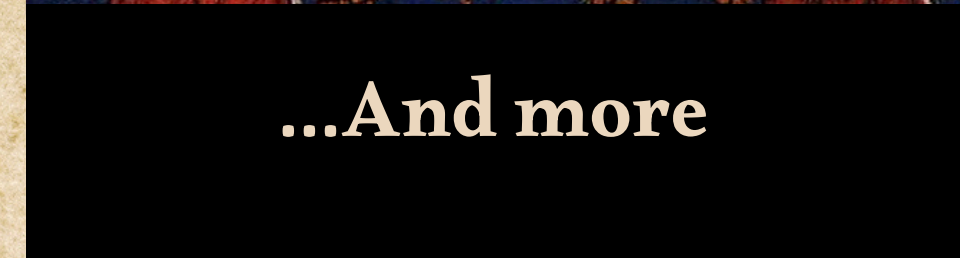
Romantic



Grotesque



Theories of Difference

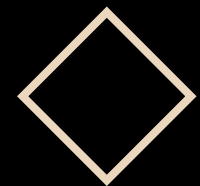


The Name of the Rose

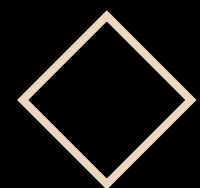
Umberto Eco



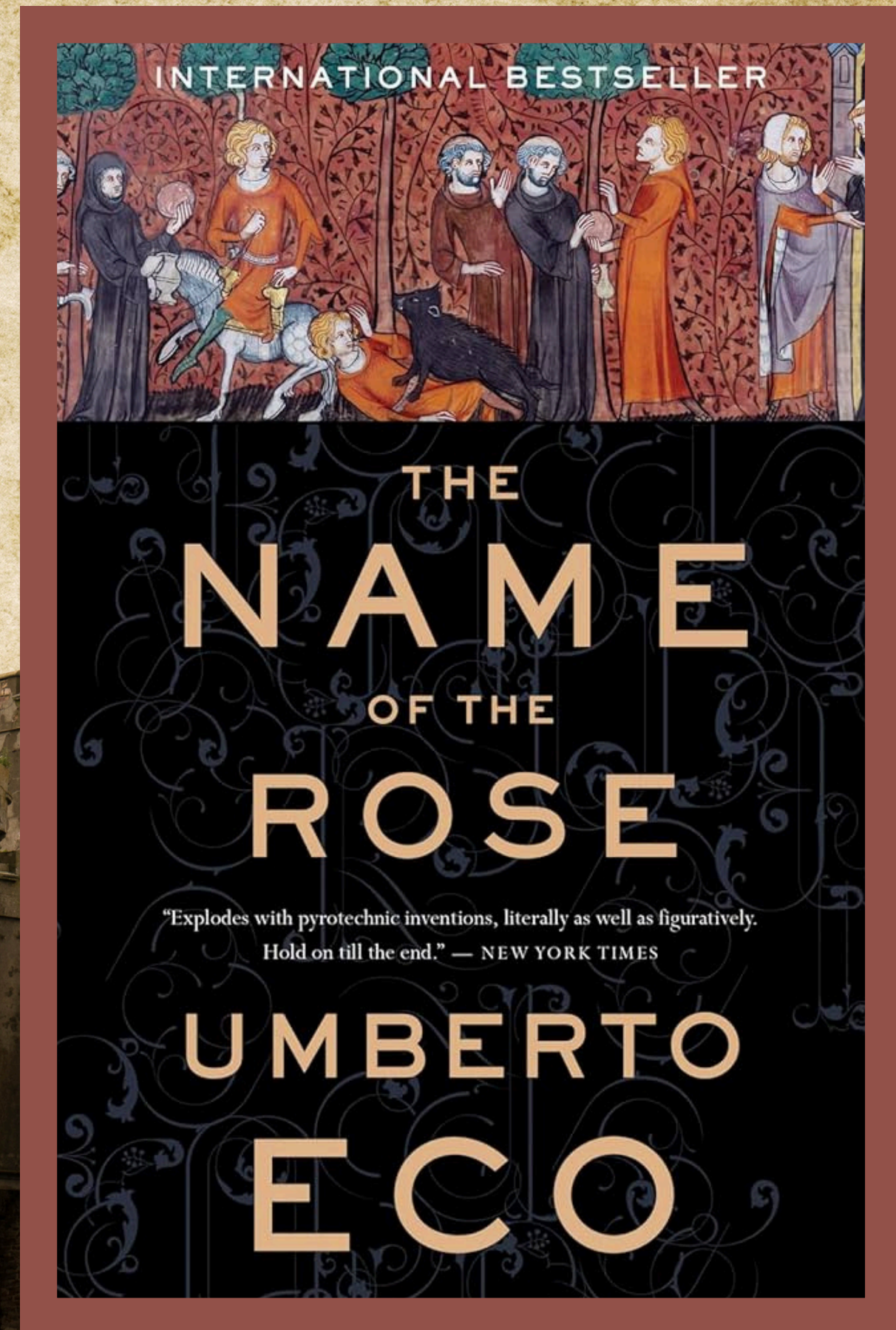
Challenging boundary between “modern” and “medieval”



Grotesque medieval as 20th century fascism



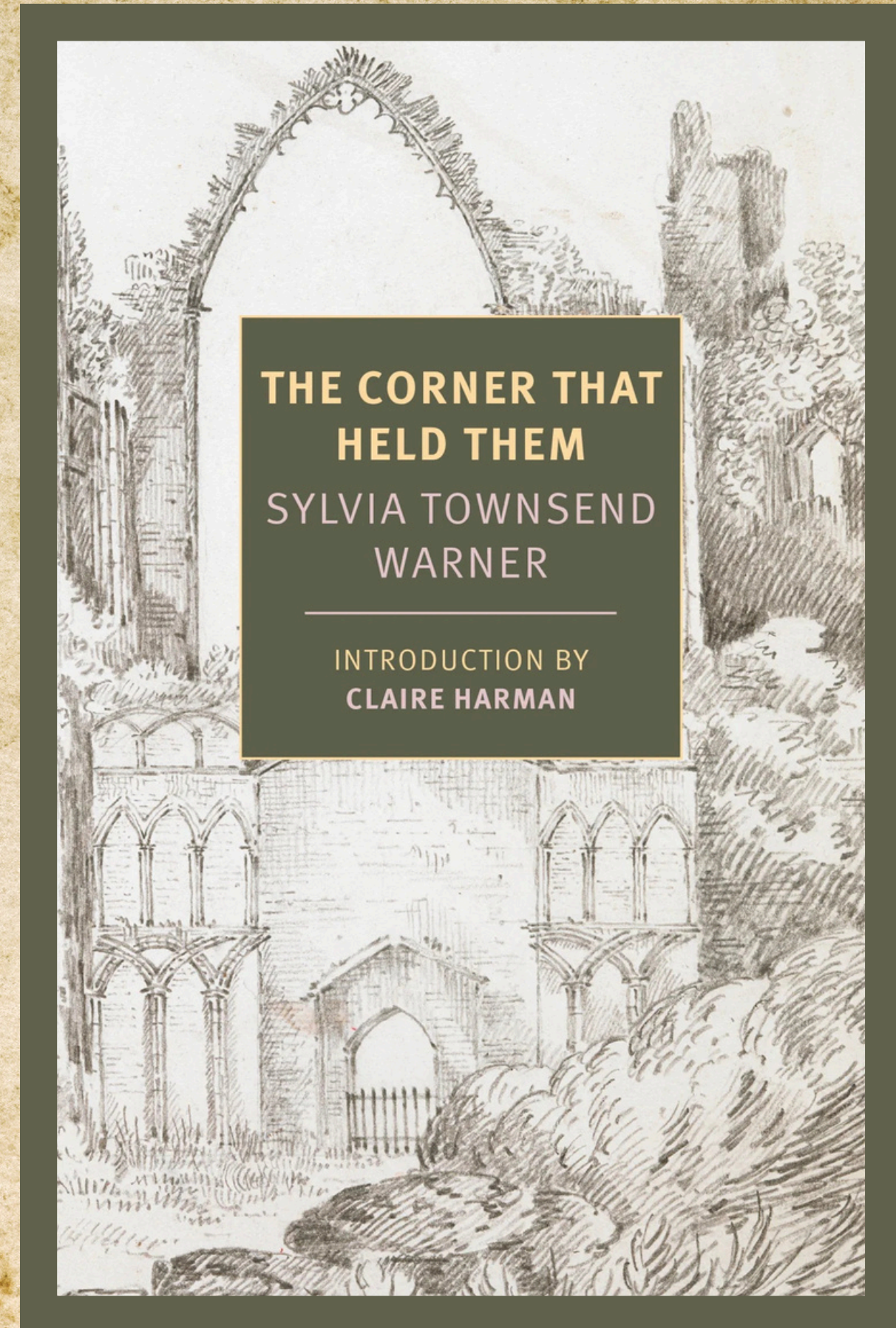
Grotesque medieval to criticize the present, not to denigrate the past



The Corner That Held Them

Sylvia Townsend-Warner

- ◇ Critiques the devaluation of women's lives under oppressive economies
- ◇ Nuns as a “queer” group outside of the heterosexual expectations of marriage and childbearing
- ◇ Grotesque medieval to criticize the present



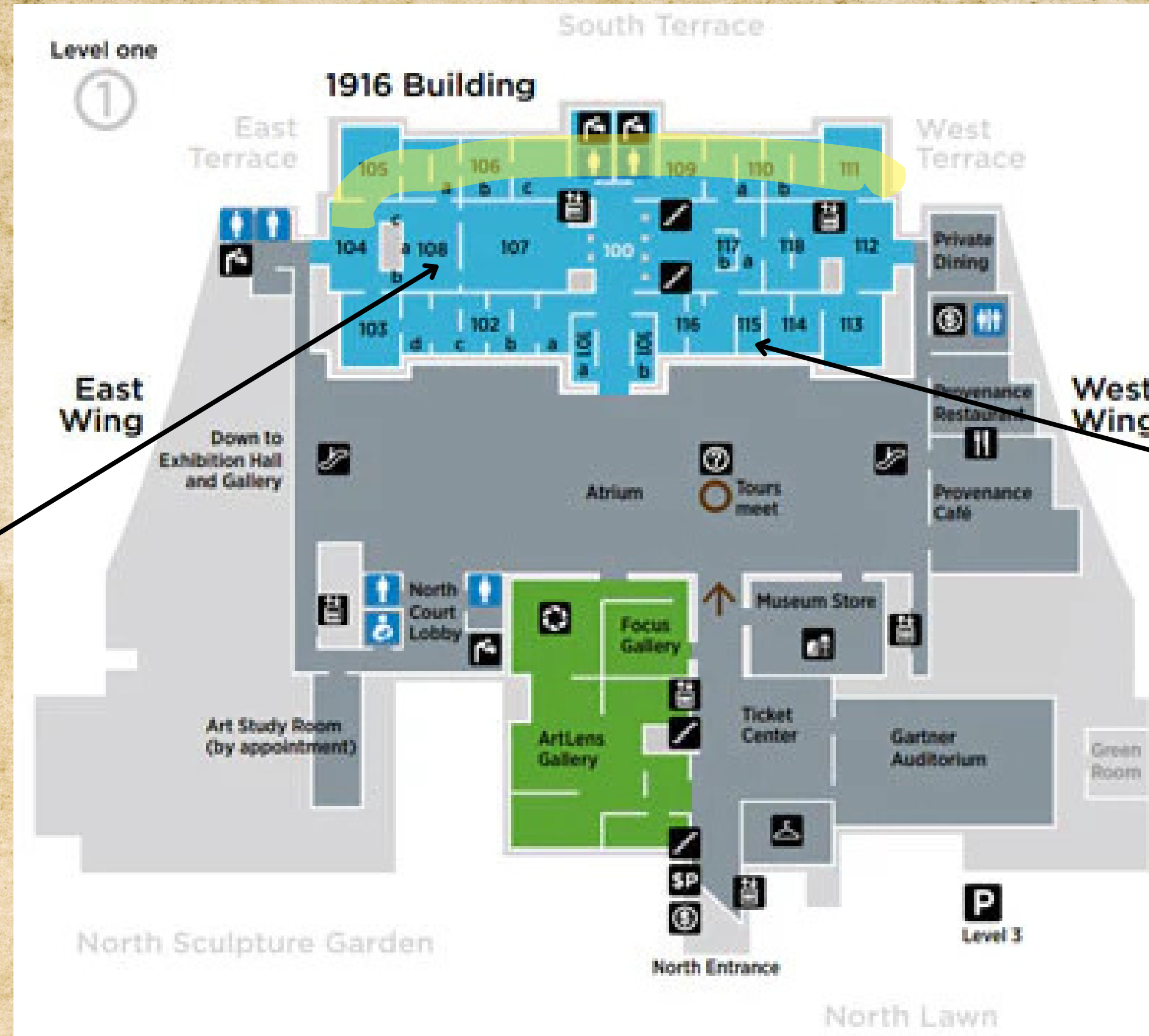
The Cleveland Museum of Art

Develops a romantic (and Eurocentric,
Christian) Middle Ages through design
features and collecting practices

Ethnographic interviews and visual
analysis



Highlighted:
Byzantine and
Medieval Galleries



African Art Gallery... yes,
just that one.

Special Exhibition: Creation
and (Re)Birth

Luxurious colors



Pointed arches

Columns

Velvet cases

Somber lighting





“Halo” spotlights



CREATION AND (RE)BIRTH IN MEDIEVAL ART

This exhibition explores some of the fundamental events in the sacred narratives of the medieval world: the creation of the universe, the birth of its gods and its humans, and visions of the end conceived as a new beginning. The show asks a series of questions: how was the creation of the world—as well as the creators of that world—visualized in several religious cultures? How were ideas about conception, incarnation, and birth figured in the objects created by these cultures? How did they perceive the difference between birth and creation, and the connections between death and rebirth? What parallels were drawn between miraculous and everyday births? How did religious teachings on reincarnation and resurrection manifest in medieval material culture? What, more broadly, was the role of images in making sense of the universe?

The objects in the exhibition span from the 800s to the 1500s. Drawn from several collections in the Cleveland Museum of Art, including medieval art, Chinese art, Indian and Southeast Asian art, art of the Americas, and prints and drawings they offer possibilities of forging connections across cultures and geographies.

The show is a culmination of several years of collaboration between the medieval art history program at Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Museum of Art, made possible by the support of the Mellon Foundation.

Creation and (Re)Birth

- **Cross-cultural**
- **Questioning gendered norms**
- **Exploring a less rigid understanding of what it means to be “medieval”**



Conclusions: Why the Middle Ages?



- Recognizable but distant
- Precursor to modernity

... And why is this important?

- Medieval imagery increasingly prevalent in white supremacist rhetoric
- Exercise in interrogating the narratives of what we read and see
 - Narratives in books/museums/etc. **matter!** They tell us how to behave and what to value
 - Especially in places/formats we consider educational

What does “medieval” look like to you?

