Social, political, economic, and religious conditions have each greatly influenced French art from the time of the Celtic Gauls through the reign of King Louis XIV, but religion has been the overriding influence. Each of the time periods studied will be briefly examined with an illustration of religion’s influence on art. A more in-depth analysis of Antoine Caron’s *The Massacre of the Triumvirate* (1566) will demonstrate how religion was the predominant influence during the time period studied and how it was deeply intertwined with all other societal conditions.

Julius Caesar’s logs of the Gallic War (58 to 50 BC) described that the Celts of Gaul worshipped Roman gods and their own gods of nature. He wrote of many images of the Roman god, Mercury, and the religious significance of the wild boar sometimes used on war helmet crests. Very little art from this era has survived, but the stone relief at Rheims of the horned god Cernunnos shows the influence of religion in art of the time through the choice of subject matter to show reverence (Figure 1).\(^1\)

Religion grew to have even more significant control over French society in the Middle Ages. Christianity became the state-endorsed religion around the year 900 and the idea of civilizing others through the spread of Christianity was promoted. The Church spent a great deal of time and money building large pilgrimage-style churches since converting people to Christianity and increasing the Church’s power during the Crusades was a top priority.\(^2\) The Catholic Church was a unifying cultural influence that preserved Latin learning, maintained literacy, provided centralized administration through its network of bishops, and raised revenue through papal indulgences. The illuminated manuscripts in gold and silver that the monks produced demonstrate the Church’s role in art and preserving literacy (Figure 2).\(^3\) Massive art projects and
cathedrals were undertaken with the wealth of the Church after Charlemagne made tithing mandatory. The Catholic Church had become omnipotent and influenced social, political, economic, and religious conditions simultaneously. The prime example of this influence on art of the period can be found in the Romanesque and Gothic architecture of the grandiose cathedrals, which served as both religious and secular gathering places. They were used for civic/social/political purposes, as well as religious. The Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in Figure 3 shows the finest Gothic architecture.

Following the misery of the Black Death and the Hundred Years’ War in the 14th and 15th centuries, French art evolved during the Renaissance. The spread of humanism, with a focus more on the human than the supernatural, and the more active patronage of the arts by royalty and nobility, lessened the Catholic Church’s artistic influence. Artwork became more secular and often depicted landscapes and portraits of the patrons. However, the Wars of Religion between the Catholics and the Huguenots resulted in art for religious and political propaganda purposes. Antoine Caron’s *The Massacre of the Triumvirate* depicts not only the religious propaganda of the Wars of Religion, but shows the influence of religion on art throughout the period studied (Figure 4).

*The Massacre of the Triumvirate* referred to the triumvirate of Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus marching on Rome in 43 BC as representative of the April 6, 1561 battle by the triumvirate of Constable de Montmorency, Jacques d’Albon de Saint Andrew, and the Duke of Guise against the Huguenots. The most striking element of the painting, besides the extreme violence, is all of the ancient Roman imagery. The ruins of ancient Roman buildings, including the Colosseum, are throughout. Romanesque arches, columns, pillars, and statues demonstrate the strong interest in Greco-Roman art during the
Renaissance. The two statues on either side in the foreground may be ancient Roman gods, reflecting an old religious influence. Their whiteness against the yellow, orange, and red of the rest of the painting suggests purity and superiority versus the angry colors. The size of the statues of the gods relative to the sizes of the people in the painting also suggests religious importance. The blood and gore were meant to evoke sympathy for the Huguenots’ cause by shocking the viewer. The inclusion of ancient Roman ruins and buildings that appear to be churches amidst the violence of the Catholic massacre of the Huguenots illustrates the influence of religion over the time period studied.

The post-Renaissance period began with the reign of King Louis XIV, the Sun King, and his belief in the divine right of kings to govern. During his reign, he successfully increased the Crown’s influence and authority over the Church. His luxurious Palace of Versailles rivaled and surpassed the architecture and furnishings of the Church’s cathedrals, which demonstrated his divine right to rule and power. Under his rule, the persecution of the Huguenots continued when he revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which caused harm to France’s economy by driving out highly skilled Protestants. Figure 5 depicts Louis XIV battling heretic Huguenots with divine guidance/intervention above him.

The examples given provide strong evidence that religious conditions during the period from Celtic Gaul through the reign of Louis XIV had a substantial influence on French art. Religion influenced art through the choice of subject matter; the promotion of literacy through monks’ illuminated manuscripts; the need to spread Christianity, by constructing elaborate pilgrimage-style churches; and the use of art for propaganda during the Wars of Religion.
Figure 1: Celtic God Cernunnos from Pillar of the Boatmen in Paris (1st century AD) since no photo could be found of the older stone relief at Rheims. Example of religious subject matter to show honor and reverence for a god.
Figure 2: Early 14th century page from a Psalter showing illuminated manuscript and the Church’s role in learning and literacy through the artistic endeavors of monks.

Figure 3: Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris (1163-1285) as an example of a Gothic pilgrimage-style church, which demonstrates religious reverence, as well as civic/political/social purposes of the Catholic Church.
Figure 4: Antoine Caron’s “The Massacre of the Triumvirate” (1566) as an example of religion as subject matter and religious/political/social propaganda. This example also suggests how the Church preserved Latin learning and history.
Figure 5: King Louis XIV battling the Huguenots (Louis XIV – the Sun King site, no artist or date) as an example of art as religious/political/social propaganda.