

Interpreting the Visual Record

Clues regarding the historical development of instruments can be found in:

- Illustrated manuscripts
- Miniatures
- Sculpture
- Paintings and illustrations
- Written descriptions

Because there are few instruments from the medieval age or earlier that have survived, we must rely on other sources for information. Painting and sculpture can provide much information about the shapes of instruments and the way in which they were held and played. It is necessary to study many examples in order to separate 'fact' from 'fancy'. For instance, a painting by Canaletto shows fact, whereas the Isenheimer Altar in Colmar shows fancy (the angel is playing an instrument with an impossible bow grip). So it is absolutely necessary to study as many pictures, etc., as possible in order to get a clear idea of historical practices.

When pictures of similar shapes of instruments are found dating from the same period of time in various countries - for instance Poland, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, England, Holland, etc. - it is quite likely that actual instruments are depicted, and conclusions can be drawn about construction and playing practices.

When a gamba or lute player is shown playing a real chord or harmony, the pictured instrument is likely very close to the real thing. On the other hand, artists frequently exaggerated dimensions of objects, especially those that they didn't understand or were not familiar with, such as the bow or other novel items. It is therefore necessary to consult several sources before drawing a conclusion; written as well as pictorial ones. Even then, the musical practice may not be absolutely clear, because often different writers applied terms differently. To further complicate things, surviving instruments were often converted to meet modern requirements: gambas to celli, viole d'amore or viole da braccio into violas, etc.

Bows could not be converted or changed to the modern form, and so just a very few have survived. Of course there are exceptions to be seen in several museums, bows of extremely high quality, but these were probably never intended to be used. Before about 1750, the bow was considered an accessory, made by the maker of the instrument, and was not always of the same quality as the instrument itself.

Most of the leading musicologists of our day believe that stringed instruments were initially plucked, then stroked, rubbed, and finally bowed. This progression can be seen in the accompanying illustrations.

Before the bow came into use more than 1,000 years ago, a plectrum or pick was used to cause the strings to vibrate. Simple bow-sticks without hair (Germ. *Reibstab*), and sticks for beating the strings (Germ. *Schlagstab*) are also documented.