

The Historical Foundations of the Gothic Style and Medieval Architecture

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The Materials of Medieval Art in Cross-Cultural Perspective
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Perhaps one of the most brilliant forms of art during the Middle Ages exists preeminently in that of Medieval Gothic Architecture. The Gothic style, transcribed with pointed arches, rib vaults, flying buttresses and large elaborately constructed windows adorned with delicate traceries, lace a spiritual and symbolic meaning to those of any structure comprising as such. Known during this period as *Opus Francigenum* (meaning 'french work'), the Gothic style is most familiar to us as the architecture for cathedrals, churches and abbeys of Europe; including those of monasteries, castles, palaces and greathalls¹. Originating from *Lle-de-France* during the first beginning half of the 12th century, the Gothic style bloomed fiercely by the middle, shifting from a predominant Romanesque style when the Catholic church started growing into a powerful political force². Additionally, the shift into the Gothic style was heavily encouraged by the move from rural monasteries of the Romanesque, into urban environments where many new gothic churches were built around wealthy cities³.

Articulation of three primary characteristics: pointed arches, rib vaults and flying buttresses, are essential when identifying a structure with the Gothic Style. Cathedrals, in particular, flourish under this Gothic notion and are marked as one of the most influential

¹ Wikipedia, *Gothic Architecture*, April 18, 2018. Accessed April 18, 2018.

² Wikipedia, *Ibid*.

³ Wikipedia, *Ibid*.

attributes of the style. Coming from the greek word, *Cathedra*; meaning ‘seat’ or ‘housing the seat of the Bishop’ the Cathedral serves as a place of diocese, conference or episcopate⁴. Acting as the Cathedral’s contributing exterior element, the Flying Buttress slants from a separate pier, forming an arch shape with its supporting wall⁵. However, there were occasional supporting errors that would occur with the flying buttress that were corrected with the aid of ribbed vaults. Functioning entirely for structural purpose over the decorative, the ribbed vaults (“vault” being a unique name for ceilings in a Gothic Cathedral⁶) are comprised with a series of arched diagonal ‘rib’-like structures to divide the vault’s surface into panels⁷. In fact, it was rib vaulting that led to the establishment of the French-Gothic⁸. Used in nearly all places that the vaulted shape may be called for, the pointed arch serves both structural and decorative purpose while lending itself to elaborately insert shapes that developed on the window spaces⁹. The arch was often given the name *Ogive*, having been originally used as an ancient Eastern motif being later introduced to the West during the 11th century¹⁰. As these primary characteristics distinguish the very breath of the Gothic style, as do their secondary personalities. Because the Gothic style has such a high demand for extensions of glass to shower the room with light, Gables, multifoil rose windows and lancet-shaped sections provided

⁴ BBC. *The History of Gothic Cathedrals and Architecture Documentary*, YouTube. August 15, 2017. Accessed April 14, 2018.

⁵ Louis Grodecki, Anne Prache, and Roland Recht. *Gothic Architecture*, New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1985, (pp.7)

⁶ BBC, Ibid.

⁷ Wikipedia, Ibid.

⁸ BBC, Ibid.

⁹ BBC, Ibid.

¹⁰ Louis Grodecki, Ibid. (pp. 7)

various elements to distinguish national/regional aspects/ that mark evolutionary stages of Gothic Architecture¹¹ (refer to rose window in figure. 2).

Gothic characteristics and the building processes of such marvelous constructions go hand and hand with one another. Careful floor plans were introduced to provide an equally striking appearance of the interior in addition to the exterior. In particular, floor planning for the Gothic Cathedral utilized the *Cruciform*, where the decision makings for the floor's over all design were organized to resemble the shape of the Christian cross¹². During this time, most secular buildings were made of wood. Here however, the architecture is made of stone which acts as a protective aid against fire damage¹³. Being the most extraordinary feature of the church's external power would be the Gargoyles that embellish the rooftops of the exterior. These grotesque-like forms are not only spiritual tools to frighten away evil entities, but are an important architectural device used to divert rainwater from the roof and away from the wall, keeping water damage at bay¹⁴. Only 30 -40 men, composed of stained glass makers, stone carvers, rod iron workers, masons, labourers, carpenters and architects, were positioned to build a gothic cathedral¹⁵. Turning towards more technical consideration during the middle 19th century, methods of constructing the Gothic Vault began to involve schemes of interlacing ribs and cross vaults¹⁶. The logical system of diagonal arches and enclosing the vault field, with the pointed arch and diagonal arches being placed under roofing, indicated preliminary Gothic

¹¹ Louis Grodecki, Ibid. (pp. 7)

¹² BBC, Ibid.

¹³ BBC, Ibid.

¹⁴ BBC, Ibid.

¹⁵ BBC, Ibid.

¹⁶ Louis Grodecki, Ibid. (pp.7)

experimentation¹⁷. With an emphasis on high, narrow proportion (secondary characteristics of the Gothic Style), linear arrangements of supporting the vaults were applied in geometric fashions: vaults taking on the shape of trapezoids and squares, oblong ribs and spacial cells indicating transverse, oblique and semi-circular forms¹⁸. Additionally, the articular structure of intersecting longitudinal, transverse and vertical perspective enforced a graphic / linear quality of the exterior¹⁹ (refer to external contours in figure.1).

For 900 years, the mechanics of pulleys and chain hoists in order to raise each individual stone into place, had stayed the same when building the architecture²⁰. In our modern day, such mechanics are still being utilized in the restoration process of deteriorated Gothic architecture. Current restoration of these structures are ways of immortalizing the grit, and passions the workers had when producing such an outstanding homage to God. Preserving the very essence of those contemporary within this period provides a crucial reminder to us of the lengths taken in the spirit of faith. As such, religious factors held significant value for the influence of Gothic architecture, especially that of cathedrals.

The Gothic Style led to the association with the church, as the characteristics were most predominantly used in religious structures. Considered to be the most formal and coordinated forms of the physical church, elements of the Holy bible were explored in the dimensions and design of some cathedrals²¹(reflecting back on the interior floor planning

¹⁷ Louis Grodecki, Ibid. (pp. 10)

¹⁸ Louis Grodecki, Ibid. (pp.12)

¹⁹ Louis Grodecki, Ibid. (pp.12)

²⁰ BBC, Ibid.

²¹ Wikipedia, Ibid.

of the *Cruciform*). In addition to such religious foundation, politics also played an important role on the style's development. The Gothic arts were often viewed as the art of the *feudalism* era, connecting greatly to the change of Medieval social structures²². As a result at this time, developing freedoms in the construction profession bloomed the Gothic Style in architecture²³. When Europe divided into multitudes of city states and kingdoms at the end of the 12th century, the Gothic Style of architecture began to parallel the beginning of a declining *feudalism*²⁴.

The powers of religious and political influences on the Gothic style enabled emotional, symbolic and philosophical impacts of Gothic Architecture. Conveying the theological message of the great glory of God through dimensions of statues, sculptural decoration, murals and stained glass, designs of the Gothic style followed the current theological scholastic thought²⁵. Stained glass components were considered to be the most typical facet and significant feature in terms of narrative depiction²⁶. The horizontal and vertical scope of the Gothic church showered the room in light, identifying as a symbol of the grace of God²⁷. The essences of *creation* was depicted through narratives of: The Labours of the Months, the Zodiac, sacred history of the Old and New Testaments, lives of the Saints and references to the Eternal in the Last Judgement²⁸. Additionally, the story of Adam and Eve along with the Creation Cycle were narratives often represented,

²² Wikipedia, Ibid.

²³ Wikipedia, Ibid.

²⁴ Wikipedia, Ibid.

²⁵ Wikipedia, Ibid.

²⁶ Louis Grodecki, Ibid (pp. 12)

²⁷ Wikipedia, Ibid.

²⁸ Wikipedia, Ibid.

as exemplified through exterior sculptures of *The Cathedral of Our Lady Chartres*²⁹ (refer to figure. 3).

Standing as the domain of time and place³⁰, The Gothic Cathedral was thought to be the very physical residence of God on Earth, a place of comfort and safety. For the New Jerusalem, it was even considered to be the temporal image of paradise³¹. Even the structures serving for functional purposes, such as Gargoyles, mirror our ecstatic love for god through strong expression within their features³². Indeed, the relationship between body and soul are projected from the Gothic Cathedral³³. Governed by the *manifesto*, a principle of transparency, High Gothic architecture insulated faith from reason while conveying the impression of a space determined impenetrable³⁴.

²⁹ BBC, Ibid.

³⁰ Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, New York: New American Library, 1970 (pp.2)

³¹ Wikipedia, Ibid.

³² BBC, Ibid.

³³ Erwin Panofsky, Ibid. (pp. 27)

³⁴ Erwin Panofsky, Ibid. (pp. 43)

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(Fig.1) *Beauvais Cathedral*, Roman Catholic church, Beauvais, France (13th Century)



(Fig. 2) *Milan Cathedral*, Cathedral church of Milan, Lombardy Italy, (13th century)



(Fig. 3) *Exterior of the Chartres Cathedral*, Chartres France, (1194 - 1220)

Roman Catholic church, houses the tunic relic, *Sancta Camisa*, said to be worn by the Virgin Mary at Christ's birth.