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8. The Gothic Cathedral


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8. The Gothic Cathedral

Abstract

The Gothic cathedral, like the Summa of Aquinas, the University of Paris, and the Christendom of Innocent III, stands as one of the major expressions of the spirit of the High Middle Ages. The word "Gothic," coined by the Renaissance as a term of disparagement, has come recently to have more favorable and appreciative connotations. Such a reevaluation may be due not only to the better perspective that a longer period of time offers us, but also to a deeper understanding of the cultural role of artistic and spiritual symbolism. The artistic expression of the Middle Ages found its supreme embodiment in the architecture of the Gothic cathedral.
[excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, Church, God, Faith, Religious Society, Cathedral, Gothic Architecture

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Architectural History and Criticism | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | History of Christianity | History of Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section III: The Medieval Church](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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8. The Gothic Cathedral

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At least prior to the appearance of modern art, architecture shared with music a unique freedom in being less limited by the patterns of nature and history than the other arts; there is no one pattern to which a building must conform. At the same time, however, architecture does impose certain severe limitations upon builders, the most important of which are the material, engineering, financial, and spiritual. Without the building materials, the engineering skills, the financial resources, and the spiritual vision, no such creation as the medieval Gothic cathedral would have been possible.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Gothic is its engineering. Here the master-mason and the churchman combined talents to create the new style. A distinguished French churchman, royal advisor, and historian, Abbot Suger (c. 1081-1151), was a leader in its development. The church which he planned for the monastery at St. Denis, near Paris, is often considered to have been the first Gothic structure. It was in terms of his largely Neoplatonic vision of the world as not separated from God, but rather so related to Him as to be the foundation from which men might rise to heaven, that Suger judged inadequate the churches built according to the earlier Romanesque style. Enclose space they did, but they could not seem to release the human spirit. Built of stone they were, but because they employed the solid round arch which could never rise to the height of more than half the distance it spanned, these structures were inadequate to express Suger's vision. The solid arch supporting the roof resulted in tremendous weight which could be supported only by massive walls. The effect of Romanesque construction emphasized the mass of heavy, almost solid, walls with largely horizontal lines, while the resulting paucity of windows produced a gloom which stressed even more the separation of the building from its natural setting and its spiritual function. Such a structure might fit the needs of the Church just emerging from the Dark Ages. It might give adequate expression to the birth of God in a stable manger. But it was no fit expression for the Church of the High Middle Ages, or for the worship of the God who was Lord of lords, King of kings, and Judge of the whole world. It was in response to the demands of

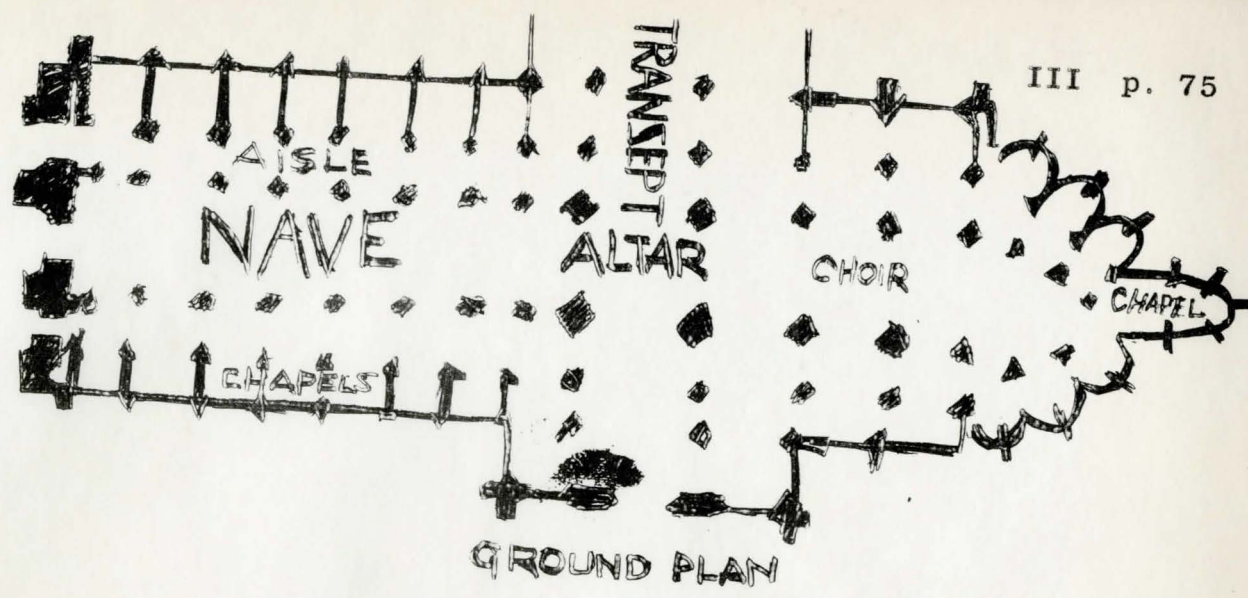
*Everything pointed up word to God.
Fight increased. Whole community involved in raising money, etc.*

this latter vision, a combination of Augustinian and Neoplatonic thought, that the Gothic style first appeared, in the northern France of the twelfth century. From here it spread over much of Western Europe.

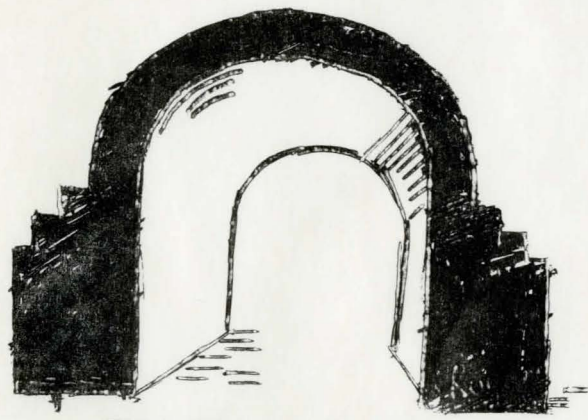
The basic problem of mass and weight confronting any builder was solved in a way which gave the Gothic structure a set of proportions quite different from the Romanesque. Master-masons, most of whom are unidentifiable by name, employed the ribbed rather than the solid vault, thus enabling them to center the weight of the vaulting at certain specific points rather than along the entire wall. Columns that were made integral parts of the wall and that were supported by outside buttresses could bear the weight, and between the columns there was now ample space for windows, so much that the Gothic cathedral has been described as having walls of glass. In addition, the combination of columns and buttresses made it possible to widen the whole structure. By enclosing the space provided between the main center section (the nave) and the outside buttresses, an aisle could be added on each side of the church. The space between the nave and the aisle was broken only by a series of inside columns.

As long as the solid round arches were used, they never reached the same height unless they were spanning the same distance. To improve on this the pointed arch was developed, which enabled the masons to reach the same height while spanning different distances. Because of the more equal distribution of weight and pressure which it effected, the pointed arch also made possible an increase in the height of the building. This increase was needed for two reasons. First, it met the demands for artistic proportion. Second, it offered the possibility of increasing the amount of inside light which the wider building demanded. To widen the church without increasing its height would only emphasize its horizontal lines and earth-boundness, the very things which the Gothic builders were trying to avoid. In answer to this the ceiling over the nave was raised by extending the inner columns with their ribs upward. The outside walls of the nave high above the aisles (called the clerestory) were then pierced for more windows. The windows of the clerestory and of the outside of the church took on the shape of the pointed arch which made them possible. And the added height made room for the huge rose windows at the front and back of the church, which were still another source of light. In these ways the use of the ribbed vault and the pointed arch made possible the height and the light which Gothic builders strove to achieve. These four things are basic characteristics of Gothic architecture.

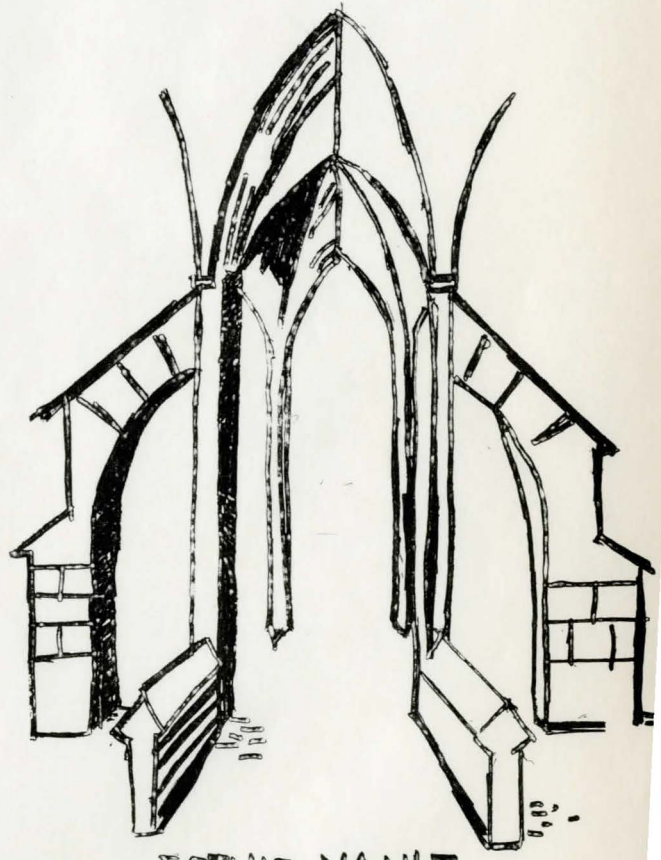
The ground plan of the church was in the shape of a cross, the nave being the main section. The parts which crossed the nave were called transepts, and the part which projected beyond them in line with the nave was called the apse, in the center of which was the choir. Along the outer walls of the apse small chapels were added. Usually the largest of these was dedicated



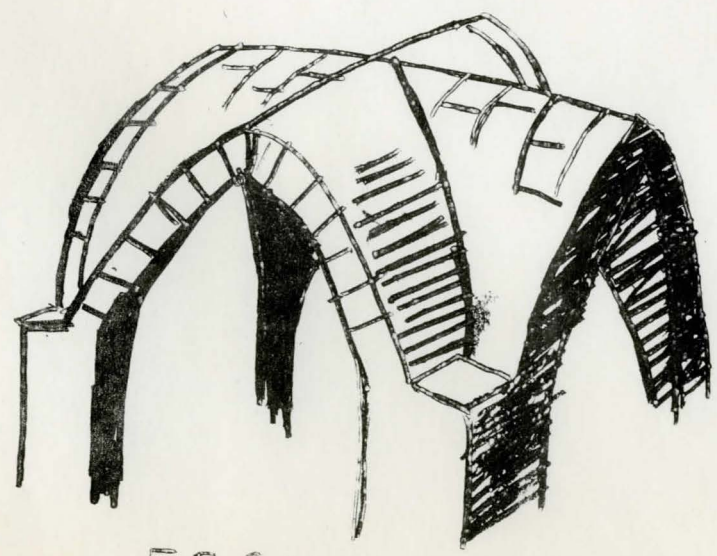
GROUND PLAN



BARREL VAULT



GOthic VAULT & FLYING BUTTRESS



GROIN VAULT

to Mary, the queen of Heaven, and the smaller ones to particular saints. Some of the chapels were used as the final resting place for sacred relics.

The possibilities both for decoration and for instruction which Gothic architecture offered were not overlooked. Each niche which pointed arch and column opened up was filled with sculptural representations of Biblical, natural, or local history. The high altar, the choir stalls, and the chapels were carved and decorated, as were the entrances to the church. A new method of fusing colors permanently into glass was developed, the glass was then cut into small pieces and leaded together, and the whole was then placed in the frame which the pointed arch outlined.

Two other features, the flying buttresses and the towers, must be noted. The roof of the nave, with its lead or copper covering, had tremendous weight and produced a powerful thrust at the point where it joined the clerestory. To balance this the outside buttresses were heightened and supports, called flying buttresses, were thrown across at strategic points. To carry the rainwater from the roof, human and animal figures were forced into positions where they could serve as waterspouts, producing what we call gargoyles. In the front of the church and in line with the aisles two towers were raised to great heights as if to command the surrounding scene. They were often the last parts of the church to be built and some of them were never completely finished.

The meaning of the Gothic cathedral was often expressed by calling it the "house of God and the gate of Heaven." Tied solidly to earth, yet soaring heavenward, this "music in stone" was the vision that Abbot Suger saw for the Abbey of St. Denis which he built and which became the prototype for such great cathedrals as those at Chartres, Paris, and Amiens. Between 1180 and 1270 there were 80 cathedrals and nearly 500 abbeys built in France alone. No two of these were exactly alike, yet each gave corporate expression to men's thanks for the gift of grace mediated by the Church. Having solved the problems of materials, engineering, and finance, medieval people could give a free rein to their spiritual aspirations which created, in the Gothic style, something new in the Western World and something which permitted them to respond to that divine gravity which drew them ever heavenward.

The use of all of the art for the glory of God.

Organization side of things.