English Gothic Fan Vaulting

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Background

This architectural style is unique to England and dates from the late Middle Ages (late 1300s to mid-1500s). It is a development of the French Gothic whose pointed arches are much sharper than the pointed but flattened arches of English Gothic. Like all Gothic styles, the emphasis is on verticality, raising the eyes and hearts of the view ers upward to heaven. One of the sub-styles of English Gothic is called "perpendicular" for its thin, graceful lines in stained glass and stone.

The best way to understand the fan vaulting of an English cathedral is as "trees in a forest". The fan vaults are both structural in the way that trunk and branches support a tree, and decorative in the way that leaves and fruit hang from them to give each tree its distinctive look. This combination of struc-ture and beauty makes English Gothic cathedrals unique gems in the world of architecture.

What To Look For

Ribs: the sturdy ribs that emerge from the tops of the pillars are the roof supports that form a kind of network of branches on a tree.

Tracings: sophisticated fan vault designs have patterns in stone and color that are decorative and often give the impression of foliage.

Arches: fan vaults are elaborate arches that hold up the central aisle of a cathedral or a corridor like perfectly aligned rows of trees in a forest would form a canopy of branches over a pathway.

Central Node: fan vault "branches" converge at central points (nodes), which unify and hold together the entire structure. The nodes function something like a keystone in a rounded arch.