

The North Rose Window of Chartres Cathedral

Background

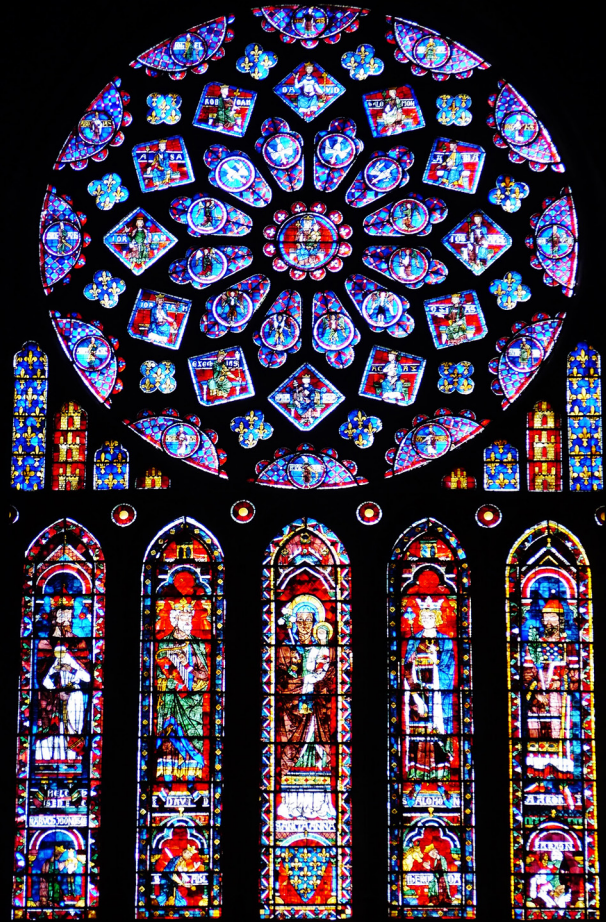
It is sometimes difficult to fathom cultural artifacts that have been around for a millennium, yet the stained glass windows of Chartres Cathedral (56 mi. south of Paris) were created well over 900 years ago and are as brilliant today as the day they were given birth. Chartres contains 167 stained glass windows in total, most of which date from a thirty-year period (1190-1220 AD) during the cathedral's construction. They are the fullest and most complete set of stained glass windows surviving from the Middle Ages.

The large and intricately-designed round windows that light up the walls of Gothic cathedrals are called rose windows because of their resemblance to the flower's rounded and petal-like design. Chartres Cathedral has three of these glorious testimonies to radiant beauty.

What to Look For

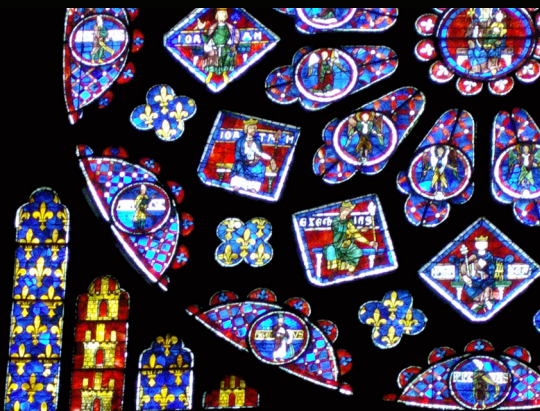
Theme: Chartres' North Rose Window is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, as seen by the medallion of Our Lady seated with the Christ Child in the center of the window.

Geometry: The central medallion is encircled by four layers of windows of different geometric shapes carefully designed to fill in the entire round space; these small windows feature doves, angels, kings, prophets, and the fleur-de-lis of the French nation.



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Ribbing: The black areas between the panes of glass are the stone ribbing holding the windows in place; seen from the inside, the black spaces create the airy impression of floating points of light piercing the darkness. If you just focus on the design of the ribbing you will get the clear impression of a multi-layered rose in full bloom.

Lancet Windows: The tiny vertical windows on either side of the rose window depict the coats of arms of the noble families that sponsored the windows ("lancet" means a sharp, pointed shape, derived from "lance"); underneath the rose window, the central lancet features St. Anne holding the infant Virgin, and is flanked on either side by figures of kings and priests of the Old Testament whose offices foretold the Savior Christ.

Window-Facts

- The North (Virgin Mary) Rose Window is 33 ft. 4 in. in diameter – about as tall as a three-story building; the larger lancet windows are 24 ft. 6 in. in height, roughly the size of a two-story house.
- Most modern stained glass windows are 1/8" thick; however, medieval stained glass was fully 1" thick, which contributes to the intensity of their color as the light passes through the thick glass.
- The famous "Chartres-blue" of the cathedral's windows was created by mixing cobalt oxide with molten glass; for the medievals, blue always symbolized heaven and was especially associated with the Virgin Mary.