

Sunday – February 11, 2024

Medieval Gothic Cathedrals are a True Wonder

Dear Thomas,

I have never kept my love of Gothic architecture a secret. I have only to walk into a Gothic cathedral to **experience a spiritual retreat**. I can literally spend hours looking upward. And there is a good reason for that

Gothic architecture is not a bunch of stones placed cleverly together for dramatic effect. It is, rather, **an eloquent story to be read and absorbed** by the human soul. Best of all, you don't need a college degree to "read" that story in stone. You can be totally illiterate and still understand the meaning as well as any Oxford don.

That's because Gothic structures were *made for uneducated people* in an age before the time of high literacy. The elegant stories they tell are not abstract. **They are instructional:** their stones tell us how to worship.

(Image at right: Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Mother of God, Moscow, Russia.)

The Marvelous Work of a Whole Civilization

The first thing to realize about Gothic architecture is that it is the product of a profoundly Catholic civilization. The men who built these churches were by all accounts fervent believers who also had **immense artistic and practical talent**.



I noted in a [previous newsletter](#) that there is no necessary connection between faith and religious art, yet, **when deep faith and art do coincide**, the resulting works are usually extraordinarily beautiful.

That is undoubtedly the case with **Gothic architecture**, which emerged from the completely Christianized society of the Middle Ages.

The earliest Gothic cathedrals built were begun in the century **beginning around 1150 AD**, and it almost defies

belief that one age could produce so many enormous blessings for the world.

(Image at left: Cologne Cathedral, Cologne, Germany)

My favorite **historian, Paul Johnson**, had this to say about these mammoth creations



The medieval cathedrals of Europe – there are over a hundred of them – *are the greatest accomplishments of humanity in the whole theater of art* (emphasis added.) They are *total art* on the grandest scale, encompassing architecture at its highest pitch, and virtually every kind of artistic activity, from carpentry to painting.... An entire lifetime can be profitably spent in visiting cathedrals and in the minute examination of their beauties and treasures. (*Art: A New History*, 2003)

Johnson goes on to say that **the durability of these structures** is also part of their wonder. No one worships the gods in the Roman Pantheon any more, but Christians still worship the One, True, God in all of the ancient cathedrals of Europe!

The Name and Origin

Believe it or not, the name Gothic was not originally meant as a description of a sublime architectural style as we are accustomed to understanding it. “Gothic” was actually **meant as an insult**. Unfortunately, we only have Catholics to blame for this.

The Italians of the Renaissance (1400s to 1500s) wanted to exalt their own style of architecture (called Romanesque) as superior to all others, so **they disparaged the dominant earlier architectural style** that was the main rival of their beauty. (Those Italians!) St. Peter’s Basilica is a pretty good example of the Romanesque style.



Yet, in their enthusiasm to denigrate, the Italians also got their facts wrong. They **somehow thought the Gothic style was German** (where the barbarian Goths came from), so they hoped to brand it as northern, cold, crude, barbaric, and uncultured. **Ha!**

But how could they have overlooked the fact that **Gothic was French in origin**?! The concept of the Gothic architecture developed from the design of Abbot Suger (pron. Soo-Zhay, 1081-1150 AD), who created the first grand basilica to incorporate all the elements of the Gothic style in **the Abbey of St. Denis** just outside of Paris. (Image at left.)

From there, the Gothic style spread rapidly throughout Paris and northern France, and within a century there were hundreds of Gothic churches small and large in France. Then, of course, it **spread to many other countries** of Europe (including Germany!)

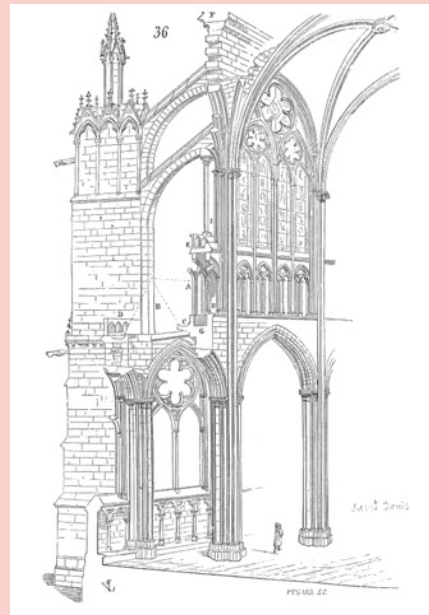
English Gothic is as much of a wonder as French Gothic and deserves its own special treatment—stay tuned.

The Most Essential Feature

If you were to boil down the complexities of Gothic architecture to its most essential feature, it would have to be **the pointed arch**, which was an advancement from the rounded arches used in the early medieval period as well as later.

The pointed arch had several advantages over the rounded arch:

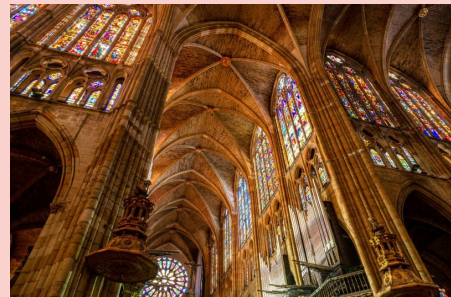
- It shifted the immense weight of the roof to the sides so that **the load pushed outward** rather than downward;
- This led to the development of decorative **flying buttresses** on the sides of these cathedrals which strengthened the walls as the weight pushed outward.
- It also allowed the architects to **raise the roofs higher** than ever before because the weight on the walls was less onerous;
- A further advantage: that the pointed arch allowed **the walls to be thinner**, which in turn gave them the grand idea of placing big holes in the walls and filling them with **stained glass**. *Wow!*



Cathedral, Bourges, France



Sainte Chapelle, Paris



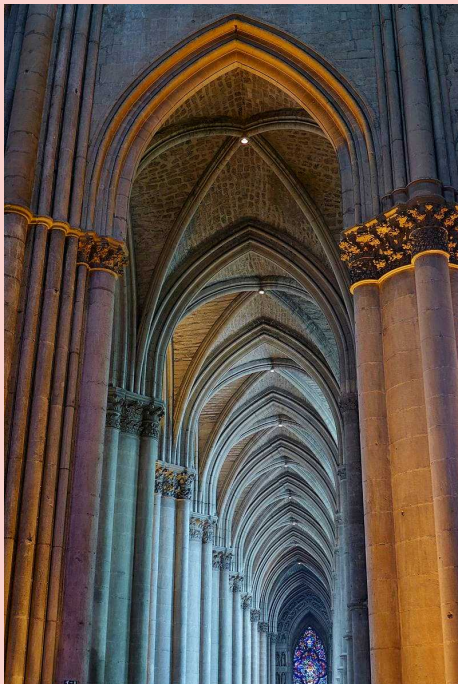
Cathedral, Laon, France

It really is amazing how **one simple design change** in an arch led to such gracious developments in stone, glass, and form!

When you look at Romanesque churches, you'll notice that they don't have much, if any, stained glass. Their dominant features are **mosaics and those huge domes**, which sit nicely on the rounded arches.

Grace Builds on Nature

What I like best about the pointed arch is that it almost makes you look up at it once you enter the space. It's a fascinating and attractive view that **mimics something you've seen before** in nature: a forest.



The succession of pointed arches in a long cathedral corridor creates **the impression of trees in a lush forest**. The fan vaulting (namely, the stone ribs that hold up the roof) resembles the tree branches as they "fan out" to create a sort of sacred canopy over the viewer's head. Stunning!

If the dome sitting on the rounded arch mimics the "vault of heaven" in a way, the pointed arch reminds the viewer of something natural and majestic, **like an oaken forest**, that draws the eye up, up, upward—beyond this world, to heaven.

A theological message is integral to this Gothic creation: namely, the beauty of the natural world **leads us to the spiritual world**, to the world of grace.

(Image at left: Side aisle, Cathedral of Reims, France.)

As I have always said, many things in this world—natural and human creations—become **sacred**

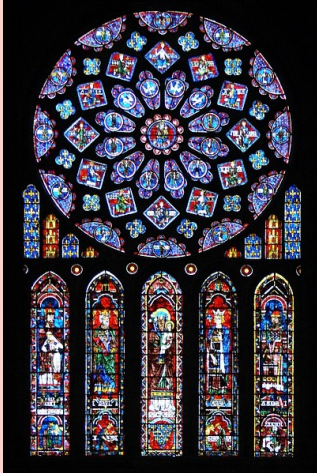
better than Gothic architecture.

windows to a higher reality. Nothing displays this

Other Aspects of Gothic

I could offer whole newsletters on all of the other wonderful aspects of Gothic architecture, but I can only list a few in this one, hoping to whet your appetite for **learning to “read” these churches more deeply and prayerfully**. Pardon the pun, but the sky's the limit here! (Links are to previous SW articles.)

- Flying buttresses and stained glass, as mentioned
- [Gargoyles](#) and [carved statues](#);
- Elaborate towers and [spires](#)
- [Clerestory windows](#) (on the second level between floor and ceiling)
- Magnificent [rose windows](#) (huge round windows at the ends of aisles)
- Cross-shaped floorplans, and
- Magnificent portals (that encompass and decorate entrance ways).



Notre Dame de Chartres



Gargoyles on Notre Dame de Paris



Spire, Notre Dame de Paris



Majestic Front Portals, Cathedral of Laon, France

Final Note: Gothic Revival

Did you know that there was a revival of Gothic architecture more than seven centuries after the original medieval cathedrals were built? It took that long for architects to get the Renaissance out of their system!

The reason why we see **so many Gothic-style churches in American cities** is because the 19th and early 20th centuries blossomed into what is known as the Gothic Revival in Europe and North America. The style is sometimes called Neo-Gothic.

These centuries experienced periods of relative stability (between wars, that is), which, combined with economic prosperity and **advances in construction technologies**, caused the immortal Gothic style to emerge once again to grace the landscapes of so many places.

We could name a hundred US Catholic cathedrals and churches in the **Neo-Gothic style**, but St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City is probably the most recognizable example of the Gothic Revival in the US (built from 1858-1910).

(Image at right: Sacred Heart Basilica, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, consecrated 1888.)

Many Protestant denominations copied the Catholic style quite effectively with the building of massive churches like St. John the Divine in NYC and **the National Cathedral** in our own nation's capital. Both were built in the same general timeframe as St. Patrick's.

While the Medieval Gothic style was used solely for houses of worship, the Neo-Gothic expanded to encompass **a wide variety of buildings**, particularly the most exalted and important centers of power in a country.



Case in point: the **British Houses of Parliament** are pure Gothic Revival (rebuilt between 1840 and 1876 over early medieval foundations).

The Gothic wonder has many facets and many angles, but most importantly, it is a gift that keeps on giving. The **myriad Gothic stories written in stone** throughout the world have been instructing the faithful to worship for many centuries. Above all, there is one thing their story is not: boring!

Features

One of the first Sacred Windows Vignettes I wrote last year was precisely on the Gothic **National Cathedral in Washington DC**. It is extraordinarily beautiful if a bit quirky in some of its aspects, which you'll understand when you read the short article:

Another favorite Gothic structure is **the majestic Sainte-Chapelle** on the same island as Notre Dame in Paris. You'll get an eyeful of stained glass, but don't worry: this glass doesn't hurt, it only inspires. Enjoy!

A Gothic Cathedral in our Nation's Capital



The Jewel of Light That Is Sainte-Chapelle



May God bless you and your families!

Peter Darcy

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