

The cathedral, an emblematic European monument

Dany SANDRON

ABSTRACT

By virtue of their number and architecture, cathedrals are the most visible element of an ecclesiastical network that has structured Europe since paleochristian Antiquity. Their architectural choices and large decorative ensembles (sculpture, painting, and stained-glass windows) express a varying desire to display the influence of papal hierarchy and to glorify the local church. From the Middle Ages to the modern period, their building sites were home to an intense intermixing of artists from different backgrounds.



Fonds Colbert, Cologne Cathedral. Source : [EHNE](#)

The expression of ecclesiastical hierarchy

By virtue of their number—over 600—and monumentality, cathedrals are a powerful aspect of European identity within the limits of Catholic Christianity, and were structured from the fourth century onward in a multitude of

dioceses headed by a bishop. The term cathedral comes from *cathedra*, which in Latin means the bishop's throne, near the sanctuary. However, the term mother church (*ecclesia mater* or *matrix*) was dominant until the late Middle Ages, due to the fact that all of the churches in a diocese were affiliated with it, with very rare exceptions. The predominance of a cathedral's architecture and decor over diocesan churches echoes the local ecclesiastical map, in which the clergy is subject to the bishop.

Another "supradiocesan" hierarchy is expressed through the numerous references these buildings make to the Cathedral of Rome, St. John Lateran, "mother of all churches." This explains the success of the basilical type that is paleochristian in origin, with an elongated design containing multiple naves, dominated by the central nave ending in an apse that contains the sanctuary, opposite the entrance. It was present at least until the late Middle Ages in the most ambitious buildings, which were faithful to a type layout including five naves (Bourges, Cologne, Toledo, Milan). Cathedrals are buildings that are emblematic of Christianity of Roman obedience, in the image of the submission of bishops to the pope. The facade of St. John Lateran bears an inscription dating back to at least the twelfth century, a reminder that the cathedral of the pope, who is the bishop of Rome, is first among all churches: *mater omnium ecclesiarum orbis terrarum*.

The leading church in the diocese both chronologically and hierarchically, the cathedral originally retained some of the features of major imperial halls from Roman Antiquity, especially the staging of power. This dramatization was adapted to a new liturgy in which the faithful were henceforth admitted within part of the consecrated space, as demonstrated by Split Cathedral, built in the former palace of Diocletian (c. 300), in which the bishop takes his place in the former imperial throne room. The transformation of prestigious ancient temples (Parthenon in Athens, Syracuse)—or elsewhere of major mosques (Lisbon, Cordoba)—into cathedrals speaks volumes about the desire to be in keeping within a centuries-old religious tradition.

Cathedrals and politics: sites of memory, from regions to nations

Cathedrals have served as privileged sites for the staging of power, with churches being used for coronations or consecrations (kings of France in Reims; of Norway in Trondheim; sovereigns of Hungary in Bratislava [1563 to 1830]), as a necropolis for princes (Salian cathedral in Speyer; "Norman" cathedrals of Sicily in Cefalù, Monreale, and Palermo; Uppsala in Sweden [1272/73-1435]; Roskilde in Denmark), or both (Krakow, Wawel Cathedral for the kings of Poland; Notre-Dame de Rouen for the dukes of Normandy). They house trophies illustrating the epic of power they exalt: the griffon of Pisa, a large gilded bronze statue atop the east gable of the Romanesque cathedral, recalls the victories of the maritime republic over the Arabs in the Western Mediterranean. Valencia Cathedral (Spain) conserves the chains to the port of Marseille that were carried away by the Aragonese during an attack on the city in 1423. In Paris, the maréchal de Luxembourg received the nickname of Tapissier de Notre-Dame (The Upholsterer of Notre-Dame), as the banners of those vanquished by the armies of Louis XIV were hung from the cathedral's vaults as trophies.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, cathedrals occupied a prominent place in the foundational discourse of a genuine art history. Goethe (*On German Architecture*, 1772) made Strasbourg Cathedral the emblematic building of the German spirit. During the nineteenth century, cathedrals even served as a medium for nationalist discourses, and were the subject of dispute. The French-German dispute over the origins of the gothic continued even after the German art historian Franz Mertens recognized the precedence of French monuments (1843). The national dimension of cathedrals was emphasized through major restoration efforts, and was also one of the central considerations in the projects to complete construction that were conducted during the nineteenth century. In Cologne, the construction site for the gothic cathedral, whose choir was the only part built during the Middle Ages (1248-1322), was opened once again after three centuries of interruption, initiating a forty-year phase (1842-1880) to complete the gigantic building, which was emblematic of the German unity concluded in 1871.

The success of these large-scale construction projects was such that it spread to other confessions, Protestant and especially Orthodox, which had taken little notice of the word “cathedral” until then, as it was foreign to their institutional structures. The term referred in this case to prestigious sanctuaries that translated regional architectural traditions onto a colossal scale. In Sofia, Alexandre Nevsky Cathedral (1882-1892), of Byzantine inspiration, was the largest church on the Balkan peninsula, with the capacity to welcome 10,000 worshipers.

International building sites

European art history can hardly overestimate the role of cathedrals, which illustrate the history of architecture better than any other type of building. Archeology can help reveal the features of cathedrals from the high Middle Ages (Geneva) with a certain degree of clarity. More recent periods include a greater number of buildings that are representative of an artistic movement, and this is not just true of gothic art, which stands as the emblematic style of cathedrals, thereby explaining the vigor of the “Neo-Gothic” movement during the nineteenth century.

Cathedrals were “international” sites par excellence due to the ambition of those who commissioned them, most frequently bishops and canonical chapters, princes, as well as town councils (in central Italy for example), which often called on external architects, and thereby contributed to the increasing circulation of prestigious models and the emergence of highly novel buildings that in turn became centers of influence. In the far reaches of Northern England, Durham Cathedral (1093...) was one of the most innovative building projects of the late eleventh century, combining the Norman heritage, which it transformed, with one of the earlier applications of the rib vault technique. Shortly before the mid-thirteenth century, the construction sites for Strasbourg and Cologne Cathedrals introduced within the Holy Roman Empire forms created in France. The two architects of the choir for Prague Cathedral (1344-1385), Mathieu d’Arras and later Peter Parler, attest to the travels of artists throughout Europe.

The eventful history of the twentieth century made symbolic monuments of national identity into a medium for the idea of Europe. For instance, Reims Cathedral, which battered in September 1914, was the emblematic site of French-German reconciliation in 1962, with the meeting between General de Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer. Art illustrates this aspect, as the stained-glass windows by the German artist Imi Knoebel decorate the windows of the rayonnant chapels on either side of Chagall’s windows in the axial chapel, beneath the original windows of the upper section of the apse.

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