ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

The Gothic or *Opus Francigenum*: An Architecture from France Without Borders

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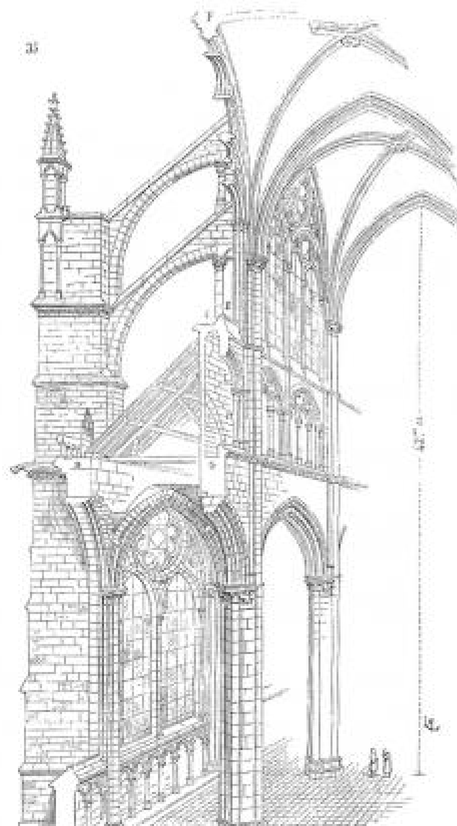
ABSTRACT

Gothic architecture, which is based on a complex structural system devised from technical innovations tried and tested during the Romanesque period, developed in Ã�le-de-France beginning in the 1130s. In the space of a few decades, it had spread throughout Europe thanks to the expansion of monastic orders, as well as the initiative of ecclesiastical communities seeking to erect soaring monuments bathed in light. All while integrating various local building traditions, â��Frenchâ�� architectural models transfigured the territories of the Old World, and helped define a common cultural identity from Italy to England, and Portugal to Hungary. It was a phenomenon that unfolded over the *longue durÃ©e* until the early sixteenth century, when medieval architecture, which was still in use, began to be disdained, before once again being reappraised in the eighteenth century.



Cross-section of the nave from Amiens Cathedral (after E. Viollet Le Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonnÃ© de lâ��architecture franÃ§aise du XIe*

au XVIe siÃ¨cle, s.v. *Architecture religieuse*, Paris, 1854-1869, t. I, p. 203).

Opus Francigenum: those are the words Burkhard von Hall used, acknowledging the French origins of gothic architecture, to refer in 1280 to the Church of Saint Peter at Wimpfen im Tal, in Germany. âGothicâ denotes an art of building that developed in Ãle-de-France during the 1130s, and spread throughout Europe up through the sixteenth century. This movement, which had multiple variations, was long seen in a negative light. The reference to the Goths was itself originally pejorative: introduced in the French language by FranÃ§ois Rabelais (*Pantagruel*, 1533), it was used by Giorgio Vasari in 1550 to refer to the supposed period of artistic decline between Antiquity and the Renaissance. Gothic art was nevertheless reevaluated beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, a process that was also international in scope.

A Structural System

Gothic can be defined as a structural system that perfected techniques tried and tested since the Romanesque period, in an effort to obtain new esthetic and symbolic effects. Between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the typology of basilicas of Paleochristian ancestry was revamped to meet new liturgical and functional requirement. The enlargement of the sanctuary, needed to welcome the increasing numbers of clergy, was accompanied by a systematic setting out of vaults to protect the framework from fires, which were frequent at the time.

Romanesque architecture was characterized by thick wallsâneeded to support the thrust of the vaultsâand by the darkness resulting from the impossibility of making large perforations in the walls. The Gothic builders of Ãle-de-France understood that the force exerted by a ribbed vault was not continuous, but rather directed toward the corners. The use of ribs, which were first tested in the late eleventh century in the Anglo-Norman world and Northern Italy, helped materialize this load-bearing structure, on which light *voÃ»tains* could be placed. The thrust was thus shifted away from the vaultâs corners via the flying buttresses set against it, toward exterior buttresses and abutments. The thickness of the walls could subsequently be reduced, with stone giving way to large glass walls. The use of the Gothic arch also allowed for increasing the height of buildings, with the 48.5 meters of the choir of Beauvais Cathedral setting a record in the second quarter of the thirteenth century. The astounding vertical push, remarkable luminosity, and effect of lightness of these structures were the primary components of the Gothic esthetic, which was conceived as a terrestrial image of the celestial Jerusalem.

History

While the double ambulatory of the Rayonnant choir chapels from Saint Denis Abbey Church, built near Paris between 1140 and 1144, is considered the first example of Gothic architecture, the first novelties appeared at Sens Cathedral, which was begun around 1135.Â With its square six-part vaults built on alternating strong and weak columns, it served as a model for subsequent reflections. Other innovations appeared at Noyon Cathedral, which features an interior elevation of four levels (large arcades, galleries, triforium, and upper windows), and at Laon Cathedral, which was built with homogenous pillars, an arrangement that was subsequently synthesized at Notre Dame. These buildings, all of which were begun in the third quarter of the twelfth century, are illustrations of what is called the âprimitive Gothic,â which even appeared outside of France (Canterbury Cathedral, beginning in 1175).

The ensuing phase, known as âclassical Gothic,â began with the reconstruction of

Chartres Cathedral from 1195 onward. Technical innovationsârectangular ribbed vaults, systematic use of flying buttressesâmade it possible to do away with galleries and design a soaring elevation on three levels. In the ensuing decades, this model was used in Reims and Amiens, Salisbury in England, Burgos in Spain, and Marburg and Trier in Germany. Bourges Cathedral, which was a contemporary but alternative project to that of Chartres, was characterized by the fusion of space. Its impact was not as large, but can be observed in both France (Saint-Julien in Le Mans) and Spain (Santa MarÃa in Toledo).

In the European context, the reception of Gothic architecture featured unique characteristics in Italy.Â Before the Angevine conquest in 1268, which led to a kind of âFrenchificationâ of the kingdom of Naples, the reinterpretation of transalpine models was the most pronounced in Southern Latium beginning in the late twelfth century, as demonstrated by Fossanova and Casamari Abbeys. A leading role was assumed by Cistercians, who promoted building techniques from France that were then adapted to the local context. The French Gothic spread especially in Italy during the second half of the of the thirteenth century thanks to the mendicant orders (S. Maria Novella, S. Croce in Florence), although the results were less audacious than the Rayonnant Gothic that developed in France during the reign of Louis IX (1226-1270). Builders north of the Alps had learned that a buildingâs walls could be replaced by glass windows without compromising stability (Sainte-Denis starting in 1231; Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, 1241-1248; transept of Notre Dame, 1258-1270), but this knowledge did not translate successfully to Italy, where seismic activity prevented the widespread use of flying buttresses, and narrow and vertical structures in particular.

This idea spread in the rest of Europe, from England (Westminster Abbey) to the Netherlands (Utrecht Cathedral), and from Germanic areas (Strasbourg and Cologne Cathedrals) to Hungary and Cyprus. The Rayonnant style made the thirteenth century the âcentury of cathedrals,â and also prevailed throughout the fourteenth century, even though the efforts of builders shifted more toward decorative aspects. In Catalonia and the South of France, a language was developed emphasizing the vertical lines of architecture, the simplification of structural elements, and the fusion of space (choir of Narbonne Cathedral, 1272-1332; Barcelona Cathedral, beginning in 1298). When such pronounced lines take the shape of flames, they can be referred to as Flamboyant Gothic. This style was born in the early fifteenth century, and extended into the early sixteenth century. Exeter and York Cathedrals in England, Trinity Abbey in VendÃ´me, France, and Seville Cathedral in Spain are some of the major examples of a late Gothic, which was henceforth marked by a taste for unnecessary ornamentation.

Circulation of People and Knowledge

The *Opus Francigenum* was the result of a collective effort that, notwithstanding a few failures, successfully developed a construction system in Ãle-de-France that was gradually exported. The elements that made up the language of Gothic architectureâoriginally understood as an overall structural principle and not as the sum of individual componentsâbecame models to be followed and rethought within the various historical, geographical, and socio-cultural contexts of its original French environment. Transmission was fostered by the will of those who commissioned building projects, as well as by tools of diffusion, such as literary descriptions and architectural drawings. The best medium of circulation for knowledge was still the mobility of people on a continent without firm borders, as demonstrated by the intervention of the architect William of Sens in Canterbury. Early modern Europe should therefore be considered as a living space in which ideas and master builders circulated freely, contributing to both the dynamism of regional realities and the definition of a common cultural identity.

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