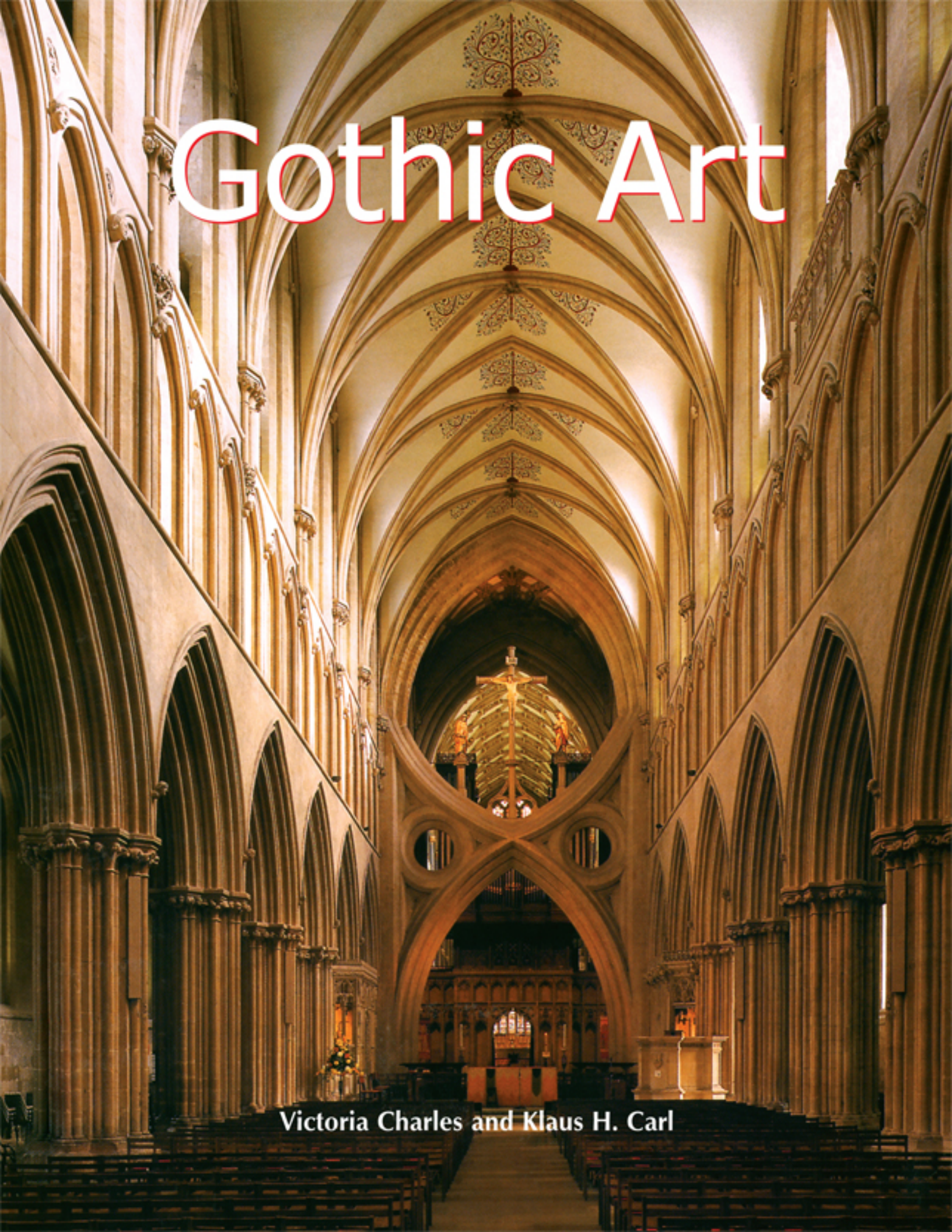
Gothic Art



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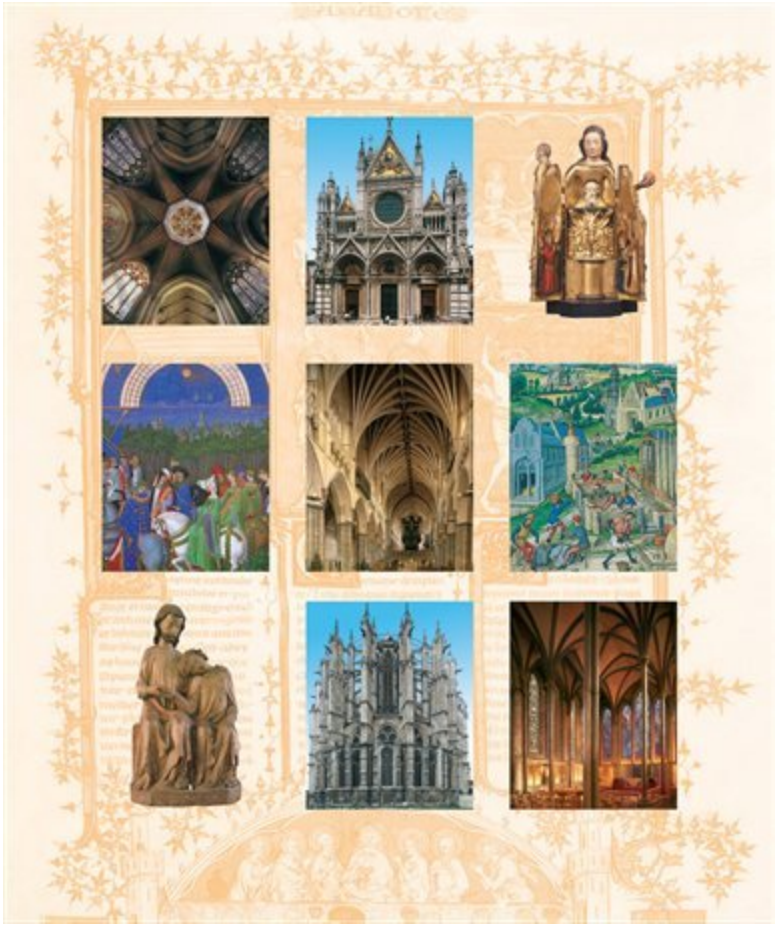


Contents

1. **Jan Van Eyck**, *St. Barbara*, 1437.
Silverpoint on paper, 31 x 18 cm.
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten,
Antwerp (Belgium).

Introduction

The beginning of the Gothic age cannot be dated precisely; it lies sometime in the mid-twelfth century and slowly replaced the Romanesque age. Its end is likewise indefinable but is believed to be sometime at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Some time later the Italian painter, master builder and writer Giorgio Vasari used the term “gothic” (which means “barbaric”) to describe the new way of building that came to Italy over the Alps. No matter how much the Italians tried to resist, the “Gothic” would soon supplant at least the exterior of their Romanesque style, which had been informed by Antiquity. It was spread predominantly by German stonemasons and foremen. From the invasions and pillaging by both the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, and their long domination in Italy, the Italians remembered all too well that “German” and “Gothic” meant one and the same thing. But, just as the Romanesque was truly a German style, the Gothic style is of French origin, as the foundation of Gothic architectural art developed first in the northern part of France, around Paris.

However, Gothic architecture’s apex of artistic creation and strength was displayed with its last development in the cathedrals of Cologne (see p. 68, 70, 71), Ulm, Freiburg, Strasbourg (see p. 26, 27, 28, 29), Regensburg and Vienna. By the time the Gothic reached this stage, its power was exhausted. Any number of Gothic churches could be built, once a perfect system existed that could be followed – all that was needed were sufficient means and inclination. But new formations could not emerge from this locked, continuous system that no longer offered any starting point for further development. While the Romanesque style displayed great freshness and flexibility in its final phase, the Gothic style ended in decrepitude. Still, the merit of the most refined Gothic works lies in their harmonious merging of courageous imagination with intelligent calculation: the former knows no obstacle, while the latter is testimony to a practical, deliberating mind. However, the early Gothic creations, in which the bravery of discoverers and inventors made its first, tempestuous attempts, are artistically more stimulating. Subsequently, the irregular, purely picturesque aspect of Gothic

buildings, and particularly the richness of their plastic ornamentations, is likewise more interesting than the perfect, yet cold regularity of those constructions that represented the highest achievements of Gothic architectural art.

The young poet and natural scientist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, viewed Strasbourg Cathedral with passionate enthusiasm (see p. 26, 27, 28, 29). After him, the German Romantics gazed at the majestic creations of the Gothic style and considered them to be art's highest achievements. This enthusiasm was replaced by a cooler perspective since research of archival documents determined that the roots of the Gothic are French. Not only were French master builders called abroad to introduce the new building style, German master builders and stonemasons also went to France, mainly to Paris, where, from the end of the eleventh century, cultural conditions emerged to which Gothic architecture owes the best part of its growth and development.

The most important of these cultural conditions was the strengthening of the townsfolk and the blossoming of cities. Citizens sought an expression of their wealth and subsequent power in the construction of towering places of worship. Far and wide, they were testimony to both the maturation and greatness of cities. Just as the French court ceremony and chivalrous gallantry gradually suffused fashion, language, poetry, and eventually all aspects European life, Gothic architecture flourished in all those countries which had been penetrated by French culture. The Gothic style accommodated the abovementioned cities' impulses to display their growing power, as well as the practical need for bright, spacious churches that came with incremental population growth. Additionally, there were religious reasons, namely the deep piety that constituted the ethical foundation of medieval man and his yearning for the bliss of Heaven, which is visible externally in the towers reaching for Heaven and internally in the pillar constructions that lift the vaults up to vertiginous heights.

This "longing for heights", this "yearning for Heaven" is not the only, but is certainly one of the decisive reasons for the vertical tendency in the development of Gothic architecture, which is so unlike the horizontal tendency of the Romanesque style. Still, the influence of this spiritual

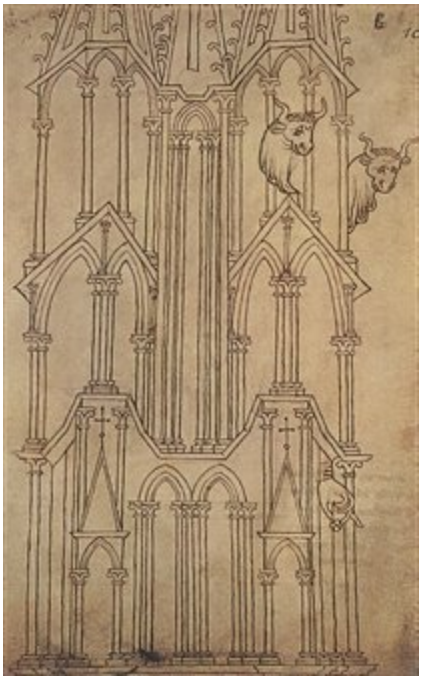
element on the development of the Gothic should not be overestimated. It was always purely technical rather than aesthetic considerations that were at the forefront of Gothic craftsmanship. In the same way that the French masters had devised a new system of vaulted ceilings for purely practical reasons, building technology moved forward with similarly practical concerns. The medieval architects already knew that a building could be turned into an organic work of art, but only from the inside out. That is why the creation of the exterior was the least of their worries, as long as there were no pressing construction concerns; it was the task of the stonemasons, who executed the plans of the highest church-foreman (the architect in the modern sense). This is the reason why, during the reign of this style, the tall spires which give each Gothic church its aesthetic completion were often only finished in smaller scale buildings.

The Gothic architectural style did not emerge as a unified whole, but gradually developed into a system. The artistic and architectural Gothic style, which, in the twelfth century immediately followed, and in parts even coincided with, the final flourish of the Romanesque, at first continued the system of the vaulted basilica, as it had been developed in the Romanesque period. The ground plan of church monuments and the main arrangement of rooms remained the same. Only in terms of architecture is the Gothic style clearly distinguishable.

2. **Ugolino di Vieri**,
Reliquary of the Corporal of Bolsena,
Orvieto Cathedral, Orvieto (Italy), 1337-1338.
Enamelled and gilded silver, h: 139 cm. In situ.

3. Western Façade,
Notre-Dame Cathedral,
Laon (France), begun before 1200.

In situ.



4. **Villard de Honnecourt**,
Sketch of the Laon Cathedral bell tower, c. 1230-1240.
Ink on parchment. Bibliothèque nationale
de France, Paris (France).

In sculpture or painting such a clear distinction is impossible to make. Therefore, the architectural works specifically have a varied character, which is determined by chronology. Buildings are categorised into Early, High and Late Gothic. The structures of highest Gothic perfection are placed in the middle. In terms of dates, the French Early Gothic lasts from 1140 to 1200, the High Gothic from 1200 to 1350, and the Late Gothic from 1350 to 1520. In Italy, the style begins only in 1200. In England the so-called "Early English" with its characteristic narrow lancet arches is considered to last from 1170 to 1250. The *Flamboyant* or Perpendicular style followed from 1350 to 1550. In Germany the Early Gothic took place in the short interval from 1220 to 1250, which was followed by the High Gothic from 1250 to 1350 and the Late Gothic from 1350 to 1530.

The Gothic style differs from country to country in many details, particularly in its decoration. Just as with Romanesque architecture, the

Gothic developed national idiosyncrasies. But the essential features, the actual constructive elements, are the same in all countries that seriously adapted Gothic architecture. Therefore, speaking of a Gothic architectural system is more justified than a Romanesque system.

5. Apse, St. Pierre Cathedral, Beauvais (France),
begun in 1225 and renovated in 1284
and 1573 after its collapse. In situ.

Gothic Architecture

The System of Gothic Architectural Art

The most striking external feature of Gothic architecture is the pointed arch, yet it is part of a larger development, which created a new kind of vaulted ceiling and gradually transformed the Romanesque method of construction. This development met the erstwhile massiveness of construction with a skeletal structure, ultimately resulting in the joist system. These joists gave an appearance of complete stability and security, even to the most daring creations of architectural imagination.

The groin vault rises between pointed supporting arches and is sectioned into parallel ribs that gather in a keystone in the vertex of the vault. Since these ribs were made of stone, the coping of the vault between them and the supporting arches only required light walls. Therefore, ribs were originally of greatest importance to construction, but over the course of the Gothic era their role became more and more decorative. Raising their number to three and four created six- or eight-part vaults. Eventually, the increase of ribs covering the copings of the vaults created the star vault, the net vault, and finally the fan vault with its low hanging keystones. The English Gothic in particular developed the latter with extravagance and rich imagination.

From the ribs of the groin vault the pressure was relayed onto the pillars of the nave, which also carried the supporting arches. Since these pillars had replaced walls in carrying the main weight, while also having to resist the lateral forces of the vault, they were reinforced not only in terms of circumference, but also externally with abutments, the so-called buttresses, which were weaker at the upper wall of the nave, but larger at the outer walls of the aisles. For additional securing, the buttresses extended beyond the walls of the aisles and climbing arches connected them to the flying buttresses of the nave. These flying buttresses anchored the construction securely. To demonstrate that the Gothic architectural principle had found

its perfection, its “keystone”, in these flying buttresses, their tops were adorned with small, slender spires, so-called pinnacles, which consisted of a lower, four-sided base (the body) topped by a pyramid form (the giant). These pinnacles were eventually sectioned and decorated like the main spires, while the edges of the pyramids were trimmed with crockets, or leafy, bulbous formations; finally, their tips were crowned with a finial of four leaves.

6. **Girart de Roussillon**,
Chanson de Geste: Construction Site,
second half of the 15th century.
Nationalbibliothek, Vienna (Austria).

The combination of the interior rib vaulting and supporting pillars with the external system of flying buttresses is most pronounced in Amiens Cathedral (see p. 32, 33). The walls of the nave no longer show any closed mass because Gothic architecture avoids large surfaces and aims to display the frame of the construction as clearly as possible. The lower wall of the nave is interrupted by arcades with pointed arches; likewise, the upper parts of the wall below the windows are set off by a narrow aisle, the triforium, which opens onto the nave with arcades.

The formation of pillars, which fulfil various tasks, also differs completely from the Romanesque method of construction. Their cylindrical core is reinforced with half or three-quarter columns. Along the longitudinal axis they carry the arcades; along the crossways axis they carry the vaults of the aisles on one side and the central vault on the other. The result is a cluster of pillars, which is a characteristic and innovation of Gothic style.

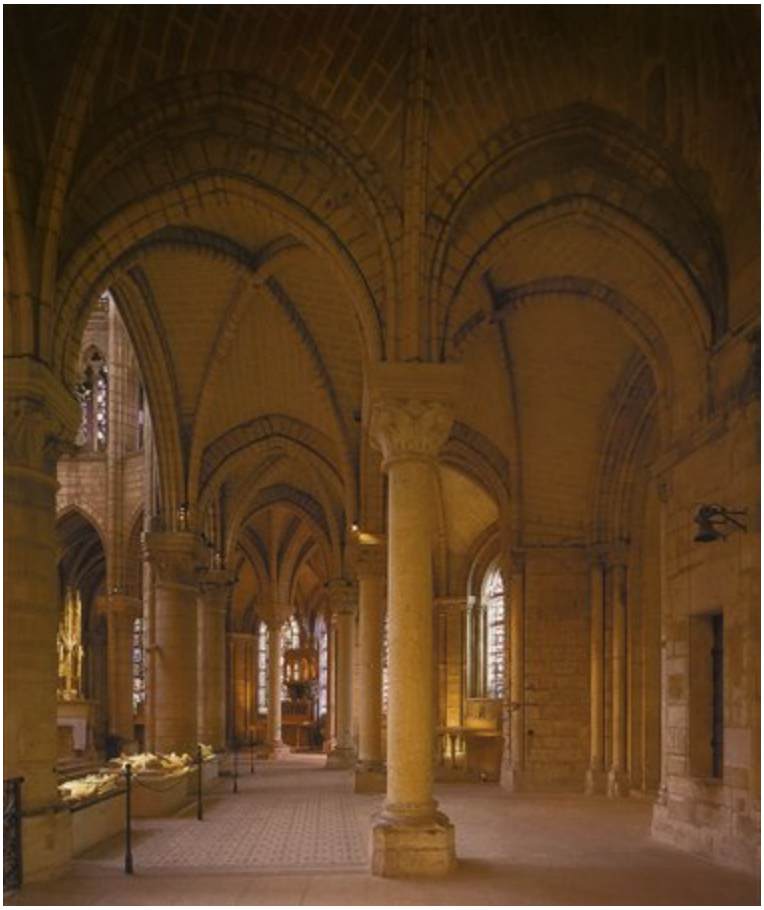
This new formation of pillars is still kept together by a common capital, which, however, consists only of a wreath of loosely strung leaves and no longer represents the actual end of the pillar. The half and three-quarter pillars climb above the roof to carry the supporting arches and ribbed vaulting.

7. Western Façade,
former Notre-Dame Cathedral,
Senlis (France), c. 1151/1153-1191.
In situ.

8. *The Parement de Narbonne*
(altar-hanging), c. 1375.

Ink on silk, 77 x 286 cm.

Musée du Louvre, Paris (France).



9. Ambulatory, Basilica of St. Denis
(former Benedictine abbey church),
Saint-Denis (France), 1140-1144.

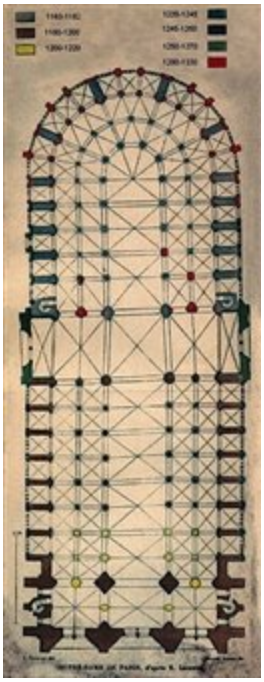
In situ.

10. Western Façade, Basilica of St. Denis
(former Benedictine abbey church),
Saint-Denis (France), before 1140.
In situ.

The introduction of naturalistic foliage to the ossified forms of medieval ornamentation was a further essential innovation of the Gothic style. All these new designs proved to be very fruitful and would later lead to a renewal of the ornamental style, which had grown rigid from its relentless study of Antiquity. The overall delight in nature was awakened in the hearts of medieval people by courtly minnesong and commoners' didactic poetry. Both influenced stonemasons, too, who wanted to test their skills with chisel and hammer in the imitation of local leaf and plant formations. Oak, ivy, acorn and vine leaves were complemented by flowers that were particularly dear to the stonemasons. These leaf and plant ornamentations, which were further refined by being painted naturalistically, spread not only over the capitals, but also over ledges and portal walls; they also framed empty surfaces. However, over the course of the Gothic period, this study of nature diminished. Once accomplished, the ornamentation forms were thoughtlessly repeated until bulbs and buds appeared only in outlines and

finally the memory of their model, which had been culled from nature, completely vanished.

Similar was the fate of the shafts and bars that structured the window openings and gave them outward closure. Originally, these window ornaments had only been a web of stone poles, but with time they developed into a well ordered system. Within the outer pointed arch that encompassed the entire window opening, stone bars rose from the window ledges. They sectioned the window into two to six fields and rejoined the top of the outer arch. The free space between these inner pointed arches and the outer main arch was filled with what is known as tracery, which consisted of stone circles and segments and was contained within a circumference. This technique created geometrical figures of great variety. The segments were at first arranged around a circle like three- and four-leafed clovers. The latter is called a quatrefoil. However, towards the end of the Gothic era, the number of leaves increased to six and eight. The outer arches were further heightened with pointed ornamental gables, known as Wimpergs, the sloping rims of which were studded with crockets and peaked in a finial. The surface of the gable was also filled with tracery. The richest tracery designs can be found in the round windows that are usually located above the central portal of the western façades between the towers. These rose windows were the centre pieces of decoration. The rose window of Strasbourg Cathedral is particularly famous.



11. Plan of Notre-Dame Cathedral,
Paris (France).

The changes that Gothic architecture brought to the ground plans of churches are less drastic and revolutionary. The basic form of the basilica was adopted from the previous Romanesque style and only expanded in some details. The cross-shaped ground plan was the norm; only the arms of the transepts did not always reach beyond the side walls of the nave. In the Late Gothic the transept was often discarded altogether. The nave was usually three aisled and even five aisled during the highest developmental stage of the Gothic. The best example is Cologne Cathedral (see p. 68, 70, 71).

The Gothic really only reinvented the formation of the choir. Since crypts were no longer built, the choir was no longer separated from the nave, but instead considered to be a continuation. The choir no longer ended in a half circle, but in a polygon. If the aisles led around the choir, they created an ambulatory. However, this was extended even further in the French Gothic: around the entire choir end, a series of chapels was added to the outer wall of the ambulatory. This chevet rendered the choir the most important part of

the entire construction. The master builders of Cologne Cathedral also adopted such a chevet. When a new Gothic cathedral was built or a Romanesque one rebuilt, the first concern was usually the choir. The master builders and their clients invested most of their enthusiasm in it, not least because their main worry was housing the main altar as well as the local, often numerous clergy. Particularly in the initial, exuberant phase the funds provided by the princes of the Church flowed freely. Later, when these funds dried up, citizens were also forced to contribute. Consequently, the enthusiasm strongly diminished under the pressure of ecclesiastical or political turmoil. This explains why the choir structures often far surpass the naves in their richness of creation and artistic decoration. Also, the two sides of the nave are frequently uneven in design, one being more lavish, the other more sober and humble, which may be another indication of the decrease of overall wealth and artistic stamina. Very rarely did Gothic architectural works actually achieve complete balance, even though the law of symmetry was at the spiritual core of the style. The buildings that were completed in the nineteenth century came closest to this ideal.