

# GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE AND EMBELLISHMENT: A LUMINOUS SHIFT TOWARDS DIVINITY

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*The grandeur and elegance of Gothic institutions exhibit an astounding contrast from the heavy, compact and dim personality of Romanesque cathedrals. The combination of structural elements such as flying buttresses, cross-ribbed groin vaults and pointed arches enables Gothic architecture to become taller, broader and brighter than has ever been seen before. An emphasis on the use of stained glass also emerged in tandem with the concept of “divine light”, alongside the accommodation of increased traffic from urban centres and pilgrimages. In addition, the proliferation of scholasticism, which involves philosophical thinking about religious concepts, and humanist values had a profound impact on the composition and character of sculpture as well as architectural embellishment of Gothic cathedrals.*

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During a time of great urbanization and economic prosperity the magnificent and monumental Gothic cathedrals flourished across Europe. Born out of the “predominantly rural and monastic”<sup>1</sup> Romanesque tradition, Gothic architecture and decoration reflect the style’s great influence beside admirable innovation. The new interpretation of religious institutions and their embellishment demonstrate the change in people’s spiritual needs and attitudes as a result of urban growth along with the popularity of humanist values stemming from scholasticism.

The architecture and embellishment of the Gothic period owe a great debt to the earlier Romanesque era for providing a model for the application of building forms and formulating a cohesive visual syntax. However, through the combination of particular structural components and sculptural development an entirely different demeanor emerges when observing the façade and interior of a 12<sup>th</sup> century cathedral. In contrast to the previous style’s heavy, musty and dark atmosphere,

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<sup>1</sup>Davies et al., “Gothic Art,” 247.

Gothic art implemented an advanced understanding of building techniques allowing for a lighter structure and brighter interior. For example, the incorporation of flying buttresses as part of cathedral structures was one of the elements which granted the introduction of more stained glass windows because of the superior delegation of weight. Evident in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Chartres (Fig. 1) this architectural component administers the distribution of downward thrust from the nave vault to the outside of the building producing the lightweight appearance of the interior. Accordingly, the clerestory is given the structural freedom to expand to match the height of the pointed arches in the nave arcade facilitating the integration of larger windows and a brighter ambience. The rose and lancet windows are also able to become larger and more elaborate reflecting the importance of the concept of “miraculous light”<sup>2</sup> emphasized by cathedrals of the Gothic period. Abbot Suger expresses this conviction in the prolific application of stained glass windows in the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis (Fig. 2), through which he believed light transforms into “the Light Divine, a revelation of the spirit of God.”<sup>3</sup> This type of embellishment remains stylized and flat while relaying biblical narratives, demonstrated by the *Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière* (Fig. 3) window at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame at Chartres, however a greater psychological impact was made on the viewer because of the monumentality of Gothic stained glass windows. The addition of a triforium also strengthens the flood of interior light in tandem with the larger clerestory windows and visually bolsters the impression of a lightweight structure. Cementing the spacious atmosphere is the employment of a cross ribbed nave vault, first used inside the Durham Cathedral (Fig. 4) in England. This architectural technique produces a reduction in thickness, weight and downward thrust resulting in slender walls and the ability to build higher in conjunction with flying buttresses. Moreover, the piers which extend from the ribbed construction, along the walls and down to the floor accentuate the height and vertical continuity of the structure, in contrast to the interior horizontality of Romanesque cathedrals. The progression from round to pointed arches is also responsible for this atmospheric effect. To elaborate, the advanced weight distribution ability of the pointed arch allows the architectural element to “reach any desired height regardless of the width of its base”<sup>4</sup> facilitating taller structures and narrower bays. This emphasis on the verticality of Gothic cathedrals also reflects the attitude that taller buildings mean a closer relationship to God and the Kingdom of Heaven. The combination of these fundamental components: the pointed arch, ribbed nave vault, and flying buttresses in Gothic architecture accentuate the “growth of Mariology”<sup>5</sup> in the pursuit of a brighter, soaring and increasingly elegant edifice that carries a more feminine appearance. This tendency is clearly exhibited in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Chartres; a holy temple

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<sup>2</sup>Davies et al., 258.

<sup>3</sup>Davies et al., 249.

<sup>4</sup>Davies et al., 248.

<sup>5</sup>Davies et al., 259.

dedicated to the Virgin Mary and housing the remains of a tunic she is rumoured to have worn. In addition, to better display important relics such as the Virgin's tunic, the Gothic apsidal chapels were opened up to appear as if they were one cohesive unit instead of existing in separate Romanesque *apsidioles*. This architectural innovation also assisted the management of traffic flow throughout cathedrals, because it created a second ambulatory and a wider space for visitors to walk along. The growth of urban centres, increase in population and decline of monasticism also made the transformation of this Romanesque feature necessary. Therefore, creating religious architecture on a larger scale became essential in order to accommodate the urban population as well as any travelling pilgrims. However, the desire to build taller and grander churches and cathedrals also escalated as a result of competition among the individual communities in the regions. In order to attract visitors and pilgrims, exquisite, monumental and awe-inspiring structures were crucial alongside prestigious holy relics. An exhibition of the urban community's prosperity and piety, these religious buildings served as a source of economic benefit for the people as well. The circulation of "divine love"<sup>6</sup> also emerged from the emphasis on venerating the Virgin Mary in some of these Christian temples and encapsulates the more humanistic attitude of the Gothic era.

The sculptural decoration on the façades and interiors of cathedrals echo this philosophy in their subtle naturalistic features. For example, while the abundantly carved tympanums and archivolts of the Romanesque era remain a part of most structures, the presentation of the prominent Last Judgement scene has been altered to fit Gothic values. To illustrate, the contrast between the anxiety-inducing scene from the Book of Revelation represented in the tympanum relief of the Cathedral of Saint-Lazare at Autun (Fig. 5) and the welcoming promise of salvation by Jesus during the same biblical event above the entrance of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris (Fig. 6) is immense. The tortures exercised upon the souls residing in Hell are no longer displayed as a spectacle to inspire horror in the faithful; a more earthbound interpretation of a procession of figures towards their spiritual destination is shown above Gothic portals instead. The influence of humanism during the Gothic era can also be observed in the jamb statue of St. Theodore (Fig. 7) in the south transept portal of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Chartres. In comparison to the three other saints in the group the figure of the knight demonstrates subtle classical contrapposto and less stylized drapery while signifying the reintroduction of youthful characters in sculpture. The carving of the entire group also indicates the progression towards free-standing sculpture, since the figures are not fully integrated into the architecture as relief but appear as if they can be removed and attached at will. In fact, the *Virgin of Paris* (Fig. 8) which is a sculpture "carved in the round"<sup>7</sup> represents the culmination of the tendency towards three-dimensional works of religious art. A subtle "S" curve and naturalistic

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<sup>6</sup>Davies et al., 259.

<sup>7</sup>Davies et al., 265.

drapery are evident, similar to St. Theodore, however the crucial aspect of humanistic values presented in the artwork is that the Virgin and Christ Child exhibit an earthly mother and child relationship. This is embodied by the naturalistic interpretation of the child-like body of Christ playing with his mother's veil, seemingly reaching towards the lily she is holding in her other hand. The Virgin has also been likened to a secular queen because of the incorporation of a crown on top of her head instead of a halo proclaiming her divinity. This decision reflects the inclusion of secular kings and queens among Biblical characters in locations such as the façade and rose window of the Notre-Dame in Paris as a result of the proliferation of humanist attitudes.

Consequently, the Romanesque tradition was reinterpreted during the Gothic era in an innovative fashion resulting in tremendous transformation. The brilliance of "divine light" and the majesty of spacious interior architecture are prominent outcomes of the combination of Romanesque elements to satisfy the spiritual and practical needs of urban communities. Gothic sculptural embellishment and decoration also flaunts the progression from rigid and apprehensive to naturalistic and humanist forms.

## FIGURES



Figure 1: Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Chartres, France  
(from the south)

Source: TTaylor, "Chartres Cathedral." Photograph. 2005.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chartres\\_Cathedral\\_000.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chartres_Cathedral_000.JPG)  
(accessed January 10, 2018)



Figure 2: Apse, Abbey Church of  
St. Denis, Paris, France.

Source: Pierre Poschadel. "Saint-Denis (93), basilique Saint-Denis, abside." Photograph. 2014.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint-Denis\\_\(93\),\\_basilique\\_Saint-Denis,\\_abside\\_3.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint-Denis_(93),_basilique_Saint-Denis,_abside_3.jpg) (accessed January 10, 2018)



Figure 3. *Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière* (detail)

Cathedral of Notre-Dame,  
Chartres, France, ca. 1170.  
Stained-glass window.  
Approx. height (4.27m).

Source: Vassil. "Vitrail Chartres  
Notre-Dame" Photograph. 2009.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:V  
itrail\\_Chartres\\_Notre-Dame\\_210209\\_1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vitrail_Chartres_Notre-Dame_210209_1.jpg)  
(accessed January 10, 2018)



Figure 4. Nave, Durham Cathedral, England. 1093 – 1130.

Source: Oliver-Bonjoch. "Durham Cathedral. Interior." Photograph. 2010.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Durham\\_Cathedral.\\_Interior.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Durham_Cathedral._Interior.jpg) (accessed  
January 10, 2018)

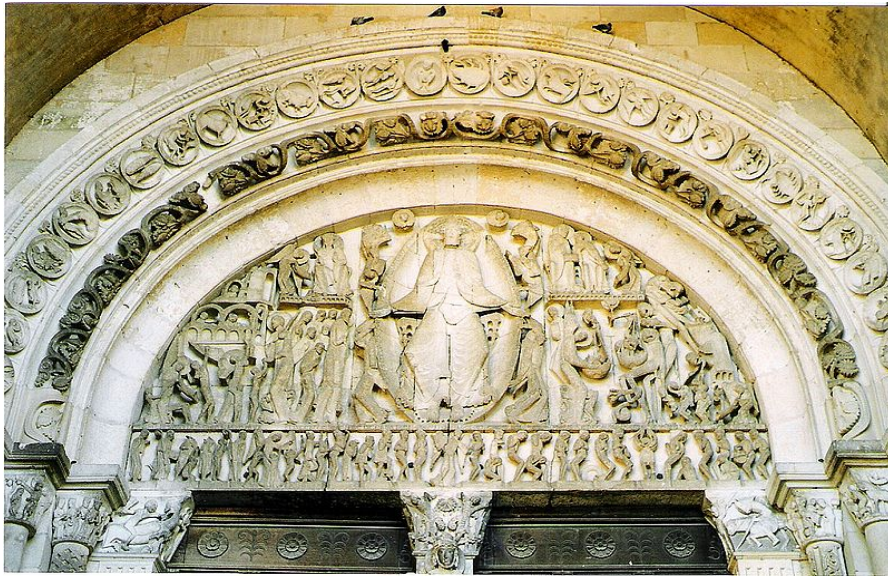


Figure 5: Gislebertus, *Last Judgement* tympanum, west portal, Cathedral of Saint-Lazare, Autun, France. ca. 1120-35.

Source: Lamettrie. "Tympanum of the cathedral St. Lazare in Autun, Burgundy, France." Photograph. 2005.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Autun\\_St\\_Lazare\\_Tympanon.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Autun_St_Lazare_Tympanon.jpg) (accessed January 10, 2018)



Figure 6: *Last Judgement* tympanum, central tympanum above the portal of the west façade, Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris, France.

Source: Philippe Alès. "Notre-Dame de Paris Tympanum of the Last Judgment." Photograph. 2013.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Notre-Dame\\_de\\_Paris\\_Tympanum\\_of\\_of\\_the\\_Last\\_Judgment.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Notre-Dame_de_Paris_Tympanum_of_of_the_Last_Judgment.JPG) (accessed January 10, 2018)



Figure 7: Jamb Statues,  
South Transept Portal,  
Cathedral of Notre-Dame,  
Chartres, France. ca. 1215-20.  
Stone.

Source: TTaylor. "Medieval  
Sculptor." Photograph. 2005.  
[wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chartres\\_cat  
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(accessed January 10, 2018)



Figure 8: "Virgin of Paris,"  
Cathedral of Notre-Dame,  
Paris, France. 14<sup>th</sup> century.  
Stone.

Source: sailko. "Notre Dame  
de Paris, statua della nostra  
signora di Parigi." Photograph  
2009.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/  
File:Notre\\_dame\\_de\\_paris,\\_statua\\_de  
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