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Gothic Style Architecture

Medieval Gothic cathedrals possess similar characteristics including the following: pointed arches, flying buttresses, ribbed vaults, and large stained-glass windows. Gothic architecture began in France. This awe-inspiring style was embraced in Germany and England, where each contributed unique structural adaptations and cultural personality to this beautiful new church style. Colossal buildings, such as these, were built to bring Christians, spiritually, closer to God. The participant in the Mass might have viewed these cavernous edifices as a little bit of heaven on earth (Brendle).

We first look toward France's Basilica Cathedral of Saint-Denis (originally a Benedictine Abbey) where Abbot Sugar was inspired to create the first known Gothic style cathedral. After reading passages from the bible referencing the grandeur of Solomon's Temple, Abbot Sugar was inspired to build a mausoleum worthy to house the remains of religious and political figures, the most notable include the martyr Saint-Denis and France's royal family. He was also faced with the task of accommodating the thousands of Christian pilgrims that would be visiting these saints' relics. These pilgrims brought commerce into Paris which enhanced the local economies (Stokstad 509).

French Gothic architecture marks a concerted move away from the Romanesque style with its thick walls, narrow windows, round arches, and barrel vaults. Abbot's new church vision starts from the ground up using the Latin cruciform plan. Here he incorporates an open

spacious nave that is crossed with the transept. Her side isles extend up to and around the apse to allow for the flow of pilgrims and avoid disrupting the Mass. This is the ambulatory (Brendle). “Engineers created a skeleton that bears the weight of the building and directs it toward the ground. Gothic craftsmen could now fill these walls with colorful glass windows” (Building the Great Cathedrals 00:34:20-00:34:50). The French Gothic builders used ribbed vaults and pointed arches to extend these churches to new heights. Thinner walls allowed for massive, multiple stained-glass windows to illuminate the interior of the church. The exterior buttresses and flying buttresses would help to bear the tremendous weight of the taller structure and in doing so, entice the architects to build even higher. Beautiful sculptures decorated the exterior of French cathedrals. Other examples of the French style include Notre-Dame de Paris with its beautiful rose window, west end towers and watchful Gargoyles; Notre-Dame d’Amiens Cathedral the largest Gothic cathedral in France; Tours Cathedral with its telescopic towers and a new way of making stained glass windows using silver stain (Jenkins 52). The race for height and light was on and these splendid works of art became the inspiration for the English and German builders.

England welcomes this new architectural innovation and proceeds to incorporate the ribbed vault, pointed arche, lancet window, a screen separating the choir from the nave, and flying buttress into their churches while adding a screenlike facade and spires at the crossing. Length is emphasized over the vertical height of the structure. The cruciform plan is still part of the English architect’s design, but a second transept might be added as with Canterbury, Lincoln, Salisbury, and Wells Cathedrals. Gothic architecture developed a new vein called the Decorated Period where more elaborate tracery patterns and vaulting masonry were used.

York Minster Cathedral is a good example of the delicate vine-like tracery work. Lacy heart shaped masonry is utilized over her center west portal and can further be observed throughout the structure including the elaborately decorated tower ceiling. In England according to Ethan Matt Kavalier, Gothic fan vaulting was experiencing a metamorphose. “Prominent structures such as the chapel of Henry VII at Westminster Abbey, the choir of St. Frideswide at Oxford, employ internal bracing arches from which paneled cones seem to be suspended” (156). “The cones are hung like some decorative pendant boss and secured by the dominant transverse arches” (Kavalier 158). One would be amiss not to mention the amusing bare bottomed grotesque sculpture who lurks high above the unsuspecting pedestrian. These massive bright and colorful spaces, along with music and sweet-smelling incense, must have been a welcome escape from the not so merry old England of the day.

German Gothic architects take the cathedral layout in a different direction by the inception of a new hall church plan (often made of brick due to the scarcity of proper stone in northern regions). The hall plan has the nave and side aisles around the same height. One roof could cover them both allowing for a more open sanctuary with plenty of room for the faithful. Builders could take full advantage of the height of the walls installing stained-glass windows that could extend upwards accentuating the expansive high ribbed vaults. According to Jonathan Glancey when referring to the Church of Saint Elizabeth in Marburg Germany, “Like many German churches of the Gothic period, St. Elizabeth is a hall church: that is, both nave and aisles are the same height. The result is a large uniform interior, rather than the French high Gothic idea of a vertical space that rises to a crescendo in the nave vault” (193). This church was unique as it had a triple choir consisting of the Elizabeth choir, the High choir, and

the landgrave choir. Massive towers and spires are hallmarks of this German style, but because of their grandiose size many were never completed. Gothic Ulm Minster's was completed and has a single steeple with bragging rights as the highest in the world. The German Gothic church has distinguishing traits. These unique features are a testament to the people of the towns who built and supported their Christian leaders. They had great faith and aspirational plans to create transformative places of worship.

France, England, and Germany all built churches in the gothic style. The architects expanded upon and made alterations to this style in the hope of meeting the needs of the people and their culture. They built colossal soaring structures to enlighten and bring the faithful closer to God. They succeeded.

Works Cited

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