

Gothic Architecture | Higher Level Notes

Background Information

The Gothic period dominated the 13th Century. It began when changes were brought about in the late 12th Century with regards to how art could be used to teach people. At the Benedictine Abbey of St Denis, Abbot Suger wanted to build a new façade for his old church and came up with the concept for “an architecture of light”. This concept meant that people would begin to explore the idea of light as a vital part of religious education and beauty. It caused a huge development in stained glass art and was a major reason for the change from small windows and dark interiors in Romanesque churches to large windows and light interiors in Gothic churches. Suger then took elements of different Romanesque churches all over France and united them in the renovation at St Denis, thus becoming the “creator of Gothic”. This style spread rapidly across Paris and then France itself. Although Gothic architecture was based on the Romanesque style, it soon developed into its own unique style. Builders had a better understanding of architecture, new ideas spread as well as new techniques. Towns, cities, prosperity and trading grew, increasing the standard of education. Gothic buildings became much more elaborate and decorative. Every new one built became taller because it was believed that tall towers brought the townspeople closer to God.

Chartres Cathedral

- South spire is Romanesque – thick walls, small windows, simple decoration
- North spire is late Gothic – thin walls, large windows, flamboyant decoration
- Three-layered front symbolises the Trinity
- Focus on “divine nature of God” (light) and space
- Known for relic Santa Camisia (Virgin Mary’s gown worn during childbirth)
- Cruciform floor plan, small transepts, wide nave
- Clustered thin columns inside support rib vaulting
- In 1194 there was a fire and the relic was thought to be lost

- Found days later in the crypt under the church
- People took it as a sign to build a new church

Notre Dame Paris

- 13th Century – Early Gothic and High Gothic
- Spires never completed
- Pointed arches, linear quality
- Fine, delicate details
- Thin walls, large windows (rose and lancet)
- Deep sculpted portals, very decorative façade
- Flying buttresses, rib vaulting inside

Rheims Cathedral

- Built 1210 after fire destroyed original
- Towers never fully completed
- Thin walls, large windows, pointed arches
- Lace-like decorative sculpture, rose window with tracery
- Three deep portals at entrance, central portal dedicated to Virgin Mary
- Rose window replacing usual tympanum on Central portal
- Famous for association with royalty (all French kings from 9th-19th Century crowned here)

Rouen Cathedral

- Thin walls, linear quality

- Sculpture is ornamental, highly-detailed and lace-like
- Pointed arches, flying buttresses, cruciform floor plan
- Four-part groin vaulted roof
- Organic, encrusted appearance
- Made famous by Monet painting
- Built in 13th Century with many later additions
- Mixture of all Gothic stages but mostly late/flamboyant
- Completed in early 16th Century