

# Gothic Art

## 1140—c. 1450

*SOURCES and DOCUMENTS*

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superposed work (of each side) was brought together and terminated. This is the arrangement of the pillars [piers].

The outer wall, which extends from the aforesaid towers, first proceeds in a straight line, is then bent into a curve, and thus in the round tower the wall on each side comes together in one, and is there ended. All which may be more clearly and pleasantly seen by the eyes than taught in writing. But this much was said that the differences between the old and the new work might be made manifest.

*9. Operations of the Seventh, Eighth, and Tenth Years.* Now let us carefully examine what were the works of our mason in this seventh year from the fire [1181], which, in short, included the completion of the new and handsome crypt, and above the crypt the exterior walls of the aisles up to their marble capitals. The [aisle] windows, however, the master was neither willing nor able to turn [complete], on account of the approaching rains. Neither did he erect the interior pillars [last piers in the interior]. Thus was the seventh year finished, and the eighth begun.

In this eighth year [1182] the master erected eight interior pillars [piers at the end of the choir] . . . and turned the arches and the vault with the windows in the circuit [ambulatory]. He also raised the tower [of the east crossing] up to the bases of the highest windows under the vault. In the ninth year [1183] no work was done for want of funds. In the tenth year [1184] the upper windows of the tower [over the crossing], together with the vault, were finished. Upon the pillars [piers of the transept arms] was placed a lower and an upper triforium, with windows and the great vault. Also was made the upper roof where the cross stands aloft, and the roof of the aisles [transept arms] as far as the laying of the lead. The tower was covered in, and many other things done this year. In which year Baldwin bishop of Worcester was elected to the rule of the church of Canterbury on the eighteenth kalend of January, and was enthroned there upon the feast of St. Dunstan next after....

#### ON THE QUESTION OF THE PARTICIPATION OF THE COMMON PEOPLE IN THE BUILDING OF GOTHIC CHURCHES

Nineteenth-century romantic literature, including the early literature on gothic art, abounds in allusions to the pious enthusiasm of the common people of the Middle Ages for their beautiful churches, which caused them to assist physically in their construction. Modern research, on the other hand, has viewed with skepticism all accounts of this nature, maintaining that the occasionally hysterical pitch of the faith of the

masses was encouraged and precipitated by irresponsible priests and monks interested in channeling this dumb devotion into monetary donations and free services.<sup>18</sup>

Curiously enough, both these interpretations rest on the same documented incidents: in 1144, when the cathedral of Chartres was undergoing extensive repair and reconstruction, a pious assembly of pilgrims and local people at Chartres pulled carts heavily laden with building materials and other provisions up the hill toward the cathedral, driven to this act by their love for the Virgin Mary and for her ancient shrine. There are two letters of 1145 which tell of this event as well as of its emotion-laden reverberations as far away as Normandy. Excerpts of both letters follow, written by Hugh d'Amiens, archbishop of Rouen, to Thierry, bishop of Amiens, and by Haimon, abbot of Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives, to the monks of Tutbury Abbey in England. It should be remembered that Suger also claimed that crowds voluntarily hauled carts laden with building materials while construction went on at Saint-Denis. This implies that the general enthusiasm for the rebuilding of Saint-Denis was great, and that, in fact, the pulling of carts at Saint-Denis preceded the events at Chartres. Professor Panofsky suggests that Suger was already familiar with the demonstrations at Chartres and in Normandy and that he was also familiar with the eleventh-century Chronicle of Montecassino, written by Leo of Ostia, who, when speaking of the construction of that abbey church between 1066 and 1071, mentioned that ecstasy of faith led the masses to dragging carts laden with material toward the monastery.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, it would be historically wrong to dismiss as meaningless all church annals speaking of the concern and the participation of the local populace in the important events of their cathedrals or churches.<sup>20</sup> Gervase of Canterbury, it may be remembered, speaks in a matter-of-fact way of the participation of the people of Canterbury in trying to quench the fire at the cathedral, and his account, though anything but flattering, is not without sympathy. Other accounts too, predominantly of the twelfth and first quarter of the thirteenth century, speak of the sharing by citizens in the joyful and tragic events of their local churches. It would

<sup>18</sup> Frankl, *The Gothic*, pp. 22, 209; Arthur Kingsley Porter, *Medieval Architecture: Its Origins and Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912), II, 153–59.

<sup>19</sup> Panofsky, *Suger*, pp. 214–15, reminds us that Hugh, archbishop of Rouen, a frequent guest at Saint-Denis and a close friend of Suger, does not confirm Suger's claim that Saint-Denis was the first site of what is called the cult of carts. Panofsky suggests that Suger used all these sources to dramatize his own account.

<sup>20</sup> No one has been more explicit in condemning greedy priests and recurring excesses of superstitious beliefs among the common people than some of the leading theologians and teachers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; see G. G. Coulton, *Life in the Middle Ages*, I (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1928), for passages from Guibert de Nogent, pp. 15–22, Peter the Chanter, pp. 36–39, and Jacques de Vitry, pp. 56–58.

seem reasonable to assume that, in that as yet intimately interrelated world, the members of the clergy derived comfort from the devoted support of the citizenry, and that the drama of the Church's pageant was to a certain degree directed to and dependent upon the participation of the masses. Two further excerpts, one taken from the records of the bishops of Auxerre and the other from the records of the bishops of Le Mans, may demonstrate this interrelation.

**Letter of Hugh d'Amiens, Archbishop of Rouen,  
to Thierry, Bishop of Amiens**

Hugh, priest of Rouen to the Reverend Father Thierry, Bishop of Amiens; may thou ever prosper in Christ. The great works of the Lord are shown in all His designs. At Chartres they commenced in humility to draw carts and beams for the construction of the church, and this humility brought forth miracles. The fame of these spread abroad and excited our Normandy. Therefore our diocesans, having accepted our blessing, went to Chartres and fulfilled their vows. After this, in a similar manner, they commenced to come from throughout our diocese to their own cathedral church of Rouen, having made this condition, that no one should come in their company unless he should first confess and repent, and unless he should lay aside wrath and envy. Thus those who were formerly enemies came into abiding concord and peace. These requisites filled, one among them is made chief, at whose command they drag with their own arms the carts, advancing in humility and silence, and bringing thus their offering not without discipline and tears. These three conditions which we have related,—confession with penitence, the laying aside of all malevolence, humility and obedience in following their leader, we required from them when they came to us, and we received them piously, and absolved and blessed them if these three conditions were fulfilled. While in this spirit they were accomplishing their journey, very many miracles took place in our churches, and the sick who had come with them were made whole. And we permitted our diocesans to go out of our see, but we forbade them to go to those excommunicated or under the interdict. These things were done in the year of the incarnation of the word 1145. Farewell.<sup>21</sup>

**Letter of Haimon, Abbot of Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives,  
to the Monks of Tutbury Abbey in England**

Brother Haimon . . . to his most sweet Brethren and fellow-servants in Christ that dwell at Tutbury.

Who ever saw, who ever heard, in all the generations past, that

<sup>21</sup> Porter, *Medieval Architecture*, pp. 156–57.

kings, princes, mighty men of this world, puffed up with honors and riches, men and women of noble birth, should bind bridles upon their proud and swollen necks and submit them to waggons which, after the fashion of brute beasts, they dragged with their loads of wine, corn, oil, lime, stones, beams, and other things, necessary to sustain life or to build churches, even to Christ's abode? Moreover, as they draw the waggons we may see this miracle that, although sometimes a thousand men and women, or even more, are bound in the traces (so vast indeed is the mass, so great is the engine, and so heavy the load laid upon it), yet they go forward in such silence that no voice, no murmur, is heard; and, unless we saw it with our eyes, no man would dream that so great a multitude is there. When again, they pause on the way, then no other voice is heard but confession of guilt, with supplication and pure prayer to God that He may vouchsafe pardon for their sins; and, while the priests there preach peace, hatred is soothed, discord is driven away, debts are forgiven, and unity is restored betwixt man and man. If, however, anyone be so sunk in evil that he will not forgive those who have sinned against him, nor obey the pious admonition of the priests, then is his offering forthwith cast down from the waggon as an unclean thing; and he himself, with much shame and ignominy, is separated from the unity of the sacred people. There at the prayers of the faithful ye may see the sick, and those that are vexed with divers diseases, arise whole from the waggons on which they had been laid.... When, therefore, the faithful people... set on their way again with bray of trumpets and waving of banners borne before, then marvellous to relate, the work went on so easily that nothing hindered them on their way, neither steep mountains nor deep waters rolling between.... When they were come to the church, then the waggons were arrayed around it like a spiritual camp; and all that night following this army of the Lord kept their watches with psalms and hymns....

Such sacred scenes had first taken place in connection with the building of the church at Chartres, and thence the holy institution came to be established among us in consequence of innumerable miracles; at last it spread throughout the length and breadth of almost all Normandy, and especially was established in almost all places dedicated to the Mother of Mercy.... The multitude of faithful ran hither from different and very remote parts of the world, and here obtained the speedy fulfilment of their petitions in whatsoever necessity they supplicated.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The first two paragraphs of this letter are from Coulton, II (1929), 18–22. His translation breaks off before the end of the original letter; the third paragraph is taken from Porter, *Medieval Architecture* p. 153. The Latin text of both letters is given in Victor Mortet, *Recueil de textes relatifs à l'histoire de l'architecture et à la condition des architectes en France au moyen âge, XI<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: A. Picard et fils, 1911), II, 64ff.

From the Records of the Bishops of Auxerre,  
the Episcopate of Guillaume de Seignelay,  
Bishop of Auxerre between 1207 and 1220

*For 1215. How the bishop had the old building of the church of Auxerre demolished in order to construct the new.* At the same time the construction of new churches everywhere heightened people's zeal. And so the bishop, seeing his own church at Auxerre, which was of ancient and crude construction, suffering from neglect and old age, while others all around were lifting their heads in marvelous beauty, determined to provide it with [a] new building so that it might not be inferior to these others in form and treatment. He had the east end completely torn down so that, as the squalor of the old was removed, it might become rejuvenated in the elegant shape of its reconstruction. The building of the first years, as the church lifted its head aloft beyond what had been hoped for, proclaimed the great generosity with which he poured large sums of money into it; indeed he disbursed for the work's expenses about seven hundred livres of his own in the first year, apart from the offerings of the faithful and the income from the land under his jurisdiction which he had assigned to it at the beginning; and at times in the remaining years, ten livres a week, at times approximately a hundred sols [sous], apart from the sums aforementioned and the taxes from his own and neighboring dioceses.<sup>23</sup>

*For 1217. Concerning the fall and miracle of the towers.* Incidentally it is urgent that... that miracle be told... which is known to have occurred in the demolition of the old structure. Now in the year 1217 on the Sunday before Advent, we were celebrating the day in honor of the Holy Trinity. In the old church there were on either side two towers of no small height and of vast solidity, one south, one north, containing beneath them the whole width of the choir and the choir stalls. Since the buttresses (*antae*) of the old structure, which used to support them firmly, had been removed for the new building, these towers began to crack, at first only by a small fissure, thanks to their cohesion over so many years. No one anticipated that they could collapse so speedily. During this service... (not only the smaller but the larger bells were being rung)... the southern tower spread with a more than ordinary gap; some, observing this, began to talk, and this reached the clergy. The architect was summoned as the third hour approached. He was asked whether there were any immediate danger of collapse of the towers and whether the clergy could safely celebrate the divine service below. Upon his steadfast assur-

<sup>23</sup> As far as I know, no translation into modern monetary terms has been made of these donations in money, landholdings or other property.

ance that there was nothing to fear, one of his disciples who was present said it was not safe to remain under them through the hour. The architect started to upbraid him for bringing unnecessary fear upon the clergy, pointing to certain beams stretched from tower to tower which were keeping the whole structure from falling. When he was more pressingly asked to give no assurance except of what was certain, he said, as if overcome by the persistence of his questions, "I can say nothing certain at all, being ignorant of what the future is preparing." At these words, as by some sort of presentiment, there was a consensus of opinion shared by all that, after the procession, which was now impending, was over (for it was the third hour), Mass should be celebrated in the church of the Blessed Mary, which adjoined the cathedral. This was done. Nonetheless, in customary fashion, as if there were no fear, all the bells were formally and solemnly rung. Only a strong frame would have withstood their striking, according to human reckoning; but the collapse was postponed so that both the divine power which could restrain their sudden collapse and the mercy which wanted to spare might be more evident when all the striking had ceased. Further, even as the place of holding the divine services was moved, so also were the books which were in daily use, and likewise all those that were kept in the closet under the south tower, as if everyone expected the tower to fall immediately. After Mass had been celebrated and the canons were sitting together at their meal, the southern tower, shaken violently, fell onto the opposite tower with a sudden crash, its foundations having been impaired deep within. . . . The people, aroused by the crash, came running. The northern tower still stood and seemed to rest on a solid base: all of a sudden, after scarcely half an hour, it fell to earth and cast the whole mass of its weight on the one that had fallen earlier. . . .

The devotion of the people, evoked by the proclamation of the priests, made them eager to remove the rubble. The outer walls of both towers had survived the collapse. What remained of the south tower had a fissure and cavity that constantly threatened immediate collapse; nevertheless, the dedicated people and others hired for wages exerted themselves to remove the rubble, and the danger of imminent collapse did not deter them in their zeal.<sup>24</sup>

**From the Records of the Bishop of Le Mans,  
the Episcopate of Geoffrey of Loudun,  
Bishop of Le Mans between 1234 and 1255**

*For 1254. The dedication of the new choir of the cathedral and the simultaneous translation into this choir of the relics of Saint Julian*

<sup>24</sup> Victor Mortet and Paul Deschamps, *Recueil de textes relatifs à l'histoire de l'architecture et à la condition des architectes en France au moyen âge* (Paris: Editions Auguste Picard, 1929), II, 202–9; translated from the Latin by Professor Margaret E. Taylor, Wellesley College.

by Bishop Geoffrey of Loudun on April 20, 1254. And now let us hear with what honor the bishop transferred the body of the Most Blessed Julian to the new structure. . . . In order to bring to happy fulfillment the desire of all Mans, he and the chapter ordered that a day be appointed on which the body of the Most Blessed Julian should be transferred to the new structure. This was done a week after Easter Monday, 1254.

On the morning after the Easter service, in the church of the Most Blessed Confessor, a great multitude was at hand, of every condition, sex and age of the whole city of Mans. To free the church of building debris they carried out the rubbish, vying with one another in their eagerness. Matrons were there with other women who, contrary to the way of women, not sparing their good clothes, carried the gravel outside the church in various garments, in clothes bright with green stripes or some other color. Many who carried the sweepings out from the church in their dresses rejoiced that the dresses themselves were stained with the dirty dust. Others, filling the tiny garments of babies with the rubbish from the church, carried it outside the church. Small wonder. It was fitting that the praise of infants attend the divine work. In order that infants and little children might seem to have contributed their labor to so great a service, three-year-olds and little children in whom one could already discern signs of holy faith and who until then could scarcely walk carried the dirt outside the church in their own little garments. Those who were older and stronger carried great pieces of wood and stone outside the church more quickly and easily than could be believed. The younger ones attended to light loads, according to their strength, while the older ones, according to theirs, toiled to carry heavy ones. In a short time they did voluntarily what many hired men had not accomplished over long periods of time. And this they did on their holiday, without interruption and without having been asked to do so. What more need be said? Such was the zeal of people's faith, such the ardor of their devotion, that onlookers marveled. The people also wished the light within their hearts to be made visible without. Hence they resolved and ordered that each trade should provide candles of a size according to its means, to burn on the solemn day. Some of the larger trades made candles containing two hundred pounds of wax; others made candles of different weights, according to their means. . . . Apart from the great number of these candles, the church provided candles around the choir and arranged in a circle in the presbytery. There were also little holders in the nave of the church adorned with a great number of candles. . . . It is a pleasure to tell also of the locksmiths and vinedressers, who, seeing the candles of the others and having done nothing themselves, said to one another, "Others have made light for the moment; let us make windows to lighten the church in the future."<sup>25</sup> They made a window having five lancets in which they

<sup>25</sup> For the style and quality of the stained glass in the choir of the cathedral, see *Le Vitrail français, sous la haute direction du Musée des Arts Décoratifs de Paris* (Paris: Editions des Deux Mondes, 1958), pp. 155–56.

themselves are depicted in their trades. Nor did we think we should withhold praise of them, simply because they made a window in which they depicted themselves in their trades, for, after all, they did make a splendid window.... The day is at hand, awaited by all but most eagerly desired by Bishop and Clergy, who long for the transfer from the squalor and cramped size of the old building to the beauty and spaciousness of the new cathedral.<sup>26</sup>

### TWELFTH-CENTURY CRITICS OF THE NEW ARCHITECTURE

*The Church has always maintained the attitude of encouraging the artistically beautiful, in that the beautiful leads man to greater awareness of the Sublime Godhead; it has condemned beauty for its own sake under the title of Pride and Luxury, two of the Vices offending against the Laws of Holy Scripture. This broad and open, if not ambivalent, position of the Church produced a wide range of interpretations within the medieval institutions of the Church and among its spokesmen. Each generation produced those who looked with grave misgivings at the corrupting influence of a style of life other than of the severest and simplest kind; witness the considerable number of monastic orders of the twelfth and early thirteenth century which chose to follow the example of the strict Rules of the Cistercians in modeling their customs, rejecting all sources and manifestations of luxury and wealth.<sup>27</sup> Almost immediately, warning and shocked voices were raised from outside the monastic establishment against the new architecture. We hear, for instance, several of the theologians and moralists teaching at the Schools of Paris launch their rebuke against the lavish building of their time, a rebuke which may have been provoked by the construction, before their eyes, of the cathedral of Paris, in building since 1163, under the episcopate of Maurice of Sully.*

*One such critic was the English scholar Alexander Neckam (ca. 1157–1217), educated at the abbey school of Saint Albans and at the Schools of Paris, where he then taught for many years. He continued teaching after his return to England and finally became abbot of Cirencester.*

<sup>26</sup> Mortet and Deschamps, pp. xiv and 257–59, translated from the Latin by Professor Margaret Taylor. The choir was begun after agreement on its size was reached in 1217; see A. Ledru, *La Cathédrale du Mans Saint-Julien*, 2nd ed. (Le Mans: Imprimerie E. Benderitter, 1923), p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Dom David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of Its Development from the Times of St. Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 943–1216* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1940), p. 210.