Gothic Architecture

by Sophia

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

The overall effect of Gothic architecture is light and spacious compared to Romanesque architecture.

1. Period and Location: Gothic Architecture

The time frame for this tutorial is very small, from 1140 to 1144. The tutorial will focus on one church in Paris, France.

2. Influences of the Development of Gothic Style

Gothic is an architectural style originating in France during the 12th century. Traits of Gothic include the use of the pointed arch, flying buttress, rib vault, and a general emphasis on space and verticality. Scholasticism was a form of theology and philosophy taught at universities during the Middle Ages based on Aristotelian logic.

The term "gothic" was coined by Giorgio Vasari, the Italian author who used the term disparagingly during the Renaissance to refer to this type of architecture.

❓ **DID YOU KNOW**

Today, the word "gothic" and especially goth style is strongly associated with the dark and fantastical, but ironically, it's a design intended to bring a sense of religious light and airiness to Christian architecture. It was a departure from the comparatively darker, heavier style of Romanesque architecture that was a consequence of the construction limits of that time. As you can see, it is kind of the opposite of what is known in the mass mainstream today!

The stylistic changes of the Gothic are also related to the sociopolitical happenings of the time. Cities were getting bigger and bigger, and urban cathedrals were becoming more important as religious institutions versus monasteries. There was also the establishment of urban universities, like the University of Bologna in Italy. Monasteries, instead of universities, had been the primary educational repositories for centuries.

University of Bologna
Bologna, Italy
1088

2a. Scholasticism

During the Middle Ages, classical learning had never really disappeared. The teachings of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers were preserved in monasteries, which revived these works by translating them. **Scholasticism** was based on the work of Aristotle and on dialectical reasoning, which refers to a method of learning in which people learn the truth through reasoned debate. Generally speaking, scholasticism represented an attempt to reconcile classical learning with Christian religion. It was influential in the rise of universities throughout Europe in the 12th century.

Thinking about the Renaissance as a sudden revival of classical learning separate from the medieval period is factually incorrect. The return to classical humanism had a long buildup that took hundreds of years and extended at least as far back as the reign of Charlemagne. There is a lot of evidence of support for scholasticism and classical learning in the sculptures on the exterior of Gothic cathedrals, in particular the cathedral at Chartres.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Scholasticism
A form of theology and philosophy taught at universities during the Middle Ages, based on Aristotelian logic.

2b. Pseudo-Dionysus

Lastly, let's discuss the influence of Pseudo-Dionysian light mysticism, a form of mysticism concerning the important association with light and God—specifically, that light was a physical manifestation of God. This was attributed to the 5th century author **Pseudo-Dionysus**, who combined elements of Greek philosophy with Christianity. His work would have been known to the Abbot Suger, the person primarily responsible for the Gothic style at Saint-Denis.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Pseudo-Dionysus
A Christian philosopher mystic and theologian during the late 5th century.

3. Characteristics of Gothic Architecture

Basilica of Saint-Denis
Paris, France
1140–1144

Saint-Denis was an important church in Paris, originally founded during the 5th century. It was the royal abbey, located about twenty miles outside of Paris, and it was where many French kings had been buried. It was also quite wealthy, since it had benefited from the patronage of French royalty.

The rise of Gothic style directly countered a reform movement in the church. Through pilgrimages, many churches and monasteries in particular had grown quite wealthy. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who was a monk but also a skilled politician, preached a return to asceticism through his Cistercian movement. Abbot Suger, the leader of Saint-Denis and of the remodeling of the **choir**, loved beautiful things and wanted his church to be lavish, but was afraid of Bernard's criticism. His monks did not really need beautiful objects to help them in spiritual contemplation. Suger turned to Pseudo-Dionysian light mysticism as his justification. Through contemplation of the stunning stained glass windows at Saint-Denis, the monks would be better able to contemplate the beauty of God. The structural innovations implemented in the choir made it possible for the walls to be pierced by stained glass windows. The use of architectural elements largely associated with the Gothic style, like the pointed arch, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses, had already been used in other Romanesque-style buildings in one way or another.
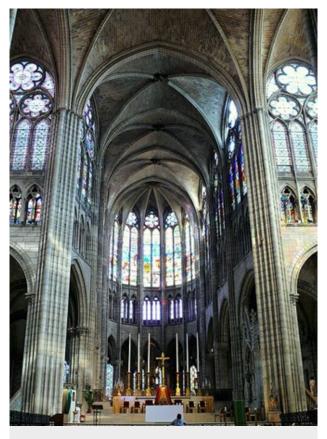
⤳ EXAMPLE An example would be Durham Cathedral with its ribbed vaults.

It was here at Saint-Denis, specifically in the reconstruction of the church's choir, that they were combined in a way that allowed for greater expanses of open space. This space could be filled in with stained glass and yet still exist within a structurally sound building.

Rib vaulting at Saint-Denis

The **rib vaulting** channeled most of the downward force into the supportive columns, rather than the walls. Walls had a minimum load bearance in Gothic architecture as opposed to Romanesque style buildings where the exterior walls were primary load-bearers.

Pointed arch at Saint-Denis

The **pointed arch** allowed for the expanses to stretch upwards, creating more space. The use of the flying buttress as an exterior supportive element allowed walls of glass and light, as opposed to walls of stone. The overall effect was that of something light and spacious compared to the Romanesque style of architecture.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Choir
Architecture; a part of the cruciform church east of the crossing.

Rib Vault
Architecture; a vault supported by or decorated with diagonal ribs.

Pointed Arch
Also referred to as the "ogival arch," a primary characteristic of Gothic architecture; also seen in Islamic architecture.

📋 SUMMARY

The **Gothic architecture** style originated in France during the 12th century. **Influences of the development of gothic style** include a hybrid of theology and philosophy called **scholasticism**, and a form of mysticism developed by 5th century author **Pseudo-Dionysius**, concerning the important association with light and God.

Characteristics of gothic architecture include rib vaulting, flying buttresses, and the pointed arch to create space.

The big idea for today is that the overall effect of Gothic architecture is light and spacious compared to Romanesque architecture.

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