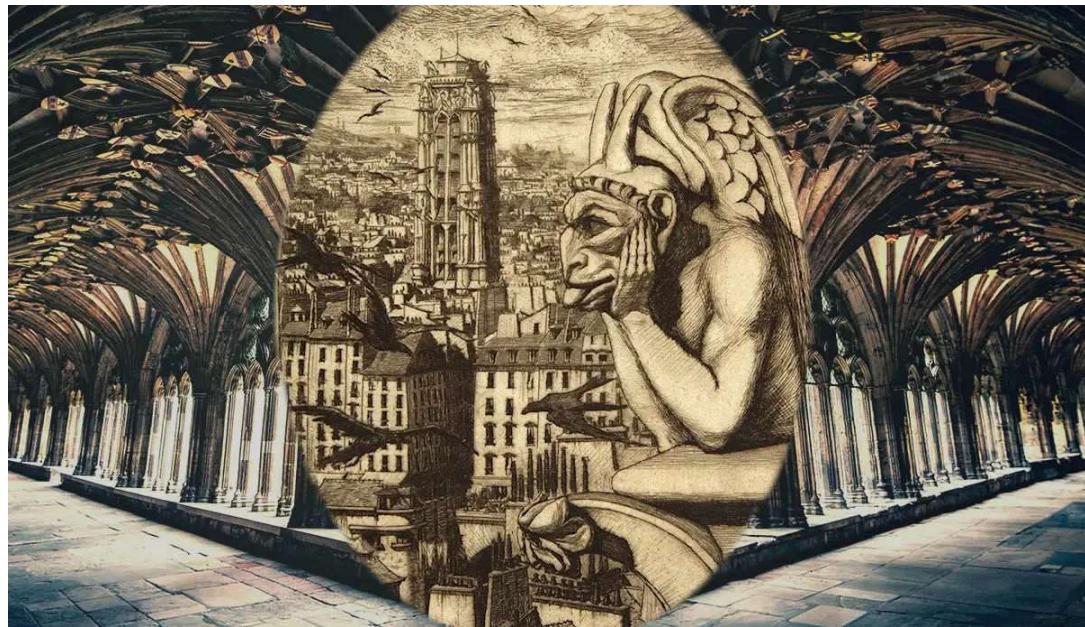


Here Are The 10 Greatest Gothic Cathedrals To See

Gothic cathedrals leave no one indifferent, with their multi-colored stained glass, ogival arches, and insatiable need to touch the sky.

Nov 9, 2021 • By [Cinzia Franceschini, MA Art History w/ History of Art Criticism](#)



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The earliest examples of Gothic architecture date back to the second half of the 12th century. The worksites of cathedrals involved architects, master carpenters, stonemasons, and glassworkers, and construction could last for hundreds of years and involve the efforts and donations of whole cities. Gothic cathedrals expressed the taste, values, and religiosity of the society of the time. The accentuated verticality, the walls lightened by decorated stained-glass windows, the flying buttresses, rib vaults, and pinnacles created a spiritual and transcendent space.

10. The Gothic Cathedral of Bourges



[Bourges Cathedral](#), photo by Renaud MAVRÉ, via Britannica

The Gothic style spread from Northern France throughout Western Europe from the 12th to the 15th centuries, before being supplanted by [Renaissance](#) styles. France was the point of irradiation for this artistic current, with the construction of the first cathedral: the [Abbey of Saint-Denis](#), not far from Paris.

Among the most exemplary of these French masterpieces, although not the most famous, is the gothic cathedral at Bourges, dedicated to the first Christian martyr, Saint-Étienne. This imposing building was constructed between the late 1100s and the early 1200s, on the site of an earlier sanctuary. It was closely linked to the Capetian domination of the region, of which it was to become a symbol. Saint-Étienne Cathedral is characterized by its two asymmetrical towers, one with *flamboyant* Gothic pinnacles and crockets, and its impressive system of double flying buttresses. Its sculpted portals, particularly the one depicting the Last Judgment, are also remarkable.

9. An Italian Interpretation: Siena Cathedral



Siena Cathedral, photo by Luca Florio, via Unsplash

Despite their many recurrent elements, Gothic cathedrals in Europe are all distinguished by local features and national variations. In Italy, for example, Gothic architecture spread across the region but was of a less extreme style than on the other side of the Alps. This is why Italian Gothic is also called "*gotico temperato*", or temperate gothic. In Italy, there are no Gothic cathedrals that reach vertiginous heights or that use the massive sculpture found in their French sisters. A simple, classical architectural approach was maintained.

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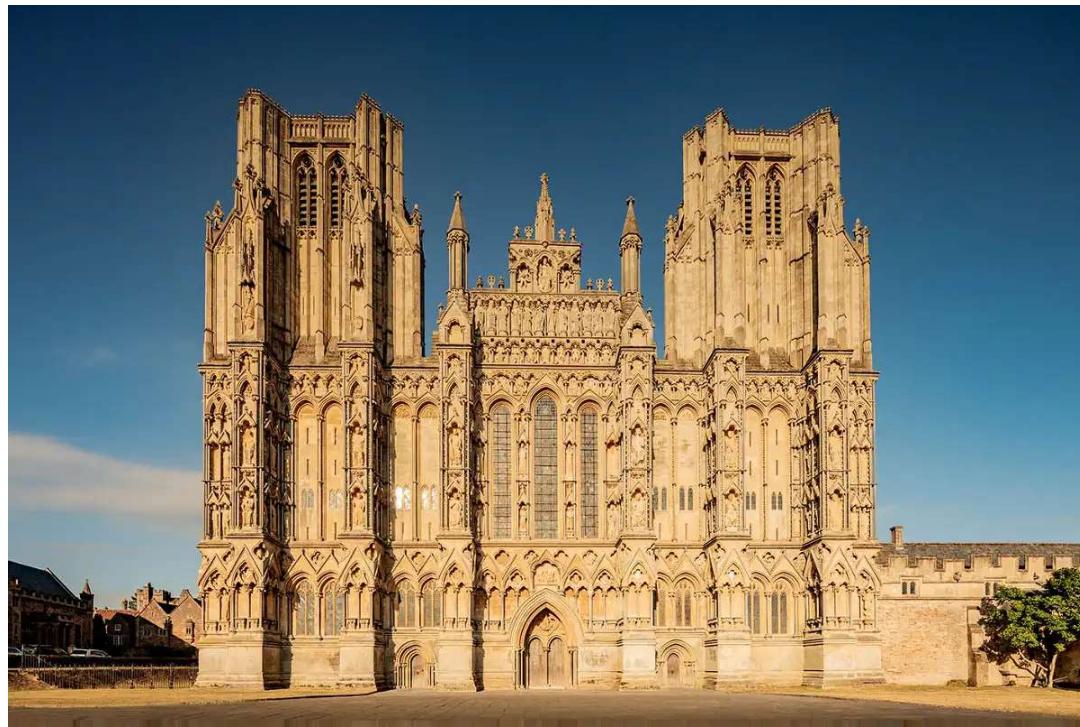
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Siena's façade was conceived on two levels, and it blends elements of the French Gothic tradition with Italian Romanesque and classical architecture. The use of polychrome marble and geometric decorations makes the structure typically Tuscan. The upper level, with pinnacles and gothic decorations, is more reminiscent of French Gothic cathedrals. Inside [Siena's Cathedral Complex](#) is Nicola Pisano's sculpted marble pulpit, Duccio di Boninsegna's impressive rose window, and the Piccolomini Library, adorned with a cycle of frescoes. The uniqueness of the charm of Siena Cathedral also lies in its unfinished nave. The expansion project was interrupted by the terrible epidemic of the [Black Death](#), in 1348.

8. The English Cathedral of Wells

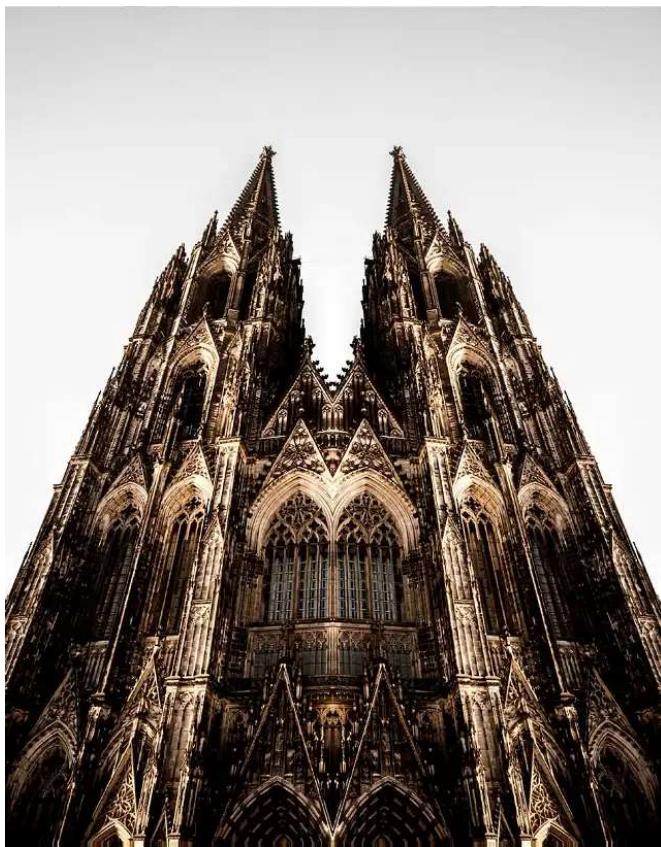


[Wells Cathedral](#). Photo by Michael D Beckwith, via Unsplash

Wells Cathedral in South-West England is the first example of English Early-Gothic architecture, breaking with the previous Romanesque tradition. Its architecture is another example of how the Gothic style took on different national forms. The most unique aspect of the building is undoubtedly the magnificent West Front completed in the mid-1200s, which houses more than 300 figural sculptures.

While in French experiments sculptures were typically located in the portal, at Wells they occupy the niches of the entire façade. The effect must have been even more striking in the Medieval period, as the carved statues were painted red, blue, and white. Another curiosity about [Wells Cathedral](#) concerns music. Above the doorway, there are holes within the quatrefoils. This allowed the voices of the choristers to sound directly from the façade, a secret that makes this complex Gothic cathedral unique!

7. The Superb Cathedral of Cologne



[Cologne Cathedral](#), photo by [Yunus G.](#), via Unsplash

Germany is not only a land of [medieval castles](#) and fortification; Gothic cathedrals also left their mark in the Middle Ages. Cologne Cathedral for example, is the largest Gothic church in Northern Europe. Its twin towers with huge spires are more than 150 meters (492 feet) high, securing it the record as the world's tallest structure until 1884. It is also one of the most visited places in Germany, as a pilgrimage site.

Since the Middle Ages, Cologne's Gothic cathedral has held the relics of the Three Kings, taken by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa from another basilica in Milan. This treasure was extremely significant for Christian worship and is preserved inside a golden reliquary created by the famous goldsmith, Nicolas de Verdun. The shrine itself is another medieval masterpiece.

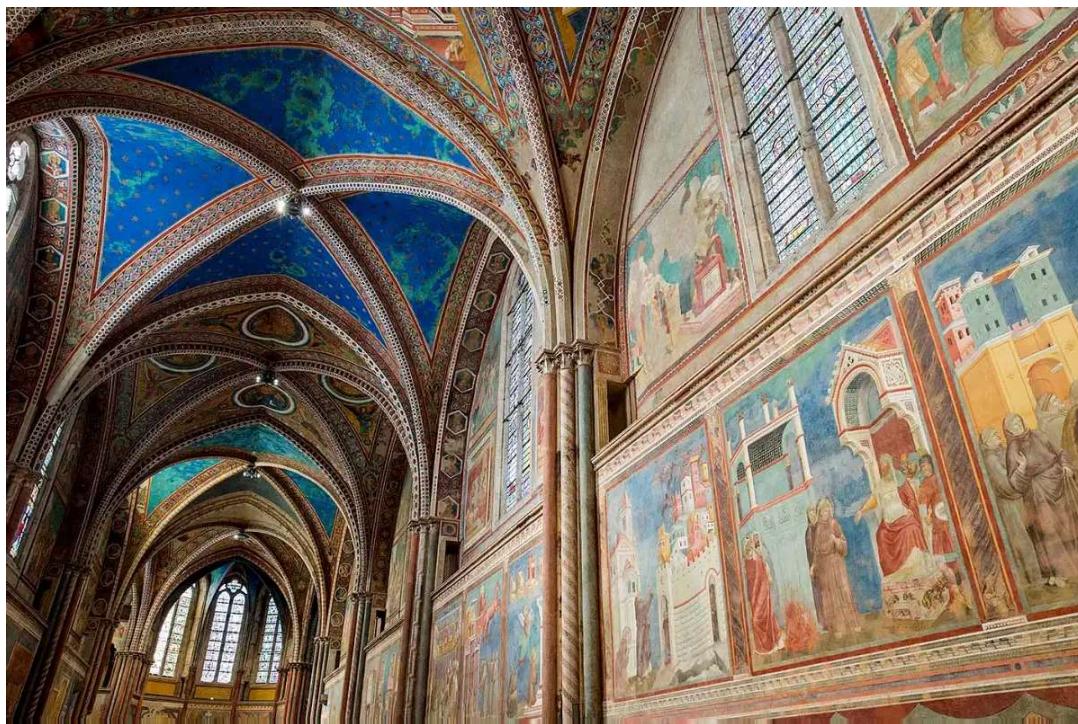
The cathedral has also seen the dramas of the 20th century. During the Second World War, it suffered fourteen air raids, losing one of its bright stained-glass windows. The contemporary visual artist [Gerhard Richter](#) replaced it in 2007, creating a modern stained-glass window filled with pixels, a contemporary form of Gothic glasswork and devotion.

6. The Synthesis of Assisi's Basilica



[Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, Photo by Josh Applegate](#), via Unsplash

The Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi is the mother church of the Conventual Franciscan order, and it is a revered pilgrimage site throughout the Catholic world. Its architecture may surprise you, because it is a veritable synthesis of Romanesque and Gothic elements. It marks the beginning of a new artistic era. The basilica, in fact, looks like a real double church, with different structures and functions. The Upper Basilica, closer to the Gothic style, was dedicated to functions and preaching while the Lower Basilica, with the crypt of Saint Francis, founder of the order, was designed for recollection and more intimate prayers.



[Frescoes in the Upper Church of Assisi](#), via sanfrancescoassisi.org

The architecture of the church creates a successful and balanced syncretism; there are elements linked to the Umbrian Romanesque tradition, such as the gabled façade and the solid quadrangular tower, and aspects influenced by the more recent Gothic style. Examples of this are the buttresses, the pointed arches of the nave of the upper church, and the ogival cross vaults.

The interior of the basilica is made even more precious by the extraordinary cycle of frescoes depicting major stories from the life of Saint Francis. The purpose was not only decorative but also didactic; devotees could retrace the life of the saint. The frescoes were painted by the young Giotto, although the [patronage and dating](#) of the cycle have been the subjects of a lively [debate](#) among academics for decades.

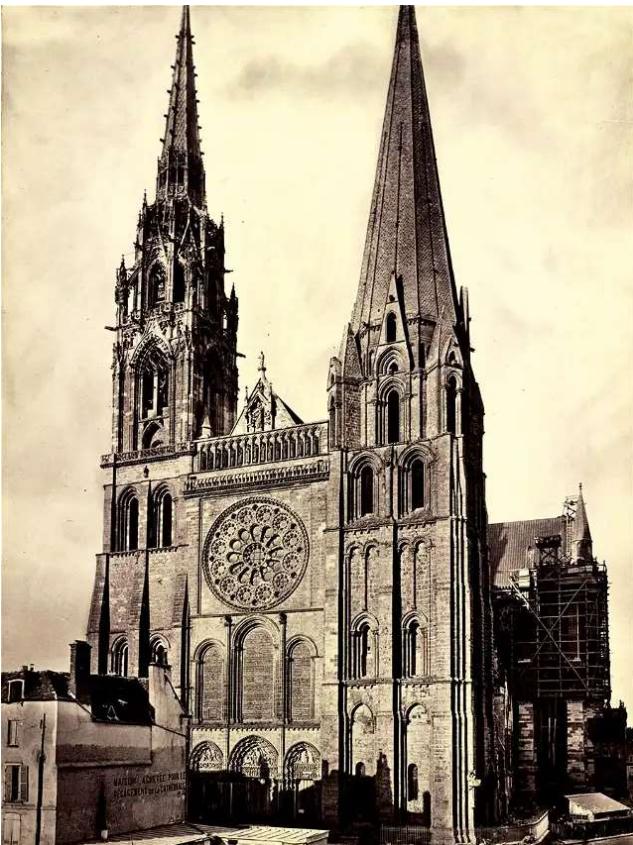
5. Another Italian Gem: Orvieto Cathedral



Orvieto Cathedral, photo by Pavel Satrapa, via Wikimedia Commons

Orvieto's cathedral is not one of the most famous churches in Italy, but it has its own charm precisely because it is a hidden gem. It was built at the end of 1200 at the request of Pope Nicholas IV to celebrate the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena, a village not far from Orvieto. According to legend, a priest was saying Mass in the small village when he noticed that the consecrated host was bleeding on the corporal. The sacred object is now kept inside the cathedral in a chapel dedicated to it. The [church in Orvieto](#) has gothic features after an Italian interpretation. Its rose window, reworked by Orcagna, is particularly interesting and has an unusual shape, with a 22-sided polygon design.

4. The Symbolic Cathedral of Chartres



[Chartres Cathedral, West Front, Andrew Dickson White Architectural Photographs Collection, ca. 1865-ca. 1886](#), via Cornell University Library

[Chartres Cathedral](#), also known as the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres because it was dedicated to the cult of the Virgin Mary, is a milestone of Gothic architecture. Its stained-glass windows, portals, decorations, and carved sculptures are still in an excellent state of preservation. They make the church one of the most intact examples to study the period. As is typical in French Gothic, the western façade is enclosed between two different towers. One of them has an elaborate and slender structure with flames and spandrels. It is an excellent example of *flamboyant* Gothic.

The [Royal Portail](#) consists of three entrances and features an abundance of sculptures, reliefs, and statue columns. Their iconography is in some cases still linked to Romanesque influence, depicting the cycle of the seasons, the zodiac, and even a curious bestiary. However, it is the famous labyrinth of Chartres that attracts lovers of symbolism. Located on the floor of the main nave, it represents a salvific path that the pilgrims must follow, distinguishing between good and evil. A word of warning: there is only one way out.

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3. Canterbury Cathedral and its Records



[Canterbury Cathedral](#), Photo by Zoltan Tasi, via Unsplash



Here Are 5 Of The World's Most Impressive Medieval Castles

Canterbury Cathedral is the mother church of the Anglican Communion and is situated in the medieval center of Canterbury, one of the oldest cities in England. The heart of the cathedral is undoubtedly its choir, rebuilt after the terrible fire of 1174. A French architect, William de Sens, was responsible for its reconstruction, which also affected other parts of the complex. His choices left a strong imprint of the Gothic style, already prevalent in France. The [stained-glass windows](#) of Canterbury Cathedral occupy an area of approximately 1200 square meters (12,916 square feet). In 2021 it was discovered through careful analysis that some of these windows date back to the mid-1100s and may be considered among the oldest in the world!

2. A Never-ending Construction: Milan Cathedral



[Milan Cathedral](#). Photo by Kristy Kravchenko, via Unsplash

Milan is a dynamic and vibrant city but at its heart its ancient cathedral remains. It is dedicated to the nativity of Saint Mary and the golden statue located on the highest spire represents the Virgin, the “Madonnina”, an authentic symbol of this Italian city. Milan’s cathedral is not afraid of big numbers: it is the largest church in Italy (excluding the Vatican), and it covers an area of over 100,000 square feet which can accommodate up to 40,000 people. It is also decorated with an inordinate number of gothic statues, gargoyles, and figures. Among them, there is also “the New Law”, a statue that is near identical to the Statue of Liberty.

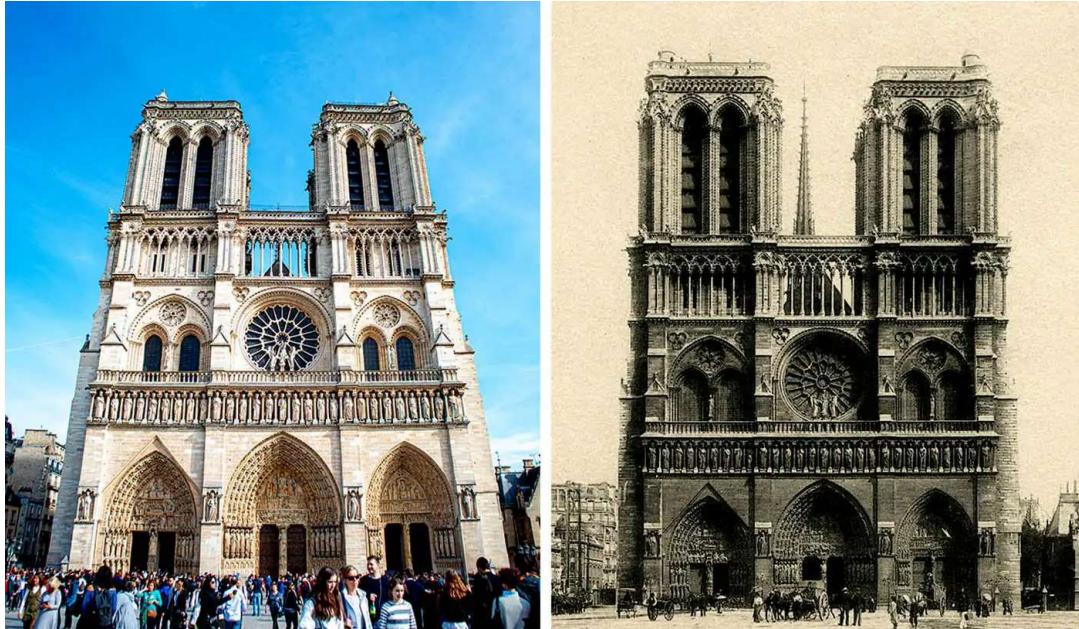


[The Duomo Milan, photo by Calvert Richard Jones, Duomo Milan, 1846, via the Met Museum](#)

Milan Cathedral's construction, the "*Fabbrica del Duomo*", lasted about six centuries...and it is still not finished! Consecrated in 1418, its façade remained unfinished for centuries until Napoleon's intervention. Today, it is still the subject of continuous restorations and cleanings that keep its white and pinkish marble impressive. The original project was strongly desired by the ruler Gian Galeazzo Visconti to celebrate the territorial expansion of his family.

The [cathedral](#) today is a triumph of styles, due in part to the presence of the French and German medieval master masons who worked in conjunction with Lombard masters. The result is a piece of Gothic architecture that masterfully blends international influences with the more modular Lombard tradition.

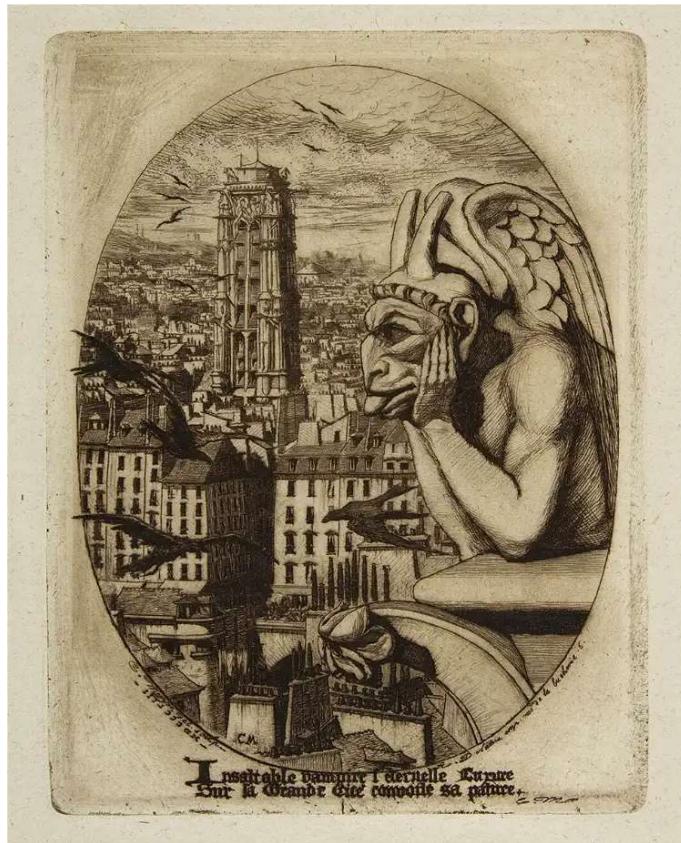
1.The Queen of Gothic Cathedrals: Notre-Dame de Paris



[Notre-Dame of Paris Cathedral](#), Photo by [chan leg](#), via Unsplash; with [Notre-Dame de Paris, unknown photographer](#), 1900, via publicdomainreview.org

Notre-Dame de-Paris is probably the most famous and recognizable of all medieval Gothic cathedrals. It was built on the ruins of two earlier churches, which in turn were erected on a Gallo-Romanesque temple dedicated to the cult of [Jupiter](#). Consecrated in 1189 but completed in the mid-14th century, its façade framed by two twin Gothic towers is one of the symbolic monuments of France. The two towers dominated the Parisian skyline until the construction of the Eiffel Tower in the 19th century.

Its dimensions are impressive: it is a five-nave, Latin cross church with double aisles. Notre-Dame was also among the earliest buildings to use flying buttresses, making it a jewel of the audacious Gothic Rayonnant style. It is impossible to remain indifferent to the charm of the sculptures in this Gothic cathedral. The church was in fact conceived as a *liber pauperum*, a “poor person’s book”, as its statues were intended to tell biblical stories through images to crowds of uneducated worshippers.



[The Vampire](#), Charles Meryon, 1853, via publicdomainreview.org

Among the Cathedral's most fascinating sculptures are its grotesque gargoyles. Their purpose was much more practical and less frightening than you might think: they served as rain spouts! However, it is often imagined that they served a mythical function as protectors. These monsters were capable of exorcising evil or perceiving it inside the church itself. But despite the mysterious Gothic atmosphere and their inspiration from medieval bestiaries, don't be fooled... the gargoyles are actually historical fakes! They were added by [Eugène Viollet-le-Duc](#) at the end of the 19th century, and they were not part of the original Gothic revival movement.

According to the American historian [Michael Camille](#), their meaning could be a metaphorical representation of the 19th century working class. The populace, represented as gargoyles, were seen as "ugly and bad" by the Parisian bourgeoisie. Are these statues a medieval reminiscence or an icon of a new and contradictory society? The choice is yours.

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