

Overview of Medieval Architecture

Two primary styles characterize medieval architecture: the Romanesque and the Gothic. While there was overlap in style and technique making a clean division impossible, in general the Romanesque style hit its zenith between the eleventh to the mid-twelfth century, and the Gothic style came to the forefront during the middle of the twelfth century. Church building primarily advanced primarily both styles. The same religious sentiment that caused groups of Christians to call for a purer form of Christian expression, reform of the Catholic Church, and put more and more pilgrims on the path to Christian shrines throughout Europe fueled a massive building campaign of new churches. In France alone, eighty cathedrals sprang up between 1050 and 1350. These building projects were also fueled by the desire of monarchs to express their wealth and authority, but also their piety. Sponsoring the building of a new church was a way for monarchs and other members of the nobility to enact penance. For example, after defeating Harold Godwin at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, William the Conqueror commissioned the erection of Battle Abby on that very site as an act of penance for those who had fallen in the battle. As a result of the boom in church building, tools such as cranes and hoists improved, and workmanship also improved including that which applied to roads, walls of castles, towns, public buildings, and bridges. Moreover, it took the vision of patron and master builder to organize the design, funds, resources such as timber and stone, and, perhaps most importantly, labor. It took a whole force of masons, carpenters, metalworkers, sculptors, and with the Gothic style, glassmakers. A church in either style could take several decades to complete.

The Romanesque style took its inspiration from Roman basilicas, which were rectangular buildings with rounded, stone arches. Originally used for non-religious purposes, the growth of Christianity necessitated larger spaces. Christians adopted the basilica for their gatherings, transforming it into a spiritual space. During the early medieval period, basilicas had wooden frames and flat roofs. By the late eleventh century when the size gathering at key sites required larger spaces, builders began incorporating elements of the late imperial Roman edifices. These new churches had large naves—the large gathering space in the center of a building—and stone arches linked by columns. The width of the rectangular base was proportional to the height of the rounded roof. With entrances on the sides as well as the front, the Romanesque church took on the shape of a cross. The bay at the far end of the nave, or the apse, was where the relic of the church was displayed. The pathway leading back to the apse, which moved and directed traffic around the relic, was called the ambulatory. Roofed interior arches side by side formed a tunnel-like effect. These barrel vaults, and the webs of vaults, or ribs, helped support the weight of a stone roof. To ensure the roof did not collapse, however, builders had to keep as much weight in the walls as possible. This made for few windows and relatively dark interiors. To brighten up the interior, sculptures and other decorations such as ceiling and wall frescoes, depicting stories from the bible and the saints' lives, filled Romanesque churches. Another decorative detail emerged: the pointed arch. Initially used inside Romanesque

churches, the pointed, or broken, arch was the key visible distinguishing characteristic of the Gothic style.

The pointed arch so closely associated with the Gothic style in church building allowed for flexibility in design. Breaking arches in the center to form a point redistributed weight so that the width of the space underneath vaults did not have to be square, nor did the height of the arches need to be proportional to the width of the ground space as much as with rounded barrel vaults. The Gothic style also incorporated cross ribs. This technique consisted of arches stretching diagonally among four columns, crossing at a bay in the center. Cross ribs significantly lightened the ceiling. Furthermore, if the remaining weight was buttressed externally, the walls could be opened up for more and larger windows. Flying buttresses were attached to exterior walls for this purpose. As a result of the number and size of windows now possible, Gothic churches were much brighter in design and construction than Romanesque churches. The windows were filled with stained glass, depicting scenes from the bible and the lives' of saints depicted in frescoes in the Romanesque style. Gothic churches also had a special circular, stained glass window, known as a rose window. The towers that the pointed arch allowed soared to sights Europeans had not seen before, for example, those built into the cathedral at Strasburg stretched 466 feet in the sky.