

## Gothic Cathedrals

The architectural styles of cathedrals in the medieval period—the Romanesque and the Gothic—were works of art unto themselves. However, they were first and foremost expressions of faith and Christian spirituality. The solid, sturdy design of the Romanesque church was a testament to God’s strength in Christian thought. It stood as a fortress, protecting the faithful from the dangers of the sinful world. The frescoed ceilings and walls, depicting stories of the Bible and the saints, served to remind those who stepped inside of the connection between the worldly and heavenly realms. The Gothic style communicated a slightly different message. Its soaring arches immediately drew the eye upward and its profusion of light served to remind the faithful of celestial light and salvation in the next world, a world very different from their own.

When the Christian faithful stepped into a Gothic cathedral, they were enveloped in God’s celestial light and majesty. Unlike entering a Romanesque cathedral, Christians left the world behind them. The light of the Gothic cathedral served as an allegory for faith and salvation. The stories depicted in the stained glass were meant to lead the faithful to transcend their worldly existence. Inside the Gothic cathedral, they were reminded of their separation from the celestial world, which was given form in the soaring heights of the interior that could not be imagined from the outside appearance of the cathedral. The desire to order and harmonize human experience and knowledge of the divine came to life inside the Gothic cathedral. It was a measured representation of the transcendent and intangible reality of God’s majesty. At the churches of Saint-Denis, Chartres, Reims, Notre Dame, and Amiens, just to name a few, one could see the order and unity of creation and the Catholic Church itself. The sculpted figures stood out from their rounded background and took on more naturalistic characteristics—including gestures, movement, and emotional expression—reflecting the desire for a closer connection to the divine and the intercessory powers of the saints. The first structure to give full expression to this notion was the church at the monastery of Saint-Denis. Construction began around 1135 under the direction of Abbot Suger. Describing the sheer scale of the project in his *De administratione*, Abbot Suger listed the considerations one had to take, such as securing large enough timber, funding various stages, organizing the massive amount of labor—including masons, carpenters, glassmakers, and sculptors—and retaining a suitable master builder to direct the daily operations. His work also reveals the applied mathematics and mastery of geometrical principles necessary for executing such a feat. The monument that resulted and was consecrated in 1144 became a pilgrimage site and the burial place for French kings of the Capetian line.

By the mid-thirteenth century, the Gothic style that began in France had spread to other regions of Western Europe. The Gothic cathedral was meant to transform the believer’s mindset upon entering. Those who patronized its construction became attached to the transcendental majesty it communicated, which was good for the Catholic Church and good for monarchs. More importantly, however, the Gothic cathedral captured a

religious intensity combined with the ordering principles of scholastic thought. In other words, the world could be measured and understood. The divine could not, but its intangibility and transcendent nature could be symbolized through the careful ordering of columns, pointed arches, and floods of light.

