

European - Romanesque & Gothic

Architecture | Sample answer

The scenes of judgment and damnation found in Romanesque sculpture contrast greatly with the more serene imagery used in Gothic sculpture.

Discuss this statement with reference to one named example of Romanesque sculpture and one named example of Gothic sculpture. In your answer refer to subject matter, composition, style and treatment of the human figure.

and

Briefly describe and discuss the main features of Gothic architecture. (2017 Q8)

I agree that the scenes of judgment and damnation found in Romanesque sculpture contrast greatly with the more serene imagery used in Gothic sculpture.

An example of a Romanesque sculpture is the Tympanum in St. Lazare, Autun. A tympanum is a decorative semi-circular sculpture in relief above an entry portal. The function of Romanesque sculpture was to illustrate biblical stories to illiterate commoners. They were, therefore, often frightening and exaggerated, in order to discourage people from sinning. The tympanum in St. Lazare has an inscription below identifying the sculptor- "Gislebertus made this".

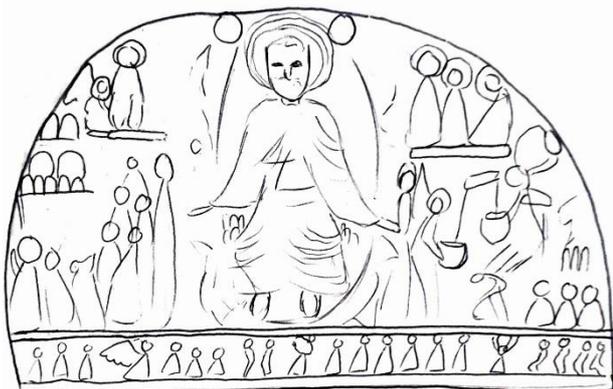
The subject matter of this tympanum is the last judgement theme, showing the glory of god. Christ sits in majesty inside a mandorla (a decorative almond shape).

In terms of composition, we see God in the middle. On the left, apostles (except Peter) incline their heads towards Christ, conducting souls so heaven. The Virgin Mary extends her hand in blessing. Below, redeemed dead arise, among them bishops and pilgrims. A seashell on one of their bags

represents Santiago de Compostela, the popular pilgrimage route. St. Lazare is on one of the pilgrimage roads. On the right of the tympanum, we see the weighing of the souls by Archangel Michael, while the devil leans on one side of the scales. The devil torments the damned and an angel trumpets to awaken the dead. Two people sit in their tombs in grave clothes. The tympanum is framed by two archivolts: the inner has carved foliage, the outer has medallions representing seasons, zodiacs and labours of the months.

The carving style is rather linear and flat, with many details in low relief. However, it is also quite lively, with great movement and imaginative imagery of demons and monsters. This stylised approach was popular in the Romanesque period because it gave a striking visual to a strong message: sin, and you'll go to hell.

The treatment of the human figure is quite inaccurate and stylised. The tympanum is above a door, and so made to be viewed from a distance. Romanesque sculpture was meant to tell a story and impress fear, not to be an accurate human representation. Conveying the message effectively was more important than having anatomical accuracy.



As Romanesque sculpture progressed into the Gothic period, production of large stone sculpture became more popular to decorate churches and cathedrals, until Gothic sculpture had evolved into an independent art form of itself.

An example of Gothic sculpture is the Well of Moses, carved by Claus Sluter. As in Romanesque sculpture, the purpose of Gothic sculpture was largely to educate the worshipper, but in a much more benign and forgiving way than before.

We can certainly see this in the subject matter of the Well of Moses. It depicts various biblical characters in the one sculpture, intended for worship. As much as it is for worship, however, it is equally a display of Sluter's technical ability, as gothic sculpture became a vehicle of expression for human thoughts and emotions.

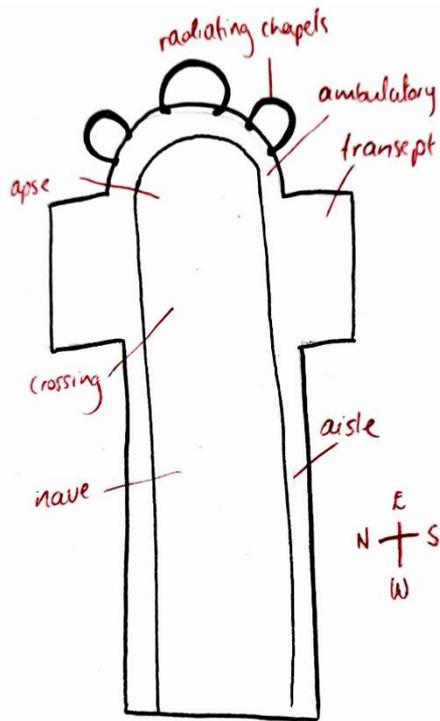
The composition is of a 6 sided Well, now missing the calvary group, which would have been placed on top. The calvary group was a large crucifixion scene with a tall slender cross and hexagonal base. It had been assumed that the Calvary would have depicted Mary Magdalene, Virgin Mary and St. John, but archival evidence suggests it was just Mary Magdalene. There are 6 life sized prophets, each holding a book or scroll. The figures dominate the architecture. Beginning with Moses and working counter clockwise, it depicts David, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Daniel, and Isaiah. Moses was originally below Jesus. 6 weeping angels stand on colonettes on corners between prophets.

The style is dramatic, yet lifelike. It is carved in high relief, and the figures look very lifelike. It has a very naturalistic look, and fabric folds have a very 3-D appearance. Originally, it was painted in several colours by Jean Malouel, painter to the duke, and gilded by Hermann of Cologne. Little paint remains today.

The treatment of the human figure is very realistic and natural. Sluter had a great interest in anatomical accuracy and emotional expression, and like most Gothic sculptors, he carefully observed human emotions and expressions. Gothic sculptors were skilled at communicating the hardness of bone, the softness of tissue, the firmness of muscle and the heavy weight of fabric.



The main features of Romanesque architecture were thick walls to support heavy stone roofs. The churches were blocky, bulky and strong, made up of simple geometric masses like cuboids and cylinders. The insides were gloomy, as the thick walls didn't allow many windows. Builders developed vaults to make churches bigger and stronger. The floorplan of a Romanesque church was cruciform, with a nave running east-west, the transept running north-south, the crossing where they meet. The choir and apse make up the main altar area, and the ambulatory is where pilgrims can walk around it. Radiating chapels form a crown around the apse.



Gothic architecture is characterised as tall, soaring, elegant, vertical, relatively slender, bright and spiky. Pointed arches, combined with a Norman rib vault, allowed for higher, more flexible vaults. Flying buttresses meant that thinner walls were possible, as they took the thrust away from walls and onto outside pillars. This meant that bigger windows were possible, and stained glass windows became popular, allowing in “mystical light”. Gothic architects had a greater understanding of gravity and engineering principals, and used this in an attempt to harmonise all parts of the church.

