

European - Romanesque & Gothic

Architecture | Sample answer

The design possibilities of new building techniques united art and architecture in the churches and cathedrals of the Gothic period.

Discuss this statement with reference to one named Gothic church or cathedral that you have studied. Refer in your answer to techniques, structure and decoration.

and

Briefly describe and discuss the treatment of the human figure in one named Gothic sculpture. (2018 Q8)

I agree that the design possibilities of new building techniques united art and architecture in the churches and cathedrals of the Gothic period, especially through the mediums of sculpture and stained glass. "Gothic" was the name given by Renaissance historians to the style of architecture that existed between 1150 and 1499 in Europe. It was meant as a derogatory term indicating that this art was barbaric and not in keeping with ancient Roman art. Indeed, it was a far cry from the earlier Roman and Romanesque design features: they were squat and blocky, while Gothic was characterised by its tall, soaring silhouettes. During the Gothic Period, many European cities began to develop, and cathedrals became centres of education and politics- Paris became the intellectual capital of Europe. People of the time saw gothic style as modern, and its elegant architecture soon branched out to include ornate stained-glass windows and incredible sculpture, adept in expressing the human form.

An example of a Gothic church is St. Denis in France. It was a Benedictine abbey which housed the relics of St. Denis. Since 639AD most French kings have been buried here. There had been 9th century church at the same location, but Abbot Suger thought it inadequate for the remains of the

royal family (largely due to the growing power of monarchy at the time). Abbot Suger was responsible for remodelling this 9th Century church in 1144. He wanted it to be a spiritual centre. Though it has elements from multiple phases of the Gothic period, St. Denis is largely considered to be a part of the Early/ Archaic Phase- characterised by buildings still being fairly blocky, as in Romanesque, but with Gothic features like windows.

The floor plan of St Denis is a fairly typical cruciform plan: the nave runs from the entrance portal to the centre of the church; the transept runs north-south perpendicular to the nave; the crossing is the space where the transept meets the nave; the choir and apse make up the main altar area; the ambulatory is an arcaded area for pilgrims to walk around the apse; and side aisles are separated from the central nave by a row of arches (arcade) supported by rectangular piers.

Ribbed groin vaults and pointed arches create open, massive interior. A rib is a slender, moulded masonry arch that projects from a surface (in this case, the walls). The ribs form the framework for vaulting. Diagonal ribs form X of groin vault. Transverse rib crosses nave or aisle at 90-degree angle. Overall, there is definitely a sense of pull toward the vertical, with an emphasis on geometry, light and harmony. Suger ingeniously opened up the radiating chapel system for more harmony and light. What were once separate radiating chapels were integrated into one open flowing space, and this integration can be found throughout the interior.

Suger reduced the mass of the supporting column and arch system by moving support to the exterior by making walls lighter and directing thrust of arches outward through to buttresses. The interior columns line up to exterior buttresses. This created a lighter structure, with thinner, stronger walls, which allowed him to create large clerestory windows. These large stained glass windows allowed mystical light to enter the church. Suger had his own ideas about the spiritual nature of light: he believed light that came through stained glass was "the light Divine"- the essence of God. He was influenced by 5th C St. Dionysus writings on mystical the properties of light (though he thought the writings were by Saint Denis!). The ornate glasswork actually went a bit against other theological ideas of the time (e.g. getting rid of all decoration in devotion for God). Stained glass changes colour of light, which absolutely gives the idea of the spiritual world. Suger thought that this allowed the soul to come into the presence of god. St. Denis has a big circular rose window. Stained glass windows were created with coloured glass cut into pieces to form pictorial shape, and details like faces were painted on afterward. These bits were pieced together and held in place with strips of lead. Horizontal bars give support.

Gothic sculpture continued on from Romanesque. In the beginning it was visually and physically dependant on the church building itself, but by the end of Gothic Period, sculpture became free-

standing and independent from the cathedral itself. The function of Gothic sculpture was to educate the worshipper, but in a much more benign and forgiving way than Romanesque. Themes were mainly religious, but sculptors had greater freedom for interpretation. This resulted in emergence of “artistic sub themes”, where sculptors explored gesture and facial expression to create emotion, as well as ways to incorporate flowing movement to make figures believable

An example of Gothic sculpture is the sculpture of St Modesta outside the porch of north transept of the Chartres Cathedral. This is from the next phase of Gothic sculpture- it is almost completely free standing. The folds in the drapery seem full and three dimensional- they show the form of the body underneath (her waist and feet). There is a gentle movement with the turn in her upper body. Her figure and face fuller, more rounded and 3D than previous examples of sculpture, compared to how early sculptors gave faces a realistic, naturalistic look and fabric a more stylised appearance. Overall, there was more interest in anatomical accuracy, and emotional expression improved as the era progressed. Sculptors began to communicate hardness of bone, softness of tissue, firmness of muscle and heavy weight of fabric through the medium of stone. Eventually Gothic sculpture separated completely from architecture and was seen as an art form in its own right.