

European - Gothic & Romanesque

Architecture | Sample answer

Discuss the ways in which the main architectural and decorative features of Romanesque churches differ from those of Gothic cathedrals. In your answer name one Romanesque church and one Gothic cathedral, and make detailed reference to scale, structure, layout and decoration.

and

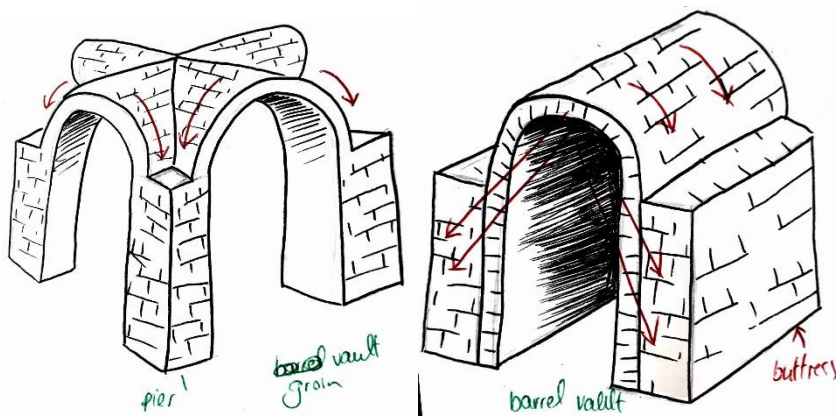
Name and discuss briefly one example of Gothic sculpture that you have studied. Illustrate your answer. (2011 Q8)

I agree that the main architectural and decorative features of Romanesque churches differ from those of Gothic churches.

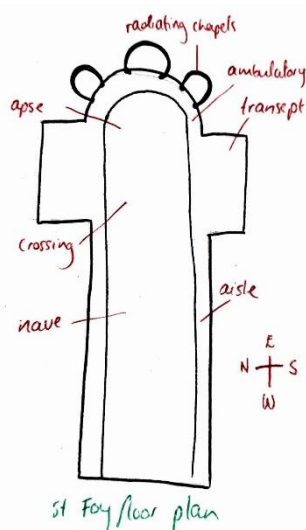
An example of a Romanesque church is St. Foy, Conques, France. It is located on one of the pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. During the Romanesque period. Pilgrimages became popular, and so churches along the way like St. Foy had to accommodate many pilgrims. St. Foy has occasional "mason's marks"- symbols indicating who built what part. The towers aren't original- one was rebuilt in the 15th Century, the other two in the 19th.

Construction began around 1050, making it one of the oldest Romanesque churches still standing. The design was borrowed from the Roman basilica. The vaulting in the nave is 22.1m tall- super tall for the time. It's very narrow for its height compared to other Romanesque buildings of the time. Structurally, like all Romanesque churches, St. Foy is rather blocky and squat. The church's walls are thick to support the heavy stone roof, and windows are small. As a consequence, the interior is rather dark and gloomy. Buttresses- additional thicker walls- add further support. In St. Foy, the roof is made up of barrel vaults- curved stone structures supported by buttresses. This

system is repeated in bays. In the bays, groin vaulting is used to distribute pressure more evenly, meaning there can be slightly larger windows.

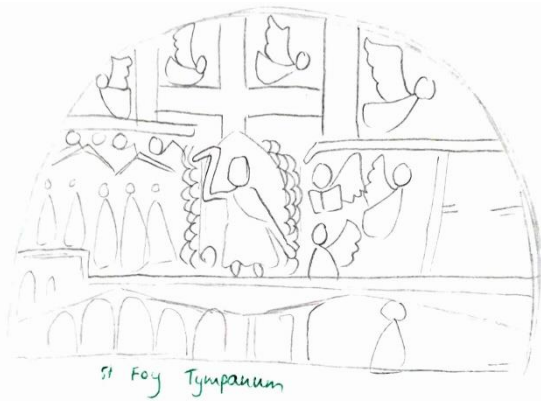


The layout of St. Foy is a typical Romanesque cruciform floor plan, based on the simple rectangular plan of the Roman Basilica, but with more space to accommodate pilgrims. The entrance is in the west. The nave runs from the entrance portal to the centre of the church. The transept runs north-south perpendicular to the nave. The crossing is the space in the middle where they meet. The choir and apse form the main altar area at the eastern arm of the church. The ambulatory is an arcaded area for people to walk around the apse. This ambulatory is covered by a groin vault. St. Foy has two side aisles, separated from the central nave by 14 pillars. There are three radiating chapels forming a crown around the apse. Above the ambulatory, there is a gallery: overflow space for more pilgrims. Above this is a clerestory, identified by a series of pillars and arches forming a blind arcade.



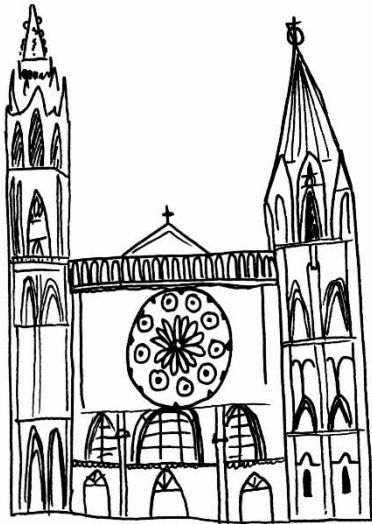
The decoration of St. Foy is relatively plain, with little colour. Decoration is confined to sculpture, which is integrated into the architecture itself in capitals and tympana. All arches are rounded. We can see human figures sculpted into the capitals- a first for Christian sculpture at the time. They

are 9m above the ground, so lost to the height of the nave. A tympanum is a large semi-circular sculpture in relief above an entry portal. The Western tympanum in St. Foy depicts God, with heaven on the left and hell on the right. We see angels weighing the souls of the deceased, and demons trying to bring them to hell. Such last judgement scenes are typical of the Romanesque period. The point of sculpture was seen as to inform illiterate pilgrims of the Bible, and to scare them away from sinning.



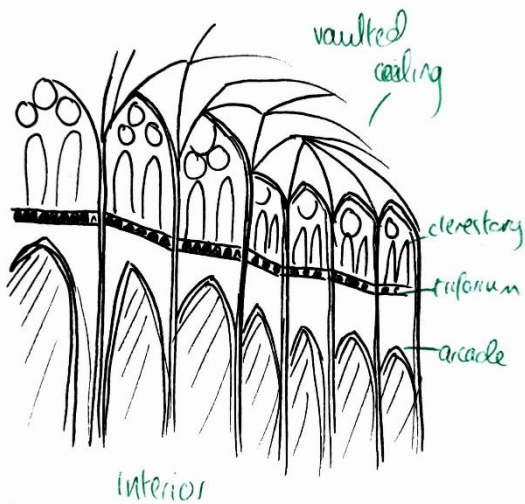
An example of a Gothic cathedral is Chartres, located around 80km south of Paris, France. By the end of the 12th Century it was one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in Europe. The present building was constructed between 1150-1200 in the Middle Gothic Phase. The west end has two different spires- one is plain and 105m tall, the other is 113m tall and built in the 16th Century Flamboyant Gothic Style. This is much taller than St. Foy. Similarly, the nave is made up of three levels- the arcade is 12m tall, the triforium is 6m tall and the clerestory is 12m tall. This makes the nave 30m high- much taller than that of St Foy. Unlike St. Foy and other Romanesque churches, which are short and squat, Chartres and other Gothic cathedrals are characterised as tall, soaring and elegant.

The layout of a Gothic church is not dissimilar from a Romanesque church in its cruciform floor plan. The nave is a bit wider in Chartres than in St. Foy. However, a difference between Romanesque and Gothic is the radiating chapel system. In Chartres, the radiating chapel system has been opened up in an attempt to create a sense of harmony throughout the church. This is because the Bishop of Chartres was a friend of Abbot Suger, who designed St. Denis, another Gothic cathedral. The Bishop of Chartres borrowed some of Suger's ideas.



Chartres exterior

Structurally, the nave is divided into three levels: the arcade, the triforium and the clerestory. By removing the gallery, the builders could make the arcade and clerestory larger and equal in height, with a small, dark triforium in between. Unlike the thick walls of St. Foy, Chartres has rather thin walls, and huge windows that allow lots of “mystical light”- it was believed at this time that light was a direct symbol of God. Thin walls were achieved using flying buttresses on the outside, which supported the lateral thrust from the high stone vaults. These stone vaults were higher and wider than any attempted before in France. They come from top of nave down in stages onto a supporting pillar or buttress. This pillar gets wider as it goes down as pressure becomes greater, flying buttresses on the outside to add additional support. This structure gives rise to much more elegant and lightweight churches than we saw in the Romanesque period.

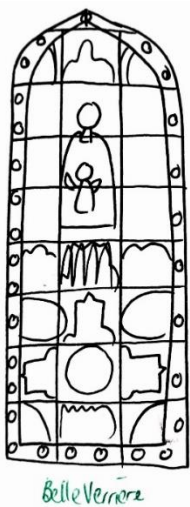


interior

Decoration in Chartres is extremely different to that in St. Foy. There is far more decoration, as focus shifted to creating the most ornate and beautiful cathedrals possible. Like in Romanesque, sculpture was integrated into the church design, especially around entry portals. In the entry portal

we see a calm scene with lifelike animals and humans. There are also sculptures of the evangelists, 12 apostles and 24 elders of the apocalypse on the archivolt. Like in St. Foy, this sculpture is integrated into the architecture.

One feature of decoration completely unlike anything found in Romanesque churches is the stained glass. The new method of construction meant that they could have huge windows glazed with densely coloured glass, making Chartres relatively dark inside, but emphasising the richness of the colour of the light. One of the most famous windows is Belle Verrière, located in choir. We see the Virgin Mary wearing blue, with Jesus on her lap, hand raised in blessing. Nearly all 176 stained glass windows have dense stained glass, giving a dark but richly coloured interior. The function is narrative and spiritual. Lead holds pieces of coloured glass together.



An example of Gothic Sculpture that I have studied is the sculpture of St Modesta outside the porch of the north transept of Chartres. It shows the next phase of Gothic sculpture, where the sculpture is almost free-standing from the architecture. The folds in the drapery seem full and 3-dimensional. It shows the form underneath the clothes very well, particularly around her waist and feet. There is a gentle sense of movement with the turn in her upper body. As opposed to earlier examples of Gothic sculpture, which were quite flat and stylised, the figure and face of St. Modesta is fuller and more rounded, giving a quality of 3D naturalism in her expression. Unlike before, Gothic sculptors were given more creative freedom to explore realistic expression and gesture. Eventually Gothic sculpture separated completely from architecture and was seen as an art form in its own right.

