The Gothic Period | H1 Notes

The Times

Following the Romanesque period, European trade saw a time of great expansion, and the resulting wealth gave The Church (and other patrons) the means to fund monumental, ornately beautiful cathedrals and basilicas. The size and majesty of the buildings also showed the wealth and power of The Church. As a result, the ornate style of Gothic architecture developed. Generally the Gothic Period is said to be from the mid-12th century to the 16th century. Typically the Gothic Period is associated with France. (See St Denis Cathedral, Paris, the "birthplace of Gothic architecture")

As well as the developments in architecture, sculpture and stained glass played a greater role in the building and were used to educate and tell stories to the illiterate.

The Architecture (Very, very important!!!)

Gothic architecture is mostly based on the pointed arch, (the pointed arch distributes weight differently to the rounded arches typical of Romanesque architecture), and rib vaulting. Rib vaulting is where thicker load bearing stone is used to support the roof, which is made of lighter (non-load bearing) stone, (and so is reduced in weight). Using buttressing, and these techniques, architects could build taller cathedrals with more windows. Buttressing is the technique of adding external half arches (flyers, in pink), to support the walls of the cathedral.
As with the Romanesque Period, particular areas within the buildings had special roles. The **nave** is the main area of the church, running from the entrance to the centre of the church. The **side aisles** were separated from the nave by a row of arches, (the arcade). The **transept** is perpendicular to the nave, (generally running North-South. **North**, the darker side, often represented The **Old Testament** (pre-Jesus), and the **southern** arm, the brighter side, usually represented The **New Testament**). The **crossing** is the area where the nave and transept intersect. The **choir** and the **apse** make up the main altar area of the church. Around the main altar area is the **ambulatory**, from which pilgrims could observe the service, and visit the **radiating chapels**, which contained **shrines**, **relics** and **reliquaries**.

Gothic Architecture can be sorted into 3 styles; **Early/Experimental**, **High/Classical** & **Late/Flamboyant**. Opinions differ, some would include **Rayonnant** (As in rays of the sun, seen in the radiating patterns of large High and Late Gothic **rose windows**), as between Classical and Flamboyant, (but so long as you stay consistent during your answer, it’s not important whether you chose to include this or not).
Chartres Cathedral

12th Century – Experimental/Early Gothic – Chartres, France

Existing cathedral was rebuilt after a fire. Original sculpture and stained glass survived. Believed to be blessed as a result. This relic made it a pilgrimage destination. Short transept, Gothic arches, rib vaulting, shows innovative use of buttressing, allowing for many windows.
Reims Cathedral
13th Century – Classical/High Gothic – Reims, France

Highly decorative façade, elaborate external statuary. Three portals & two large towers dominate façade. No sculpture on tympanum, delicate rose window instead. Buttressing at eastern end shown. As building took so long, a mix of styles is visible. Short transept. Western end narrower than eastern. Statuary was damaged during WW I.

Rouen Cathedral
15th Century – Flamboyant/Late Gothic – Rouen, France

The Stained Glass

Figurative subject matter, tells story to teach illiterate. Reflected views of patron(s). The architecture was used to maximise the amount of stained glass.

Pigments were added to glass (metal oxides etc.). Pieces cut, shaped. Details painted with enamel paint. Fired to bond enamel. Pieces assembled in iron frame & lead strips.

Circular rose windows (below), smaller circular medallion windows (below in Chartres), tall pointed lancet windows (Blue Virgin).

Earlier glass (12th–13th Century), was vividly coloured. Stood out in dim interiors. As later architecture (14th Century onwards), made more room for glass, brighter interiors meant colours were muted. Below, earlier rose window in Chartres versus later Sainte–Chapelle Paris, (considered Rayonnant).
The Blue Virgin

12th Century – Experimental/Early Gothic – Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France

Survived the fire that destroyed the original Romanesque Chartres Cathedral. Considered blessed. Became pilgrimage relic. Enthroned Mary shown in blue as “Queen of Heaven.” Also Holy Spirit (as dove over Mary’s head). Child-Man Jesus in lap. Stands out against blue. Censors to either side. Angels etc. surround the pair. Rich ruby red contrasts deep blue.

The Sculpture

Unlike architectural Romanesque sculpture, Gothic sculpture was considered form of art in its own right. Sculpture became more 3 dimensional, often in the round rather than just relief. As with stained glass, these sculptures told stories and taught lessons. They were designed to teach the stories of The Faith to the illiterate. They also provided decoration, and showed the wealth and power of the Bishop in charge of the cathedral.

The sculpture was both internal and external, as capitals, on buttresses, facades & around doorways. The figures were more realistic, with expressive faces and more relaxed, natural poses.
Portal figures, Chartres Cathedral

12th Century – Early Gothic – Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France

The "Royal Portal," (as the entranceway of the west façade (front entrance) is known) shows the development of stiff architectural Romanesque sculpture into the more naturalistic, almost free standing works of later Gothic masters like Claus Sluter (see Well of Moses).

The portal figures are of the Old Testament. They are vertically distorted elongated column-statues. This particular innovation is an example of Gothic style. The drapery is stylised rather than realistic, but their gestures are expressive, and their expressions are realistic and more naturalistic than Romanesque figures. They show the beginnings of Early Gothic style. (Compare these statues to those on the north transept to see how Gothic style develops.)
The Annunciation & Visitation

13th Century – Classical/High Gothic – Reims Cathedral, Reims, France

These four figures decorate the west façade of Reims Cathedral (which is famous for the quality of its sculpture). As with Chartres, the sculpture follows the architectural forms of the building.

The free-standing sculptures stand contrapposto and though they are elongated, are carved in a naturalistic style. They have realistic, expressive faces and personalities. They interact with one another and gesture expressively.

As you look at them, it becomes immediately obvious that the two pairs were carved by different artists. The Annunciation, on the left is carved in a contemporary style. The angel has a broad smile and the pairs’ gestures and poses look more natural. By contrast, the heavy, exaggerated drapery of the other figures (The Visitation), looks far more stiff and staged. The style of this pair mimics earlier Roman sculpture.
The Well of Moses

14th Century – Flamboyant/Late Gothic – Dijon, France

Claus Sluter was considered the best Medieval sculptor. He designed and made The Well of Moses for the cloisters of a monastery near Dijon. His figures are realistic and expressive.

The hexagonal base supports the central column and each of the six prophets, (separated by columns). The figure of each prophet is naturalistic, expressive and realistic. Sluter breaks form tradition by having his figures stand out from the niche behind them. They have intense expressions, their gestures are emphasised by the dramatic folds of their clothing, and the figures are short, stolid, of life-like proportions. This epitomises the development of Gothic sculpture. (Compare to Chartres)

On each dividing column stands an angel, each with a unique pose and expression. Their wings are outspread as they create a border between the prophets at the base and the crucifixion scene (now missing), which was on top of the well. Originally, the whole thing was richly painted. Traces of the colours remain.
Writing Your Answer

Generally, the question focuses on a particular sculpture or stained glass window, with the “and” part asking about Gothic architecture. Alternatively, these two can be reversed. Sometimes the question will ask you to **compare** pieces, Early and Late Gothic, or Romanesque & Gothic. (In which case, describe each piece in every point you make, but make sure to bring it back to the question and say how they are similar/different). As with Romanesque sculpture, you don’t need to draw every little detail of the piece. So long as you give the basic idea, you’ll get the marks. Don’t forget to label it.

If you’re asked about the architecture it is essential to discuss **pointed arches**, **rib vaulting**, and give a quick and basic summary of the parts of the typical Gothic church. If you can, try put in a few **quick sketches** of these. (You don’t need to know any floor plans by heart, if you want to (when asked about a particular building), you can include a rough idea of the plan with a few labels). As always, the most important thing in Art History is **LABELS**.

Sources

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_architecture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_architecture)
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