

American gothic architecture

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For only the antique style of architecture is conceived in a purely objective spirit; the Gothic style is more in the subjective spirit. American Gothic architecture was the outcome of a way of thought, the product of a special kind of imagination. Every one will easily be able to see clearly how from the fundamental thought and the peculiarities of Gothic architecture, there arises that mysterious and hyperphysical character which is attributed to it. It principally arises from the fact that here the arbitrary has taken the place of the purely rational, which makes itself known as the thorough adoption of the means to the end.

The many things that are really aimless, but yet are so carefully perfected, raise the assumption of unknown, unfathomed, and secret ends, i. e. , give the appearance of mystery. On the other hand, the brilliant side of Gothic churches is the interior; because here the effect of the groined vaulting borne by slender, crystalline, aspiring pillars, raised high aloft, and, all burden having disappeared, promising eternal security, impresses the mind; while most of the faults which have been mentioned lie upon the outside.

In antique buildings the external side is the most advantageous, because there we see better the support and the burden; in the interior, on the other hand, the flat roof always retains something depressing and prosaic. For the most part, also, in the temples of the ancients, while the outworks were many and great, the interior proper was small. An appearance of sublimity is gained from the hemispherical vault of a cupola, as in the Pantheon, of which, therefore, the Italians also, building in this style, have made a most extensive use.

What determines this is, that the ancients, as southern peoples, lived more in the open air than the northern nations who have produced the Gothic style of architecture. Whoever, then, absolutely insists upon Gothic architecture being accepted as an essential and authorized style may, if he is also fond of analogies, regard it as the negative pole of architecture, or, again, as its minor key.

With the recent explosion of Gothic criticism, scholars have failed to juxtapose Gothic novels and dramas with archival architectural sources to explore the interrelationship between literature and architecture in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. The scholars who have rescued the Gothic novel from literary history's dust heap have provided cultural historians with a base from which to examine the sweeping influence of this significant literary genre.

In the United States, Gothic novels and Scott's historical romances (which were inspired by Gothic pioneers Walpole and Radcliffe), had an enormous impact on architecture in the period between 1800 and 1850. The groundwork in Gothic literary scholarship allows us to move beyond literature to examine how the Gothic seeps into other forms of artistic creation. One of the earliest American architects to enjoy Gothic novels was Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764-1820).

Although born in Great Britain and educated in Europe, Latrobe immigrated to the United States at the age of thirty-one, arriving in March 1796. About three months after relocating to Virginia, Latrobe wrote in his journal that he found Radcliffe's descriptions of buildings so "successful" that he "once endeavored to plan the Castle of Udolpho from Radcliffe's account of it and

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found it impossible” . Latrobe began experimenting with Gothic architectural forms for residential design in the United States in 1799.

Latrobe's Gothic work includes Sedgeley (built for William Crammond near Philadelphia in 1799 and considered the first Gothic Revival house in the United States); the Baltimore Cathedral design (unexecuted; 1805); Christ Church in Washington, DC (1806-07); the Bank of Philadelphia (1807-08); and St. Paul's in Alexandria, Virginia (1817) (see photos). But, overall, Latrobe's Gothic output pales in comparison to his rational neoclassical efforts such as the Bank of Pennsylvania (1799-1801). His Gothic Revival designs are symmetrical with superficial Gothic detailing.

For example, Sedgeley is a geometric form Gothicized by the placement of pointed arch windows in the pavilions that protrude from the corners of the house. Despite this Gothic touch, there is little mystery or surprise in store for the observer of Latrobe's Gothic creations. Although he clearly read Radcliffe's books and was quite possibly influenced by them, he did not translate the mysterious, rambling architectural spaces of her stories into his own architecture. Other American architects, too, dabbled in Gothic Revival design before the 1830s. Some notable examples include Maxmillan Godefroy's St.

Mary's Seminary in Baltimore (1806); Charles Bulfinch's Federal Street Church in Boston (1809); and the unexecuted design for Columbia College (1813) by James Renwick Sr. , engineer and father of the architect James Renwick. Daniel Wadsworth, who designed for himself a Gothic Revival villa called Monte Video (c. 1805-1809) near Hartford, Connecticut, explained that, to him, the Gothic style was not inherently menacing as are the castles

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and convents of Gothic novels: “ There is nothing in the mere forms or embellishments of the pointed style [...] in the least adapted to convey to the mind the impression of Gothic Gloom” .

His house bears out this belief; Gothic details appear as an afterthought, a decorative motif rather than a programmatic agenda. It was not until the 1830s and 1840s that American Gothic Revival architecture came of age. The most prominent designer of Gothic residences in this period was Davis. Davis was born in New York City in 1803 and, during his boyhood, lived in New Jersey and New York. When he was sixteen, he moved to Alexandria, Virginia, to learn a trade with his older brother Samuel. Davis worked as a type compositor in the newspaper office.

Besides work, his four years at Alexandria were filled with two of his favourite activities: reading and acting. An amateur actor who performed in several plays while he was in Virginia, Davis was a voracious reader as well. His two pocket diaries from this period, preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, are filled with youthful exuberance. Often, Davis would begin an entry with an illustration from a text, which would then be excerpted in his own handwriting. Among the dramas that he read and illustrated were Maturin's *Bertram: or the Castle of St.*

Aidobrand and Heinrich Zschokke's *Abadilino*. Maturin was an Irish Gothic novelist and dramatist who corresponded with an encouraging Scott. After reading Maturin's drama *Bertram*, Scott wrote that the character of Bertram had a “ Satanic dignity which is often truly sublime” . Starring Edmund Kean, *Bertram* opened on 9 May 1816 at the Drury Lane Theatre in London, with the support of Lord Byron, who was impressed with the play. In one of his

pocket diaries, Davis made an illustration of the play's first act, showing a ship tossed on a stormy sea in view of a Gothic convent.

The setting of the play is quintessentially Gothic from the “ rock-based turrets” of the convent to the moonlit “ terrassed rampart” of the castle of Aldobrand. Davis copied an excerpt from the play into his diary and as the budding actor included Bertram in his list of recitations. While he was a youth in Alexandria, Davis engaged in amateur theatricals and became interested in stage design. He dreamed of becoming a professional actor. Davis's illustration filters the Shakespearean scene through contemporary Gothic, emphasizing the mysterious flicker of the nightstand candle and the inky blackness of unknowable architectural spaces.

At the age of twenty, Davis moved to New York City, and his fascination with the theatre continued. In the evenings, he frequented the theatre and was on the free list at both the Park Theater and the Castle Garden Theater in 1826 and 1828. He also expressed his love of drama in his artistic work. In 1825, he completed a study for a proscenium featuring Egyptian columns and Greek bas-relief sculpture and numerous portraits of actors in character, including “ Brutus in the Rostrum” and “ Mr. Kemble as Roma”. That so early in his life Davis was fascinated with the theatre is significant to his later Gothic Revival architectural creations.

The dramatic images he drew for his youthful diaries display his acute interest in stage design and scenography. Indeed, Gothic Revival architecture is inherently theatrical, a quality often commented upon by architecture critics. Davis often used trompe-l'oeil materials to create theatrical effects, substituting plaster for stone. Davis's houses, then,
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become stage sets, in which the owners' mediaeval fantasies, inspired by Gothic romances, can take flight. While still in Alexandria, Davis's sensible older brother bristled at what he perceived to be the younger Davis's useless pastime of reading Gothic books.

Later in life, Davis wrote to William Dunlap about himself in the third person for Dunlap's *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*: " Like another Franklin, strongly addicted to reading, he limited himself to the accomplishment of a fixed task, and being a quick compositor, he would soon complete it, and fly to his books, but not like Franklin, to books of science and useful learning, but to works of imagination, poetry, and the drama; whence, however, he imbibed a portion of that high imaginative spirit so necessary to constitute an artist destined to practise in the field of invention".

Davis's brother condemned such reading and turned Davis's attention to " history, biography and antiquities, to language and the first principles of the mathematics". The architectural allure of Gothic literature fascinated Davis. As a young man, Davis was known to " pass hours in puzzling over the plan of some ancient castle of romance, arranging the trap doors, subterraneous passages, and drawbridges, as pictorial embellishment was the least of his care, invention all his aim".

Any Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century may have been the subject of his artistic dreaming, but most likely he is referring here to either Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* or Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, two of the most popular and influential of the Gothic novels. Davis's catalogue of books shows that he owned both books. The image depicts a partly ruinous

labyrinthine space with a multitude of pointed arches leading to mysterious staircases (perhaps inspired by Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri*). Light filters in through barred windows.

This drawing shows his early interest in the Gothic underworld, which is described in detail in *The Castle of Otranto*. The castle of Otranto (see photo) contains intricate subterranean passages that lead from the castle to the church of St. Nicholas, and through which the virtuous Isabella is chased by the lustful Manfred. Scott cannot be considered a Gothic novelist in the same way that his predecessors Walpole and Radcliffe are. Scott's genre is historical romance, but the influence of the Gothic is omnipresent in his work.

From his earliest days and throughout his life, Scott read tales of terror. In 1812, after the success of his three poems and before he began writing his *Waverley* novel series, Scott purchased 110 acres, upon which he built his elaborate Gothic castle (1812-1815; enlarged in 1819). He named his new home *Abbotsford* after the monks of *Meiose Abbey*. The architect was *William Atkinson*. *Abbotsford* has been described as “ an asymmetrical pile of towers, turrets, stepped gables, oriels, pinnacles, crenelated parapets, and clustered chimney stacks, all assembled with calculated irregularity”.

Visitors flocked to *Abbotsford* to see the author and his residence first-hand, and, according to *Thomas Carlyle*, *Abbotsford* soon “ became infested to a great degree with tourists, wonder-hunters, and all that fatal species of people”. Architectural historians often praise *Strawberry Hill* for introducing asymmetry into British domestic design and historicism into the Gothic

Revival. But it is also important for another reason: the castle inspired Walpole to write his Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764.

In *A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole*, Walpole writes that Strawberry Hill is “ a very proper habitation of, as it was the scene that inspired, the author of *The Castle of Otranto*”. One June morning, Walpole awoke from a dream: “ I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled, like mine, with Gothic story) and that, on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase, I saw a gigantic hand in armor” (Early 88). That evening, Walpole sat down to write *The Castle of Otranto*.

The setting of the story, as Walpole tells us in the preface, is “ undoubtedly laid in some real castle”; indeed, as W. S. Lewis has shown, the rooms at Strawberry Hill and those in the pages of *The Castle of Otranto* correspond. Read by British and American readers alike, *The Castle of Otranto* enjoyed popularity long after Walpole's death in 1797. About the castle, Gilmore wrote: Tis in the most beautiful Gothic (light) style. Much cut up into small rooms, none, except the long picture gallery being large. Some of the ceilings beautifully gilded others beautifully fitted in wood or scagliola.

But all things, wainscottings, - door-fireplaces - all Gothic. [...] These same rooms crammed - most literally crammed - with chef d'oeuvres of Antient and modern paintings, statuary; sarcophaguses, Bronzes and silver carvings of Benvenuto Cellini and others. [...] In this superb cabinet of curiosities for such the Gothic castle deserves to be called, I strolled delighted. On 21 September 1832, not long after Gilmore's return in late 1830 or early 1831, Scott died. Two weeks later, on 5 October 1832, Davis makes his first notes on Glen Ellen in his day book.

Perhaps Gilmor may have conceived of Glen Ellen as a tribute or romantic memorial to his genial host at Abbotsford. Indeed, as William Pierson has shown, the plans of Abbotsford and Glen Ellen both display a progression from left to right of octagonal corner turret to octagonal bay to square corner tower. But Abbotsford is not the only source for Glen Ellen. Gilmor was very impressed with the rococo Gothic he saw at Strawberry Hill, and the interior decoration of Walpole's residence becomes the inspiration for the exterior ornamentation at Glen Ellen.

The battlements, pinnacles, towers, and pointed arch windows all recall Strawberry Hill, and the long rectangular parlour mirrors Walpole's mediaeval gallery. Both Abbotsford and Strawberry Hill are sited along rivers; it is significant, then, that Gilmor chose a site for Glen Ellen on the Gunpowder River, twelve miles north of Baltimore. While Town, Davis, and Gilmor were clearly indebted to Walpole and Atkinson, Glen Ellen is quite unlike anything that had come before it in American architecture.

Most striking is its adoption of the complete Gothic program: it is asymmetrical in plan and elevation; its rooms are of disproportionate sizes; its ornamentation is both whimsical and reliant on recognizable mediaeval architectural forms. Glen Ellen is certainly not a repetition of Benjamin Henry Latrobe's and Daniel Wadsworth's earlier forays into the Gothic Revival style for domestic architecture. Unlike Sedgely and Monte Video, where Gothic Revival ornament appears as an afterthought, Glen Ellen wears its mediaeval styling in a more assertive manner.

Here Town and Davis enlisted the picturesque element of surprise; the beholder of Glen Ellen views a shifting facade with unexpected tower

protrusions and heavily ornamented bay windows. Although light and airy Glen Ellen lacks the gloom of Radcliffe's architectural spaces, the architects do create a villa in which the element of surprise is paramount. What is most significant about Glen Ellen is its conception as a place of fantasy, a literary indulgence to whet the Gothic appetite of its well-travelled owner.

That Glen Ellen imitates the facade of Abbotsford or the interior ornamentation of Strawberry Hill is important; but more momentous is the idea of Glen Ellen as a retreat into the mediaeval world popularized by Gothic novels and historical romances. But Glen Ellen is Gothic fiction transformed into stone, a constant reminder of its owner's preferred reading material. With Glen Ellen, Gilmor pays homage to his favourite writers, thus participating in the cult of the Gothic author. Although he is the first, Gilmor will not be the last to yield to his literary fantasies by creating a permanent reminder of his Gothic passion.

Influenced by Gothic novels and historical romances, American writers James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving Gothicized their houses (Otsego Hall and Sunnyside, respectively) after visiting Gothic sites in Europe. After Glen Ellen, Davis went on to design numerous Gothic Revival cottages and villas, including his masterpiece, Lyndhurst in Tarrytown, New York (1838; 1865). Why were American architects, artists, and their clients so interested in mediaeval architecture? Their reading habits tell us a great deal.

Mediaeval architecture plays a crucial role in Gothic novels and historical romances, leading some curious readers to visit mediaeval and Gothic Revival architectural sites related to their favourite novels. That American

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Gothic Revival architecture was closely related to the fictional works of writers such as Radcliffe and Scott is highlighted by a nineteenth-century observer's comments on a Gothic Revival building in New York City. Thomas Aldrich Bailey wrote in 1866 about the University of the City of New York (now New York University; original building demolished) on Washington Square: " There isn't a more gloomy structure outside of Mrs.

Radcliff's [sic] romances, and we hold that few men could pass a week in these lugubrious chambers, without adding a morbid streak to their natures - the genial inmates [sic] to the contrary notwithstanding". Usually, though, the Gothic Revival buildings constructed in the United States in this period were anything but gloomy. Like Strawberry Hill, Davis's designs were light and airy; delicate rather than dark and massive (Davis does begin to experiment more with fortified castle designs in the 1850s).

As Janice Schimmelman has argued, Scott's novels recast the Gothic architectural style, moving it away from the barbarism associated with the Middle Ages and toward a more domestic ideal. An American author who wrote at the same time as Scott sums it up nicely by saying, " A castle without a ghost is fit for nothing but to live in". Certain Gothic work in the Boston neighborhood, by Solomon Willard and Gridley Bryant, has a kind of brutal power because of its simple granite treatment.

But these early gray and lowering edifices, despite their pointed windows and their primitive tracery, are scarcely within the true Gothic tenor. That remained almost unknown in this country until suddenly, between 1835 and 1850, it was given abundant expression in the work of three architects - Richard Upjohn, James Renwick, and Minard Lafever. Upjohn, in Trinity
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Church, set a tradition for American church architecture which has hardly died yet; and Renwick, in Grace Church in New York (see photo), showed the exquisite richness that Gothic could give.

Minard Lafever's work is more daring, more original, and less correct, but in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Brooklyn (see photo), only slightly later than Trinity and Grace, he achieved a combination of lavish detail, imaginative variations on Gothic themes, and a general effectiveness of proportion and composition which make it one of the most successful, as it is certainly the most American, of all these early Gothic Revival churches.

Yet even in these, correct as they were in detail, beautiful in mass and line, there was always a certain sense of unreality. The old tradition of integrity in structure, on which the best Greek Revival architects had so insistently based their work, was breaking down. Romanticism, with its emphasis on the effect and its comparative lack of interest in how the effect was produced, was sapping at the whole integral basis of architecture.

These attractive Gothic churches were, all of them, content with lath-and-plaster vaults. In them the last connections between building methods and building form disappeared, and in their very success they did much to establish in America the disastrous separation between engineering and architecture which was to curse American building for two generations.

The best of the American Gothic work remains in its simpler, its less ostentatious, monuments: the little churches in which wood was allowed frankly to be itself, as in the small frame chapels which Upjohn designed for country villages and distant mission stations; and the frank carpenter Gothic

of the picturesque high-gabled cottages which rose so bewitchingly embowered in heavy trees along many of our Eastern village streets. The polychrome Victorian Gothic of England also became a brief American fashion.

A number of architects, especially in New York and later in early Chicago, fell under the spell of Ruskin's persuasive writing, and sought as he did to create a modern, freely designed, inventive, nineteenth-century Gothic. But here also the strings that bound America and England seemed too tenuous to hold for long; and in spite of the occasional appealing successes of the style - such as the old National Academy of Design with its black-and-white marble front, designed by Peter B.

Wight, and some of Renwick's city houses - the Victorian Gothic was doomed in America to swift disintegration into the cheapest and most illogical copying of its most obvious mannerisms, and a complete negation of its essential foundations. It became in a sense a caricature, to be rapidly swallowed up in the confusion of eclecticism which the last quarter of the century brought with it. If we might sum up French Gothic as architecture of clear and structural power, and English as the architecture of personalized rural charm, American Gothic would be the architecture of experimental and dynamic zest.

American Gothic architecture was much more than the solution of building problems; it was also the expression of a new America that had been gradually coming into being - a new America which was the result of the gradual decay of the feudal system under the impact of trade, prosperity, and the growth of national feeling. The Gothic Revival in America was more a

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matter of intellectual approach than of architectural work. The sudden new enthusiasm for medieval work made all America passionately aware of its amazing architectural wealth, and also acutely conscious of the disintegration which threatened ruin to so many of the medieval structures.

Nowhere did the Gothic Revival have a greater and a more revolutionary effect than in America, which had given it its first expression, for nowhere else were the forces behind it so irresistibly strong. In Germany, nationalism had led the architects of the romantic age into the byways of Romanesque and of Renaissance. In France, the strong classic traditions of the Ecole des Beaux Arts held firm against all the attacks of the romanticists and gave, at least to the official work, the requisite classic stamp.

But, in America, religious fervor, so closely allied to the desires of the court and the government, made the drive toward Gothic design irrepressible, and there was no academic and classic tradition powerful enough to withstand it. Furthermore, the movement was blessed with extremely brilliant and articulate writers, who had the gift not only of interesting the specialist but of moving the general population. Gothic architecture was best now because it was the most Christian, later because it was the most creative and least imitative, then again because it was the most honest - whatever that might mean.

The religious facets of the movement had an even greater importance. The whole American church was exercised more and more about the fundamental problems of ritualism and historical tradition. The most important ecclesiastical thinkers were reacting against the routine secularism of the eighteenth century church, demanding not only greater

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seriousness and a more intense devotion to Christian ideals, but also expressing their conviction that the medieval church had been a vital force and medieval devotion a vivid experience that had been subsequently lost, and that therefore the easiest way to reform the church was by a return to medievalism.

Of the religious controversies these ideas aroused it is not necessary to particularize. Also important is the fact that everywhere these religious controversies focused attention on medieval church architecture, and that there was the closest relationship between architecture and ritual. Therefore, the theory went, if it was necessary to return to the medieval conception of Christianity, it was equally essential to return to medievalism in church design. There more subtle factor behind the Gothic Revival in architecture.

The word "romanticism" has accumulated so many different meanings in the course of a century of criticism that it is necessary to be more precise. Behind the new interest in medieval architecture went a search for emotional expression which was a new thing. Romanticism means many more things than mere antiquarianism, for from the point of view of a mere turn to the past the Classic Revivals might also be considered romantic; but, as we have seen, the architects of the Classic Revival were striving primarily for form which should be serene, well composed, consistent, harmonious, adequate.

The true romanticist is not satisfied with this. He demands more; he demands that architecture shall be "expressive" - that is, that it shall aim definitely at expressing specific emotions such as religious awe, grandeur, gaiety, intimacy, sadness. He seeks to make architecture as expressive and

as personal as a lyric poem, and oftentimes this demand for emotional expression he makes superior to any other claims.

All architecture is expressive; but, whereas the classic architect allows the expression to arise naturally from forms developed in the common-sense solution of his problem, the true romantic seeks expression first, with a definite self-conscious urge. To the romantic architect of the mid-nineteenth century, Romanesque and Gothic had somehow come to seem more emotional than the other styles. References Andrews, Wayne. *American Gothic: Its Origins, Its Trials. Its Triumphs.* New York: Random House, 1975. Donoghue, John.

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