

The cathedral of our  
lady of chartres: how  
a romanesque  
basilica became a  
french ...



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The medieval period which dated from the fall of the Roman Empire until the beginning of the Renaissance is characterized by the advancements of the arts, humanities, science, and technology. The accomplishments of this era such as the introduction of algebra, the use of the decimal system, advancements in the translation of literature and philosophy, advancements in art and music, the invention of cannons, and the use of gunpowder had a profound impact on history. Although each of these accomplishments would later alter history, none were more powerful during this time than religious reform. Around the year 1000, the economy of France improved dramatically, which promoted a general sense of well-being. Monasteries flourished, cities began to grow again, and in them a new group of merchants and craftsmen emerged who would come to be known as the bourgeoisie. Trade returned to create a moneyed economy. Due in part to the popularity of pilgrimages to religious sites and in part to the Crusades, which began in France, the High Middle Ages saw a prodigious amount of monumental building and technological innovation in both secular and religious architecture. Architectural historians conventionally divide the High Middle Ages into the Romanesque and Gothic styles of architecture, which are differentiated by both formal and technical qualities. Romanesque is characterized by a revival of large-scale masonry construction and the rediscovery (or reinvention) of lost Roman building techniques and forms, thus the term Romanesque. Architectural styles were mastered, improved upon, and transformed. Magnificent cathedrals such as St. Sernin Cathedral were built in the classic Romanesque design. New architectural styles and building techniques lead to the building of Gothic cathedrals. Most French Gothic churches are immediately recognizable, offering gravity-defying stone

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skeletons surrounded by a forest of freestanding buttresses connected to the body of the building by flying arches (flying buttresses). Tall, pointed arches replace the squatter round arches that characterize Romanesque architecture, and delicately ribbed vaults replace the thick, barrel-shaped vaults that covered the interiors of Romanesque churches. Because of this sophisticated skeletal structure, Gothic architects could create outer walls of jewel-like stained glass instead of the thick walls and small windows of Romanesque churches<sup>1</sup>. Salisbury Cathedral is one of France's largest Gothic Cathedrals. However, no chapel better illustrates both the classic Gothic and the underlying Romanesque architectural styles than Chartres Cathedral. The Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres, (French: Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres), located in Chartres, about 80 km from Paris, is considered one of the finest examples in all France of the Gothic style of architecture; however this was not always so. The city of Chartres, which received its name from the Carnutes, a late Iron Age Celtic tribe, was a main center for the Druids, priests of the Gallic religion, and a regional capital of Celtic France. Druids gathered once a year at the sacred center of the Carnutes in an oak grove with a well, where they settled legal disputes and religious questions. This oak grove was to become the future site of Chartres Cathedral<sup>2</sup>. Plagued by disastrous fires that destroyed the earlier Cathedral many times, Bishop Fulbert (960-1028) initiated the construction of a large basilica in 1020. The subsequent basilica was of the classic Romanesque architecture. It was characterized by its enormous quality, its thick walls, round arches, sturdy piers, well-built vaults, large towers and ornamental arcading. Each building had clearly defined forms and they were often very symmetrical, so that the overall appearance was one of simplicity when compared with the Gothic

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buildings that were to follow. The general impression given by Romanesque architecture, in both ecclesiastical and secular buildings, is one of massive solidity and strength. In contrast with both the preceding Roman and later Gothic architecture in which the load bearing structural members are, or appear to be, columns, pilasters and arches, Romanesque architecture, in common with Byzantine architecture, relies upon its walls, or sections of walls called piers<sup>3</sup>. The Romanesque church was often built in the shape of a Latin cross, and often featured very geometrical ornamentation. Although the Gothic Cathedral adopted a new look, its floor plan remained the same as its Romanesque ancestor, a Latin cross. The major differences came with the use of stone rib vault and pointed arches. The Romanesque cathedral featured groin vaults. These vaults were produced by intersecting two barrel vaults at right angles, and were often heavy and required several lateral buttresses. The use of barrel and groin vaults required the Romanesque characteristic thick walls to support its weight, thereby reducing the amount of windows that could be placed between buttresses. The cathedral was often dark, but this wouldn't be a problem for the livelier Gothic cathedral. The introduction of the ribbed and pointed arch vaults solved the problem of the older Romanesque church. Whereas as the rounded vaults of the Romanesque church were heavy and required massive support to counter the outward thrusts of the vaults, Gothic architects developed a system of stone ribs to distribute the weight of the vault onto columns and piers all the way to the ground; the vault could now be made of lighter, thinner stone and the walls opened to accommodate ever-larger windows<sup>4</sup>. The employment of the flying buttress meant that the load bearing walls could contain cut-outs, such as for large windows that would otherwise seriously weaken the vault

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walls. Flying buttresses, arches that "fly" from the tops of the outside walls to large piers standing well away from the building, were used from the beginning at Chartres. Earlier churches, such as Notre Dame in Paris, which were originally built without them, required deep galleries, upper levels as deep as the side aisles, for stability. Though these galleries could be used for overflow crowds to hear a service, nothing on the ground floor is visible from them. Chartres' architects replaced them with a low (10-foot high), narrow, arcaded passageway built into the wall at the level of the sloping roofs over the side aisles. It consequently has no windows, but creates a layer of space that visually lightens the interior; and the passage is useful for maintenance. In combination, the flying buttresses and elimination of the deep galleries allowed the architect to make the windows on the top (clerestory) level of the church as tall as the arches in the ground-floor arcade (46 feet).<sup>6</sup> Compared to its predecessor, the Gothic version of the Chartres Cathedral was magnificent. New styles of architecture, such as the ribbed vault, pointed arches and flying buttress, allowed beatification of the church in ways that the earlier basilica had not. The pointed arch also had many architectural advantages. One problem with the rounded arch is that its height is dictated by its width. This is not true of the pointed arch, which can span varying distances while the crowns of all the arches in a building remain more or less even. Pointed arches are sturdier, by a factor of 20 to 25 percent, than rounded arches. And the thrust generated by a pointed arch is directed more effectively toward the supporting piers and walls than is the case for a rounded arch.<sup>5</sup> Windows were often small and scarce throughout the Romanesque chapel because it was either not feasible to cut through the massive walls, or cutting through them would weaken the structure of the

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building. This led to a dimly lit cathedral. The rebuilding of the Cathedral which began in 1145 transformed the basilica into a Gothic masterpiece. Unlike previous models, the Gothic cathedral featured vivid splashes of color and light from nearly every angle, a product of the superb stained glass windows. The stained glass windows are particularly renowned for their vivid blue, red and yellow colors, especially in a representation of the Madonna and Child known as the Blue Virgin Window. The contrast between the windows of the Romanesque and Gothic Cathedral is one of the major distinctions between the two styles. The Blue Virgin Window is probably the most famous window in Chartres, and one of the most famous stained glass windows in all of Europe. It is known for its beautiful and vibrant colors. This window is not alone, as the Cathedral features nearly two hundred stained glass windows. Although primarily red and blue, the windows serve to give the cathedral a great monumentality and lightness of form which is also in stark contrast to the fortress like appearance of its Romanesque counterpart. Whereas the new Gothic style rapidly asserted itself in cathedral architecture, stained glass windows showed a continued Romanesque influence for several more decades. Although the windows of the west lancet of Chartres retain Romanesque traits in their composition, Chartres attains a quality of weightlessness and immateriality as the space, illuminated by stained glass, expands upward and outward. The addition of the stained art, which was often donated by royalty; lords; locals; and trades-people, served not only to brighten the church and give it a heavenly aura, but the windows also helped to immortalize its donor, as the person who paid for a particular window was often portrayed in their natural theme amongst the Biblical characters. Many different artists contributed, and there is consequently a <https://assignbuster.com/the-cathedral-of-our-lady-of-chartres-how-a-romanesque-basilica-became-a-french-gothic-masterpiece/>

variety of styles. Scenes from the Bible are mixed with scenes of everyday life. They are a medieval encyclopedia as well as an illustrated Bible<sup>7</sup>. One of the final major differences between the Romanesque and Gothic architectural styles is the level to which Gothic architects employed the use of sculptures and statues to ornament the Chartres Cathedral<sup>8</sup>. The carvings and sculptures on the earlier Romanesque Basilica were very geometrical and characterized the time. Once again in stark contrast, Chartres' gothic form features more lifelike carvings and sculptures. More than 2000 sculpted figures decorate Chartres. The fire of 1194 which destroyed the cathedral with the exception of the west façade, allows for the contrasting styles to be featured side by side. The gothic figures are lithe and smiling--a pilgrim sauntering on his staff, a young woman rocking a baby on her hip. The Romanesque ones, however, depicting the kings and queens of Judah, stand stiff and elongated, grim faces contemplating the next world<sup>9</sup>. The symbolism of showing royalty displayed slightly lower than the religious sculptures, but still very close, implies the relationship between the kings and God. It is a way of displaying the authority of royalty, showing them so close to figures of Christ, it gives the impression they have been ordained and put in place by God. Different stone-working techniques have been employed as well; rougher acids burned out the shapes of the earlier statues and thicker chisels scraped the folds of their garments. The blunt parallel gauges resemble flutings on columns rather than fabric on human bodies. Elsewhere on the cathedral, however, delicate tools have rounded the breasts and cheeks of each figure. The men's tunics are crosshatched to resemble sackcloth; the folds of the women's veils have been polished to a butter-smooth sheen. Beneath, living flesh seems to move, bend, and

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breathe<sup>10</sup>. In addition to religious figures, many Gothic cathedrals are heavily ornamented with strange, leering creatures called gargoyles. These gargoyles are not merely decorative. Originally, the sculptures were waterspouts to protect the foundation from rain. Since most people in medieval days could not read, the carvings took on the important role of illustrating lessons from the scriptures. The wealth of information gained during the High Middle Ages is unsurpassed. Advancements in architectural styles lead to magnificent cathedrals. Chartres, while primarily viewed as a classic Gothic cathedral, features several Romanesque traits: from the original Latin cross floor plan, to the untarnished west façade. Traits of the earlier Romanesque scene are highly visible against the more colorful, lighter Gothic section. Both styles are highly cultural and reflect on the advancements of their respective times. Flying buttresses, pointed arches, and ornamental figures highlight the cathedral. In a mere thirty years, what the fire of 1194 destroyed, modern architects rebuilt with astonishing precision. Light from the stained windows pours over parishioners, many of which are pictured within the stained art. Groin vaults have been replaced, and the building seems to float. Outside and in the courtyard secular carvings are mixed with religious figures, giving the feeling of ordination. With the exception of the west façade, gone are the elongated, geometrical faces that ordained the Basilica prior to the fire; yet the cathedral seems different from other French cathedrals. Chartres was not built as a Gothic cathedral from the foundation as Salisbury Cathedral nor is it comprised entirely of the Romanesque style such as St. Sernin Cathedral; however, the art of both styles can not be captured and displayed more flawlessly than they are in Chartres. Notes 1. Hanser, David A. Architecture of France. p xxv. <https://assignbuster.com/the-cathedral-of-our-lady-of-chartres-how-a-romanesque-basilica-became-a-french-gothic-masterpiece/>



2. " Chartres Cathedral and its Stained Glass," *Athena Review* 4, no. 2 (2005): 46-47. 3. Sir Bannister Fletcher, *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. 4. Julien Chapuis, " Gothic Art," *Timeline of Art History*. 5. Hanser, David A. *Architecture of France*. 58. 6. For information on different kinds of arches, see Jean Bony, *French Gothic Architecture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, 17-21; John Fitchen, *The Construction of Gothic Cathedrals*, 78-80; J. E. Gordon, *Structures*, 171-97; Mario Salvadori, *Why Buildings Stand Up*, 213. 7. Hanser, David A. *Architecture of France*. 59. 8. Pictures of the Chartres stained glass, floor plans, sculptures, can be found by visiting . Permission to link to files is granted by the Digital Research Library (DRL) at the University of Pittsburgh. 9. Avrigh, Jane. *Building Chartres*. 88. Works Cited Banister, Sir Fletcher. *A History of Architecture*. New York: Scribner, 1975. (Brevard Community College, Melbourne Library, REF NA200 . F63 1975b). Chapuis, Julien. " Gothic Art". *Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mgot/hd\\_mgot.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mgot/hd_mgot.htm) (October 2002) Hanser, David A. *Architecture of France*. Westport, 2005. Greenwood eBooks. 30 November 2007. . Avrigh, Jane. " BUILDING CHARTRES." *Harper's Magazine* 300, no. 1800 (May 2000): 88. MAS Ultra - School Edition, EBSCOhost (accessed November 27, 2007).