

The Gothic Interior: Chartres Cathedral

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Abbot Suger (Benedictine of Saint Denis) who rose to the position of Regent of France in the 1100's during the Second Crusade, was the guy who came up with the concept of "Lux Nova" (meaning "New Light" from Latin.) He had been looking for a way to transform churches into a new and higher level of spirituality through visual arts. His concept was to utilize stained glass windows as a way to allow light in to be transformed in such a way as to add to the mysticism and otherworldliness of the experience of religion. Stained glass had been used before, but Suger aimed to use this as a primary focus. When he worked on the reconstruction of Saint Denis, he incorporated the concept in a big way. As the official church of the French kings, the new "divine" light was so widely admired and inspiring, that it became the standard for future Gothic churches, and is one of the main elements of Gothic art

The next step in the evolution of Gothic art was to construct churches in such a way as to showcase this new technology. This was achieved by the evolution in the design and construction of rib vaults from semicircular arches to pointed arches. This provided two key advantages. It made the ceilings of the arched ribs look much higher (and actually be higher) than equivalent rounded arches, and also provided the benefit of requiring less load and outer support to hold the arches up. What this meant was that churches could be built higher than before - because of the increased vault heights and also because of increased structural stability. To advance this even more, the use of buttresses supporting the walls of the church meant higher scale could be achieved. And the buttresses, taking the load off the outer walls meant that wall space could be opened up and provide the space for windows to be used rather than the masonry which had previously been used to provide stability. By placing smaller buttresses atop larger buttresses or on walls of upper levels, church construction could take the bearing load to hold multiple stories. In the case of Chartres there are 3 stories (tripartite) consisting of nave/aisle arcades, triforium arcades, and clerestories. And for other churches, even 4 stories evolved and flying buttresses as well to add more light and more airiness to the structure. Inside Chartres, the compound piers and four part ribbed nave vaults break up the minimal surface structures even more, so that hardly a flat surface survives.

Where mosaics and murals and frescos would be used to convey the story, and a feeling of wonderment and inspiration in Romanesque and Byzantine churches, now windows could do the same. There was no more need to "cover" the walls with religious art. By using the same symbols and characters from theology, those images, stories, and figures of religious art could now be conveyed through the stained glass windows – which had effectively superseded blank walls. The reflective quality and pattering of multicolored mosaics now would be replaced by the translucency of an infinite range of colored light streaming in to literally envelop the worshiper. A believer would be transfixed and immersed in the aesthetic quality of the light. Even for someone not committed to the spirituality of the religion, a sense of awe and mystery would not be lost.

The period of Gothic Art was a time of expanding knowledge of science, geometry, technology, along with intense religious fervor. And all these factors were interrelated. The application of geometric forms and its permutations were proof that mathematics was directly linked and intertwined with divinity. The dimensional combinations and multiples of structural heights, widths, lengths, arcs and angles of Chartres were meant to correlate with the principles of Christian theology to create a Holy Space. From the practical side, to enable the construction of Chartres and similar sanctuaries, widespread prosperity plus the support of royal treasuries guaranteed the ability to finance these innovative projects. All of this came together to allow the construction of massive yet artful and inspiring churches of the Gothic Era.