

THE AGE OF GREAT CATHEDRALS

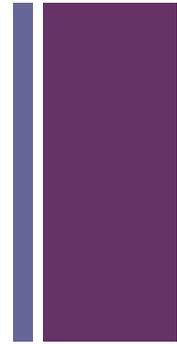
FRENCH GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE

curated by Anna Mattedi



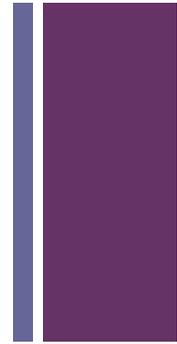
INTRODUCTION

- The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a massive shift in the population of Europe. People moved from the countryside into towns, which grew in size to become cities;
- **CATHEDRALS** became the religious, cultural and social centers of the growing cities. Cathedrals schools and universities replaced the monasteries as learning centers;
- The cathedrals, the bishops' own churches (cathedra=bishop's throne) were conceived on such a bold scale that their dimensions seem to dwarf anything that is merely human;
- It was a time of technical **knowledge**: from this newly found freedom emerged Gothic art and Gothic architecture



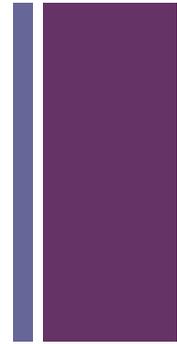
+ The term “Gothic”

- In the mid-16th century, Vasari (1511-1574), the father of art history, used “Gothic” as a term of ridicule to describe late medieval art. For him Gothic art was “*monstrous and barbarous*”, invented by the Goths;
- Vasari codified the notion already advanced by the early Renaissance artist Ghiberti (1378-1455), who, in his *Commentarii*, characterized the Middle Ages as a period of decline;
- The humanists of the Italian Renaissance, who placed Greco-Roman art on a pedestal, believed that the Goths were responsible not only for the downfall of Rome but also for the destruction of the classical style in art



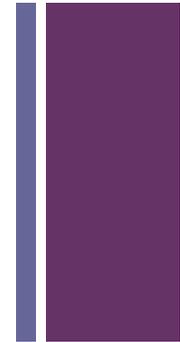


- The Gothic style first appeared in northern France around 1140;
- **UNITY** is the key word in Gothic architecture. Interiors and exteriors belong together and are similarly decorated. For the first time in history they received equal emphasis. The aim was to create an organic whole, a unified structure to symbolize the unity between God and humankind;
- This unity was an astonishing feat considering that the building often took several generations to complete, required the services of several architects and were never completed according to their original design

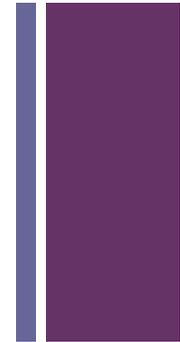


+ Abbot Suger: the early Gothic style

- Saint Dionysius was the apostle who brought Christianity to Gaul and who died a martyr's death in the third century. The church, a few miles north of Paris, housed the saint's tomb and those of the French kings, as well as the crimson military banner said to have belonged to Charlemagne;
- The Carolingian basilica was France's royal church, the symbol of monarchy;
- The Gothic style of architecture began at the royal abbey of Saint-Denis in 1135, when abbot Suger (1081-1151) started to enlarge and redesign his small church to accommodate the many pilgrims who were visiting the chapel;

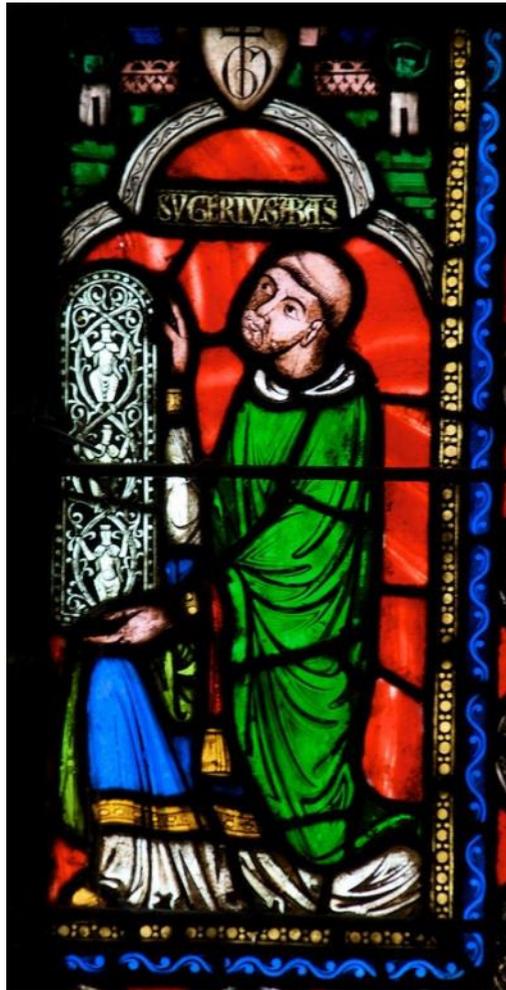


- Abbot Suger described the great crowd of pilgrims, in addition to the usual worshipers, as becoming jammed at the doors and totally blocking other people from entering. For this reason his priority was the enlargement of the entrances and side aisles;
- His main concern for the interior was light because it symbolized the presence of God;
- Abbot Suger rose from humble parentage to become the right-hand man of both Louis VI and Louis VII. From his youth, he wrote, he had dreamed of the possibility to embellishing the church in which French monarchs had been buried. In 1122 he became abbot of Saint Denis

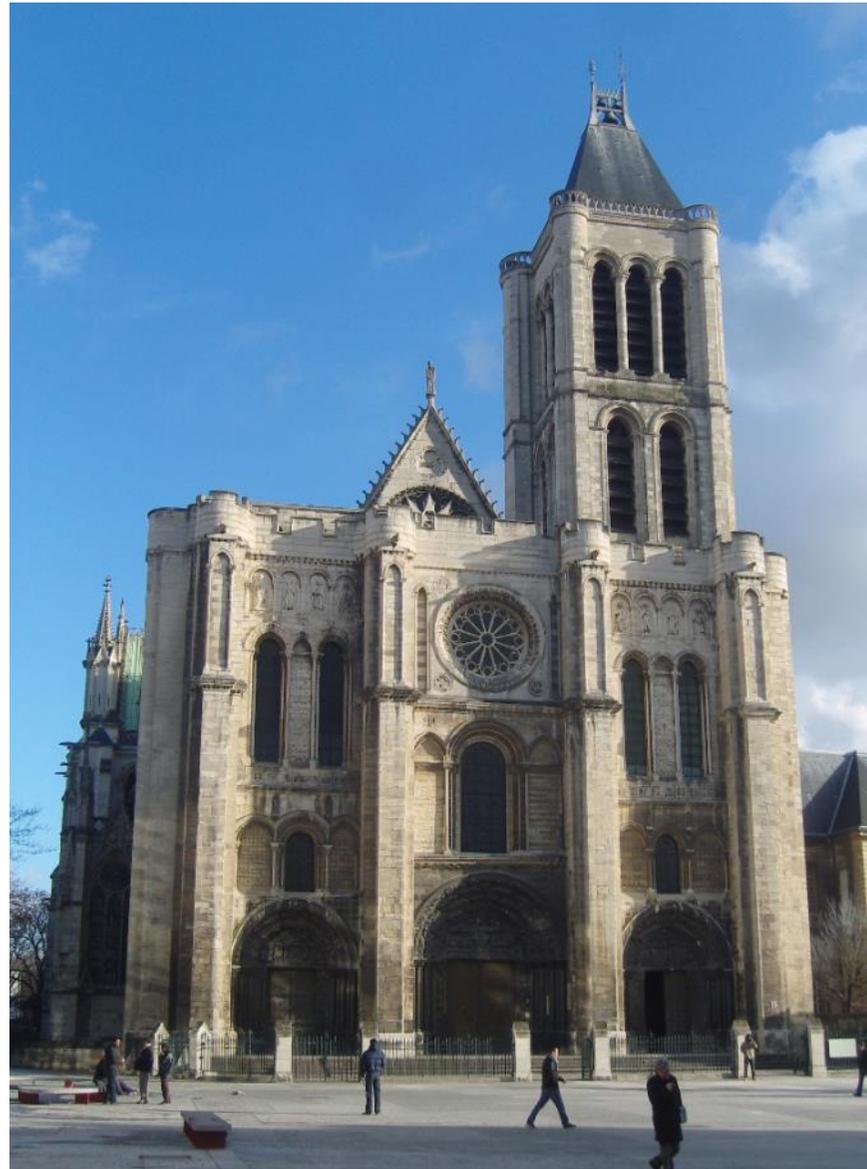


- Suger wrote three detailed treatise about his activities as abbot of Saint-Denis. He summoned artists from many regions to help design and construct his new church;
- His splendid new church, permeated with light and outfitted with gold and precious gems, was a way station on the road to Paradise, which “*transported him from this inferior to that higher world*”

+ Abbot Suger and Saint Denis



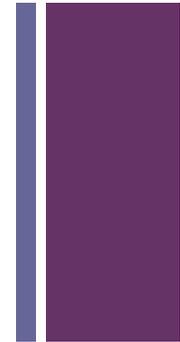
*Abbey church, Saint-Denis,
France, 1140-1144*





*Abbey church, Saint-Denis,
France, 1140-1144*

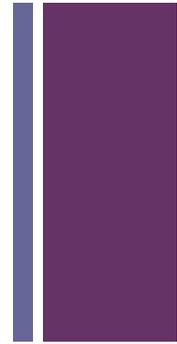




- He greatly enlarged the apse, providing an ambulatory for the pilgrims;
- He designed huge windows that let in great quantities of light through **STAINED GLASS**. Windows replaced the massive and heavy walls of the Romanesque style

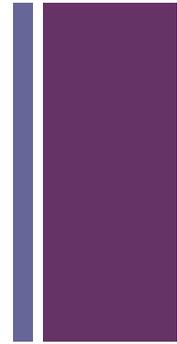
+ Stained glass

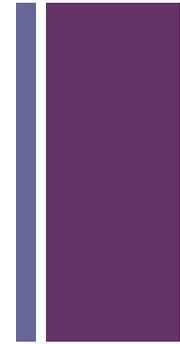
- Abbot Suger considered cathedrals as frameworks to hold stained glass. The techniques of producing glass sheets with brilliant colours reached their peak in the magnificent windows of Gothic structures;
- **TECHNIQUE** (Theophilus): the colours glow when light passes through the glass. The glass could be cut to fit the shapes the artist required. A full-scale line drawing (called a cartoon) was first put on a large board. Then sheets of glass were placed over it and cut according to the lines. These pieces were then put together like a giant jigsaw puzzle and later soldered in place with I-shaped lead strips. Carved stone tracery or iron bars were used as supports to hold the entire window flat so that it could be set upright in place.



+ Lux nova

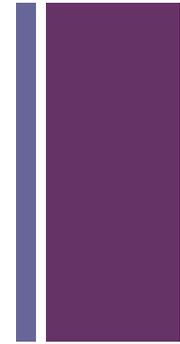
- The art of making colored glass is very old: Egyptian artists excelled at fashioning colorful glass vessels and other objects for both home and tomb. Archaeologists also have uncovered thousands of colored-glass artifacts throughout the classical world,
- Although the technology of manufacturing colored glass was ancient, the way artists used stained glass in the Gothic period was new. Stained-glass windows were not just installed to introduce colour and religious iconography into church interiors: that could have been done with mural painting and mosaics,
- They don't conceal walls, they replace them. Abbot Suger called this light "*lux nova*"



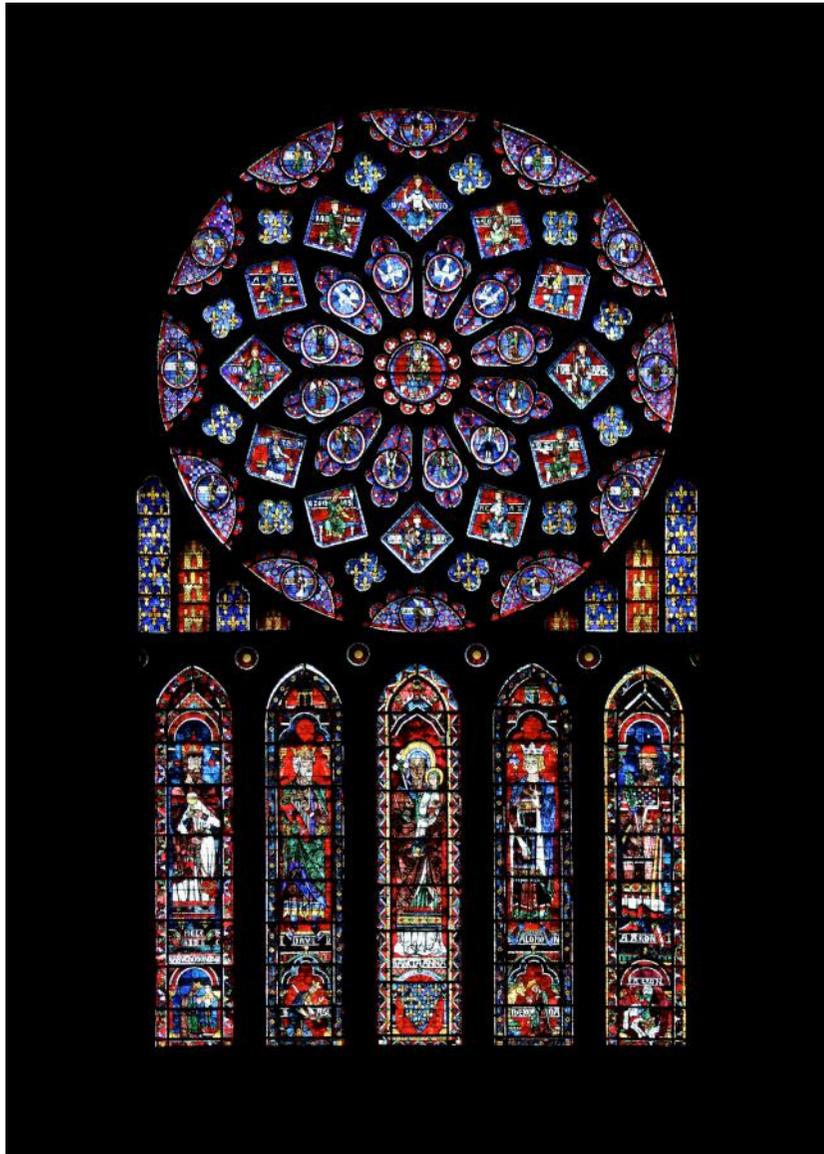


- The glass windows in a church are Holy Scriptures, which expel the wind and the rain, that is trasmit the light of the True Sun, God, into the hearts of the faithful;

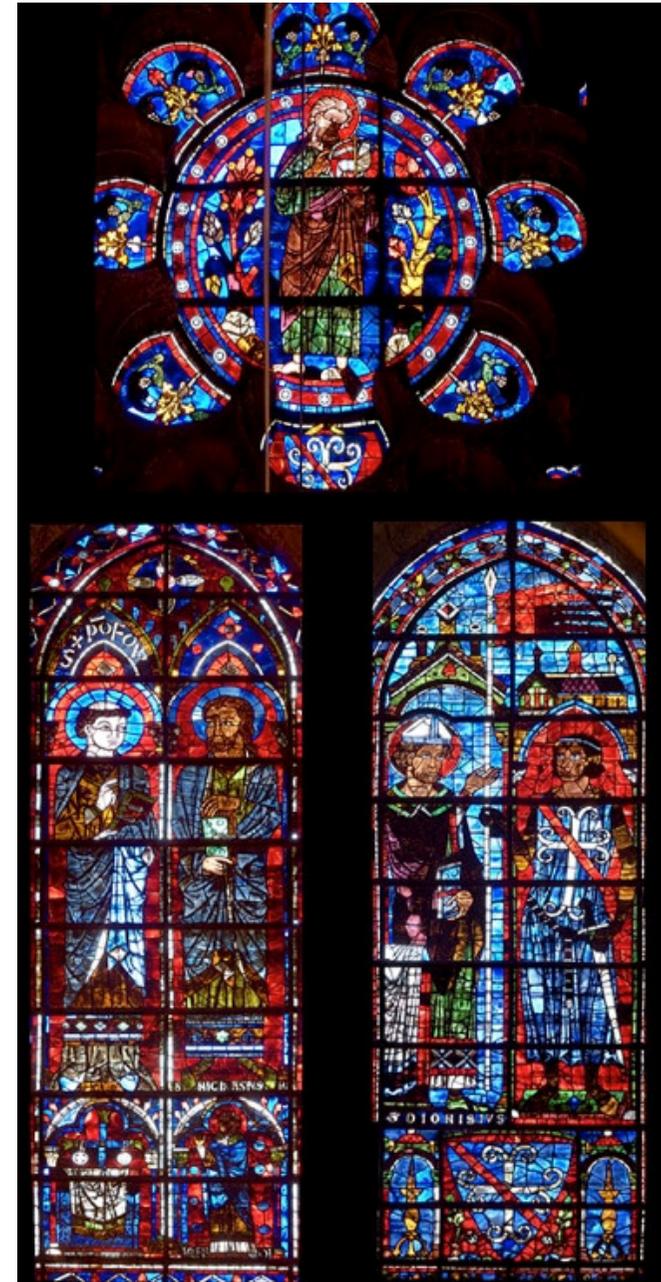
+ Stained glass



- Before assembly, paint was applied in certain places to create shading, lines and details. The individual pieces were fired in a kiln to harden the pigment;
- **RED** and **BLUES** are dominant Gothic colour schemes. Meaning of the colours: white = purity, red= love and charity, blue=spirituality (the cloak of the Virgin),
- Chartres is the only major Gothic cathedral that retains much of its original stained glass: the single large window shows St. Denis presenting his red banner to the knight who donated the window to the church.



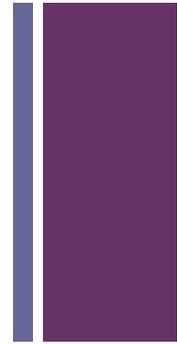
Stained glass, rose window, Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France, ca 1220

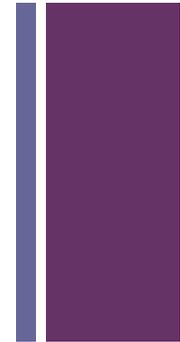


St. Denis and Jean Clemente, 12th century, Chartres Cathedral



- The immense rose window (43 feet in diameter) of Chartres cathedral north transept was the gift of the Queen of France, Blanche of Castile, around 1220;
- Royal motifs of yellow castles on a red ground and yellow three-petaled iris flowers on a blue ground. The iconography is fitting for a queen: the enthroned Virgin and Child appear in the roundel at the center of the rose, around her four doves of the Holy Spirit and eight angels. Twelve square panels contain images of Old Testament kings, including David and Solomon; Isaiah, the genealogical tree of Jesse, Sain Anne and the baby Virgin flanked by four of Christ's Old Testament ancestors

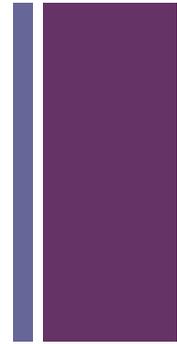




- That this vast fabric of stone-set glass has maintained its structural integrity for almost 800 years attests to the Gothic builders' engineering genius!

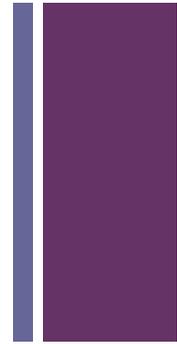
+ Stained glass: Sainte-Chapelle

- Incredibly complex windows in Sainte-Chapelle in Paris: built by Louis IX in 1243, the small chapel has no side aisles and no flying buttresses, but the windows are magnificent. They are huge for the size of the small chapel. Single panels of glass extend from several feet above the ground all the way to the vaults. The columns between the windows seem thin and fragile. The pieces of glass are cut very small and illustrate Bible stories in the medallions. In sunlight, all details are blurred by the brightness and the entire chapel seems to glow with brilliant colours.

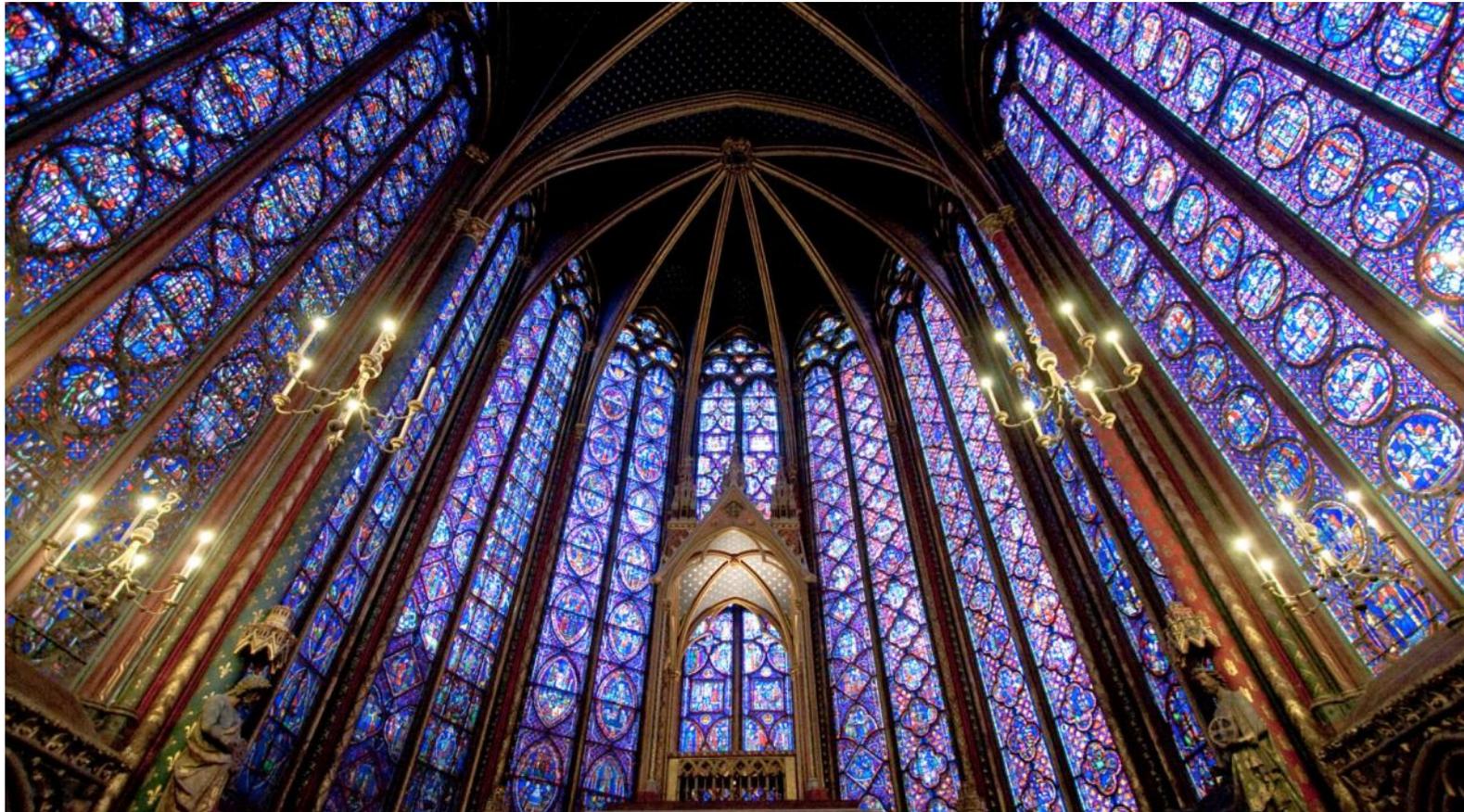


+ Sainte-Chapelle

- Louis IX built Sainte-Chapelle joined to the royal palace as a repository for the crown of thorns and other relics of Christ's Passion he had purchased in 1239. The chapel is a masterpiece of the Radiant style of the High Gothic age, which dominated the second half of the century;
- The chapel was restored after damage during the French Revolution but it has retained most of its original 13 th century stained glass



+ Sainte-Chapelle, Paris



Sainte-Chapelle, 1243-1248, Paris, France

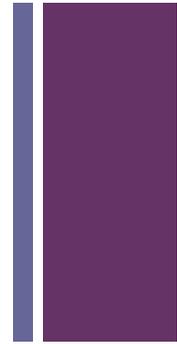
+ Sainte-Chapelle, Paris

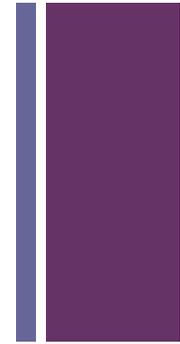


Sainte-Chapelle, 1243-1248, Paris, France

+ Gothic architectural elements

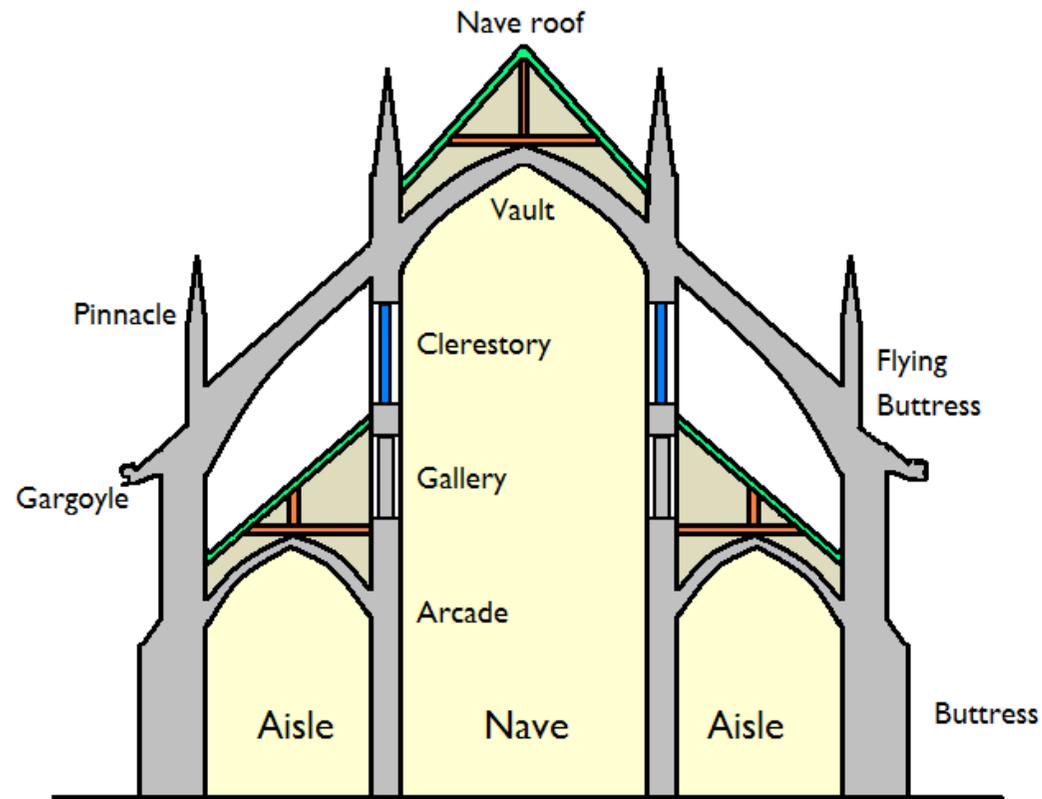
- **FEELING OF VERTICALITY:** the masters builders tried to make the interiors as high as possible, as if reaching toward heaven;
- **RIBBED CROSS VAULTS** added stability and strength and allowed for huge **STAINED GLASS WINDOWS** at the clerestory level, over the side aisles;
- **POINTED ARCHES** provided greater height and more open area (more vertical direction)
- **FLYING BUTTRESSES** eliminating the the need for solid, thick walls



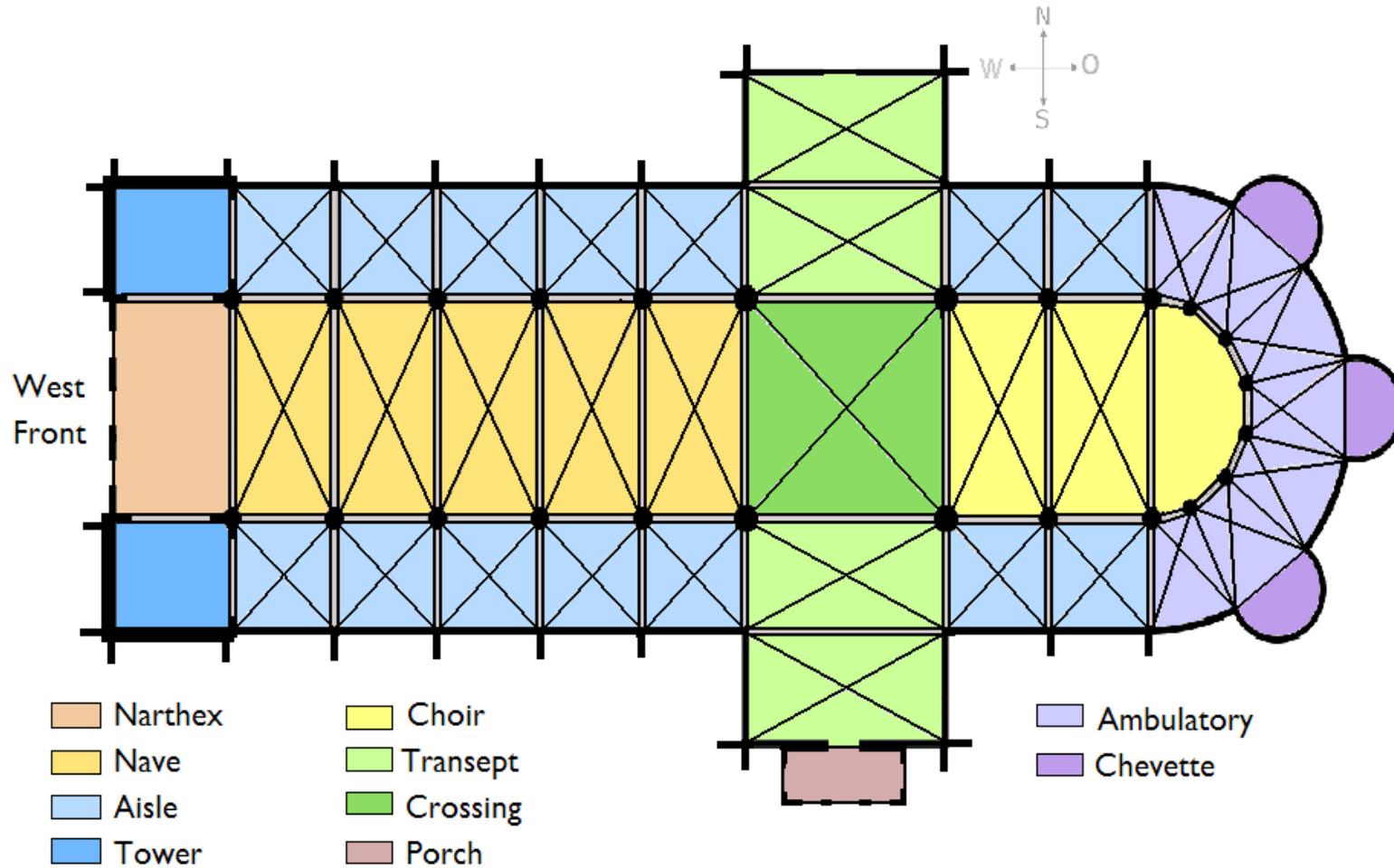
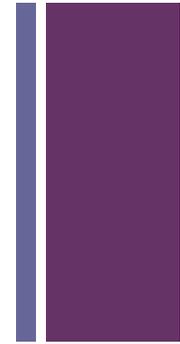


- **HUGE ROSE WINDOW:** placed over the main portal or at the ends of the transept

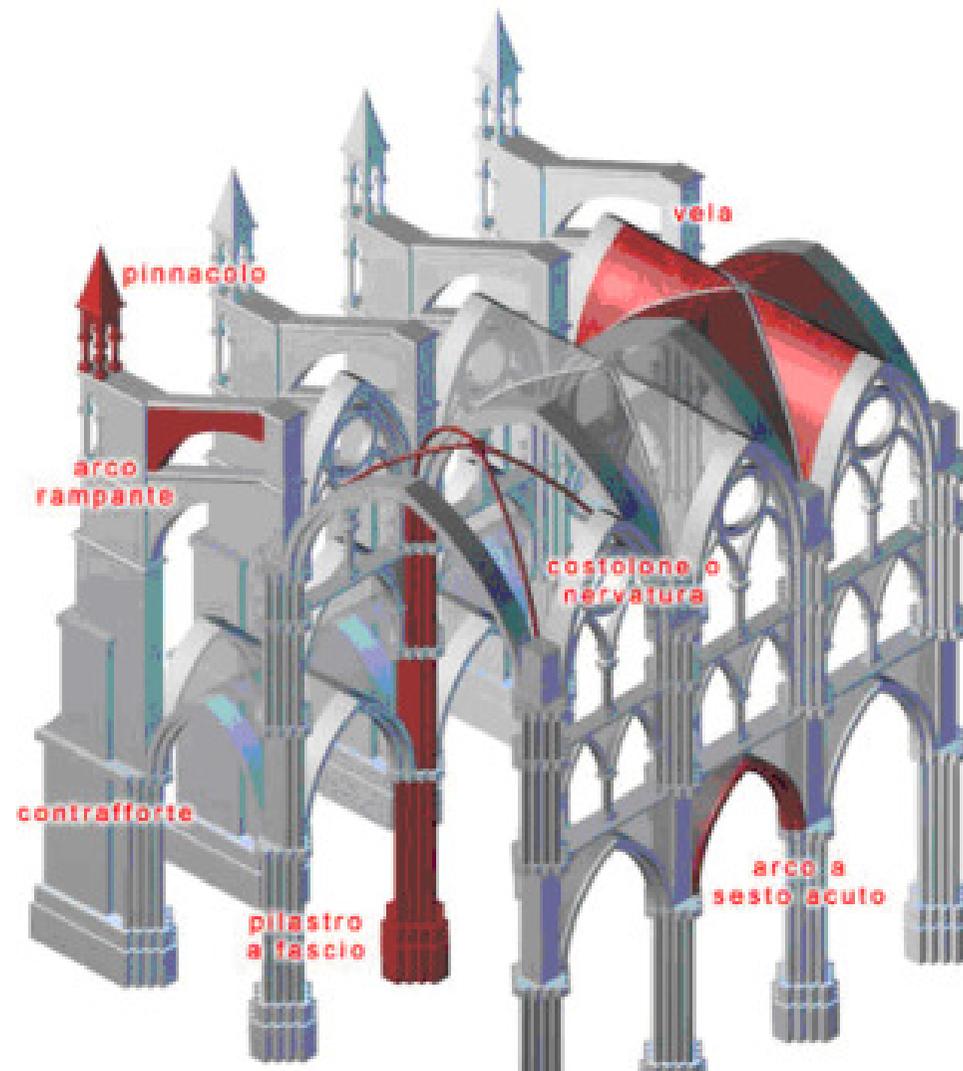
+ Gothic architectural elements



+ Plan

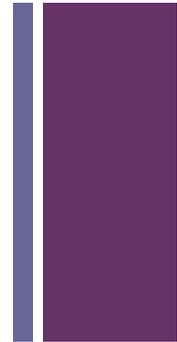


+ Gothic architectural elements

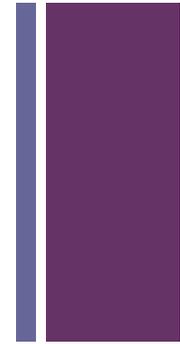
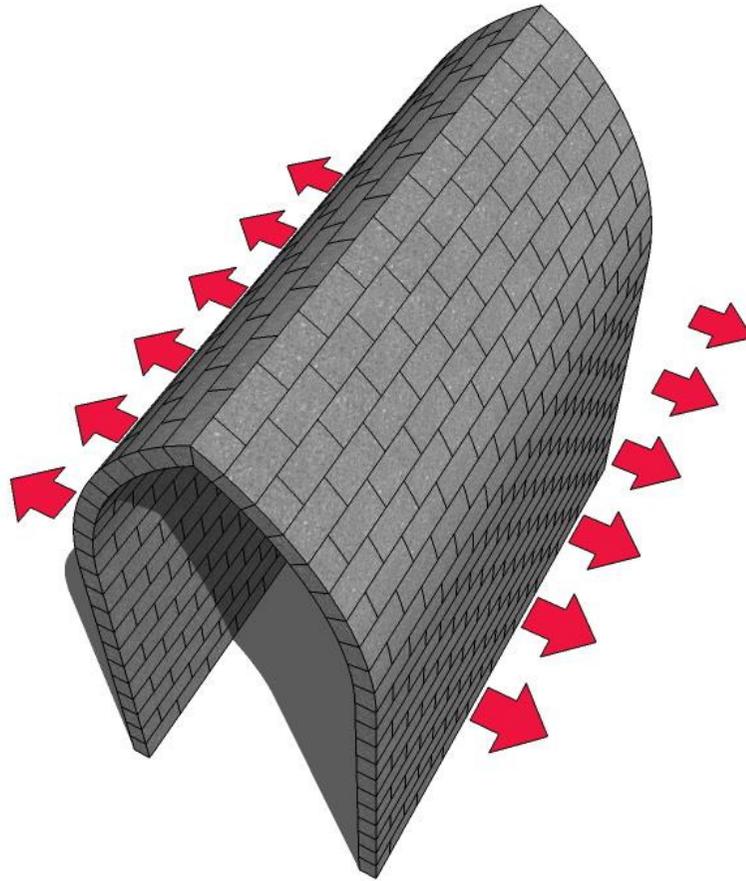


+ Pointed arches

- The round arches (barrel vault) of the Romanesque style were unsuited to the aims of the Gothic builders. Its great advantage is that it can be varied at will, made flatter or more pointed according to the requirements of the structure

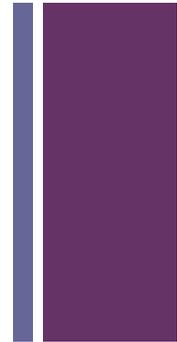


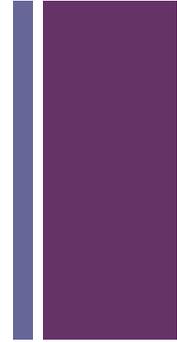
+ Pointed arch



+ Notre Dame, Paris

- From Saint-Denis, the Gothic architectural style moved to Chartres, Paris and the rest of northern France. It spread to England, Germany and all of northern Europe. Finally, it filtered into Italy;
- Notre Dame, Paris (dedicated to our Lady): these miraculous buildings seemed to proclaim the glories of heaven. The whole structure seems to rise up before us like a mirage!
- On a small island in the heart of Paris, is one of the best known of all Gothic cathedrals

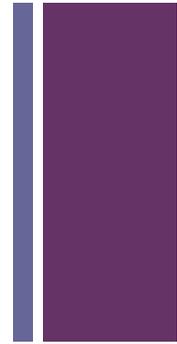




- About 1130, Louis VI moved his official residence to Paris that became the leading city of France, indeed of all northern Europe, making a new cathedral a necessity,
- Notre Dame occupies a picturesque site on an island in the Seine River called the Ile-de-la-Cité. The Gothic church replaced a large Merovingian basilica

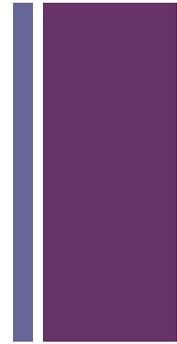
+ Notre Dame, Paris

- Construction began in 1163 and continued for about a hundred years, but was never completed;
- The two square towers at the front were originally to be the bases for impressive spires;
- Interior view: use of pointed arches and ribbed vaults; the clerestory windows are huge and reach up to the roof, allowing light to flood the vault itself; gallery through which monks, nuns and priests walked while in prayer; heavy rounded columns seem Romanesque but are well integrated;



+ Notre Dame, Paris

- Exterior view: flying buttresses, huge rose window at the end of the transept and the immense choir
- Three porches (Last Judgment, Virgin and St Anne)



+ Notre Dame, Paris



Torre Sud

Galleria delle Chimere

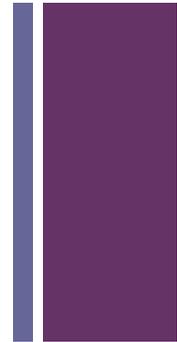
Rosone

Galleria dei Re

Portale del Giudizio Universale

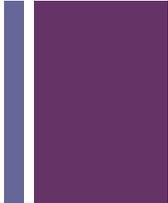
Portale della Vergine

Portale di Sant'Anna



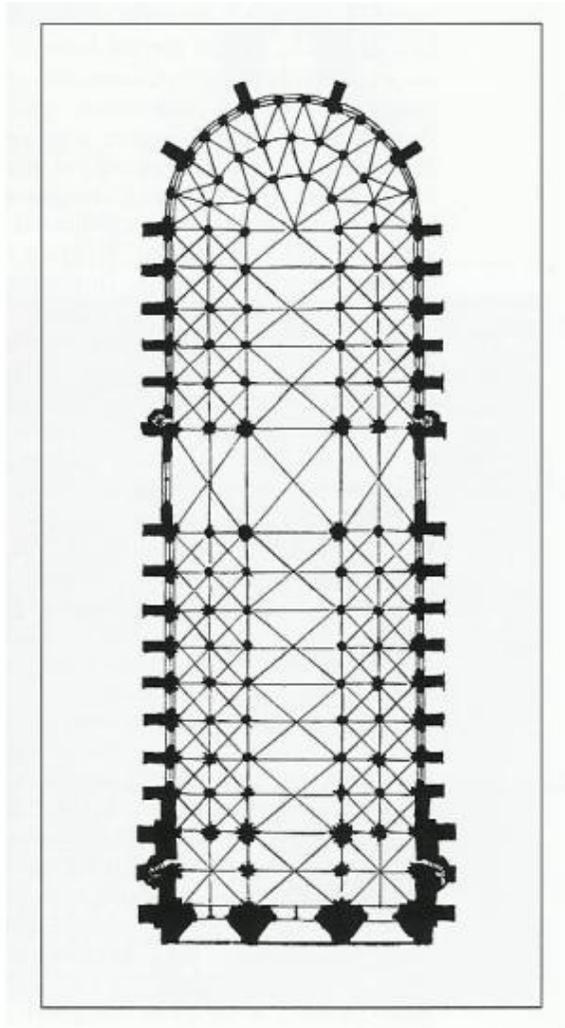


*Notre Dame, portals, Paris, France,
begun 1163*

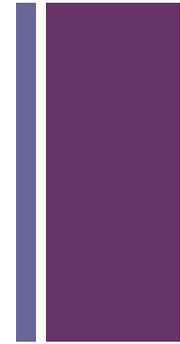


Notre Dame, Paris, France, begun 1163

+ Plan



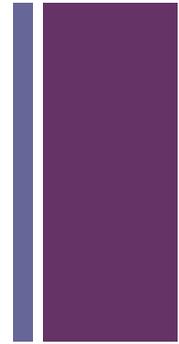
Parigi. Notre-Dame

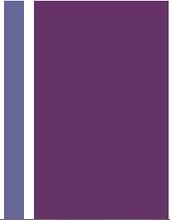


+ Notre Dame, Paris

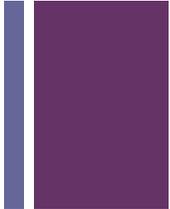


*Notre Dame, apse, Paris, France,
begun 1163*





*Notre Dame, gargoyle, Paris, France,
begun 1163*

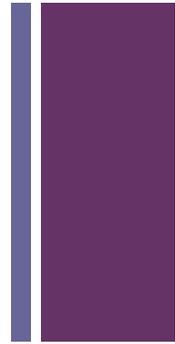


*Notre Dame, gargoyle, Paris, France, begun
1163*

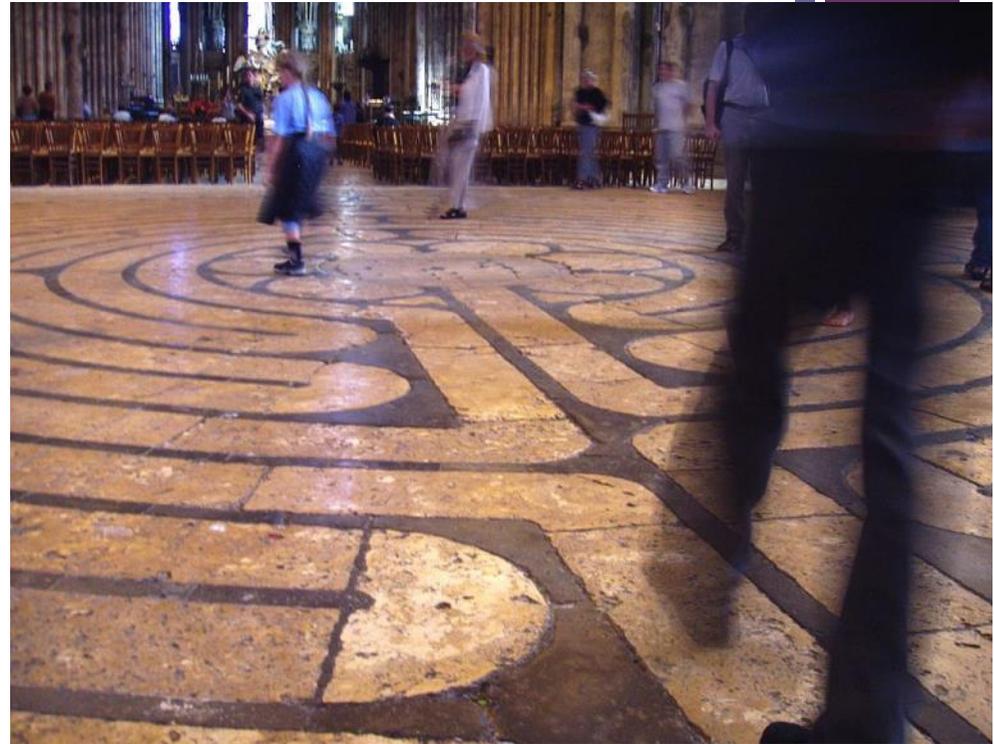


Chartres cathedral

- The basic design is unified. It seems that it must have been planned by a single master builder. However, the construction proceeded through four centuries and was never completely finished;
- For this reason the west towers, though similar, are not identical. They were built fifty years apart. Their **SPIRES** can be seen for miles around;
- The cathedral was built after a fire destroyed an earlier church. It is 121 feet tall and has 126 windows, most with their original glass. The original wooden roof was destroyed by a fire in 1863 and was replaced with a copper roof;
- Flying buttresses, skeletal structure, huge stained glass windows which today remain intact

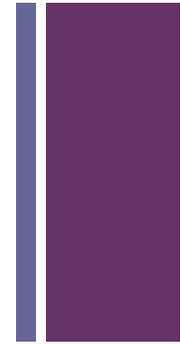


+ Chartres cathedral



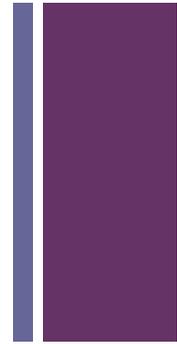
*Chartres Cathedral and the labyrinth,
Chartres, France, begun 1134*

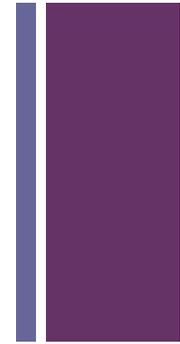
+ The labyrinth



+ Chartres cathedral

- **SCULPTURES** in Chartres: the master who worked on the northern porch made each of his figures come to life. They seem to move, and look at each other solemnly, and the flow of their drapery indicates that there is a body underneath;
- Each of them is clearly marked, recognizable to anyone who knew the Old Testament. Abraham: the old man with his son Isaac ready to be sacrificed; Moses holding the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed; each one is marked with an emblem so that its meaning and message could be understood

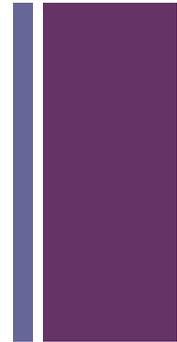




Jambs statues from the left side of the central portal, Abraham with Isaac, 1205-1240, Chartres Cathedral, France

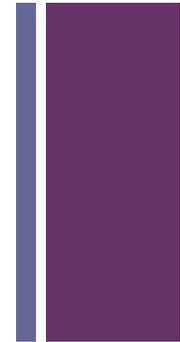
+ Differences

- There is a vast difference between Greek and Gothic art, between the art of the temple and the art of the cathedral. The Greek artists of the fifth century were mainly interested in how to build up the image of a beautiful body. To the Gothic artist all these methods were only a means to an end, which to tell the sacred story more convincingly.





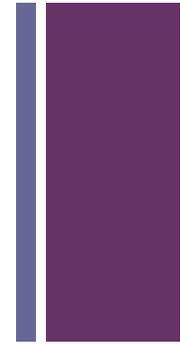
Chartres cathedral: high Gothic



- Sculpture during the Gothic period, like the rest of the Middle Ages, remained primarily associated with church decoration;
- Statues of Old Testament king and queens decorate the jambs flanking each doorway of the Royal Portal. They are the royal ancestors of Christ and, both figuratively and literally, support the New Testament figures above the doorways;
- These figures are quite three-dimensional and natural looking (naturalism), their gestures are stiff, the human figure is elongated to conform to the columns of the jamb, they wear 12th century clothes



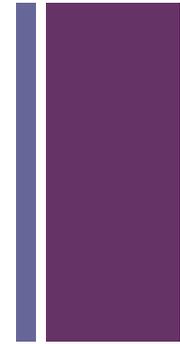
Chartres cathedral



- The symbolism of Romanesque sculpture gave way to a new awareness of the natural world. In the *Four ancestors of Christ* the drapery is still stylized and flat. The statues appear to be part of the columns. Like Romanesque sculpture, the statues lack a sense of movement. In spite of the early date, there is some individualization of the faces. The feet seem to be floating over the sloping platforms instead of resting on them.

+ Chartres cathedral, Royal portal



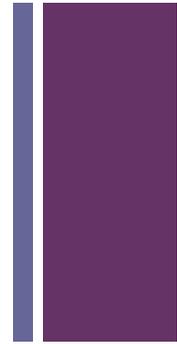


*Old Testament kings and queen,
jamb statues, central doorway of
Royal Portal, Chartres Cathedral,
France, ca. 1145-1155*



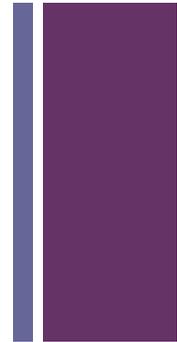
Christ and the Virgin at Chartres

- In the tympanum of the right portal Christ appears in the lap of the Virgin Mary (Notre Dame);
- Mary's prominence: at Chartres the designers gave her a central role in the sculptural program, a position she maintained throughout the Gothic period (the cult of the Virgin). As the mother of Christ, she stood compassionately between the Last Judge and the horrors of Hell, interceding for all her faithful;
- Worshipers sang hymns to her, put her image everywhere and dedicated great cathedrals to her



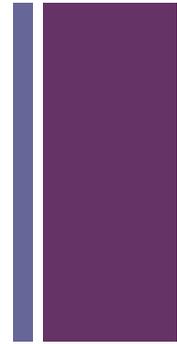
+ The cult of the Virgin

- The severity of Romanesque themes stressing the Last Judgment yielded to the gentleness of Gothic art, in which Mary is the Queen of Heaven. The Last Judgment theme was still of central importance as it was in Romanesque portals but the theme became a symbol of salvation rather than damnation;
- One Chartres window that survived after the fire of 1194 was that of Notre dame de la Belle Verrière (Our Lady of the Beautiful Window). The central section, depicting the Virgin Mary enthroned with the Christ Child in her lap, dates to 1170 and has a red background. The framing angels are seen against a blue ground.



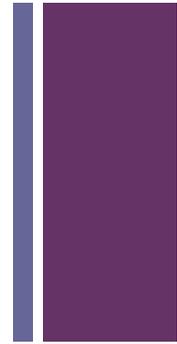
+ The cult of the Virgin

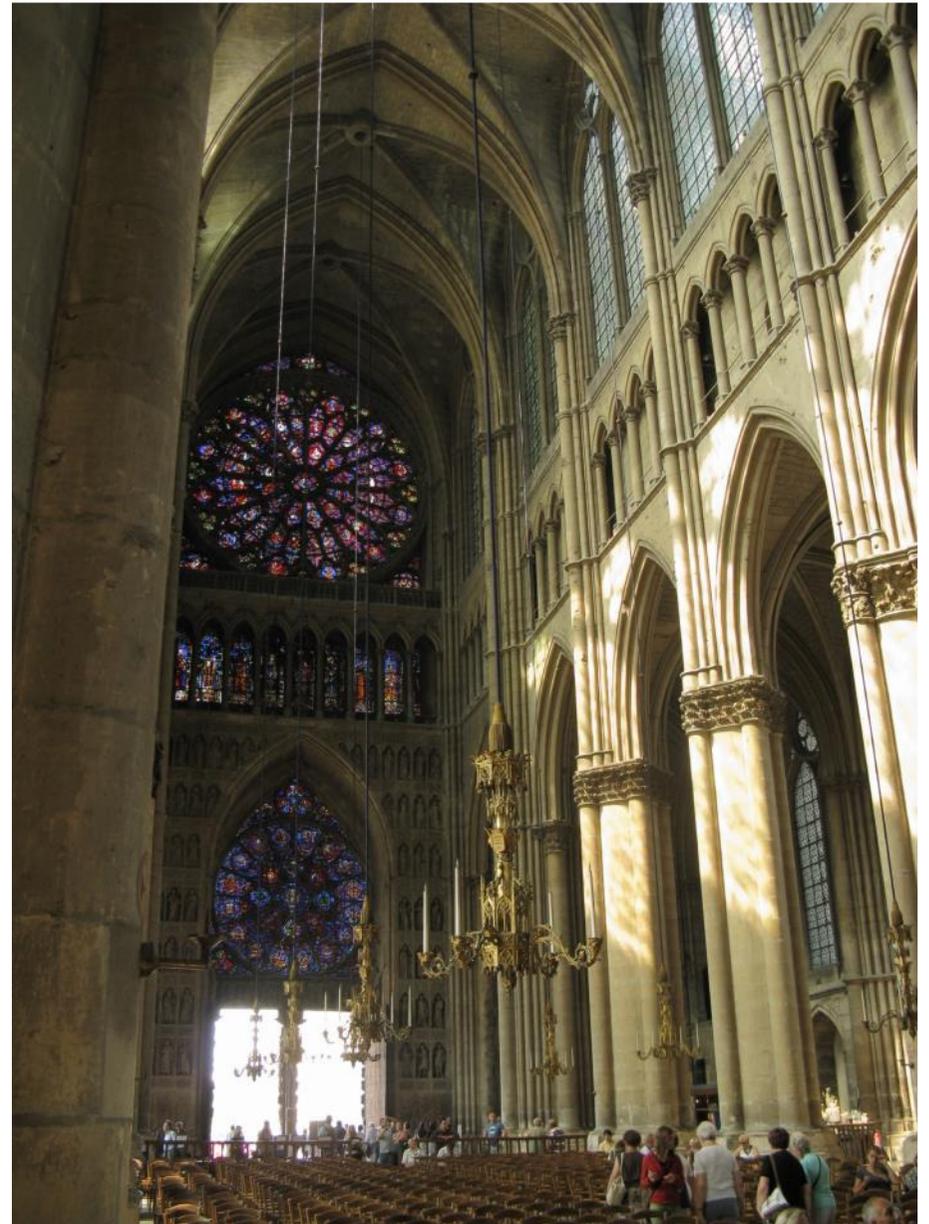
- The artist represented Mary as the beautiful, young, wordly Queen of Heaven, haloed, crowned and accompanied by the dove of the Holy Spirit;
- Gothic and Byzantine builders used light to transform the material world into the spiritual but in opposite ways. In Gothic architecture light entered from outside the building through a screen of stone-set coloured glass. In Byzantine architecture, light was reflected from myriad glass tesserae set into the thick masonry wall



+ Reims cathedral

- Reims cathedral has an interior arrangement similar to Notre Dame in Paris. An immense choir takes up about half the length of the building. Because the kings of France were often crowned here, an extremely large space was needed for their pageantry
- The west facade is fascinating: solidity and heaviness have been replaced by openings and lightness; flying buttresses; towers carved stone openings of delicate tracery; over each portal a window with stone tracery. Only in the third level is the facade solid filled with carved niches and the portraits of French kings;

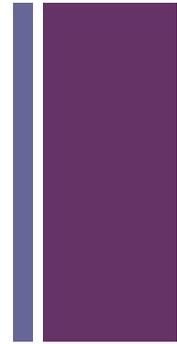




*West facade and interior of Reims Cathedral,
Reims, France, ca. 1225-1290*

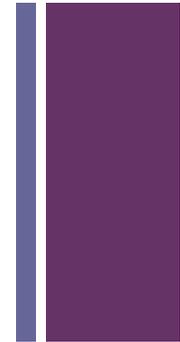
+ Reims cathedral

- The rest of the facade is filled with sculpture: in the portals, over the portals, in other niches. Each pinnacle is carved with protusions to create a delicate and airy feeling;
- The towers were designed to hold huge spires, which were never built

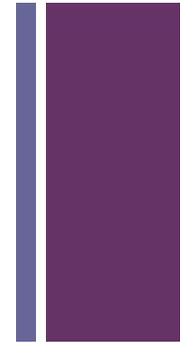




Reims cathedral: jamb statues

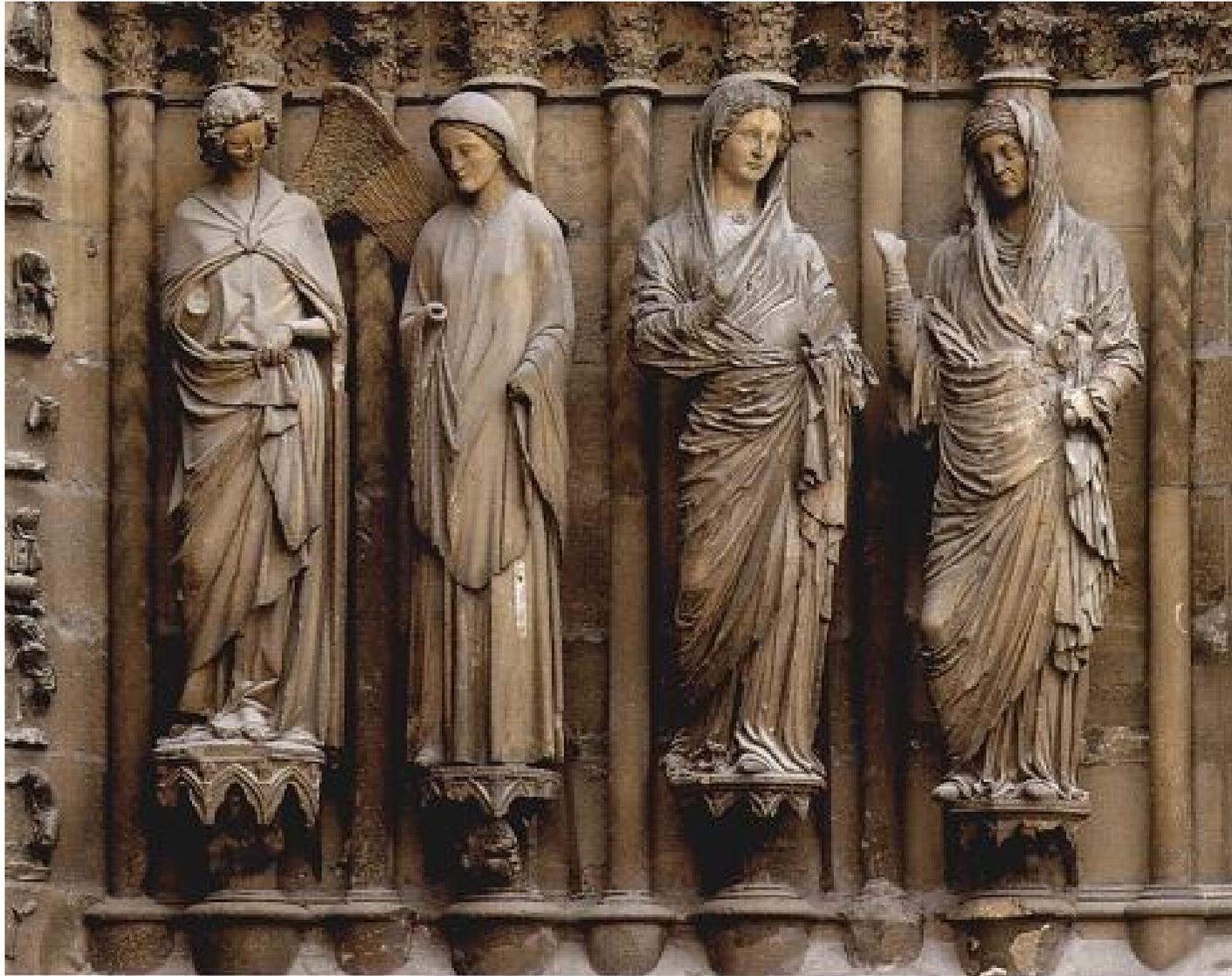


- The jamb statues of the west portals of Reims cathedral appear to be completely detached from their architectural background, free and easy movements of the full-bodied figures;
- Saint Elizabeth visiting the Virgin Mary before the birth of Jesus. They are two of a series of statues celebrating Mary's life and are further testimony to the Virgin's central role in Gothic iconography;
- The heads of both women look like ancient Roman portraits; classical naturalistic style; use of the Greek contrapposto posture;



- The right legs bend and the knees press through the rippling fold of the garments. The sculptor set the figure's arms in motion. Mary and Elizabeth turn their faces toward each other and they converse through gestures. In the Reims Visitation group, the formerly isolated Gothic jamb statues became actors in a biblical narrative

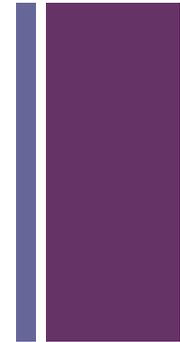
+ Reims cathedral



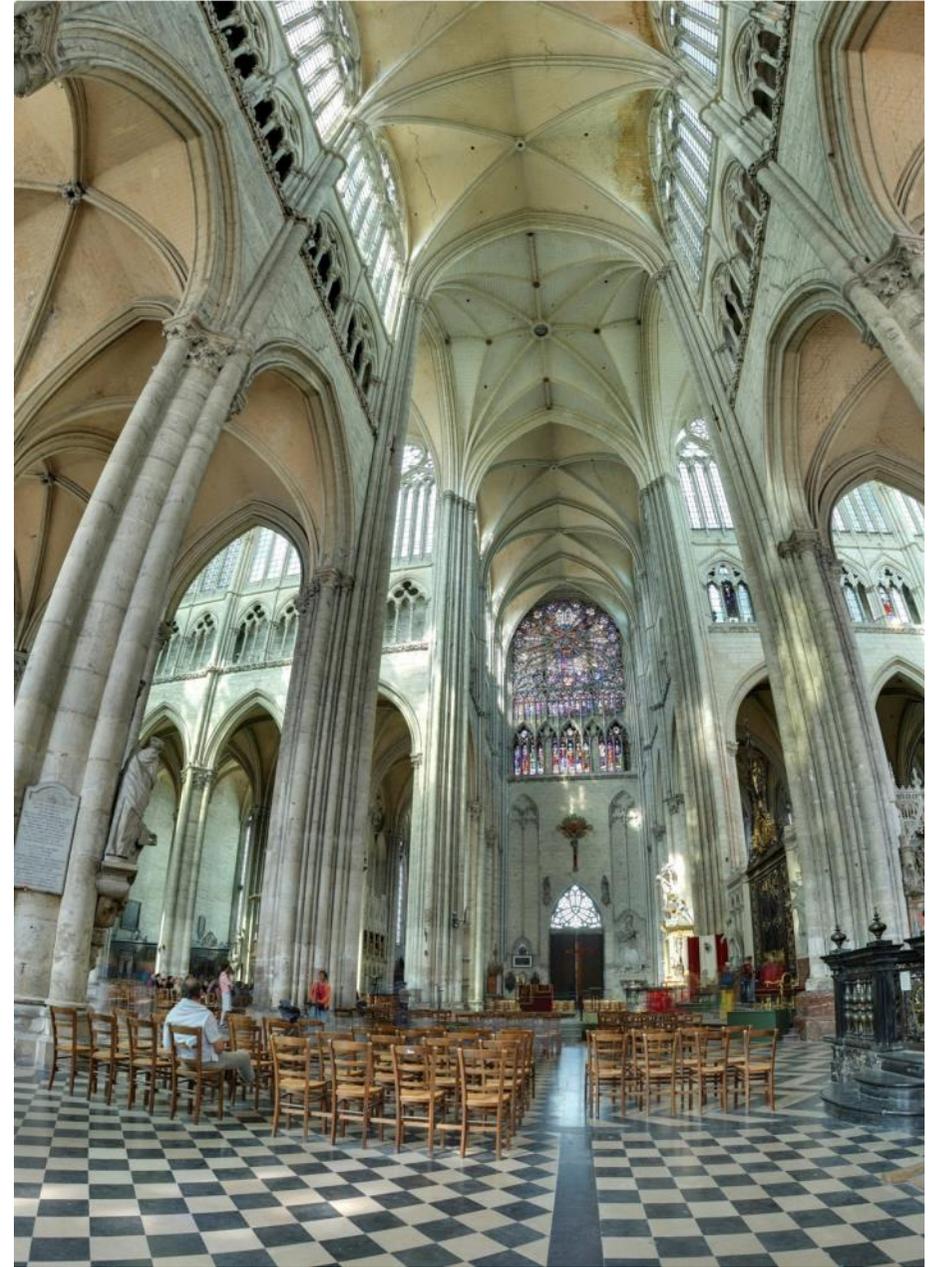
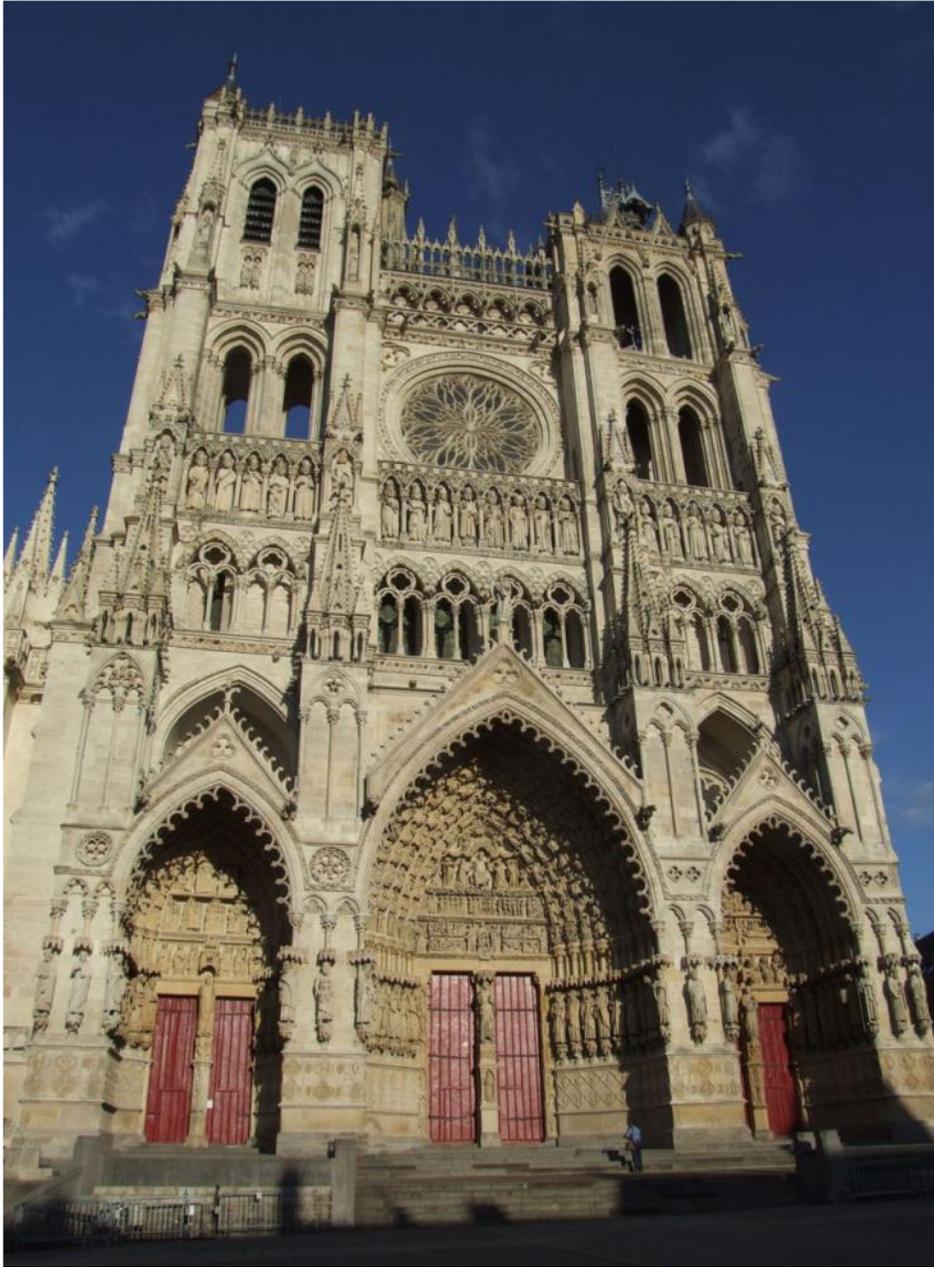
*Visitation, jamb
statues of central
doorway, west
facade, Reims
Cathedral, Reims,
France, ca.1230*



Amiens cathedral: High Gothic



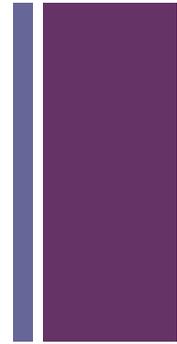
- Amiens cathedral is one of the most impressive examples of the French Gothic obsession with constructing ever taller cathedrals. Gothic architectural style reached its climax in Amiens with a nave over 137 feet high, the soaring effect of its interior is dramatically overpowering;
- The clerestory windows are immense. They are separated only by the thin columns. The vault seems to float without support above the glass. These windows and the tracery openings eliminate the feeling of any walls at all;



*West facade and interior of Amiens Cathedral,
Amiens, France, begun 1220*

+ Amiens cathedral

- Rose window above the main portal (40 feet in diameter); incredible amount of glass and the small visible columns that support the stone vault;
- Comparison with Hagia Sophia in Constantinople: if Hagia Sophia is the perfect expression of Byzantine spirituality in architecture, Amiens, with its soaring vaults and giant windows admitting divine colored light, is its Gothic counterpart.



+ Bibliography

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- Gombrich E., *The story of art*, London, 1995

