

Betty Gilson
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Romanesque and Gothic

After studying the Classics, we're moving on to the Romanesque and Gothic style—two amazing styles of “Art of the Western World.”

The Pre-Romanesque style developed after the fall of the Roman Empire (around 476 A.D.)—this in turn led to the Romanesque style. Charlemagne's achievements—especially the Carolingian Revival—and Ottonian Art made a smoother transition between the Early Christian and Byzantine periods and the Romanesque period.

The term **Romanesque** started as a derogatory term, because the buildings of the early Romanesque period included Roman style and elements. The Romanesque style spread quickly from France to all over Europe.

The Romanesque style achieved some of the following:

- The development of the stone vaulted building;
- Round and pointed vaults;
- Plain and ribbed vaulting;

-Heavy walls and piers to support the vaults—these elements made possible for the first time the construction of a single barrel vault over the whole building, instead of two or three;

-The height of the ceiling was unprecedented before; therefore, the buildings were very impressive, outside and inside.

Pilgrimage Churches

A most important pilgrimage route in Medieval Europe was that to Santiago de Compostela. St. James the Apostle was believed to have been buried in Spain, in Compostela, after his martyrdom in Palestine. Five of the churches along the various routes to Compostela had the same basic cruciform plan.

All of these pilgrimage churches had relics of their own, which pilgrims came to view in large numbers. These churches were designed to accommodate the pilgrims. After passing through an entrance, one was in the midst of a large barrel vaulted nave, with either two or four side aisles. A transept separated the nave from the choir. A tower was usually erected over the crossing of the nave and the transept. Relics were kept in chapels, which sprung from the choir. In older churches, this proved dangerous and inefficient, as pilgrims often trampled each other just to view the relics. The planners of these churches created an ambulatory, or aisle, around the choir, with surrounding radiating chapels, which contained the relics. This created a manageable flow of traffic through the choir area.

The Basilica of Mary Magdalene c. 1120 A.D.

A barrel vault is one of the characteristics of the Romanesque style, as we can see it at Vézelay. The Burgundian Romanesque style did not yet include the pointed arch or stained glass windows. However, the interior of the nave is highly decorated with colored stone and carved capitals.

The Abbey at Cluny

Burgundy - France (909-1790 A.D.)

The Clunaics took the Vézelay Basilica model and enlarged it. They also added a second transept and two more side aisles. Architects included a pointed arch in the barrel vault construction. As Cluny reached its completion in 1130, many of its builders were also working on the construction of the [Cathedral in Autun](#), a few miles away, which was finished a few years later.

Cathedral Saint Lazare

Founded by the Romans in 14 B.C., as the capital for a provincial district, Autun is one of the oldest towns or cities in Burgundy. Towards the end of the 11th century, the bishop and the people began construction for a Romanesque Cathedral, in order to contain the sacred relics of Lazarus—the man whom Jesus Christ was said to have brought back to life. We can see influences from Cluny III in elements like the “pointed barrel vault of the nave and the classicizing fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals” (Stewart, Andrew, et al., 37).

The exterior of Saint Lazare was renovated during the early Renaissance to include a Gothic crossing tower. The Cathedral sits on top of a hill in the oldest part of the city, within walls constructed during the Roman Empire, and the Middle Ages.

The transition of Romanesque architecture to Gothic was not a fluent one. Since the new form was not the traditional, a great number of people preferred the Romanesque style over the Gothic one. Eventually, people got used to the new form, and every new church was built in the new Gothic style.

The difference between Gothic and Romanesque architecture is the spiritual approach. In Romanesque the emphasis was on transcendental and feudalistic systems whereas in the Gothic this approach was humanized and individualized. The Gothic architecture emphasized upward movement towards god, a feeling that cannot be found in a Romanesque basilica, although the basilica might have had pointed arches, a key element of gothic architecture.

Northern France gave birth to the Gothic style, which would become one of the most important styles of the Art of the Western World. Front-runners in the Gothic style were the cathedrals of Chartres and of Sens, both situated near Paris. Chartres was rebuilt after a fire destroyed the Gothic cathedral in 1194. During the reconstruction an element appeared that would become a Gothic symbol—the rose window.

The Gothic style achieved some of the following:

- Height was one of the building elements and reached new records;
- The ribbed vault is one of the typical elements of the Gothic style, even though it started appearing at the end of the Romanesque period;
- Pointed arches are also taken from the late Romanesque style but developed to perfection during the Gothic era;
- Tall, thin columns;
- New sense of space organization;
- Large spaces filled with light;
- Stained glass; although it existed during Romanesque times, it was not frequently used and became one of the symbols for Gothic buildings and a defining factor of Gothic art;
- Flying buttresses, which took the weight of the building off of the walls and transferred it to the ground;
- Further elimination of masonry by piercing the walls with windows.

The Romanesque and Gothic styles set the stepping stone for the Early Renaissance years. I consider myself very fortunate to have witnessed the majestic presence of some of these buildings, while visiting France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and England. The feeling you have when you enter these altars of breathtaking beauty is impossible to explain. One thing is for sure: You'll always dream about going back.

Works Cited

Stewart, Andrew, et al.. *Art of the Western World: Study Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1989.