Architectural Styles through the Ages

The evolution in architecture of the great Churches of Christendom are usually described showing how church design has progressed through the different styles over time:

Style	Features
Early Christian [320+]	The first Christian Churches, built soon after Christianity became legal were designed in the manner of old Roman Basilicas (public buildings).
Byzantine [500+]	Churches designed using Greek and Persian architecture were built in the East particularly under Justinian.
Romanesque [500-1200]	As Christianity expanded in the West, churches began to develop along particular lines. Most were built in the shape of a cross with the Altar to the east, and nave to the west, with arched windows and rounded apses.
Gothic [1140-1500]	Architectural innovations to classic Romanesque churches were first attempted in France in 1140 that shifted the weight of roof supports onto columns, allowing for thin walls and increased use of stained glass.
Renaissance [1400-1600]	Renaissance churches flourished in mostly in Italy where innovations, including domes, facades, and increased use of artwork were inspired by a movement to restore classical beauty to Rome.
Baroque [1600-1800]	The Baroque style of the 17th century evolved from the Renaissance movement and influenced courts throughout Europe. Baroque churches were highly decorated with statues, dramatic paintings, and facades.
Neo-Gothic [1800-1960]	The neo-classical movement of the 19th century was a reaction against the excesses of the Baroque period. A return to the simpler, classic structures of Gothic architecture was thought to be desirable.
Modern [1960-]	Vatican II allowed for more flexibility and experimentation in architectural design than was previously considered possible. The results have been mixed, to put it kindly.

These categories are helpful but simplistic. The evolution of church architecture is best understood by considering the following complications,

1. The Gothic architectural innovations of the 12th century, providing for stable ceiling support, thin walls, and large window areas, dramatically changed architectural structures. Most innovations of later periods were aesthetic, rather than structural.
2. Few churches built before 1000 are still in their original condition. Even ancient Churches in continuous operation have been extensively rebuilt or remodeled so it is difficult to trace the history of architectural innovations before the 12th century. Even after the 12th century, renovations led to a mix of styles.
3. Architectural styles varied by region and climate, as well as by as era. Gothic churches predominated in England and France, but were never popular in Italy. Renaissance style churches were mostly found in Italy, etc.

Because of these factors it is sometimes difficult to strictly categorize Churches as one style or another. Some churches are very representative of a certain style and easy to categorize, but others are a mix.

Early Christian Churches [330 A.D. +]

The construction of large, public, Christian churches did not begin until Constantine made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire in the early 4th century. The first churches were modeled on Roman 'Basilicas' or large public buildings, rather than Jewish or Roman Temples. Four of the first Catholic churches built in Rome in the mid 300's still exist as 'Major Basilicas', but each has either been rebuilt entirely or remodeled extensively.

Two of the oldest, the Basilicas of St. John Lateran (left) and St. Maria Maggiore (right), show below, have the external appearance of Roman public buildings.





Other Ancient Churches that were built in during the reign of Constantine include the following. Most are still in operation, although several have been rebuilt entirely and all have been extensively remodeled.

- **Saint John Lateran** (Rome) — This Ancient Church is the official Cathedral of Rome, and the seat of the Bishop of Rome. Lateran is a historical Roman name for the property on which the Church sits. The church itself is dedicated to John the Baptist and John the Apostle. (There is no Saint named John Lateran!!)
- **Santa Maria Maggiore** (Rome) — This church was built in honor of the Blessed Virgin as 'Our Lady of the Snows' on the spot on which snow miraculously fell in August.
- **Church of the Nativity** (Bethlehem) — This Church was built over the site where it is believed Christ was born. The first church, built by Constantine was entirely destroyed and rebuilt under Justinian.
- **Holy Sepulchre** (Jerusalem) — This Church was built on the site of Jesus's crucifixion. The property is also said to contain the site of Christ's tomb and several of the stations of the cross. It was an important Christian pilgrimage site even before the church was built.
- **Saint Paul Outside the Walls** (Rome) — This church was built just outside the city of Rome on the site of the Martyrdom of Saint Paul.
- **Saint Peters** (Rome) — This Church was built on the site where saint Peter was martyred and it contains his relics. The original Church entirely rebuilt in the 15th century.
- **Santa Sophia** (Constantinople) — The original version of this church was built in Constantinople during the age of Constantine, but the dome of the existing structure was not built until the 7th century. Sophia is a Greek word for wisdom, so the Church is named in honor of "Holy Wisdom of God" rather than after a saint.

Byzantine Churches

Only a hundred years after Constantine make Christianity legal, the Roman Empire in the west was near collapse and the center of Roman culture moved to Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Empire. For the next few centuries, the art and architecture of the Greek speaking regions of the Roman Empire were prevalent and many of the great churches built from the 6th to the 9th century were Byzantine. The most famous of these was the Cathedral of Santa Sophia* in Constantinople, for hundreds of years the largest Church in Christendom.

Distinctive features of Byzantine style Church architecture include some of the following:

- **Greek Cross** Byzantine Churches are usually built in the form of a symmetrical square cross, rather than a rectangular cross. The Apse and Choir are to the east, but the other three portions are of similar size. Some Byzantine Churches were built on an octagon plan, rather than as a square.
- **Mosaic Facades** Mosaic designs were prevalent throughout the east, and were frequently used to decorate walls, floor, and facades of Byzantine Churches.
- **Brick and Plaster** Portions of most Byzantine Churches were constructed of brick and mortar rather than stone.
- **Circular Domes** Circular, or octagon domes supported on large pillars are distinguishing features of Byzantine style Churches.
- **Small Windows** Wide walls necessitated relatively small windows, often located within the dome structures.

Byzantine style Churches were prevalent from the 5th century, not only in the East, but also in Africa and parts of Italy, such as Ravenna and Venice, that were under the influence of the Eastern Roman Empire. St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, and Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna are examples of Italian-Byzantine Architecture.





By the 8th century, Moslem Arabs had over-run much of the Eastern Empire, and few new Christian churches were built. The Byzantine influence in architecture continued in Slavic regions that adhered to Orthodox Christianity, and also in Moorish Spain.

Romanesque Churches

While the Byzantines fought of Moslems in the East, Christendom was gradually becoming the dominant civilizing force in the west. The Barbarian leaders of Spain, France, and England had all adopted Catholic Christianity. The monastic movement begun by Saint Benedict spread rapidly over the west, and under Gregory I, the papacy was reformed and strengthened..

By the time Charlemagne rose to power in the late 8th century Christianity had become principle unifying force in the west, and there was a flurry of building activity. By the 10th century, Church architecture throughout Western Europe had evolved into a 'Romanesque' style, characterized by cross-shaped (cruciform) Churches, with massive walls and pillars, round arches, groin vaults, towers and arcades. The Normans build many new structures when they conquered England so what are called ‘Norman’ castles, monasteries are essentially Romanesque.

The primary weakness of Romanesque architecture was that wide walls were needed to support ceilings, and roofs eventually collapsed due to long term pressure. Romanesque structures were also relatively dark because the walls could not support large windows.

Because of this there are few surviving original Romanesque churches, and most that we do know of were built between 1000 and 1200. In most cases, Romanesque churches were converted to Gothic churches when they were damaged or replaced. The Gothic architecture that evolved in the 12th and 13th centuries was developed specifically to improve the weaknesses of Romanesque architecture.

Nevertheless, many of the elegant features that are associated with Gothic cathedrals, such as plate tracery, compound piers, and groups of narrow windows, evolved during the Romanesque period, along with the three tiered walls. The reason these features are more associated with Gothic than Romanesque architecture is that the 12th century improvements allowed for more stable, longer lasting structures. While there are few original Romanesque Churches still in existence, there are hundreds of Gothic churches throughout Europe.

Gothic Architecture [1160 -1500]

The principles of Gothic Architecture were first developed in France in the early twelfth century, and during its period of flourishing was known as "French Work". The new techniques spread throughout France, England, and Northern Europe but were never entirely adopted in warmer climates where large windows were not practical. Since Gothic architecture was popular in northern rather than southern countries, it came to be associated with the Germanic or 'Gothic' regions..

While many of the features associated with Gothic Churches, include the cruciform layout, rounded apse, three tiered walls, and tracery, evolved gradually during the Romanesque period, the innovations that definitely mark Gothic structures were first employed in the Abbey of St. Denis when the choir was reconstructed by Abbot Suger in the 1140s. These innovations included pointed arches, flying buttresses, and ribbed vaulting.

Although seemingly independent design changes, all three worked together to revolutionize the manner in which Cathedral ceilings were built. In short, pointed arches and ribbed vaulting (i.e. pointed arches within a ceiling structure) allowed the pressure of the roof to press down upon supporting columns at a steeper angle. This directed more weight onto the piers and once buttresses were put in place to stabilize columns, the walls of the Cathedral itself did not bear much weight from the ceiling and could be made dramatically thinner.

> *The use of the pointed arch allowed for great flexibility in the interior design and could extend upwards to great heights. Pointed arches also allowed for a greater distance between the columns. Also from the top of these piers were arches that crisscrossed the ceilings and were locked together by a boss stone. Pushing against these piers on the outside were the flying buttress. It all held together. The walls were no longer load bearing so they could have large openings for windows. It has been said that you could remove all of the walls in a Gothic cathedral, and it would still stand.*

These four elements - pointed arches, vaulted ceilings, flying buttresses and stained glass windows offered innumerable possibilities. . . . .

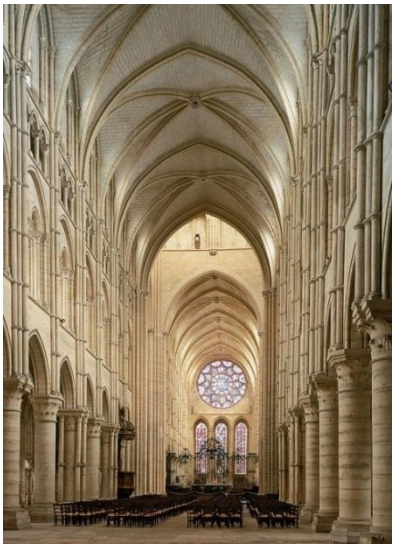
— Rev. T. D. Clay, from http://www.cathedralquest.com/gothic_architecture.htm



Pointed Aches



Flying Buttresses



Ribbed Vaults

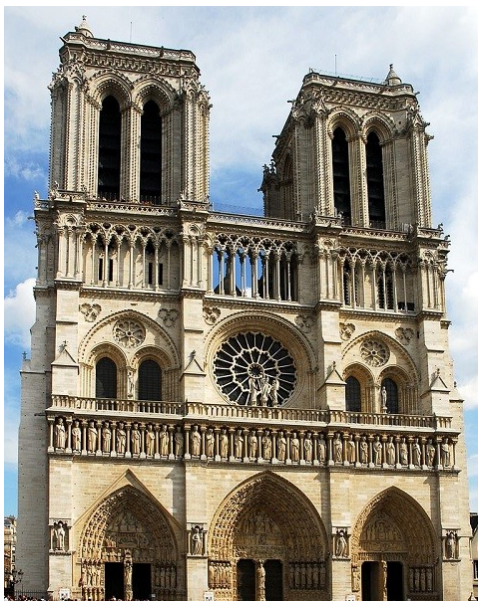
In truth, all of these features had appeared in Romanesque structures before the 12the century. So it was their combined effect, not their individual qualities that set Gothic Cathedral's apart.

In 1140, Abbott Suger began a renovation of St. Denis Abbey which was the beginning of what we now call Gothic architecture. Suger had a high theology of light and wanted the abbey filled with light and color.. . .

The end result was both dramatic visually, and a great improvement in terms of structural integrity, and from that point on almost all major cathedrals built or renovated in England, France, and northern Europe employed "French Works".



WESTMINSTER ABBEY



NOTRE DAME OF PARIS

During the following century, many of the most famous Cathedrals in Europe were designed or renovated according to Gothic principles.

Gothic Churches are easily identified from their distinctive exteriors, including a majestic West Entrance, and flying buttresses along the north and south sides. The West Entrance often features three arched doorways, two towers, and a Central Rose Window, as seen on this image of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

Renaissance Architecture — 1300-1650

The great innovations of Gothic architecture were less popular in Italy than they were in northern climates. There were practical as well as political reasons for this. On the practical side, large sun-filled windows are more inviting in cool areas than in warm regions. In terms of politics, the period of greatest flourishing of Gothic architecture in France corresponded closely to a century during which the French crown meddled severely in Church affairs and removed the Pope from Rome to Avignon. To put it mildly, Italians were not on the best terms with the French during this period. It is not surprising, therefore that Gothic architecture never took off in Italy, and Renaissance architecture flourished more in southern regions than it did in the north.



The word 'Renaissance' has come to mean an intellectual and artistic movement of the late middle ages known for a revival of Greek and Roman era art, architecture, a literature. Like the word 'Gothic' it was applied to the period of artistic creativity after the fact, and usually refers to a period beginning in the early 1300s, to the late 1500's. The most importance centers of the Italian Renaissance were Florence and Rome, and the Architectural revolution is usually credited to the innovative work of Filippo Brunelleschi, who designed the dome of the Cathedral of Florence between 1418 and 1440.

The grand domes of the Cathedral of Florence and St. Peter Basilica are the two most iconic examples of Renaissance architecture, the Renaissance style involved much more than domes. The great emphasis of the age was on art, proportion, symmetry, order, and the revival of classic ideas of beauty. Instead of simply reviving classical styles however, Renaissance era artists and architects made great innovations in painting, frescos, altarpieces, statues, and

architectural facades. Renaissance churches, therefore, are most notable for the manner in which they are adorned by beautiful art and design, rather than for structural extravagance.

> *Instead of stone walls hosting a multitude of windows, in the Renaissance church, the walls are generally smoothly plastered and painted a chalk white. Stained glass windows are not often used, and if so used they are not very large. Many of the interior walls are divided into small niches for a small chapel or just an altar with either a painting or a sculpture above it. Since the Renaissance was a period of high art, the churches are filled with wonderful works of art by the great Italian masters.*
>
> *— Rev. T. D. Clay, from http://www.cathedralquest.com/renaissance_architecture.htm*

The 'Italian Masters' of the Renaissance are some of the greatest artists in history and are too numerous and important to cover in a division on architecture except to mention that religious artwork and works specifically commissioned for churches made up a large proportion of the world's greatest masterpieces. One outstanding example is the roof of the Sistine Chapel, painted by Michelangelo in the late 15th century. In terms of architecture, the Chapel itself is nondescript, but by the hand of an artistic genius it has been raised to one of the most glorious churches in Christendom.



In spite of the fact that the Renaissance movement was confined mostly Italy, it was a very important period. The construction of St. Peter's Basilica, featuring a massive dome constructed by Donato Bramante was the high water mark for Renaissance architecture, and Michelangelo and Raphael, who both lived at the same time as Bramante, are arguably the greatest Christian artists of all time.

Baroque Architecture — 1600-1800

This section on Baroque Architecture was derived the web page of Rev. T. D. Clay, at http://www.cathedralquest.com/renaissance_architecture.htm

Baroque architecture evolved out of Renaissance architecture in Italy. In the 1600's, the Renaissance architects began to get bored with the symmetry and same old forms they had been using for the past 200 years. They started to make bold, curving, unsymmetrical buildings, with ornate decorations. The word Baroque literally means a "misshapen pearl". This period of architecture was called Baroque because some considered the style odd or exaggerated.

The facades consisted of many curves, often using the double curve (in at the sides, out in the middle). Baroque pediments (triangular area between the rooftop and the end of the roofs) were often highly decorated. The tips were sometimes turned into scrolls and gilded.

The most distinct shape of the Baroque style is the oval. The baroque architects used marble, gilt, and bronze in abundance on the interior. One often finds the interiors surrounded by numerous gilded puttos (little angels) as well as some life sized ones.

The ceilings and domes of Baroque churches often contained large frescos or murals using what is known as "Trompe l'oeil" painting which is an art technique involving extremely realistic imagery in order to create the optical illusion that the depicted objects appear in three dimensions, instead of actually being a two-dimensional painting. The walls are often also painted with images.

The Baroque played into the demand for an architecture that was on the one hand more accessible to the emotions and, on the other hand, a visible statement of the wealth and power of the Church. By the middle of the 17th century, the Baroque style had found its secular expression in the form of grand palaces, first in France and then throughout Europe.

The Baroque style became more restrained in France. While lavish details were used, French buildings were usually symmetrical and orderly. The Palace of Versailles is an outstanding example. Baroque architecture emerged in England after the Great Fire of London in 1666. Architect Christopher Wren used restrained Baroque styling when he helped rebuild the city, his most famous accomplishment was St. Paul's Cathedral.

Builders in Spain, Mexico, and South America combined Baroque ideas with exuberant sculptures, Moorish details, and extreme contrasts between light and dark. Spanish Baroque architecture was used through the mid-1700s, and continued to be imitated much later. In Germany, Austria, Eastern Europe, and Russia, Baroque ideas were often applied with a lighter touch. Pale colors and curving shell shapes gave buildings the delicate appearance of a frosted cake. The term Rococo was used to describe these softer versions of the Baroque style.