

“The principle of the Gothic architecture
is infinity made imaginable.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

ARCHITECTURE

WE CAN STATE with some confidence that the fountainhead of all that was to follow in the rich and diverse (and sometimes tenuous) world of the gothic aesthetic was Gothic architecture. As with most historical “isms” and movements, a retrospective quip gave us the title, and an accumulation of scholarly sparring over subsequent generations gave us the content. Horrified by the lack of classical principles present in contemporary buildings, Italian architectural writers in the fifteenth century (undoubtedly caught up in the fervour of the Renaissance with its revolutionary approach to optics, vision and perspective) quite naturally deemed the buildings around them irrelevant, vulgar and overpowering. What better term to name them than that of the marauding hoards who, like the architecture that so offended the sensitive Italians, ruined their beloved Rome back in the fifth century?

An architectural theme that followers of gothic sensibilities would be familiar with is the disregard for rules and convention. This may sound absurd to the contemporary viewer of medieval architecture, but when compared to their classical predecessors, Gothic buildings (and in particular cathedrals) did not follow a rigorous and predetermined rule book. The proportion, geometry and order that was so essential to classical buildings was replaced with a far more metaphysical desire to build an evocation of the heavenly Jerusalem on earth. The motive was to create a space that provided a stage for spectacular ceremony and visual wonder, to encourage and accommodate movement and sound demanded by the liturgy, and to display secular wealth. With ego, piety and money dictating the outcome, as opposed to structured rules and convention, the results are, even today, awe-inspiring.

RIGHT

Showing a depiction of the celebration of Christmas Mass at Sainte Chapelle in Paris, this early fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript by the Limburg Brothers reflects in its composition the architectural motifs of the Gothic cathedral, with the position of the three monks at the altar leading the eye upward.

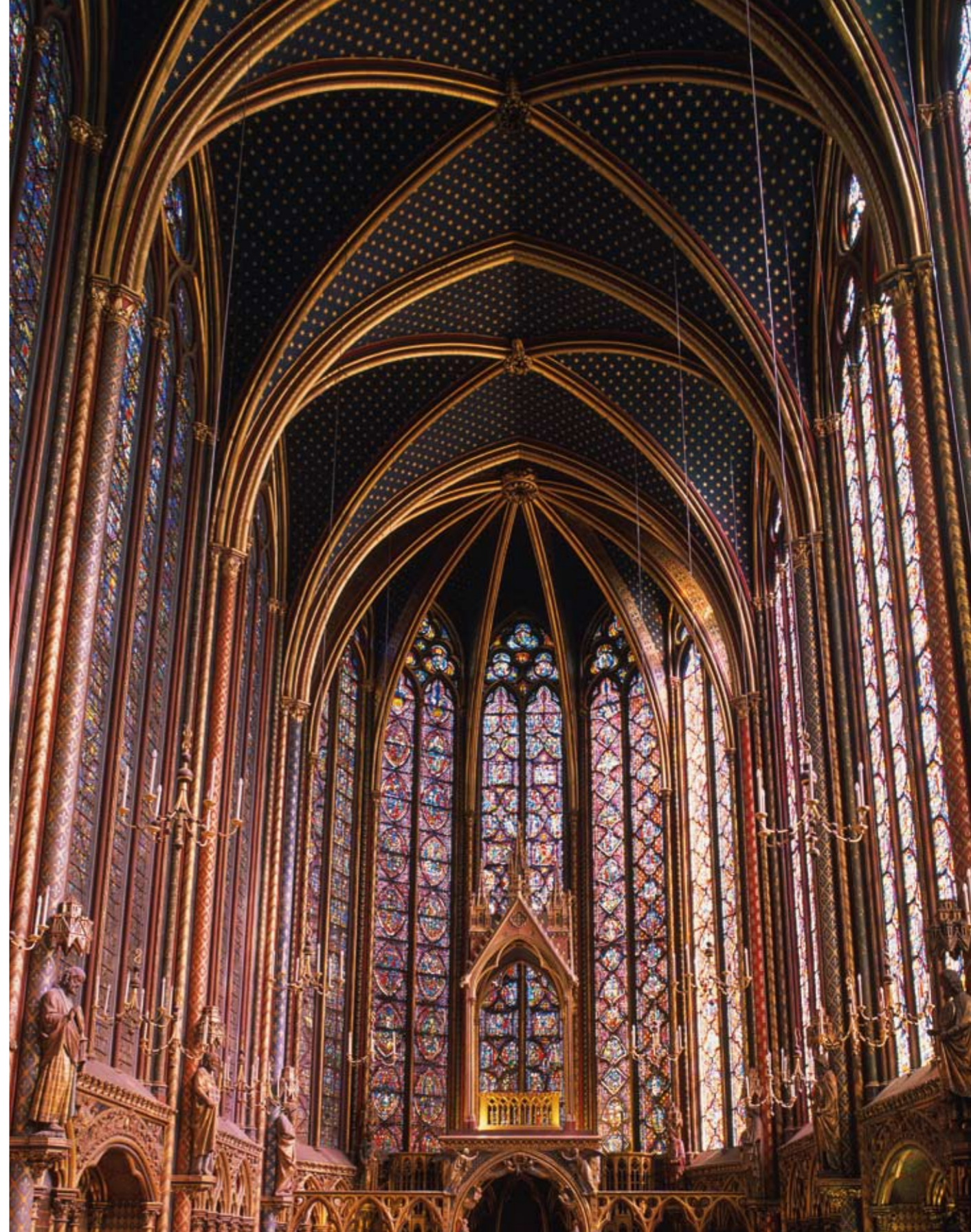


PREVIOUS PAGE

This architectural drawing of the thirteenth-century cathedral of Chartres in France epitomizes what has latterly become known as High Gothic. Comparing the cathedral against the original drawings demonstrates a rare example of master masons adhering to their architect's plans.

OPPOSITE

Built in the 1240s as a home for relics of Christ's Passion, the Saint Chapelle encapsulates not only architectural grandeur, but the stunning ornamentation associated with Gothic cathedrals.



Abbot Suger and the Royal Abbey of St Denis

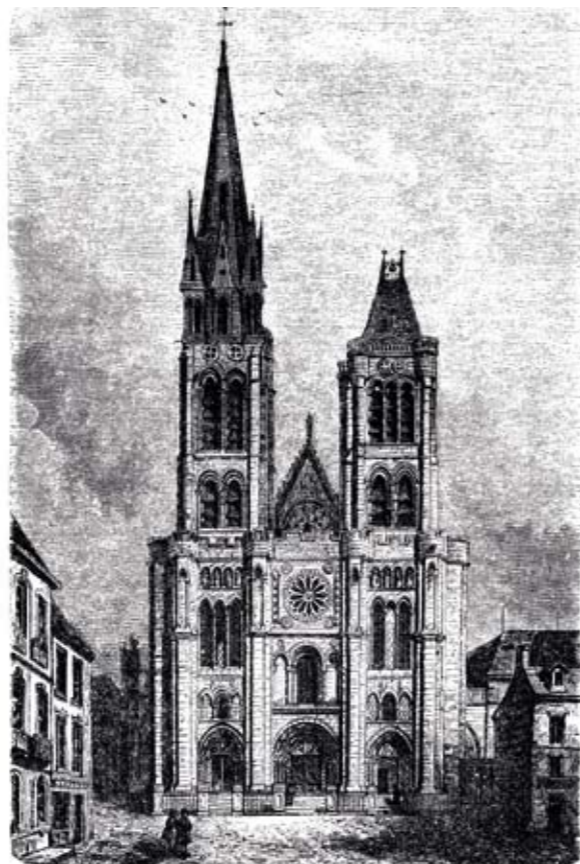
The Royal Abbey of St Denis in Paris is broadly acknowledged as being the first, definitive example of Gothic architecture in its full and spectacular splendour. The site upon which the Abbey is founded was determined by the gloriously gothic legend of St Denis, the first bishop of Paris who walked to the spot freshly decapitated, carrying his own head. Abbot Suger (c.1081–1151), on his appointment to the abbey in 1124, began an enthusiastic campaign of commissioning new and dazzling reliquaries to house the precious relics that not only provided a direct link to heaven, but also a valuable source of income from visiting pilgrims. Due to the perennial conflict between church and state, France was at the time under threat from both the English King Henry I (1068–1135) and the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V (1086–1125). Having made a pious promise to God that if he was victorious he would endow France's patron saint with gifts and riches, Louis VI (1081–1137) took his troops to Reims ready to

BELOW

What better way to prove the authenticity of a legend than to claim possession of its gory aftermath? Part of St Denis' decapitated head is claimed to be held in the reliquary at the Royal Abbey of St Denis.

RIGHT

After being struck by lightning in 1837, the north tower of St Denis (on the left), was so badly damaged that it had to be demolished, never to be rebuilt.



fight the emperor. The emperor, in an apparent answer to the French king's prayers, withdrew and, true to his word, Louis afforded Abbot Suger the resources he required to fulfil his vision. Suger's instructions were both single-minded and structurally vague. The key demands were a suitably grand setting for the shrine of the patron saint, enough space for the visiting pilgrims to circulate and get a good view of the relic, and a huge amount of light – the purest and most direct evocation of heaven. The instructions to the architect drew on an interpretation of the divine taken from liturgical imagery, rather than any practical architectural rule. The simplest way to create more light was, of course, to create bigger windows. But more glass meant less stone, which meant less structural integrity. These problems formed the basis of what have become key signifiers of the Gothic architectural aesthetic – the removal of supporting walls to create more space, resulting in internal columns and ribbed vaulting, combined with external buttresses to cope with the incredible weight. Every structural aspect of the Gothic cathedral had a direct link to liturgical symbolism or function, from the cruciform shape of the building's footprint, to the great empty expanse of the nave built to accommodate the awestruck public, and the curved arches and vaulted windows symbolically evoking everlasting life. All this was in direct and conscious opposition to the austere finality of classical design. With each subsequent cathedral, the masons and their patrons competed to outdo the previous building, with the demand for more light producing ever larger and taller windows, resulting in more ingenious and gravity defying engineering.



ABOVE

The Royal Abbey of St Denis, Paris. Illuminated by huge windows, the enormous expanse of lateral and vertical space achieved by replacing supporting walls with columns gives the illusion that the vaulted ceiling is floating heavenward.



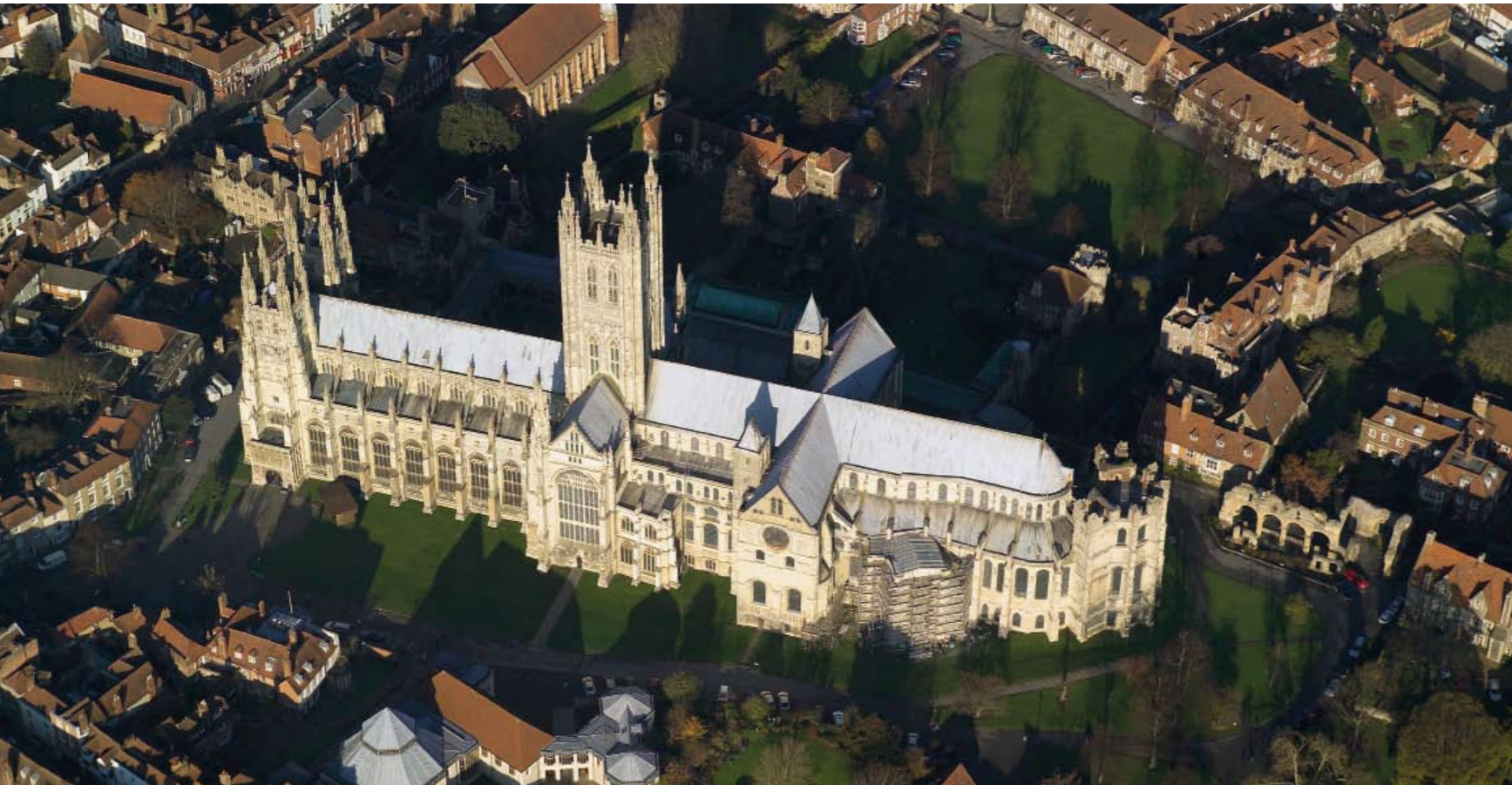
ABOVE

Bourges Cathedral, France (c.1195–1230). The addition of buttresses to the outside meant that the huge structural pressures could be externalized, supporting the weak points where the interior columns met and divided into the vaulted ceiling.



OPPOSITE

Chartres Cathedral, France (c.1145–1220). A common attribute among all Gothic cathedrals is the cruciform plan. The nave, where the public would gather, is longer than the other three arms.



LEFT
Canterbury Cathedral's East end (c.1179). The use of pink and white stone and marble was a stroke of genius by Sens' replacement, William of England, encapsulating the violent drama of Becket's death with emblematic significance.

BELOW
Depiction of the murder of Thomas Becket, stained glass window, Canterbury Cathedral. The cult of Thomas Becket spread around Europe extraordinarily quickly, forcing the Pope to declare him a saint in one of the fastest canonizations ever.

The Gothic in England

It wasn't until 1174 that one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture emerged in England, after a blazing fire swept through and destroyed a large part of Canterbury Cathedral. But it was the dramatic events of four years before that inspired the eventual outcome of the cathedral's rebuild, with a gruesome turn of events that would prove to be worthy of any nineteenth-century gothic imagination. England's Archbishop Thomas Becket was charming, intelligent, well-connected and influential, and soon became chancellor to King Henry II (1133-1189). But instead of becoming a powerful double act, Thomas fell out with the king, abandoning his courtly duties for long bouts of prayer and solitude. Eventually he was forced into exile in France, where for seven years he practised austere piety. Becket returned in December 1170 having reinvented his public persona from political agitator to revered holy man, which only enraged the king further. As the tensions between the two began to mount, word spread of the

ABOVE
Canterbury Cathedral can be traced back to the seventh century, its sprawling architecture a record of a thousand years of religious conflict and political change.

king's displeasure. Four barons decided to take direct action, and with a group of armed men set off to the cathedral, presumably to arrest Becket. There was a vehement verbal resistance from the forthright Becket and, with a crowd of spectators watching the confrontation, things got ugly. In the flurry of sword slashes and fists, Becket's skull was split open, and he fell to the ground. Blood and brains were spattered across the floor and upon seeing the gory result of their actions, the knights fled. Almost immediately the martyrdom of this holy man was acknowledged, and the opportunistic medieval onlookers dashed forward to daub their eyes with the blood – literally imbibing his body – while others dipped their clothes in the gore. The visual potency of the red and the white mingling on the floor was powerful in its symbolism, evoking the suffering of Christ himself. Soon enough the cult of Becket took hold, so that when the fire ruined the east end of the cathedral four years later it was seen as a perfect opportunity to finally do his martyrdom justice.





ABOVE

Wells Cathedral, England (1176–1490). The unusual scissor arch in the nave of Wells Cathedral distinguishes it from French architectural influence and displays an ingenious twist on the vaulted arch, evoking the link between heaven and earth.

OPPOSITE

Lincoln Cathedral, England (1074–1548). An excellent example of zealous piety dictating outcome, the so-called “crazy vault” ceiling of St Hughes choir is completely asymmetrical, leading the eye fervently along.

Much Like Abbot Suger’s demands to create a platform to venerate St Denis, the rebuild of Canterbury Cathedral was wholly based around the martyrdom of Becket, and the desire to maximise both the impact of his sainthood and the revenue from visiting pilgrims. Master masons were sought out and interviewed, with William of Sens (bringing with him the skills and flair he’d displayed in the building of Sens Cathedral in France) winning the contract. One of the many notable introductions William made to English Gothic architecture was that of the fully exposed flying buttress, seen in the presbytery of the cathedral. William suffered a crippling fall from a scaffold in 1179 and was replaced by William of England, who took up the complex job of rebuilding by adding his own dramatic flourishes, such as building columns using rare pink and white marble – a direct reference to Becket’s spilled blood and brains and a symbol of his virginity and martyrdom. Once again, drama, death and spirituality coupled with innovative and inspired individual craftsmanship dictated the outcome, resulting in a complex and often mind-boggling amalgamation of gothic features.



Late Gothic Architecture



Gothic architectural design rapidly spread, as did the ambition of the patrons and the skill of the architects. By the Late Gothic period between the latter years of the fourteenth century and the early years of the sixteenth century, magnificent examples of Gothic architecture were appearing all over Europe. One of the more notable cathedrals of this period is the Cathedral of St Vitus in the grounds of Prague Castle, Czech Republic. Charles IV (1316–78), King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, wanted to create a central European version of Paris, complete with its own university and magnificent cathedral. Keen to make a statement worthy of the power and prestige of Bohemia, Charles spared no expense, diverting ten percent of the enormous royal revenue generated by Bohemian silver mines to meet the cost of building the cathedral. In 1355 and at great cost, he purchased the relics of St Vitus, who was to become the patron saint of the cathedral. Work on building the cathedral was begun by the architect – personally recruited by the Emperor – Matthew of Arras (1290–1352). But it wasn't until Matthew died, with most of the work still incomplete, that St Vitus Cathedral was transformed into what has become one of the finest examples of central European late Gothic architecture. The mastermind behind the work was Peter

Parler (c.1330–1399), who in 1356 was drafted in to replace his predecessor at the precocious age of twenty-three. Parler was from a family of prestigious architects, and was at the cutting edge of architectural development. He worked on the cathedral over the following sixty years or so, introducing beautiful details exemplified by the vaults above the sacristy. In a complex mirror image of the ribbed vaulting, the ribs themselves are drawn out three dimensionally and suspended, as if dropping back down to earth – a beautiful example of the advanced engineering and ingenuity displayed by Parler, pushing the boundaries of what was already a dramatic gothic trope.

Long after the completion of St Vitus Cathedral, and in the closing stages of the Gothic era between 1492 and 1502, King Vladislav II (1456–1516) reconstructed his castle in Prague on whose grounds the cathedral stands. Clearly influenced by the elaborate and intricate designs of Peter Parler, Vladislav's master mason Benedikt Ried (c.1450–1531) was able to knock through three large rooms to create one enormous throne room and jousting hall, the intricate ribbed ceiling curving down into the floor providing the structural support for the massive, 16-metre expanse.

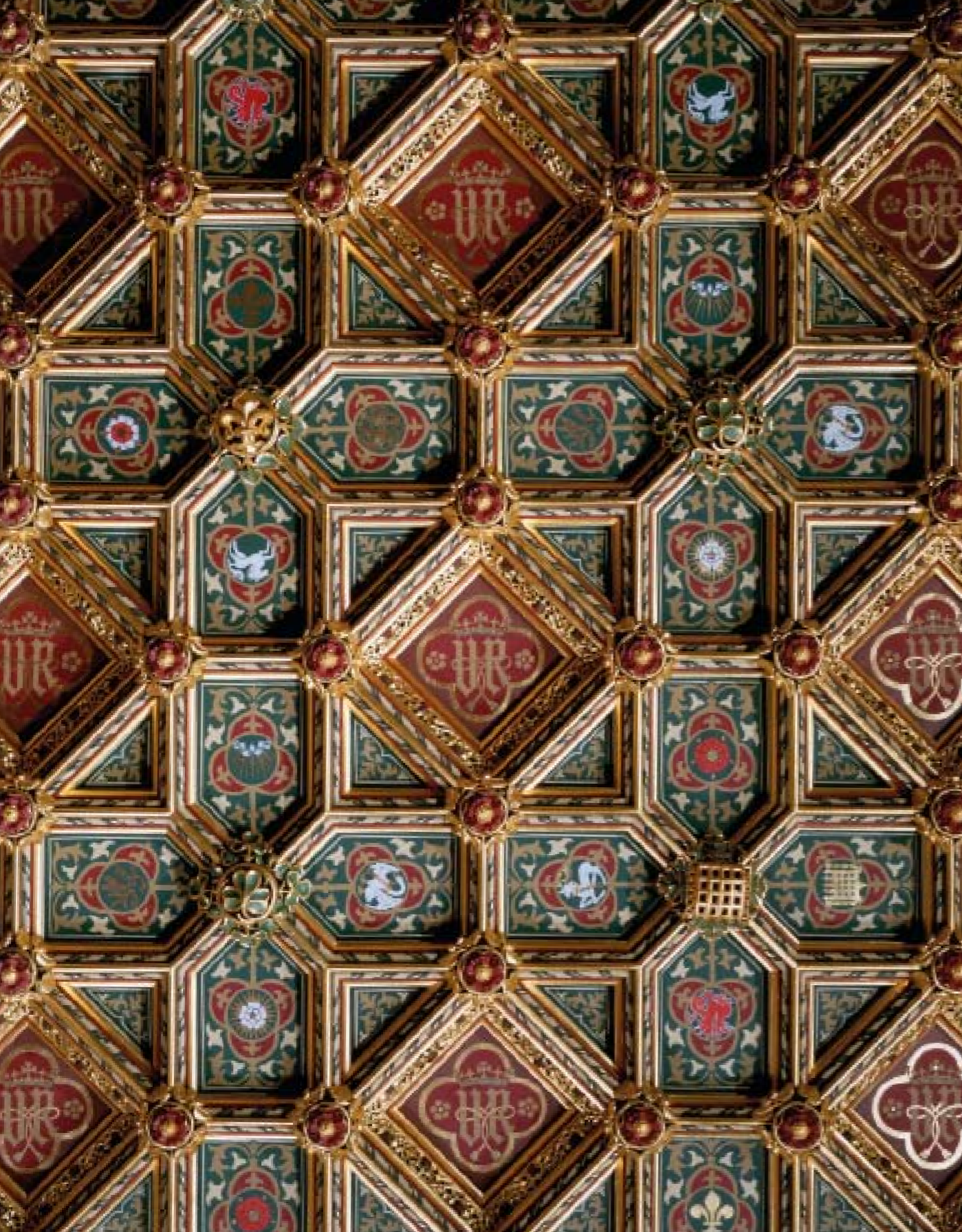


OPPOSITE ABOVE
St Vitus Cathedral, Prague. The work of the young master mason Peter Parler proved to be as strong an influence on central European Gothic architecture as the Sainte Chapelle was in Paris.

OPPOSITE BELOW
Demonstrating technical virtuosity, the suspended vaults in the sacristy of St Vitus Cathedral showcase Parler's groundbreaking creative ambition.

RIGHT
Vladislav Hall, Prague Castle (1492–1502). Vladislav II needed a room large enough for coronations, banquets and matters of state. The biggest secular space in medieval Prague, it was even able to accommodate competing knights on horseback.



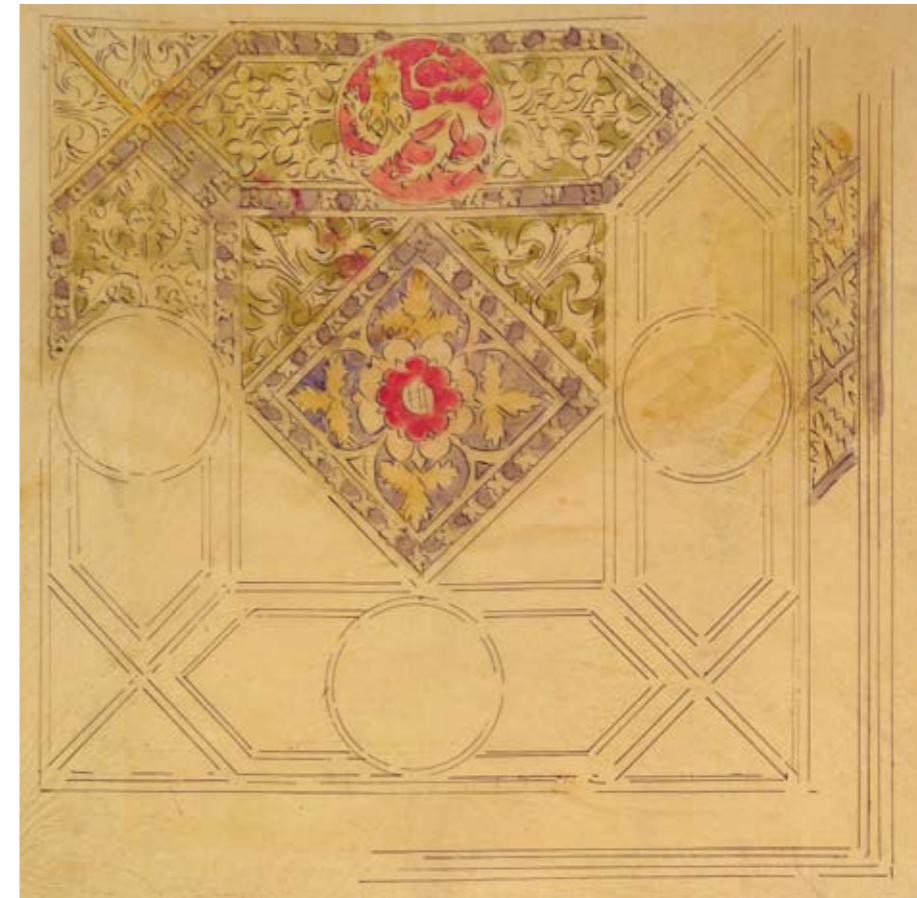


OPPOSITE

The ceiling of the Robing Room, designed by Pugin for the Palace of Westminster, is decorated with intricate panelling depicting badges of the monarchs of England, and is where the Queen puts on her robes of state before entering Parliament.

Gothic Revival Architecture

Proof of the powerful influence and longevity of Gothic architecture is its re-emergence in the mid-nineteenth century. Victorian Gothic Revival emerged not only as a way of creating symbolic and visually arresting buildings, both secular and religious, but also as a way of appropriating through visual association the high moral and Christian values that underpinned the original Gothic cathedrals. A fine example of this is the Palace of Westminster, London. After burning down in 1834, the Palace was redesigned by Sir Charles Barry (1795–1860) and A. W. N. Pugin (1812–52). Taking over thirty years to build, from 1836 to 1868, Barry and Pugin never saw its completion. Pugin was particularly instrumental in the outcome of the now iconic building, being responsible for the stylistic medieval design of the outer surfaces. Given a clean slate to re-build after the fire, the architects deemed it far more suitable to build to the design of Christian cathedrals rather than the alternative, the less suitable neo-classicism associated with pagan Greece.



LEFT

While Sir Charles Barry organized the rebuilding of the ruined Palace of Westminster, Augustus Pugin planned everything from the exterior decoration to the detailed interior surfaces, as shown in this geometrically complex watercolour-and-ink-wash ceiling design.



LEFT

Pugin's beautiful designs went beyond the interior and exterior surfaces to include furniture, such as this large cabinet for the Palace of Westminster. The cabinet was displayed in the Great Exhibition of 1851, held in London to demonstrate to the world the skill and ingenuity of Britain's artists, designers and engineers, and was part of Pugin's display depicting the medieval court.

ABOVE

Houses of Parliament, London, England (1836–68). The revival of Gothic architecture was due to its Christian associations, favoured by nineteenth-century architects over the classical designs that Renaissance scholars had longingly harked back to.

RIGHT

The English rose is accompanied here in Pugin's wallpaper design for the Palace of Westminster by the crowned Portcullis emblem.





OPPOSITE AND DETAIL RIGHT
The door to the Queen of England's Robing Room in the Palace of Westminster, also created by Pugin, surpasses the intricacy and detail of his elaborate wallpaper and ceiling designs. It is a fine example of the Gothic Revival and a suitably grand doorway – fit for a queen.

ABOVE
Toddington Manor, Gloucestershire, England (1820). Built in 1820 by Lord Sudeley (1778–1858) with stylistic cues taken from the Houses of Parliament, the 300-room Toddington Manor, set in 124 acres of land, was acquired by artist Damien Hirst in 2005.





ABOVE
Clad in Tuckahoe marble and with spires rising 100 metres from street level, St Patrick's Cathedral in New York is the largest decorated Gothic-Revival Catholic cathedral in North America.

One of the finest examples of Gothic Revival architecture in the US is St Patrick's Cathedral in New York, designed by James Renwick Jr (1818–1895). In uncanny parallel with his medieval forbears, Renwick Jr proved to be a prodigious talent at a very young age, entering Columbia University to study engineering at the age of 12, and graduating in 1836. Without formally studying architecture, Renwick gathered his understanding and appreciation of Gothic buildings from his travels throughout Europe, a fact that is clearly revealed in the mixture of French, German and English influences on the cathedral. Unlike the cathedrals that so influenced Renwick, the building of the current cathedral took a mere 21 years to complete, opening its doors in 1879.

Borrowing the now familiar architectural feature of soaring aspirational height, we can see an example of the Gothic cathedral's influence as late as 1922, in Chicago, Illinois. The Chicago Tribune Tower was built by the architects John Mead Howells (1868–1959) and Raymond Hood (1881–1934). The two architects met while studying in Paris, where they were clearly influenced by the original Gothic architecture so prevalent in the city. The proprietor of the *Chicago Tribune* was impressed by their proposal. Undoubtedly the complex arrangement of soaring ornamental masonry supported by buttresses, and its association with status, grandeur and success was not lost on him.

OPPOSITE

Chicago Tribune Tower, Chicago, USA (1923–25). By the early twentieth century, Gothic architectural style had evolved to such an extent that it signified not a representation of heaven on earth, but secular aspiration, ambition, success and quality.

