

# Week 4 - Romanesque vs. Gothic Architecture

The Middle Ages spanned from 476 AD when the western Roman Empire fell, to 1400 AD or the beginning of the Renaissance. During this time, the power of the European civilization moved from Greece and Rome toward the north, to Germany, France and England. Christianity was spreading across Europe and the Pope in Rome realized that to keep his power over all the different kings of Europe, he needed to join forces with these rulers. One important way he did this, was by crowning Charlemagne *The Holy Roman Emperor* in Rome in 800 AD.

<< *Crowning of Charlemagne Image*>>

*Crowning of Charlemagne*. Raphael. 1517 AD. Vatican Museum

But the capital of the Holy Roman Empire was not in Rome - it was north, in Germany. Kings all over Europe wanted to show their connection to the Pope in Rome, so they created religious structures or buildings that would show a devotion to the Church and serve as a center for their Medieval cities and towns. Also during this time we have the Crusades - a series of wars when Christian soldiers from Europe went to the Middle East to fight Muslims for control of the Holy Lands. These 'Crusaders' brought back many religious artifacts (or special objects) from their military expeditions - the cross below was believed to include a piece of wood from Jesus' cross! These treasures needed safe places to be viewed and stored. The enormous cathedrals across Europe became just the place!

<< *Reliquary Cross Image*>>

*Reliquary Cross*. 1180 AD. The Metropolitan Museum of Art

These Cathedrals had 2 very different architectural styles: First came Romanesque, then Gothic.

First we need to talk about the cathedral roof. Up until this time in history, large churches had stone walls and wooden roofs. But back in 1000 AD there were no fire departments, fire trucks, or hoses hooked up to water. There was also no electricity - the dark insides of churches were lit by candles. Fires were very common and without firemen those wooden roofs often burned down. Architects (or people who design buildings) thought there must be a way to not only have stone walls, but also stone roofs. **What do you think is heavier, a wooden roof or a stone roof?**

Those stone roofs were super heavy, and the walls that supported them needed to be changed to hold all that weight. From 1050 to 1200 AD architects copied the Roman idea of rounded arches to help support the stone ceilings. This is why we call this type of architecture *Romanesque*!

Here's a Roman aqueduct - this was a structure that Romans used like a water pipe to move water into cities:

<< Pont du Gard Image>>

Pont du Gard. 40-60 AD. Nimes, France

See the round arches that make up this structure? Now look at the inside of Saint-Sernin in Toulouse, France.

<< Saint-Sernin Interior Image>>

Saint-Sernin Interior. Toulouse, France. 1080-1120 AD

See the same rounded arches along the walls? Also, notice the rounded stone ceiling. This is called a *barrel vault* and also comes from Roman times.

Here's a picture of the outside of Saint-Sernin. If you look closely you only see very small windows. Romanesque architects couldn't figure out how to support the ceiling while also having large glass windows.

<< Saint-Sernin Exterior Image>>

Saint-Sernin Exterior. Toulouse, France. 1080-1120 AD

**What shape does this building look like?**

Maybe a cross! This layout worked well to create a space in the center of the church, called the *nave*, for worshipers to gather, while leaving *aisles* along the sides for pilgrims to walk through on their way to observe all those religious treasures from the Holy Lands.

<< Plan of Saint-Sernin Image>>

Plan of Saint-Sernin. Toulouse, France. 1080-1120 AD

Then, in about 1150 AD an Abbot (or a religious man who is the head of an Abbey of Monks) named Abbot Suger started to think *there must be a better way to hold up those ceilings!* He also wanted cathedrals to be filled with natural light through beautiful, large windows. He believed that this "Light Divine" would be like the spirit of God coming into the space. He discovered that changing those arches from rounded to pointed would do the trick! Also changing the ceilings from barrel vaults to something called a *ribbed vault* would allow for walls so strong they could include huge windows.

<< Saint-Denis Image>>

Saint-Denis. Paris, France

We now call this type of architecture *Gothic* and it was the favorite way to build Cathedrals across Europe until about 1450 AD.

Take a closer look at the windows at Saint-Denis - **Are they see-through glass windows like you have in your house?**

These types of windows are called stained-glass windows and they were decorated with beautiful depictions of stories from the bible. During the Middle Ages most people didn't know how to read, these windows were almost like enormous glass comic strips, working to teach people the messages of God and the Church. One of the most common types of Gothic stained glass windows was the *Rose Window*, which we see here on the most famous Gothic Cathedral, Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France:

<< Notre Dame Cathedral Image>>

Notre Dame Cathedral. Paris, France. 1250 AD

This picture of Notre Dame also shows another very important part of Gothic Architecture - the *flying buttress*. That's a pretty funny word isn't it! A flying buttress is an arch that extends from the outside wall of a building to help support and hold the wall up. Here's a closer look at the flying buttresses of Notre Dame:

<< Notre Dame Cathedral Image>>

Notre Dame Cathedral. Paris, France. 1250 AD

Finally, we can't finish talking about Gothic Cathedrals without mentioning the *gargoyles*! These sculptures were perched all over the outside of the Cathedrals - some were very fancy drains to help move rain water off the roofs, all were scary creatures designed to scare people into coming to church! Would these creatures scare you into coming to church, or into running far away from the church?? I'm not so sure! Here are some of the gargoyles of Notre Dame:

<< Notre Dame Cathedral Gargoyles Images>>

Here's one last look at the main differences between Romanesque and Gothic Architecture:

Romanesque Cathedral	Gothic Cathedral
1050 - 1200 AD	1200 - 1450 AD
Rounded Arches	Pointed Arches
Rounded, Barrel Vault Ceiling	Ribbed Vault Ceiling
Dark with few windows	Light with big Stained Glass Windows & Rose Windows
	Flying Buttresses
	Gargoyles

Now that you've got all the information, let's play **Romanesque or Gothic? Name that Medieval Architecture!**

<< Cathedral Images >>