

The néo-Gothic style

A PARISIAN TRAIL

Contrary to popular belief, the Gothic style did not die out completely at the end of the 15th century. Ogive vaults were still built throughout the Old Regime and are found in Saint Louis of Blois and Sainte Cross of Orleans. However this style persisted in the Anglo-Saxon countries in particular, where Gothic remains the national style (bell towers at Westminster, 1723, N. Hawksmoor). Therefore the artists were prepared for the renewed interest in medieval arts, which would be embraced by the Romantic and Modern wave as well as the nationalist and conservative currents. The famous Walpole villa in Twickenham, "Strawberry Hill" (1749-1764), marked the starting point of this revival. Having fallen out of favour under the Empire, Anglomania saw a revival in France during the Restoration, especially in the area of gardens circa 1780.

Encouraged by the example from across the Channel, the Museum of French Monuments founded by Lenoir in 1791 contributed to the growing taste for the Middle Ages, which swept over the artistic creation scene.

Architects were not left out and, under the aegis of Arcisse de Caumont, an archaeologist from the western regions of the country, and Prosper Mérimée, the first Inspector General of Historic Monuments, played an active role in "listing the artistic riches of France". It was in this context that the emblematic figure of Eugène Viollet le Duc entered the scene as a polemicist, archaeologist, restorer and theoretician.

No doubt unfairly, he is now considered as the father of a current that still survives today (Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, New York).

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(7th) 23 bis, rue Las Cases
Sainte-Clotilda

When Prefect Rambuteau took the initiative to build a Gothic church on Rue Las Cases in 1839, he started a lively polemic, for up to that point the Restoration and the July Monarchy had adhered strictly to Neo-Classicism. This debate, in which the Council of Civil Buildings forcefully represented Neo-Classicism, hampered the gestation of the project considerably.

François Christian Gau – German by birth, what’s more! - saw his drawings rejected several times between 1841 and 1846. It should also be said that his project was also criticised by scholars, who accused him of having only a vague knowledge of the “real” Gothic style. It is true that deep down, Gau was a little uncomfortable working for a side that he had not really chosen. His academic culture is evident in many areas, for example the combination of the Gothic ornamentation of the surface decorations with vast sections of bare walls that show a strong Romanesque influence.

Indeed, at the time of his death in 1853, a cold and rigid building stood on the site, where the façade mouldings were generally characterised by an almost clumsy thinness: throughout the works, Gau sought to master a style which, while historic, still needed to be relearned.

His assistant Théodore Ballu, who joined him in 1846, was from another generation, more versed in the knowledge of the medieval arts. He would lead the project to completion, modifying the design of the porch: as a response to the critics, he would thicken the door and above all integrate ornamental sculpture into the architecture, including the medieval-style statues of kings and saints in the porch. He enlisted the help of first-rate sculptors, some of whom worked on the restoration of Notre-Dame: Geoffroy-Dechaume (Clovis and Sainte Clotilda), Leharivel-Durocher (Sainte Geneviève and Sainte Théodochilde) and Fromanger (Saint Remi and Saint Maur).

However, his suggestion of crowning the towers with metal spires inspired by the Alavoine project in Rouen was rejected because of its cost. In the end, Ballu did little more than make the church look a little more picturesque, although it remains very austere from the outside. Inside, however, in 1854, Ballu brought in some far more personal decorative programmes. Inspired by Flamboyant Gothic models, he introduced stained glass windows showing full-length figures topped with architecturally elaborate daises, which are a cause for controversy even today. However, they were undeniably a significant step in the development of the Neo-Gothic language, implemented with great authority. Likewise, the pulpit is a fine example of this approach, and also has an architecturally remarkable dais.



(1st) Place du Louvre

Belfry of the Town Hall of the first arrondissement

The belfry, built by Théodore Ballu in 1858, is the centrepiece of a firm composition that closes off the Place du Louvre opposite the Colonnade. In 1851, Haussmann established its general principles.

The outline of the Town Hall would provide an element of symmetry in response to the door of Saint Germain l’Auxerrois Church and the axis would be carried by a tower. Ballu, who had just restored the Tower of St. James, seems to have found a source of inspiration in these recent works. He put forward plans for a bell tower with a square base, which becomes octagonal from the third floor. The taste for the picturesque and knowledge of authentic models led him to provide access to the terrace via a corbelled turret containing a spiral staircase. The ornamental sculpture is inspired by that found in the great Parisian Gothic buildings. This is a particularly meticulous pastiche of a Flamboyant Gothic construction, which demonstrates the author’s scholarly background. However, Ballu’s scholarship did not stop at the Gothic style, for he also built Saint Ambrose) Church in the Neo-Romanesque style, and the City Hall in the Neo-Renaissance style. This generation of scholars of historical architecture had a natural tendency to find solutions to contemporary problems in increasingly obscure examples, where the previous generation restricted itself to the Antique style.

The neighbouring Town Hall, built by Hittorff in 1856, is the expression of another tendency towards a similar way of working: the architect has combined the Flamboyant Gothic style of the balustrades with that of the Italian Renaissance (Ionic colonnade), as well as ornamentation of the first Renaissance and pierced the gable with a Gothic rose window... A brilliant demonstration of a style that knowingly but ruthlessly mixed all the other styles together: the Eclectic style, which prevailed for a long time in all architecture.



(4th) Ile de la Cité

La Cité and Notre-Dame

Not much is left of the medieval fortress rebuilt by St. Louis around the Palatine chapel and redeveloped by his immediate successors. La Cité has not been frequented by the kings since 1417, and the royal administrations that would occupy it until the Revolution adapted it to suit their own needs.

Throughout the 19th century, La Cité would be an immense building site which would make use of all the architectural vocabularies (Neo-Gothic façades on either side of the Clock Tower).

At the very heart of this ensemble, the Holy Chapel is a building of particular interest. As a bastion of the monarchy, a religious symbol of royal power and heir to the crown of Christ that was once kept in its treasury, the aristocracy of the early 19th century worked constantly to re-establish its splendour.

Jean Baptiste Lassus, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and Félix Duban would be appointed to complete this task, which would be one of the first major projects to restore an historic monument. The architects would take an interventionist approach, aimed at restoring parts which had disappeared. At times they worked on a highly speculative basis, sometimes to the point of recreating new edifices. Viollet-le-Duc, who would direct the restoration work along with Lassus, would make it a profession of faith, developing the idea of restoration/recreation.

The sacristy of the chapterhouse of Notre-Dame (Treasury) built to the south of the choir, the construction of the crossing spire, and the restitution of the furniture are examples of how this theory was put in practice. The quality is undeniable, demonstrating an in-depth knowledge of the Gothic style, apart from a few exceptions.



(10th) 68, boulevard Magenta

Saint Laurent Church

When the Boulevards Strasbourg and Magenta were opened up, the decision was made to modify the existing church to fit in with the new alignment. The old façade, known from photographs and a beautiful example of the Jesuit style, was demolished. The architect Simon Constant-Dufeux added a span to the nave and in 1862-1865 rebuilt a new façade inspired by Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, in the Flamboyant Gothic style. The ensemble surprisingly displays great consistency. However, while the choir dates from the 15th century, the side aisles were built in 1621 and the nave was finished between 1655 and 1659: the façade therefore completed an edifice that was built over four centuries.

Here we can see Viollet-le-Duc's principle of unity of style put into practice. This involved favouring the predominant architectural style when restoring or extending a monument, even if this meant removing the later modifications, with no regard for their intrinsic quality. The furniture in fact bore the brunt of this doctrine, as the high altar designed by Lepautre and Blondel was distorted to make way for a Neo-Gothic high altar, which in turn was removed.

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(19th) 139, rue de Belleville

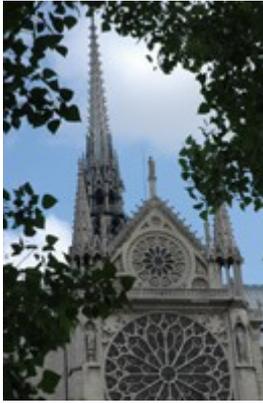
Saint Jean Baptiste de Belleville Church

A real testament to its author, Saint Jean-Baptiste de Belleville is the work of Jean-Baptiste Lassus. Alongside the great restorations that he carried out with Viollet-le-Duc at Notre-Dame and the Holy Chapel, starting in 1854, Lassus created a church in a very pure Gothic, authentic style, resulting in a completely original edifice. Reminiscences of the knowledge he gained through contact with historic monuments can of course be seen here. Yet he designed this church with the fervour that he imagined would have animated the builders of the Middle Ages, who were involved in their work in a quasi-mystical way. Otherwise the result is freer and looser than at Sainte Clotilda. The care taken over the various viewpoints is remarkable, providing picturesque notes that give life to the ensemble. He entrusted the sculpted decoration, which was especially important to him, to Aimé-Napoléon Perrey. He designed the furniture himself, devoting equal attention to it. Unfortunately, the implementation of the Vatican II council led to regrettable modifications, such as the removal of the high altar and the stalls. Lassus, who died in 1857, would never see the masterpiece he dreamed of. The church would be completed by his student Truchy in 1859. It remains a model of Historicist design.

Notre-Dame

La Cité

Belfry of the Town Hall of
the first arrondissement



Due to the provisions of the Concordat signed in 1801 between France and the Holy See, which ratified the Revolutionary seizures of the clergy's possessions and transferred the property of the parish churches and their offices to the communes, the City of Paris currently owns around one hundred religious buildings, including a large number of Catholic churches.

The Concordat regime, which remained in force until the 1905 law separating Church and State, proved to be advantageous for religious buildings belonging to the commune. Making the works of art confiscated during the Revolution available to the clergy, combined with an active policy of commissioning decors and constructing new buildings, made the churches of Paris an artistic series of buildings of exceptional wealth covering the major periods of French art, from the Classical era to the modern period.

The Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of Paris is currently responsible for conserving this considerable heritage. It is in charge of its inventory, maintenance and promotion as well as the restoration work necessary to conserve the buildings which house it.