

CATHEDRAL

Van James, Honolulu, Hawai'i

Let the churches be filled with paintings that they who do not know their letters may be able to read on the walls what they cannot read in the manuscripts.—Pope Gregory III

Imagine you live in medieval Europe. You do not read and you live in tune with nature and her rhythms. You have an unshakeable faith in the creative spirit working through the world and in you as intuition.



Fig. 1. Spires of the cathedral stretch skyward like clasped hands in prayer pointing to the heavens.

Your faith and your devotional life have led you to take a pilgrimage to one of Europe's great cathedrals. A journey of this kind requires preparation, separation, transformation, and return. Just the decision to travel on foot for perhaps several hundred miles can be part of the preparation. Both as psychic or soul-spiritual and a physical preparing would be necessary before the actual departure and separation from family, community, and daily routines takes place. Such a journey can be a powerful rite of passage for on the way events will occur, things will happen, and changes will be undergone. As you approach your goal, perhaps after weeks of expectant, tiring travel

you see the spires of the cathedral from afar, stretching skyward, like clasped hands in prayer, piercing the heavens (fig. 1). Across the meadows and farmland, it is the tallest structure, a sacred focal point, presiding over the entire town. As the church gradually comes clearly into view the architectural forms reveal elaborate stone tracery and sculpted stone figures in niches upon the facade. In the carved images you recognize Old and New Testament figures as well as pagan personages such as Greek and Roman poets and philosophers. Fantastic creatures in the form of gargoyles (fig. 2) also appear. These latter figures often serve as rainspouts (gargoyle comes from the French word *gargouille*, also the root of gargle) carry run-off from storms, directing the flow of water and fury of the elements away from the house of God. These striking images are intended to draw evil forces into their stone forms, thus diverting negative influences away from the church itself. Cathedrals were intended to serve as unassailable bulwarks against demonic forces and to turn these forces to stone.



Fig. 2. Gargoyles guarded the cathedral by redirecting malevolent elements away from the House of God.



Fig. 3. The royal portal with its tympanum displayed images appropriate to the threshold of a sacred place. Chartres Cathedral.

As you approach the great west portal you are taught about heaven and earth by relief sculptures of saints and prophets, spiritual beings, and symbols of cosmic powers. The image of Christ above, within the tympanum¹ suggests the words from the Gospel of Saint John, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me" (fig. 3). As you enter the royal portal you leave behind the outer world of nature for an otherworldly, inner space unlike anything you have ever beheld. Passing through the Royal Portal, leaving the outer experience of open, natural space, you enter the narthex and the first experience of a compressed space. Moving from this anti-chamber into the vast nave of the church (fig. 4) the space opens up again. "The root of the word 'nave' is the same as navy, with its overtones of the ark, and of protection from the boundless fears of the deep."² This lends support to why the church is referred to as a ship. Reverence for this sacred space overwhelms you and you drop to your knees and cross yourself. Holy water is provided in a nearby font for the act of purification. As you collect yourself you notice the harmony of the interior architecture: distances between pillars and the length of the nave, transept, and choir were sometimes based on the divine proportion or golden section, 1.618. But more often the architects stressed the vertical direction through progressively elongated proportions so that one feels drawn out of oneself. Three entrances appear at each of the four directions, twelve gates in all, referring to the New Jerusalem (Revelation, 22:12-13). In the east, behind the altar, toward Paradise, the gateway is not physical, but spiritual. Fresco paintings on walls and tempera paintings on wood panels become visible as your eyes adjust to the diffuse, interior light; their forms and colors are framed and accented with the glitter of gold leaf. Finely crafted woodcarvings are illuminated by atmospheric colored light streaming in from gem-like stained glass windows along the aisles. The window pictures tell of genealogies, ancestral deeds, and great spiritual destinies, as the medium of outer sunlight penetrating translucent glass is transformed into a colorful radiant medium: A metaphor and

imagination for the virgin birth, the birth of colored light into the world out of the divine light of the heavens.

All the visual arts work together in order to dissolve the walls in a diaphanous experience of color and light. Music resounds through the interior spaces of the cathedral. "Then the voices rebound to become musically what the vault is architecturally," is how the sculptor Auguste Rodin put it. "Music and architecture meet, cross one another, and unite in elegant melodies."³ The art of the chanted, spoken, and sung word reverberate as chromatic displays of light catch the rising columns of fragrant smoky incense. A ritual procession moves toward the altar. People in regal, flowing garments, holding candles and sacred objects, carry out a religious choreography as the sacred drama of High Mass is celebrated. All the arts come together in a festive, yet sacred display of the spiritual (fig. 5). As Otto von Simpson writes of the Gothic cathedral, "Within its walls God himself was mysteriously present. The medieval sanctuary was the image of heaven."⁴



Fig. 4. Chartres Cathedral's nave shows it to be one of the few cathedrals oriented to other than a strict east-west axis. This allows for seasonal light effects to occur within the structure.



Fig. 5. Santa Croce, in Florence, displays an impressive sacred space with powerful religious imagery, including frescos by Giotto.

Perhaps the nave has a tile labyrinth on its floor, as does Chartres, Amiens, Reims, Saint Quentin, and other French cathedrals. Speaking of the former church, Emile Male says, "Other cathedrals of the Christian world have not known how to say so many

things, nor how to say them in such a splendid order... Chartres is the very spirit of the middle ages made manifest."⁵ The labyrinth is the largest decorative element at Chartres (fig. 6) together with the rose window.



Fig. 6. Chartres Cathedral's labyrinth is a central feature of the nave and part of a pilgrim's sacred journey.

Again you fall to your knees, this time remaining on them as you proceed, rosary in hand, in solemn prayer, along the path of the labyrinth. This final stage of your pilgrimage, before you reach the altar and before receiving mass, finds you moving in straight lines, in gently curving arcs, and in rounded 180-degree turns, coming close to the heart of the labyrinth then moving further away from it, back towards your goal and then again away from it until finally, after spiraling through eleven giant rings, you enter the six-petaled center of the labyrinthine design, the twelfth rung. You have traced a 660-foot long pattern on the floor of the cathedral, an image of the inner path of the soul on its journey to its source, a recreation of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the way to God. You see a brass plaque at the center of the Chartres labyrinth (no longer there) depicting Theseus-Christ, Ariadne, and the Minotaur, an allegorical depiction of overcoming the devil with the help of the Virgin Lady. (The labyrinth is not only a symbol for Christ's descent into hell for redemption and resurrection but it is also a picture of the complexity within the cosmic order of things and an image of humanity as microcosm.) You look up from your prayerful journey towards the sanctuary at the eastern end of the church to find that all these movements, all these twists and turns, and all these sense impressions have brought you to the threshold of a mystic experience, the ecstasy of spiritual revelation.

The cathedral is based on the plan of a cross and the human form. One enters at the foot of the cross, from the base level of the earth, and gradually approaches the heart of the church at the crossing and the head at the ambulatory and sanctuary. Enlightenment is sought between head and heart at the altar by receiving the host in the

form of bread and wine, as the body and blood of the Creative Word, the miracle of all sustenance.

This supersensory experience, kindled by ritual arts and inner faith, is described by Arguelles thus: "...the Gothic cathedral provides an example of an aesthetic process whose end is achieved when a participant is able to experience a state of psycho-sensorial interfusion. The effect of different sensory agents acting upon the participant simultaneously transfuses and uplifts the whole being, evoking a transcendent experience. With the onset of the Renaissance this total experience became much more the exception than the rule."⁶ This "transcendent experience," based on a "state of psycho-sensorial interfusion" occurs even far less today and is seen as a pathological condition when it does occur. However, such a state is akin to the shaman's trance condition and the seer's visionary experience in that it provides a momentary "crossing of the threshold," or transcendence of the barrier between the spiritual and sensorial worlds. This kind of *crossing* with the help of the arts was a predisposition of early humanity and was still accessible to medieval worshippers at European cathedrals.

Wherever a cathedral was being constructed, the townspeople, as well as those of the surrounding countryside, would be involved in the building project, usually for generations. It was the building of a community as much as it was the construction of a church. This is what many artists and architects of the twentieth century dreamed of when they spoke of building the "Cathedral of the Future" and the "Crown of the City." There was a spontaneous urge at the beginning of the last century that took hold of people to erect the "Peoples' House" and form a new community of brothers and sisters.⁷

At the very time when cubism was shattering and rearranging the visible world in search of its own primal imagery, when abstraction was dissolving the material world in search of spirit in art, when Dada in reaction to the madness of World War I set about demonstrating that all things are contrived non-sense, at this auspicious time, the first quarter of the twentieth century, Rudolf Steiner brought into being the much discussed ideal of European artistic striving--the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). As artists dreamed of creating "the new cathedral," where all the arts would come together, Steiner succeeded--even as the cannon fire of the Great War could be heard sounding across European borders.

The German architect Bruno Taut, working quite independently of Steiner, declared in 1918, "...there will be no boundaries between the crafts, sculpture and painting; all will be one: Architecture. A building is the direct carrier of spiritual values, shaper of the sensibilities of the general public which slumbers today but will awaken tomorrow. Only a total revolution in the realm of the spiritual can create this building;

yet this revolution, this building, does not happen by itself. Both have to be sought-- today's architects must prepare the way for this edifice."⁸ Many architects shared this view and sought through their own work for what Peter Behrens, the teacher of Mies van de Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier, describes as "...the sense of a higher purpose, a purpose that was merely translated into material terms, a spiritual need, the gratification of our transcendental nature."⁹ Such buildings would in turn shape and mold the individual within his or her community. As Winston Churchill remarked, "We shape our dwellings, and our dwellings shape us."

In medieval times every stone was set in place by an individual who took pride in his or her work. Every door handle and hinge was singularly handcrafted by someone who poured his thinking, feelings, and willing into the work (fig. 7). This work affected and influenced everyone who came into contact with it and became part of the inner life of the townspeople. A moral-aesthetic impulse was passed on in this way. Societies like the Masons were well aware of this power of the arts, and the builders of the cathedrals, in the ancient temple-building tradition, put the spiritual language of form to profound use.¹⁰ Rodin could say out of his artistic sensibility, "If we could but understand Gothic Art we would be irresistibly led back to Truth."¹¹



Fig. 7. Medieval entrances were often designed to lift the soul of the visitor toward a mood appropriate for religious services. This 12th century church doorway at Kilpeck, England, supports such a task by way of its design patterns and figurative imagery, which includes signs of the zodiac and mythical beasts. The grapevine in the tympanum symbolizes Christ, "the true vine."

The Gothic cathedral is a total work of art. In it all the arts come together in the service of the sacred. The Greek temple was intended only for the god; no people were admitted into the interior apart from the priests. The Christian church was a dwelling not only for God, but for the entire congregation. The Christian faithful were allowed entry into the house of God. They needed to enter His house because they were fast losing the experience of God in nature. The Greek temple stood like an altar in the landscape (fig. 8), expressive of human beings living on the earth in communion with the spiritual worlds. The Christian church presents a duality in its striving beyond the landscape, attempting to rise above nature (fig. 9). Christians had to leave nature, leave their land and the outer affairs of daily life, in order to seek the spirit within the cathedral. Even within the cathedral there was a division between congregation and priest, between nave and sacristy. The congregation needed to be present in order that God would attend.



Fig. 8. Greek temple architecture, such as that seen in the Parthenon in Athens, expresses balance and harmony between heaven and earth. The Parthenon, dedicated to Athena, goddess of wisdom, incorporates slight "imperfections" that help create visual balance and harmony: end columns are closer to their neighbors, column shafts swell slightly to allow for a more harmonious perspective from the ground, and the floor rises at its middle by as much as four inches.



Fig. 9. The cathedral exterior demonstrates a striving to the heights, rather than a balance of lightness and weight. The difference in the spires of the cathedral at Chartres resulted from successive building phases.

A curious structural aspect of the Gothic cathedral is its piers and buttresses that form a bone-like framework on which the walls and windows are placed like a thin skin (fig. 10). This *skeleton* of the cathedral prefigures the structural design of the modern skyscraper, and prepares medieval men and women for the discovery of their own skeleton, their own physical framework. The essential spirituality of the cathedral, in the temple-building tradition of the ancients, is achieved by way of exemplifying the mysteries of the human body, at the same time as providing a picture of upward striving toward God. The forms of the Gothic cathedral are mechanistic but lead out into the great beyond.



Fig. 10. Flying buttresses, like these at Chartres cathedral, form a skeletal-like structure that carries weight away from the walls allowing them to be thin and light, rising to great heights.

Baptisteries and mausoleums are often built adjacent to cathedrals and basilicas. In contrast to the axial layout of the church, which invokes movement and directional flow towards the altar, the baptistery and mausoleum have round or octagonal central floor plans, which elicit rest and stillness. Whereas the baptistery and mausoleum are places for approaching the thresholds of birth and death, respectively (the entrances and exits of life) the cathedral is where one encounters the threshold of the spirit while in the midst of life's journey. The architectural forms in each case are suited to the purpose of the building in the way they encourage peace or movement.

Imagine entering an eighth-century baptistery for your conversion and baptism into the Christian faith. You step into the waist-deep water of the sacred fount with the officiating priest and he bends you backwards, immersing you completely in the blessed water. It may only be a few moments, but just long enough induce a near-drowning experience where your entire life flashes before you in a great panorama of memory pictures. You are quickly raised up out of the water gasping for breath and the first thing you see on the ceiling is the mandala-like mosaic image of the twelve apostles surrounding Jesus at His baptism, which represents the constellations of the zodiac surrounding the sun (fig. 11). The baptismal dunking becomes in this way a "trial by water" in the sense of the ancient mystery practices where the soul is separated from the firm ground of the physical body and set adrift in the great cosmic ocean of spirit.

In this vast ceiling mosaic, Jesus stands in the river Jordan with the river god on one side, representing the beings of nature, and John the Baptist on the other. John is the Hebrew prophet who "makes way" for the One who will "baptize with fire," the One "who must increase." Above, the hand of the Father God releases the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, which descends via the living water into the Son. This is the moment of the birth of Christ, the Son of God, in Jesus, the Son of Man. It is also the beginning of the three and a half years that the Christ, the Highest of the Sun Sphere Spirits, will live on earth in a human body. In many early depictions, Jesus is shown beardless, as the Apollo-Christ, whereas later representations (not until after the 6th century CE) show him bearded as "the man of sorrows." Jordana, god of the river, is crowned with two flaming horns and demonstrates that the chthonic gods, and the elements, take part in this event: acknowledge Christ as the "Lord of the Elements."



Fig. 11. The cupola mosaics in Ravenna's Arian Baptistery, late Fifth-Century A.D., portray the beardless Christ-Apollo and acknowledge the river god, Jordana.

Today, we look at the art and objects of the church as symbols of religious belief, but to genuine practitioners, people of pre-modern consciousness, they were far more than mere symbols. Polynesians would say such sacred objects are imbued with *mana* (spiritual power). Although such a relationship to the art of the church may be for the most part lost today, for early Christians religious art was imbued with divine power that could heal and save souls lost in a world of baffling temptations and desires. Painted icons, sculpted figures, stained glass images, and architectural forms were, along with holy sites and relics of saints, experienced as a part of the sacred practice that helped form men and women into whole human beings. Francis of Assisi acknowledged this making whole that artworks can perform when he said: "He who works with his hands is a laborer. He who works with his hands and his head is a craftsman. He who works with his hands, his head, and his heart is an artist."

Notes

1. Tympanum comes from the Greek word *tympanon*, meaning kettle-drum. The drum is a traditional percussion instrument used esoterically to help induce the shamanic trance state and exoterically to call one

to action, to stir the will by means of beat. Barrie suggests that the drum's taut skin stretched on a frame expresses the tension of "the opposing forces present at any spiritual decision." Barrie, T., p. 225.

2. James, J. *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend*, p. 85.

3. Rodin, A. *Cathedrals of France*, p. 264.

4. von Otto, O. *The Gothic Cathedral*, p. vii.

5. Emile Male cited in James, J. "Chartres: The Masons who Built a Legend." p. 12.

6. Arguelles, J., *The Transformative Vision*. p. 49.

7. Biesantz, H. *The Goetheanum*, p. 94-95.

8. Taut, B. *Ein architecture-Program*. 1918.

9. Cited in a lecture by Mann, W. "The Spiritual History of Art," Emerson College, 1979.

10. Schmidt-Brabant, M. "Architecture and Community: Age-Old Impulses in Temple Architecture." *News from the Goetheanum*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1998, p. 1. "The social element emancipated itself from art as the Roman idea of a state based on purely juristic principles came into influence. Although the connection between religious life and Roman and Gothic church architecture continued for a long time still, right up until the end of the Middle Ages, their one source was recognized only by a few in whom the wisdom of the ancient mysteries still flowed in an esoteric form of Christianity. Such teaching continued for a long time, especially in the building communities of the cathedrals in the Middle Ages."

11. Rodin, A. *Rodin*, p. 10.