

75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know anthologizes some of humanity's most influential and renowned works of art that examine the realities of the human condition and Christian truth. Through engaging these masterpieces, Christians today can enrich their own faith with the creativity of history's brilliant artists.

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1

Paintings in the Roman Catacombs

(paintings, c. 300)

The earliest surviving Christian art is not hanging on the walls of a museum or adorning a cathedral but rather can be found in the labyrinth of tombs underneath the city of Rome. At a time when Christianity was not seen as an acceptable religious option, Christian art went underground. Literally. Beneath the streets of the Roman capital and its suburbs, Christians decorated the tombs of their loved ones with simple paintings of biblical scenes or Christian symbols, there in the dimly lit maze of catacombs.

One of the common images in early Christian art, an image that can frequently be seen in the catacombs as well as in mosaics and in the earliest statuary, is the depiction of Christ as the Good Shepherd.

His features bear a strong resemblance to traditional depictions of Apollo in classical art—handsome, strong, and dignified—and He is tending to His flock with gentle care, usually with a lamb draped over His shoulders. It is an image that reminds the viewer of Jesus' love for His people and the protection He offers in a world filled with predators—precisely the message most needed by early Christians suffering from marginalization and persecution. In the days of Christian faith's infancy it could be dangerous to be a believer. And because the image of a shepherd with a flock wasn't a blatantly religious image, it was art that could communicate from one Christian to another without drawing unwanted attention from hostile authorities. It was a

sort of coded message of reverence for the Savior based upon Jesus' words from John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd."

Finding a way to memorialize their dead was one of the things that inspired the artists who created most of the earliest

surviving Christian art; and much of it can be found in these catacombs. These underground burial sites were composed of a network of narrow interconnected passages with niches where the dead could be laid. Developed in the second century, about



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Roman
catacombs,
photo by
Romaine

the time of the persecution of Christians under the emperor Decius, the catacombs were a common burial ground until the mid-fifth century. There were about 550 miles of catacombs around Rome, and an estimated 4 to 6.5 million people were buried in them. They were a popular option for citizens of Rome who could not afford land in which to bury their dead, as real estate was scarce and expensive in the capital of the Roman Empire. Since the early Christians generally considered cremation to be a pagan practice, burial in the catacombs was a good and reasonably priced alternative. The soft volcanic rock underground was easy to dig and carve but hardened nicely when exposed to air, so these niches in the network of catacombs were an ideal way to lay the bodies of loved ones to rest.

Contrary to popular mythology, the catacombs were not generally used either as places to hide from persecution or as places where Christians worshiped. But they were places that were visited with some frequency, where one might celebrate a deceased loved one by having a funerary meal—a kind of “picnic with the dead.” And since the early Christians had few other public places to display their art, the catacombs are one of the main places in which it can be found.

The art used to decorate these funereal niches is somewhat crude and naïve in style, pretty much what you would expect from

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The Good Shepherd, Roman catacombs

paintings done underground by the light of a torch. We do not know the identity of the artists who created the images for the catacombs or exactly when they were created, but they share a simple beauty and dignity and are the earliest artistic masterpieces of the Christian tradition. Classical Greek and Roman art was their main stylistic source, and the most common subject matter is either stories from the Old Testament or events from the life of Christ.

These early Christian artists drew especially upon the redemptive stories of the Old Testament, stories where God was portrayed as a deliverer, such as the story of Daniel and the lions, the three Hebrew brothers in the fiery furnace, Noah and the ark, or the trials of Jonah (who was considered as a prefiguration of Jesus and His resurrection). Their favorite subjects from

the life of Jesus were the miracle stories, especially stories of healing. Interestingly, images of the cross and the crucifixion are very rare in early Christian art, and it seems there was a distinct preference for images and symbols that represented resurrection and immortality—images such as doves, palms, peacocks, the phoenix, and the lamb. Instead of focusing on the sufferings of Christ, as became so common in later Christian art, these early artists seemed more interested in painting pictures that offered hope.

In a time when it was a crime to practice the Christian faith, and where one could be sentenced to death for proclaiming Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar, it should not be surprising that much of this art also shows an interest in venerating the holy martyrs of the faith, those who had surrendered their lives in the cause of Christ. In fact, Christians sometimes jockeyed for a place in the catacombs so they could bury their dead as near as possible to where the martyrs of the faith had been laid.

In ancient Rome, wealthy Christians were fewer in number but they could more easily afford to be buried in the traditional way rather than in the catacombs. They were often laid to rest in a sarcophagus, a stone casket on which decorative art could be carved. One of the most well preserved of the surviving sarcophagi is that of Junius

Bassus (c. 350). The front of this sarcophagus is decorated with two rows of sculpted images that are more artistically refined than the paintings in the catacombs. The top level depicts scenes of Abraham, Paul, Christ with Peter and Paul, Christ before Pilate, and Pilate washing his hands of responsibility for Jesus' fate. The bottom level has carvings of Job, Adam and Eve with the serpent wound around the tree of life, Christ's entry into Jerusalem and meeting with Zacchaeus (the wee man in the tree), Daniel flanked by tamed lions, and the apostle Paul being led to his execution. These key biblical stories show both the Old Testament roots of the faith and scenes from Jesus' life. (The scene of Paul's execution is not recorded in Scripture but drawn from extrabiblical studies.)

In the generations that followed, Christian art would begin to become more grand and showy, striving for splendor and a highly aesthetic effect. The earliest Christian art, however, with its greater simplicity and obvious devotion, remains a powerful testimony to the way that art could reflect deep faith and trust in God, even at a time of great persecution. Despite the threat of death, early Christians held fast to a faith in the God who was a deliverer, and who would ultimately snatch them even from the jaws of death. That message echoes out from the Roman catacombs.

2

The Book of Kells

(illuminated manuscript, c. 550)

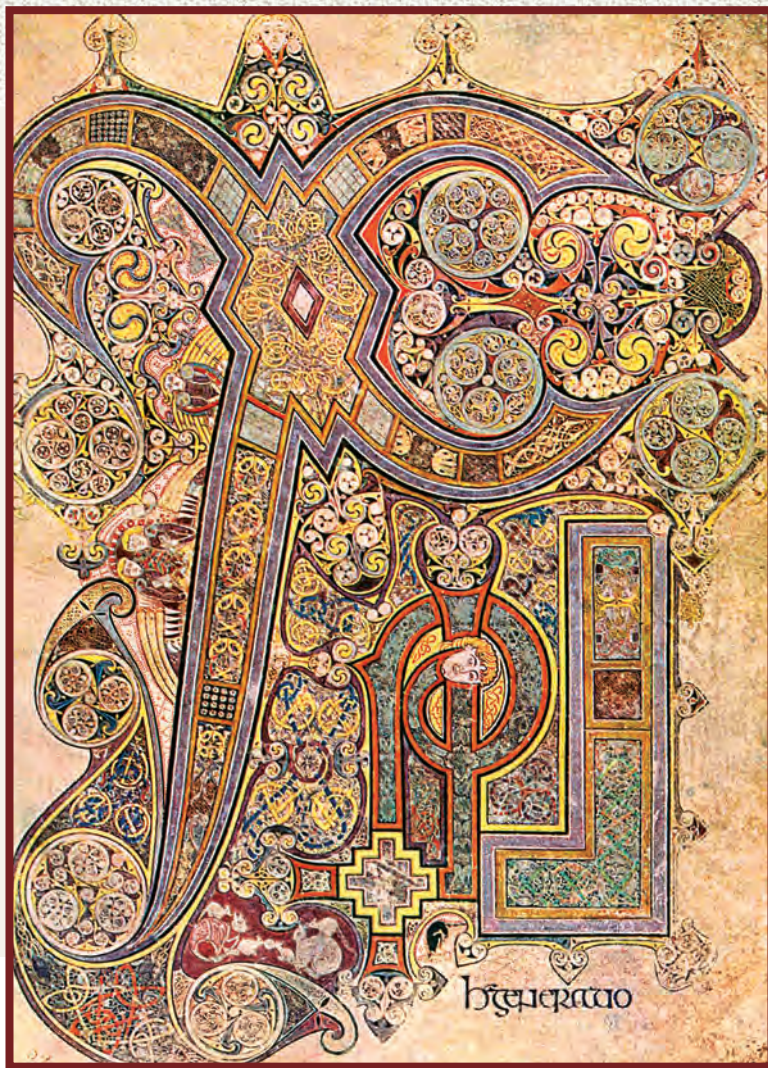
Christians have long been considered “people of the book” because of the importance they place upon the Bible as the Word of God. In a time when books were rare and very precious, no book was more precious than the Scriptures, and no part of the Scriptures more precious than the Gospels, which tell the story of the One who was Himself the Word. Therefore, it is fitting that one of the most beautiful books ever created was an illuminated copy of the Latin translation of the four gospels, which has come to be known as *The Book of Kells*.

A monastery on a small, lonely island off the western coast of Scotland was the home to a group of monks who created this masterpiece. They were far away from

the violence and chaos that spread across Europe in the centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire, and were able to develop the art of copying manuscripts to an unparalleled degree of accuracy. But their peaceful existence on this remote island ended when the Vikings attacked the monastery in 806. Sixty-eight monks were killed, but the rest escaped to the mainland of Ireland, where they established a monastery at Kells, not far from Dublin. It is almost a certainty that they brought the book with them. Hence it has come to be called *The Book of Kells*.

And what a book it is. The monks of Kells adapted Celtic artistic traditions to fit the Christian message. Although we can place no names to the anonymous scribes

Chi Ro page
from *The Book
of Kells*, folio 34r,
Trinity College
Library, Dublin



WikiCommons

who copied out the text and embellished it with imaginative and sometimes playful images, many scholars believe it shows the artistry of at least three distinctive hands. Ultimately, however, it is the product of the entire monastery working together to dry and prepare the animal skins necessary for making the parchment (it is said to have required the skins of 150 calves to provide

enough pages for the book), to grind and prepare the colors (the blue, in particular, which is used extravagantly, came from lapis lazuli, a semiprecious stone that in those days was as priceless as gold), to gather and cut and sew the parchments into a codex (book form), and to sit at their desks for hours every day to painstakingly copy and paint and illuminate the manuscript.

The result of their labor is an exuberant work of art—finely detailed, intricate, and imaginative. It evidences a sense of respect for the holiness of the labor of illuminating the Word of God, as well as an undisguised playfulness in creating the interwoven loops and curves and tangled vines and dizzying spirals. Peering out at the reader are a teeming zoological plentitude—birds, snakes, butterflies and moths, cats, dogs, and mice, otters, and many purely fantastical beasts. They share space with portraits of the four gospel writers, tangled and twisted human figures (some likely the images of fellow monks), and angelic beings. It is high and holy art combined with a deep humanity. It contains an abundance of the ornate and beautiful, rich in symbol and meaning, but with little touches that make us smile.

One medieval writer gives witness of how greatly *The Book of Kells* moved him:

Fine craftsmanship is all about you, but you might not notice it. Look more keenly at it and you will penetrate to the very shrine of art. You will make out intricacies, so delicate and subtle, so exact and compact, so full of knots and links, with colors so fresh and vivid, that you might say that this was the work of an angel, and not of a man. For my part the oftener I see the book, and the more carefully I study it, the more I am lost in ever fresh amazement, and I see more and more wonders in the book.¹

This quote exemplifies one of the qualities of *The Book of Kells*—it contains layers of detailing that make it unlikely for a viewer to be able to appreciate it all with a single brief look. One can spend hours letting the eyes settle upon a page and explore all the little secrets and mysteries hidden in the beautiful illuminations. It rewards a close look, and it unfolds its beauty, humor, and symbolic profundity slowly to the attentive eye.

Until the fourth century, most writing had been done on scrolls. There were distinct disadvantages to the scroll, however, especially when you wanted to revisit a passage you'd read earlier. You might have to unwind nearly the entire scroll to find what you were looking for. But with the development of the codex, which consisted of individual pages sewn together, we begin to come close to something resembling today's books.

Because of all the effort expended in making a book—the technology to print and reproduce them mechanically didn't exist until around 1450—they were rare and extremely valuable. And monasteries became a place where this work was done. Jakob Louber, a fifteenth-century Carthusian prior, expressed the importance of books: "A monastery without books is like a state without its troops, like a castle without walls, a kitchen without utensils, a table with no dishes upon it, a garden without herbs, a meadow without flowers, a tree without leaves."²

Books were viewed as nearly irreplaceable treasures, more valuable than a single human life. In 1237, the library of the monastery of Vorau, in Syria, caught fire. The prior rushed to the library and took his place in the midst of the flames, transporting one book after another to the window, where he tossed them to safety. He kept at the task, rescuing as many books as he could, until he was finally engulfed in flames.

Monasteries were places where these books were stored and copied for posterity in order that the gospel might be spread. Missionary monks would take these books with them when they brought the Christian faith into new lands. Therefore, many early books were small and portable, and often written in miniscule lettering for economic reasons. But the books created for use in worship or at the high altar were another matter. Here no expense was spared. These Scripture portions, prayer books, liturgical aids, and commentaries were turned into works of art. They were also bound in exquisite covers encrusted with jewels and set in gold and silver.

It was not unusual for a monastery to take a year or more to copy out a manuscript of the Bible. It was an arduous task. Sometimes a monk would express his complaints in a personal note appended to the end of a section. One left behind this testament to his frustration: "Thin ink, bad velum, difficult text. The parchment is hairy. Thank God it will soon be dark."³ Perhaps a

small insight into the human cost involved in creating a beautiful manuscript.

The result of that kind of effort is these luminous pages of text. Our term "illuminated manuscript" comes from the Latin *illumināre*, "to light up." The effort of these monks truly lit up the pages of the books. Each and every page was an original work of art, created by hand and likely guided by prayer. They copied carefully and added miniature paintings within the text. They sometimes used gold leaf and expensive colors in great profusion. These monks were the first to illustrate the initial letter of the text, on occasion filling a full page with its intricate design. They also created abstract "carpet pages" that look pretty much like they sound—formal repetitive designs of great beauty and detail.

The Book of Kells has its impressive predecessors, among them *The Book of Durrow* and *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, but none can really compare to what the monks created in Kells. Illuminated books are a part of the Christian heritage, and all kinds of such books appeared in the years that followed *The Book of Kells*, including prayer books for the laity (*The Book of Hours*) and breviaries for the clergy, all beautifully adorned with inspiring art. Many times the art overwhelmed the text in these later works, but *The Book of Kells* seems a nearly perfect marriage between text and artistry, and is one of the great masterpieces of the Christian heritage.

3

Gregorian Chant

(choral works, c. 580)

In what can only be described as the most unexpected musical hit in history, a 1993–1994 recording of Gregorian chants by the Spanish Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos topped the charts in Europe and the United States. In the United States, the album was number one on the classical music charts but also, more surprisingly, number three on the pop charts. The serene melodic tones of their recording, simply entitled *Chant*, reawakened interest in Gregorian chant and sold millions of copies—over four million units in forty-two countries. It was an overnight hit that was a thousand years in the making! Perhaps it is a sign of our stress-laden modern age that these simple and mysterious musical compositions from the Middle

Ages would speak to us in such a fresh way, calling us toward stillness, inner quiet, and peace. They are, in that much-overused term, timeless.

Gregorian chant has demonstrated a peculiar power to help its hearers quiet the mind. The gently rising and falling tones are sung in unison to a simple melody and without any instrumental accompaniment, showcasing the strength of voices joining together in praise. Gregorian chant is spacious, transcendent, and mysterious in its sound, and produces a calming and focusing effect. Perhaps that is why it is even embraced by those who do not readily assent to the truths it proclaims in its biblical texts. It is music that inexplicably arouses spiritual longings, and some have

even been set upon the path toward faith by first being drawn to the beauty and mystery of Gregorian chant.

It must always be remembered, though, that however beautiful or relaxing it might be to listen to, Gregorian chant exists for the purpose of proclaiming the sacred texts it illumines. These chants were not created to be artistic masterpieces but rather vehicles for communicating Scripture. The chant is a heightened form of speech, existing in service to the words it expresses. As Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of the ideal chant, “Let it be sweet, but without levity, and whilst it pleases the ear, let it move the heart. . . . It should not contradict the sense of the words, but rather enhance it.”¹ Chant gives musical emphasis to each of the words in the text, and expresses their meaning. Those singing must concentrate on every word, and those listening are invited to focus not only on the beauty of what is being sung but also on its message aimed at the heart of the hearer. Through the rising and falling tones, both singer and listener are drawn into prayer, a state of worship, and an experience of the presence of God.

Ultimately, chant is praying with the aid of song. Both singers and listeners are drawn into a unified prayer directed toward God. In its native state in the monasteries, there are no listeners per se, for all are expected to join into these prayers of praise and contemplation. Nor are there soloists in chant, as every singer is an anonymous voice joined together with other voices to

create a greater whole. Chant, therefore, requires humility, obedience, and finding one’s own small place as part of the choir.

There are fundamentally three different types of chant, each adding a bit more complexity to the structure of the singing. The first is *syllabic*, where there is one note for each syllable. In the *neumatic*, there are groups of notes for each syllable. And in the *melismatic* there can be lengthy passages of music for each syllable, stretching out a word such as “alleluia” by adding drama and flourishes to the singing. But in all cases it is important that the text be clearly understood, no matter how complex the music that carries it.

The origins of chant can be found in the Jewish tradition, where psalms and other Scriptures were chanted aloud, both to emphasize the dignity of the texts and to aid the listener in remembering them. So it was natural that such traditions would carry over into the fledgling Christian movement. In the early churches, lessons were chanted instead of being read so that they could be heard more easily. Otherwise Scripture readings might have been inaudible in larger worship spaces.

As Christianity spread, differing styles of chant began to develop throughout the Christian world. Between the fifth and eighth centuries, chant developed its own regional peculiarities that were characteristic of the musical traditions of the local areas and their own respective pronunciations of the Latin texts. The Roman chant



Three Monks
Singing Before
a Lectern,
c. 1300–25,
artist unknown,
Walters Art
Museum,
Baltimore

came to be known as Gregorian chant, named after Pope Gregory the Great, though scholars doubt he actually had any role in the composition of the chants themselves. More likely it is connected with him because he was responsible for important liturgical reforms that had far-reaching influence throughout the medieval church.

But legends don't die easily, and during the Middle Ages he was sometimes pictured as receiving chant music directly from the Holy Spirit, who whispered in his ear in the form of a dove perched upon his shoulder. He is famous for calling Gregorian chant "the song of the angels."

When Charlemagne came to power in

the Frankish Empire, he imposed Roman-style Gregorian chant upon the far-flung populations he ruled as part of an attempt to unify the territories over which he held sway. He desired cohesion and stability in his realms, and saw unity in liturgical style as one of the ways to achieve that. He convinced Pope Stephen III to send out cantors to teach the same chants to monasteries throughout his empire. Although other stylistic traditions have lived on, it is Gregorian chant that has remained the standard form. There have been many developments and innovations throughout the centuries, but the basic structure of the chant remains unchanged and continues to be practiced in monasteries throughout the Christian world. Though contemporary chants may be a bit more complex and polyphonic, they are still recognizable to the ear as the kind of singing that has been practiced for so many centuries.

Chant has always been the primary music of the monasteries. When Benedict created his *Rule* for monks, he made the singing of psalms a central part of the life of the monastery. Usually the monks of his order would chant through the entire book of Psalms during the course of every week. Each day was, and still is in most orders, punctuated by voices raised together in unison toward God, speaking His own

words back to Him in the form of prayer.

Modern medical experts have done studies on the effect that this ancient form of singing has on the modern listener. They have found it has what they call an *interiorizing* effect. Though it is light and calming, the music of the chant is also passionate and strong. This combination seems to create very positive physiological effects on those who hear it. Dr. Alan Watkins of Imperial College in London has discovered such effects as lowered blood pressure, increased levels of DHEA, and a reduction in anxiety and depression in those who listened to chant. Ruth Stanley, a Benedictine nun who heads up the complementary medicine program at Minnesota's St. Cloud Hospital, has found it useful in easing chronic pain in her patients. Other studies have even suggested that the sound of chant can aid in communication between the right and left hemispheres of the brain by creating new neural pathways.

The gathering of human voices lifted in song toward God, which is the heart of Gregorian chant, is a way of offering praise and worship to God and of contemplating His glory. It is also a sound that is aesthetically beautiful and healing to those who incline their ear toward its soothing cadence. Perhaps that is why the fascination with Gregorian chant continues to this day.

4

Chartres Cathedral

(cathedral, 1134)

One could easily fill a book with seventy-five cathedrals that are worthy of being considered masterpieces of religious architecture. Due to the space limitations of this book, we must limit ourselves to two—Chartres Cathedral, and in a later chapter, La Sagrada Família Cathedral. They will have to suffice as representatives of their respective traditions—one medieval, one modern—each of them awe-inspiring accomplishments of human ingenuity put to the service of honoring God. Both of these cathedrals are immense in size and immense in their emotional impact upon the visitor who encounters them. They are intended to take your breath away, and they do. Mere words cannot really capture their power.

Located about an hour outside Paris, and one of the best preserved examples of early Gothic architecture, Chartres Cathedral is a fitting representative for the entire tradition of Gothic cathedrals. It would certainly be near the top of any list of the greatest and most beautiful cathedrals of the world. Chartres Cathedral had long been a major pilgrimage site and the home to one of the most revered medieval relics: the cloak of the Virgin Mary, which was miraculously preserved when much of the original cathedral was destroyed in a fire in 1134. Most of the earlier building burned and reconstruction was begun almost immediately, this time in the splendid and ornate Gothic style rather than the previous Romanesque.

The reconstructed Chartres is famous

for its use of flying buttresses, which are not only useful—strengthening the structural integrity of the building—but also add to the elegance and style of the building. Chartres is also notable for the grand arrangement of figures representing the Last Judgment that adorns the main portal, and the individual statues of kings and saints (called jamb statues) that decorate the façade. Like the abundant stained glass windows inside, these wonderful sculptures remind us of the heritage of faith.

Chartres Cathedral contains the most extensive collection of stained glass in any cathedral, with 165 windows including three rose windows. One of the most popular windows in Chartres is the Noah window, which beautifully depicts the story of Noah and the ark with delightfully intricate detail. The windows at Chartres not only celebrate the glories of the Christian faith but also commemorate the merchant brotherhoods who donated money for building this spectacular edifice. The careful observer will find small images of wheelwrights, shoemakers, butchers, carpenters, and other skilled laborers pursuing their crafts and trades. It is a good reminder of the unified effort of labor and financing that went into building the cathedral. We will look more closely at the topic of stained glass windows in the next chapter, but surely the main rose window of Chartres is one of the most beautiful of them all, radiating color and harmony as natural light illuminates all the individual sections

of colored glass that revolve in various patterns out from the central section, where Christ sits on His throne.

While Chartres Cathedral has many unique characteristics, it also contains many elements that can be seen in every Gothic cathedral. When one experiences the totality of these elements—standing before a cathedral or kneeling inside it—it feels kind of like a miracle, more of a supernatural phenomenon than something manufactured by human hands. But it is a “miracle” with a history.

Early Christians did not have elaborate public places to meet and had to settle for meetings in private homes. In time, as Christianity grew in influence, eventually being embraced as the official state religion of Rome, a need for bigger and more elaborate places to worship developed. The first great church building was the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, built between 532–537 and constructed around a central dome design. This central dome style of architecture, clearly influenced by the design of the Roman Pantheon, but on a much grander scale, was the chief form of church architecture for the first ten centuries of the church.

The basic style that most commonly comes to mind when people think of a cathedral began at St. Sernin in Toulouse, France, about 1080, when a large structure that drew upon the design of Roman public buildings, called basilicas, was designed and built. This early medieval architectural style



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Exterior of Chartres Cathedral,
photographer unknown

has come to be known as Romanesque. It generally features a tower (or towers), a cruciform floor plan (with wings jutting out from both sides in the form of a cross), barrel vaulting, smaller windows, and rounded arches in the windows and interior.

But within a century, the Romanesque had largely been superseded by the Gothic style as the primary architectural style for cathedrals and other religious buildings. When Chartres was reconstructed after the fire, its wooden roof (dangerously susceptible to fire) was replaced with a stone roof. Supporting the greater weight of a

stone roof necessitated important innovations, as did the desire for larger and more elaborate windows to let in natural light through stained glass. This led to the invention of flying buttresses, supporting structures attached to the sides of the building that transfer most of the weight of the roof off of the main walls. This allowed for taller, thinner walls and offered the possibility for builders to create structures of dizzying heights. This they did, and at the same time they began to move

away from the traditional rounded arches, instead installing elegant pointed arches in the vaulting and windows. These pointed arches helped accentuate the height and openness of the interior of the cathedral, with results that are mesmerizing and breathtaking. Gothic cathedrals are tall and soaring, both inside and out, lifting our eyes and hearts toward heaven. Imagine, in the days before skyscrapers, how dizzyingly tall these buildings must have seemed to those who first saw them.

For a preliterate population, the cathedral was a visual “book” they could read to learn the stories of the Bible and of the saints, as well as the key doctrines of Christianity—a virtual encyclopedia of faith in stone and glass. The cathedrals were decorated with images not only of the supernatural world but also of the natural world, with images illustrating the everyday life of the average person. We see clouds, seas, vines, leaves, trees, insects, birds, sheep, fish, and domestic animals in the windows and statues. We see portraits of people busy at work at their trades, or engaged in some virtue or vice. Alongside these natural images we find portrayals of the biblical miracles, glorious angelic figures, and terrifying demons. And bridging this world and the next are the depictions in glass and stone of departed saints. These blessed dead surround the visitor to a Gothic cathedral. Their figures frame the doorways and radiate from the stained glass, and in many cases their actual bodies

lie under the floors and their relics in the altars. In the cathedral their world and ours become one.

Besides its function as an encyclopedia of faith, the cathedral was also a place for communal celebration. Pagan temples had been seen as homes for the gods, and the people would gather around them for worship. The cathedral, on the other hand, was a home for the believing community, a gathering place where people might enter for religious worship, feasts, and even secular gatherings. Often situated on the highest point in town, cathedrals became the central buildings around which everything grew and flourished. They were a communal phenomenon. The process of building them required the efforts of people from every part of the social strata, who joined together to finance the construction, gather the needed materials, and perform the grueling labor required to build them.

Some of the most interesting and unexpected elements of a cathedral are the gargoyles, sculptural embellishments featuring ugly, deformed creatures that combine various natural forms with those of mythical beasts. They are a testament to the strangeness and mystery of life, and also demonstrate the humor, earthiness, and playfulness of the cathedral builders. Plus, they serve a very practical function as well: during a rainstorm they gather the falling precipitation, which gushes from their mouths into the streets below, away from the building.

The Scriptures teach that “God is light” (1 John 1:5); therefore, it is the radiance of light that symbolizes the presence of God in these holy structures. The darkest part of the cathedral is usually the entryway. We stumble out of the darkness of the sinful world with a feeling of disorientation caused by entering the dim interior. But our eyes are drawn toward the light as we make our way into the main part of the edifice. Since the light in a Gothic cathedral comes mostly from its windows, these buildings are characterized by an abundance of windows. In order to have the full experience of any cathedral, it is necessary to visit it at different times of the day, when the play of light creates different effects upon the walls and windows.

The cathedral was a place of safety and peace in a harsh and dangerous world, a shelter from the storms of life. The central section near the front doors was called the nave, which is probably derived from *navis*, the Latin word for ship or boat. Like a ship, the cathedral is a vessel well suited for taking a voyage—a voyage through the storms to the safe harbor of God’s presence.

Above all else, though, the cathedral is a place for worship. It is here that the liturgy is enacted, prayers are offered, and voices are raised in song. It is also a place

for silence, for personal communion with God. Each element of a cathedral is ultimately meant to quiet our minds from the distractions of the world and redirect them heavenward.

The great cathedrals can, of course, be appreciated by those who do not believe in what they stand for. They are marvels of ingenuity and intricacy in their design and are breathtaking in their symmetry and elegance. Their almost supernatural beauty, though, may well tempt the unbeliever, at least for a moment, to entertain the possibility of something grander that upholds the universe.



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Interior of Chartres Cathedral,
photo by Jörg Bittner Unna

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