

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Architecture

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#### ANCIENT PERIOD

**Ancient.** Ancient western European sculpture provided us abundant examples, from the Neolithic period, of small figurines evidently connected with fertility. (Large breasts resembling the Helladic sculptures from Neolithic Greece.) Paintings from the caves of southern France and northern Spain, dating to 35,000 B.C., similarly prioritized themes of harvest and fertility, quite naturally concerned with the promotion of the species. Massive architectural complexes, like Gobekli Tepe (in southern Anatolia; ca. 10,000 B.C.) or Stonehenge in central England (3000 B.C.), naturally lead us to suppose that they too have connections with promoting abundance in natural cycles.

**Neolithic.** We are not sure this is true, of Neolithic architecture. Both Gobekli Tepe, for instance, and Stonehenge have been seen in such light, the former as a pilgrimage site for worship, the latter as a kind of solar observatory intended to align sites on earth with the positions and movements of the planets. All this, in both instances—and in many more instances around the Neolithic world—is pure speculation, inevitable though in view of our natural interest in determining the origins of the development of massive architecture, such a significant and challenging component of Western culture.

#### POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Romanesque.** As with all the artistic continuities in Western Europe, the transition from the Neolithic to the post classical is sharp and abrupt. By 313 A.D., when Constantine had helped to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity, there was already a profusion of structures, around Rome, in which the growing (but still suppressed) Christian community had been meeting and unifying itself. With the adoption of Christianity by the Empire, the Church began to take advantage of certain kinds of *basilica*, large structures constructed by the Romans for official business, which could be converted into larger structures for Church purposes, and which—the basilica form—were to become launching pads for the great Byzantine churches like Hagia Sophia. The basilica style, as it developed in western Europe, evolved slowly, from the sixth to the twelfth centuries, into the Romanesque style, the earliest mature style.

**Gothic.** By the twelfth century, a new church style—the Gothic, identical to new church building today—had made its way out through the constructive processes of the Romanesque. Flying buttresses, ribbed walls, and vaulted arches became the trademarks of this new style, which was to generate the greatest of the cathedrals, especially in France, and to recommend itself as an essential adornment to every proud city of believers. The greatest of the patrons of these new cathedrals—like the French abbot Suger—were associates of Kings, major historians of their time, and farsighted students of the development of city life. They were precise students of math and geometry, who valued the classical perfections of the finest cathedrals, who foresaw the perspectival and adorational features of the interiors of the finest cathedrals, and spared no detail of attention—consider the pop fascination of gargoyles—in order to assure that their creations displayed the maximum of the vivid struggle of good with evil.

## RENAISSANCE

**Mysteries.** The Renaissance, or rebirth, of Classical Culture introduced a significant revision of the Gothic mode in European architecture. As we explore high gothic cathedrals, like Notre Dame or Chartres, we see that they are all about mysterious spaces, dark naves and nooks, places where the spirit can indulge itself in that sense of mystery which for so many Christians, then as now, was an essential part of the religious experience. When we say that the Renaissance was a turn back to classical sensibility—remember the Parthenon, the Zeus temple at Olympia, the temple at Agrigento in Sicily—we mean in part that the clear and balanced lines of the ancient Greek temple were rediscovered, as were the open and sculptured spaces which were transparent to all in the interior of the Renaissance structure. We talk here, then, of a wide variety of building types—under the category of Renaissance—great Basilicas like St. Peter's (construction begun 1506); palazzi, great homes for noble families like the Medici; elite living quarters for people of high substance in the Catholic hierarchy.

**Textbooks.** The repercussions of the printing press made themselves felt throughout the Renaissance of architecture. The order and classical discipline we treasure in Renaissance building construction had its roots in texts which were widely studied, and which established models for architecture. In 1562, Giacomo da Vignola published the influential *Canon of the Five Orders of Architecture*, which was a textbook study designed for the use of architects. Vignola, who had worked on St. Peter's and the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, was a practical architect whose book featured how-to-do examples of column and balustrade construction. A second, and even more influential text of the time was Antonio Palladio's *The Four Books of Architecture*, published in 1570. (Palladio was one of the most accomplished practitioners of his time, and his work in the 1550's in Venice, on the churches Il Redentore and San Giorgio Maggiore, establishes Palladio's own principles with stunning clarity.) The windows, doors, and floor plans, on the typical Palladian structure, share an openness, lightness and clarity which forged new directions in architectural history. A particularly well known example, of the rage for the Palladian, was Thomas Jefferson's home in Monticello, based on Palladio's own home, La Rotonda.

## 18<sup>TH</sup> AND 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES: NEOCLASSICISM

**Presence.** If we review the continuing stream of Western European architecture, we see that by and large what is understood as the classical remains a persistent theme. In the early Renaissance the notion of the classical dominates architectural style, and that because, in Western Europe, the actual presence of Greco-Roman lands and cultures is right beneath your feet. (That depends, of course, on just where you live, but may be possible anywhere in Western Europe, giving the material-ware saturation of an area the size of Western Europe, subject for centuries to Roman and Greek boots and buildings.)

**Travelers.** A decisive turn, within this native classical tradition, in Europe, was given by such factors as developments and discoveries within archeology, by a rage for continental travel, which took Western European art connoisseurs to every corner of Europe—often to places like Southern Italy or Greece—by trade and by commerce, which by the eighteenth century were clogging the Mediterranean—even by rediscovered ship wrecks, which were beginning to be uncovered from the ocean floor, as often as not laden with massive loads of commercial amphorae, intended for the wine or grain trade.

**Neoclassical.** The Neoclassical style, as a continuation of the stages of Renaissance style, is manifestly linked to its predecessors, favoring the Palladian styles when it comes to domestic architecture, and leaning toward the Gothic in general slant. The Gothic of 18th and 19th century architecture is not the dark and obscured Gothic of the high middle ages, or of mysteriously dark places hidden away in such structures, The new Gothic we are looking at is if one might so express it, the Palladian Gothic, the sharp outlines and clear paced form Palladio himself proposed, The neoclassical of this New Gothic ramps up constantly, through the eighteenth century in England and France: Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1776), Herder's *Journal meiner Reise im Jahre 1769* (1769), Goethe's *Italienische Reise* (1786-1788) —all these classics are drawing sharp attention

around Europe, as the actuality of such stunningly painted interiors as those of Herculaneum and Pompei burst free of their ash.

**Napoleon.** In 1806 Napoleon wishes to build a memorial church to his victories, and his immediate thought is of the Greek exemplars he can turn to. In 1806 he turns to his first choice, a version of the ancient Greek Parthenon, and though it morphs in process, eventually becoming La Madeleine, he has found the track of his time. In Edinburgh, in 1822, another Parthenon is started—after all what better inner image to work from—as a memorial to the Scots who have died in the Napoleonic Wars. When it comes to choosing a design for the new British Museum, in 1823, an extended Parthenon is the first model that occurs.

## MODERN ARCHITECTURE

**Modernity.** A brief summary can hardly cover the culture gaps that lead from Neoclassicism, the late Gothic, to the international modernity which had swept over Europe by the early nineteenth century. The best we can do is to let contrast underline the intensity of the transition, throughout western Europe, from a culture working off a classical base to a culture winging it with experiments in all the arts—sculpture, architecture, and painting.

**Experimentation.** Architecture's version of the Expressionism which moved Western painting was expressed—for example in the *Goetheanum* of Rudolf Steiner (1923)—by the use of new natural materials for construction, and by the incorporation of broad natural forms, often associated with broad socialist agenda. So called Art Déco was taking off in the mid twenties, with its reinforced concrete skyscrapers, vertical lines, and geometrical forms attached to the outside of the structure; buildings like the Art Déco Chrysler Building, in New York City (1930), put such public structures right in the public's eyes, where one hundred and fifty years earlier there would have been a sleek neo gothic cathedral. By the end of the decade of the nineteen thirties—and this indicates how rapidly 'modernist' styles were changing—the Great Depression and the critiques leveled by architects like LeCorbusier, had concluded that Art Déco was far too 'fancy'. This verdict and hinted at the speed with which, in the late thirties, the German Bauhaus movements—Gropius, Mies van der Rohe—was promoting a newly convincing streamlined style of public architecture, the style that marks the wonderful skyline of Chicago.

**Philosophies.** Some critics, tired of the self-conscious sparseness of Modernism, drifted in the direction of Regionalism—an effort to create historically lodged buildings inside universal settings; to follow Paul Ricoeur's question of 'how to become modern and to return to sources, how to revive an old, dormant civilization, and take part in universal civilization.' (An outstanding ideologue of this quest was Kenneth Frampton, whose 'phenomenological architecture' sought for the philosophical underpinnings of his constructions.)

**Frampton.** One might say that Frampton was concerned chiefly with reference in architectural structure, and thus came up against the then newest movement to deepen and change the presence of architecture in fast changing urban societies. *Postmodernism*, in the mid twentieth century sense, was broadly concerned with 'wit, ornament, and reference,' in architectural style. With Postmodernism enters the architectural debate about historicism and newness in architecture. On the horizon of this debate lie movements like New Classicism and New Regionalism, and ultimately—but there is no such thing in architecture—the wide movement of Deconstruction, which counts on careful undermining of classical structures, from within those various structures, and which thus explicitly invokes the collaboration of philosophers, like Jacques Derrida, with architects interested in buildings as works of thought.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

To what do you attribute the long lasting classical tradition in European culture? What was the special power of the Greeks and Romans—in the visual arts—that gave them such lasting influence over later generations, and centuries? What broke that tradition, or what weakened it? Did the classical tradition in literature weaken and break at the same time as that tradition broke in the visual arts? Can we restore that tradition? Do we want to?

In what ways did Christianity use architecture as a means for developing its power? Was the church a means of protection, or fortification, for the long defenceless church? Exactly how did the early church—the structure itself—develop out of the basilica form? What accounts for the different styles that the Christian church assumed in the course of development of Byzantine Art? Where did the Byzantine basilica get its distinctive form?

What was the role of materials in shaping the development of medieval European architecture? Were there new material finds, along the way—new minerals, new processes—which made possible advances in structural architecture? What kind of assisting machineries were employed—say at Notre Dame Cathedral—for heavy and high lifting?

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