
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Experiencing the Gothic Style

Sigrid de Jong

Eighteenth-century French accounts of Gothic churches are testimonies of both negative preconceptions about the Gothic style formed through reading and actual positive experiences of Gothic buildings. While Goethe at Strasbourg Cathedral reconciled the discrepancy between preconceived opinion and opinion based on experience by referring to history, many 18th-century French architects avoided any historicist interpretation after they visited churches. They continued to express a dislike for Gothic ornament, but also found they could admire the spaciousness of Gothic churches. Jacques-Germain Soufflot, who analysed the church of Notre Dame in Paris by moving through it, suggested disregarding 'entirely the chimerical and bizarre ornaments of the Goths', in favour of experiencing the church's spatial qualities.

This article argues that we can only understand how ideas about the Gothic style changed if we study them from the point of view of the observer of these buildings. This turnaround happened precisely through experience, which allowed 18th-century architects to reconcile their conflicting feelings. By moving through the buildings, they came to understand the idiosyncrasies of the Gothic, from its ornamentation to its spatiality. Beginning with Soufflot's lecture of 1741, 'Mémoire sur l'architecture gothique', this article analyses similar experiences of 18th-century architects and writers who focussed not on historicization (like Goethe did) but on the ahistorical aspects of the Gothic. It thus aims to unveil the complexity of the workings of style.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's fear of encountering a 'mis-shapen, curly-bristled monster' when he visited Strasbourg Cathedral turned into sublime admiration when he finally stood before it, as he wrote in 1772: 'My soul was suffused with a feeling of intense grandeur'. In his essay 'On German Architecture', his account of the Gothic cathedral unveils that contradiction between expectation and experience of the Gothic and how he reconciled his initial preconceptions about the Gothic style with the actual impressive, though disturbing, sight of the building (Goethe 1980: 6). He was no longer intimidated by it, but only through repeated visits was he eventually able to overcome his prejudices towards the Gothic (Purdy 2011; Hvattum 2017).

Goethe's encounter with the cathedral was both an emotional and an aesthetic experience. Through his emotive immersion, which Mari Hvattum calls 'an intense, emotional identification with the spirit of a bygone age' (Hvattum 2017: 702), Goethe came into contact with history. In his perception of the actual site, the Gothic style of the church functioned as a mode of communication with the past. He felt history on the spot at which it occurred, an experience of history that allowed him to then appreciate the style.

Goethe was not alone in experiencing contradictory ideas and feelings when considering and encountering Gothic architecture. Other 18th-century accounts also offer testimonies of negative preconceptions about the

Gothic style and positive experiences of the buildings themselves (Herrmann 1962: 71–83, 235–46). Goethe presented a historicist answer to this conundrum, but many 18th-century architects explained it in other ways. What both Goethe and his French counterparts have in common is the central position of the spectator in their assessment of architecture. In the second half of the 18th century, being able to judge a building, whether this was done to identify its meaning, to learn from it, or to identify useful elements for an architect's own design, depended on experiencing them (de Jong 2017; de Jong 2014). The role of the spectator was therefore of central importance in the way buildings were viewed and designed, and more importantly for this article, how style was seen and used.

To many architects and writers of the 18th century, the Gothic was both repulsive and fascinating. In an ahistorical gesture, the French architect Jacques-Germain Soufflot, after having examined the church of Notre Dame in Paris and walked through its interior, proposed that his contemporaries disregard 'entirely the chimerical and bizarre ornaments of the Goths', and instead focus on the church's spatial qualities (**Figure 1**). Soufflot revealed his thoughts in his lecture 'Mémoire sur l'architecture gothique' for the Lyon Académie des beaux-arts in 1741 (Soufflot 1982). His contradictory assessment of the church permits us to analyse a more general paradoxical reaction to the Gothic style within 18th-century French architectural thought.

This article will examine 18th-century French writings on the Gothic that reveal these contradictions, beginning with an analysis of Soufflot's lecture on Gothic architecture. In examining the paradoxical reactions to Gothic



Figure 1: View of the interior of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, 1760. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

buildings I aim to expose what happens when, instead of Goethe's historicization – his perception that the Gothic style conveyed a deep sense of the period from which it emerged – these writers decided to focus on those aspects of the Gothic that they believed were universal and not historical. Like Goethe, though, Soufflot, Montesquieu, Marc-Antoine Laugier, André Morellet, and Julien-David Le Roy assumed the viewer of historic architecture was central to any assessment and chose to begin with their own experiences, primarily of interiors of Gothic churches. In examining how they navigated between criticism and admiration, I intend to uncover the complexity of the workings of style.

Between Dismissal and Admiration

Soufflot gave his lecture on Gothic architecture at the Académie des beaux-arts in Lyon on April 12, 1741.¹ It was one of a series of seventeen lectures and presentations at the academy. In these lectures, Soufflot often emphasizes the role of experience, of the spectator encountering buildings, cities, and natural phenomena (de Jong 2015). A week later he read the same lecture on Gothic architecture again to a larger public, and would repeat it twenty years later, in 1761, at the Académie royale in Paris. The prevailing perception of Gothic architecture was quite different from what Soufflot presented. The style was considered strange and even horrible, based not on actual experience but rather on preconceptions from looking at textual or visual sources. Most of all, it seemed foreign to current tastes. In 1736 Soufflot's predecessor in Lyon, the architect Ferdinand Delamonce, gave a lecture about Gothic architecture in which he told his audience that the 'Gothic taste' entails a 'shockingly bizarre' and 'depraved idea to the point that in its invention it almost presupposes the deliriousness of the human spirit'. He added, 'we have to admit that all these different Gothic tastes ... have something monstrous, especially in the idea of these barbarian ornaments ... and consequently they are not worthy of the applause of ignorants' (Hermann 1962: 236).

Soufflot was referring to this accepted view when he stated that those who wrote about architecture 'all thought that the Goths have not produced anything in architecture but bizarre and contemptible', and if they decided to write about Gothic architecture, they did so in a negative way, 'only to provoke disgust', or to give a counter example (1982: 189). He argued that François Blondel, in his *Cours d'architecture* (1675), was almost the only one who wrote favourably about Gothic architecture. Blondel found similarities, for example, between the façade of the Milan cathedral and ancient architecture, which, Soufflot said, explains the 'pleasure [Blondel] felt while examining it' (1982: 190). However, instead of concentrating on proportions and drawing comparisons with ancient architecture, the way Blondel did, one should be guided by on-site experience in formulating a judgement. Before showing how he had experienced such churches, Soufflot suggested his public begin reflecting on the merits of Gothic churches whose 'audacity surprises us so strongly'. He often used the word *hardiesse*, audacity or boldness of design, to refer to how these buildings surprise their visitors, a word that often appears in other contradictory descriptions of Gothic buildings by 18th-century writers (Middleton 1962–63: 296).

The feeling of danger that these constructions produced in the spectator is a recurring point in these writings. The French architect Germain Boffrand, who called the Gothic churches 'devoid of correctness and taste' and with 'incongruous ornaments' and 'freakish monsters', commented on the apparently purposeful sense of imminent collapse conveyed by Gothic buildings:

Instead of pursuing the idea of rational solidity, they departed from it, and performed bold and astonishing feats – as if there were more merit in building structures that seem ready to collapse at any moment (though just as solid in fact) than in making them appear destined to endure forever. (Boffrand 2002: 5)

In his *Essai sur l'architecture* of 1753, Marc-Antoine Laugier wrote about the sublime character of this type of church: 'the eye is frightened, because it judges its solidity not sufficient'. His admiration was mixed with fear: 'Their churches, of which their lightness astonishes, frightens even the imagination', he wrote (Laugier 1755: 182, 221), a paradox characteristic of the sublime as later defined by Edmund Burke in 1757. These reactions of both admiration and puzzlement continued well toward the end of the 18th century.

Although controversial in the Enlightenment period, Gothic architecture was nonetheless recommended as an example to follow for 18th-century architects because of its spatial qualities (Middleton 1962–63; Herrmann 1962).² It even led to projects to 'purify' church interiors by whitewashing their walls, thus rendering their structural elegance and spatial openness more visible and enabling an aesthetic experience of interior space (Wittman 2006).³ In the 1670s Claude Perrault praised the structural ingenuity of Gothic architecture, as had Michel de Frémin (Frémin 1702) and Jean-Louis de Cordemoy (Cordemoy 1706).⁴ But they did not do so on the basis of their personal experience. Their texts are analytical, while Soufflot's account in his lecture is a passionate plea for personal observation about the impact a building makes on its beholder.

In his lecture, mainly aimed at (future) architects, it becomes clear that Soufflot hopes that what he says is

useful for their own work. Soufflot wished to present a sort of parallel between Gothic churches and the churches 'built following the rules of ancient architecture' that he calls 'our churches'. He started out by giving their general plan, and then turned to the elevations, to conclude with their dispositions and decorations. In his descriptions Soufflot continually emphasized his dislike for Gothic ornament. Gothic columns are adorned with a 'type of capital, almost always in bad taste'; the façades are 'decorated with numerous niches in bad form, in which the figures lack taste and grace'; and the doors 'with bad ornaments and small figures ... form a real mumbo jumbo' (Soufflot 1982: 195). He knew that his public 'completely despises the chimerical and bizarre ornaments of the Goths', but he advised architects that when designing they should nevertheless find 'a happy medium between their proportions and ours', so as to redress 'the defect of the first glance' and concludes that 'perhaps let us say to him who should have this good fortune: *Omne tulit punctum*' (Soufflot 1982: 195).

Using his own experiences at Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, the cathedral in Milan, the churches of Saint-Jean, Saint-Nizier and les Cordeliers (Saint-Bonaventure) in Lyon, and Saint-Maurice in Vienne (France), Soufflot demonstrated the process of appreciation and attempted to convince his audience of his argument (**Figure 2**). He began conveying the effect of the Gothic with Notre Dame Cathedral (**Figure 1**):

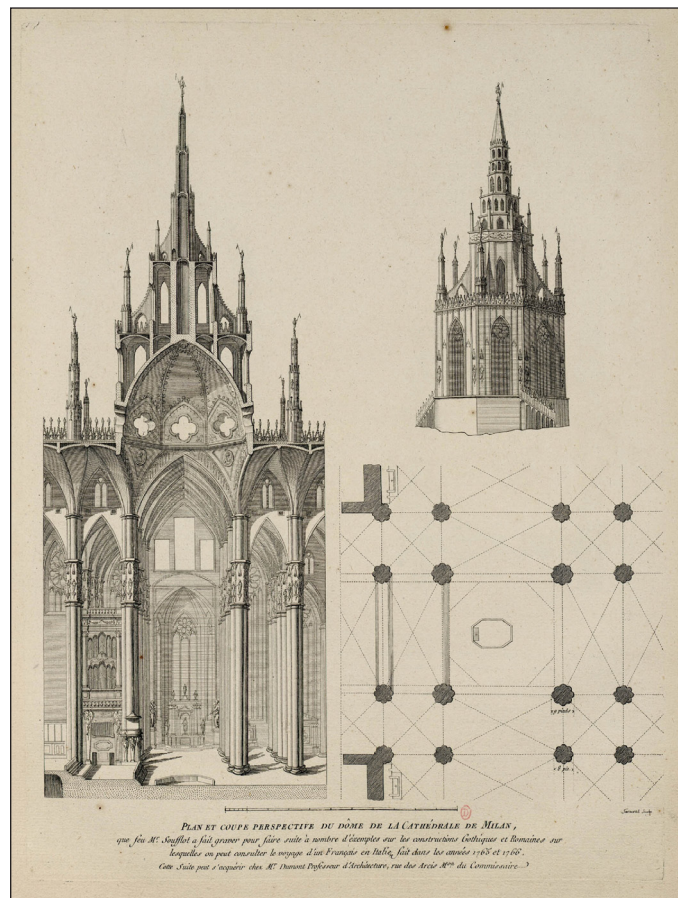


Figure 2: Jacques-Germain Soufflot, perspective view, section, and plan of the dome of Milan Cathedral, engraving by G. Taraval. From *Oeuvres de Jacques-Germain Soufflot*, Paris, 1757–77, Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, collections Jacques Doucet.

[The tribunes] of Notre Dame in Paris are of a considerable extent and produce a surprising effect in that they offer to the eye, as it were, a second church; its brightness, contrasting with the sort of dimness that reigns beneath, makes it appear both more indistinct and more elevated, and reveals to the spectators, as if in the distance, a thousand objects that—sometimes fading, sometimes reappearing—offer spectacles that delight [spectators] as they move away or approach. (Soufflot 1982: 191)

Soufflot's focus was on the movement of visitors who examine the different elements in the church's interior from afar and nearby.

After some brief remarks about Gothic façades, Soufflot began to compare Gothic with classicist churches. While they are quite similar in their disposition, he said, Gothic churches are of a very different method of construction: 'more ingenious, more daring and even more difficult than ours'. Within a Gothic church, the eye perceives a lightness of composition, an experience to which the act of moving through an interior contributed: 'we see, when entering the church and moving in the large nave, only one of their four sides' (Soufflot 1982: 193). He noted that the eye cannot immediately capture the entire interior, a fact that further enhanced the impression made on the viewer. He also compared the ratio of height to length of Gothic churches with that of classicist churches, creating a sort of scientific, or objective, comparison. His account thus mixed objectivity in analysis with subjective judgement on site (1982: 193–95).

Soufflot concluded that it is without a doubt the difference in proportion that produces these effects on the visitor. Initially the visitor would feel a sense of pleasure: 'if we enter into a Gothic church, our eyes are deceived by

its proportions that bring pleasure to our soul that surprise and amaze us at first, and which makes us say, out of admiration: here is a vessel of a prodigious length and height'. But this initial feeling changes when the visitor starts walking through the church. Following his first entrance, and his first surprise, Soufflot began to move through the church: 'We had easily believed we would never arrive at the end [of the church;] we start to walk and are surprised to arrive there earlier than we had thought; we judged, as a consequence, that it would be the same for the height if we would measure it, and we are right' (Soufflot 1982: 195). These effects were quite different from the ones produced by the dimensions in classicist churches (which he calls 'our churches') (**Figure 3**):

If on the contrary we enter one of our churches, for example, St Peter's of Rome, at first sight our soul is enchanted by a harmony of the whole and the parts; the idea one has given us suspends our judgement for some time, and finally we decide to say: I would have imagined this church to be much larger. We believe we are very close to the end; we walk towards it, and soon it seems to move away from us the more we move forward; that is when we are surprised at the extent [of the church], and we admit we have never seen such a long church. (Soufflot 1982: 195)

By the end of the exploration of a Gothic church, the initial pleasure is destroyed, while in a classicist church the opposite happens. For Soufflot, the experience of Gothic churches was negative while the experience of classicist ones was positive: 'In the first ones the exploration destroys the pleasure, so to say; in the others it creates it' (Soufflot 1982: 195). Moving through a Gothic nave was

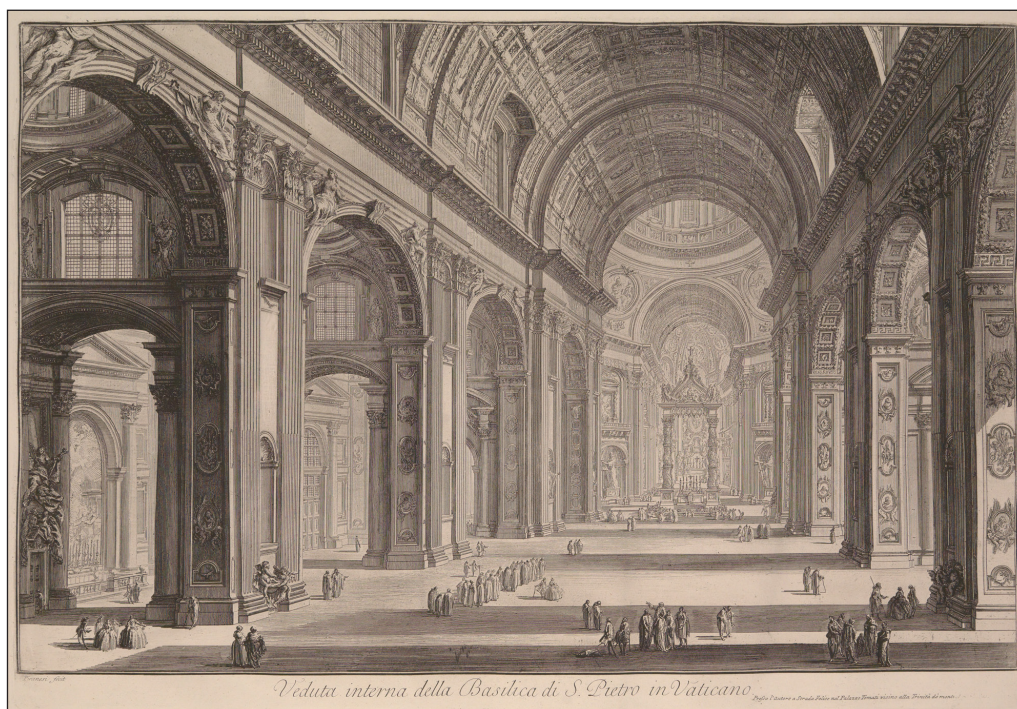


Figure 3: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, interior view of the Basilica of Saint Peter's Rome, ca. 1778. Ghent University Library.

disappointing because the eye misjudged the size of the space, while in a classicist church the expansiveness of the interior came as a nice surprise. He demonstrated that a static viewer judges wrongly and cannot comprehend the building's size. Only a beholder in motion could judge the actual dimensions, because they are unveiled through movement.

Soufflot's lecture contains two principal elements in his on-site exploration and judgement of Gothic churches: a dismissal of ornament while admiring the spaciousness and construction of the buildings, and an analysis of this spaciousness through a comparison with spatial experience of classicist churches. Both elements, based on explorations on site, appear again in later French sources of the period where they serve as a veiled or explicit criticism of contemporary architecture.

Ornament and Illusions of Space

French writers of this period were well aware of the lines the philosopher Montesquieu wrote about the ornamental aspects of Gothic architecture in his *Essai sur le goût* of 1757, in the chapter called 'Des plaisirs de la variété', a text that was also published in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's seminal *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* under the entry of 'Goût' (Taste). Montesquieu did not admire the spatial qualities of Gothic architecture, and focussed on the effect of ornament on the experience of space. He stated that a Gothic building appears confused when an abundance of ornament prevents the eye of the spectator from resting, and thus it causes displeasure. In a comparison with poetry, he argued in this text, 'a building of the Gothic order is a sort of enigma to the eye that views it; and the soul is embarrassed, like when one presents it with an obscure poem' (Montesquieu 1994: 21).⁵

One of the main architectural critics of the period, Marc-Antoine Laugier, had read Montesquieu and, according to Robin Middleton, might even have heard Soufflot's lectures in Lyon. Just like Soufflot, Laugier let his judgement of Gothic churches be guided by his own experience, which generated similar conflicting feelings. In his *Essai sur l'architecture* (Laugier 1753; 1755) he analysed his perceptions, employing an experimental method to account for different kinds of experience. In one passage he discussed the conflict between the innocent eye and the educated mind when examining a building:

I enter into the church of our lady [Notre Dame]; it is at Paris the most considerable of our Gothic churches ... [A]t the first glance of the eye my looks are stopt, [because] my imagination is struck with the extent, height, and freedom of its vast nave. I am forced to bestow some moments on the surprise that this great assemblage of majesty excites in me. Recovered from this first admiration, if I reflect on the detail, I find absurdities without number, but I throw the blame on the unhappiness of the times. ... [A]fter having well examined and criticised, returning to the middle of this nave, I still admire, and there remains in me an impression which makes me say; I behold many defects,

but yet behold that which is great. (Laugier 1755: 174–75; English translation from Laugier 1756: 197–98)

Laugier's account of his sensory perceptions evokes the sublime in emphasizing the vastness, greatness, and awe the vast space of the church inspires. Although he disliked its architectural forms and its style, Laugier did appreciate the enormous space of the building.

In his subsequent publication on architecture in 1765, *Observations sur l'architecture*, Laugier took his readers by the hand in showing them the cathedrals: 'Let us enter into one of our beautiful Gothic churches, for example the cathedrals of Amiens, Reims, or even Paris. Let us place ourselves in the centre of the crossing' (Laugier 1765). When standing in the middle of the church he suggested his readers let their imagination work in order to fully appreciate the elements that strike him as compelling:

Let us imagine dismissing all the impediments that obstruct our view. What do we see? A charming distribution, where the eye plunges deliciously through several lines of columns in chapels in recess, of which the stained-glass windows spread the light with abundance and irregularity; ... these aspects multiply, and are diversified even more; a mix, a movement, a tumult of pierces and masses that play, that contrast, and of which the entire effect is ravishing. (Laugier 1765: 130)

Laugier revealed a spectacle of architectural elements that move the beholder, aided by the imagination that erases certain unwelcome elements. For Laugier, as for many others, Gothic ornament had to be discarded by the mind to unveil the positive side of these buildings. He even made a distinction between the 'great ideas' with which the architects contributed and the 'poor inventions' of the 'decorators' (Laugier 1765: 130). Laugier's solution to the apprehension of conflicting feelings was to focus on the spatial qualities and the lightness of construction, turning a blind eye to the ornamental aspects.

The spatial qualities of Gothic churches that Laugier praised were, as we have seen in Soufflot's lecture, compared to those of the classicist ones. Montesquieu was one of the French authors in this period who wrote about their own movements within such classicist churches and how the unfolding of spatial experience in time affected them. He exposed this process in a section entitled 'Progression de la surprise'. At first sight, he argued, the church of Saint Peter's in Rome does not appear to be that large; only through examination does the eye of the spectator 'see the building becoming larger' while 'the astonishment increases'. Montesquieu compared the experience to natural phenomena, specifically, 'the Pyrenees, where the eye, that first thought it could measure them, discovers mountains behind the mountains, and we always lose ourselves even more' (Montesquieu 1757: 40–41).

André Morellet, like Montesquieu a contributor to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, was in Rome in 1758, and he analysed these phases of exploration in the same church. He observed how one cannot perceive

Saint Peter's in a single gaze or in a short amount of time, as the impressions grew gradually. As such, the church resembles even more 'a beautiful poem and a beautiful tragedy' (Morellet 1823: 69). This experience unfolded while moving through the church. While he wrote of his own perceptions, he referred to and confirmed what many previous travellers had written about their observations on the spot. The impression of the church was a forceful one, though not immediate; 'this majestic building does not strike you at first with all the admiration that it produces in stages. We do not grasp its immensity at the first entrance'. Upon entering, he saw two statues of angels placed against the two first pillars, and at first 'we think they are close by, and of human stature', but then 'we walk much longer than we thought to arrive' at these statues, and they turn out to be immense (Morellet 1823: 67).

Morellet went on to address the illusion of space experienced while walking through the interior. He thought his readers would surely go through a similar process while wandering through this building, and would acknowledge the illusion of distance and size that changes as they move through the space: Surely, he said, the grand pillars, which support the immense arches, appear infinitely less distant from one another as one crosses the space that separates them. After having crossed this space, 'the astonishment doubles as one begins to apprehend the height of the space close to the canopy'. Only through one's 'own experience of the distances and the grandeur of the masses' will one be able to understand the size of this church (Morellet 1823: 68). For Morellet, like his contemporaries, movement through space was crucial for understanding the architecture of that space.

He further reflected on the awareness of being a spectator, when he described the surprise that strikes his readers: 'the astonishment, the admiration that this beautiful spectacle must cause, and ... you experience a sort of self-esteem that inspires human beings to feel grandeur in the works of human beings, a secret charm, that maybe attaches us the most to the master pieces of art' (Morellet 1823: 67–68). Humans are inspired to be better people, Morellet says, when a great work of architecture instills that sense of grandeur.

Morellet then outlined how to design a building that produces a succession of different sentiments in the visitor, a series with a clear beginning and an ending: 'we always walk from soft to strong, from simple to magnificent'; just as a playwright writing a tragedy for the theatre uses different scenes to evoke different emotions, the architect, when designing a palace, for example, has to pay attention to how different spaces evoke different sentiments; 'the vestibule of [that] palace should not be equally decorated as a salon'. To perceive these effects, taking time to explore is essential, and their perception should occur in stages. A tragedy requires time to watch and understand, and a poem cannot be read in a day; likewise, we cannot experience 'an immense building' 'in less than a few hours' (Morellet 1823: 69).

Both Montesquieu and Morellet stressed how the progression of movement and how feelings change through these movements were essential in understanding Saint Peter's. Such movement was necessary to overcome an

initial disappointment about the spaciousness of the church, and then, after having explored the whole building, to fully appreciate the immensity of the space in the interior.

The French architect Julien-David Le Roy adopted a similar approach in his *Histoire de la disposition et des formes différentes que les Chrétiens ont données à leurs temples depuis le règne de Constantin le Grand jusqu'à nous* of 1764. He describes the process of apprehending the space in Saint Peter's church, which 'when we enter ... does not seem to have the immensity that we acknowledge it to have when we have spent time to explore the interior' (Le Roy 1764: 68). Just as Soufflot had done in his lecture, Le Roy told his readers how to come to a spatial understanding by comparing the height and width of a Gothic church. Such a comparison will reveal that Gothic naves, although very high, do not appear to be so. This is due to their 'being supported by columns of a small diameter, in relation to the spaces that separate them' (Le Roy 1764: 69–70). The view through a Gothic interior is relatively unobstructed, and the spectator thus can see a large part of the size and space of the church, unlike the experience of classicist churches.

Laugier wrote in his *Observations sur l'architecture*, which appeared one year after Le Roy's text, that the differences in spatial expression can be perceived and analysed in a comparison of the effect of Saint Peter's interior space with that of a Gothic church. He attributed the grand effect of a Gothic church to only one thing: the narrow intercolumniations. Saint Peter's did not seem as large as it actually was because the space between columns was so large; when looking down the full length of the nave, 'the eye finds only a very small number' of moments where it can pause (Laugier 1765: 55–56). Laugier considered the many architectural and spatial faults in the interior of classicist churches had been imitated for too long in modern churches.

He also criticized the churches built since the Renaissance where the interior space seems lower than it actually is, caused by the enormous projection of the cornices that interrupts the feeling of height: 'we know that an interrupted impression deteriorates and loses its effect' (Laugier 1765: 115). However, he found the opposite effect in Gothic churches, where one can experience the substantial height 'without interruption and without trouble', because 'nothing changes the impression of height and everything takes part in making it more noticeable' (Laugier 1765: 116).

For contemporary churches to have the same grand effect, Laugier suggested that 'maybe we should imitate and improve that Gothic architecture, and keep Greek architecture for the exterior' (Laugier 1765: 117). Laugier may be alluding here to Soufflot's church of Sainte Geneviève in Paris, which combined interior Gothic lightness with exterior classical ornament.

The Hidden Gothic

Between 1756 and 1760 Soufflot, who was by then 'Contrôleur des bâtiments de Paris' and 'Contrôleur général ambulant des bâtiments du Roi', in charge of the buildings in Paris and those built for the king, worked on

an extension of the church that he had explored with so much mixed emotion. He designed the sacristy and treasury located at the south side of Notre Dame in Paris. His drawings, signed by Louis XV, show the plans, sections, and elevations of a classicist building.⁶

As we can tell from these drawings and the published engravings (**Figure 4**), Soufflot added an ambulatory and a door to connect the Gothic building to his classicist extension. But the architectural style he chose to use for this building was distinctly classicist, both on the exterior and in the interior. The sacristy thus stood stylistically on its own and did not appear to be in dialogue with the church. Soufflot's designs betray no inkling of how much he admired certain aspects of the Gothic; perhaps a sacristy was not thought to be the right building type to express such appreciation. Half a century later, opinions would change, however; Soufflot's sacristy was demolished in 1832 when Viollet-le-Duc decided to purify the building and take away all non-Gothic additions,⁷ replacing Soufflot's sacristy with his own 'pseudo-Gothic' version (Mosser and Rabreau 1986: 98).

To the 18th-century French mind, the Gothic could be suitably integrated only in the interior of a church. Soufflot had the opportunity to do precisely that in a new

church for the city of Paris. In the same period that he was designing the sacristy, he was also working on the designs for Sainte Geneviève, for which Louis XV signed the first plans in 1757. Soufflot must have visited the church of Notre Dame quite regularly. He was thus able to use and translate his on-site findings of Gothic construction to the building of his new church, named after the patron saint of the city of Paris, and one of Louis XV's main building projects.

Soufflot studied the Gothic construction methods and recommended, just as his contemporaries did, that the structural aspects of these churches be considered as a way to renew contemporary architecture. In 1772, the Académie royale noted that, although they were aware of the shortcomings of this style, their members

turned their attention towards the monuments erected by the Goths, inferior in many respects to those of the beautiful architecture of the Greeks; noted that these monuments had been perhaps too much despised by the Renaissance and now set themselves to penetrate the secret of their light construction. (*Procès-verbaux*, 7 January, vol. 8, 118, cited in Herrmann 1962: 84).

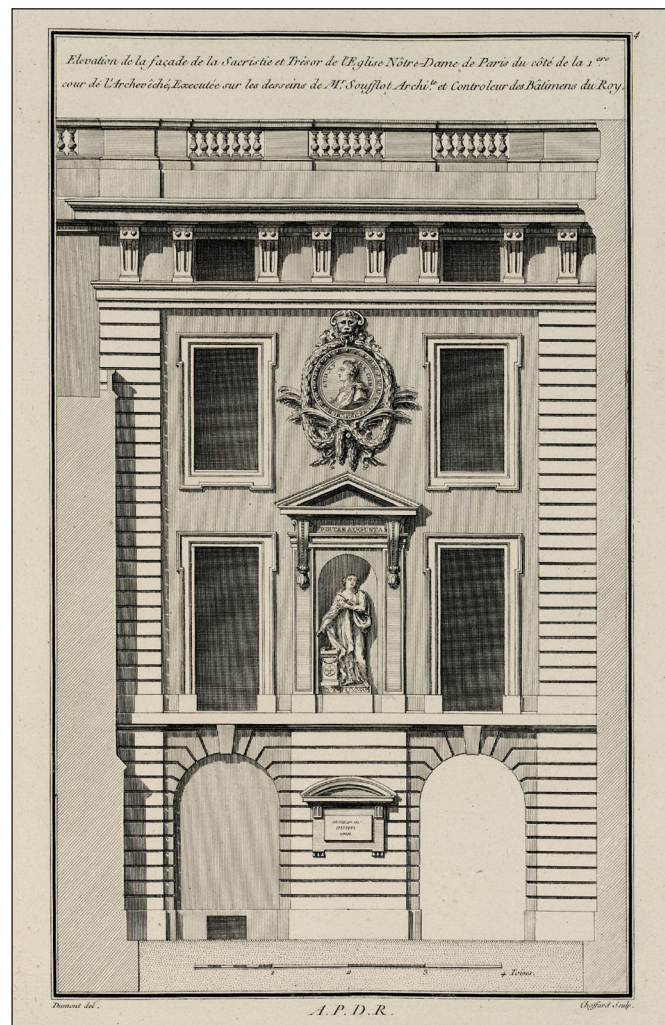


Figure 4: Gabriel-Martin Dumont, elevation of the facade of the sacristy and treasury of the Notre Dame Cathedral, designed by Jacques-Germain Soufflot, in *Oeuvres de Jacques-Germain Soufflot*, Paris, 1757–77. Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, collections Jacques Doucet.

Soufflot's colleague Le Roy summarized how the attitude towards the Gothic had changed among architects. He stressed the perfection of the daring constructions, which were sometimes overlooked because of all the negative associations with this style. To Le Roy the Goths perfected the art of using the building material available to them, citing the tiny stones they employed and the boldness of design they showed in their edifices. Only recently had the positive characteristics of their architecture come to be known and developed; only in recent years did architects 'endeavour to study all the marvels of [Gothic] constructions' (Le Roy 1764: 78).

Le Roy explained how the Goths had succeeded in building such lightness into their constructions. The vaults in their naves are taller than in classicist churches, have less thrust, and are less thick. The vault of the Notre Dame cathedral, for example, is only six inches thick, according to him, while the vault of Saint Sulpice, also in Paris, is almost three times as thick. This means that Gothic vaults, because of their weight and thrust, do not need the support of the sort of stout piers that classicist churches employ (Le Roy 1764: 78).

Le Roy specifically addressed his colleagues and fellow architects in this part, because he was recommending how to design. The lightness and height of the vaults, and as a consequence the slimness of the columns, were presented as a necessary object of study for architects, if they were to render contemporary church interiors as delightfully light as the Gothic ones. The Gothic was presented as the technical solution to improving classicist architecture.

Le Roy went one step further in recommending ways to improve contemporary architecture. In a later publication, the second edition of the *Ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce* of 1770, Le Roy suggested combining Gothic vaulting methods with Greek classicist orders:

by following ... in the footsteps of the Goths, by searching for the strongest and at the same time lightest materials for the construction of vaults, and by placing extremely slender piers at the points of support where those vaults exert their greatest force, French architects might endeavor to make the interiors of their churches more unobstructed than was formerly thought possible, while gracing them with Greek orders used in the noblest and most comprehensive manner. (Le Roy 1770: xxiii; Middleton 2004: 228)

The measures Le Roy proposed to imitate the lightness of Gothic architecture would also lead to the desirable spaciousness. But the architectural language had to remain classicist. Laugier had already made a similar suggestion earlier, when he recommended a fusion of 'the good taste of ancient architecture' with 'a height and lightness equal to our most beautiful Gothic churches' (Laugier 1755: 177). Laugier and Le Roy thus proposed an architectural hybrid that combined two styles, but each in a noticeably distilled form, where one takes the spatial and constructional focus and the other the ornamental foreground.

Soufflot's church, Sainte-Geneviève, was seen as the perfect example of such a fusion (**Figure 5**). Apparently, Soufflot himself had said that his aim was to unite 'the lightness of the construction of Gothic buildings with the purity and magnificence of Greek architecture'.⁸ He hid the Gothic constructional elements from sight and offered a light-filled and grand space among Corinthian columns.

Even before the building was actually built, Le Roy had anticipated that Sainte-Geneviève (and the new church of Madeleine by the architect Pierre Contant d'Ivry) would offer a spatial spectacle to the visitor in motion, noting



Figure 5: Interior of Sainte-Geneviève church, Paris, drawing by Jean-Baptiste Glomy, 1767. Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, collections Jacques Doucet.

that the plans reveal how the spectator will only discover the entire interior while walking. With every step, Le Roy said, 'the columns ... successively cover different spaces of the decoration of the church'. With only Soufflot's and Contant d'Ivry's drawings for their churches from which to judge, he continued: 'This changing scene not only takes place at the columns that are close to the spectator, but even in relation to those he will [subsequently] perceive'. The effect of the sun shining through the large windows of these Parisian churches creates a striking scene: 'And if the light animates the interior decoration of the buildings, I dare to say that an enchanting spectacle will result from this, of which we can form only feeble ideas' (Le Roy 1764: 85).

Le Roy thought Soufflot's church would work wonderfully, as it would for other architects, he believed. Marrying classicist architectural form with Gothic structural methods should lead to a renewal of French contemporary architecture: 'We will see knowledge of Gothic construction deepened, and will learn how mechanical principles can be applied to make Greek architecture more noble, using the imperfect materials at our disposal' (Armstrong 2012: 211).⁹ Le Roy, like Laugier, hailed the idea of a 'nobler' architecture that was taking shape in the two new churches being built in Paris: 'Contant and Soufflot sought to combine in the churches of the Madeleine and Sainte-Geneviève the beauty of Greek architecture with the daring of Gothic construction' (Armstrong 2012: 210). Le Roy suggested that even in architectural education, Gothic buildings could inform newness in architecture: 'Gothic churches offer the professor material for new reflections on architecture. He will show the students the daring and intelligence with which they were built and the beauties that strike the viewer upon entering them' (Armstrong 2012: 209).¹⁰

In the twenty years since Soufflot had given his Lyon lecture on Gothic architecture for the first time, thoughts on the Gothic had evolved. When he repeated the lecture in Paris in 1761 the Gothic was no longer seen as a disturbing, bizarre, monstrous, or barbarian style; it had become a key to renewing French contemporary church architecture. However, we might ask what these architects' contradictory interpretations of the Gothic meant for the meaning of style.

Style and the Spectator

Style is 'the general concept ... by which the spectator is enabled to interpret or 'read' the building correctly', writes Caroline van Eck (van Eck 1995: 95–96). The testimonies encountered above show how problematic this interpreting and reading was when 18th-century writers tried to make sense of Gothic architecture. Their puzzlement upon entering Gothic churches, their conflict between expectation and experience, between common opinion and their own perceptions, are all strikingly expressed in Soufflot's lecture and in Laugier's and Le Roy's publications.

In this article I have tried to demonstrate that we can only understand this turnaround of 18th-century judgement of the Gothic style if we study it from the point of view of the observer of these buildings. This turnaround happened

precisely through experience, which allowed architects of the time to find solutions for their conflicting feelings. By moving through the buildings, and by considering how to explain what experience does, they came to understand the idiosyncrasies of the Gothic, from its ornamentation to its spatiality.

We have seen how architects and writers decided to discard certain elements that constitute a style. Their reactions also raise questions about the workings of style. We concentrated here on style in the sense of rhetoric, of persuading a spectator of an idea in the way a speaker convinces his audience, as the effect of a building on a spectator, rather than as a category by which to classify architecture. But what remains of a building, of a style, when certain elements are mentally erased? When Soufflot and other architects looked at these buildings with a designer's eye, they asked themselves which elements of this style were useful for their own contemporary architecture. Gothic lightness, gracefulness, and spaciousness were the qualities most of these architects thought were missing from modern churches and which they wanted to be central to a renewal of French church architecture. Blondel, one of the first to apply the term 'style' directly to architecture in rhetorical terms, as the poetry of architecture (van Eck 1995: 96), wrote about the Gothic church of Sainte-Croix in Orléans:

[W]hat nobility, what dignity, what calmness [this church] offers the gaze of connoisseurs; when entering this temple a religious character affects the soul; a contemplative admiration anchors us and incites devotion in us [...] the large heights of the vaults, that, when we examine them, carry our minds to divinity, an ingenious elegance that satisfies reason; a beautiful simplicity that suffices in itself and makes us enjoy contemplation are the effects we experience in the interior of this edifice; something we sense rarely in our modern churches. (Herrmann 1962: 246)¹¹

Blondel explained that the classicist model came under pressure because the Gothic evoked different effects. While classicist churches affected admiration in the mind, Gothic churches moved the soul. In this period buildings were judged through the actual experience of them, and so the emotional effects of architecture became increasingly central to their design. Buildings that could move the spectator so strongly should function as examples for architects, Blondel thought.

Blondel had been quite critical of the Gothic style, but after reading Laugier, listening to Soufflot, and visiting the Gothic cathedral of Sainte-Croix in Orléans (Herrmann 1962: 89), he too thought that these churches should serve as models, for their height, lightness, and simplicity. In his *Cours d'architecture* of 1771, he advised architects to study this type of architecture, 'only to imitate the height of their vaults, that apparent lightness' that is solid at the same time, and 'the great simplicity of forms, the constant uniformity of their plans, that real grandeur, that make their monuments appear even larger, because they only (or

little) employ horizontal parts'. Blondel even went so far as to state that the most important ambition an architect should have is to create a pleasing effect and an appropriate character for every type of his buildings, and not to make them resemble 'antique, ancient, gothic or modern architecture'. To him 'a real architect is impartial, the beautiful to him is always beautiful'. Architects should draw their inspiration generally, and Blondel painted a picture of an open-minded artist: 'Everything is his resource, he can draw on the different productions of the fine arts and the infinite variety of nature' (Blondel 1771: II, 318).

With his focus on the effects of architecture rather than on a specific style, Blondel was not alone; as Herrmann and Middleton suggest, he was not a particularly original thinker, but rather one who, in his opinions on architecture, followed trends. Laugier, writing about Gothic churches in his *Observations*, compared the function of their interiors to 'allées', or lines, of trees. To him, a repetitive series of elements placed at equal distances apart provokes strong sensations in a spectator (Laugier 1765: 116–17). When Laugier writes in his *Essai* about the Strasbourg cathedral, any reference to style is missing:

This superb pyramid is a ravishing master-piece by its prodigious elevation, its exact diminution, its

agreeable form, by the justness of the proportions, and by the singular finess of the labour. I do not believe that ever any architect has produced any thing of so bold an invention, so happily thought, so properly executed. There is more art and genius in this one piece, than all that we see any where else of the most wonderful. (Laugier 1755: 201; English translation from Laugier 1756: 227)

And Le Roy, in his tribute to the peristyle in the last part of his *Essai sur la Théorie de l'Architecture* (Le Roy 1770), conveys a focus on the general qualities of architecture that also alludes to an erasure of style.

Le Roy had also placed contemporary architecture in a timeline in his *Histoire de la disposition et des formes* of 1764. In his attempt to nationalize Gothic architecture, he argued that, just as Egyptian, Greek, and Roman architects had adapted their architecture to local building materials, so the French had managed to introduce local materials and vaulting techniques of the Gothic that, in combination with classicist architectural forms, formed a new French classicism, as expressed in the churches of Sainte Geneviève and Madeleine. An informative comparative plate in his publication demonstrates this development (**Figure 6**).

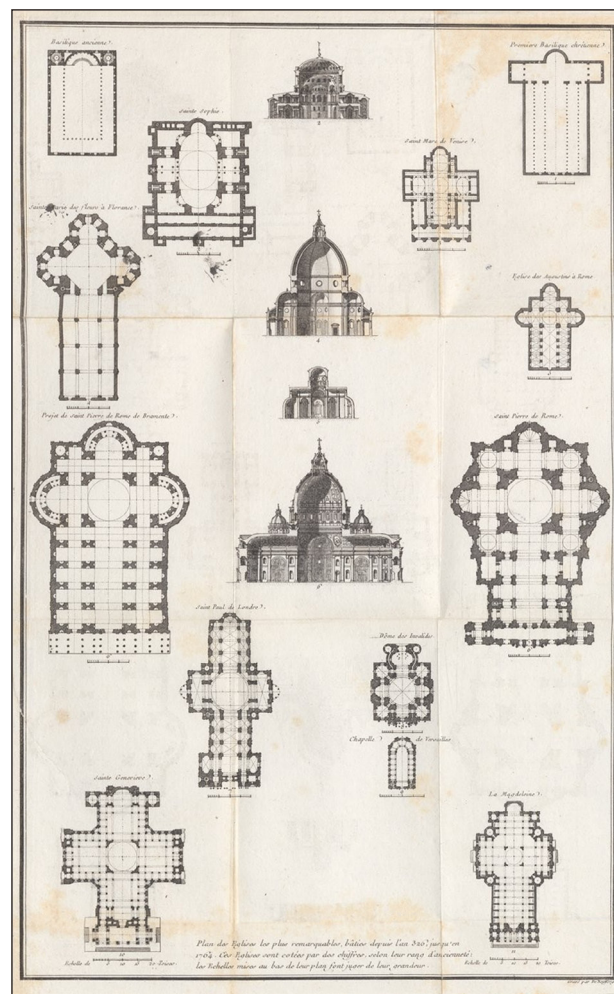


Figure 6: Julien-David Le Roy, 'Plan des églises les plus remarquables, baties depuis l'an 326 jusqu'en 1764'. From Le Roy (1764).

To Le Roy the combination of elegant Gothic spaciousness with a classicist language in Soufflot's church was pure modernity. In this distilling of both styles, can we still talk about a presence of the Gothic? At the end of his publication Le Roy turned to the effects of buildings, as he would do again in his *Essai sur la théorie de l'architecture* of 1770, in particular to the effects of peristyles, to conclude that it is not the style of such architectural forms that is important but their general qualities of space, light, and shadow.

The effect of Gothic churches – the fact that they could elevate the soul, as Blondel described – is central to the reactions we have encountered in this article. However, the French writers lacked the historical layer that Goethe would provide when he concentrated on the effect of a building on the mind and the senses. If Goethe entered 'into a dialogue with the past through emotive immersion', as Mari Hvattum has put it, the past was not part of the French architects' reactions (Hvattum 2017: 703). They did not focus, as architects would do in the 19th century, on style as subject to changing times and taste, or as an expression of a particular epoch. Goethe might have known these French discussions, but his outlook and cultural contexts differed from his French counterparts. For both Goethe and his French contemporaries, their own experiences were the primary source for their judgements of the Gothic. However, where Goethe emphasized the subjectivity of his reactions, French architects tried to deduce more general values from their experience of style. The experience of style can thus be personal or more general, historicist or non-historicist, but in all cases it is an expression of a viewer's agenda and epoch.

Notes

- ¹ The manuscript of the lecture is in Lyon, Académie des Sciences, M. 263. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
- ² While the French admired its spatiality and construction, the English concentrated on the sentimental aspects of the Gothic (Germann 1972).
- ³ Attitudes to the Gothic in transformation projects ranged from positive to negative, from transforming churches into Graeco-Gothic hybrids to changing Gothic elements into classicist ones.
- ⁴ Also in a lecture for the Académie in Lyon, fellow Lyon architect Ferdinand Delamonce argued in 1736 for the superiority of Gothic proportions because of their delicacy. In 1738 Amédée François Frézier expressed his admiration for the Gothic system of vaulting as well.
- ⁵ His essay in the *Encyclopédie* is entitled 'Goût' (vol. 7, 1757: 764–66).
- ⁶ Paris, Archives Nationales, N and O₁ 1690. The drawings were also engraved by Charpentier and published by Dumont.
- ⁷ Viollet-Le-Duc also had Jules Hardouin-Mansart's and Robert de Cotte's interventions in the choir of the church demolished.
- ⁸ Rondelet had written to d'Angiviller, 20 October 1780, about Soufflot's ambition 'de réunir sous une des

plus belles formes la légèreté de la construction des édifices gothiques avec la pureté et la magnificence de l'architecture grecque'. Letter in Archives Nationales, Paris O₁ 1694, cited in Mondain-Monval (1918: 423), Petzet (1961: 147–52), and Armstrong (2012: 229).

- ⁹ Carton B 17, Arch. Inst. Discours sur les avantages que l'académie retirerait de la publication de ses Travaux, cited in Armstrong (2012: 211).
- ¹⁰ 'Mémoire des commissaires nommés ... pour examiner différents objets qui regardent les élèves'. Carton B 19, Arch Inst. This appreciation by Le Roy in his report for the Académie d'architecture was not new, as Armstrong states, but his inclusion of it in the programme of the Académie was.
- ¹¹ *Recueil ... de Blois*, 1760. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Institut, MS 1046, as quoted in Herrmann, 246.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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