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The development from High Gothic to the  
*Rayonnant* style through Reims Cathedral  
and the Sainte-Chapelle

By Diane Prigent

The Gothic style introduces an incredibly influential set of engineering and design principles for architecture and architectural decoration in art history. It emanated from France in 1140 and evolved through 1500. Architects and patrons developed the style through centuries, constantly innovating their building techniques in order to elevate and complicate their enormous structures. These architects' objective was to increase the height of the churches, intensifying their verticality. In the late middle ages, France was governed by a powerful monarchic dynasty, the Capetians. The royal family was powerful, wealthy and closely allied with the Catholic Church. This dynasty strongly encouraged religious art and facilitated the development of Gothic styles. Art and education, unlike previous generations where they had generally been fostered within monasteries, began to grow in cities and more specifically in Cathedrals and Universities. This accelerated the spread of gothic architecture throughout France.

At a time when art and religion were tightly linked, economic success of France allowed for the creation of many great edifices. Artists and patrons were following the gothic philosophy, which associated art with religion; Gothic structures were constructed as representations of (and for) God's grandeur. Moreover, the architects' motivation in building such cathedrals was focused on constructing great houses of worship; places that created commanding images of the monarchy and the Catholic Church's power. These buildings were decorated and embellished in a grand way. Through Gothic cathedrals' splendor, the worshiper could have a spiritual and divine experience, ameliorating his connection to God. This new consideration of the church, allowing enhanced worship through its focus on aesthetic qualities, emanated was developed during the gothic

period; it cumulated in the final stage of the Gothic era, with the *Rayonnant* style.

Through the High Gothic and the *Rayonnant* periods, French architects developed great skills and great senses of taste, which led to wonderfully elevated and decorated structures. Through examples taken from the High Gothic, and the *Rayonnant* style, we will study how the arts were reaching new levels of refinement in order to bring God and his worshipers closer together.

After being inspired by great Gothic Cathedrals throughout France, artists in the 13<sup>th</sup> century were focusing on improving the work of their predecessors. Emulating their predecessors in style and attempts, High Gothic architects worked on improving and developing the style. Believing in the Gothic philosophy of connecting art and religion, the goals of artists were to reach greater heights, creating fine, light structures with the most embellishments possible. The development of the style reinforced the purpose of the churches as an art object, used to elevate the worshipers and provoke spiritual sensations. Situated in the Champagne region, in the north east of Paris, Reims was the city where French kings were coronated. Representing the French monarchy and its traditions, Reims Cathedral (**Figure 1**) captured the attention of the most important patrons of French art. When the original structured burned down in 1211 the king and clergy commissioned a Gothic Cathedral to be rebuilt on the site that same year. Four architects worked successively to finally complete the massive Cathedral in 1311. The plan of the cathedral captured the development of the Gothic style and how architects were gathering inspiration from different Gothic cathedrals. In order to improve the style, architects were researching and combining different plans and building techniques from other Gothic examples like Notre dame de Paris (1163-1200) (**Figure 2**) and Chartres (1194-1220)



**(Figure 3)**. Similar to that in Paris, the nave at Reims **(Figure 4)** was elongated and extended directly into the choir, where the transept almost completely faded into the nave. However, the transept was still existent, which reinforced and extended the width of the cathedral similar to Chartres, but different in that; Reims did not have a distinctive Latin-cross plan. The still noticeable transept extended the cathedral width, and it served as a great support for the larger than thirty-seven meters main vault **(Figure 5)**.<sup>1</sup> The nave's height was emphasized by groin vaults, the thin columns forming the ambulatory, and by the fact that the nave seemed to be prolonged all the way into the five circular chapels that formed the *chevet*. The interior impression of length and verticality reminded the viewer of Notre Dame, Paris, but the more complex and developed decorative additions were inspired by Chartres.<sup>2</sup> The principal ambition of the builders was to elevate the structure to the highest point in order to be spiritually closer to heaven. The flying buttresses were Gothic architectural elements that supported the weight of the stones and kept the thin wall standing. In addition, they added some aesthetic qualities and intensified the skeletal-like impressions depicted in Gothic edifices. The architectural decorations of Reims Cathedral were extremely ornate. It is evident in the combination of basic geometrical patterns and figural sculptures that combine to produce an impressively complex use of stone, stained-glass windows, and sculptures, inside and outside.

The decoration in Reims gathered different meanings and was intended to be permanent. As Clark wrote in *Reading Reims, I. The Sculptures on the Chapel Buttresses*:

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<sup>1</sup> James Snyder, *Medieval Art* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Pearson: New Jersey, 2006), 359

<sup>2</sup> Snyder *Medieval Art* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Pearson: New Jersey, 2006), 358

The decoration of a Gothic cathedral was not a monolithic program destined to have a single meaning over time, but a collection of multivalent ideas that had different meanings at different epochs.<sup>3</sup>

Besides bringing the worshiper closer to God through soaring heights and impressive groin vaults, decorations and sculptures were added to benefit worship. Sculptures and reliefs were directly integrated into the structure, becoming part of the masonry itself. The increasing use of architectural decoration could be seen as a way for architects to elevate the cathedral itself, as a work of art made for and through God. The west facade of the Reims Cathedral (**Figure 6**) represents wonderfully the incorporation of decorative sculptures into a gothic structure. It also highlights the importance given to the construction of giant religious works of art made not only for liturgical purposes. The pointed arch porches are massive, fully covered with reliefs (**Figure 7**). The viewer is encouraged to feel inspired by the beauty and complexity of the designs. Every inch of the tympanum is filled with holy figures that represent the power of the Church. Depicted as praying under the figures is a gallery of High Kings.<sup>4</sup> In addition to representing religious power, the High Kings stand for the monarchy and its association with the Church. There is a classical revival in the way the figures were sculpted. As is clear in *Annunciation and Visitation* (1230-1233) (**Figure 8**), the viewer can clearly see that the figures are realistic and pull different elements from classical forms. Each body, posture, face, and expression is differentiated from the other; they are all standing in space, with a visible *contrapposto*. The figures' draped robes outline the shapes and movements of their bodies. In addition to reviving classicism, the elements mentioned above also represented the period's courtly manners. Because the Monarchy was powerful, courtly

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<sup>3</sup> William W. Clark, "Reading Reims, I. The Sculptures on the Chapel Buttresses" *The University of Chicago Press* (The International Center of Medieval Art, 2000), 135

<sup>4</sup> Snyder *Medieval Art* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Pearson: New Jersey, 2006) 360

behaviors were appreciated and admired. The refinement and lightness of Reims' sculptures represented the customs and attitudes of the court. Because of the desire to represent God through art, and the desire to satisfy their patrons, the clergy, and royalty, Gothic architects created great vertical structures full of decorative architectural elements and sculptures.

The *Rayonnant* style was the zenith for the gothic architectural development. It combined all of the formal and contextual elements of gothic art, as discussed earlier, with the example of Reims Cathedral. It was also known as the Courtly Style, which proved the importance of the monarchy for late gothic, and more particularly for *Rayonnant* architecture. The skeletal elements featured in constructions were still highly represented and used often. Furthermore, the "skinless" aspects of Gothic edifices were amplified to their full extent. The decorative, spiritual purpose of the church was brought to its full extent, as well. Under the reign of Louis IX (1226-1270) the monarchy and the Church were strongly linked and ruled both the economic and spiritual side of France. The structure that best represents the new *Courtly* style is Sainte-Chapelle (**Figure 9**). Built as a private chapel for Louis IX, it was also intended to hold precious relics brought from Constantinople. The ability to hold relics and to worship them was priceless to the king, who led the Seventh and Eighth Crusades and who intensely embraced the Catholic Church. After acquiring great symbols of his faith, he commissioned a private worship space to protect and honor his relics. The Sainte-Chapelle was built to house his treasured and religious edifice. As stated by Andrew Ayers, "To acquire the Crown of Thorns, Louis had paid the then-astronomical sum of 135,000 livres. The Sainte-Chapelle by

comparison, came cheap at only 40,000 livres.”<sup>5</sup> This fact explains that the luxury of the chapel was a personal delight to the monarch; indeed, it was a way for Louis to show and express his dedication to the Catholic Church. The combination of the chapel’s reliquary purposes and its use as the new worship space for the royal family explains the form of the structure. As in previous Gothic styles, *Rayonnant* architects gave much importance to the visual representations of the structures’ main purposes. Since the chapel was intended to hold relics, it was designed like a reliquary. This new representation of purposes required new techniques and skills. After describing the ways in which Louis IX was intending to link himself to Christ, Ayer continues his analysis of the Sainte-Chapelle and explains:

It was the Sainte-Chapelle’s role as a shrine, moreover, that dictated both its physical form and decorative treatment: It was conceived to evoke on a monument scale the work of goldsmiths and jewelers, whose gem-encrusted reliquary boxes were considered the highest form of church art by virtue of their association with Saints and Altar.<sup>6</sup>

Also, since it was a private structure mainly used by the king and his closest entourage, the chapel was kept relatively small. It is twenty-six meters long, under eleven meters wide and slightly over forty-two meters high.<sup>7</sup> The structure has been attributed to Pierre de Montreuil (1200-1267), a French architect that also worked on the remodeling of Notre dame de Paris. When designing the structure, the architect focused on creating the most vertically-oriented structure possible, while entirely replacing the already thin gothic walls with stained glass. The plan of the chapel was modeled like a miniature cathedral. The transept is shrunken, and the thin, long space recalled the designs of the

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Ayers, *The architecture of Paris: An architectural Guide* (Axel Menges, 2004), 25

<sup>6</sup> Ayers, *The architecture of Paris: An architectural Guide* (Axel Menges, 2004), 24

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

radiating chapels in the cathedral of Amiens.<sup>8</sup> (1220-1270) (**Figure 10**) Although buttresses were constructed to support the chapel, instead of using flying buttresses, which had become typical in the architectural structures of the time, the architect used wall-buttresses that were decorated. Because the buttresses were positioned against the building, they were thin, decorated and invisible from the inside. Diagonal and transverse ribs supported the high vault. The rib vaults were directly linked to the aisle vaults as the columns supported them together. The ribs symmetrically met as they formed supporting lean columns that emphasized the verticality of the chapel.

The Sainte-Chapelle brings the culmination of the Gothic sculptural architecture and architectural decoration to a head. The jewel of a chapel gathers and improves different decorative elements from earlier Gothic structures with the uses of new techniques that were incorporated by metalworkers. The use of metals was necessary in order to complete the Sainte-Chapelle structure, not only for decorative purposes, but also for construction purposes. Metal technologies allowed the structure to be built in such a prodigious manner. In *Mediaeval Art* W.R. Lethaby states,

The windows were sub-divided by strong grates of wrought-iron, some of the horizontal bars of which ran on through the piers continuously. At the Sainte-Chapelle a chain was imbedded in the walls right round the building, and the stone vaulting ribs were reinforced curved bands of Iron placed on each side and bolted to them.<sup>9</sup>

The new uses of metals in the construction permitted the *Rayonnant* style's love of transparency, lightness and stained glass to be represented in the Sainte-Chapelle with new bravado and magnitude. Because of the development of materials and techniques, the Sainte-Chapelle allowed its visitors to experience the *lux nova*, which transformed the

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<sup>8</sup> Allan M Brodie, "Sainte-Chapelle" *Oxford University press* (Oxford Art Online, 2007), np

<sup>9</sup> William Richard Lethaby, *Mediaeval Art* (Duckworth & co, 1911), 161

space into a glorious combination of multiple colored lights.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the Chapel structure's construction, the authentic decorations and stained glass designs were created to emphasize the purposes of the Sainte-Chapelle as a reliquary and as a place for royal worship. Consequently, stained-glass artists and sculptors excelled their gothic art in the same way that architects and designers had, while working on the Sainte-Chapelle structure. Again, the artists that created the architectural decorations attempted to produce the most beautiful and inspiring stained glass designs and sculptures. While representing the new *Courtly* style, each artist contributed to the construction of the greatest chapel at the time and gave inspiration to artists throughout Europe, not only for architecture and decoration, but also for illuminated manuscripts. As describes by Madeline H. Caviness,

The brilliant tonality, in which red and blue predominate with touches of deep golden-yellow and paler colors, had been gradually intensified since the mid-twelfth century; these colors were not surpassed in glass later than that of the Sainte Chapelle, and already in other buildings of the mid-thirteenth century this brilliancy had given way to quieter tones, modified by an increased use of white glass. Furthermore, at the time when the Sainte Chapelle was built, as perhaps at no other, stained glass was emulated in manuscript illumination.<sup>11</sup>

Using their own faith and inspirations, artists and designers created great stained-glass designs that illustrated the *Bible* while still retaining the *Courtly* Style's characteristics. While carefully organizing and planning scenes from the Creation, artists had followed the led of classical revival in their figures. In addition to being moralizing, the chapel's stained glass used some formal characteristic from classical art. For example, in *The feast of Abraham*, the figures are elongated. Also, the way in which the figures are displayed interacting and the forms of their bodies recall the courtly manners. Their association with the court, monarchy or aristocracy is obvious. Another great decorative example of

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<sup>10</sup>Snyder, *Medieval Art* 2nd ed., (Pearson: New Jersey, 2006), 365

<sup>11</sup> Madeline H. Caviness "Three Medaillons of Stained Glass from the Sainte Chapelle of Paris" *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* vol 62, no.294 (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1967)np

classical revival combined with aristocratic features and made with all the attention and luxurious approaches that the Sainte-Chapelle was constructed within, is the ivory sculpture of the *Virgin and Child*. **(Figure 12)** The Figures are elongated, and serenely interacting with each other. The Virgin is standing in *contro-posto* relaxing her right leg but with a strong twist on her left. Her gown is slightly shaping her body and her serpentine posture is emphasized by the fall of the drapery. The attention given to fabrics increases the graceful composition. Christ is comfortably seated and playfully interacting with the Virgin. He is reaching for the apple that she is gently holding in her right hand. Christ represents the new Adam and the Virgin represents Eve. Although it is intended to be moralizing, it is very gracious and courtly. The Sainte-Chapelle also had examples of stained glass compositions that incorporated monarchic symbolism such as the *Fleur de Lis* **(Figure 13)**. Some holy figures were also directly modeled on royalty highlighting the close relationship between the monarchy and the Late Gothic art; Furthermore, it demonstrates the intimate links between the Catholic Church and the monarchy.

Gothic art was one of the most significant periods for French art. While there were a number of phases over the three-hundred-centuries development, building techniques and creative processes evolved. The ultimate ambition of the architects and artists was to generate spiritual experiences through highly decorated religious structures. This light and sophisticated architectural and decorative style produced an immense number of edifices through France. With great cathedrals like the one in Reims, medieval architects have displayed amazing skills in order to elevate vaults and to be able to create highly detailed and precise decorations as shown through reliefs and sculptures. The developments of stained-glass designs and the use of new materials permitted artists to

expand their work in size and in complexity. The specific techniques of masonry, stone construction, and stained glass design developed by Gothic artists and technicians permitted the Gothic art to culminate with the *Rayonnant* or Courtly style. The Sainte-Chapelle represents prodigious achievements in techniques and in style. As affirmed by Andre Ayers “Even Amongst the other extraordinary achievements of the medieval period, the Sainte Chapelle stands out, and its capacity to amaze remains undiminished”<sup>12</sup>. In addition to being an immaculate heritage for the art world, the Sainte-Chapelle instructs us about the French medieval society and the intimate relationship between art, religion, and the monarchy under the reign of Louis IX, who was canonized in 1297.

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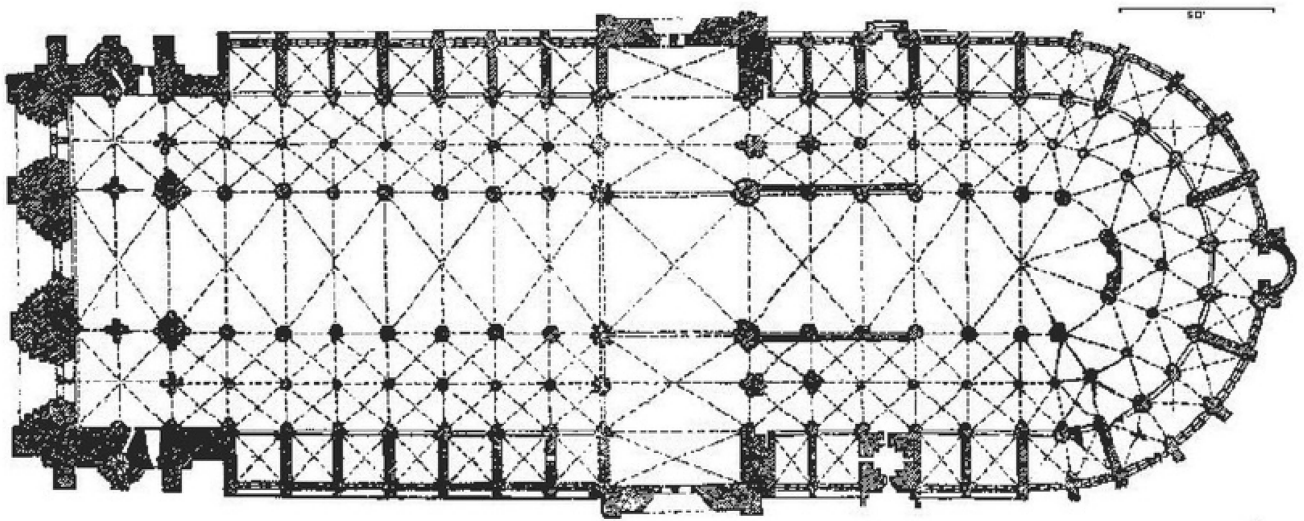
<sup>12</sup> Ayers, *The architecture of Paris: An architectural Guide* (Axel Menges, 2004), 23



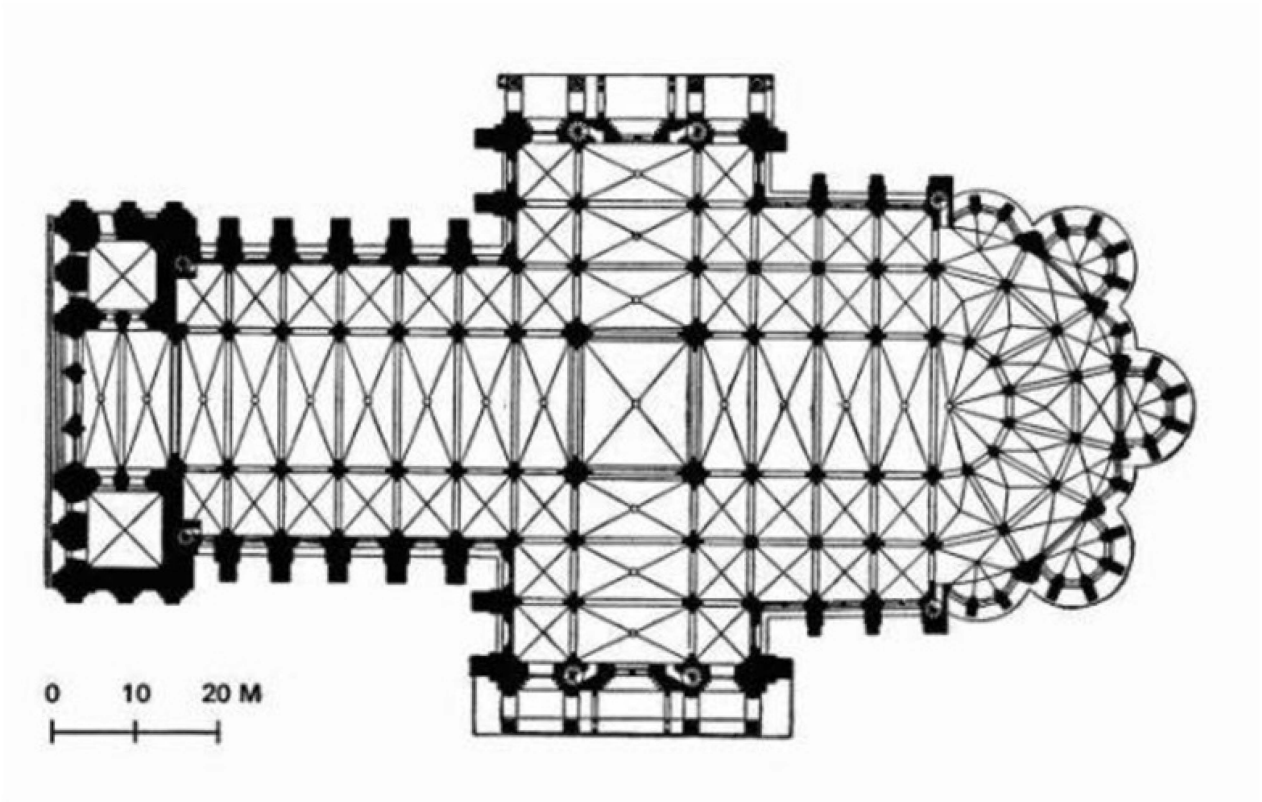
## Illustrations



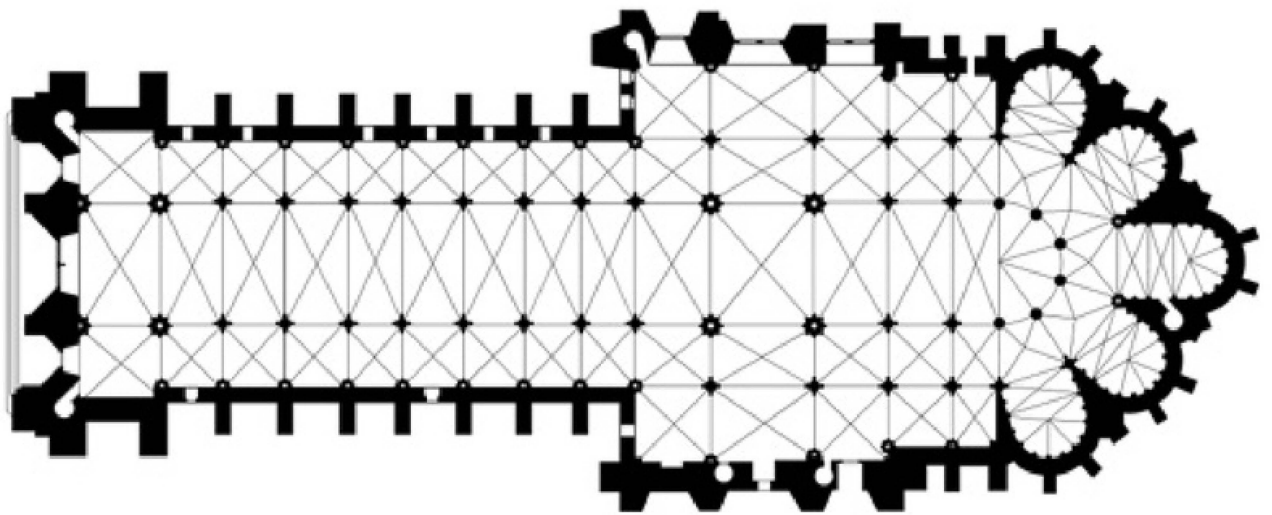
**Figure 1:** Reims Cathedral, began 1211



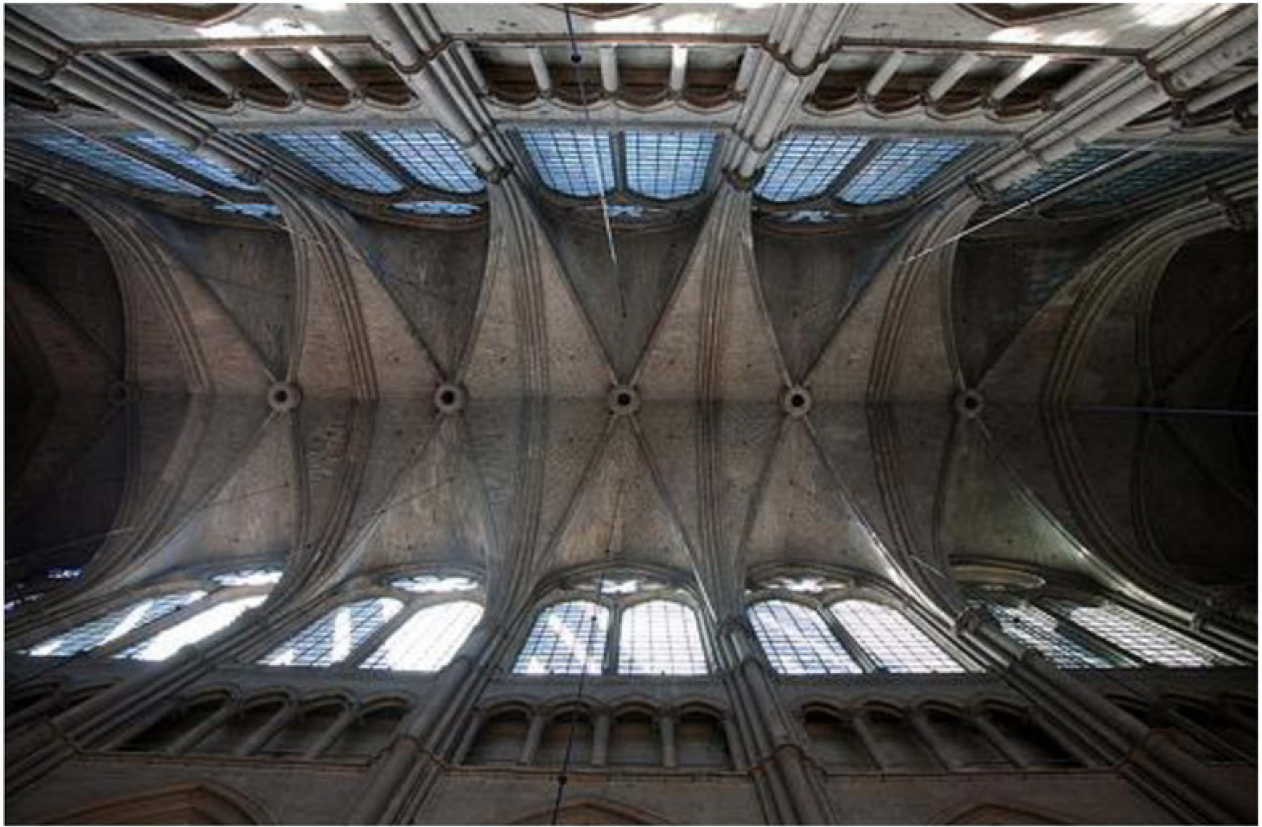
**Figure 2:** Plan of the Cathedral of Paris, began 1163



**Figure 3:** Plan of Chartres Cathedral, began 1194



**Figure 4:** Plan of Reims Cathedral, began 1211



**Figure 5:** Reims Cathedral, Main Vaults, began 1211





**Figure 6:** Reims Cathedral, west façade, began 1211



**Figure 7:** Tympanum of Reims Cathedral, West Façade, began 1211





**Figure 8:** Annunciation and Visitation in Reims Cathedral, 1230-1233





**Figure 9:** Sainte-Chapelle, 1241-1248



**Figure 10:** Cathedral of Amiens, 1220-1270



**Figure 11:** Virgin and Child, Sculpture from the Sainte-Chapelle, 1241-1248





**Figure 12:** *Fleur de Lis*, Symbol of French Monarchy, in Sainte Chapelle, began 1241-1248

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