

Basilica of Saint Denis

Guided Tour

1. Brief history of the basilica



Legend: France's patron saint Denis was sent to convert the inhabitants of Paris to christianity but he was beheaded by the Romans on the hill at Montmartre. After he was decapitated he picked up his head and carried it 4 miles. Later King Dagobert founded an abbey on the site of his tomb in the 7th century.



Abbot Suger is the one who rebuilt the basilica. He was running the country whilst the king Louis VII was off fighting in the crusades. The basilica (church) was constructed around what was already there - including the chapel that had been built over the saint's grave in the 5th century.

© Open Door Web Site 2001

Why is it so famous?



Almost every French king since 996 A.D. has been buried there. The dead have been honoured with sculptures made out of marble. Inside we can see these sculptures which were made from the 12th to 16th centuries. These became more and more extravagant as time went on they should look out for the tomb of Henry II and Catherine de Medicis. There is nothing in these tombs however, as they were ransacked and the bones thrown away during the French revolution by the mob.



The design as it is the first example of a church with gothic elements. The students should look out for the following

(i) The design is based on biblical command 'let there be light' and inside there is a preoccupation with light, more unified space and larger openings. Inside it is much brighter than your typical medieval cathedral. The design allowed for the use of stained glass windows with colours red and blue.

(ii) the rose window which was the first of its kind

(iii) use of structural innovations cross rib vaults and flying buttresses to create space.

Stress that Suger's church transformed western architecture : gothic elements can best be seen in the chancel and ambulatory with its famous stained glass windows.

2. Looking at the outside

Gothic architecture was the derogatory name given to this type of architecture by those in the renaissance period. It began in France in 12th century and spread throughout Europe. At St Denis we see the beginning of gothic architecture, although it still has romanesque elements.

Gothic elements to look out for on the outside

- ❖ rose window
- ❖ a monument that seemed to dwarf man
- ❖ decorated portals that draw the observer into the building

The rose window. First example of a rose window in gothic architecture. 2 towers - note that the north tower is gone as it was taken down in 1847. Very tall building :going up to heaven.



© Open Door Web Site 2001

Entrance : central portal above west facade there are decorations either side of the door. These show scenes from the Last judgement.



3. Inside

Note the shape of the cathedral : Roman basilica modified by a Christian cross. There is the central nave then the two lateral aisles which make the arms of the cross.

Nave



= center aisle of a cathedral. Look at the central stained glass window above the choir (area in front of altar where the choir sings) in the back of the church. The nave ceiling is 24 metres high. Everything is built to give idea of verticality going up towards heaven. Look at the gothic arches and the columns as they rise up. Here we can see an example of 3 storey elevation: each element on top of the other
Arcade= series of arches supported by columns, piers or pillars
Triforium= a gallery of arches above the side aisle
vaulting in the nave of a church
Clerestory = upper part of nave, transepts, choir of a church which contains windows to let in light
This gives sense of direction, of going upwards - man's journey from earth to heaven.



Notice changing light as it flows in and out of church. Notice sense of space : another important element of gothic architecture. Gothic architecture placed importance on framework i.e. piers, arches and buttresses NOT on the walls.

Ambulatory

aisleway surrounding the choir at east end of the cathedral. Here there are two large windows which are diaphanous (thin and transparent) And allow more light in. Gothic architecture tried to reduce wall surfaces. Light is an important element of religious symbolism of gothic cathedrals. On the ceiling we can see ribbed vaulting (vaulting that crowns in a pointed arch) This was built by Suger and its influence on other buildings was very important.

South/North transept

(perpendicular, north/south crossing of the nave to form the horizontal unit of a cross)
Here were 16 recumbent effigies commissioned by St Louis. 14 have survived. Their features are idealised ; they are crowned and carry a sceptre. Notice the different styles of tombs from the simple ones to the more extravagant ones.

Crypt

Explore it to see who is buried there.

© Open Door Web Site 2001