Cathedral Buildings Essay, Research Paper

The Cathedral wa a symbol of authority and religious achievement to people of the Middle Ages. Both Romanesque and Gothic style cathedrals are monuments to the skill and creativity of medieval people. Upon entering a Romanesque or Gothic style cathedral, one would have noticed that the function of these houses of worship is very similar. They are each an urban religious center in which priests conducted masses. Upon further examination of the sculptures and the different structures that embody them, one would have found that they differ quite dramatically.

Aside from being a religious center in which mass was conducted, Romanesque style cathedrals had one function that churches before them had never employed. They housed relics that attracted thousands of Christian pilgrims. Gothic cathedrals did this and more. They housed the administrative seat of the bishop, served as an educational center, and also served as a municipal center that attracted business, civic events, and festivals. While the Romanesque style cathedral held sacred relics, the advent of the Gothic style cathedral provided a central hub for the medieval urban community.

The portal of the Romanesque cathedral was adorned with much sculpture. It contained elaborate carvings that reminded one of sin, death, and judgement. Narrative scenes depicting the life of Christ often ornamented the capitols of columns. The scenes on the sculptures of the Romanesque cathedral reminded one of the wrath of God and the inevitability of sin. On Gothic cathedrals, however, the sculpture concentrated on portals, capitols, and choir screens was much more light-hearted. Focused on depicting stories from the bible and individual characters such as Christ and the Virgin Mary, medieval sculptures depicted a profound symbolic message.

The Romanesque and Gothic style cathedral shared the same floor plan?the Latin cross. Despite this similarity, the design and structure of these cathedrals was quite different. Romanesque style churches employed a heavy stone structure to withstand the force of the building?s height, made possible by stone vaulting. The walls were thick and contained small windows, if at all. Gothic style cathedrals were so large they physically dominated the town. Gothic style cathedrals could reach even greater heights because the round arch, used in the Romanesque cathedral was replaced by the emergence of the pointed arch. Each of these were made of heavy stone, but the pointed arch was much more successful because the weight of the building was thrust downward into the foundation, instead of outward. This made thick walls of the Romanesque style obsolete. Thin walls supported by flying buttresses replaced the thick walls and allowed for many more windows because the walls were much stronger.

Stained glass windows dominated many walls of the Gothic cathedral. As the walls were strengthened and thinned, windows became numerous. Unique to the Gothic cathedral, the brilliant stained glass windows often illustrated bible stories. They also held vivid pictures of saints, kings, and workers. They were a delight to the eye of the Middle Ages, casting a rainbow of divine light over the entire body of the cathedral.

Though differences are apparent in function, sculpture, and structure, Romanesque cathedrals share the same basic principals as Gothic cathedrals?they each serve as a center for religious concentration. Representative of the hard work and creativity of the Middle Ages, Cathedrals remain a focal point for religious life.

Bibliography

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