

Birkbeck BA History of Art, 1250-1400, Year 2

Laurence Shafe

With what justification can Italian architecture of the period be described as Gothic?

With what justification can Italian architecture of the period be described as Gothic?

"We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary - for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose)."¹

This is how Wittgenstein described the difficulty of explaining the concept "game". Words, such as Gothic, do not point to absolute forms that we try to define. No boundaries have been drawn and if we try we create a particular new concept that may or may not be useful.

Italian architecture of the period was certainly influenced by Northern European Gothic architecture but overall it contains such strong regional features that I will suggest that it is misleading to call it Gothic.

This raises the question of what we mean by Gothic. This question is often answered narrowly in terms of features and sometimes other formal aspects. In fact, as well as architectural features (pointed arches, flying buttresses, ribbed vaults and so on)² and formal aspects (verticality, connected spaces)³ there are cultural and political aspects (the role of France in determining cathedral fashion and the classical past of Italy), practical religious aspects (the liturgical function of the building, the spread of the mendicant orders), ideographic (analyzing the 'charge' and the 'brief' and how they could have given rise to the form)⁴ and iconographic aspects (the meaning associated with certain structures and features at the time). There is also what might be called the etymological approach that concerns itself with the derivation of the word "Gothic" and whether the negative associations of what was originally a term of abuse

¹ Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1972), page 33.

² Covered in many books, such as Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2002).

³ One approach is described by Frankl in *Gothic Architecture* (London, Yale University Press, 2000). Also Wölfflin's five principles in *Principles of Art History* (New York, Dover Publications, 1950) although applied to Renaissance compared with Baroque could very interestingly be applied to Gothic compared with Romanesque architecture.

⁴ Baxandall, M. *Patterns Of Intention* (London, Yale University Press, 1985)

(interestingly of Italian origin) are still with us today. Thomas argues that the term should be seen in purely physical terms, for example, he describes Minster Court (1989) in the City of London as Gothic.⁵ This may be useful for an architect but I argue it loses important distinctions for the art historian and I would suggest a term such as neo-Gothic for modern buildings.

In terms of architectural features Gothic is exemplified by ribbed vaults (initially quadripartite but developing into complex patterns), pointed arches, flying buttresses supporting relatively thin walls (typically rising to the clearstorey and externally highly visible), shafts split into multiple colannades rising from the floor to the springing of the vault giving a strong upward sweep, the use of micro-architecture that reflects the overall design in miniature, complex decoration (both surface decoration and tracery), a façade with three portals and often two towers, gables and a rose window typically with radial tracery, decoration such as crockets, figures on the façade, tympanum and jambs of the portals, a gallery, triforium and clearstorey later combined to increase the window area, large windows filled with stained glass at the expense of wall area, arcades lower than the nave, a 'chevet' design (an ambulatory with radial chapels), open connected spaces rather than separate compartments, a strong emphasis on the diagonal, and a general acceptance of the irregular and the particular.

I have selected a small number of Italian cathedrals and churches where building started during the period 1250-1400 and that have been described as Gothic. I argue in each case that although some Gothic features are evident the building is more clearly understood as part of a continuous Italian architectural development from the classical to the Renaissance. I will demonstrate that although some of these features are found in Italian churches they are never all found and where they are found they have often been added to a basilica design, with a horizontal and rectilinear emphasis, small windows (often oculi) with large wall areas for murals and a brick construction with marble cladding.

⁵ As argued by Thomas in 'The meaning of 'style' in traditional architecture: the case of Gothic', *The Journal of Architecture*, Volume 5 (2000: Autumn 2000), pages 293-306.

An interesting church that demonstrates many of these points is S. Francesco in Assisi. San Francesco was built between 1228 and c.1239⁶ shortly after the death of St. Francis who is buried in the lower church. The upper church is often cited as a Gothic church^{7,8} and it does have a pointed single portal, a pointed gable, a rose window, flying buttresses, quadripartite ribbed vaults, pointed transverse arches and French Gothic window tracery. It has been pointed out as a political explanation that the Franciscans felt gratitude for French support of their order.⁹

However, overall it is a late Romanesque mendicant church with a nave without aisles designed for preaching. There is no attempt to reduce flat wall space to a minimum; on the contrary it is designed to create wall space for a cycle of narrative frescoes. It is a traditional Latin cross church and has no feeling of verticality and soaring lines. The east façade (the church is at the western end of the town and so faces east) is plain with strong horizontal lines (lesenes), has little decoration, an oculus in the gable above a rose window, in turn above a single entrance porch with a rounded archivolt. Add to this the low, dark, earthy, mysterious lower church with barrel vaulted chapels (albeit with ribbed vaults in the central area) and the sturdy Romanesque campanile then the overall conclusion is that it is a Romanesque church that was built with some Gothic features.

Four Italian cathedrals that are often described as Gothic are Siena, Orvieto, Florence and Milan. Siena Cathedral's façade, probably by Giovanni Pisano, has been described as the most Gothic in Italy¹⁰ and it does present three portals, a rose window above, gables, and it is covered in decoration including crockets and figures. However, the rose window has rectilinear window supports rather than radial tracery, the windows and transverse arches are round and there is a strong horizontal cornice of sculpted heads with classical

⁶ Wilson, C. *The Gothic Cathedral* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2002), page 261

⁷ "shows the influence of Northern French Gothic", Frankl, page 156

⁸ "for the Franciscans, at least Gothic acquired something of the character of an official style after its use at the 'headquarters' church of S. Francesco at Assisi", Wilson, page 261

⁹ Coldstream, N. *Medieval Architecture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), page 183.

¹⁰ This and the following sentences are summarised from Frankl, page 215 but he uses the features

tondo busts in the spandrels below. The façade is typical Italian, marble clad with mosaic decoration, and the doors are of equal height and size below upper piers with no apparent vertical support unlike the typical Gothic façade. The church was originally planned as a hall church and the eastern end is planned around a hexagon and the nave has high round arches and heavy Corinthian capitals.¹¹ All these features lead to the conclusion that it is a Romanesque church with a west façade that contains Gothic elements and a lot of uniquely Italian Romanesque detail.

The current Orvieto Cathedral was started in 1263, the year of the miracle of the drops of blood. It has flat walls without mouldings supporting a wooden roof. The arcade has round, striped columns with foliage capitals and round arches below small round clearstorey windows, separated from them by a jutting cornice that creates a strong horizontal line.¹² Clearly, from this description there are few Gothic features and the internal appearance is like an early Christian basilica.

The eastern portion has a more Gothic feel with the shafts of the transept piers rising to the springing of the vault. In fact, the Italian builders went a step too far with the transept and Lorenzo Maitani was called from Siena in 1305 to reinforce it with flying buttresses. This raises questions about whether local craftsmen were reluctant to build "in the Northern manner" because of a lack of technical knowledge. Maitani went on to build the famous west façade between 1309 and his death in 1330.¹³ It is interesting that the first design, which still exists, shows more French Rayonnant features than the second design which was used. This indicates, if it was his design, that those builders that could build in the French manner were controlled by the patrons. The overall appearance again shows Gothic features such as three portals with pointed arches, crockets, gables (actually a sixteenth century addition) and a rose window with radial features. However, the overall feel is again Italian because of the extensive use

mentioned to argue it is Gothic.
¹¹ Martindale, A. *Gothic Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1967), page 148
¹² Coldstream, page 24
¹³ Martindale, page 170.

of mosaics (although added later, they were in the original plan), no column or voussoir figures, and narrative relief sculptures at the dado level covering the vertical rise of the buttresses, creating a strong horizontal feature.

Florence Duomo (Santa Maria del Fiore) was designed by Arnolfo di Cambio in 1290 and work commenced in 1294 to replace the previous cathedral of Santa Reparata. When he died in 1302 only parts of the west front and adjoining bays had been completed and work did not restart until 1334 when Giotto was appointed master of works. He concentrated on the campanile which has been described as a "soaring Gothic grace"¹⁴ and is used as the frontispiece in Wilson's book "The Gothic Cathedral". Giotto designed the lowest storey and the tower was continued by Andrea Pisano and finished by Francesco Talenti.¹⁵ A polygonal openwork tower was planned but never built.¹⁶ The tower certainly has Gothic features but a single detached bell tower is hardly a signature of a Gothic cathedral and again the Gothic features appear secondary to the main features of the cathedral. It has a vast Romanesque interior with ribbed, dome-shaped quadripartite vault, pointed transverse arches, oculi in the clearstorey, no gallery or triforium, and with the verticality interrupted by a heavy cornice at the vault springing.^{17,18}

The design process used for Florence cathedral also illustrates the different procedures used in the Italian city states. A model was built and public comments invited in 1357, a process that was more likely to produce a conservative Italian design than one demonstrating strong foreign influence.

Milan Cathedral was started in 1386, near the end of our period, and is the most ambitious Italian late fourteenth century church.¹⁹ The driving force was Giangaleazzo Visconti whose wife belonged to the French royal family. It is thought that he was imitating the combination of royal seat and great church as

¹⁴ Swaan, W. *The Gothic Cathedral* (London, Elek, 1969), page 306

¹⁵ Swaan, page 306

¹⁶ Martindale, page 151

¹⁷ Pevsner, N. *An Outline of European Architecture* (London, Penguin Books, 1990), page 171

¹⁸ Frankl, page 214

¹⁹ Wilson, page 268

is found in Paris, Prague and Westminster so one would expect a Gothic cathedral.

It is perhaps the most Gothic of Italian cathedrals yet it has small windows and even the flying buttresses are primarily decorative.²⁰ The interior has columns consisting of colonnade shafts wrapped around a central shaft. These have capitals that are very unusual consisting of drums containing full-size figures that interrupt the vertical flow.

Over fifty foreign and local master masons and experts were brought in to advise on the design and the discussion of the recommendations is well documented.²¹ The discussions show the detailed knowledge the local craftsmen have of French Gothic construction and although they may have lacked practical experience of using flying buttresses to support thin walls occupied mostly by window, they were aware of the proportions and techniques used in Paris. This suggests that their resistance to adopting foreign design was a matter of choice based on historic and regional differences such as building in marble-clad brick.

There were many other churches built in Italy during the period and to complete the overview a few key churches will be mentioned. S. Maria della Spina in Pisa (1230-1323) is a 'wedding cake' of a church like a Gothic cathedral in miniature. It does exhibit many exquisite Gothic features and could almost be described as an experiment in Gothic. Sta Croce in Florence (1246, 1294-1442) is one of the largest churches in Europe, described as "the Westminster Abbey of Italy" because so many famous Italians are buried within its walls. It is primarily a basilica church with Gothic features. Sta Maria Novella in Florence (1246 or 1279?) has a rectangular east end of Cistercian square bays, quadripartite ribbed vault, pointed transverse arches in the nave, but the ribbed vault is domed (a technique that transfers forces downwards and so minimizes the need for buttresses). Its verticality is brought lower by a striped decoration on the ribs and soffit of the arches and it has small oculus windows high up in the

²⁰ Wilson, page 271

²¹ White, J. *Art and Architecture in Italy 1250-1400* (London, Yale University Press, 1993), pages 517-530

clearstorey. S. Fortunato in Todi (1292, halted 1348, finished 1405) has three entrances and a central marble portal that looks more like a triumphal arch as the outer porches are rounded. Martindale calls Fossanova in Priverno "unpretentious but authentic Gothic"²², but it has solid square pillars and half engaged columns rising to the springing of the vault but the columns do not reach the ground. It has small windows in the clearstorey, no triforium or gallery and although it has pointed arches it has no ribbed vault. S. Francesco, Bologna has an ambulatory.²³ Italian churches are mostly two-storied with a large arcade and small clearstorey and no traceried panelling, no double skins of tracery, no elaboration of the main mouldings and little refinement of the pillars.

Although brief, the above summary does indicate that the Gothic features found are additions to an otherwise Italian Romanesque church. This raises the question of why Gothic did not take over in Italy as it did in the rest of Europe.

Although my argument has been based mostly on architectural features the principle case for arguing that Italian churches were not Gothic is cultural. Frankl states that in Italy the Gothic style was felt to be something alien²⁴, and Martindale that the "resistance to French ideas in general and Parisian ideas in particular appears to have been exceptionally strong"²⁵ and Wilson goes so far as to describe it as a "fear and distain of the barbarian West, especially France", and he suggests the "cool reception" to Gothic in Italy is because of its "unique inheritance from pre-medieval times".²⁶ Clearly Italians felt they had a classical tradition that had been destroyed by races from Northern Europe and they did not want to follow French or German fashions.

There are many other factors that inhibited the spread of Gothic in Italy. For example, there were a large number of towns in Italy, all with their own bishops, and so each was small and poor. This meant that that there were few opportunities to build on a grand scale. However, there were large city states,

²² Martindale, page 147-8

²³ Martindale, page 148

²⁴ Frankl, page 259

²⁵ Martindale, page 145

²⁶ Wilson, page 258

such as Florence and Siena that could afford cathedrals. In these democratic cities there was a tradition of involving the population in decisions such as the design of a cathedral. This meant that designs had to appeal to the majority who were often conservative in approach.²⁷ Also, as city states, unlike a bishop, would have experience of commissioning many buildings they would have learnt how to control an architect and get the design they wished rather than the latest architectural fashion.

The other factor was the rise of the mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans) from 1225 which gave rise to the need for large churches for sermons. They were not as standardized as Cistercian churches but were large, simple, and useful with "little to suggest a specific ecclesiastical atmosphere".²⁸ Many friars were not priests and not much of an eastern chapel was required but they needed a spacious nave. The earliest Franciscan church, S. Francesco, Assisi 1228, is a vaulted aisle-less room with a vaulted transept, and polygonal chapel described as "One spacial unit with piers subdividing it".²⁹ Wall areas were kept large for murals, particularly the narrative style used by the mendicant orders whereas in northern churches religious narrative switched to stained glass by the end of the twelfth century.³⁰

It has also been claimed that as the materials used were different (marble and brick) this changed the form but churches in the Baltic area are of brick construction and are built in the Gothic style.³¹ It has also been suggested that windows were kept small to keep out the heat of the sun although this factor also applies in Spain where the Gothic style was adopted. However, oculi are often used in Italy which has a direct reference to the oculus of the Roman Pantheon. Ribbed vaults are sometimes claimed to be an indication of Gothic but

²⁷ Wilson, page 265, "Neither Talenti nor any of his successors was ever free to implement a major design decision without...committee..."

²⁸ Pevsner, page 142

²⁹ Pevsner, page 142

³⁰ Martindale, page 176

³¹ Martindale, page 147

they appear in Italy, north of the Apennines at about the same time as they appear in the north of Europe.³²

This short summary shows even on the limited dimension of architectural features it is hard to see Italian architecture as Gothic. It is better seen as a continuous line of evolution from Roman to 'Roman-esque' to the 'rebirth' of the Roman. At one period outside influences and fashion resulted in some Gothic features being added but the continuous line of development remains. This view shows the Renaissance in a new light, not a sudden rebirth from a "Dark Ages" but a natural evolution over the medieval period.

³² Martindale, page 147

Bibliography

- Baxandall, M. *Patterns of Intention* (London, Yale University Press, 1985)
- Coldstream, N. *Medieval Architecture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002)
- Deuchler, F. *Gothic* (New York, Universe Books, 1989)
- Martindale, A. *Gothic Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1967)
- Frankl, P. *Gothic Architecture* (London, Yale University Press, 2000)
- Pevsner, N. *An Outline of European Architecture* (London, Penguin Books, 1990)
- Schaper, E. 'The Concept of Style: The Sociologist's Key to Art?' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 9:3 (1969: July), pages 246-257
- Swaan, W. *The Gothic Cathedral* (London, Elek, 1969)
- Thomas, J. 'The meaning of 'style' in traditional architecture: the case of Gothic', *The Journal of Architecture*, Volume 5 (2000: Autumn 2000), pages 293-306
- Trachtenberg, M. 'Gothic/Italian "Gothic": Towards a Redefinition', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, L:22-37 (1991; March), pages 22-37
- White, J. *Art and Architecture in Italy 1250-1400* (London, Yale University Press, 1993)
- Wilson, C. *The Gothic Cathedral* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2002)
- Wölfflin, H. *Principles of Art History* (New York, Dover Publications, 1950)