
Robert Branner and the Gothic: A Prologue

Author(s): Paula L. Gerson and Stephen Murray

Source: *Gesta*, 2000, Vol. 39, No. 2, Robert Branner and the Gothic (2000), pp. 85-88

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the International Center of Medieval Art

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/767138>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The University of Chicago Press and International Center of Medieval Art are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Gesta*

ROBERT BRANNER AND THE GOTHIC A PROLOGUE

PAULA L. GERSON

Florida State University

STEPHEN MURRAY

Columbia University

It seems entirely appropriate thirty years after Robert Branner delivered the Mathews Lectures on Gothic architecture to return to some of the monuments and problems that he presented with such vision and eloquence to his students, to the scholarly world, and, in his popular book on *Gothic Architecture*, to the widest audience. The papers included in this special issue of *Gesta* dedicated to the memory and scholarly achievements of Robert Branner were first heard in a one-day symposium that formed the Mathews Lecture of October 1998. The audience of some two hundred included his widow, Shirley Prager Branner; his son, David and daughter-in-law, Shujen Yeo; and a host of friends and former students.

Whether by design or by accident the following papers fall neatly into three groups. First, we hear from three of Robert Branner's former students; then we focus upon Branner's thought in theory and in practice; and third, representing the post-Branner period, we explore the design of Gothic edifices based on new methods of surveying and drafting, finally considering the very definition of the phenomenon that we call "Gothic."

In the first set of papers, Edson Armi, Georgia Wright and William Clark pursue three very specific cases: one article illuminating the use of the corbel table and "Lombard band" in Romanesque architecture, the second touching the phenomenon of portraiture in the fourteenth century and the third concerning the sculpture of Christ and the angels on the exterior of the chevet at Reims. In all three papers the reader can see evidence of Robert Branner's training in the methodology employed, in the questioning of accepted wisdom, and in the demand for contextuality.

With Edson Armi we find ourselves looking at corbel tables with surprising intensity. Here the study of minute detail ultimately leads to a broad statement reevaluating the nature of the creative abilities of the builders of Romanesque churches. Bringing together a host of buildings in northern Italy, France and Switzerland, Armi deals with the corbel table in relation to other forms of articulation and the structural envelope of the edifice as a whole, documenting the extent to which, "blending decoration, articulation, construction, and structure, masons employed the corbel table to create an architecture more interconnected than heretofore imagined." Armi counters the tradi-

tional prejudice that Romanesque builders were "imprisoned in mass," unable to break out from a vicious circle in which structural dangers led to the deployment of additional mass which threatened the edifice with higher levels of weight and stress. The stones or bricks of the little arches of the Lombard band ("stretchers") might penetrate the thickness of the wall, providing a rigid bookend mechanism for the conch of the apse or barrel vault of the choir. Voiding of the niches framed by the arches of such a corbel table can help reduce the weight of the upper wall. Through the eyes of Armi we see Romanesque architecture as the work of human beings (the masons) who possessed the intelligence to learn from the experience of building, and extended this knowledge to create innovations in structure and design.

There is a similar refreshing quality in Georgia Wright's new look at "portraiture." Just because an image of the face has wrinkles or some other identifying mark or is sensitively rendered, it is not necessarily a "portrait." Wright applies three criteria in framing a definition: the image(s) must be securely dated; they must be produced during the lifetime of the subject, allowing for direct personal access; and there must be two or more such likenesses that bear a resemblance one to another.

With this clearly defined methodological framework Wright proceeds to look at the early-fourteenth-century portraits of Boniface VIII, and the mid-fourteenth-century portraits of Rudolph IV of Austria, Karl IV, Holy Roman Emperor and Charles V, king of France. She finds no steady path for the appearance of the "portrait." This is not a developmental phenomenon—not "progress." Instead, on a case-by-case basis, Wright documents the peculiar circumstances and specific agendas associated with each situation. The issue of the "portrait" is thus complicated, depending upon patrons as well as on dynastic intentions.

William Clark's essay is concerned with a group of sculptures often overlooked in studies of Reims: the figure of Christ and the eleven accompanying angels found on the exterior of the chevet chapel walls. Clark examines the relationship of this program to liturgical processions, seeking many levels of meaning for these figures and placing them within the many contexts of Reims, its historical importance, its coronation rites and status as archiepiscopal seat.



Robert Branner, France, late 1940s (photo: Robert Velter, with the permission of Shirley Prager Branner).

The second set of papers by Eric Fernie and Peter Kidson returns to Robert Branner's thoughts in theory and in practice. Written some twenty-five years after Branner's death, they provide evidence of the enormous effect Branner had upon the study of Gothic art and architecture; an extraordinary achievement, given the relatively short time span (twenty-one years, 1952–1973) of his life as a publishing scholar.

Peter Kidson's contribution re-creates an event that never happened, a debate between two Goths on the most beautiful cathedral of Gothic: Bourges. Robert Branner's great book on Bourges had just appeared in its original French edition and Kidson, asked to review it, found himself simultaneously developing an intense admiration for Branner's analytical eye and a counter position that allows us to catch a glimpse of not one cathedral but three. Kidson never completed his review or wrote a book on Bourges, but instead he gives us this powerful aperçu. Positing that the critical moment in the life of the cathedral and of the city was the extension of the city walls in 1170, Kidson suggests that work on the cathedral might have extended beyond the older Gallo-Roman wall, as traces of this work are apparent at the base of the south side of the hemicycle in the chapel of Sainte Solange. Work on the early Gothic crypt can then be put in the mid-1180s. This phase anticipated a cathedral very different from the present one, possibly with an arcade composed of double columns. The date normally assigned to the start of work on the Gothic cathedral (1195) can be applied to the third phase that involved the beginning of the demolition of the old cathedral inside the Gallo-Roman wall. Kidson's analysis of the spatial envelope of this structure finds a union between the five-aisled church and the "ad triangulum" section, integrating articulation with geometry in the creation of a framework of meaning in which the Church Militant is propelled upward to become the Church Triumphant. His search for a mega-system of geometric interconnections linking Notre-Dame of Paris with Bourges anticipates the ideas of Davis and Neagley, who find comparable geometric linking mechanisms.

Eric Fernie offers a critical assessment of Branner's thought as it may now appear to us in an art historical world that has, over the past decades, transformed itself in the most radical ways. Certainly, many of these changes would not have been possible without the earlier work of Bob Branner who, in his own time, revolutionized the study of Gothic architecture. Fernie discusses three aspects of Branner's work: design analysis, archaeology and style, focusing on this last concern, especially as it appears in *Saint Louis and the Court Style* and *Burgundian Gothic*. He documents the roots of Branner's approach to style in the work of Henri Focillon and Jean Bony. To these names we might add those of Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène Lefèvre-Pontalis and Marcel Aubert. Fernie criticizes the tendency to slip into the kind of figurative language that assigns to "style" an active agency: forms that "migrate" from here to there, and design formulae that "ra-

diate" from a paradigmatic monument. Similarly, it is possible to question the extent to which a particular mason could have been familiar with the procession of prototypes identified by the art historian. Branner's principal synthesizing achievement, according to Fernie, was to bring the phase of Gothic architecture known as "rayonnant" to the attention of the English-speaking world, to contextualize the phenomenon and to document the construction of buildings as the work of real people, insisting upon a reassessment of the work of a Pierre de Montreuil or a Robert de Luzarches. Of importance here is Branner's perceived conception of "architect as artist" in the modern sense, a conception that brings both positive and negative ramifications.

Our third and final pair of essays brings the results of continuing research in the post-Branner period: research intended to sharpen and extend our understanding of "Gothic" in practice and in theory. How wonderful it would be to hear Robert Branner's comments on each of these essays! He would certainly have been intrigued by the new technical means available to Linda Neagley and Michael Davis, and one can almost hear him debate Marvin Trachtenberg's analysis of the nature of Gothic.

Applying the most sophisticated technology in surveying and computer-assisted drafting to the study of the Benedictine abbey church of Saint-Ouen in Rouen and the collegiate church of Saint-Urbain in Troyes, Linda Neagley and Michael Davis offer a compelling new look at Gothic design. The authors find striking similarities between two works separated in time and place. In each case we are dealing with the establishment of a crossing square that is extended outwards through the application of dynamic geometry, principally manipulations of the golden section and the square root of two. A great double square results from the projection of the crossing—120 feet in the case of Saint Ouen. This paradigmatic number, understood in terms of ten-foot modules, is interpreted as a reference to the twelve gates that opened into each of the four walls of the celestial city. That this prototype was applied to the design of Saint-Ouen is assured by the very direct references in the foundation document of 1321 translated and presented as an appendix. One of the guest editors of this volume, Stephen Murray, finds particular satisfaction in the discovery that the work of Robert de Luzarches of Amiens was not forgotten in the ensuing period.

Marvin Trachtenberg, finally, comes to the definition of Gothic as a kind of "modernism." Observing that recent work on Gothic architecture has eschewed the broad questions of definition that preoccupied earlier generations (Paul Frankl, in particular), Trachtenberg suggests that the term "Gothic," by invoking the "barbarian" people who were thought to have destroyed Rome, quite correctly expresses the deep-seated anti-classicism of the new style. The pointed arch is better described as a broken arch, a deliberate breaking and reconstitution of a form associated with the pre-Christian pa-

gan tradition. Similarly, Gothic cathedrals frequently punched through the old Roman wall. This anti-classical, anti-historicist movement is best understood as a kind of medieval modernism privileging the critical power of reason over precedent and authority, and pointing emphatically to the here and now.

In order to substantiate his reading Trachtenberg turns to a familiar source: the writings of Suger, abbot of Saint-Denis. He points to the various lines of justification articulated by the abbot in defense of his radical new project—principally that it was functionally necessary, that it was beautiful, and that it was sanctioned by God, whose approval was demonstrated by a string of miracles. Trachtenberg, finally, brings the discussion back to Bourges, the monument that stands at the beginning of Robert Branner's scholarly life. Trachtenberg sees this monument as the apogee of anti-historicist or ultra-modernist architecture, in which solutions were so radical as to be unacceptable or incomprehensible to contemporaries.

Some final observations. We are in an age in which the study of historiography has become something of an end in itself. We are preoccupied with mediation. Many art historians, rather than believing that we have direct access to the work of art, are led to concentrate upon the prejudices and presuppositions that this or that great art historian (whether a Panofsky or a Branner) brought to the business of looking and thinking. The passion for historiography tends to reduce the subject to a thumb-nail sketch. Ultimately one needs to have worked directly with Robert Branner, to have read his publications and explored the great monuments of Gothic to reach a full understanding of the person and his intellectual life. We will end with some brief remarks by one who never met Robert Branner and a longer appreciation of the teacher by a former student.

Studying Gothic architecture as I did at the Courtauld Institute in the 1960s, it was impossible to escape the writings of Robert Branner.¹ When I inquired of my own teacher, Peter Kidson, why every seminar paper seemed to end up as a critique of Branner's latest book or article, he replied that this was generally the only pertinent material on the subject and the only argument worth engaging. I was led to challenge and to pursue. It was my privilege, in later years, to revisit some of the buildings Branner had published: Troyes, Beauvais, Amiens, and Notre-Dame of Paris. While I have sometimes reached conclusions that were radically different from his, it was often Robert Branner's incisive thoughts that provided the starting point for my quest. He knew how to animate a building with his spirit of inquiry and with his prose.

I should like to record the one telephone conversation I had with Branner in 1972. I had encountered the nightmare situation that every doctoral candidate dreads: another student with exactly the same dissertation topic. As the sponsor of the other dissertation Branner did not attempt to warn me off the subject; rather, he generously suggested that we should both complete our work, that the two dissertations would be very

different one from another, and each would be valuable in its own way.

Those who studied medieval art with Robert Branner found that he created a special scholarly climate.² We all felt that we were on the very edge of the newest developments in the field, at the frontiers of discovery, and in touch with the minds of the leading thinkers. The sense of excitement and discovery that Bob Branner brought to all his courses was enveloping, exhilarating and seductive. His passion for discovery extended to embrace the work of his colleagues. One semester he had us attend John Mundy's lectures in the History Department. We were all sent to Willibald Sauerländer's courses at the Institute of Fine Arts. Sessions of our own Columbia seminar frequently would be protracted informally in a coffee shop on Amsterdam Avenue, where discussion would range from art history to music to the stock market—all with the same sense of adventure.

While the climate that Bob Branner created emphasized the forward path of research, the experience of working under his direction resembled that of a beset hero in a medieval epic. First came the period of testing, varying in length with each student. It was a hard, grueling time, and many students gave up or moved to other areas of the discipline. This period ended only after you had proved yourself, either by producing an excellent piece of scholarship or by one-upping RB—knowing more about something than he knew. At this point you were accepted as an equal in the pursuit of scholarly truth. You might meet RB on campus and he would drag you off to show you some photographs and ask your opinion on some aspect of his latest project. He truly wanted your reactions and would seriously consider your suggestions.

The search for answers was uppermost. We would come to him with a new idea, a new interpretation, and he would always listen. His favorite response was to play devil's advocate, questioning the facts, the underlying logic, and the implications of the hypothesis. If you could support your conclusions or if he could find no flaw in the facts or the reasoning, then he would accept the idea presented, no matter how contrary to the standard view. When—not infrequently—the debate exposed a flaw in logic or an aspect of the issue overlooked, we would go over the material again and come back with an even stronger argument. And RB seemed just as eager to go over it again himself. It is difficult to relate the quality of these encounters. There was no attack involved. It was rather a pure search, like examining a newly found object in a strong light, looking at it from all sides, finding the flaws in material or craftsmanship.

Bob Branner's acceptance of our fought-for solutions and discoveries was real. He incorporated our successful research in his courses, always scrupulously giving us credit for it. He made us feel that there was so much to be done that we all had to join together to push the discipline forward. By sharing with us his developing ideas, he fostered in all of his students the need to share material and to be open with one another.

Many of his seminars were so constructed that a basic core of knowledge had to be shared in order for anyone to do a proper job. Such seminars might be built around a specific monument (Notre-Dame of Paris) or a group of related works (*Bibles moralisées*). Particularly memorable was the seminar on Mosan art in which students formed a medieval workshop that produced the infamous Arm Reliquary containing the left ulna of Godefroid de Claire. The reliquary came complete with written provenance.

As a teacher RB's generosity with time and material was incredible. He lent us his own copies of books not available in libraries and shared his photographs. He always had time for students, whether from Columbia or elsewhere. All aspects of our training were of concern to him. He made sure that we knew about cameras and lenses and that we knew our way around the darkroom. He made us all learn paleography, and by example, he taught us to edit. He was a fantastic editor of student work. I do not know how he did it with the fierce tempo of his own publication, but he read papers quickly and thoroughly. He championed simple, straightforward prose, and he allowed no quirky or overly literary features.

RB tried his damndest to get us through the system as quickly as possible. On one occasion his patience wore thin with a student who had been having difficulties writing a paper. "For God's sake," he said, "you're not married to this paper. Finish it and move on." He believed that good scholarship was not produced until ten years after the dissertation and he wanted us, above all, to be productive scholars. He also saw the employment market dry up in the late '60s and early '70s, and he wanted to be certain we had good jobs.

Being a Branner student was not easy. Bob Branner was a tough and demanding teacher. You always had to produce your best, and frequently you were pushed beyond that. We recognized that the standards he demanded of us were the same ones he set for himself. He taught us to excel while also creating a sharing community of scholars. But his greatest legacy to us was the passionate desire to know.

NOTES

1. The reflections of Stephen Murray.
2. The reflections of Paula Gerson.