Countless works of architecture—secular as well as ecclesiastical—spread across and beyond Europe express through sameness and difference a suprapositionary creativity and identity capable of changing in response to time and place. This is the phenomenon we call “Gothic”—arguably the most powerful projection of human aspiration and inventiveness.

Studied in isolation from the written and graphic sources, these great buildings have led generations of students in the old, style-based art history to resort to well-tried systems of classification where artifacts are arranged as a biologist might arrange specimens in constructing chains of etiological necessity in the great story of evolution or progress. The very origin of the word—“Gothic” as an allusion to the creation of architectural form from living trees—encouraged such morphological thought processes. The study of architectural production within the human context of the buildings, however, invites us to push the understanding of Gothic beyond the old stories of influence and development.

As the forms of existing buildings are assessed, it is most useful to consider the architectural production of the Middle Ages as a process of compression and expansion: internalized as mnemonic images, manipulated in various ways, modified, and then, in laborious construction work extending over decades or even centuries, laid out and rising from the ground as new construction. Such a process can be traced thanks to the survival of written and graphic documentation. The most critical evidence for the representation of the unbuilt edifice as a compressed image are the hundreds of drawings that have survived from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. The largest collection of such drawings resides in Vienna, in the print room of the Academy of Fine Arts, with more in the Historical Museum. The academy acquired the drawings in 1839 from the medieval-revivalist architect/stonemason Franz Jäger (1780–1839); they served for many years as a vital tool in the creation of Gothic Revival buildings in the nineteenth century and have subsequently been the focus of monographic studies and of broader attempts to grapple with the essential “idea” of Gothic style. It is probable that the bulk of the collection already existed at the end of the Middle Ages and was used for the training of young masons. It seems likely that the collection stayed together precisely because of its usefulness to both fifteenth- and nineteenth-century architects.

The glory of the present folio publication is the generous scale and sumptuous reproduction of the drawings. Dating from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, they represent not only Saint Stephen’s Cathedral of Vienna but also lodges in Prague, Cologne, and Regensburg and detailed working drawings of secular buildings in Austria and central Europe. The drawings appear in a variety of scales—sometimes the general view of the entire drawing is supplemented with a close-up (although the inclusion of a unit of measure with each image would have allowed the user more liberty to play with the drawings and experiment with mensuration). The full-color reproductions have a wonderful tactile quality, showing the translucency of the parchment, often allowing one to detect lines on the verso. The drawings themselves thus receive “star” status: Johann Joseph Böker presents them not according to some theoretical presupposition or links with known buildings or the oeuvre of named master masons but entirely according to inventory number, providing for each drawing a detailed description, summary of historiographical problems, and critical exploration of attribution. We may understand this approach as a kind of formlessness, akin to Viollet-le-Duc’s alphabetical ordering of his Dictionnaire raisonné.

The introduction, conveniently presented with an English translation, provides an account of the history and historiography of the drawings and a glimpse of the creative aspects that lay behind their preparation. Through his careful examination of the collection, the author has discovered a number of hitherto unknown drawings, bringing the total to 428 (from the previous count of 399). Two-thirds of the drawings are on high-quality paper, and the careful study of watermarks facilitates new insights about dating and attribution. The remaining one-third of the collection is on parchment, often of mediocre quality. (The author suggests that parchment assists the design process since erasures and corrections can be made without puncturing the membrane.) The drawings associated with the work of Peter Parler on the cathedral of Prague provide a graphic document of change, particularly highlighting the modifications of the triforium area. Paper drawings are often copies of drawings considered paradigms of excellence—the fragility of the fine papers precludes alterations. Thus, we are presented with a copy of the original plan for the choir of Prague Cathedral as conceived by Matthew of Arras in a paper plan dating from around 1515.

Present in some number in the collection are signs of the learning process where an artisan has clearly been assigned an exercise of some kind. Such an exercise formed a critical part of the training that would allow an apprentice to become a journeyman or master. Drawings are rendered with metal nib guided by straight edge and compasses in “ferro-gallic ink,” more or less black or brown depending upon the content of carbon black and the status of the artisan (trainee drawings tend to be browner). Most of the drawings show “flat” plans and elevations, though there is limited depth in the angling of the sides of octagonal towers and apses. In most cases duodecimal scaling is used (1:6; 1:12; and 1:24). Preliminary drawing is sometimes
apparent in impressed lines scored in the parchment surface through the use of a metal drypoint.

Böker ends his critical introduction with an overview of the agency of the masters and architects associated with the drawings—the nineteenth-century masters of the Gothic Revival as well as the names of those associated with the original creation of the drawings: Peter Parler, Meister Michael, Hanns Puchsbaum, Laurenz Spennig, Jodok Dotzinger, Jorg Ochs, Anton Pilgram, Gregor Hauser, Wolfgang Denck, Benedikt Ried, and Wolfgang Rixner. Some of these names are known because of their well-documented relationship with construction campaigns on some of the greatest late Gothic churches (Parler and Ried, for example, made important contributions to the Cathedral of St. Vitus in Prague and Puchsbaum at Vienna Cathedral), while others (such as Rixner, who assembled a pattern book for his fellow masons providing invaluable insights into practices in the masons’ lodge) are less well known. While some of this material produces an arid discourse on problems of attribution, the new work on watermarks coupled with the author’s art historical acumen create some rewarding apérs. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of late Gothic vaulting was the production of curving ribs following interlocking circular trajectories that sometimes flow together into sinuous patterns. Thanks to Böker’s analysis of the drawings in relation to actual works of architecture, we are able to watch the design process in the hands of masters Puchsbaum, Spennig, and Ried.

Leafting through the drawings we can grasp many essential aspects of Gothic creativity. This mode of production, right from the start, privileged sleight of hand or illusionism and the creation of astonishing effects through the manipulation of form, space, and light. Gothic’s earliest manifestations came through the dramatic juxtaposition of the historicizing forms of classical antiquity with the mass and elongation of the supporting elements, made possible through lightweight vaulting and an exterior support system. Through the process of critical response (contraction and expansion), increasing focus was placed on linearity and convexity—particularly with the invention of window tracery. The drawings attest to the astonishing survival in late Gothic of a few basic concepts: externalized structure; illusionistic interiors; juxtaposed geometric forms that run together to create double curves; rounded torus moldings that seem to turn into fillets before our very eyes; and squares interacting with octagons and manipulated rectangles. As indicated above, one of the most exciting developments apparent in the drawings is the passage from webbed rib vaults with diminished emphasis upon bay divisions to the apparently free-flowing forms of the vaults of Ried’s Wlatslaw Hall in Prague.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the drawings is the combination of lines generated with the aid of instruments (straight-edge and compass) and luxuriant foliage elements. In late Gothic we encounter a paradox: foliage, once employed principally in the sculpture of capitals, seems to migrate across the extrados surfaces of arches and gables, up pinnacles and spires, establishing pride of place in oversized finials (particularly in the work of Spennig in Vienna; see drawings 17.061 and 105.067). The increased linearity of late Gothic combined with the absence of capitals and the sinuous forms of double-curved tracery and vault patterns lend to Gothic the kind of organic-forest look that made it susceptible to the rhetorical manipulations of Vasari and Raphael and the invention of the great founding myth—that of forest origins. Some years ago, Paul Crossley proposed that this myth was based on the way that northern builders theorized their architectural production correspondingly; in one of the drawings (105.068), sinuous forms of foliage actually take over and dominate the architectural frame, while the multiple turned squares of the spires of Vienna and Strasbourg lend to these designs the appearance of organic growth.

It is to be anticipated that this impressive publication will unleash a new burst of interest in the human processes of response and creativity that lie behind Gothic architecture.

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Notes