Ethan Matt Kavaler
Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540
New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012, 344 pp., 80 color and 210 b/w illus. $75, ISBN 9780300167924

Ethan Matt Kavaler’s beautifully produced new book makes an extraordinary contribution to the growing discourse on “Late Gothic” artistic production in the last decades of the fifteenth and first decades of the sixteenth century. The very title chosen by the author—a “provocative oxymoron” (22)—complicates old notions of Gothic as a style that “develops” continuously over three centuries, entering into a period of “decline” before being swept aside by the Renaissance.

The unruly and provocative material Kavaler deals with in this book is hard to cram into a traditional structure of chapter headings, and it has to be said that the introduction is disturbingly multifarious in its content. Yet the author’s argument is, for the most part, well served by the thematic organization into five chapters—“Ornament and Aesthetics,” “Flamboyant Forms,” “Microarchitecture,” “Natural Forms,” and, finally, “Deconstruction and Hybridxity”—a sequence that conveniently allows the author to reserve his most original thinking for the later parts of the book.

The introduction provides an overview of problems of taste and historiography: older historians of Gothic often possessed a real dislike for this mode, which they considered to be “overcharged” with ornament of a kind that had broken loose from its old role of expressing architectural behavior. A few carefully chosen juxtapositions make the point: the “rational” forms of Saint-Maclou of Rouen (ca. 1440), in which slender filleted piers run smoothly into arches and ribs, is contrasted with the “jungle of overlapping shafts” (11) in the church at Brou, built some seventy-five years later for Margaret of Austria. Similarly juxtaposed, we see an austere geometric window (ca. 1300) from the nave of the minster at Freiburg im Breisgau with a window from the sixteenth-century choir where “designs have become fully emancipated from the mundane task of supporting the glass” (12). The coexistence of elements of Gothic and Italianate architectural idiom creates a new dispensation in which neither could claim exclusive right to express a unified worldview. The notion of “Renaissance Gothic” is invoked as a means of representing the Gothic of these decades (ca. 1470–ca. 1540) as qualitatively different from “High Gothic” and “Rayonnant.”

Almost fifty years ago Jan Bialostocki (1493–1503). and to the extraordinary work of Benedikt Ried in the Vladislav Hall in Prague (1493–1503).

In chapter 1, “Ornament and Aesthetics,” Kavaler introduces the difficulty many commentators have experienced with “ornament,” which a Stoic or puritan mentality might see as extraneous to the essential properties of the architectural frame and a sign of decadence and decline. Vasari’s critique of Gothic is much in this spirit. Kavaler, on the other hand, argues that “geometrical ornament might function as a kind of metalinguage … considered an approximation of divine thought” (50).

Kavaler says further, in the spirit of Roland Barthes’s Le plaisir du texte, that “it could provide an erotically tinged response that provided a motor for continued viewing. Indeed, these structures offered a jouissance, a pleasure of reading surfaces” (51). Medieval witnesses were aware of the extraordinary virtuosity of many of the decorative forms of the period, but not necessarily in a positive sense. The 1439 contract for the vault of the Oxford Divinity Schools specified (in vain) that the proposed job should be “free of all curiosities … [such as] tabernacles, carved figures, casements, and fillets and all other curious frivologies that have nothing to do with the work but occasion expenses of luxuries” (52).

Kavaler begins his analysis of Late Gothic ornament with the well-founded premise that behind the mind-boggling complexity of double-curved patterns may lie a simple geometric matrix, able to convey a subliminal sense of organization and purpose to forms that seem randomly composed. We are offered what Kavaler labels “pictures of geometry” and their transformative power. Interestingly, the patterns of some German Late Gothic vaults, which may seem random or impossible to grasp when seen obliquely, may resolve themselves into the simplest geometry when seen from directly underneath or in ground plan. As Kavaler writes, “Amazement and wonder were amongst the goals of this aesthetic” (80).

Ornamental vocabularies were simultaneously wide ranging, linking, for example, the Brabant and Spain, and Islam and the North, while at the same time capable of expressing regional or personal identities. Ornamental articulation encourages a narrative reading that may impose a sense of order while the similarities between the complexities of Late Gothic architectural ornament and the look of goldwork may induce thoughts of celestial architecture.

Chapter 2, “Flamboyant Forms,” allows the author to show us some of the building
blocks of Late Gothic and to spin some engaging descriptive passages, or ekphrasis, while at the same time demonstrating his enviable acquaintance (with beautiful photographs) with a wide range of buildings extending from eastern Europe to Spain. The most effective section of this chapter deals with vaulting, a discussion in which the author introduces his idea of “pictorial vaults.” We encounter here some very eloquent figurative language: of Sankt Valentin and Krenstetten in upper Austria Kavaler writes, “The vault appears to pour down to form a type of capital, a box-like structure that surrounds the column like a clamp gripping a wooden dowel” (137). Chapter 3 deals with microarchitecture, a theme first introduced to the scholarly world in the 1960s by François Bucher and profitably explored in multiple rich essays by Achim Timmermann. Microarchitecture celebrated the rites and functions of the church, dramatizing the performance of baptism and the Eucharistic sacrament and offering a dramatic platform (pulpit) for the reading of scriptures and sermons. The mode induces reflection on scalelessness: as represented in the Vienna drawings, small objects can look like monumental spires.

I found chapter 4, “Natural Forms,” the most inspired section of the book, leading as it does to the central trope in the story of Gothic as an architectural mode derived from trees not yet cut down (Raphael and Vasari). Natural forms, already incorporated in earlier Gothic buildings, reached a crescendo in the decades around 1500: “Architectural members suddenly morph into living forms, an effective artistic conceit and an instrument for conveying the mystical nature of religious experience. These botanical forms, these vines, branches, flowers, and the like, could communicate the miracle of animation, of vivification and its divine origins” (199–200). Natural forms were multivalent according to Kavaler, pointing to the Garden of Eden as well as to Paradise and allowing Northerners (particularly Germans) to discover their cultural roots. The author echoes Paul Crossley’s pioneering work in highlighting the new availability of a printed edition of Tacitus, the role of humanistic patrons, and the need to find theoretical underpinnings for Northern forms to counter the force of the Italianate.1 Kavaler’s most original contribution here is the intriguing structuralist interpretation of the hanging vault in the aisle of the Frauenkirche in Ingolstadt, which juxtaposes the crisp perfection of geometric forms with the disconcerting vegetal forms that seem to reflect nature that has somehow escaped from God’s command.

Chapter 5, “Deconstruction and Hybridity,” is also full of original observations and wonderful photographs of little-known monuments. Gothic articulation traditionally created an upward passage that provided a metaphor for the structural viability of the building. Kavaler shows how this was now challenged by new games introducing mimetic forms and signifying masters’ consummate command over techniques of their art. We are offered images of tracery that seems to be breaking apart and has been tied together with “rope,” carved in the stone as well as ribs that seem to have missed their landing point in the springing of the vault and have been secured by “bolts”—again carved in stone. This is a self-conscious critique of the old relationship between articulation and structure. Gothic traditionally had been associated with a prematernal world of geometrical forms and properties that registered the divine imprint in pure mathematical terms. The new games challenged this extraordinarily status: metaphysical became physical with a radical assertion of mundane materiality. It is, above all, this deconstructive mentality that confirms Kavaler’s thesis that the Gothic of the decades around 1500 should not be seen as a simple continuation of what went before but rather as “a vibrant, vital mode that borrowed essential constructive elements from earlier Gothic designs but turned these to radically new purposes” (265).

Renaissance Gothic sets out to be provocative, and some readers may have reservations. Kavaler is self-conscious in choosing a scholarly mode resembling that of Paul Frankl, one that focuses on the “aesthetic” of the style. But should we recognize the essentially subjective nature of the noun aesthetic? While the author is a master of ekphrasis, others might find a different set of architectural qualities in a particular building. A different selection of buildings, moreover, might change the flavor of the phenomenon as a whole. The Frankl mode also tends to insulate the monuments from their context, liturgical function, and structural behavior. I would have liked to hear about the structural behavior of, for example, the great vault of the Vladislav Hall or the hanging pendants of Oxford Cathedral. The structural viability of the spectacular jubé of the Saint-Madeleine Church in Troyes is secured by a bridge-like mechanism in the radial coursing that runs across the entire screen transcending the three “bays.”

These are minor points, outweighed by the great virtues of a book that brings to the attention of the reader an extraordinary range of monuments, accompanied by eloquent commentaries, together with some exciting new insights on architectural form and the production of meaning.

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**Note**


Ömür Harmanşah
**Cities and the Shaping of Memory in the Ancient Near East**

The urban and architectural traditions of Syro-Anatolia, the region of southeastern Turkey and northern Syria, are the focus of Ömür Harmanşah’s *Cities and the Shaping of Memory in the Ancient Near East*. As the “world’s desire” in preclassical antiquity, this is the area where the great conquests of the founders of the Hittite Kingdom were directed, through which the Hittite state became acquainted with ancient Mesopotamian lore, and where Assyria had also turned its face on its westward expansion.