

# Gothic art

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Chartres Cathedral

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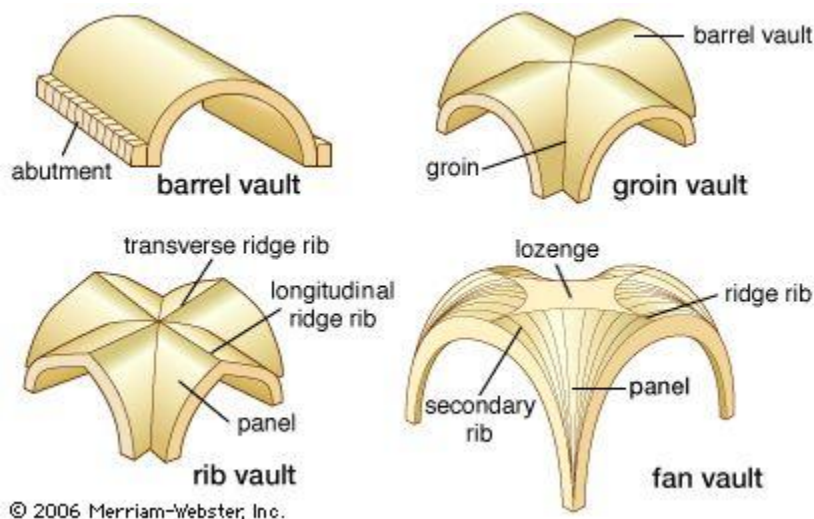
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Gothic art, the [painting](#), [sculpture](#), and [architecture](#) characteristic of the second of two great international eras that flourished in western and central Europe during the [Middle Ages](#). Gothic art evolved from [Romanesque art](#) and lasted from the mid-12th century to as late as the end of the 16th century in some areas. The term Gothic was coined by classicizing Italian writers of the [Renaissance](#), who attributed the invention (and what to them was the nonclassical ugliness) of [medieval](#) architecture to the barbarian Gothic tribes that had destroyed the Roman Empire and its classical [culture](#) in the 5th century

CE. The term retained its [derogatory](#) overtones until the 19th century, at which time a positive critical reevaluation of [Gothic architecture](#) took place. Although modern scholars have long realized that Gothic art has nothing in truth to do with the Goths, the term Gothic remains a standard one in the study of [art history](#).

## [Architecture](#)

Architecture was the most important and original art form during the Gothic period. The principal structural characteristics of Gothic architecture arose out of medieval masons' efforts to solve the problems associated with supporting heavy masonry ceiling [vaults](#) over wide spans. The problem was that the heavy stonework of the traditional arched [barrel vault](#) and the groin vault exerted a tremendous downward and outward pressure that tended to push the walls upon which the vault rested outward, thus collapsing them. A building's vertical supporting walls thus had to be made extremely thick and heavy in order to contain the barrel vault's outward thrust.



### [four common types of vault](#)

Four common types of vault. A barrel vault (also called a cradle vault, tunnel vault, or wagon vault) has a semicircular cross section. A groin (or cross) vault is formed by the perpendicular intersection of two barrel vaults. A rib (or ribbed) vault is supported by a series of arched diagonal ribs that divide the vault's surface into panels. A fan vault is composed of concave sections with ribs spreading out like a fan.

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### [Amiens Cathedral](#)

The rib-vaulted ceiling of Amiens Cathedral, France.

Medieval masons solved this difficult problem about 1120 with a number of brilliant [innovations](#). First and foremost they developed a [ribbed vault](#), in which arching and intersecting stone ribs support a vaulted ceiling surface that is composed of mere thin stone panels. This greatly reduced the weight (and thus the outward thrust) of the ceiling vault, and since the vault's weight was now carried at discrete points (the ribs) rather than along a continuous wall edge, separate widely spaced vertical piers to support the ribs could replace the continuous thick walls. The round arches of the barrel vault were replaced by pointed (Gothic) arches which distributed thrust in more directions downward from the topmost point of the arch.

Since the combination of ribs and piers relieved the intervening vertical wall spaces of their supportive function, these walls could be built thinner and could even be opened up with large windows or other glazing. A crucial point was that the outward thrust of the ribbed ceiling [vaults](#) was carried across the outside walls of the nave, first to an attached outer buttress and then to a freestanding pier by means of a half arch known as a [flying buttress](#). The flying buttress leaned against the upper exterior of the nave (thus counteracting the vault's outward thrust), crossed over the low side aisles of the nave, and terminated in the freestanding buttress pier, which ultimately absorbed the ceiling vault's thrust.

These elements enabled Gothic masons to build much larger and taller buildings than their Romanesque predecessors and to give their structures more complicated ground plans. The skillful use of flying buttresses made it possible to build extremely tall,

thin-walled buildings whose interior [structural system](#) of columnar piers and ribs reinforced an impression of soaring verticality.

Three successive phases of Gothic architecture can be distinguished, respectively called early, High, and late Gothic.



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## [Early Gothic](#)



## [Basilica of Saint-Denis](#)

Basilica of Saint-Denis, France, designed by Abbot Suger, completed 1144.

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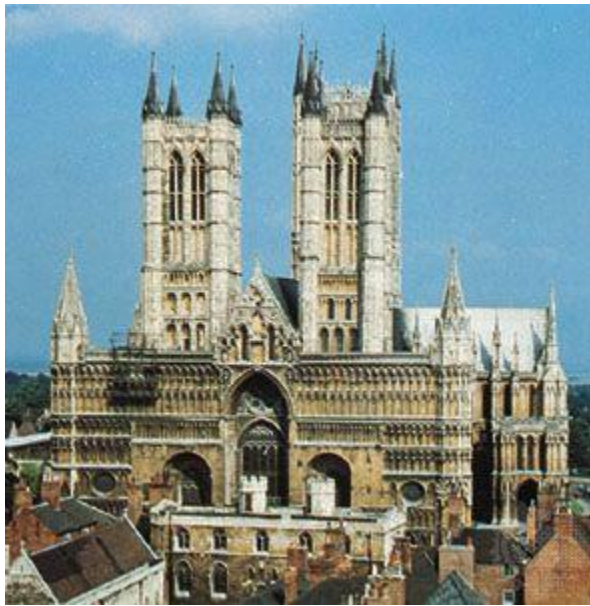


## [Notre-Dame de Paris](#)

Notre-Dame de Paris, France.

This first phase lasted from the Gothic style's inception in 1120–50 to about 1200. The combination of all the aforementioned structural elements into a [coherent](#) style first occurred in the [Île-de-France](#) (the region around Paris), where prosperous urban populations had sufficient wealth to build the great [cathedrals](#) that epitomize the Gothic style. The earliest surviving Gothic building was the abbey of Saint-Denis in Paris, begun in about 1140. Structures with similarly precise vaulting and chains of windows along the perimeter were soon begun with [Notre-Dame de Paris](#) (begun 1163) and Laon Cathedral (begun 1165). By this time it had become fashionable to treat the interior columns and ribs as if each was composed of a bunch of more slender parallel members. A series of four discrete horizontal levels or stories in the cathedral's interior were evolved, beginning with a ground-level arcade, over which ran one or two galleries (tribune, triforium), over which in turn ran an upper, windowed story called a clerestory. The columns and arches used to support these different elevations contributed to the severe and powerfully repetitive geometry of the interior. Window tracery (decorative ribwork subdividing a window opening) was also gradually evolved, along with the use of stained (coloured) glass in the windows. The typical French early Gothic cathedral terminated at its eastern end in a semicircular projection called an apse. The western end was much more impressive, being a wide facade [articulated](#) by

numerous windows and pointed arches, having monumental doorways, and being topped by two huge towers. The long sides of the cathedral's exterior presented a baffling and tangled array of piers and flying buttresses. The basic form of Gothic architecture eventually spread throughout Europe to Germany, Italy, [England](#), the [Low Countries](#), Spain, and Portugal.



[Lincoln Cathedral, Lincolnshire, Eng.](#)



[Lincoln Cathedral: St. Hugh's Choir](#)

St. Hugh's Choir, with organ crafted by Henry Willis, in Lincoln Cathedral, Lincolnshire, England.

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In England the early Gothic phase had its own particular character (epitomized by Salisbury Cathedral) that is known as the early English Gothic style (c. 1200–1300). The

first mature example of the style was the nave and choir of [Lincoln Cathedral](#) (begun in 1192).

Early English Gothic churches differed in several respects from their French counterparts. They had thicker, heavier walls that were not much changed from Romanesque proportions; [accentuated](#), repeated moldings on the edges of interior arches; a sparing use of tall, slender, pointed lancet windows; and nave piers consisting of a central column of light-coloured stone surrounded by a number of slimmer attached columns made of black Purbeck marble.



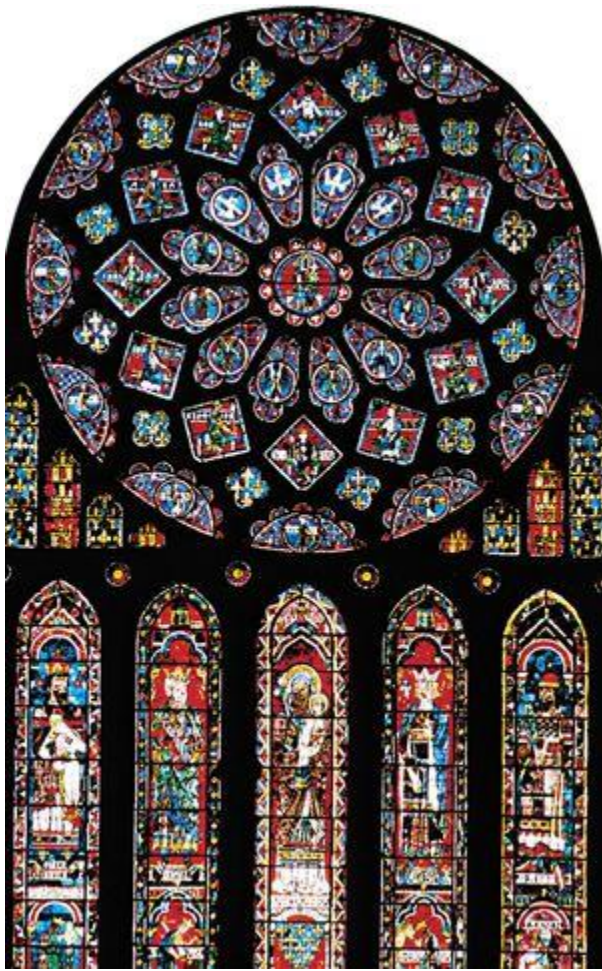
[West facade of Wells Cathedral, Somerset, Eng.](#)

Early English churches also established other stylistic features that were to distinguish all of English Gothic: great length and little attention to height; a nearly equal emphasis on horizontal and vertical lines in the stringcourses and elevations of the interior; a square termination of the building's eastern end rather than a semicircular eastern projection; scant use of flying buttresses; and a piecemeal, asymmetrical [conception](#) of the ground plan of the church. Other outstanding examples of the early [English style](#) are the nave and west front of Wells Cathedral (c. 1180–c. 1245) and the choirs and [transept](#) of Rochester Cathedral.

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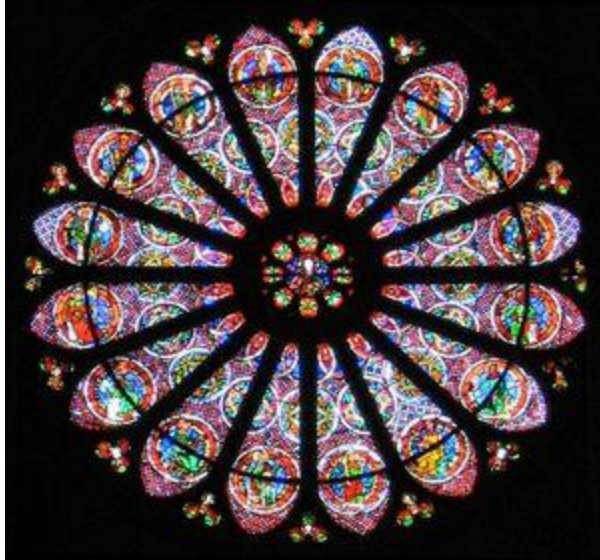
## [High Gothic](#)

The second phase of [Gothic architecture](#) began with a subdivision of the style known as [Rayonnant](#) (1200–80) on the Continent and as the [Decorated Gothic](#) (1300–75) style in England. This style was characterized by the application of increasingly elaborate geometrical decoration to the structural forms that had been established during the preceding century.



[The north rose window in Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France.](#)





### [Reims Cathedral: rose window](#)

West rose window in Reims Cathedral, France.

During the period of the Rayonnant style a significant change took place in Gothic architecture. Until about 1250, Gothic architects concentrated on the harmonious distribution of masses of masonry and, particularly in France, on the technical problems of achieving great height; after that date, they became more concerned with the creation of rich visual effects through decoration. This decoration took such forms as [pinnacles](#) (upright members, often spired, that capped piers, buttresses, or other exterior elements), moldings, and, especially, window tracery. The most characteristic and finest achievement of the Rayonnant style is the great circular [rose window](#) adorning the west facades of large French cathedrals; the typically radial patterns of the tracery inspired the [designation](#) Rayonnant for the new style. Another typical feature of Rayonnant architecture is the thinning of vertical supporting members, the enlargement of windows, and the combination of the triforium gallery and the clerestory until walls are largely undifferentiated screens of tracery, mullions (vertical bars of tracery dividing windows into sections), and glass. Stained glass—formerly deeply coloured—became lighter in colour to increase the visibility of tracery silhouettes and to let more light into the interior. The most notable examples of the Rayonnant style are the cathedrals of Reims, Amiens, Bourges, Chartres, and Beauvais.

The parallel Decorated Gothic style came into being in England with the general use of [elaborate](#) stone window [tracery](#). Supplanting the small, slender, pointed lancet windows of the early English Gothic style were windows of great width and height, divided by mullions into two to eight brightly coloured main subdivisions, each of which was further divided by tracery. At first, this tracery was based on the trefoil and quatrefoil, the arch, and the circle, all of which were combined to form netlike patterns. Later, tracery was based on the ogee, or S-shaped curve, which creates flowing, flamelike forms. Some of the most outstanding monuments of the Decorated Gothic style are sections of the cloister (c. 1245–69) of Westminster Abbey; the east end, or Angel Choir, of [Lincoln Cathedral](#) (begun 1256); and the nave and west front of [York Minster](#) (c. 1260–1320).

## [Late Gothic](#)

In France the Rayonnant style evolved about 1280 into an even more decorative phase called the [Flamboyant style](#), which lasted until about 1500. In England a development known as the Perpendicular style lasted from about 1375 to 1500. The most [conspicuous](#) feature of the [Flamboyant](#) Gothic style is the dominance in stone window tracery of a flamelike S-shaped curve.

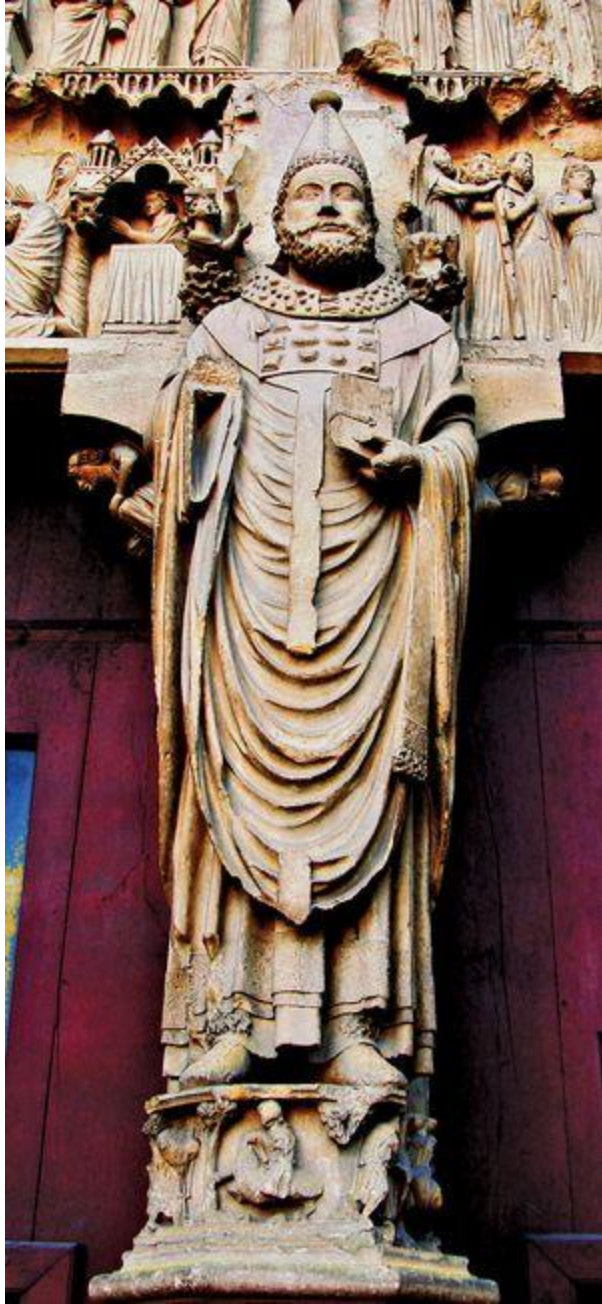
In the Flamboyant style wall space was reduced to the minimum of supporting vertical shafts to allow an almost continuous expanse of glass and tracery. Structural logic was obscured by the virtual covering of the exteriors of buildings with tracery, which often decorated masonry as well as windows. A profusion of pinnacles, gables, and other details such as subsidiary ribs in the vaults to form star patterns further complicated the total effect.

By the late Gothic period greater attention was being given to [secular](#) buildings. Thus, Flamboyant Gothic features can be seen in many town halls, [guild](#) halls, and even residences. There were few churches built completely in the Flamboyant style, attractive exceptions being Notre-Dame d'Épine near Châlons-sur-Marne and Saint-Maclou in Rouen. Other important examples of the style are the Tour de Beurre of Rouen

Cathedral and the north spire of Chartres. Flamboyant Gothic, which eventually became overly ornate, refined, and complicated, gave way in France to [Renaissance](#) forms in the 16th century.

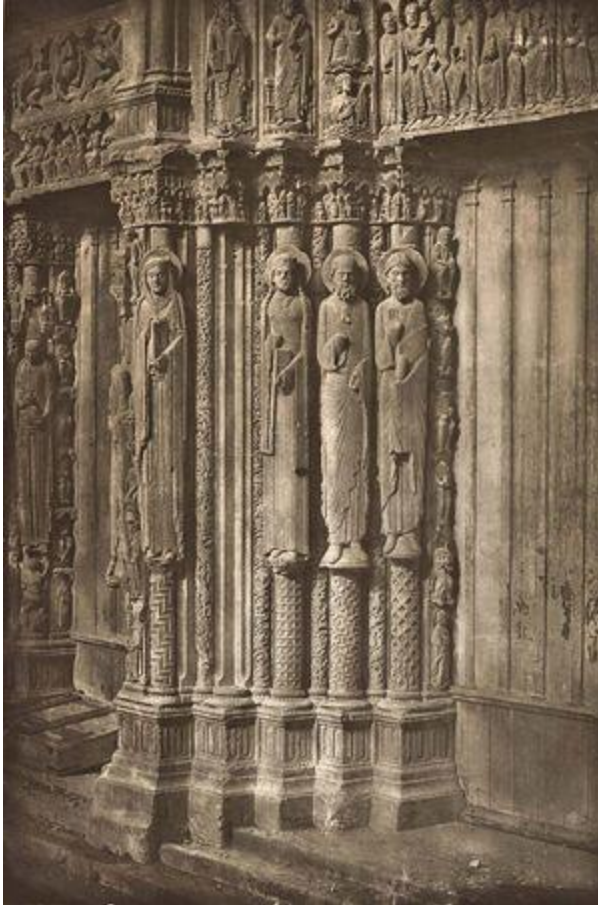
In England the parallel [Perpendicular Gothic style](#) was characterized by a predominance of vertical lines in the stone tracery of windows, an enlargement of windows to great proportions, and the [conversion](#) of the interior stories into a single unified vertical expanse. The typical Gothic pointed vaults were replaced by [fan vaults](#) (fan-shaped clusters of tracery-like ribs springing from slender columns or from pendant knobs at the centre of the ceiling). Among the finest examples of the Perpendicular Gothic style are Gloucester Cathedral (14th–15th centuries) and King's College Chapel, Cambridge (1446–1515).

## **Sculpture**



[St. Callixtus I](#)

St. Callixtus I, statue at Reims Cathedral, France.



[Charles Nègre: Chartres Cathedral. Right Door of the Royal Portal. West Side. XII Century](#)

*Chartres Cathedral. Right Door of the Royal Portal, West Side, XII Century*, photogravure by Charles Nègre, c. 1857; in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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Gothic [sculpture](#) was closely tied to architecture, since it was used primarily to decorate the exteriors of cathedrals and other religious buildings. The earliest Gothic sculptures were stone figures of saints and the [Holy Family](#) used to decorate the doorways, or portals, of cathedrals in France and elsewhere. The sculptures on the Royal Portal of [Chartres Cathedral](#) (c. 1145–55) were little changed from their Romanesque [predecessors](#) in their stiff, straight, simple, elongated, and hieratic forms. But during the later 12th and the early 13th centuries sculptures became more relaxed and naturalistic in treatment, a trend that culminated in the sculptural decorations of the [Reims Cathedral](#) (c. 1240). These figures, while retaining the dignity and monumentality of their predecessors, have individualized faces and figures, as well as full, flowing

draperies and natural poses and gestures, and they display a classical poise that suggests an awareness of antique Roman models on the part of their creators. Early Gothic masons also began to observe such natural forms as plants more closely, as is evident in the realistically carven clusters of leaves that adorn the capitals of columns.

Monumental sculptures assumed an increasingly prominent role during the High and late Gothic periods and were placed in large numbers on the facades of cathedrals, often in their own [niches](#). In the 14th century, Gothic sculpture became more refined and elegant and acquired a mannered daintiness in its elaborate and finicky drapery. The elegant and somewhat artificial prettiness of this style was widely [disseminated](#) throughout Europe in sculpture, painting, and manuscript illumination during the 14th century and became known as the International Gothic style. An opposite trend at this time was that of an intensified [realism](#), as displayed in French tomb sculptures and in the vigorous and dramatic works of the foremost late Gothic sculptor, [Claus Sluter](#). Gothic sculpture evolved into the more technically advanced and classicistic Renaissance style in Italy during the 14th and early 15th centuries but persisted until somewhat later in northern Europe.

## Painting



[The illustration for the month of May from the \*Tres Riches Heures du duc de Berry\*, manuscript illuminated by the Limburg brothers, 1416; in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.](#)

Gothic painting followed the same stylistic evolution as did sculpture; from stiff, simple, hieratic forms toward more relaxed and natural ones. Its scale grew large only in the early 14th century, when it began to be used in decorating the retable (ornamental panel behind an altar). Such paintings usually featured scenes and figures from the New Testament, particularly of the Passion of Christ and the Virgin Mary. These paintings display an emphasis on flowing, curving lines, minute detail, and refined decoration, and gold was often applied to the panel as background colour. **Compositions** became more complex as time went on, and painters began to seek means of depicting spatial depth in their pictures, a search that eventually led to the mastery of perspective in the early years of the Italian Renaissance. In late Gothic painting of the 14th and 15th centuries secular subjects such as hunting scenes, chivalric themes, and depictions of historical events also appeared. Both religious and secular subjects were depicted in [manuscript illuminations](#)—i.e., the pictorial embellishment of handwritten books. This was a major form of artistic production during the Gothic period and reached its peak in France during the 14th century. The calendar illustrations in the [Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry](#) (c. 1409–16) by the [Limbourg brothers](#), who worked at the court of [Jean de France](#), duc de Berry, are perhaps the most **eloquent** statements of the International Gothic style as well as the best known of all manuscript illuminations.

Manuscript illumination was superseded by printed illustrations in the second half of the 15th century. Panel and [wall painting](#) evolved gradually into the Renaissance style in Italy during the 14th and early 15th centuries but retained many more of its Gothic characteristics until the late 15th and early 16th centuries in Germany, [Flanders](#), and elsewhere in Northern Europe.