

Reassessing “Lateness:” Issues of Periodization and Style in Late Medieval Architecture

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Session co-organizers:

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This panel engages with notions of lateness and what constitutes lateness in the architecture of the medieval period (c. 1400-c. 1600), and aims to situate Late Gothic architecture within the larger narratives of art history. In some cases, medieval architectural forms and styles persist well into the seventeenth century, posing problems to existing periodizations in the field. How might we begin to

explain these examples? Although modern scholarship has adhered to progress models of stylistic change that presuppose a nascent, fully-realized, and late style in architecture, the issues surrounding constructs of “lateness” in architecture remain to be fully considered from methodological and theoretical standpoints. How has the concept of lateness been applied to the study of medieval architecture and its ornamentation? How might these considerations begin to revise historiographical bias in the field?

The session features four papers that address historiographic, methodological, and theoretical concerns related to the study of Late Gothic architecture between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries in Western Europe, East-Central Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean. The individual papers in this session focus on case studies and larger historiographic concerns, dealing with issues of the relationships between monumental architecture and other forms of artistic expression, the role of ornament as bearer of cultural meaning, the coexistence of Gothic and antique features and the attribution of meaning, as well as the development and functions of eclectic styles with roots in both Gothic structures and classical forms.

In his paper entitled “Relativizing the Lateness of Late Gothic: Contrasting Approaches,” Robert Bork investigates how the marginalization of the rich architectural culture of this era is rooted in historiographic bias that privileges “Renaissance” monuments and northern figural art. Bork’s contribution to the study of Late Gothic architecture confirms that the Gothic tradition did not decline in the shadow of new developments, but, rather, continued well into the sixteenth century. Abby McGehee explores how such monuments and their elaborate sculptural programs were interpreted in this moment of societal, cultural, and artistic change. Her study of the multifaceted decorative program of the treasury at Saint-Jacques in Dieppe—which includes both Gothic and Classical architectural motifs as well as figural sculpture—reveals how patrons and architects chose to combine medieval and antique modes of expression after the discovery of the New World and the cultures of its indigenous (“Other”) population. The geographic footprint and appeal of Gothic is extended in Michalis Olympios’ paper “Old Styles Die Hard: Late Gothic, Classicism, and Architectural Nostalgia in Venetian Cyprus,” which demonstrates the currency of Gothic forms in the eastern Mediterranean at a time when classical elements were predominant. Marek Walczak highlights the continuity and creativity of the Late Gothic workshop, which coexisted with the antique, and produced new motifs and combinations of structural and non-structural ornament that was fused with both the physical and ideological fabric of Late Gothic churches across East-Central Europe.

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Speaker one: **Robert Bork**

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Relativizing the Lateness of Late Gothic: Contrasting Approaches

A fundamental question in framing the discussion of Late Gothic architecture is “late relative to what?” In a strictly architectural framework, the High Gothic age of the thirteenth century provides one prominent point of comparison, while the emergence of Renaissance classicism in fifteenth-century Italy provides another. In a broader cultural framework, moreover, Late Gothic architecture has often been derided as a decadent product of the waning Middle Ages, even though the figural art of the same period and milieu has often been celebrated as characteristic of a uniquely northern Renaissance. These contrasting interpretations have deep historiographical roots in the writings of prominent authors including Johan Huizinga and Erwin Panofsky, and they continue to inflect scholarly approaches to Late Gothic architecture even today. Partly as a consequence, studies of Late Gothic have until recently occupied only a relatively marginal place in the discussion of medieval architectural culture. The past decade, however, has witnessed an increasing pace of publication in the field, with several new synthetic works offering contrasting approaches to the question of lateness. Matt Kavalier’s *Renaissance Gothic* treats the period between 1470 and 1540 largely on its own terms, while noting that growing interest in classicism could spur the creativity of builders working in both Gothic and hybrid modes. Pablo de la Riestra’s *Revolte der Gotik* emphasizes the emancipation of the German Late Gothic tradition from French High Gothic and Rayonnant standards, thus echoing Roland Sanfaçon’s pioneering treatment of the French Flamboyant, which is itself about to be republished. My own new book on Late Gothic instead follows Paul Frankl’s approach, emphasizing the continuity of the Gothic tradition until its fateful collision with Renaissance classicism in the sixteenth century. Consideration of these complementary glosses helps to situate the study of Late Gothic architecture within the larger narratives of art history.

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Speaker three: **Michalis Olympios**

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Old Styles Die Hard: Late Gothic, Classicism, and Architectural Nostalgia in Venetian Cyprus

A growing body of scholarly literature on early modern architecture in Northern Europe and the Iberian Peninsula has been muddling the waters of canonical architectural-historical periodization by problematizing the continuous relevance of Late Gothic styles alongside the then-fashionable Italianate all’antica design mode long after the end of the Middle Ages. Termed “Renaissance Gothic” or “Modern Gothic,” this strand of late-fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century architectural discourse has been shown to have been at once firmly rooted in local building tradition and extraordinarily inventive in its virtuoso handling of surface effects, microarchitectural detailing, and vaulting design. Often calibrated towards subverting contemporary viewers’ expectations of what could be achieved in full-scale architecture, it was Gothic recast for a new age. In the Latin-ruled polities of the Eastern Mediterranean, late-fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Gothic architecture not only comes in short supply, but also exhibits little of the flamboyancy of its Western European counterpart. In Venetian Cyprus (1474/89–1571), a mere handful of urban church and other public buildings, together with a small number of loose and reused architectural fragments, display strongly Gothicizing features redolent of the grand Latin cathedrals of the Lusignan period (1192–1474/89). The present paper will take the Greek cathedral of the Panagia Hodegetria in Nicosia as its starting point in examining the remarkable currency of past visual forms at a time when the large-scale refortification works carried out under the Serenissima attracted a host of Italian military engineers and masons to the island, steeped in the principles of classicizing design. Through the lens of the Hodegetria’s unmitigatedly historicist countenance, it will address the social issues that led to the sixteenth-century revalorization of Lusignan Gothic architecture as a legitimate alternative to officially-sanctioned architectural classicism.

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Speaker four: **Marek Walczak**
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Ropes and Knots: A Contribution to the History of *Emulatio* in the Architecture of the Late 15th and Early 16th Centuries North of the Alps

When reflecting on the art of the late Middle Ages in court circles, attention is drawn to the phenomenon of deliberately imitating the effects of one type of artistic forms in quite different techniques. This treatment is described using the rhetorical category of *emulatio*, anachronistic in this case, because it is significant for the modern art theory developed in Italy. One of the more interesting examples of this phenomenon, so far poorly researched, is the reference to carpenters in stone architectural decorations. Particularly symptomatic is the introduction of a stone carved decoration in the form of ropes often with effective knots to portals, window frames, traceries, vaults, and even to the decoration of flat surfaces. The most well-known examples of this are found in the Hieronymites Church in Belém and other examples of the Manueline style in Portuguese architecture. The earliest examples are the simple portals in several churches in Lesser Poland founded by an outstanding chronicler of the Polish Kingdom Jan Długosz, dating from the third quarter of the fifteenth century. The motif of a rope was often used in a constructional way, as if it actually served in building practice, binding or tying something together, and even joining parts of architecture with non-architectural features. Sometimes this motif also carried important ideological meanings, as in the case of architectural works related to the Order of the Cord (Ordre de la Cordelier), founded in 1498 by duchess Anne of Brittany. The paper will present the development of this type of decoration in various European countries of the late Middle Ages, its ancient sources, and alleged literary origins.