

# Architecture

WITH ITS APPEAL TO ANCIENT ROMAN MODELS, ARCHITECTURE WAS THE MASTER ART THAT TRULY ANNOUNCED THE IDEALS OF RENAISSANCE CIVILIZATION.

▼ *Though the Italian Gothic style of the cathedral at Siena (built between 1284 and 1299) is neither as pronounced nor as complex as the great French and English Gothic cathedrals, this building's finials (crowning ornaments) and triangular gables nevertheless trumpet its Gothic inspiration.*

Using the materials and building techniques a culture offers, architecture interprets place through the lens of imagination, transcending mere function so as to express the aesthetic, political, and religious ideals of civilization. In the 1400s these ideals were changing. Before the mid-fifteenth century, buildings in southern Europe were designed on traditional patterns, particularly the Roman house and the *insula* (urban apartment block) and the long basilican church with its center aisle running toward a semicircular apse in which the altar stood. In

northern Europe, from Milan and Venice north throughout France, Germany, and England, there flourished a style of exceptional beauty that contemporaries called German or modern but that Renaissance writers, critical of the style's lack of clear classical references and assuming an association between this architecture and the invasions of the barbarian Ostrogoths, named Gothic. Late Gothic, called perpendicular because of its use of pronounced verticals in window mullions (slender elements dividing sections of a window) and stone details, persisted in England, where such masterpieces of Gothic architecture as the chapel of King's College, Cambridge, and the chapel of Henry VII at Westminster Abbey were still under construction in the 1510s, just as Donato Bramante (1444–1514) was introducing High Renaissance style to Rome.



## Renaissance Styles

In Italy, beginning in the 1420s, buildings designed with the self-conscious intention of imitating ancient Roman models began to replace the traditional southern architectural styles and patterns. The core vocabulary of Renaissance style was formed by the five orders of Roman architecture: Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Tuscan, and Composite. Each order was defined according to its characteristic columns (including their capitals and bases) and the entablatures the columns supported (including cornices and moldings). Within the broad movement to recreate an architecture based on the five orders and on antique building patterns in general, there are identifiable modes: early Renaissance, High Renaissance, mannerism, and baroque. The development of Renaissance style through these phases is clearly illustrated in Italy, where fifteenth-century architects were intrigued not only with ancient Roman architecture but also with geometry and mathematical proportion.

This interest in geometry was especially evident in the design by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) for the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence and in such buildings in Rome as the Cancelleria Palace and the Church of Sant'Agostino. In these early Renaissance

Raphael wrote the following in a letter of 1514:

*That your Lordship has honored me [with a commission] that has placed a great weight on my shoulders, as the Fabbrica di San Pietro [the building of Saint Peter's] has done. I hope not to fall under this weight, all the more since the model I made of it pleases his Holiness [Pope Leo X] and is praised by many fine minds. But my thoughts soar still higher. I would like to rediscover the fine forms of ancient buildings. Vitruvius has thrown much light on the subject for me, but not enough.*

Letter to Baldassare Castiglione

► This engraving of Christopher Wren's Saint Paul's Cathedral (c. 1750), viewed from a vantage point south of the Thames River, tells the viewer more about the importance the building held in English imagination as a native Protestant answer to Saint Peter's in Rome than it does about the exact proportions of the famous cathedral.



Jones's career was developed mostly before the revolution of 1642, which deposed the Stuarts and ruined Jones's practice. His most important designs were the Queen's House in Greenwich (1616–1619) and the Banqueting House in Whitehall (1619–1622). The link between Jones and Christopher Wren was Jones's assistant John Webb (1611–1674). Webb was employed by Inigo Jones at Wilton House and Durham House, both undertaken between the restoration of the Stuarts in 1661 and Webb's death in 1674. By that time Christopher Wren, a fellow of All Soul's, Oxford, who was well known for his studies in astronomy and anatomy, had developed an interest in architecture and had come to the attention of King Charles II. Wren began his architectural career with the design of the chapel at Pembroke College, Cambridge. In 1665 and 1666 he traveled to France, where he met François Mansart and also Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who had been in Paris since June 1665 at the

behest of King Louis XIV. While in France, Wren also visited Versailles and the country houses of the Loire valley.

Wren had already committed to paper several designs for covering the crossing of Saint Paul's Cathedral with a dome like those he had seen in France at Jacques Lemercier's Church of the Sorbonne and François Mansard's Church of the Val-de-Grâce. However, it was the great fire of London (1666) that gave him the opportunity to provide the design for the new Saint Paul's Cathedral and indeed for the other city churches destroyed by the fire. His scheme for Saint Paul's, which is rightly considered his most important work, was imposing and monumental, although it was somewhat somber in comparison with baroque churches elsewhere. There would be no statues of saints or any trompe l'oeil paintings of saints ascending, since England had just emerged from a decade of Puritan government (Puritans condemned the use of images of Christ and the

saints in worship). Masterly in composition, all Wren's work has a delicacy that echoes the French Renaissance; one of his favorite devices is the paired column, which he preferred to the bold orders of Inigo Jones's Palladianism.

In addition to the great cathedral in London, Wren designed fifty-two churches to replace those destroyed in the great fire. These churches followed Jones's centrally planned design for the Queen's Chapel and also the Roman baroque style of Bernini and Borromini. Each was arranged around a central space with the altar the dominant feature on the east wall and a pulpit placed high toward the middle of the nave to ensure that the sermons that were central to Protestant worship could be easily heard. The variety of Wren's spatial solutions, dictated by the restricted urban sites, gave the London skyline its distinctive character until tall buildings obscured the forest of spires in the twentieth century. Among Wren's churches, two that seem especially evocative of his architectural imagination are Saint-Mary-le-Bow, famous for its steeple as well as for its bells (a Cockney was defined as anyone living within hearing range of Bow Bells), and Saint Martin's, Ludgate, the spire of which would be frequently imitated in seventeenth-century New England.

### Renaissance Borderlands

Generally speaking, as the Renaissance spirit crossed the Alps into Germany and the Low Countries, the architecture it produced was a hybrid of medieval detail and half-understood Renaissance themes. The result in Germany and the Low Countries was a charming and picturesque architecture represented in such a municipal building as the Rathaus (town hall) in Bremen and in such a church as the Marienkirche at Wolfenbüttel, buildings whose design is far removed from the Renaissance classicism of Italy or the Palladianism of seventeenth century England. Exceptions to this trend may be found in Russia, where Peter the Great simply commanded that neoclassicism be adopted. In Mexico City, Lima, and other major cities in Spain's colonial dependencies, despite a certain localism, a recognizable and powerful baroque style appeared.



### The Enduring Renaissance

The architectural Renaissance that began in fifteenth-century Florence has never ended. The baroque of the 1600s gave way in the eighteenth century to neoclassicism, an architecture using the classical orders but based on a claim to reasonableness that characterized the Enlightenment. Even after neoclassicism gave way in the 1780s to romanticism, which scorned rule and precedent, there were repeated classical revivals, notably the Greek revival of 1790 to 1840 and the later Renaissance revivals associated with the French *École des Beaux-Arts*. As late as 1850, public buildings in the United States were more likely to be Palladian than of any modern design. Varieties of classicism persisted into the 1940s.

#### FURTHER READING

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#### SEE ALSO

- Bernini, Gian Lorenzo • Bramante, Donato
- Brunelleschi, Filippo • Michelangelo
- Painting and Sculpture • Renaissance

▲ The Rathaus in Bremen, built between 1602 and 1612 by Luder von Bentheim, typifies the tendency of German architects to subordinate Renaissance architectural styles to local themes and tastes. The facade carries statues of Charlemagne and the seven electors of the Holy Roman Empire.