Thirteenth Century Gothic in Italy

In my last lecture we considered the development of Gothic sculpture up to the high point of its achievement in the sculpture of the west portals of Rheims Cathedral which are dated to 1225; that is to the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Let us look at the Visitation group again. We know that this sculpture was inspired in part by classical models. Rheims itself originally a Roman city, Durocrotorum, and the centre of a Roman vine growing and wine producing region. But the importance of the Rheims sculpture does not consist simply in the fact that it was in part inspired by classical models. More important is the fact that within the Gothic style a distinctly classical feeling has been captured without destroying or overwhelming the Gothic quality so that here we can reasonably talk about a Gothic classicism, a classical feeling at the high point of the style itself, which is not dependent upon individual models it is inherent in the development of the style itself. Panofsky calls the classicism of Rheims sculpture an ‘intrinsic classicism’.

The intrinsic classicism of the Visitation Group was however to be submerged by a quite different tendency in later Gothic sculpture. We can already note this different stylistic trend in the Annunciation Group* right next to the Visitation Group, produced about ten years or fifteen years later. The Virgin Annunciata is carved in a severe style, with a strong vertical emphasis, straight tubular folds, emphatic angular transitions; and the Angel Gabriel, has a tiny round face, smiling face, richly accented drapery, and the S-curve, the Gothic sway, is marked. Of course, we must remember that even this Gothic sway has an ultimate classical origin; it is nothing less than the classical contraposto in disguise, that classical contraposto which we first meet in such figures as Polycclitus’s Doryphorus. But the stylistic disguise is itself essential to an understanding of the Gothic style. Panofsky points out that in classical contraposto the shoulder above the leg bearing the weight, sags, is lax. But in a figure dominated by Gothic sway the shoulder above the leg taking the weight does not sag, rather it rises. He then goes on to make a nice comparison with architecture. Whereas the classical contraposto, the leg may be compared to a column bearing weight, and the shoulder to the dead weight it bears; the gothic disguised contraposto, the gothic sway, may be compared to a pier which, visually at least, transfers its upward thrust to the vault ribs. This at least is an endeavour to identify the raison d’etre of the two styles: the one wreath bound and ideally naturalistic, the other upwards thrusting and transcendent.

At Rheims then we may identify two trends in Gothic sculpture, a classicistic Gothic and a more attenuated elegant Gothic.

Now in order to follow the history of these two trends in the later Gothic style, we shall have to transfer out attention from northern France to Southern Italy. The change need not surprise us. There as a strong Norman element in both regions. The Normans
had conquered Sicily from the Arabs in the very years that they were conquering England from the Saxons. And the Normans built up a highly efficient kingdom in Sicily in which Byzantine, Muslim and Norman elements mingled. But the Norman line in Sicily died out and through marriage and conquest came under the sway of the German Emperors. At the time when the Rheims west portals were being carved, Sicily and Southern Italy was ruled by the young Frederick II of Hohenstaufen.

Frederick was one of the remarkable men of history. Burckhardt in his Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy describes him as ‘the first ruler of the modern type who sat upon the throne’; that is, the thoroughly centralised and rigorously controlled state entirely subject to the will of the prince. A modern historian, Steven Runciman, has described Frederick as intellectually amongst the most remarkable men of his time. A gifted linguist, fluent in French, German and Italian, Latin, Greek and Arabic, learned in law medicine and natural history. Brilliant, audacious, sadistic, impious and half-pagan, he was more than a match for the Papacy which had reared him in childhood and regarded him as Antichrist in manhood.

Like Charlemagne, Frederick II possessed classical tastes; like Charlemagne the classical taste was an aspect of political policy, to identify himself as Emperor of the Romans. Although little remains of the art of which flourished under Frederick there is evidence that a classical style related to the Gothic classicism of Chartres and Rheims was preferred.

This classicizing style may be seen in the busts from the gateway built by Frederick II at Capua in Southern Italy, and in the work of Noccolo de Bartolommeo da Foggia. [Probably allegorical figure of justice, Justicia; Head from Portia Capuosa(?) 1233; Head of Frederick II]

The bust of Pietro della Vigna, Chancellor of the Emperor; the guise of a Roman senator.

It was within this circle of classicizing sculptors of Apulia in south Italy that Nicola Pisano was trained. It was Nicola who introduced a highly classicizing form of Gothic sculpture to Northern Italy with his pulpit in the Baptistery at Pisa; and it is with the work of Nicola Pisano that Vasari in his Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects chooses to begin the history of Italian sculpture; as he uses Cimabue to begin the study of painting. ‘We now propose’ Vasari wrote ‘to treat of sculpture and of the very important works of Niccolò and Giovani Pisani… remarkable for the manner in which they have been conceived as well as for the style in which they are executed, since to a great extent they have emancipated themselves from the clumsy and ill-proportioned Byzantine style in both arts, showing more originality in the treatment of their subjects and arranging their figures in better postures’.
Niccola was born in Apulia and probably trained in the circle of Niccola da Foggia. Little is known of his early life but he completed his first known major work, the pulpit in the Baptistry at Pisa in 1259.

It is hexagonal, supported by seven columns, sustaining tre-foiled arches, a gothic motif, upon which are mounted five large-scale narrative reliefs, which are separated by clusters of three piers, another Gothic motif.

If we compare the Presentation in the Temple Relief with the Rheims Visitation group executed 25 years before, we may see that Niccola Pisano has continued and further developed Gothic classicism. The proportions indeed are now more squat, more Roman, the folds of the robes more ample. We know that Niccola made direct use of classical models because the bearded figure on the right has been copied directly from an antique vase which was then standing in the Campo Santo which is adjacent to the Baptistry.

Even more patently derived from the antique are the figures placed between the trefoils, such as the allegorical figure of Prudence, and the figure of Strength, in the stance of a Heracles.

In 1259 Niccola Pisano undertook a commission for a second pulpit, a more elaborate pulpit for the Cathedral of Siena.

Again, with lions, columns, Corinthian capitals and trefoils, this pulpit was octagonal with seven narrative reliefs, the clusters of pillars being here replaced by figured carvings.

Here at Siena, Niccola’s style remains predominantly classical but the Gothic element in his style is now stronger. This may be seen in his Crucifixion. Note the group to the left of the Cross, with the fainting Virgin supported by a woman and St John, composed in the rather angular Gothic sway contraposto, note too the greater expressiveness of the figures.

The Gothic element in Niccola Pisano’s style is to be seen even more plainly in his last important commission, the magnificent fountain at Perugia, the Fontana Maggiore completed in 1278. Like the pulpits it is polygonal; a 25 sided basin set on a flight of steps, each face being decorated with reliefs, within which is a smaller 12 sided basin cared with statuettes, and surmounting the whole a plain bronze basin supported by three caryatids.*

The further development of the Gothic element in Nicola Pisano’s work is to be seen in the work of his son, Giovanni Pisano, born about 1250 and employed on the Siena pulpit between 1270 and 1276. The statues on the Perugia fountain have sometimes
been ascribed to Giovanni rather than to his father Niccola. It is believed to be likely that Giovanni travelled in France between 1270 and 1276, and Vasari informs us that ‘under his father’s care he learned both sculpture and architecture’. From 1284 Giovanni was employed as architect and sculptor on Siena Cathedral. The sculptural programme which he devised for Siena forms a novel contest to that of such French cathedrals as Amiens or Rheims which Giovanni might well have known.* At Siena, Giovanni has kept the portals free of sculpture, confining the statuary to positions well above eye level, and using single figures placed in prominent and central positions, rather than in the clusters typical of French Gothic.

Giovanni’s sculpture possesses strong and vivid characterization. Consider, for example, the statue of the prophet Habakkuk on the Siena façade. The open mouth, the asymmetrical drive, the not of suppressed fervour. Again, tis Sybil*, with its tilted head and deeply angular drapes reveals Giovanni’s penchant for the Gothic.

In 1301 Giovanni completed a pulpit for the church of S Andrea at Pistoia. It derives its forms from the earlier pulpit at Pisa; but the trefoils are now pointed and the clusters of columns are replaced by statuary. The difference between Giovanni’s style and his father Niccola is indicated more clearly by comparing the narrative reliefs of the two pulpits. Compare the Annunciation and Nativity at Pisa with the Annunciation and Nativity at Pistoia. At Pisa the figures are static, solid and staid, they possess the amplitude of Roman reliefs. By contrast Giovanni’s work at Pistoia emphasizes movement; the Virgin shrinks back, everything is in motion, the lines are more fluent. The figures are deeply undercut, and a most expressive linear rhythm is used throughout.

In 1302 Giovanni Pisano began the last of the great Pisan pulpits; the pulpit for the Cathedral at Pisa. It is rather elaborate, an octagon with protruding side, and the execution which is uneven reveals the hands of assistants in the Pisani workshop. More important than the narrative relieves are the large-scale figures beneath, here allegories of strength and prudence.* Here Giovani has been courageous enough to use a Venus Pudica figure, similar in pose to the classical Medici Venus, to present prudence. This is the furthest move towards classicism, but here the naked ness one feels is more Gothic than classic; the Medici Venus is proud of nudity; Giovannis prudence is ashamed of her nakedness. The classicistic note which here reappears in Giovani’s esseniiall Gothic style is also to be seen in the magnificent Madonna and Child over the Iter of the Arena Chapel,* where something of the solid classical feeling of his father is recaptured. Nevertheless, we can agree with Panosky who writes in summing up the achievement of Pisani ‘The influence of Niccola Pisano was neutralized by that of his son Giovanni, who, while foreshadowing Donatello and Michelangelo in the spirit, ws certainly more Gothic than his father in the flesh.”
I want to turn now, for a moment to consider Gothic architecture in Italy during the 13th century. You will recall that in a previous lecture we noticed that the austere ascetic mysticism of S Bernard of Laivaux made a direct impact during the 12th century upon French Gothic architecture, producing fine austere and bare building like the Abbey Church at Fontenay. The Cistercians were a highly centralized order and consequently all their monasteries whether built in northern England in Yorkshire or Southern Italy imitated the mother house of the order at Citeaux in Burgundy. As a consequence Gothic architecture penetrated Italy, and the penetration in its austere Cistercian form. The Abbey of Chiaravalle near Milan founded in 1135 is an early example of Italian Cistercian Gothic. But in Italy, Gothic did not sweep all before it as in the north; it was modified by the existing Romanesque style which had strong roots in Italian Roman architecture, the ruins of which were much more in evidence than they are today. The Church of S Miniato, the façadedates about 1090, is an excellent example of this Italian Romanesque which preserves classical memories, particularly the round arcade carried on Corinthian columns, and the pediment temple from, as though on temple has been placed on another. The colouristic effect obtained by contrasting different coloured marbles, here off-white and dark-green is characteristic of much Tuscan and Lombard architecture. The most impressive example of Tuscan Romanesque in Florence is the Baptistry built between 1060 and 1150, which is severely geometrical in its contrasting marble patterning.

The impact of the Cistercian Gothic upon the existing Italian Romanesque was greatly promoted by the two important new orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Both were founded in the early 13th century and expanded with great rapidity. These mendicant orders, as they were called, the Grey Friars, ie the Franciscans, and the Black Friars, Dominicans, directed their attention to the spiritual needs of the urban and rural poor. Whereas the older monastic orders lived out their lives within monasteries, these orders taught. St Francis and St Dominic both embraced vows of poverty. Whereas St Dominic directed his energies to counteracting the extensive Albigensians heresy of Southern France and became a teaching order; St Francis sought to humanize religion and bring it to the outcasts of society. Much has been written about his great love of nature, his Canticle to the Sun, and his Sermon to the Birds. In one of his hymns he thanks God for brother sun who lights the day, for sister moon who shines at night; for brother wind, sister water and brother fire; for mother earth and her fruits and finally for sister death. The followers which he gathered about him like brother Jacopone da Todi, known as the jongleur de Dieu followed St Francis in giving poetic form to the new spirituality. Poverty has always been linked with sadness and melancholy; St Francis’s genius lay in linking poverty with joy. Joy was the essence of his teaching as revealed in the Rules of the St Francisian Order (Speculum Perfectionis) ‘The blessed Francis strove above all to maintain, outside the times of prayer and Divine Office, a continuous spiritual joy, both inward and outward. His he also prided among the brethren, and he often reproached the for manifestations of sadness or melancholy’.
Now it has been claimed and claimed rightly that the Francisan movement led to a new naturalism in art. But this did not happen immediately, for St Francis’s asceticism had much in common with his forerunner St Bernard, and was in some degree anti-art. St Francis laid down himself that ‘temples of large dimensions and richly ornamented are to be avoided, and for this reason the Franciscan Chapter of Narbonne limited the dimensions and decorations of its churches and adopted the Cistercian Gothic, then the most austere and sober in all of Christendom.

St Francis died in 1226 and so widely was he venerated that he was canonised two years afterwards in 1228. In the same year the church of San Francis at Assisi* was founded. This church admirably reveals the convergence of the Tuscan Romanesque and the Cistercian Gothic styles the was the work of Brother Elias, the Franciscan who begun the process of directing the order away from austerity and poverty to splendour and power. There are two churches one above the other, the lower church has a long narthex followed by a single nave. The upper church begun in 1253 has also a single nave; its extreme airiness and lightness forms a marked contrast to the gloom of the lower church. The weight of the great stone vaulted roof supported by ribs decorated with the *cosmati* work which we have seen already in Tuscan Romanesque, as at San Miniato. The Cistercian aisles church particularly suited the mendicant orders who required large unimpeded spaces to house the large congregations who came to listen to their preaches. The greater heat of the Italian climate meant that the huge glass walls of the Gothic of the Ile de France was unsuitable. It also meant, of course, the existence of large wall spaces eminently suited to fresco painting.

At Flornace the Dominican Order built their first great church Sta Maria Novella begun in 1246. it made use of aisles, but the square east end and bare walls preserve the simplicity of the Cistercian Gothic. A particularly fine effect of contrast is established by the use of the dark blue grey *pietra serena*, the fine hard stone which the Florentines used so well for their architecture and much architectural sculpture.

The Franciscans of Florence, not to be outdone by the Dominicans began their great church Sta Croce in 1292. By this time the Franciscan order became bitterly divided over the question of preserving the original vows of poverty. Sta Croce indicate something of the new luxury which crept into the order in its emulation of the Dominicans who were not bound to poverty. The Franciscans attracted rich charitable donations, particularly from the great banking houses of Florence, such as the Bardi and the Pazzi. Florence, we must remember was the financial capital of medieval Europe, but even there usury was a sin, and secular authorities had power to fine right and left for usury. It is not surprising that bankers like Bardi and Pazzi, with tender consciences on the subject of usury, should found magnificent chapels in the Friars churches.
There is no documentary evidence as to whom was the architect of St Croce, but it is traditionally attributed to Arnolfo di Cambio. This really brings us back, in a way to the beginning of my lecture, because we know that Nicola Pisano trained two important architects and sculptors in his workshop, one was his son Giovanni, and the other was Arnolfo di Cambi. Arnolfo was probably responsible for designing the Badia Church at Florence, built between 1284 and 1310, St Croce begun in 1294 and not completed until 1442; and thirdly, was responsible for the basic plan for the Florence Cathedral begun in the same year as Sta Croce, 1294. The church was built at the expense of the Florentine Republic itself; and was intended to outrival the Cathedrals of Pisa and Siena.

Arnolfo di Cambio is important in another way. He is one of Vasar’s three firsts. When Vasari came to write the history of Italian architecture, sculpture and painting looking back from the vantage point of the mid sixteenth century, it seemed to hum that during the later thirteenth century all three of the fine arts le belle arti, namely architecture, sculpture and painting, were born again, this re-birth, la renascita, was begun by Noccola and Giovani Pisano in sculpture; Arnolfo de Cambio in architecture; Cimabue and Giotto in painting.

Cimabue, Vasari tells us, was born in 1240. ‘Then as it pleased God, there was born in the city of Florence, Giovanni, of the noble family of Cimabui, to shed the first light on the art of painting.’ He as sent to a relative who taught grammar at Sta Maia Novella, but alas he paid no attention at all to his lessons preferring, Vasari informs us, to pay attention to the Greek artists who had been summoned to the city to revive painting there, since that art was ‘not so much debased as altogether lost’. So his father allowed Giovanni to study under the Greek artists working in Sta Maria Nevella so that ‘by dint of continual practice, he so far surpassed the manner of his teachers both in design and colour. For they had never cared to make any progress, and had executed their works not in the good manner of the ancient Greece, but in the rude style of that time’. Although Cimabue imitated the Greeks he introduced many improvements in the art and in a great manner emancipated himself from their stiff manner, ‘bringing honour to his country and by his name and by the worse which he produced.’

That Cimaue studied with Greek artists in Sta Maria Novella has never been proved bit it no doubt contains an element of truth. A neo-Byzantine style (or Greek manner as Vasari calls it) made its appearance in Italy shortly after the conquest of Constantinople by the Christian armies of the Fourth crusade in 1204 and flourished there during the 13th century. This late neo-Byzantine style retained much of that hieratic expressionism which we have already examined in the Christ Pantokrater of Daphni executed about 1100, and the even more expressive crucifixion at Daphni(?).
Just how much Cimabue derived from this late and highly expressive and pathetic Byzantine manner may be seen in his Crucifix in Arezzo Italy.*

The Arezzo Crucifix is considered to be an early work dating to about 1280. Cimabue uses the attenuated proportions of the lat Byzantine style, despite this the lively interest in anatomical detail should be noted. It is to be stressed that the Byzantine far more than the Gothic painting preserved in a kind of rigid iconographic storage the naturalistic style of antiquity.

About 1285 Cimabue painted a Madona and Child for the monks of Santa Trinità, which is now in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. It is a figure of awesome and hieratic majesty. The figures are immobile but tense, as though maintaining rigid positions from which they must soon break. The geometric inlay of the throne recalls the styles of Miniato and the Florentine Baptistry. The throne is placed frontally with foreshortening upwards; a birds eye view. The sweeter faces of the angels and their contrapostal positions shows that Cimabue was heir notionally to the Byzantine but also to the Gothic tradition. Another source of his power is the incision and firmness of his contour, especially when it is contrasted with the incipient tenderness present in the Madonna and the Chirst child so different from the contorted pathos of the Arezzo Crucifixion.

In 1288 he began painting frescoes in the Upper Church at Assissi. A whole team of artists were assembled here in that year when Nicholas IV the first Franciscan open and general of the Franciscan order, published a bull initiating the decoration of the Church. The paintings in the choir and transept are usually attributed to Cimabue and his assistants. The frescoes are now in a damaged condition but they are of the greatest importance, for they were clearly conceived as a single decoration, and they stand on the threshold of the subsequent developments of Italian painting. There is time now only to look at the Crucifixion. Here, if anywhere, we are at a parting of the ways, on the one hand the Byzantine and Gothic, on the other that new manner, the first light, Il primo lume, which, as Vasari says, Cimabue shed upon painting. The Byzantine Christ is now thrust against a void of turbulent space, crowded with angels flapping about in a great state of violent agitation Below the monumental frieze of mourners ad weepers. The group of holy women and St Jon contains a mournful, elegiac harmony of line, a magnificent synthesis of Byzantine monumentality and Gothic pathos. With Cimabue we meet a new world of spatial organization a new interest in narrative, characterisation and expression which will lead us on to the triumphs of the High Renaissance.
Reading Guide to Carolingian, Romanesque and Gothic Architecture

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Library Digitised Collections

Author/s:
Smith, Bernard

Title:
Thirteenth century Gothic in Italy

Date:
1956-1966

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/56259