The Notre-Dame Translation Project

IV. Stained-Glass Windows

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Due to its stylistic features, the north transept rose is thought to predate the south transept rose. Based on our current understanding of the succession of the cathedral's architects, the north transept rose window is attributed to Jean de Chelles and to the 1250s. It was reworked identically by Viollet-le-Duc from 1862-1865.

At 12.9 meters in diameter, it was among the largest rose windows of its day (the southern rose window of Saint-Denis of around 1245 is “only” 12.2 meters in diameter), even if we often lack reliable measurements for Gothic rose windows. Moreover, its tracery is very fine, especially compared to earlier rose windows of comparable dimensions, like the west rose window of Chartres Cathedral. It is composed of sixteen large petals, which appear to blossom from the center toward the periphery, and which are subdivided in such a way as to appear double-flowered: sixteen single petals radiate from the central octofoil, before each one is subdivided into two. Along its circumference, sixteen trefoils occupy...
the interstices at the heads of the lancet windows. These subdivisions are linked to the Old Testament iconography of the rose window (16 prophets in the medallions of the first corolla, 32 kings and prophets in those of the second corolla, 32 high priests of Israel along the perimeter). The moldings are strongly hierarchized: principal mullions of the petals, secondary mullions of the petals of the external corolla, the head of each lancet window featuring a trefoil. The rose window is inscribed within a square frame; the lower spandrels are glazed and furnished with polylobular tracery.
In its overall arrangement, the south rose window follows the model of the north rose window. The design is different on the periphery, where the petals, which are shorter, are flanked by trefoils facing inward and inscribed within curvilinear triangles. Composed of only twelve petals, due to its iconography linked to the New Testament (twelve apostles surround Christ, depicted in the central quatrefoil, 24 confessors, 12 martyrs, and the Wise and Foolish Virgins from the parable), the rose window also has a lighter structure. It is more difficult to study, because, after being reworked once in 1725-1727, it was entirely reconstructed, and altered, by Viollet-le-Duc (see figure above). An extensive
body of surviving graphic representations allows us to know its pre-restoration state: Viollet-le-Duc had the rose window rotated in order to place a mullion along the vertical axis, he thickened the moldings, he replaced with rounded forms all of the elegant pointed forms so characteristic of the Rayonnant style of the 1260s, which survive only on the reverse of the portal and on the walls of the transept. The programmed restoration may have also provided the occasion to rethink the transept entrance vestibule in such a way as to make visible the reverse of the south transept façade, carefully worked by Pierre de Montreuil, just as Jean de Chelles had done on the north side.
The Notre-Dame Transept and its Rayonnant Rose Windows: Avenues of Research

Written by Yves Gallet & Markus Schlicht (source)  
Translated by Ian Shelley | Edited by Lindsay S. Cook

The transept rose windows of Notre-Dame—two of the most beautiful examples of Rayonnant architecture in 13th-century France—both stand out for the boldness and elegance of their design. Paradoxically, they have never been the object of an in-depth study. Yet there remains much to learn about the geometry of their layout, their construction techniques, the way the stones were cut and assembled, the models that inspired them (the north rose window of Saint-Denis, the original rose window of the Sainte-Chapelle), and also their impact in France and Europe—that is, their place in the history of Gothic architecture. Many rose windows—for example, at Reims, Poitiers or Limoges, at Saint-Germer-de-Fly or on the shrine of St. Gertrude of Nivelles, evince a design similar to that of the rose window by Jean de Chelles, unless they are actually copies of the original rose window of the Sainte-Chapelle. The south transept rose, for its part, was copied more than fifteen times throughout Europe, from Santarém (Portugal) to Vienna (Austria), and from Uppsala (Sweden) to Orvieto (Italy) and Palma de Mallorca. This level of success, which no other rose window has ever matched, speaks to the unparalleled renown of the work of Pierre de Montreuil.

Bibliography


The Rose Windows of Notre-Dame and Europe: Transmission and Transformations

Written by Marc Carel Schurr & Daniel Parello (source)
Translated by Ian Shelley | Edited by Lindsay S. Cook
With a diameter of nearly 13 meters, the transept rose windows of Notre-Dame surpassed, by far, all similar examples that came before. Marvels of intricate architecture, radiating with colors and light, rose windows set into square frames quickly became a key element of all ambitious architectural projects, not only in France, but also in the Holy Roman Empire.

One of the most beautiful examples in Germany is the rose window of the west façade of the former abbey church of Ebrach. This rose window with 20 spokes was created before 1285 and followed the Parisian model, both in terms of its architectural layout and the iconographic concept of the glass, which paired figures of saints with multicolored ornamentation. Shortly thereafter, the great rose window of the façade of Strasbourg Cathedral (see figure above) likewise followed the model of Notre-Dame of Paris, while renouncing a figural program. Its glass is composed entirely of decorative motifs. However, its architectural articulation had become even more complex, pushing to the extreme the ideal
of a filigreed structure impressive for the subtlety and rich variation of its details. As, a bit later, at Freiburg im Breisgau, where the Strasbourg rose window inspired the rosettes of the western wall of the cathedral’s side aisles, the penchant for architectural invention prevailed at the expense of the imagery in the stained-glass windows, which had previously been bearers of complex religious meaning. In this way, the ideas of Parisian architects acted as a catalyst that lastingly transformed the European architectural landscape.

Bibliography


After its nave and western frontispiece were completed in the mid-13th century, the cathedral underwent numerous transformations, which quickly gave rise to new stained-glass programs. Today, the only glass that survives from the 13th century are the three rose windows situated on the west façade and the transept arms. We know some fragments of the stained glass installed over the years thanks, in particular, to Pierre Le Vieil, the cathedral’s glass painter who was charged, over the course of thirty years, with the removal of the bulk of the medieval windows. The chronology of his account is occasionally unreliable, but it remains precious for understanding the state of Notre-Dame’s stained glass in the 18th century, supplemented by other descriptions. Thus we know that Notre-Dame was adorned with a “triumphal vision of the Virgin” given by Suger for the old edifice or with a stained-glass window dedicated to St. John the Baptist given by Philip the Fair and Jeanne de Navarre at the end of the 13th century. The stained-glass program underwent particularly radical transformations in the 14th century, particularly in the choir, where Pierre le
Vieil saw grisaille and silver-stained glass depicting a series of bishops, and the clerestory windows and those of the ambulatory chapels constructed in the same period were likewise replaced. This 14th-century ensemble was embellished through periodic donations over the following centuries, but nevertheless remains a major milestone in the history of Notre-Dame’s stained glass. The destruction of the medieval glass in the 18th century is attributable to several factors: new architectural and furnishing arrangements, the lacunar state of some of the glass, and the change of aesthetic, in order to “illuminate” the building. Pierre Le Vieil removed these vestiges and inserted glass that was virtually colorless, with discrete touches of color (see figure below).
In the 19th century, the restoration campaign supervised by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc replaced Pierre Le Vieil’s work with contemporary creations, in a historicist style. The current glass of the clerestory windows of the nave replaced the 19th-century grisaille windows: realized by Jacques Le Chevallier in the 1960s, they are the result of a debate about the glass that aimed to install contemporary works of art, produced by members of the sacred-art revival movement in the interwar period. Some of the windows, briefly installed at Notre-Dame and taken down after World War II, were still stored in the cathedral.

Bibliography

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Dating to the 1220s, the west rose window is the oldest and the smallest of the three rose windows of Notre-Dame (diameter: 9.6 meters). The fact that it preceded the other two explains why it includes less “empty space” than the latter, and why it decorates a wall completely devoid of glazed spandrels at its corners or a glazed gallery at its base. Formally, it tends toward the balanced forms of Rayonnant art, which the more mural rose windows of Chartres (west and north transept roses) and Laon did not yet feature, nor even did the south rose of Chartres Cathedral, nor those of Lausanne and Mantes.
With 12 spokes, the rose window is organized into three large concentric circles containing figural imagery: the smallest contains 12 quatrefoils, the middle circle features 24 small medallions, while the third, and largest, circle accommodates 24 quatrefoils, all predominantly blue and red. Several medallions were reworked in the 16th century or the 18th century (1731) and found in considerable disarray around 1855; the interventions attributed to the painter-draftsman Louis Charles Auguste Steinheil (1814-1885) and glass painter Alfred Gérente (1821-1868) might have been even more major had the placement of the organ not hindered their restoration work.

In its most literal sense, the iconography is organized around a Virgin and Child (19th century), which occupies the small central polylobular rose, surrounded by seated prophets (inner quatrefoils), Zodiac signs and Labors of the Months (middle medallions), and finally the Vices and Virtues (outer quatrefoils). With an encyclopedic impulse, the rose draws from both the mirror of nature (Zodiac and months of the year) and the moral mirror (Vices and Virtues), a reflection of the theological context of the 12th and 13th century. It is this topic that it would now be interesting to study in greater depth.

**Bibliography**
