

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Kavaler, Ethan Matt. Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe 1470–1540

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Volume 36, numéro 1, hiver 2013

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091190ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v36i1.20035>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Coffman, P. (2013). Compte rendu de [Kavaler, Ethan Matt. Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe 1470–1540]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 36(1), 184–186.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v36i1.20035>

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*Constitution* is an inspiring, thought provoking, exemplary work of scholarship that should please anyone interested in political theology, early modernity, and the complex relationship between secular politics and religious faith.

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**Kavaler, Ethan Matt.**

***Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe 1470–1540.***

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012. Pp. 344 + 80 colour & 120 b/w illustrations. ISBN 978-0-300-16792-4 (hardcover) \$75.

In *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), John Ruskin lamented the “loss of truth and vitality” in late Gothic architecture. This “corruption,” as he called it, affected all nations equally: Germany and France became lost in “extravagance”; England was saddled with the “insanity” of Perpendicular; Italy effloresced into “insipid confusion.” Ruskin was neither the first nor the last to hold this view. The discipline of architectural history has carried this baggage ever since, treating the final, florid manifestations of Gothic like an inebriated guest who has stayed too late at the party.

Nevertheless, the sheer abundance, originality, virtuosity, and formal sophistication of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Gothic suggest that dismissing it as a decadent hangover of obsolete medieval habits represents a serious historical distortion—and a significant scholarly blind spot. This is the error that Ethan Matt Kavaler sets out to correct, with very considerable success, in *Renaissance Gothic*.

The book’s parameters are established right from the start. This will not, we are told, be a book about patronage, political function, or liturgical use; rather, it will be an aesthetic investigation in the Paul Frankl tradition. That methodological framework will not satisfy everyone, but there can be no doubt that Kavaler answers the questions he sets himself with formidable rigour and insight.

No one familiar with Gothic design of the period Kavaler is exploring (ca. 1470–1540) will be surprised that the first and longest chapter is devoted to the question of ornament. The topic is framed within a wide-ranging and

perspicacious discussion of the shifting intellectual context of ornament, and of the complex and ambivalent medieval relationship with it. The analysis roams from Bernard of Clairvaux to Derrida with deceptive effortlessness founded on meticulous scholarship; one does not discuss the influence of Alberti on Gothic design without first doing considerable homework. Geometry emerges as a central theme—not the constructive geometry that famously underlies the design processes of Romanesque and Gothic buildings, but geometric pattern as an object of visual experience. This is especially evident in features such as vault patterns, which are analyzed as pure geometric ornament, with all the connotations of sacred authority that carries. This casts an intriguing retrospective light on the structural vs. constructional vs. iconographic debates that surround early rib-vaults such as Durham Cathedral's.

Vaulting also plays a central role in the next chapter, "Flamboyant Forms." According to Kavalier, "the paradigm of very late Gothic architecture was the complex figured vault" (133). His copious and meticulous photographs provide compelling evidence for this, as he takes the reader through figured vaults (characterized by increasingly complex rib patterns), curvilinear vaults (characterized by the double-curved rib), prismatic vaults (which abandoned ribs but retained rib-like patterns by juxtaposing geometric planes) and late vaults (especially fan and pendant) in England and France. No part of the book better demonstrates the author's use of formal categories to structure diverse material.

Any lingering, Ruskinian doubts that the very late Gothic period produced some truly remarkable architectural art should have melted away by the end of the chapter on microarchitecture. Freed from the structural imperatives of full-size architecture, artists were free to stretch Gothic design to seemingly impossible extremes. Kavalier explores pulpits, sacrament houses, jubés, and tombs, showing how the most sophisticated and advanced design ideas were realized in these relatively diminutive virtuoso pieces. The relationship of stone-carving to metalwork is explored, and there is also a refreshing new look at wood, which for once is seen as a desirable material in itself rather than as something to be painted in imitation of other materials.

Natural forms, the subject of chapter 4, were well-established in Gothic art long before the period covered by this book. Most frequently found in capitals and friezes, they could take a highly abstracted, generalized form (the stiff-leaf capitals of Wells Cathedral, for example), or be highly naturalistic (as at Reims Cathedral, or the chapter house at Southwell Minster). Little is conventional

or constant about this evolving tradition, but as Kavalier demonstrates, the late Gothic period still manages to be breathtakingly radical and varied in its depictions of nature. Vegetal forms burst from capitals to envelop virtually every imaginable component of architecture and church furniture. Naturalism co-exists with abstraction, nature evokes both the Garden of Paradise and carnal desire, and all of it unfolds in sacred and secular contexts simultaneously. Kavalier's structuralist reading of what he terms "the tension between vegetal and architectural modes" (221) is subtle and compelling, although it inevitably makes assumptions about medieval perception that are, and will remain, difficult to prove.

Kavalier's final chapter, "Deconstruction and Hybridity," explores examples of late Gothic mannerism fully as surprising and witty as anything that Giulio Romano was concocting at the nearly contemporary Palazzo del Te. By this time, Kavalier argues, the Gothic designer is in a different position from that of his predecessors, observing the canonical norms of his style from the outside and commenting on them. That these works do not figure in scholarly accounts of their Renaissance contemporaries is unsurprising; that they must be incorporated into an enlarged and multi-layered understanding of what constitutes Gothic is an argument implicit in the entire book. It is thus ironic and slightly surprising that Kavalier, in his closing remarks, fails to understand that the same consideration must be given to the Gothic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One other great virtue of this book must be acknowledged. Almost every page is adorned with photography of an exemplary technical and aesthetic level, nearly all by the author. It is tempting to frame this in the context of Kavalier's discussion of the value of ornament: Are we being informed by this visual opulence, or seduced by it? The best answer to that question is to observe that such illustrations are a testament to the care and depth with which Kavalier has observed his monuments, and a gesture of great respect to both his subject matter and his readers.

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