South Ural State University

Faculty of service and light industry

#### REPORT

##### Subject: «Italian late Gothic»

Chelyabinsk 2008

# Contents

Introduction 3

Italian late Gothic 4

Conclusion 11

Literature 12

# Introduction

Italy's contribution to Gothic great church architecture was not commensurate with its wealth and importance during the Middle Ayes. To some extent this was due to the cool reception accorded to the Gothic style by the Italians but a more fundamental factor was that very few of the numerous churches built in Italy during the Gothic period were great churches. At the roof of both these divergences from the Northern European pattern lay Italy's unique inheritance from pre-inedieval times. The sense of being the spiritual liars of die ancient Romans must provide most of the explanation for the general reluctance to abandon completely the concepts embodied in the basilican church type invented in the early 4th century; and there can be little doubt that atavistic feelings of tear and disdain towards the barbarian West were a contributory factor in die Italians' generally grudging response to what was clearly recognizable as a French style. A Roman legacy which hindered the formation of a tradition of great church architecture in any style was the large number of towns in northern and central Italy. After the barbarian invasions of the sell and 6th centuries the towns shrank to a fraction of their former size, yet the great majority were still in being when steady expansion began again in the late 10th century.

Since virtually all towns of any consequence had had a bishop from the 4th century, most Italian dioceses were small (and consequently poor) by comparison with the huge territorial dioceses centered on the tar tower important Northern European towns which laid managed to continue functioning after die collapse of die Roman Empire. In this situation it was inevitable chat responsibility for cathedral fabrics would pass from bishops and chapters to the city governments who were the leading powers in medieval Italy.

# Italian late Gothic

Alongside racial, political and economic factors there is one other cultural deference which helps explain Italy's failure to generate a tradition of great church architecture comparable to that of Northern Europe: the low prestige of architecture relative to the figural arts, particularly painting. To some extent this may have been another consequence of Italian fidelity to the basilica, in which the architect's contribution inevitably appeared less distinctive than that of the painter who not only enriched but transformed the uncirculated wall surfaces making up most of the interior elevations. When Architecture could be regarded as little more than a support for paintings, it is unlikely chat anyone thought it odd that painters should assume the role of architect, and it is equally unsurprising that the buildings designed by pander-architects owed astutely to Northern Gothic concepts as did the tradition of monumental fresco painting which emerged in central Italy during the late 13th century. Although Italian sculptors when receptive to die more obviously relevant achievements of Northerners in then» held, die buildings which they designed are not markedly closer to Northern ideas than those designed by painters. Despite the occasional disaster due to inadequate technical knowledge, die practice of architecture by figural artists continued into die Renaissance period, when it spread beyond Italy.

As in other parts of Europe, it was the Cistercians who introduced the aliments of Gothic architecture into Italy. In their two most important earl 13th century churches, those at Casaman (begun 1203) and its Tuscan daughter house S. Galgano (begun 1218), the Burgundian Romanesque scheme exemplified by Pontigny was retentively Gallicized by substituting ribs tor the pointed-arched groins of die vaults. This was not a purely Italian development for exactly the same revision laid achieved a wide diffusion in later 12‑th century French Cistercian churches, probably because it was viewed as a modernization which did not challenge the ascetic traditions of the order S. Galgano seems to have exerted important influences on the cathedral of nearby Siena, the only great church built in Italy during the first half of the 13‑th century. The Siena bay design is not a straightforward copy of the S. Galgano, but there is no other obvious source in Tuscany for its combination of Romanesque four-sliaft piers with Gothic crocket capitals, for its lack of angled members to receive the diagonal ribs, or the keeled profile of the latter.

The consistent use of round arches, the tallness of the main arcades and the lowness of the original clear storey (replaced when the vaults were rebuilt higher from с. 1369) can readily be understood is criticisms of the S. Galgano scheme made by a designer whose loyalties still lay partly with the traditional basilica form. In Tuscany by far the most impressive basilica was the huge Romanesque cathedral of Siena's pro-imperial and anti-Florentine ally, Pisa, and it seems reasonable to view the mutation of Pisa Cathedral's zebra-striped marble cladding as a demonstration of solidarity at a time when the bitter struggle between the emperor and the pope was test approaching its final crisis in 1240.

Apart from its striped livery, which overpowers the three-dimensional articulation of the bay design, the most memorable feature of Siena is its unique hexagonal crossing. The symbolic allusion is fairly certainly to the centralized plan of the Roman Pantheon converted in 609 into a church dedicated to the Virgin and all Martyrs, for Siena Cathedral is dedicated to the Virgin and tour other patron saints, some of them martyrs. Less evident is the reasoning behind the choice of the hexagon, whose four non-axial sides relate very awkwardly to the aisle-high transepts. An octagon would have been the obvious choice for this first Italian crossing to exceed the width of the main east-west vessel.

Nevertheless, Siena had no immediate sequels, for in 13th-century Italy the cathedrals were left behind in the rush to build churches for the mendicant orders. Many Franciscan and Dominican churches were very large, so large in fact that a high proportion of the populace of any town could assemble in them to hear preaching. Nevertheless, out of respect for their founders the friars strove to keep their architecture simpler than that of the great churches. The appearance of elementary Gothic forms in mendicant churches should not be seen as the inevitable response to a more advanced style for medieval Italy could often remain remarkably impervious to outside influences. It is likely that for the Franciscans at least Gothic acquired something of the character of an official style its use at the 'headquarters' church of S. Francesco at Assisi (1228 – c. 1239), one of the very few Italian 13th-century buildings which bespeak direct contacts with France. Because the mid and late 13th-century mendicants' churches were sited in the town which so dominated Italian life, they were far better able to perform their involuntary role of 'missionaries of Gothic' than the rurally sited Cistercian churches of the late 12th and early 13th centuries; yet by comparison with Cistercian churches, those of the mendicants were far less distinctive. In part this stems from the fact that the friars were not cloistered monks but evangelizers of the towns, their churches were not their spiritual homes in quite the way they were for the Cistercians or other monks.

The lack of uniformity in 14th-century Italian mendicant architecture is well illustrated by the highly contrasting churches of the Florentine Dominicans and Franciscans, S. Maria Novella and S. Crocc. S. Maria Novella was perhaps conceived as a modernized and marble-less version of the nave of Siena Cathedral in which all arches are made pointed and shafts rather than desserts receive the diagonal vault ribs; the ocular in reproduce what existed at Siena before its heightening. Alongside the limpid grace and poise of S. Maria Novella, S. Crocce appears less perfectly resolved but more robust.

The wide timber-rooted central vessel, the corbelled-out walkway above the main arcade, and perhaps also the octagonal columns, derive from the cathedral in the papal city of Orvieto, begun in 1290, only a year or so earlier than S. Croce, as a free adaptation of the great Early Christian basilica of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome.

The inspiration behind the eastern parts of Florence Cathedral must have been primarily symbolic and only secondarily architectural. The central element, the wide octagonal crossing shielding the choir and high altar dedicated to the Virgin, was conceived as a grander version of the Siena crossing, performing the same function of evoking and rivaling the Christianized Roman Pantheon, S. Maria Rotunda. The Pantheon had already influenced the architecture of the most Roman of all Italian Romanesque buildings, the baptistery built beside Florence Cathedral during the rule of the fervently pro-papal Countess Matilda of Tuscany (1046–1115); and since the baptistery ranked as the main civic church of Florence before the completion of the cathedral, it was only natural that the crossing of Arnolfo's great church should resemble the city's earlier emulation of the Pantheon more than it does the Pantheon itself. No-one would have thought the evocation of the circular S. Maria Rotunda was impaired by the adoption of the baptistery's octagonal plan, for in such relationships the essential concept counted tor more than the exact form taken by the architecture. There is, however, one very important Classical architectural idea faithfully transmitted from the Pantheon *via* the baptistery, named the treatment of the crossing space as a single unsubsidized unit Siena's crossing has shafts in the angles indicating that it was conceived as the aggregate of six triangular bays, whereas at Florence the octagon consists primarily of smooth, completely unarticulated surfaces.

The stark contrast in Arnolfo’s designs between the serenity of the masonry-vaulted octagonal sanctuary and the longitudinal movement implicit in the wooden-roofed, multi-bay nave embodies a symbolic distinction appropriate to the differing functions of the two parts As in the ancient world, the dome signifies heaven and eternity, while the much more Gothic nave, being the vestibule to the sanctuary and the part most accessible to the laity, registers as a modern structure and a symbol of earthly, temporal progression. This meaning is conveyed by the existing cathedral, although since the nave is vaulted the contrast with the octagon is less than Arnolfo intended.

The treatment of the three limbs radiating out of the north, east and south sides of the octagon as part-octagonal apses may have been influenced by centralized Early Christian and Byzantine churches such as S. Lorenzo in Milan, S. Vitale in Ravenna or Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, but once again the initial impulse must have been iconographic more than aesthetic, for the church with apsidally ended transepts which would have been most familiar to Florentines was Pisa Cathedral.

Pisa's transepts in their final, elongated town are quite unlike Florence's, but they derive either from the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem or from St. Mary in the Blacliernai in Constantinople, both of them 6th-century buildings and both no doubt familiar to the many Pisans involved in trade with the Levant and Byzantium. Arnolfo's cathedral thus seems to have been specifically designed to outshine the churches dedicated to the Virgin in the two cities which vied with Florence for pre-eminence in Tuscany.

After its long-delayed incarnation during the late 14th and early 15th centuries, it became the prototype of all the innumerable centralized and quasi-centralized churches built from Renaissance times onwards.

Probably on account of the political crises which racked Florence at the start of the 14th century, the cathedral works were abandoned after only the west parts of the aisle walls had reached their full height. Nevertheless, the mere possibility that Florence would be able to boast the finest church in Tuscany had become by 1316 sufficient to spur the Sienese into replacing the short choir of their 13th-century cathedral with another more than twice as long.

Construction began in 1339 and progress was so rapid that when the Black Death intervened ten years later, the nave was more than half way towards completion. Unfortunately, the tall and slender main arcades had begun to tilt inwards in response to lateral thrusts from the aisle vaults, apparently because the designers had failed to use the standard.

Northern device for overcoming this problem: temporary tie beams linking the arcades to the outer walls until the building of the clearstory provided a loading strong enough to enable the arcades to resist aisle vault thrusts.

In 1373 similar fiasco was averted in Florence when it was discovered that the walls of the great campanile begun three years earlier had only half the thickness necessary. The culprit in this case was none other than Giotto, who had been appointed capo maestro on the strength of his publicly acknowledged status as the greatest painter of his day. Giotto's design easily excelled its simple and comparatively small precursors within the distinctively. Italian genre of tall detached bell towers, but it showed no concern with lessening the traditionally self-contained character of the successive stores or with finding a convincing relationship between these and the exotic, Strasbourg – or Freiburg-inspired lantern and spire.

That no problems of this kind ever affected Brunelleschi's dome must have seemed an additional recommendation to the many Renaissance and Baroque architects who chose to emulate the energetic effect imparted to the exterior by its Gothic ribbing and pointed profile in preference to the more earthbound quality of the low-set domes built by the Romans.

The periodic summoning of Northern architects to Milan is a sure sign that it the administrative council was racked by doubts as to whether their team of locally recruited architects was capable on its own of building a great cathedral in the Northern manner.

Since a project of this kind had never before been attempted in Italy, such doubts were probably legitimate, but the main consequence of importing Northerners was to spark off acrimonious wrangles between them and the Italian architects.

Conflict was inevitable, for the two groups had inherited very deferent assumptions not only about architectural practice but also about the status of the practitioners Whereas Northern master masons were accustomed to the exercise of complete and unchallenged control over the design and execution of 'their' buildings once agreement had been reached with the patron, the documentary evidence for major Italian churches like Milan and Florence reveals chief architects to have been far less powerful and authoritative figures.

A Northern cathedral architect would have found it anomalous, not to say intolerable, that his designs should have to compete for acceptance by the patron with those of men who at home would have lead no say in the design process.

From the point of view of the Milanese architects, it must have been no less galling that the council should have demonstrated its lack of confidence to the extent of bringing in outsiders.

Yet the Milanese possessed a clear advantage of numbers, since only a single Northern architect was normally present at any one time, and the competitive situation to which they were accustomed seems to have given them the edge in polemic over their Northern rivals.

# Conclusion

The Late Gothic is the bridge between the Middle Age and the Renaissance. The new age began in the 14th century, where lawyers and notaries imitated ancient Latin style and studied Roman archaeology. The first of the great men who initiated the Renaissance was the Italian poet Petrarch.

All the Northerners whose opinions on the subject were recorded agreed tliat the structural design of Milan Cathedral was flawed. In particular, they criticized the buttresses of the outer walls as being too shallow to resist the thrusts from the aisle vaults, vet the Italians were equally adamant that the buttresses were sufficient.

Neither side did more than assert the correctness of their views, and there is no sign that anyone was capable of computing thrusts, even in the rough-and-ready way prescribed in the earliest surviving account of thrusts compiled by a European architect, the tract written c. 1530 by the Spaniard Rodrigo Gil de Hontanon.

In 1400 the Parisian architect Jean Mignot declared that the buttresses at Milan ought to be three times as deep as the piers inside were wide, but lie gave no indication of whether this was an unvarying rule-of-thumb or whether it was his considered estimate of the specific needs of Milan.

The former is the more-likely, since Mignot regarded as absolute errors the many things at Milan which were at variance with the long established practices of the northern French lodges; for him there was no question of making allowances for the difference of milieu.

# Literature

1. Cristopher Wilson. The Gothic Cathedral