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Ethan Matt Kavalier. *Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540*
Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540 by Ethan Matt Kavalier

Review by: Ian Campbell

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

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. xi + 332 pp. \$75. ISBN: 978-0-300-16792-4.

I remember Robert Cook, author of the classic *Greek Art* (1972), once asked me what my favorite architectural style was. I began to answer how I specialized in the Renaissance in Rome, but was cut short and asked if I actually liked the style. He insisted that it was an advantage not to like one's area of study too much. I was relieved to confess that secretly I preferred Gothic and especially the Flamboyant phase. How much Kavaler loves the luscious late Gothic *tours de force* portrayed here isn't clear but he has confirmed my opinion that the Renaissance was the greatest con trick ever played on patrons and practitioners of architecture. I'm not saying I don't admire Bramante's Tempietto but, like conceptual art, one gets the idea in an instant. In comparison, the sheer exuberance of architectural invention of the contemporary spire of the church of the Madeleine in Verneuil is far more engrossing.

Kavaler breaks the book into a long introduction, five main chapters, and a short conclusion. The introduction largely consists of an examination of the reception and historiography of later Gothic architecture (roughly mid-fourteenth to mid-sixteenth century), showing how illuminating terms, usually invented by Germans, such as *Baroque* or *Rococo Gothic*, have failed to dispel or even reinforce disapproval of its perceived decadent nature. He also establishes the self-conscious character of the style. The idea that the arrival of the Italian Renaissance cavalry saved benighted Northern Gothic masons from endless repetition of an outmoded repertory is given short shrift. Margaret of Austria considered the *all'antica* manner for the funerary church she had built at Brou in Burgundy, but opted instead for what Kavaler calls “virtuoso late Gothic.”

The first main chapter, “Ornament and Aesthetics,” looks at the evident enjoyment taken in filling surfaces with superfluous ornament, in contrast to the structural logic (and the implied moral superiority) of High Gothic, in a conscious attempt to stimulate the eye of the beholder. Kavaler suggests that Alberti’s theorizing about the nature of ornament may have been made known to some masons, since copies of *De Re Aedificatoria*, both printed (1486) and manuscript, were in circulation north of the Alps. He also makes the intriguing suggestion that the geometric games designers increasingly played, forcing spectators to look hard to find the underlying key, may have been stimulated by the increasing sophistication of readers once printing allowed more and more elaborate page structure.

The next two chapters are largely descriptive: “Flamboyant Forms” takes us through the bewildering variety of tracery, both for windows and adorning walls, and vaulting, with examples ranging from Spain to Poland and from England to the Sudtirol, followed by “Microarchitecture,” concentrating on features such as fonts, sacrament houses, rood screens, and organ lofts. One has to admire Kavaler’s own virtuosity in finding words to pin down these complex forms, my own favorite being “tennis racket,” though a few more plans would have helped make sense of objects such as the Vienna organ loft.

The fourth chapter, “Natural Forms,” examines the fashion for explicitly imitating vegetative forms in vaulting and tracery and the late medieval ambivalence toward nature, which often contrasted “wayward” nature against reason. A few pages later he tries a structuralist approach to make sense of the juxtaposition of (feminine) naturalistic and (masculine) geometrical ornament in the same object. One of the strengths of the book is that such attempts to introduce theory to throw light on the bewildering profusion of forms are offered to rather than forced on readers. Kavaler does not impose a conceptual framework, but still invites us to do more than marvel at the excellent illustrations.

Finally, “Deconstruction and Hybridity” and the conclusion look at the increasing penetration of *all'antica* motifs into the Gothic idiom. I would have welcomed more exploration of Romanesque Revival, whether in Germany, or Scotland, but one cannot have everything. Kavaler has demonstrated that late Gothic was not just a decadent coda to the heroic High Gothic but a style still

potentially capable of evolution. The fascinating experiments of masters such as Benedikt Ried make one regret that printed pattern books finally allowed unalloyed classicism to triumph.

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