

Rose window

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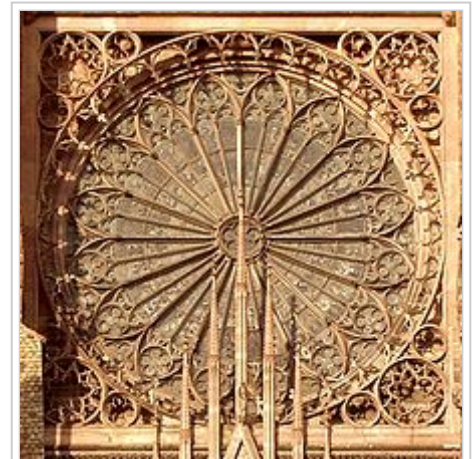
A **rose window** or **Catherine window** is often used as a generic term applied to a circular window, but is especially used for those found in churches of the Gothic architectural style and being divided into segments by stone mullions and tracery. The name “rose window” was not used before the 17th century and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, among other authorities, comes from the English flower name rose.^[1]

The term “wheel window” is often applied to a window divided by simple *spokes* radiating from a central *boss* or opening, while the term “rose window” is reserved for those windows, sometimes of a highly complex design, which can be seen to bear similarity to a multi-petalled rose. Rose windows are also called *Catherine windows* after Saint Catherine of Alexandria who was sentenced to be executed on a spiked wheel. A circular window without tracery such as are found in many Italian churches, is referred to as an ocular window or oculus.

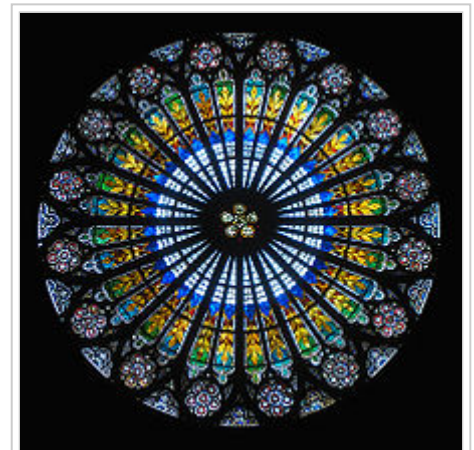
Rose windows are particularly characteristic of Gothic architecture and may be seen in all the major Gothic Cathedrals of Northern France. Their origins are much earlier and rose windows may be seen in various forms throughout the Medieval period. Their popularity was revived, with other medieval features, during the Gothic revival of the 19th century so that they are seen in Christian churches all over the world.

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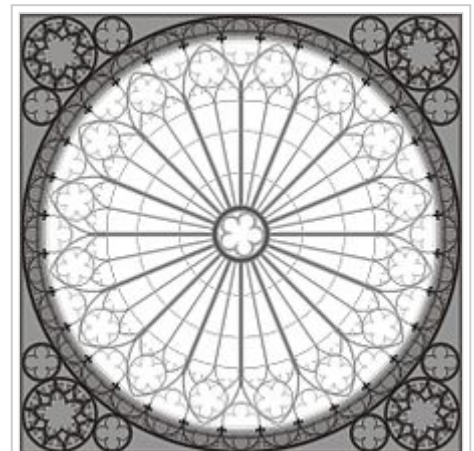
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Exterior of the rose at Strasbourg Cathedral, France.



Interior of the rose at Strasbourg Cathedral.



Architectural drawing of the rose window of Strasbourg Cathedral

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History

Origin

The origin of the rose window may be found in the Roman oculus. These large circular openings let in both light and air, the best known being that at the top of the dome of the Pantheon.

In Early Christian and Byzantine architecture, there are examples of the use of circular oculi. They usually occur either around the drum of a dome, as at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, or high in the end of a gable of low-pitched Classical pediment form, as at Sant'Agnese fuori le mura, Rome, and Torcello Cathedral.^[2]

A window of the 8th century, now located in Venice, and carved from a single slab, has alternating tracery-like components of two tiers of four *lancets* separated by three oculi. Many semicircular windows with pierced tracery exist from the 6th to the 8th century, and later in Greece.^[3]

Small circular windows such as that at S. Agnese and Torcello as well as unglazed decorative circular recesses continued to be used in churches in Italy, gaining increasing popularity in the later Romanesque period.

The German art historian Otto von Simson considered that the origin of the rose window lay in a window with the six-lobed rosettes and octagon which adorned the external wall of the Umayyad palace Khirbat al-Mafjar built in Jordan between 740 and 750 CE. This theory suggests that crusaders brought the design of this attractive window to Europe, introducing it to churches.



The oculus of the Pantheon, Rome.



Torcello Cathedral, Venice.



San Miguel de Lillo, Oviedo, Spain.

The windows of Oviedo

In the vicinity of Oviedo in Spain are several churches of the late 9th and early 10th century which display a remarkable array of windows containing the earliest examples of tracery outside the Byzantine Empire. The designs closely resemble the motifs found on the Byzantine relief carvings of marble sarcophagi, pulpits and well heads and pierced decorations of screens and windows of Ravenna and Constantinople. The church of San Pedro has a rectangular window with a pierced decoration of two



Aquileia Basilica, Italy.

overlapping circles, the upper containing a *Greek Cross*, the window being divided by the circles and the arms of the cross into numerous sections like tracery “lights”.

In another of these churches, San Miguel de Lillo, is the earliest known example of an axially placed oculus with tracery. Several such windows of different sizes exist, and decoration of both Greek Cross and scalloped petal-like form occur, prefiguring both wheel and rose windows.

Romanesque circular windows

Circular windows and decorative circular recesses are a feature of many Romanesque churches and cathedrals, particularly in Germany and Italy where the style existed for a prolonged period, overlapping the development of Gothic in France and its arrival with French architects in England.

In Germany, Worms Cathedral, has wheel windows in the pedimental ends of its nave and gables, very similar to the Early Christian Basilica of S. Agnese in Rome. The apsidal western end has a central wheel window with smaller oculi in each face. The Church of the Apostles, Cologne has an array of both ocular and lobed windows forming decorative features in the gables and beneath the Rhenish helm spire. The octagonal dome has a ring of oculi with two in each of the curved faces.^[3]

In Trebic, Czech Republic, is the 12th- and 13th-century Romanesque style Basilica of St Procopius with apsidal windows similar to those at Worms, but in this case the openings are filled with tracery of a Gothic form, clearly marking the transition to a new style.

In Italy, the use of circular motifs in various media was a feature of church facades, occurring on Early Christian, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque churches, a well-known example being those great circles in polychrome marble which complement the central circular window on Alberti’s Early Renaissance façade at Santa Maria Novella in Florence.^[4] Oculi were also typically used in the drums supporting domes and as upper lights in octagonal baptisteries such as that at Cremona.

Romanesque facades with oculi include San Miniato al Monte, Florence, 11th century, San Michele, Pavia, c. 1117, and Pistoia Cathedral, 1150. As the windows increased in size in the later Romanesque period, wheel windows became a standard feature of which there are fine examples at San Zeno Maggiore, Verona and Monza Cathedral.^[3]

On the Romanesque façade of Spoleto Cathedral there is a profusion of recessed and traceried oculi surrounding the central features of a rose window set within a square beneath a large mosaic of 1207.

In England there exist five Romanesque wheel windows, notably those at Barfreton and Castle Hedingham parish churches.

St Denis, Chartres, Mantes, Laon and Paris



San Pedro, Ávila, Spain.

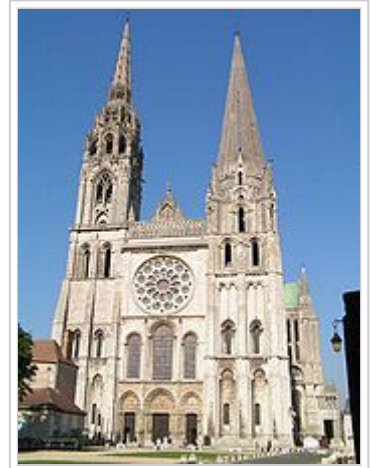
The transition from the Romanesque style to the Gothic was not clear cut, even at the Abbey of St Denis, to the north of Paris, where the Abbot Suger, between 1130 and 1144, gathered the various newly emerging features of Gothic into a single building, thereby “creating” the Gothic style.^[5]

Suger’s original rose window in the prototype Gothic façade of St Denis probably pre-dates many of the remaining circular windows in Romanesque buildings such as those in England, at Trebic and Spoleto and that in the façade at Speyer.

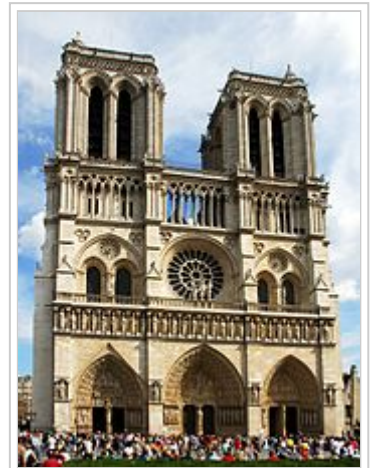
Suger’s window was not distinctively Gothic in its appearance. It no longer has its original form, but a mid-19th-century drawing by the restorer Viollet-le-Duc indicates that it had a very large ocular space at the centre, the glass supported by an iron hoop, and surrounded by simple semicircular cusped lobes cut out of flat stone in a technique known as "plate tracery". The window now has Gothic tracery in it, possibly added by Viollet-le-Duc who was very concerned about the lack of stability of the whole façade, and having restored the towers, was impelled to demolish the northern one when it suddenly subsided.

Along with the simple wheel windows of the late Norman period in England, Germany and Italy, a large late 12th-century window still exists at Chartres Cathedral. This remarkable window combines a large roundel at the centre with the radiating spokes of a wheel window, surrounded by a ring of smaller “plate tracery” lights with scalloped borders. The window, depicting the Last Judgement, contains its original scheme of glazing and retains much of the original glass of 1215, despite suffering damage during World War II.^[6]

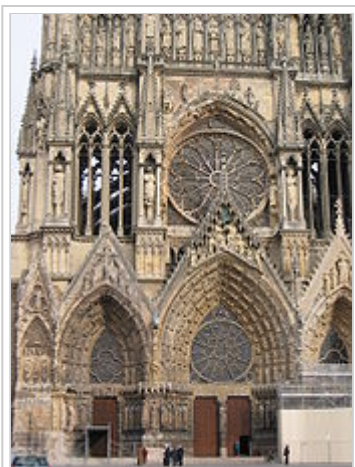
Following the west window of Chartres, more daring Gothic windows were created at the Collegiate Church of Notre-Dame in Mantes and in the dynamically sculptural facade of Laon Cathedral (which also, unusually, has a rose window in its eastern end as well as in its transept ends). These windows have large lights contained in tracery of a semicircular form, like overlapping petals.



Chartres Cathedral



Notre Dame, Paris.



Reims Cathedral, France.

The window that is central to the well-known Gothic façade of Notre Dame, Paris, is of more distinctly Gothic appearance, with mullions in two bands radiating from a central roundel, each terminating in pointed arches. It was this window, completed about 1255, that set the pattern for many other rose window including those of the transepts at St Denis and the gigantic and complex window in the south transept at Notre Dame.^[7]

At Chartres, the transepts roses follow the style of the original 12th-century rose, elaborating on the theme of contrasting forms. The south rose combines the wheel with circles and semicircles, while the north rose introduces square lights which, rotating around the centre, are all set at different angles, creating a kaleidoscopic effect of great energy.^[8]

Further development

From the building of Chartres the dimensions of the rose window began to increase with the development of more elaborate window styles associated with Gothic architecture. By the middle of the 13th century the rose had attained the greatest possible size – the entire width of the nave or transept, as seen in the transept roses at St Denis and Paris.

In the facades of St Denis, Chartres, Mantes, Laon and Paris, the rose was put under a circular arch. The next important development in its use for the Gothic style was to put it under a pointed arch, as was done in the Notre-Dame de Reims (after 1241), in the transepts as well as in the later roses of the facade. This form probably stemmed from the now destroyed St Nicaise, also in Reims.

The rose window was often placed above a row of vertical lights as the apex of the composition, the small corner "spandrels" between the rose and lower tier being filled by smaller lights of rose form, as in the transepts of St Denis and Notre Dame.

The last step in evolution of the Gothic style was to set the rose into a tier of vertical lights, of staggered height and surmount it by a tapering pointed light so that it became the centre of a vast window composition, covering the whole end of the transepts, as in Rouen or Beauvais Cathedrals. This sort of elaborate composition can also be seen at the east end of Milan Cathedral.

Rose windows were also set into square windows, the spandrels being pierced and filled with smaller lights as at Paris, 1257, or unpierced with sculpture, the form more common in Italy as at Spoleto and also seen in the north transept of Westminster Abbey and at Strasbourg Cathedral, (see pictured above).

Style

Oculi

These could be open or blind, could be glazed or filled with thin alabaster. During the late Gothic period very large ocular windows were common in Italy, being used in preference to traceried windows and being filled with elaborate pictures in stained glass designed by the most accomplished Late Medieval and Early Renaissance designers including Duccio, Donatello, Uccello and Ghiberti.^{[9][10]}



Wheel- Church of San Francesco at Lucera, Italy

Wheel windows

These windows had a simple tracery of spokes radiating either from a central boss or from a central roundel. Popular during the Romanesque period and Gothic Italy, they are found across Europe but particularly Germany and Italy.^[11] They also occur in Romanesque Revival buildings of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Plate tracery

Rose windows with pierced openings rather than tracery occur in the transition between Romanesque and Gothic, particularly in France and most notably at Chartres. The most notable example in England is the north transept window, known as the "Dean's Eye" in Lincoln Cathedral. These windows are occasionally found in 19th-century Revival buildings.^[12]

Early Gothic

Rose windows with tracery comprising overlapping arcs like flower petals, circular and square shapes. This form occurs in Northern France, notably at Laon Cathedral, Italy and England. This style of window is popular in Gothic Revival architecture for the similarity that it has to a flower and is also utilised with specific reference to Our Lady of the Rosary.



Oculus, Florence Cathedral

Rayonnant Gothic



Rayonnant- at the ruins of Languidou Abbey

The rose windows are divided by mullions radiating from a central roundel, overlapping in a complex design, each light terminating in a pointed arch and often interspersed with quatrefoils and other such shapes. Many of the largest rose windows in France are of this type, notably those at Paris and in the transepts of St Denis. A well-known example in England is that in the north transept of Westminster Abbey. This style occurs widely in Gothic churches and is also widely imitated in Gothic Revival



Plate- at Działoszyce, Poland

buildings.^[13]

Flamboyant Gothic

The style is marked by S-curves in the tracery causing each light to take on a flamelike or "flamboyant" shape. Many windows are composed of fairly regularly shaped lights the richness of design dependent on the multiplicity of parts. Good examples are at Beauvais Cathedral and Sainte-Chapelle, Paris. Some Late Gothic rose windows are of immense complexity of design, often using elements of the Gothic style in unexpected ways. A magnificent example is that of the façade of Amiens Cathedral. Although the design usually radiates from a central point, it may not be symmetrical about each axis. This may be seen in the Flamboyant Decorated Gothic window called the "Bishop's Eye" at Lincoln Cathedral in which the design takes the form of two ears of wheat.



Flamboyant- Meaux Cathedral, France

Renaissance

The Renaissance made a break with the Gothic style, and a return to the Classical. Plain untraceryed oculi were sometimes employed, either in Classical pediments^[14] or around domes as at the Pazzi Chapel, Florence.^[15]



Baroque- Catania

Baroque

The Baroque style saw much greater use of ocular windows, which were not always circular, but frequently oval or of a more complex shape. They were untraceryed or crossed by mullions of very simple form but were often surrounded by ornate carving. The purpose of such windows was the subtle illumination of interior spaces, without resorting to large windows offering external visibility. They rarely form a dominant visual element to either the façade or the interior as do the great Gothic windows.^[16] However, there are some notable exceptions, in particular the glorious burst of light which pours through the oval alabaster window

depicting the Holy Spirit in the Reredos behind the High Altar of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.^[17]

Modern

Modern circular windows, which are most frequently of a simple ocular type, have an eclectic range of influences which includes Abstract art, ship's portholes and the unglazed circular openings of Oriental architecture.

Symbolism

In Gothic cathedrals and churches, where a rose is often found above the West Door, the most common subject of the stained glass that it contains is the Last Judgement, which by a long tradition is depicted either in mural or glass on the western wall of the building.^[18] In such windows Christ is shown seated in the centre "light" and within the lights around him are the symbols of the four Gospel writers, Apostles, Prophets, Saints and Angels. Some windows show God's dominion over Heaven and Earth by including Zodiacal signs and Labours of the Months.^[19]

When rose windows are used in the transept ends, then one of those windows is frequently dedicated to Mary as the Mother of Jesus. In modern Catholic thought, the rose window is often associated with the Virgin Mary because one of her titles, referred to by St Bernard of Clairvaux, is the "Mystical Rose". However, the specific association of Mary with the rose window is unlikely during the Mediaeval period, because the term "rose window" was not coined until the 17th century, a time when few such windows were being constructed. However, with the revival of the Gothic style in the 19th and 20th centuries, much stained glass that was installed in rose windows, both in new churches and as restoration in old churches, was dedicated to the Virgin Mary.^[20]

Regional examples

Australia

A number of Australia's cathedrals have Gothic Revival rose windows including three by William Wardell at St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney and another at St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne which form the upper part of a very large seven-light window in the west end.

Ecuador

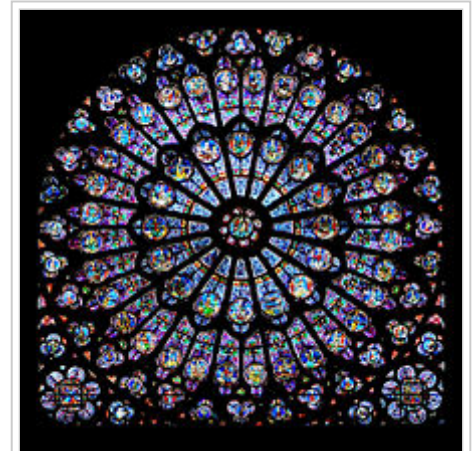
Two wonderful examples of rose windows are found in the National Basilica, built in 1893 and in the Santa Teresa Church, built in 1934. In Cuenca in the southern Andes, the cathedral has a notable rose window.

England

In England, the use of the rose window was commonly confined to the transepts although roses of great span were constructed in the west front of Byland Abbey and in the east front of Old St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

Medieval rose windows occur at the cathedrals of York, Lincoln, Canterbury, Durham and Oxford.

Mediaeval Beverley Minster has a fine example of an Early Gothic wheel window with ten spokes, each light terminating in a cusped trefoils and surrounded by decorative plate tracery.



Symbolism: the north rose of Notre Dame, Paris, has at its centre the Blessed Virgin Mary and Christ Child in Majesty, surrounded by prophets and saints.



Symbolism: the north rose of the Abbey of St Denis, Paris, showing God the Creator, surrounded by the Days of Creation, the Order of the Heavens represented by the Zodiac and the Order of Earth as represented by the Labours of the Months. In the corners are the Fall of Mankind.

Later windows are to be seen at the nondenominational Abney Park Chapel in London designed in 1838–40 by William Hosking FSA; Holy Trinity Church, Barnes, London; St Nicholas, Richmond; and St Albans Cathedral by George Gilbert Scott.

At Christ Church Appleton-le-Moors, Yorkshire, the 19th-century architect J.L.Pearson appears to have taken as his inspiration the regional floral symbol of the white rose. This unusual plate-tracery window dating from the 1860s has been designed with five double sections like the two-part petals of a simple rose.

The largest rose window in England is believed to be that installed in the chapel of Lancing College in 1978, with a diameter of 32 feet.

France

France has a great number of medieval rose windows, many containing ancient glass. In northern France, a rose window is usually the central feature of the facade. The transept facades commonly contain rose windows as well. Examples can be seen at Notre Dame, Paris (see left), the Basilica of Saint Denis (see left), Chartres Cathedral (see above), Reims Cathedral, Amiens Cathedral and Strasbourg Cathedral (see introductory pictures.)

Italy

In Italy, the rose window was particularly used by the Lombard architects, as in San Zeno in Verona, and in the Cathedral of Modena, and in the Tuscan Gothic churches like the Cathedrals of Siena and Orvieto. An outstanding example of a rose window is the thirteen-spoked centrepiece of the Minor Basilica in Larino, Molise (1312). Others are the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi and Santa Maria di Collemaggio (1289) in L'Aquila.

United States

A Baroque oculus without tracery or stained glass can be seen at San Jose Mission in San Antonio, Texas, which was founded by the Franciscan Fathers and dates from 1718–31.

The largest rose window in the United States is *The Great Rose Window* above the main doors of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. It is designed in the Gothic Revival style and made from more than 10,000 pieces of stained glass.

Washington National Cathedral has three large rose windows which represent the Creation, Last Judgement, and Glory of God.

In 1954, the French artist Henri Matisse created the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Memorial Rose Window on the east wall of the Union Church of Pocantico Hills, New York.

Galleries

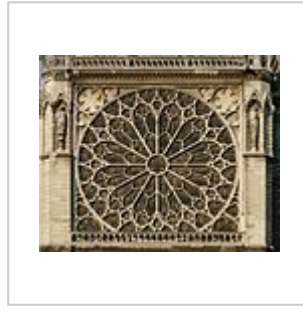
Gallery showing stone mullions and tracery



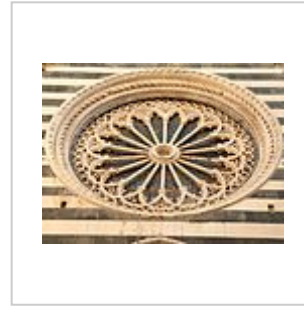
Italy, Troia, Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta (1093-1125).



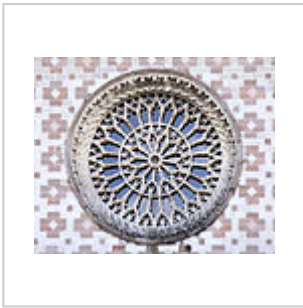
Italy, Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi (1228-1253).



France, Notre-Dame de Paris (1250-1260).



Italy, Monterosso al Mare, Church of St. John the Baptist (1282-1307).

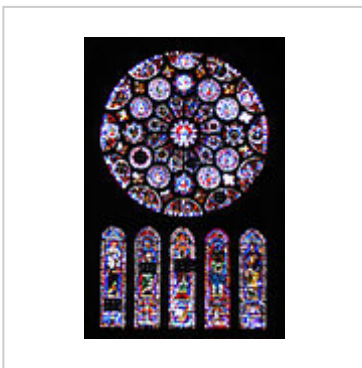


Italy, L'Aquila, Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio (1287).

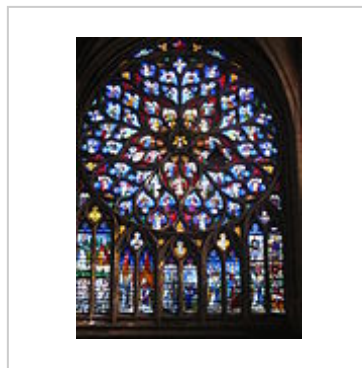


Basilica Cathedral of Lodi, Italy

Gallery showing stained glass



France, Chartres Cathedral, ancient transept window under restoration.



France, Sens Cathedral, transept, showing Flamboyant window incorporated into a large composition.



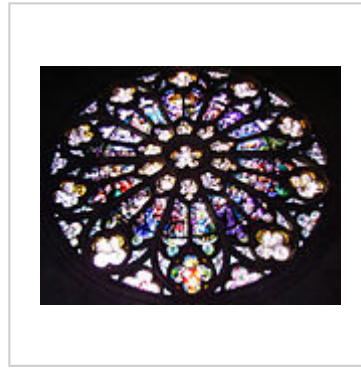
Notre-Dame de Paris, France, north transept.



France, Sainte-Chapelle, Paris, the Apocalypse in Flamboyant tracery.



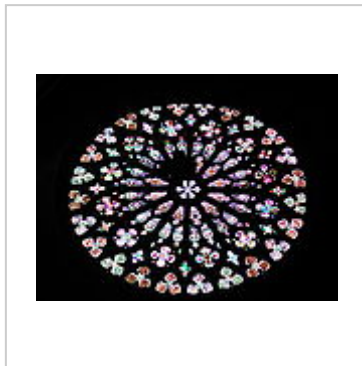
England Lincoln Cathedral, the Bishop's Eye. Fragments of ancient glass in a Flowing Gothic window.



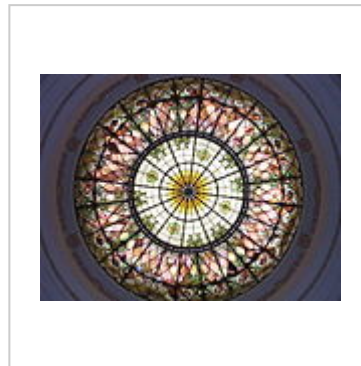
Germany, Memorial Church (Gedaechtniskirche), Speyer.



Sweden, Oscar Fredriks Church.



Catalonia, Santa Maria del Pi, Barcelona.



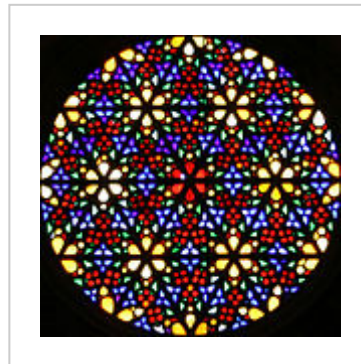
Peru, the Presidential Palace Pi.



England, St Matthias, Richmond. architect G. Scott, glass William Wailes



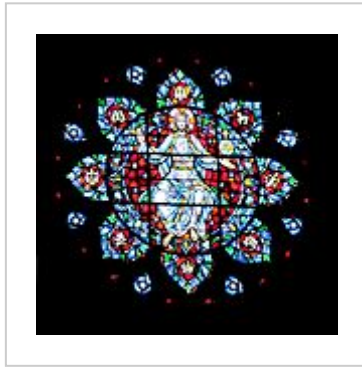
Germany, the chancel window of Himmelsfahrkirche, Dresden.



Spain, Mallorca, Palma, geometry and flowers in the Levantine style.



Australia, the Waratah window, St Bede's, Drummoyne, Sydney, by Alfred Handel.



United States, window over the altar in Boston University's Marsh Chapel

See also

- Kaleidoscope
- Mandala
- Stained Glass



Wikimedia Commons has media related to ***Rose windows***.

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- John Harvey, *English Cathedrals*, 1963, Batsford, ISBN
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Footnotes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "rose-window" ([f. ROSE n. + WINDOW n.]).
2. Banister Fletcher, *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*.
3. Banister Fletcher
4. Joseph Rykwert, *Leonis Baptiste Alberti, Architectural Design*, Vol 49 No 5–6, Holland St, London
5. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*

6. Lawrence Lee, George Seddon, Francis Stephens, *Stained Glass*
7. Wim Swaan
8. Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*
9. Florence Cathedral, Siena Cathedral
10. Wim Swaan, *The Gothic Cathedral*, Banister Flether
11. Speyer Cathedral, Orvieto Cathedral, Peterborough Cathedral
12. The Dean's Eye, Lincoln Cathedral (<http://www.lincolncathedral.com/xhtml/default.asp?UserLinkID=85866>)
13. St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney has three fine Gothic Revival examples.
14. See Madonna di S. Biagio, Montepulciano
15. Giovanni Fanelli, *Brunelleschi*.
16. Examples are at Karlskirche, Vienna; Brevnov monastery, Prague; St Bride, Fleet Street, London
17. Bannister Fletcher; James Lees-Milne, *St Peter's*.
18. The early 13th-century stained glass in the western rose of Chartres Cathedral is an outstanding extant example
19. An example is at the Abbey of St Denis
20. A fine example of a 19th-century Marian rose window exists at St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney.

External links

- Digital photographs of stained glass windows (Medieval and later) from French cathedrals, taken by Painton Cowen et. al. from York Digital Library (YODL) collection (<http://dlib.york.ac.uk/yodl/app/image/search?query=Rose+window>)
- [therosewindow.com](http://www.therosewindow.com) (<http://www.therosewindow.com>) Painton Cowen's website, with many good images of rose windows
- Tips & Tricks to Gothic Geometry (<http://www.newyorkcarver.com/geometry/rose.htm>) How to design a rose window
- Chartres Rose Window Geometry (<http://www.constructingtheuniverse.com/Chartres%20Window.html>)
- Wagon Wheel Rose Windows of the Medieval Norman Cathedrals of Puglia - Photos (http://www.paradoxplace.com/Perspectives/Sicily%20&%20S%20Italy/Puglia/Puglia_Cathedrals/Rosoni.htm)
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