

Prelude for the creation of tracery

John James

The discovery of tracery is usually ascribed to the ambulatory windows of Reims cathedral, just before 1220. I had earlier described the evolution of the transept windows at Essômes as a series in which the hollowing out concept in tracery had been explored.¹ This happened a few years earlier. However, the concept had been explored more than a decade before that in the Transepts at Chartres.²

These are in the panels under the slot windows into the stairs. They date from around 1198, [r]. The order of carving would probably relate to the order in which the windows above them were carved, and that can be established from the changes to the geometry in the templates from which they were carved.³ The panels show an evolution of an idea that is pregnant for the future. It is my guess that these were by a young apprentice working for the Bronze team, perhaps during his journeyship year. I analysed his later work in depth, and called him the master M1 as most of his work was around the Marne.⁴ The templates he used as M1 showed he designed the widows and tracery in the Reims ambulatory. There is, in my mind, the distinct possibility that he became an independent Master Mason around 1200 and reappeared at Chartres under my name of Olive.⁵

What we may be seeing at Chartres is this man's struggle with an idea and carving it on stonework without the skill with chisels he showed later, but with a determination to understand, step by stone-hewed step, how the plate-like frames around window heads could be hollowed out.⁶



Chartres cathedral, stair window and panel on south porch



The first: the lower part of the west panel on the south shows a typical pattern of trilobes with oculi between, all on the one plane. Little depth in the cutting.



The second: the east panel on the south, in which the oculus has been integrate with the trefoil. This is the first step in turning the two elements into a single form.



The third: the west panel in the north. The arrangement is similar except that the “openings” have been hollowed out more firmly and additional “lights” have been inserted under the divisions



The fourth: in the east panel in the north the little “lights” have been moved upwards alongside the oculus thus creating the first “see-through” screen, which is essentially tracery.

Notice a similar process in the pattern along the top of each panel.

You can see how this thinking would lead to the windows in Essomes, and from there to Reims. It's the first known decoration that leads directly to tracery. It also changes the way the masters thought about space, as it reversed the normal view that the wall is the basis for structure.⁷ Whereas single-light windows were designed from curves with centres set within the space of the window, now some of the curves had centres placed outside the outline of the window. This "formed openings as a consequence of the forms around it" rather than from within the shape itself.

Just as ribs had raised the mason's source for design from the ground to the vaults,⁸ so tracery disintegrated the solidity of the wall and made buildings "diaphanous".⁹

This article includes a number of concepts that are dependent on other analyses. I wanted to concentrate on this one element so it does not get overwhelmed by a complex story, but have noted the others. This part of the gothic tale is critical to the evolution of what Branner called the Court Style after the decline in the people's architecture after 1210 and the consolidation of wealth in the northern barons and the royal family after the Albigensian Crusade.¹⁰

1. John James, *The Template-makers of the Paris Basin: Toicological methods in medieval research*, Leura, 1989, chapter 7.
2. John James, *In search of the unknown in medieval architecture*, 2007, Pindar Press, London, 84-85.
3. John James, "Design changes in four similar windows", <https://www.creationofgothic.org/COGA/files/articles/Four-windows.pdf>.
4. James, *Template-makers*, chapter 8.
5. John James, *The contractors of Chartres*, Wyong, ii vols. 1979-81.
6. In plate tracery the window is capped by solid stone, usually with an oculus. In bar tracery the window is capped with glass framed by thin mullions, without any solid sections.
7. Discussed in James, *Template-makers*, 156-57.
8. John Fitchen, *The construction of Gothic cathedrals. A study of medieval vault erection*, Oxford, 1961.
9. Term coined in Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *The sculptural program of Chartres Cathedral*, New York, 1959, 134.
10. Robert Branner, *Saint Louis and the court style in gothic architecture*, London, 1965.