

Jean Wirth, La cathédrale de Chartres. Sculpture et vitraux, Genève (Librairie Droz) 2023, 180 p., 118 ill. en n/b (Collection ARS LONGA, 12), ISBN 978-2-600-06431-6, EUR 39,90.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Virginia Raguin, Worcester, MA

The author begins by addressing the magnitude of presenting a comprehensive analysis of the sculpture and stained glass in the iconic cathedral. A prolific author, Wirth comments that his two previously published volumes on the album of Villard de Honnecourt in 2015 and the sculpture of the cathedral of Reims of 2017 had contained new insights. He notes for this study that he is not bringing many new observations; he is clarifying information. His goal is to survey the considerable literature by prominent historians without claiming to have personally verified the details of each argument. Happily, for us, he has still shouldered the task, enabling readers to approach this vast subject through the author's concise overview of 160 pages and 181 black and white illustrations. Ideally, surround yourself with other volumes and more images, including Painton Cowen's online database the [Rose Window](#) and Willibald Sauerländer's *Gothic Sculpture in France* of 1970.

The study of sculpture and glass is approached methodologically, first the construction and the discussion of the separate artists, then the program or iconography, and then reflections on the state of the question. As with many other commentators, Wirth spends a considerable amount of his effort looking at chronology. The author includes more than a century and a half of study, including the work of Wilhelm Vöge of 1894 to recent publications on the restoration of the west façade by Pierre Martin in 2015 and the catalogue of the exhibition *Naissance de la sculpture gothique: Saint-Denis, Paris, Chartres* at the Musée de Cluny in 2018.

The west façade, understandably, is the first focus, and the author attempts to give an overview of the complexity of mapping the interrelationships between sculptors working at Saint-Denis, Saint-Bénigne-de-Dijon, La Charité-sur-Loire, Étampes, and Châteaudun. For those interested in precedents he agrees that for the sculpture of the west façade, Chartres was built directly after Saint-Denis with no intermediaries. The author maintains that it was the sculptor, not the painter who was the principal innovator at the time. He does however, point out the connection between manuscript, window, and sculpture especially in the transmission of decorative formulas.

As have others, Wirth reevaluates the issue of the identification of sculptures and glass painters and the possibility of defining hands. He cites the study by Claudine Lautier in 1990 where she brought new perspectives on the structure of the workshop. Wirth



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

comments that the issue of glass is more complex than that of sculpture for the very nature of a window necessitates multiple hands and skills. Ultimately, he argues that the upper windows can be seen as a coordinated ensemble. He takes as a general principle that the date of the donor's death is the terminus for the completion of a window. The upper windows of the choir (*Corpus Vitrearum* numbers 100 through 114), date to around 1215. The transepts are also dateable. Wirth gives an admirable summary addressing window donors. He rightly notes certain errors, such as Françoise Perrot's assertion in 1989 that the nobility depicted in the upper windows had taken part in the crusade. Rather, he contrasts John Baldwin's work in 2014 that notes that the chevaliers do not carry crosses and it is obvious that a good number of them could not have participated in the crusade before the completion of the windows in 1220. The windows more correctly demonstrate the donors' kinship and/or emulation. Wirth also concurs with the pioneering publication of 1993 by Jane Welch Williams about financing such an enterprise. It is clear that the trades could not possibly have paid for an entire window. Their prominent depiction should rather be classified as part of the tradition of legends of purported popular support for the clergy's building programs. Compare the »cult of the carts« related by Robert of Torigni (ca. 1110–1186), describing how men spontaneously volunteered to drag wagons to aid construction.

The very complexity of the building and disagreements among scholars actually reflects on the strength of this work. Medieval art was multivalent. Historians come from different disciplines and perspectives. The so-called Royal Portal on the west presents a clear example. Scholars have long been mesmerized by its grace of form and eloquence of subject. My own interpretation of the overall theme has been the issue of time and the mystery of the eternal existence of the Trinity which actually shares the temporal experience of its creatures. On the right, Christ is shown before time, as Wisdom which preceded all things (Proverbs 8:22–31). To the left, Christ is the Logos, the Word of the Father descending (or ascending) as the principal of all creation (John 1:3). In the center Christ is beyond time, in eternal Majesty surrounded by the heavenly host and the Tetramorph, witnessed by Apostles and Prophets (Revelation 4). Among the many authors Wirth reviews, he cites Margot Fassler, writing from a standpoint of liturgy, who argued that the left portal shows Christ before the Incarnation. His angels transmit his message to the prophets although he is hidden by clouds. The archivolt depicting the signs of the zodiac and labors of the month, however, suggest a more active role for Christ. We witness the creation of the world. Christ is the Logos, God's word incarnate, »through him all things were made« (Nicene Creed) referring to John 1:3. Further discourse on time is found in the sequential passage of human time in the narratives of the capital freezes. The scenes depict episodes from Christ's life that include the infancy of the Virgin through Christ's death and burial, but not always in a chronological sequence. Below, the statue columns proclaim a typological message of kings and queens of the Old Testament. Citing Adelheid Heinmann's work of 1968, Wirth



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

suggests modifications in her arguments that the sculptures on the columns between the figures are also typological. Many of the authors have suggested interrelationships between the zones of tympana, capital friezes and columns. I believe that their variance supports the idea that the ensemble is nuanced, with multivalent readings.

This is a richly encompassing and highly accessible study. Wirth's final chapter gives a general overview that is particularly clear in addressing the major issues of dating, finance, and style.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)