

# DES GÉOMÈTRES À BROU : ARCHITECTURE ET ORNEMENTATION EN ESPAGNE, DANS LE BRABANT ET EN EUROPE OCCIDENTALE AUTOUR DE 1500

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## RÉSUMÉ

L'intérêt esthétique de l'église de Marguerite d'Autriche à Brou repose en grande partie sur son usage particulier de l'ornementation : la décoration de la façade et du mobilier, fort bien maîtrisée, consiste en des séries coordonnées de motifs et modèles ; la création d'un contre-point rythmique permet en outre d'introduire une tension entre différents segments de structure, discernée par une observation attentive.

Brou est l'exemple le plus précoce d'un style gothique tardif qui s'épanouit dans les anciens Pays-Bas au début du <sup>xvi</sup><sup>e</sup> siècle. Ses racines, néanmoins, semblent plonger en terre espagnole, plus particulièrement dans le royaume de Castille, où les artistes devaient perpétuer la tradition islamique de profusion ornementale. Mais les artistes nordiques jouaient également un grand rôle là-bas. L'Espagne accueillit des dessinateurs venus des Pays-Bas, d'Allemagne et de France, qui synthétisèrent dans leur pays d'adoption une esthétique ornementale nouvelle ; les modèles consistaient souvent en une hiérarchie de motifs géométriques formant des « rimes » visuelles et des stratégies d'orientation ; ces figures encadraient bien souvent des armoiries.

Un autre aspect de la réalisation à Brou trouve des précédents en Espagne : il s'agit de l'emphase technique, de la virtuosité de la sculpture. Les façades, les tombeaux, le jubé, les stalles du chœur et le retable des Sept Joies de la Vierge, sans parler des murs du chœur eux-mêmes, montrent des détails qui se détachent de la surface plane. Les dais au-dessus des tombeaux sont ajourés et translucides, semblant défier les lois de la physique qui les maintiennent debout et évoquant des œuvres sculptées dans le bois ou d'autres matériaux plus tendres.

Comme une grande partie du gothique autour de 1500, l'église de Brou est d'une certaine manière internationale, partageant des points communs avec de nombreuses autres variantes régionales du gothique. Quoi qu'il en soit, l'Espagne semble avoir été le « lieu d'incubation » des artistes nordiques, offrant un environnement où ils purent perfectionner les éléments du style gothique qui existaient à l'état embryonnaire dans leurs pays d'origine.

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## ABSTRACT

Much of the visual interest of Margaret of Austria's church at Brou derives from its distinctive use of ornament. Highly controlled, the decoration on the facades and the furnishings consists of coordinated ranges of different motifs and patterns. A rhythmic counterpoint is established which creates a tension between segments of the structures, which is resolved by the attentive eye.

Brou is the foremost example of a Netherlandish mode of Late Gothic design that flourished at the beginning of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century. Its roots, however, seem to lie in Spain, particularly in the Kingdom of Castille, for it was there that artists had to contend with the Islamic legacy of profuse ornament. Yet Netherlanders and other northerners played a large role even here. Spain welcomed Gothic designers from the Netherlands, Germany and France who synthesized in their adopted land a new ornamental aesthetic. Designs often consisted of a hierarchy of related geometric motifs that established visual "rhymes" and strategies of orientation. These figures often acted as frames for armorial devices.

Another aspect of the work at Brou with precedents in Spain is the emphasis on craft, on virtuoso carving. The facades, tombs, rood-screen, the reredos of the Seven Joys of the Virgin, the choir stalls, and altarpiece, not to mention the walls of the choir themselves, feature details seemingly lifted off the surface. The finely carved openwork tabernacles over the tombs are translucent—seeming to defy the laws of engineering that keep them intact, they evoke woodwork or work on other more pliable materials.

Like much gothic art around the year 1500, Brou is to some extent international, sharing aspects with many other regional varieties of the Gothic style. Nevertheless, Spain seems to have been an "area of incubation" for Netherlandish and northern artists, offering an environment in which they perfected elements of Gothic design that existed in an embryonic state in their native countries.

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In this essay I wish to discuss connections between the Brabantine Late Gothic Ornament of Brou and architectural trends in late fifteenth-century Spain. Markus Hörsch has already noted correspondences between the grand funerary churches of the Catholic Monarchs and Margaret of Austria's church – most notably the Carthusian Monastery of Miraflores outside Burgos, yet there is much more to be said about this relationship<sup>1</sup>.

## ORNAMENT AS THE VISIBLE MANIFESTATION OF BUILDING

Ornament is, indeed, one of the most extraordinary aspects of Margaret of Austria's church and was one of the important earmarks of the dynastic chapels of the high nobility. Coats of arms and other heraldic devices were generously embedded in the framework of these structures. Tracery figures often served as cartouches, framing armorial signs. Such ornament had the effect of heroicizing these markers of family and dynastic union. As Fernando Marías has noted, "the Late Gothic mode was known in mid-sixteenth century Spain by two names: the 'German manner', indicating the significant role of immigrant German and Dutch designers, and the 'armorial manner', denoting the dominant presence of heraldic signs in the most prestigious monuments<sup>2</sup>". Skillful execution and carving was essential to this aesthetic. Virtuoso craftsmanship inspired awe and delight in the viewer as stone was perceived to imitate other materials such as metal or wood.

But such decorative display communicated more than dynastic *pouvoir*. It became a subject of art in itself and an object of beauty. This type of ornament privileges the viewer, presenting a field that the viewer must order and interpret. In the early sixteenth century, the relationship between structure and ornament was not seen as a separation between mandatory functional elements and the optional carvings they carried, which offered visual delight – a distinction ingrained in modernist aesthetics. Rather, ornament was conceived of as the visible manifestation of building; structure comprised the conceptual properties embodied. Indeed, edifices are said to be "dressed" in ornament. In the early fourteenth century, Jean de Jandun described the towers of Notre-Dame in Paris as "clothed (*circumamictas*) round about with such a multiple variety of ornaments" – among which, he numbered its numerous columns<sup>3</sup>. In 1544, Hans Sachs wrote of one of the Triumphal Arches for the Entry of Charles V into Nuremberg as "decoratively dressed" (*zierlich bekleydet*) in the antique or *Welsch* manner<sup>4</sup>. Ornament might be referred to similarly as the perceptible "flesh" that coated the conceptual "bones" of the building's structure – an invisible and largely intellectual aspect<sup>5</sup>.

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1. Markus Hörsch, « Architektur unter Margarethe von Österreich, Regentin der Niederlande (1507-1530). Eine bau- und architektur-geschichtliche Studie zum Grabkloster St.-Nicolas-de-Tolentin in Brou bei Bourg-en-Bresse », *Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Schone Kunsten*, 56, nr. 58 (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1994), p. 174-176, 181-184.

2. Fernando Marías, *El siglo XVI. Gótico y renacimiento*, Madrid, Sílex, 1992, p. 38.

3. Erik Inglis, "Gothic Architecture and a Scholastic: Jean de Jandun's *Tractatus de laudibus Parisius* (1323)", *Gesta* 42:2 (2003), p. 67.

4. Andrew Morrall, "The Italianate or 'Welsch' as a Stylistic Category in 16<sup>th</sup> Century South German Art: Some Uses and Problems of Interpretation", lecture presented in the session "Antiquity and Italian Mediation in Northern Europe, 1400-1700" at the Meeting of the College Art Association of America in Atlanta, February 17, 2005. I thank Andrew Morrall for allowing me to cite his unpublished paper. "Decoratively clothed here and there/As though they were marble,/With welsch columns and capitals/With beautiful cornices and fluting". "Zierlich bekleydet hin und her/Als ob sie merbelstaynen wer,/Mit welsch columnen und capteln,/Mit schoen gesimsen und holkeln".

5. Joseph Rykwert, "Inheritance or Tradition", *Architectural Design* 49 (1979), 3. Veronica Biermann, *Ornamentus: Studien zum Traktas "De re aedificatoria" des Leon Battista Alberti*, Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1997, p. 144-145. Alberti mentions the *ossatura* of the building, the skeleton minus the flesh [III, 12, 233]. Classical authors such as Quintilian and Tacitus had referred to rhetorical

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## THE DECOR AS AN EXPRESSION OF POWER AND SYSTEM OF COMMUNICATION

The church of Margaret of Austria at Brou is perhaps the most complete and fully realized example of the very late Brabantine Gothic from around 1500. Its abundant decoration offered both an expression of princely magnificence and a system of communication. Indeed, much of the visual interest of the facades and furnishings derives from the highly controlled and coordinated ranges of ornamental motifs and patterns. Similar tracery figures, varied in size and shape, are placed about the building, its tombs, choir stalls, and other furnishing. These create a series of visual “rhymes” that impose a sense of unity on the disparate structure while distinguishing significant sites<sup>6</sup>.

The roots of this approach to ornament, however, seem to lie partly in Spain, particularly in the Kingdom of Castille. Yet Netherlands and other northerners played a large role even here. Spain welcomed Gothic designers from the Netherlands, Germany, and France, who synthesized in their adopted land a new ornamental aesthetic<sup>7</sup>.

At Brou, the ornament comprises a system of communication integral to its aesthetics. Distinctive motifs or tracery figures act as reference points or guides through the abundant visual information. They provide the center of decorative compositions which are repeated with variation about the space of the church. Trefoils, for instance, might occur in various guises – flattened, narrowed, ogival, or otherwise elaborated – thus comprising a series of forms. These variations might further suggest a hierarchy of motifs, a sequence from the most elaborate embodiment through ensuing simplifications or from an archetypal figure through successive distortions and transformations. The designers could further arrange ornamental forms in ways that helped emphasize important sites on a building or work of sculpture.

At Brou, a limited repertory of these distinct motifs is repeated about the façades and the interior of the choir. The west facade cleverly alludes to the trefoil through the arch surrounding the portal with its projecting central lobe (ill. 1). This motif is repeated but varied on the north transept façade, where it is made ogival. Even the miniature baldachins on the buttresses carry this trefoil motif – indications of the unity and consistency of the program.

Within the choir, we find these motifs on much of the furnishing. The tomb of Margaret of Bourbon demonstrates this manner of design (ill. 2). The niche containing the effigy is crowned by a flattened variant of the ogival trefoil. This type of trefoil mirrors the frame of the portal to the chapel of Philibert immediately to its left (ill. 3), the frame of the lavabo a few metres further to the left, and the central arch on the tomb of Margaret of Austria across the choir. The Bourbon tomb introduces us, as well, to the second leading tracery motif, the Brabantine bell-shaped arch, which is embedded in the blind tracery that serves as the crest of the tomb, attached to the wall of the choir.

The two primary tropes are repeated and varied throughout the monument. The tabernacles framing the niche, for instance, are formed by bells whose contours define upside-down trefoils. In the basement of the tomb, alternating statuettes of mourners and Italianate angels are housed in niches that display different arrangements of the familiar figures: bells and trefoils, along with generic round arches. Other variations of this combination of motifs are found on the other furnishings in the church.

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ornament as the flesh or muscles that filled out the skeleton of verbal argument. This, too, was an appealing metaphor. It is likewise applied to architecture in the famous letter to Pope Leo X that bemoans the destruction of ancient buildings: “but without ornament, and as such, the skeleton of the body without the flesh” (*ma non però tanto che non vi restasse quasi la maccina del tutto, ma senza ornamenti, e, per dir così, l’ossa del corpo senza carne*). The letter is presumed to have been written by Baldassare Castiglione. See Baldassare Castiglione/Raffaello Sanzio, “Lettera a Leone X”, in *Scritti d’arte del cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, Milano and Naples, 1977, vol. 3, p. 2972. Biermann, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

6. See Ethan Matt Kavalier, “Renaissance Gothic in the Netherlands: the Uses of Ornament”, *The Art Bulletin*, 82, 2000, p. 226-251.

7. José María Azcárate, *Arte Gótico en España*, Madrid, Ediciones Cátedra, 1990, p. 113-128.



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St. Nicholas of Tolentino, Brou.

1. Western façade.

2. Margaret of Austria's shrine.

3. Portal of the Philibert's chapel.



All the photos have been taken by the author.



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## SPANISH AND NETHERLANDISH ELEMENTS

Interestingly, the elaborate and curvilinear tracery forms do not appear on Netherlandish architecture until the very end of the fifteenth century; among the earliest examples is the decoration on the jubé in the Pieterskerk (St. Peter) in Leuven, which dates to about 1490 (ill. 4). It seems probable that these forms were first introduced via micro-architecture<sup>8</sup> through woodwork.

Artistic developments in Spain seem to have nurtured the highly articulated Brabantine Gothic of Brou and the Ghent Town Hall. Of course, lavishly decorated Late Gothic was a pan-European phenomenon, rife with connections between different centers. Artistic contacts between Spain and the Low Countries were regular since the fifteenth century, following commercial and dynastic ties between the two lands. In fact, José María Azcárate dubbed this phase the Hispano-Flemish style, in recognition of the many Netherlandish artists active in Spain, who profoundly influenced architectural and sculptural production<sup>9</sup>. These immigrant designers brought with them manners of composition familiar from the Netherlands and the Rhineland but which were reformed in a sophisticated manner in their new home.

Relevant to Netherlandish design methods are a remarkable series of choir stalls constructed in Spain in the final third of the fifteenth century, for example, the stalls in the church of St. Thomas in Ávila, reputedly crafted by the Aragonese Martin Sanchez from 1482-1483 in imitation of transplanted Netherlandish precedents<sup>10</sup> (ill. 5). While the backs of the stalls are covered with complex geometric patterns, known since the later fourteenth century, the canopies are fronted by richly articulated trefoils with ogival central cusps – a central, dominating motif. This type of specific arch form would proliferate on numerous works of micro- and macro-architecture during the final years of the fifteenth century. We notice, as well, that the hanging trefoils of the Ávila stalls are reflected in the trefoil with a much smaller cusp that frames the entrance to the stalls, a modest step toward the mimicry of ornamental figures that we would find at Brou.



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4. Detail from the jubé;  
Pieterskerk (St. Peter church) in Leuven, Belgium.

5. Choir stalls, by Martin Sanchez, 1482-1483;  
St. Thomas church, Ávila, Spain.

8. Jan Karel Steppe, *Het Koordoksaal in de Nederlanden* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1952), p. 81.

9. Azcárate 1990, *op. cit.*, p. 109-137. *Ibid.*, "La introducción del arte flamenco en la primera mitad del siglo XV", in: *Portugal e Espanha entre a Europa e além mar: IV Simpósio Luso-Espanhol de História da Arte* (Coimbra: Instituto de História da Arte, Universidade de Coimbra, 1988), p. 43-52.

10. Dorothy and Henry Kraus, *The Gothic Choirstalls of Spain*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 98. Beatrice Gilman Proske, *Castilian Sculpture: Gothic to Renaissance*, New York, Hispanic Society of America, 1951, p. 194-195.



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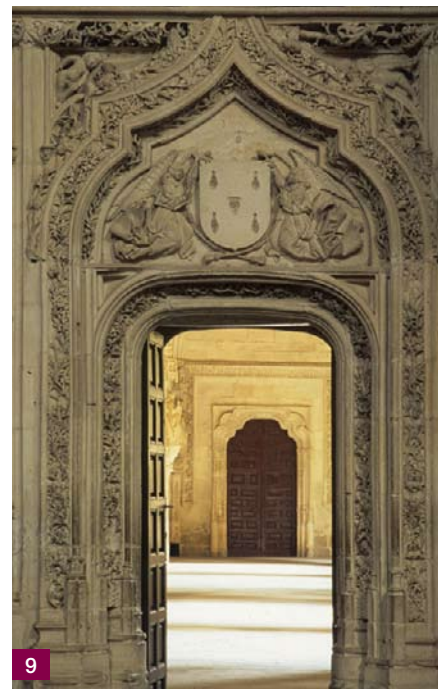
6. Portal of the Lions, by Hanequin of Brussels, 1453-1469; cathedral of Toledo, Spain.

7. Central motives on the bay, by Rombouts II Keldermans and Domien of Waghemakere, 1518-1536; Ghent Town Hall, Belgium.

8. Interior transept wall by Juan Guas, 1472; San-Juan-de-los-Reyes church, Toledo, Spain.



9. Portal of the cloister; San-Juan-de-los-Reyes church, Toledo, Spain.



An early example of the mode of design on Spanish monumental architecture is found on the cathedral of Toledo – the Portal of the Lions, constructed by Hanequin of Brussels from 1453-69<sup>11</sup> (ill. 6). The two bays of the tympanum are occupied by a monumental decorative feature, a trefoil with an ogival central cusp, which is raised above a background of gently curvilinear tracery carved in lower relief. The definition of the central motif in each bay and its projection in front of a field of filler tracery looks forward to later carving at Brou and on the Ghent Town Hall<sup>12</sup> (ill. 7).

The greatest of the Late Gothic architects working for the Catholic Monarchs at the end of the fifteenth century was Juan Guas, a native of Brittany, who was first active under Hanequin at Toledo. The transept walls of San-Juan-de-los-Reyes illustrate properties of design that seem to prefigure Netherlandish architecture of a generation later. Each wall is richly decorated (ill. 8). Its lower register is dressed with trefoils imbedded in shallow arches with filler tracery. Above these panels, a row of monumental ogival trefoils crown the arms of the Catholic Monarchs. The portal to the cloister, which perforates this wall, is especially distinctive (ill. 9). It is contained within an arch of broken contours<sup>13</sup>. We note, as well, that the portal arch contains the *arma Christi*, Christ's coat of arms. Again important information is presented within these distinctive motifs, where it can quickly be identified amidst ornate surroundings.

11. Azcárate, *op. cit.*, p. 116-117. Hörsch, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

12. Kavalier, *op. cit.*, p. 234-237.

13. Azcárate, *op. cit.*, p. 119-122.



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A hierarchal system of ornamental motifs is found on a number of Spanish structures. A prime example is the Casa de las Conchas in Salamanca, slightly older than the designs at Brou, that has, in addition to its celebrated shell bosses, a series of arches that surmount the portal and windows (ill. 10, 11)<sup>14</sup>. These arches, though all roughly Gothic, show considerable variety in their forms, and all act as frames for coats of arms. In several ways, they help bring thematic unity to the façade while acknowledging the importance of key sites such as the portal, which is adorned with a particularly elaborate arch.

10. Casa de las Conchas, c. 1510; Salamanca, Spain.

11. Cartouche above a door, Casa de las Conchas, c. 1510; Salamanca, Spain.



14. Victor Nieto, "Renovación e indefinición estilística, 1488-1526", in: Victor Nieto, Alfredo J. Morales, and Fernando Checa, *Arquitectura del Renacimiento en España 1488-1599*, Madrid, Ediciones Cátedra, 1993, p. 66-67.



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The miniature tabernacles that sheltered statues of saints became a paradigmatic form of this Renaissance Gothic, particularly in Spain and the Low Countries. It is here that many tracery motifs and aesthetic properties were introduced. The Late Gothic tomb was one of the important genres, since it usually featured elaborate baldachins hovering over subsidiary statuettes.

An essential aspect of these architectural housings was their exquisite craftsmanship. Exemplary are the complex canopies above the statuettes that surround the Tomb of King Juan II and Isabel of Portugal in the Church of the charterhouse of Miraflores near Burgos<sup>15</sup>. This tomb by Gil de Siloe, presumably a Netherlander, displays carving of miniaturized architectural features that show great technical skill; arches intersect with one another while suspended before the body of the tombs (ill. 12). Indeed, Antoine de Lalaing commented specifically on these alabaster monuments in the journal he kept during the voyage through Spain of Philip the Fair. The tombs in the charterhouse were *les plus menuyers entretailliés qu'il est possible* – as well crafted and “intercut” or “undercut” as was possible<sup>16</sup>. Lalaing uses the term “*entretailliés*” to signify a “cutting out,” the raising of spaces between forms and the raising of forms above the surface. The word “*menuyers*,” however, refers to working in miniature, akin to the delicate craft of wood cutting (*menuiser* in modern French) and here applied to stone cutting so fine that it equaled the most virtuoso carving possible in any medium.



12. Tomb of King Juan II, detail of the base, by Gil de Siloe; charterhouse of Miraflores, near Burgos, Spain.

The church of Margaret of Austria at Brou is triply an international monument. It is a Netherlandish creation that lies in French Savoy. It was designed and constructed by Flemish, German, French, and Italian artists. And it represents a mode of Gothic that traces its genesis to another gathering of international talent in Spain during the fifteenth century. From these many traditions the inimitable works at Brou arose.

15. Proske, *op. cit.*, p. 66-74.

16. M. Gachard, *Collection des voyages des souverains des Pays-Bas*, Brussels, F. Hayez, 1876, vol. 1, p. 153.

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