
Article

Late Gothic in the sixteenth-century Cathedral of Santa María la Menor, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Paul B. Niell

Department of Art History, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.

Abstract The Cathedral of Santa María la Menor, completed by the early 1540s for the Caribbean city of Santo Domingo, was the first cathedral in the Americas. An examination of its forms reveals a confluence of artistic styles characteristic of early sixteenth-century Spain and Portugal. The Gothic manner also referred to herein as Hispano-Flemish and Isabelline played a significant role in the cathedral's structure, ornamentation and symbolism. The building's location, in the heart of Spain's first colonial city in the Americas, along with the history of Antillean conquest and colonization, raises questions about audience as well as the operation of symbolic forms in colonial power structures.

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1 At present, it is unclear if the dedication of the cathedral, Santa María la Menor, is a reference to the Byzantine St Mary the Younger or to the status of the cathedral as a 'lesser basilica.'

By the early 1540s, in the city of Santo Domingo, on the Caribbean island which the Spanish named Hispaniola (modern Española, which comprises the Dominican Republic and Haiti), multiple generations of designers and craftspeople labored in building the Cathedral of Santa María la Menor,¹ the first such religious building in the Spanish Indies (Figure 1). A Papal Bull of 8 August 1511 established the city's cathedral church, formulated its administrative structure and selected as its first bishop García de Padilla (s. 1512–1515). With respect to the



Figure 1: Main (west) entryway and façade, cathedral of Santo Domingo, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Source: P. Niell.

cathedral's construction, the commencement date is debated. George Kubler and Martin Soria offer 1512–1541 as the building's timeline, but Luis E. Alemar claims the actual construction process in stone and *mampostería* (plaster, rubble and brick) did not begin until 1523, during the tenure of Bishop Alejandro Geraldini (s. 1516–1524). These scholars generally concur that by 1537 designers and workers had completed the vaulting of the nave and that the west façade was not realized until the early 1540s, under Bishop Alonso de Fuenmayor (s. 1533–1538) (Alemar, 1933, 10; Kubler and Soria, 1959, 64).² The resulting structure was one that historians have long viewed as a synthesis of Spanish Late Gothic, Plateresque and Renaissance styles (Alemar, 1933; Angulo Iñiguez, 1945; Palm, 1945–1946; Palm, 1955; Kubler and Soria, 1959; Palm, 1974).

The cathedral's plurality of visual styles mirrored something of the visual complexity of Spain during this era. German art historian Erwin Walter Palm, who conducted an analysis of the main entrance (west) façade, called it a 'Renaissance frontispiece imposed on a Gothic cathedral' (Palm, 1945–1946, 8). The stylistic juxtaposition identified by Palm at Santo Domingo reflects a similar tendency in Spain noted earlier by Bernard Bevan in his 1939 survey of Spanish architectural history. For the period of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Bevan offers such co-existing and often comingling stylistic categories

2 Other bishops who served during the cathedral's construction include Fray Luis de Figueroa (during 1524) and Sebastián Ramírez de Fuenleal (1528–1531) (see Alemar, 1933, 95).

as ‘Mudéjar, Gothic, Isabelline, Gothic Plateresque, Renaissance Plateresque and High Renaissance’ (Bevan, 1939). In dramatizing the unpredictable nature of Spanish architectural style in this period, he writes, ‘the Golden Age of Spain is stylistically a period of anarchy’ (Bevan, 1939, 135; Cf. Alemar, 1933, 135).

This complex mix of visual styles in Iberia crossed the Atlantic with conquerors, settlers and craftspeople who began the process of populating the Americas. The ideas they brought from Europe for the cathedral evince no discernable blending with local indigenous forms. George Kubler wrote that ‘more than any city in America, Santo Domingo ... was an extension of Peninsular [Spanish] architectural style’ (Kubler and Soria, 1959, 62). The city’s relative geographic proximity to Spain and its early foundation date thus account for a certain degree of likeness between metropolis and colony in this period, but we should also consider certain differences as they pertain to the colonial context. In this essay, I consider the Gothic structure, style and symbolism of the Cathedral of Santo Domingo in relation to Spanish imperial expansion and the formulation of colonial politics in the first European city in the Americas.

The construction of the Cathedral of Santa María la Menor occurred during two important political transformations in Spain; these included the conquest in 1492 of the last remaining Ibero-Islamic polity by the so-called Catholic Kings, Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516) and Isabella I of Castile (1451–1504), and the occupation of the Spanish throne by the Austrian Habsburg dynasty after 1512. While the Habsburg emperor, Charles V, began moving towards a more classicizing imagery, the Gothic or Isabelline style so favored by the Catholic Kings³ persisted in the use of pointed and trefoil arches, tracery, filigree and ribbed vaulting. Queen Isabella appropriated the Gothic style, one could argue, as a response to its use by the fifteenth-century Spanish nobility eager to express its wealth and lineage in such works as the Chapel of Alvaro de Luna in the Cathedral of Toledo and the Capilla del Condestable (1482–1494) in Burgos Cathedral, the latter by Simón de Colonia (d. 1511).

The patronage of Isabella in various projects thus co-opted the visuality of these earlier aristocratic works owing to a three-fold effort by the Catholic Kings to assert royal hegemony over the nobility, reinforce dynastic legitimacy and offer the monarchy as a steadfast defender of the Christian faith (Brown, 1991, 41–43; Kagan, 1991, 55–61). The queen’s patronage in a Spanish Gothic style included the Tomb of Juan II and Isabella of Portugal at the church of the Carthusian monastery of Miraflores, near Burgos, by Gil de Siloé (1440s–1501); the convent church of San Juan de los Reyes in Toledo, designed by Juan Guas (c.1430–1496); and the royal chapel at Granada by Enrique Egas (1455–1539). These various projects suggest the use of Gothic to make socio-political statements, and may also be simultaneously indicative of Isabella’s aesthetic preference for a Toledan Late Gothic mixed with tendencies from the Netherlands, a style usually known as Hispano-Flemish. At Santo Domingo, we find such a Hispano-Flemish Gothic used

3 For an overview of the architecture and sculpture produced during the era of the Catholic Kings, see Selva (1963, esp. 61–132).



in architectural and sculptural ornamentation, evincing various characteristics associated with projects endorsed by the Spanish queen.

The Cathedral of Santa María la Menor was situated in a prominent location alongside the main plaza of the early colonial city of Santo Domingo. Christopher Columbus' brother, Bartolomé, had founded this city in 1496 on the east bank of the Spanish-named Ozama River, after a failed settlement at La Isabella on the island's northern coast. The appointed governor, Nicolás de Ovando (1460–1511), then had the city moved to the west bank where it was re-established in stone construction, beginning in 1502 (Deagan and Crucent, 2002). It is likely that Ovando had a significant number of craftspeople in his entourage when he arrived in that year with some 2500 settlers. A decade later, two waves of craftsmen contracted in Seville sailed for Santo Domingo, reaching the city in 1510 and 1512 (Kubler and Soria, 1959, 64). With respect to the cathedral itself, two designers are known by name. The first, Luis de Moya, oversaw the closing of the vaults in 1537. Rodrigo Gil (Rosillo) de Liendo, from Santander, then took over the position of 'maestro mayor' ['master builder'] from de Moya in 1538 or 1539. Hence, the Cathedral of Santo Domingo had during its construction at least two master builders who had received some training in Spain, possibly in the orbit of such accomplished designers as Enrique Egas, Juan Guas, Rodrigo Gil de Hontañón (1500–1577) or Alonso Rodríguez (Alema, 1933, 39; Palm, 1944, 8–22; Kubler and Soria, 1959, 64–65).

The interior of Santo Domingo's cathedral is rib vaulted throughout. It consists of a nave flanked by an aisle on each side. The central vessel terminates in a polygonal apse, which is customary in the Gothic period (Figure 2). The patterned rib vaults that cover the nave are typical of Late Gothic construction in Europe, and in Spain itself. However, the actual form of the vaulting is rather unusual in that the ceiling is conceived as a pointed barrel/rib vault hybrid with side penetrations; these lateral members are themselves in the form of pointed barrel vaults, only smaller. The early thirteenth-century ceiling of the church at Airvault, in France, employs a similar vaulting system.⁴ As suggested by the plan of Santo Domingo, the aisle and nave vaults mutually reinforce each other, and the outer side of the aisle vaulting is supported by the building's projecting walls (Figure 3). These walls (perpendicular to the nave's main axis) correspond to the lines of lateral, outward thrust of the aisle vaults; this makes it possible to insert chapels between the walls without compromising structural functions. The vaulting covers a building 54 m (177 feet) long and 23 m (75 feet) wide; the vaults over the nave rise to a height of 16 m (52 feet).

Through the configuration of the vaulting, we see in the Cathedral of Santo Domingo the appropriation of the hall-church typology. The *Hallenkirche* (hall church) came to the fore in Germany in the thirteenth century and became quite popular from the fourteenth century onward in many parts of Europe. It is defined as a vaulted church structure in which the nave and aisles are of equal or nearly the same height. These types of buildings eliminated the need for flying

4 In addition to the nave proper, only three side chapels, the apse and the sacristy were complete by the 1540s.



Figure 2: Nave vaulting, cathedral of Santo Domingo.
Source: Peter Hess.

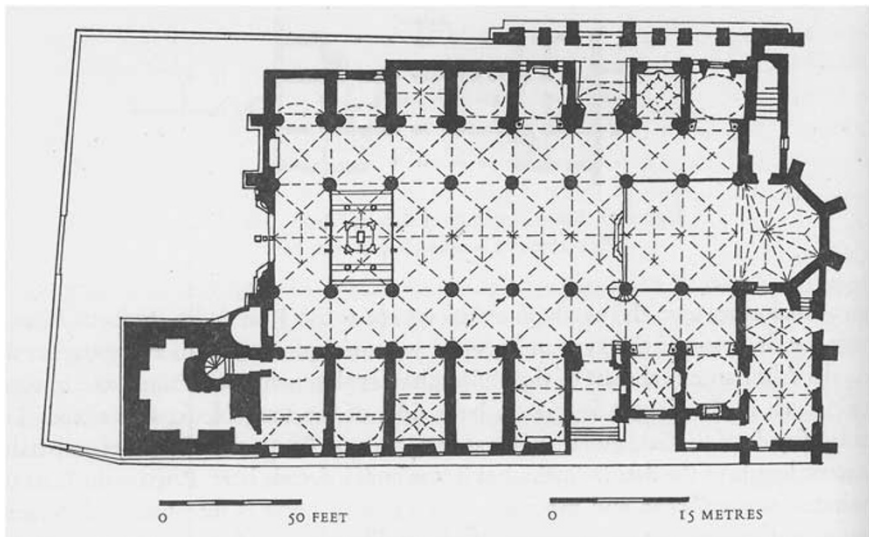


Figure 3: Plan, cathedral of Santo Domingo.
Source: After Kubler and Soria (1959, fig. 28).

buttresses; however, the high aisles prevented the use of clerestory windows. As a result, the interior is illuminated by light from windows situated along the walls of the aisles and apse. Hall churches usually did not possess a transept, and this is



the case at Santo Domingo (Fleming *et al*, 1998, 249; Curl, 2006, 343).⁵ As a hall-type building, this cathedral church resembles such churches in Spain as the Colegiata de Berlanga de Duero in Lerma, Burgos (1526–1530), by Juan de Rasines, the Cathedral of Las Palmas in the Canary Islands (1500–1570) and the Church of the Hieronymite Monastery at Belém, Portugal (1502–1601). The vaulting at Las Palmas is of particular significance for Santo Domingo since the Canary Islands served from the sixteenth century onward as an important layover for ships in the trans-Atlantic voyage between Spain and the Caribbean.

Speaking to the choice of the hall-church elevation at Santo Domingo, Kubler and Soria offered the following: ‘the purpose is evidently utilitarian: to simplify the problems of construction for transient laborers of unequal training’ (Kubler and Soria, 1959, 63). While it would make sense for designers and craftspeople in the early Spanish Colonial Americas to employ a simpler method of construction, these hall church elevations, as has already been noted, were popular in Europe during the late medieval period, especially in German lands. The examples in Burgos, Las Palmas and Belém attest to its use in the Iberian world as well. Therefore, we need to think not only in terms of the relative convenience of the hall church in a colonial territory lacking the same established tradition of craftsmanship or of harvesting and processing materials as in Europe, but also the familiarity of the form and the connection its use at Santo Domingo forges with other centers.

In terms of the cathedral’s viewing audience, the relationship of the work to the indigenous Taíno people of Española and newly arrived African slaves is presently unknown; that Santa María la Menor was principally intended for Spanish residents, there can certainly be no doubt. There do not seem to be, for example, any discernable native, and certainly no African sculptural, expressions embedded into the cathedral’s fabric, or in the city of Santo Domingo’s other religious buildings; this stands in contrast to what has been found in the architecture of mainland areas that had large native populations, as in the Aztec and Inca empires.

Santo Domingo’s cathedral was one aspect of an almost fifty-year effort by the Spanish to establish colonial rule. In the late fifteenth century, Christopher Columbus and his cohorts began the gradual conquest of the five Taíno chiefdoms that made up the bulk of the indigenous population on Española.⁶ The initial wave of conquerors showed little interest in converting these natives to Christianity, preferring instead to enslave them into the *encomienda* system (a grant of land and Indians made to members of the Conquest or privileged settlers entering thereafter).⁷ The island of Española was, therefore, not the site of large-scale conversion efforts. Genocide, European diseases and exploitation would eventually decimate the Taíno population.

By the 1520s, a substantial number of African slaves had been brought to Española who could have found themselves in Santo Domingo viewing images and signs of power, but without previous knowledge of the area’s history such imagery would have meant little to them at first (Guitar, 2006). During the years

5 Notable examples of Late Gothic German hall churches include such monuments as Nördlingen (1427–1505) and Dinkelsbühl (1444–1492) (see esp. Nussbaum, 2000, 137–184).

6 In the Spanish Americas, cathedrals typically front the plaza with their main (usually western) facades. However, at Santo Domingo, the plaza is found along the lateral, north side of the cathedral.

7 Eventually, the Spanish Crown would issue a decree proclaiming the Indians to be vassals rather than slaves after protests from the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566).

of the cathedral's construction, the city would certainly have possessed African slaves and perhaps some Taíno people, or at least *mestizos/as* (Spanish-Indian mixed bloods). But at this point, we need more research on the role of the various religious institutions in converting non-Europeans to Christianity and their assimilation into such organizations as *cofradías* (confraternities), or as seen in Cuba, Afro-Atlantic *cabildos de naciones* (Childs, 2006, 95–199). Thus, the non-European audience for the Cathedral of Santa María in Santo Domingo is largely indeterminate at present; we can only speculate on the possible viewership of Africans, Amerindians, *mestizos/as* and others.

While questions of the cathedral's audience abound, the building does exhibit elements that would have been familiar to incoming Europeans, such as the employment of pointed arches (both as a motif and structural device), tracery for window openings and the hall elevation. Such viewers would, no doubt, have appreciated feasting their gaze on the exhilarating linear complexity achieved by the employment of rib vaulting, just as they had enjoyed seeing such effects in the homeland they had left behind. The star vault of the apse also would have been familiar to the colonists in two ways: as a form related to the art of Islamic Spain and as a vaulting strategy widely used during the Gothic era in Spanish cathedrals and lesser churches. Also noteworthy are the four trefoil windows in the cathedral's apse; they serve to draw the eye to the sanctuary's centrally placed fenestration. Its distinctive keyhole shape resembles the outline of a round horseshoe arch. Such a motif is traceable to Visigothic Spain, and like so much else in the building, it was no doubt chosen to construct a sense of Spanish heritage in the New World, one that could have been affirming to and comforting for incoming Spaniards (Figure 4).

Other elements within the building's interior that derive from Iberian and Mediterranean sources include the spiral columns embedded on the walls of the apsidal sanctuary. Erwin Palm relates these to the late fifteenth-century Isabelline period in Spain and such edifices as the Lonja de la Seda at Valencia (the silk merchant's exchange) and the earlier Lonja del Mar at Palma de Mallorca. Similar treatments appear at the Colegio de San Gregorio at Valladolid and at the Loggia de la Capilla Real in Granada. The significations of these forms in Santo Domingo would have been conditioned by the colonial situation and the need to establish social order, royal presence and legitimacy, and a sense of European tradition.

Another motif associated with the visual repertoire of the Catholic Kings in Santo Domingo's cathedral is the protruding spherical (or 'pearl') ornament arranged as a string of pearls to mark borders and liminal spaces throughout the building's interior and exterior. (According to Palm, the 'pearl' motif may represent in stone the iron or bronze nailheads adorning Mudéjar doorways in Iberia [Palm, 1945–1946, 2]). This motif appears in the neck of columns at both the Santo Domingo cathedral and that of Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, establishing another important connection between the two edifices. In Santo



Figure 4: Vaulting in the sanctuary apse, Cathedral of Santo Domingo.
Source: Peter Hess.

Domingo's cathedral, pearl ornaments frame windows inside and out, span door surrounds, ring the necks of columns and crown interior cornices (Figure 5). They even extend beyond the cathedral, being found in the door surrounds of private residences in the city, such as the Casa de Tostado and the Casa del Cordón, both c. 1502 (Figure 6). They likewise adorn viceregal architecture, as in the palace built for Christopher Columbus' son and the third governor of Santo Domingo, the Alcázar de Colon. Here, pearl décor (as reconstructed) runs along the entire horizontal expanse between the two-story arched loggias on each of the building's sides. If such uses of the motif in cathedral, viceregal palace and private houses are original to sixteenth-century Santo Domingo, we may presume that these constructions in stone served as a means of forging visual relationships among church, state and nobility in order to reinforce colonial power structures in formal ceremonies and daily life.

The doors of the north and south portals of the Cathedral of Santa María la Menor are also decorated with Gothic ornamental motifs and possess considerable sculpture. The south door is framed by engaged colonnettes and vegetal ornamentation. In the upper portion of the portal composition, an elliptical arch is inscribed with a dedication to the bishop Alejandro Geraldini. The north door, facing the main plaza, which Kubler and Soria claim was completed in 1527 (in contradiction to Alemar), is more elaborately decorated (Alemar, 1933, 18; Kubler and Soria, 1959, 64) (Figure 7).⁸ The arches are collected under an ogee arch and surmount multiple door jambs comprising fine colonnettes and finials;

⁸ Alemar (1933, 18) claims that the north door was still incomplete by 1540.



Figure 5: Window from the exterior, Cathedral of Santo Domingo.
Source: P. Niell.

this portal ensemble includes above the door a tympanum furnished with three niches sheltering sculpture. The ‘flat’ arch with rounded corners supporting the tympanum is banded with vegetal decoration, and here too pearl ornamentation is included. Overall, the doorway seems to evince something of the Hispano-Flemish Gothic favored by Queen Isabella.

The tympanum sculpture includes two male saints flanking a crowned Virgin Mary, each set within a niche topped overhead by a scalloped shell. At the base of the central niche a shaft extends downward. This device is suggestive of the Virgin of the Pillar, a particularly important devotion in Spain. According to legend, the Apostle James was preaching the Gospel on 2 January, 40 C.E., in the vicinity of Zaragoza, which was then pagan Caesaraugusta. As he prayed in despair along



Figure 6: Main entry door, Casa de Tostado (c. 1502), Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.
Source: P. Niell.

the banks of the Ebro River, the Virgin Mary miraculously appeared to James and his group and gave them a column or pillar. The pillar, carried by angels and surmounted by an image of Mary, marked the site where James was to establish a chapel that would thereafter house the pillar and her image. Hence, the Virgin of the Pillar became associated with the entrance of Christianity into Spain. If the sculpture in the north portal at Santo Domingo is a reference to this devotion, it suggests that the bringing of Christianity by Spain to the Indies was as divinely ordained as was its introduction into the Spanish motherland at the dawn of the Christian era.

The iconographic program of the western façade is more secular in nature. In this portal, the sculpture partakes of conventions in late medieval European art



Figure 7: North door, from the exterior, Cathedral of Santo Domingo.
Source: P. Niell.

and architecture that served to express the unity of church and state by borrowing imagery from medieval coronation rituals and other sources. The façade is organized into an upper and lower register contained within an implied square geometry and divided by a strong molding above the twin doors and below the twin coffered barrel vaults (Figure 1). Flanking the outer edges of the square configuration, on the two set-back walls corresponding to the side aisles, are two trefoiled windows with tracery framed by colonnettes and pearl ornamentation.

Placed at the central axis of the façade, a reconstructed Habsburg coat of arms with its double-headed eagle rests on a Corinthian column raised on a pedestal. On either side of this upright, on the narrow projecting borders that



frame the façade, two additional emblems of the Habsburg monarchy occupy the area above the socle. The one on the left (as one faces the entrance) is a relief representing the arms of the Order of the Golden Fleece, which had been adopted by the Habsburgs. Balancing it on the right, another carved slab depicts two crowned columns united by a banner reading ‘Plus ultra,’ evoking not only church and state, the two pillars of the empire, but also the Pillars of Hercules. The latter were associated with the Habsburg emperor’s dissolution of Europe’s western boundary, as defined by the Atlantic Ocean. This motif along with the arms of the Golden Fleece and the imperial double-headed eagle form an implied triangle inscribed by the square of the façade. While the chosen forms are sculpted in Renaissance style, the underlying numerology and organization of motifs were drawn from ancient and medieval traditions, and here work to evoke the divine sanction of Spain’s authority over the Indies.

Elsewhere in the main facade, a number of saints, griffins, grotesques, and sea horses populate the frieze, niches and recessed square panels flanking the twin-portal entrance. Some of this work, particularly the frieze, evokes the sculptural style of Diego de Siloé at the Puerto del Perdón of Granada Cathedral, finished in 1537, the Escalera Dorada in Burgos Cathedral (1519–1523), and the work at the Ayuntamiento (the city hall) of Seville, a building begun under the direction of de Riaño in 1527. In the Santo Domingo façade, by contrast to these European examples, a bundle of arrows occupies one of the recessed squares (outer frame, above the Two Pillars), perhaps a reference to the seven sorrows of the Virgin Mary and/or the subordination of New World peoples within a celestial and temporal hierarchy. The permanence of these emblems in stone would have been expected to condition and convince all urban residents, including Amerindian and African, to embrace official Spanish authority as inevitable and divinely ordained.

In this brief overview of Gothic style and symbolism at the Cathedral of Santo Domingo, I have aimed to suggest certain interpretive possibilities. Further research may elucidate the building’s construction history with greater precision and shed light on its iconographic conceptualization. Additional investigations might serve to explain how religious, royal and private patrons appropriated signs of authority from the Gothic and Renaissance periods in order to construct a sense of Spanish power and presence in the first European city of the Americas. The social and commercial networks created by Spain’s enterprise in the Americas provided many channels by which goods and ideas could circulate through a huge part of the globe. If we look at the numerous relationships linking Spain, the Canary Islands, Santo Domingo and the American mainland and consider the multi-directional and transoceanic flow of people, ideas and merchandise in the sixteenth century, Santo Domingo’s significance and contribution to the development of early Spanish colonial architecture and urbanism becomes all the more apparent.

About the Author

Paul B. Niell is Assistant Professor of Spanish Colonial Art History in the Department of Art History at Florida State University. His recent publications include the 2013 article 'Rhetorics of Place and Empire in the Fountain Sculpture of 1830s Havana' in *The Art Bulletin*. He is co-editor with Stacie G. Widdifield of *Buen Gusto and Classicism in the Visual Cultures of Latin America, 1780–1910* (University of New Mexico Press) (E-mail: paulniell@gmail.com).

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