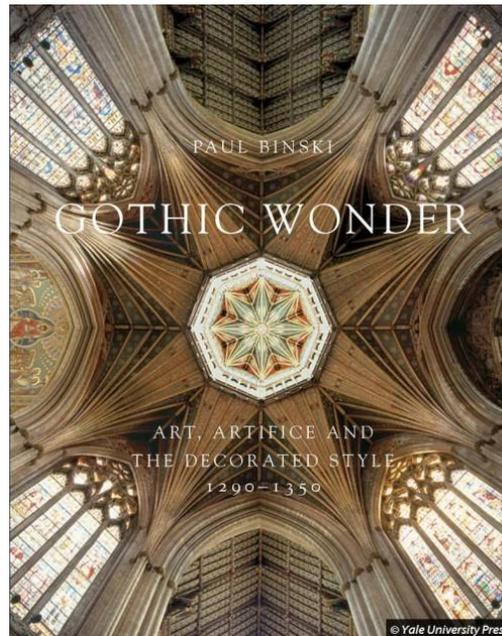


Book Review:  
 'Gothic Wonder: Art, Artifice, and the Decorated Style,  
 1290-1350'

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**PAUL BINSKI.**

***Gothic Wonder: Art, Artifice, and the Decorated Style, 1290-1350.***

**New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. 452pp.; 140 color ill., 175 b/w.**

**\$75.00**

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Paul Binski is well known among medievalists as an accomplished academic and expert on Gothic art and architecture. In his latest book, *Gothic Wonder*, which focuses on the art and intentionality of the English Decorated Style, he re-establishes the Middle Ages as a time of sublime aesthetic creativity.

The English Decorated Style, a sub-genre of Gothic architecture, was a term first coined in the 19th century. According to Binski, it is unusual in that the English style shaped, rather than was shaped by, continental artistic trends. Part I, Mode, Invention and Means, introduces the reader to contemporary aesthetic qualities such as *similitudine* and *auctoritas*, largely governed by Augustinian values and determined by designers south of the Alps. The English Decorated Style became popular with foreigners, as it was less reserved and more lyrical than its continental counterparts who were “restrained by a larger cultural hegemony” (5). Binski connects the subsequent popularity of the English Decorated Style to a strong institutionalized tradition of historic writing in England, an interesting point, which might have been

further elucidated. Unfortunately, he focuses more on his resolve to move beyond the anxieties of nomenclature that permeate the subject than on the unfulfilled connection he makes between historic writing and a flourishing art culture.

The inherent freedom of English architecture, in Binski's judgment, resulted from the meeting of formal and metaphorical elements—tracery windows, canopied niches, richly decorated altars and temporary installations representing tourneys, all are connected to manuscript illumination, which in turn gives the style its particular energy. After all, this style was intended to be flamboyant and eye-catching, and Binski's stance is that its showy nature was also doctrinally persuasive. One notable element in this regard is the Binski-dubbed "curvilinearity"—curlicues that reflected the idea that "I am a worm and no man" (Psalm 21:7). Incorporated into carved arches, these served not didactic purposes, but captured the audience's attention.

The English Decorated Style is most evident in architecture. Yet, happily, Binski also looks at other art forms, including woodwork, glass and embroidery, that served as a conduit for the style. One effective case study is the impact of English manuscripts on the capital sculptures in Santes Creus Abbey in Iberia. More of this approach would be helpful for the wider medievalist community, but that he looks at these "minor arts" at all is still a refreshing integration in a field in which architecture still dominates, and one that many scholars will appreciate. The last chapter's title, "Contagion," seems to herald the demise of the English Decorated Style, in part due to the Black Plague that decimated the population and the 1327 English regime change, among other things.

Binski's work is highlighted with striking, high-quality illustrations, making this weighty tome a work of art in itself. Throughout the volume, Binski supports his arguments with evidence from well-known sources, such as Westminster Abbey and Canterbury Cathedral. The title is somewhat misleading as he does focus on the architecture of the period, but his appreciation of other art forms is evident. Few architectural historians have covered this topic with such depth and breadth, and it is as accessible for the amateur enthusiast as it is for the well-read scholar, making it a welcome addition to any library.