La Cathédrale de Notre-Dame
La Cathédrale de Notre-Dame, also known as Notre-Dame de Paris, is the most well-known gothic cathedral in the world. As an active Catholic church, this beautiful cathedral welcomes more than 50,000 visitors every day who come for religious, historical, and literary reasons. The name Notre-Dame means Our Lady, and the cathedral was built to honor Mary, the mother of Christ. Throughout the years, numerous historical events have taken place inside Notre-Dame, including the coronations of King Henry VI and Emperor Napoleon I. Notre-Dame also served as the setting of Victor Hugo’s famous novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. The English title of this novel is *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The original sections of Notre-Dame are more than 850 years old.
La Cathédrale de Notre-Dame is located in Paris on the eastern end of the Ile de la Cité, meaning Island of the City. Because the Seine River flows through Paris, it separates the city into two sections. The southern bank, or left bank, is known as La Rive Gauche, and the northern bank, or right bank, is known as La Rive Droite. The Ile de la Cité is a teardrop shaped island that sits between the two banks, and it is the oldest part of the city of Paris. In the second century BC, a Gallic tribe known as the Parisii developed a settlement on the Ile de la Cité and named it Lutetia, which is Latin for Midwater-Dwelling.

Many poets and writers have likened the Ile de la Cité to a majestic ship on the Seine River, and La Cathédrale de Notre-Dame as the lovely princess looking out over the water from the bow of the ship.
Ile de la Cité in Paris

Notre-Dame
In 1160, Louis VII was King of France, and Maurice de Sully was the Bishop of Paris. After much discussion, the decision was made to build a new, larger cathedral to replace the Cathedral of Saint Stephen. The first cornerstone of Notre-Dame de Paris was laid in 1163 by Pope Alexander III, and it took 185 years to fully complete the cathedral. Today, Notre-Dame is 426 feet long, 157 feet wide and 115 feet high.
Notre-Dame de Paris is the most well-known gothic cathedral in the world. Gothic architecture was developed in an effort to solve some of the problems found in the common architecture of the medieval period, also known as the Middle Ages. During the medieval period, the primitive buildings were typically cold, dark, and damp with heavy walls and ceilings. The goal of gothic architecture was to create buildings that were functional, as well as pleasant, light, and airy.
Gothic cathedrals were traditionally designed in the shape of a cross. The bottom of the cross, which is the main body of the church, is called the nave. It extends from the entrance of the church forward to the transepts, which resemble the arms of a cross. The top of the cross is called the apse, and it is the most sacred part of the cathedral.
Nave
Transepts
A special feature of gothic architecture that was previously unseen during the medieval period was the extreme height of the buildings. Because medieval buildings had heavy stone walls, large rooms and high ceilings were impossible to create because the weight of the stone could not be balanced. The solution developed in gothic architecture was a structure called a flying buttress. This decorative support piece is an arch-shaped structure placed on the outside of the cathedral. The flying buttress was designed to absorb the weight from the thin walls and transfer the force to the ground. Notre-Dame has numerous flying buttresses that surround the nave and apse. Gothic buildings were built as tall as possible; therefore, art historians now refer to gothic architecture as the architecture of the sky. The roof of Notre-Dame is 115 feet at its highest point.
Flying Buttresses
Flying Buttresses
Another unique and well-known feature of gothic architecture is the gargoyle. Gargoyles are carved with grotesque or frightening faces and can represent animals, mythical creatures, or humans. Although gargoyles may look small from the ground, they are extremely large. In architectural terms, the word gargoyle refers only to the structures used as waterspouts.
In contrast, the carved creatures used only for decoration are called grotesques.
Notre-Dame has numerous gargoyles along the rooflines that collect the rainwater and direct it toward the ground and away from the walls of the cathedral.
There are also many grotesques on the cathedral, and they appear to be looking out over the city of Paris and guarding Notre-Dame from evil spirits.
According to a popular legend, gargoyles come to life at night and fly around the cathedral to keep it safe!
In 1163, when the construction of Notre-Dame began, very few people could read or write. It was decided that the cathedral itself would be used as a teaching tool, including its portals and windows. On the western façade of Notre-Dame, there are three large portals, each containing two heavy wooden doors. Above the doors, there are numerous statues illustrating stories from the Bible and stories from the lives of several Saints. Rather than reading words, the people could learn and remember the stories by looking at the statues. Today, the portals still captivate many visitors, and they find themselves intrigued by the way the statues fit together like an intricate puzzle.
The magnificent rose windows of Notre-Dame are a well-known feature, and they were also used as teaching tools. As you have learned, a goal of gothic architecture was to bring more light into the building, so a number of stained-glass windows were used to add light and color to the cathedral. While Notre-Dame has many vertical stained-glass windows, its most famous windows are the rose windows. Rose windows are circular stained-glass windows that have a diameter of 42 feet.
Their individual panes are divided into four large circles, and the designs on the panes teach a Biblical story. Notre-Dame’s oldest rose window is on the western façade above the center portal. It was put into place in 1220. The other rose windows are located on each end of the cathedral’s transept. As you learned, the transept is the section of the cathedral that resembles the arms of a cross. At either end of the transept there is the North Rose Window, which dates back to 1250, and the South Rose Window, which dates back to 1260.
During the French Revolution (1789-1799), La Cathédrale de Notre-Dame was heavily damaged by the revolutionaries. Numerous stained-glass windows were damaged. Religious icons were marred, and all of the religious statues inside the cathedral were removed or broken.

The revolutionaries supported atheism, and they wanted to destroy as many religious items as possible in an effort to minimize or prevent participation in church services. The revolutionaries also believed the French citizens would be less likely to maintain strong bonds if they were kept apart and not given an opportunity to worship together. If the citizens were isolated, they could not work together to rise up against the revolutionaries. References to the church, the Catholic religion, the Sabbath day, and Saints’ days were all outlawed.

In 1793, the revolutionaries even adopted a new calendar in which each month was made up of three 10-day intervals. Therefore, the people had nine work days between each day of rest or worship, rather than six work days. This calendar remained in place until 1806, when the Gregorian calendar, also known as the Western calendar or Christian calendar, was re-instated.
On the western façade of Notre-Dame, above the three portals and below the West Rose Window is the Gallery of Kings. This gallery contains 28 statues of religious kings, which represent 28 generations of Kings of Judah. However, during the French Revolution, the revolutionaries thought the statues represented the Kings of France, so they decapitated each statue to show their anger toward the government. In the days of the French Revolution, when people were executed, they were sent to the guillotine, a device that caused death by decapitation. In 1977, 21 of the 28 original heads from the Gallery of Kings were discovered during an excavation in France, and they are now on display in the Musée de Cluny.
After the French Revolution ended, Notre-Dame was in shambles. An effort was made to repair and modernize the building, but the damage was severe, and the repairs were much more difficult than anticipated. As the cathedral continued to deteriorate year after year, people began to discuss the possibility of demolishing Notre-Dame.

When French author Victor Hugo heard the rumors about the possible destruction of Notre-Dame, he wanted to do something to help save the cathedral. In 1829, he began writing a novel, set in 1482, and its main character was a disfigured hunchback named Quasimodo, who was found on the steps of Notre-Dame as a baby.

Victor Hugo wrote about the beautiful Cathedral of Notre-Dame from long ago, describing it in vivid detail, and in the novel, it became a home for the outcast Quasimodo. The novel, Notre-Dame de Paris, was completed in 1831, and it was an instant success.

After reading the novel, thousands of people began coming to Notre-Dame to see the place where Quasimodo lived, but they were saddened by what they found. Notre-Dame was on the verge of collapsing.
Just as Hugo hoped, the public demanded that Notre-Dame be restored to its former glory, and in 1844, King Louis-Philippe issued a decree stating Notre-Dame de Paris would be restored. In 1845, architects Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and Jean-Baptiste Lassus were chosen to oversee the project. After the death of Lassus in 1857, Viollet-le-Duc took sole responsibility for completing the project. In 1864, the newly restored cathedral was dedicated by Monsignor Darboy, the Archbishop of Paris. To honor Viollet-le-Duc for his excellent work, his statue was placed on the Spire of Saints and Heros, which is on top of Notre-Dame.