

Cistercian Architecture

The reforming Cistercian order was founded in 1098 to “live more strictly and perfectly according to the rule of the most blessed Benedict.”† St. Bernard of Clairvaux advocated an appropriately modest and unadorned architecture that became a style of great purity and perfection of proportion.

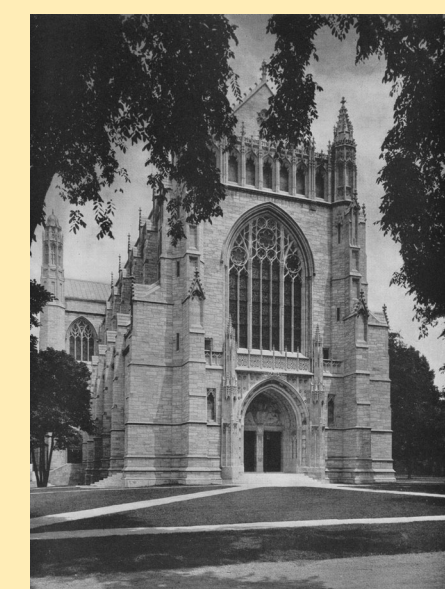
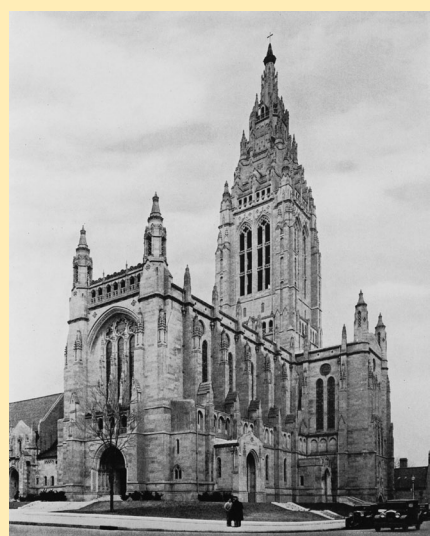
The harmony and simplicity of Tintern’s ruins evidently underlie the design of Calvary, but in Netley’s sturdy arches and compound piers Cram found a precise vocabulary that he could reuse throughout our church.

† Hugh, Archbishop of Lyon, *Founding Charter of the Cistercian Order*, 1098.



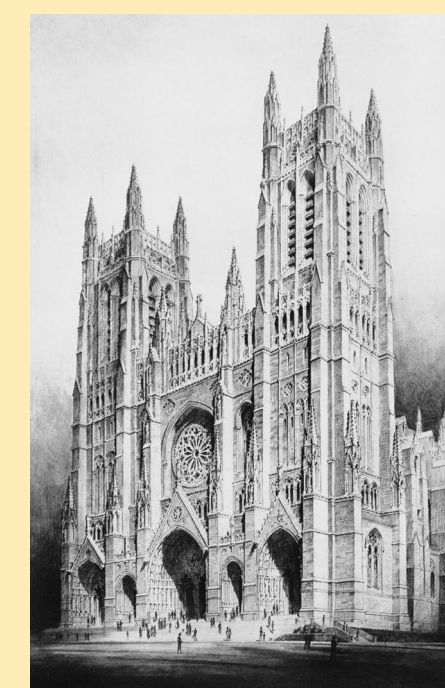
Notable Churches by Ralph Adams Cram

East Liberty Presbyterian Church
Pittsburgh, PA
(built 1930-1942)



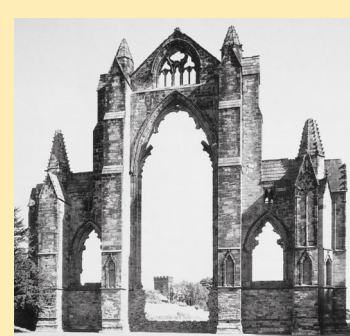
Princeton University Chapel
Princeton, NJ
(built 1924-1928)

St. Thomas Church
New York, NY
(built 1911-1913)



Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine
New York, NY
(Cram’s portion: 1912-1942)

Calvary Episcopal Church
Pittsburgh, PA
(built 1906-1907)



Calvary’s West Façade

The west façade is another example of Cram using historical precedents at Calvary. Cram himself revealed that “the composition of the west front is based largely on that of the east end of Gisborough Priory in Yorkshire,” but he made Calvary’s west end simpler and sturdier and thus much more powerful. †

Our Architect, Ralph Adams Cram

Seminal Gothic Revivalist



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Marsella
Boston

Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) was born in Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, and attended private schools including Exeter before apprenticing for five years with the Boston architectural firm of Rotch & Tilden. Following several study trips to Europe, and a dramatic conversion in Rome from Unitarianism to High Church Anglicanism, Cram returned to Boston in 1889 to establish his own architectural direction and his own firm.

In his autobiography Cram described the deliberate steps he took to do this: “...if a young firm such as ours was to get anywhere we should have to find some comparatively virgin field and make it our own. A careful survey indicated that there was such a field, and one of which my new interests, acquired in Rome, argued acceptance. This was the building of churches...” † Cram then explained his choice of style: “the thing for me was to take up English Gothic at the point where it was cut off during the reign of Henry VIII and go on from that point, and along what might be assumed to be logical lines, with due regard to the changing conditions of contemporary culture.” † Thus Cram declared his intention of specializing in building churches in a style developed from Tudor Gothic, but at the same time to make that style fit into the modern context.

Cram developed the most productive relationship with his second partner, Bertram Goodhue, who was able to visualize the detail that would complement Cram’s plans and rough massing designs. They produced a series of churches and libraries around Boston, but their 1902 commission for the U.S. Military Academy buildings at West Point was pivotal, leading to the commission of the famous St. Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue in New York in 1905 (built 1911-1913). Cram described the arduous process of getting his firm’s church-building specialty known, and, citing the early sequence of churches he had designed (that included

Ashmont, Hyde Park, Brockton and Brookline), concluded that “in the same sequence came the much larger and more sure in touch Calvary, Pittsburgh...” †

By the time Cram had finished St. Thomas in 1913 he was known as the leading Late Gothic Revivalist in America and, in addition to numerous churches, designed multiple buildings at Princeton University, the University of Richmond, and at Philips Exeter Academy. He was a well-known public figure, a writer and scholar as well as an architect, and in 1926 even appeared on the cover of Time magazine. His most famous church commission, the completion of St. John the Divine in New York, continued from 1912 until Cram’s death in 1942, and is still not entirely finished today.



The commission of Calvary, Pittsburgh, coincided with that of St. Thomas but was completed much earlier. Cram, commissioned by the periodical, The Churchman, had traveled around Britain in 1904 and subsequently published his *Ruined Abbeys of Great Britain*, featuring among others the Cistercian abbeys of Tintern and Netley. Cram then turned from Tudor to Cistercian Gothic: the simple overall design and harmonious proportions of Tintern and the discreet detail of Netley reappear in his designs for Calvary. Cram enriched the severe stone framework with glowing jewel-like stained glass and elaborate woodwork to create the “awesome place” that still delights us today.

† Ralph Adams Cram, from *My Life in Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1936).



The Nave

When Cram saw the ruins of Tintern Abbey on his trip to Britain in 1904, the arches stood out as the dominant feature, like the bones

of a skeleton. He recreated that dramatic effect at Calvary by placing broad stone arches against plain whitewashed walls so that the strong rhythm of the stonework dominates the interior.



The Rood Screen

The carved rood screen is an authentic medieval device used by Cram to form an ornamental gateway to the chancel, and, together with the whole scheme of woodwork, to counteract the Cistercian austerity of Calvary’s stonework. Cram thought that Devon was “the richest county in England so far as screens are concerned,” and he used 15th-century



Devonshire models for the double-sided fan vaults and the abundant fruit and vine carvings that distinguish our rood screen. † Although a medieval screen was originally meant to conceal the sacred rites in the chancel from the laity in the nave, Cram modified it for the modern church, keeping it as open as possible and without gates, so that the high-altar reredos and all activity in the chancel are fully visible from the nave.

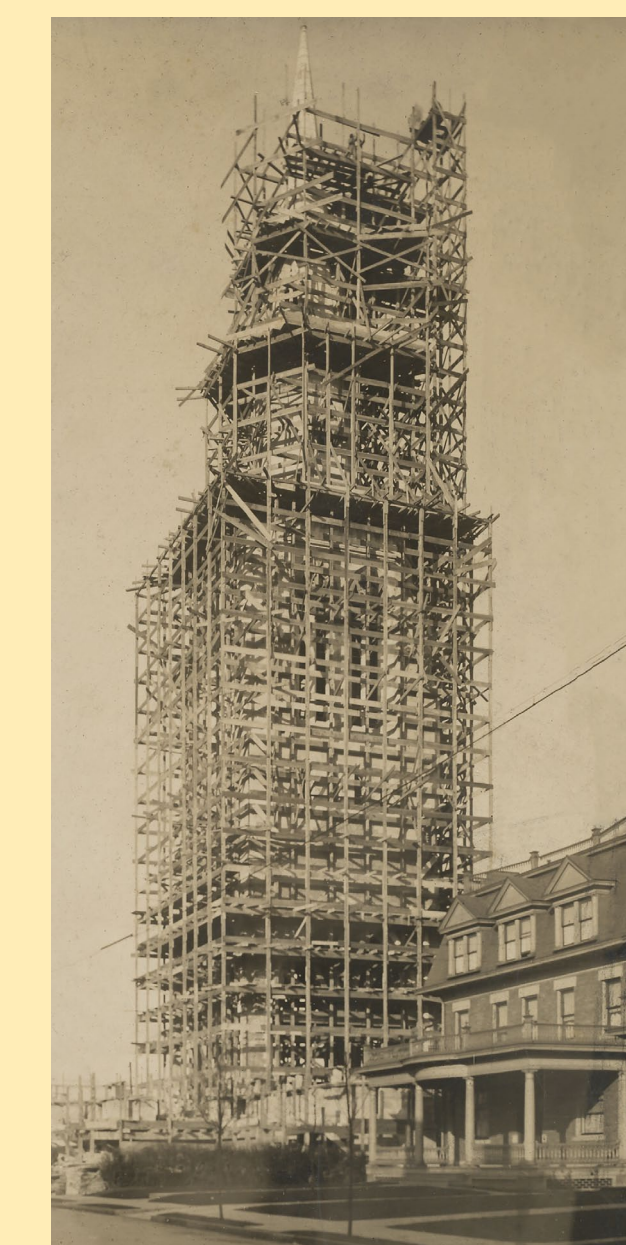
Stained Glass

Cram wanted the glass to complement the Gothic style of Calvary. He realized that contemporary developments in glass making using opalescent glass and modern color schemes would spoil Calvary’s medieval spirit and he strove to find glass-makers who were able to duplicate the effects of archaic glass. He favored 13th and early 14th-century English glass, and declared: “there are to be no ‘picture windows’ (i.e. realistic scenes); the figures are small in scale; medallions and panels are largely used... all the glass is set in very small quarries, the leads being treated as respectfully as the glass, which is wholly ‘antique’ ... and the amount of painting is reduced to a minimum.” †

Calvary’s great South Transept window was made by the London firm of Heaton, Butler & Bayne and installed in 1907 (right lancet illustrated here). It represents a historical record of the church in Britain throughout its first eleven centuries. The four patron saints of Great Britain appear at the top of the lancets, with St. Andrew (Scotland) shown here. Its great height makes this window seem, “like a rain of jewels from the sky.” †



Shown above is a medallion from Calvary’s East Window. This great window representing the Passion of Christ is based on “the principles that marked the great French glass of the 12th and 13th centuries,” typically using just the primary colors of red, yellow and blue, and very little green. † The small Old Testament scenes incorporated into this Passion window are “types” or models of the events they prefigure in the life of Christ. The scene shown above, Daniel in the Lions’ Den, is a type of Christ in the tomb, with death and hell powerless to harm him.



Construction of Tower and Spire

This photo, dated November 29, 1906, shows the construction of the tower. The tower and spire are supported by four great piers inside the church that contain iron H-columns, anchored in cast iron footings. Cast-iron framing members continue upwards into the tower. The spire is supported internally by a latticed steel framework. This modern construction method enabled the tower and spire to be built as if it were a small skyscraper before, and independent of, the rest of the church.

† Ralph Adams Cram, from *Calvary Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, The Gorham Press, 1908).

By the Architectural History Committee, 2016. New photography by Philip Maye.

