

Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Gothic Cathedral* (1811)

Abstract

Although Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841) is perhaps best known as the architect who [remade Berlin in the neoclassical mold](#), he was nonetheless very much an artist of his age. As such, he subscribed to the Romantic notion of the Gothic cathedral as an emblem of German national unity and spiritual renewal. For Schinkel, as for many of his artist contemporaries, the Gothic cathedral represented an ideal, rather than an actual world. Accordingly, this painting depicts no one cathedral in particular. Like *Gothic Cathedral by the Water* (1813), *Gothic Church on a Cliff by the Sea* (1815), and *Medieval City on a River* (1815), the painting shows a cathedral on the apex of a hill, high above a town—a spiritual destination to which town dwellers must climb as if on a pilgrimage. The image must be read as a Romantic allegory and not as an accurate architectural perspective.

In the turbulent early years of the nineteenth century, before the end of the Napoleonic Wars allowed him to embark on an enormously successful career as an architect in the service of the Prussian king, Schinkel had often focused his talents on the Romantic quest to transport the viewer to an otherworldly, magical realm through the use of a new form of popular entertainment—the panorama and diorama display, in which huge, wrap-around views (usually of popular tourist destinations) were displayed in an enclosed building, giving the viewer the impression of actually inhabiting the landscape itself. Schinkel added to the illusion by painting his views on transparencies and lighting them from behind. One such exhibit in 1811 included a depiction of a Gothic cathedral, which according to a contemporary description in one Berlin newspaper, must have been quite similar to the painting reproduced here, which dates from the same year.

Source



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