Introduction

In the Catharijneconvent Museum in Utrecht there hangs a panel painting whose diminutive size belies the splendor of its contents (Plate I).[1] Two rows of polished marble columns, bearing a canopy of rib vaults and framing the central vessel of a church's nave, mark the outer boundaries of the picture. Luminous winged altarpieces – most of them opened to display gilt statues and reliefs inside, one decorated with paintings, and one still closed – mask the lower parts of those gleaming supports.[2] But to the twenty-two tonsured men who fill the central space, the sumptuousness of these material accoutrements commands little attention. With hands tucked into their white robes and mouths gently open as if in song, they gaze in quiet admiration at the Virgin Mary herself – a dazzling maiden wearing a gown of brocaded gold, a mantle of purple velvet, and, upon her soft golden locks, a sparkling crown. Having proceeded through the men's ranks along the central aisle, she pauses, at a point close to us, to proffer a cheery Infant to the foremost friar, whom a torch-bearing dog allows us to identify as St. Dominic – the original "hound of God."[3]

Even as the phalanx of friars forms a symmetrical, stabilizing buffer around the heavenly pair, the scene is not wholly static. Following the steep orthogonals that the architecture and figures jointly create, we discover a glimmering of movement as the two men deepest in the pictorial space turn back to enter the church's choir. The goal of their implied movement is also the culmination of our eyes' journey into the fictive space: an open doorway at the center of a wall-like structure that runs straight across the nave, parallel to the picture plane. Although the continuation (and eventual complication) of the vaulting patterns overhead indicates the depth of the space beyond, all we can see beneath the door's carved tympanum is the golden glitter of another altarpiece, its wings flung open, filling the aperture. The rest of the environment into which the clerical company is about to move remains to us, the picture's beholders, a tantalizing mystery. But even as we are left to wonder what else fills the space beyond, the screen's frontal surface gives us plenty more to see: two majestic gilt retables, far larger than those in the nave, clamor for attention to either side of the door, while a spacious wooden platform, embellished with statues of saints, lends support to an intricately carved crucifix that rises high into the vaults. The structure thus not only demarcates the two major spaces of the church interior – the nave, where we stand, and the choir beyond – but also constitutes a suitably splendid backdrop to the activities in the nave, lending that space a cohesiveness that might otherwise be lost, while focusing our vision on selected elements of the choir. This kind of structure – a key component of *real* ecclesiastical architecture, as we can still see in the beautifully preserved example at the church of St. Mary in Oberwesel (Plate II) – is the Gothic choir screen, and forms the subject of the present book.

Of course, our painter and his contemporaries would have known furnishings of this type by other names. Clergy and members of religious orders, trained to read and speak Latin, used the terms *pulpitum* or *lectorium* in reference to screens' liturgical role as a stage for the reading of Scriptures. This functional appellation resonated in the vernacular languages more familiar to the laity; German speakers early on adapted

lectorium or *lectionarium* to variations such as *lecter*, *lectner*, and *lettener* – hence the modern *Lettner* – while the French, abbreviating the benediction that opened the Gospel reading (*Iube domine benedicere*), have long used the term *jubé*.[4] Other names emerged from the structure's spatial positioning. In Italy, for example, it might be called *tramezzo*, indicating the way it bisected the building, or *ponte*, with reference to its status as a kind of bridge spanning the threshold, whereas in the Netherlands the term *doxaal* signaled its location at the rear portion (in Latin, *dorsale*) of the liturgical choir.[5] Still other names focused on the structure's role as a pedestal: the English term "rood-screen" directs attention to its purpose in displaying the monumental crucifix or Crucifixion Group – consisting, at least, of Christ, Mary, and John the Evangelist – that dominated church interiors throughout medieval Europe.[6]

The modern English term "screen" stands alone in emphasizing the structure's role as an "upright partition used to divide a room, give shelter from draughts, heat, or light, or to provide concealment or privacy."[7] At least, that is the meaning upon which Anglophone scholars have traditionally fixated when discussing these furnishings. Especially in the years since the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), with its efforts to integrate the laity fully into the liturgical life of the Catholic Church, this hardly surprises. It is not difficult, after all, to see structures that disrupted the spatial unity of the physical church as likewise upsetting the unity of the *spiritual* church – the community of all the faithful – by imposing limits on lay participation. As we shall see, the retrospective application of modern desires for integration and equality onto our understanding of medieval architecture has had important implications for the study of choir screens, leading, on the one hand, to their modification if not wholesale destruction, and, on the other, to a deep and pervasive misapprehension of their original role in the church.

It is my hope that this book will dispel such misunderstandings. A preponderance of historical evidence, after all – textual, pictorial, and material – affirms that the choir screen was *central* to the design and functioning of the great Gothic cathedrals (as well as monastic, collegiate, and even parish churches) whose architectural shells we so admire today – and central to the human communities that the architecture embraced. It is only by reinserting screens into those spaces, if only conceptually, that we can understand the full richness, beauty, and socially constructive power of Gothic architecture. After surveying the various forms of choir screens (and other sorts of interior enclosure) in Chapter 1, we will, in Chapter 2, look more closely at these structures in the way their Continental terminology suggests is most appropriate: as functional furnishings for public communication and thus, both literally and metaphorically, as bridges between spaces and between social groups.

That these structures did not hinder either vision or participation to the extent often assumed is a conclusion that some earlier academics and conservators alike have reached; already in the nineteenth century, the Gothic Revivalist Augustus Pugin declared that "[t]he man who professes to love Gothic architecture, and does not like screens, is a liar."[8] Readers familiar with the specialized literature on choir screens, whether morphological surveys of screens in various countries or monographic articles in art historical or archaeological journals, will find here confirmation of that view.[9] But my aim is not merely to synthesize the existing literature but also, more importantly, to expand our sense of what screens *accomplished* in their ecclesiastical setting, by which I mean both the physical setting of the Gothic church and the social environment that the church shaped. Thus, in Chapter 3, we consider screens as *permeable thresholds* analogous in principle, if not in appearance, to the screens we put in windows and doors today. This kind of screen is important not only for its exclusionary capacity (that is, keeping insects and other detritus from reaching interior spaces) but also for the communion it allows – of visual stimuli, of air circulation, of sounds and smells – between inside and outside worlds. While I in no way assume that medieval clergy thought of their flocks as undesirable pests, and while we know that laypeople did traverse the screen's threshold with considerable frequency, it will also become clear that congregants identified strongly with the spaces outside it – not only the nave but also the side aisles and ambulatories – and that they apprehended the choir most often, and sometimes by choice, through the mediating frame of the screen. "Seeing through screens" was thus hardly a necessary evil, a contingency for the presumably disadvantaged laity, but rather a dominant – and positive – component of medieval people's

experience of the church and its rituals. We shall see this point confirmed by numerous late medieval paintings of ecclesiastical interiors. Meanwhile, the doors and windows that facilitated communication between the building's main spaces channeled gazes that longed to see the Eucharistic host, directed awareness to the embodied quality of spatial and visual experience, and reinforced a sense of communal identity among those who stood to either side.

In their fixity within architectural space, and thus their role as a focal point for ever-shifting groups of beholders, these furnishings embody something else denoted by the word "screen" in modern culture: the "blank . . . surface on which a photographic [or, we might add, filmed] image is projected."[10] After all, the body of the screen, whose structural and ornamental elements tended to mesh closely with those of the surrounding architecture, also featured a proliferation of figural imagery across its exterior surfaces; this imagery forms the subject of the second half of this book. Sometimes iconic (as in the statues of saints on the fictive screen in the Utrecht painting or the real one in Oberwesel) and sometimes narrative (as in the cathedrals of Chartres, Naumburg, and Paris), these images projected themselves toward beholders in ways that at once anticipated and shaped those beholders' interests and desires. Even while screens, in their roles as partitions and bridges, gave spatial structure to the social identities of their audiences, their programs of imagery presented an array of characters with whom the church's diverse occupants could identify themselves – or, in certain cases, against whom they could define themselves. In Chapter 4, we examine how sculptural imagery configured the relative access of women and men and of clergy and laypeople to the Body of Christ, and their ultimate union in the freshly distinguished ranks of Elect and Damned at the End of Time. In Chapter 5, we turn to widely varying depictions of the Jewish characters in sculptural depictions of biblical events, showing how their presence could function not only as a strategy of collective demonization of a social minority but also as a means of sparking reflection on the behavior of Christian individuals. In Chapter 6, we look at the portrayals of laypersons of low and high status, peasants and nobles – a focus that opens up questions of communicative modes in medieval monumental art. For all their diversity in iconography and style, after all, the array of sculpture programs we will investigate are unified by a concern for narrative legibility, a straightforward, unmannered depiction of characters moving about in homespun environments, and an unusual attention to the nuances of facial and bodily expression. These qualities make them well suited to communicating not only with elite clerical audiences but also with beholders of every rank and educational level – a point that leads us to consider them as instances of a *vernacular* mode of representation.

This form of sculpture, situated in direct proximity to rituals at the altar, differs significantly from what we find on exterior portals, especially in the renowned cathedrals of northern France. There, narrative scenes tended to be subsumed within larger thematic programs with loftier, theologically complex or universalizing content – imagery that sought to present an encyclopedic view of Christian time and space, to underscore aspects of grand processional liturgies, or to declare far and wide the unparalleled prestige of the Christian *Ecclesia*.[11] The themes of choir screen sculpture tend to be both narrower and deeper in focus, concentrating on the central mysteries of the Christian faith – the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection – or the impact of Christian mores on the lives (and afterlives) of the faithful, as in Last Judgment or Works of Mercy images. This book brings together the narrative programs – some perfectly preserved, some known only from fragments or drawings – from the major French and German choir screens of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, not only to introduce as a group some works of spectacular beauty and sophistication but also, more broadly, in hopes of shedding new light on the variety of forms, functions, and iconography of sculpture during a period marked by heightened naturalism across the visual arts.[12] No less than the screen itself, which facilitated communication between the communities it physically separated, the figural imagery adorning it was emphatically audience-oriented; the designers of these programs imbued stories from Scripture with contemporary references that made them applicable both to clergy and to denizens of the world. As both a frame *through* which people saw the sacred and a surface *at* which they looked, the Gothic choir screen was also a fundamental tool in the cultivation of distinctive visual practices we have

come to associate with High Medieval religious culture: for example, the active, concentrated *heilbringende Schau* (salvific gaze) that linked viewers to relics and the Eucharist, and imaginative devotions that involved making virtual forays into key episodes of sacred history or envisioning oneself interacting with holy characters in one's own environment.[13]

Taken as a whole, this book thus endeavors to recover not only a largely lost and still misunderstood aspect of Gothic churches but also an overlooked dimension of medieval *visuality* – the varied modes and habits of looking, and the thinking about that looking, that characterize distinct historical cultures.[14] As such, it fits within a broader trend in the study of medieval architecture since the mid-1990s to consider individual buildings not as sums of various parts defined by media – the architectural shell on the one hand, stained glass windows and monumental sculpture on the other – but as integrated entities in which the various media resonate with one another to create a visually complex spatial environment, an environment that was activated and made meaningful by the ephemeral sounds, smells, and movements of liturgical rites.[15] Whether explicitly or implicitly, such studies have been informed by theories of aesthetic reception and response, which has shifted analytical focus away from the origins of artistic production and toward the beholder's confrontation with the work of art; in so doing, interpreters have found it essential to consider questions of perspective – *who* was (and is) doing the reading or looking, and under what conditions.[16] In the wake of a concurrent explosion of studies on the history of the human body in the 1990s, this line of analysis has lately grown sensitive to the corporeal nature of perceptual experience and begun to show how the organization of medieval churches and their accoutrements both responded to and demanded certain kinds of physical movements or postures on the part of beholders.[17]

While the emphasis I place on embodied viewing here emerges from these larger tendencies in the Anglo-American literature, it also allies my study of choir screens with two strong, but quite different, currents in German art historical scholarship. The more practical, formalist approach, represented most vigorously by Robert Suckale's writings on sculpture, locates significance in the tensions that arise from a work of art's confrontation with beholders across space and over time, as the contours of a three-dimensional form shift and its volumes project or recede in meaningful ways in conjunction with viewers' movements.[18] The more explicitly theoretical tendency, exemplified in the recent work of Hans Belting and his disciples, posits an inextricable symbiotic interrelationship among images, the media that render them perceptible, and the living bodies that apprehend them – what Belting calls the *Bild-Körper-Medium* matrix.[19] By treating the work of art as a body possessing distinct material and spatial properties along with its formal and structural ones, and by granting positive significance to the space between viewers and works of art – space that, according to medieval theories of optics, was shot through with visual rays conjoining the eye with its material targets[20] – these approaches can add an important dimension to the reception-oriented art history that has found such favor over the past thirty years on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the medieval field in North America, that form of art history has tended to hold two-dimensional images as paradigmatic – manuscript illuminations that invite "reading" across flat surfaces or stained glass compositions that lend themselves to being rendered in schematic, text-based diagrams for easier analysis.[21] When addressing monumental Gothic sculpture programs, it has typically privileged iconographical or narratological aspects, aspects easily conveyable through the flattening medium of photography.[22] The approach I take to both sculpture and architecture, by contrast, allows – indeed requires – the interpreter to give primacy to the *look* of things as they confront embodied beholders in real spatial environments. Readers of this book will therefore find its argument borne along as much by the pictures as by the text; most of the photographs were made by the author on site, and they reproduce their subjects, as far as possible, as they appear from normal standpoints on the ground and in natural lighting conditions.[23] Understanding how the structures work visually and spatially has been my primary objective; the archaeology of the individual examples, their precise chronology of construction, and the archived documentary sources that attest to their uses will be adduced as needed along the way but, for most cases, readers interested in those specifics will be pointed to more technical studies in the notes.

As Gerhard Weilandt's magisterial monograph on the furnishings and ornamentation of the Late Gothic parish church of St. Sebald in Nuremberg has recently demonstrated, an approach that attends carefully to the original spatial context of works of art – and thus requires extensive on-site observations – has the potential to shine dramatically new light on those objects.[24] Yet such an approach necessarily imposes certain limitations on the researcher. This book does not, and cannot, seek to provide a comprehensive survey of medieval choir screens in all their shapes, sizes, and degrees of ornamental complexity across Western Europe. Happily, it does not need to. British scholars from William St. John Hope to Eamon Duffy and Paul Binski have already written with great lucidity and nuance of the Late Medieval screens that still grace many English churches today.[25] Recent work by Dutch art historians Justin Kroesen and Regnerus Steensma has brought welcome attention to the great screens and wall-retables of Spain, the choir lofts of the Netherlands, and the interior accoutrements of village churches throughout northern Europe.[26] The present book, by contrast, concentrates on choir screens in the major cathedrals (as well as in some smaller churches) of northern France and Germany, giving pride of place to those that rose in conjunction with the new Gothic architectural vocabulary in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and that showcased programs of narrative sculpture. Conventional as my geographical focus might appear – particularly at a moment when our view of medieval art is becoming more global – this is the first study to bring together the French and German monuments on equal footing, without relegating one or the other group to *comparanda*. As such, it is happily free from the imperatives of establishing, or reasserting, national primacies and patrimonies that have long governed European scholarship on Gothic art and architecture (and, all too often, still do today).[27]

In contrast to the Gothic choir screen, the *iconostasis* – the icon-bearing wall marking the boundary of the sanctuary in Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox churches – has never been deemed a dispensable part of the ritual environment. Far from it. As a support for the legions of saints who attract the faithful's gazes through painted images, and as a visible marker of the sacred threshold that heightens the mystery and the sacrality of the space beyond, this type of screen has generated a rich and largely celebratory literature.[28] The formal and functional differences between the planar Byzantine screen, with its changing array of painted icons and its veiled points of ingress, and the deeply articulated Gothic screen, with its permanent sculptural embellishments, altars aligned in front of it, and visible openings into the choir, are vast; the former must remain outside the scope of this book.[29] Yet for all their visual divergences, what churches in both Eastern and Western Christendom shared was a common sense that tangible boundary markers could enhance the sacredness of space by limiting physical access to it. They compensated for this form of spatial control by offering *images* of great power and beauty, in stone or in paint, to people remaining outside. By channeling or even halting movement in front of them, both choir screens and iconostases *created spectators*.

Who were those spectators? If, throughout these pages, I tend most often to adopt the standpoint of laypeople, who characteristically experienced the church and its rituals from the nave or aisles, it is not because I assume they were the only, or even the primary, members of society to inhabit areas outside the liturgical choir. In cathedral churches in particular, which were staffed with secular clergy for whom strict enclosure was not an issue, priests and canons naturally formed an equally important audience for the screens because their jobs entailed tending to altars and making processions throughout the whole building. As the Utrecht painting makes clear (Plate I), resident religious communities were also the direct beneficiaries of the screens' multifunctional designs and the observers who confronted their programs of imagery most frequently. Doubtless these men understood the sculptural scenes through the filters of their own interests (and self-interest), which would have lent the iconography different nuances than it would have possessed for laymen and women; other scholars have not been wrong to note the ways in which screens' imagery seems to underscore the clergy's privileged access to the Body of Christ.[30]

But that is only one side of the story. I concentrate chiefly on layfolk here because it is they who have traditionally been cast as the victims of an elitist clergy's exclusionary tactics, and it is therefore their agency as viewers that, ironically, has been suppressed

in scholarly interpretations. It is my contention that the screens that rose in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) were material manifestations of that council's unprecedented concern not only to *control* laypeople but also to *integrate* them more fully into the life of *Mater ecclesia*. No less than the contemporary sermons whose contents and rhetorical style were adapted to the abilities and needs of their intended audiences (materials explored in Chapter 6), the images on choir screens – filled with incidental details drawn from contemporary life and cast with characters representing the demographics of the congregation – offer glimpses into the clergy's expectations about their flocks' interests and into the social ideals they wished to promote. Sometimes, as at Naumburg Cathedral, we witness biblical iconography masking anxieties about the agency of individuals who break with normative social codes; sometimes, as at Havelberg Cathedral, we find strategies of collective demonization that could feed the fire of local hostilities toward religious "others." At Chartres Cathedral and Notre-Dame in Paris, we observe distinctions in social identity among biblical characters being drawn in order to demonstrate the universal appeal of the Christian message, while at Mainz and Bourges we see new and perpetual forms of community, those of the afterlife, overriding the formations that structured life in the earthly present. If in these examples we observe a commingling of figures with whom both laypeople and clergy could have identified, in other programs we discover a spotlight shone on specifically lay activities – at Strasbourg Cathedral, for example, the Corporeal Works of Mercy, pious acts performable only in the world beyond the church doors. As noted earlier, by halting people's movement, screens created spectators; by rendering scenes of not only the present but also the distant past and distant future with enough contemporary, quotidian details that those spectators could relate them to their own conditions and environments, screens also created *subjects*.

My focus on communication rather than conflict, and community rather than hierarchy, differentiates this study from the Marxist and poststructuralist approaches to Gothic art and architecture that fascinated so many of us undertaking graduate study in the mid-1990s: Barbara Abou-El-Haj's studies on the tumultuous construction history of Reims Cathedral, Jane Welch Williams's account of the self-serving clerical propaganda in the windows of the trades at Chartres Cathedral, and, above all, Michael Camille's analysis of "ideology and image-making in medieval art," published in 1989 as *The Gothic Idol*.[31] More strenuously than earlier practitioners of the social history of Gothic art,[32] these authors aimed to expose the ugly underbelly beneath the glowing achievements of medieval culture. Precisely those creations that most ardently proclaimed the oneness of Christian society were revealed to cloak systems of subjugation and violence born of clerical anxieties about "others" and concomitant concerns for self-preservation. My approach to the Gothic screen runs the opposite course, in that I proceed from a type of monument whose imposition of limits and reinforcement of hierarchies are visible at first glance, to show the strategies of integration and harmony that underlie its conception.

This line of thinking took shape years ago, when, in the course of a graduate seminar at Columbia University, I found myself puzzling over a paradox: the fact that choir screens, which scholarship had urged us to see as essentially "anti-pastoral" devices, confronted their lay public with an abundance of sculpted imagery that was not only arresting in its sensual appeal but also technically sophisticated, formally daring, and conceptually innovative. In their frequent infusion of concrete contemporary details into traditional Christian scenes, their experimentation with rendering emotion in characters' faces, and their precocious use of auxiliary figures who engage beholders directly through gazes and gestures, these images surpassed their ostensible justification as "sermons (or bibles) in stone" (as nineteenth-century commentators were wont to call Gothic sculpture programs) or "books of the unlettered" (as their medieval counterparts described all public images of religious content).[33] Like the vernacular literature flourishing in both secular and ecclesiastical courts in the same centuries, studied with exquisite insight by Erich Auerbach long ago, these images embraced gratuitous details as a means of rendering their fictions more vivid and accessible to beholders, and thus impressing them more firmly in consciousness as those viewers returned to the world.[34]

In contrast to the swashbuckling epics that fired up the imaginations of medieval audiences, however,

the fictive worlds displayed on the surfaces of choir screens externalized higher truths, visualizing magnificent realities that were difficult to grasp on a purely conceptual level – the Incarnation of the divine in the person of Jesus, for example, or God's continued accessibility to humanity through rituals. Even as its imagery allowed all viewers to see the sacred in terms of their familiar quotidian surroundings – and, conversely, to see their own surroundings imbued with evidence of the sacred – the choir screen, by delimiting and veiling space, also made them aware of the always difficult nature of grasping the divine. By simultaneously inviting and excluding, revealing and concealing, the Gothic screen functioned in a way that Christian exegetes might have recognized was analogous to sacred writ itself. "Indeed the authority of Scripture," Augustine (d. 430) reflected in his *Confessions*,

> seemed to be more to be revered and more worthy of devoted faith in that it was at once a book that all could read and read easily, and yet preserved the majesty of its mystery in the deepest part of its meaning: for it offers itself to all in the plainest words and the simplest expressions, yet demands the closest attention of the most serious minds. Thus it receives all within its welcoming arms, and at the same time brings a few direct to You by narrow ways: yet these few would be fewer still but for this twofold quality by which it stands so lofty in authority yet draws the multitude to its bosom by its holy lowliness.[35]

Some eight hundred years after Augustine wrote, as Europe's worldly cities were growing and its cathedrals rising, political theorists agreed that it was only through a diversity of members, each playing a distinctive role, that a functioning and cohesive social body could take shape.[36] If "the few" who enjoyed physical access to the "lofty" domain behind the choir screen were typically clerics, "the multitude" to whom the "holy lowliness" of the screen's imagery was specially directed consisted of men and women of diverse social stations that were held, by contemporary commentators, to be fixed and immutable.[37] Although the clerics who financed and directed the creation of choir screens in their cathedrals and collegiate churches were hardly blind to the social variegation of their flocks, as confessional practices and sermon rhetoric affirm, they were also capable of regarding those people as a unified entity defined at once by their membership in the Christian community and by their lack of access to Christianity's sacred truths conveyed in writing.[38]

Medieval literature is replete with clerical complaints about lazy, luxurious, and impious laity and with lay critiques of gluttonous, randy, and ignorant priests.[39] Yet people on each side of this social divide knew they needed the other: layfolk filled the church's coffers and defended it from threatening incursions, while the clergy, no matter what their personal failings, enabled people to access the church's promised salvation. At the heart of the Gothic edifice, the choir screen stood as a mechanism of mediation, monumental and permanent, between those groups. Out of the vast and luminous expanse enveloped by soaring vaults it carved a small, but all the more potent, sliver of space where denizens of the profane realm could meet the sacred – in the Eucharistic host elevated at the public altar, in the great crucifix looming overhead, in the narratives unfolding, in homespun and accessible form, across the screen's stone surface, and in the reminder of a loftier realm, embodied in the richly ornamented high altar that they could glimpse through the "narrow way" of the screen's door – before returning to the world, "not only nourished" by the "plain truths" they saw there but also "shaped by the secret truth" they knew lay beyond.[40]

PART I

The Screen as Structure