

The Medieval Design Process: Group leader notes

The worksheet is designed as a starting point for classroom discussions concerning the medieval design process and the medieval craftsmen involved. The worksheet contains areas of factual information that lead to wider questions. There are no obviously right or wrong answers, and it is hoped that the resulting discussions and debate will lead to students developing a more in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by those designing and creating a major medieval building, and insights into surviving buildings they may visit.

Why are these surviving medieval designs so important?

The medieval master masons who designed most of the cathedrals and churches in England are virtually unknown to us. The names of only a handful of individuals are recorded in the written records. In many cases their work can only be identified by similarities of style and technique. They also left no formal drawn plans behind them - just the templates on the wall and floors. These designs enable us to piece together just how they worked, and tell us a very great deal about the medieval construction process - information that just isn't available elsewhere.

Mason's marks: there are many theories as to exactly why the same mason's marks appear at different time periods and spread out across the country. Until recently it was believed that mason's marks, like heraldry, would pass from father to son. However, there really isn't any evidence to support this theory. It is more likely the result of practicality - there being only so many unique designs that can be created using a limited number of straight lines.

Exercise: give each student between 5 and 8 match sticks, and ask them to use the straight matchsticks to create a unique design. This will be their 'mark'. Get them to copy their design to a piece of paper - and then compare all the marks together. How many look similar to each other? Would members of the group each be able to distinguish the marks of their fellow students?

Window tracery: there are many hundreds of different designs for medieval window tracery, as a brief image search for pictures of medieval churches will demonstrate. Architects describe there as being four main types of late medieval window tracery -

- Early English Tracery
- Geometric Tracery
- Decorated Tracery
- Perpendicular Tracery

Exercise: research and identify examples of each of these types. Further information that the students will need can be found here: <http://www.lookingatbuildings.org.uk/styles/medieval/walls-and-windows/gothic-windows-and-tracery.html>

Logistics: the question of just how many people were involved in the building of a medieval church has no exact answer - as we usually have no clear records that give precise or exact numbers. However, the objective of this question is to stimulate a class discussion on the type and size of the logistics needed to build a church. As well as the trade groups mentioned in the text, other things to consider are -

Transport: How many tonnes of stone would have to be transported from Lincolnshire and France, and how would this be best achieved?

Weather: Building projects in the medieval period tended to take place at certain times of year - from March/April through to September. Discuss why this might be the case. Things to consider include the building materials (lime mortar won't set properly in the cold), and transport conditions.

Research: what might many of the labourers and craftsmen be doing between September and March?



Further resources, including detailed interpretation of medieval church graffiti, can be found on the project website.

www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk