Vaulting Encyclopedia Article

Vaulting

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Vaulting

Vaulting refers to the space created by an arched ceiling. Just as a horse vaults across a barricade, arched roofs literally vault across enclosed spaces and were devised to span far more area than could a simple column and lintel structure. While a vaulted roof can be a dome, domes comprise a class of their own, so a vaulted ceiling usually refers to all other arched ceilings.

Vaults are three-dimensional arched structures and fall into several categories. The simplest is the *barrel* vault, a continuous arch. The *groined* vault consists of two or more *barrel* vaults joined at right angles, and the *ribbed* or *Gothic* vault features pointed arches and decorative ribs.

While vaulting was used in ancient Egypt and the Middle East, it came into wide usage with the Romans, who used the simpler *barrel* vault in drainage systems and developed the *groin* vault for use in buildings. Romanesque columns and ceilings were massive in scale and the space between them small.

The Gothic style that began in the 1100s and continued through the 1500s took vaulting to its peak. The Gothic pointed arch made it possible to take walls and roof to airy heights. Towering Gothic arches were vaulted to create a powerfully spiritual atmosphere in medieval churches.

Vaulting prevailed well into the twentieth century with the construction of churches, courthouses, and monuments. During a Gothic revival between 1870 and 1910, arches and vaults also found their way into residential architecture. American Gothic, with its high roofs and detailed appointments, became a symbol of westward expansion in the United States, but the architecture of the later twentieth century reverted to function and practicality. The Industrial Revolution, two world wars, and an economic depression meant there was little time or money for frills, and the vaulted ceiling and its kindred features have been put aside until the next revival.