

Religious ecstasy

By Brent Gregston

The immense, eternal cathedral of Beauvais



Between the pyramids (145 meters) and the Eiffel Tower (325 meters), mankind's highest structures were Gothic cathedrals. The tallest were built in France, as cities like Amiens, Chartres, Paris and Rouen sought to outdo each other.

The cathedral of Beauvais, dedicated to St. Peter, was the world record holder. It took the prize with a vault of 48 meters and, eventually, a 152-meter tower. But one of the most daring feats in the history of architecture turned out to be a stone house of cards. Part of the vault collapsed and had to be resurrected. The tower, completed in 1567, came tumbling down six years later.

What is left is still impressive to behold. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, the man who restored Notre-Dame, called the Beauvais choir “the Parthenon of French Gothic.” Inside, there

are magnificent stained-glass windows and an astronomical clock acting out the last judgment four times a day.

The cathedral has been recently restored and, after the sun goes down, a multimedia show plays out on the south façade (until September 15). Conceived and directed by Hélène Richard and Jean-Michel Quesne, it is called “Beauvais Cathédrale Infinie.”

The two artists, trained in set design and film production, work under the name Skertzò. Lighting has become an essential part of architecture in France, recognized as an art and a profession. A passion for light is the source of thousands of jobs in the city of Lyon and produces the spectacular Festival of Lights each winter. Skertzò has created multimedia shows for the festival as well as the opening of the Asiatic Games in Qatar, and other French

cathedrals: Amiens, Le Mans and Rouen (the cathedral so famously painted by Monet).

In a 20-minute performance, Skertzò creates a surreal history of the cathedral as it came into being and was partly destroyed. The patterns of bold color on the façade are a reminder that the portals of French cathedrals were once brightly painted. The statues of saints in the portal of Beauvais cathedral are long gone, presumably destroyed in the French Revolution. In their place, Skertzò projects a choir of real people singing sacred and secular medieval music.

“We always listen to what a building has to say,” says Richard. “In this case, we wanted the cathedral itself to be the hero of the story. The image of Phoenix, a kind of eternal Tower of Babel, a building that always aspired to go higher – that’s what inspired us.”