



Unscathed despite the dangers

Monumental decoration

Chartres Cathedral is a rare case indeed, in that it has preserved all of its sculpted and stained glass decoration. Nine sculpted portals are laid out with three on each of the three façades. They give a spectacular educational overview of religious history. The Royal Portal illustrates the technical innovation of the column-statue in the middle of the 12th century, combining support and decoration in a single block of stone. The transept portals were sculpted soon after the year 1200. There are 150 stained glass windows covering a surface area of some 2,500 m². Those in the three bays of the west façade date from the 12th century, as is the case of Notre-Dame de la Belle Verrière in the south ambulatory. Most of the other stained glass windows are from the 13th century. They were very costly to build, with the money coming from donations from guilds, bishops, princes and kings.

The attic space

The history of Chartres Cathedral has been marked by fires. The fire on 4 June 1836 destroyed the forest, in other words the chestnut wood frames dating from the 13th century. When engineer Émile Martin won the reconstruction contract, the choice of a solid, long-lasting fireproof metal frame seemed obvious. The production, transport and assembly took six months. The frame is in the shape of an inverted ship's hull. The very steep slope of the principal rafters* is reminiscent of the pointed arches of Gothic buildings. This metal frame is one of the oldest in France.

* Explanations overleaf.

Glossary

Bellows and flowing tracery: flame-shaped motifs with curves and reverse curves, one symmetrical, the other asymmetrical.
Bourdon: large bell with a lowest sound.
Flying buttress: construction in the shape of an arch that supports the outside of a wall or vault.
Gable: triangular fronton above an opening.
Maze: geometrical path symbolising the complexity of man's path toward salvation.
Moulin, Jean (1899-1943): unifier of the French Résistance movement during World War II.
Principal rafters: oblique sections of a building frame supporting the superstructure under the roof.
Timbre: stationary bell that is hit with a hammer.

Visitor information

Average length of visit: 1 hour
 Guided tours in French.

Gift and book shop

The guide for this monument can be found in the Cathédrales de France collection in the gift and book shop.

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the towers of Chartres Cathedral

“the Acropolis of France”** *

The Gothic transition

Since the 4th century when the first bishop Adventus is mentioned, the cathedral has been rebuilt several times. After the fire in the year 1020, Bishop Fulbert, who was an influential teacher, had the Romanesque cathedral built, to which a new façade was added



The west
façade

in 1134. But, in 1194, a fire destroyed the building, except for the crypt and the façade. Construction on the Gothic cathedral started immediately afterward. It is 130 metres long, and the nave is 36.50 m high and 16 m wide. Its original flooring shows a round maze*. Chartres Cathedral was consecrated in 1260. King Henri IV was crowned in this cathedral on 27 February 1594. Another fire destroyed its roof in 1836.

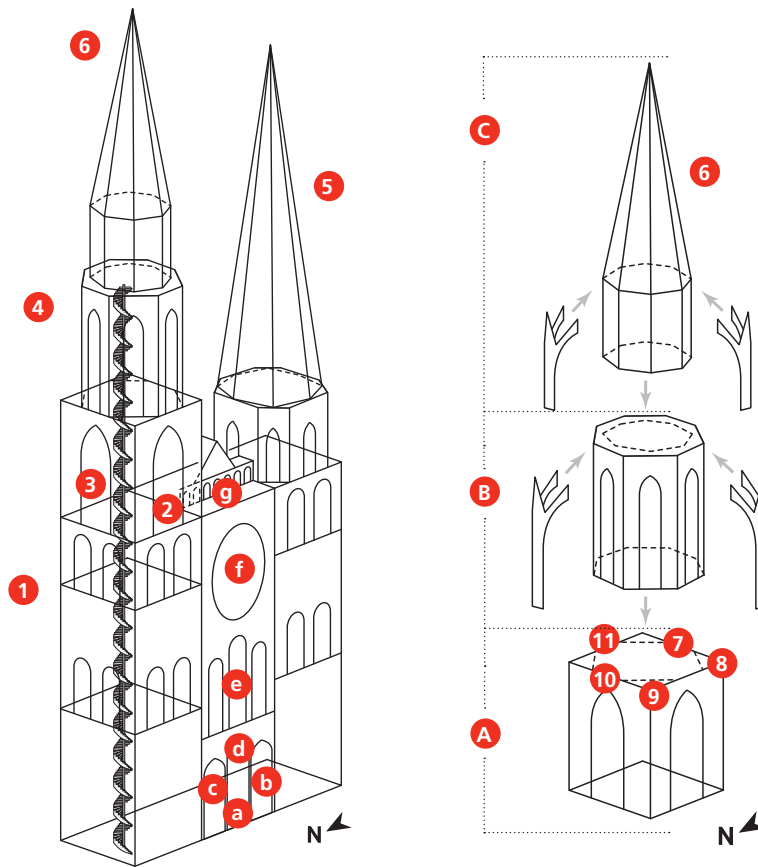
An exemplary cathedral

Chartres Cathedral constitutes an essential step in the evolution of Gothic cathedrals. Begun thirty years after Notre Dame in Paris, it is the forerunner of the gigantism, the verticality and the extreme gutting found in the walls of Reims, Amiens and Beauvais. It has preserved its stained glass windows and monumental sculpted decoration of exceptional quality. It was placed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1979.

* Explanations overleaf.
 ** Quote from Auguste Rodin.

The west façade

- 1 At the base of the roof**, we can see the roofing made up of 11,000 copper plates and covering a surface area of 5,125 m², installed after the fire of 1836. The flying buttresses* are superposed on three levels: the lower ones are unique in that they are connected by columns.
- 2 The bell ringer's room** occupies the fourth level of the tower and is part of the 16th-century construction. In the centre of its impressive vault, the keystone measures 3 metres in diameter. The bell rope hole can still be seen.
- 3 The first belfry** can be seen from the spiral staircase. It holds two of the cathedral's seven bells, including the largest one, the bourdon*, Marie, which weighs 6 tonnes and dates from 1840.
- 4 Around the octagon**, to the east, we can see the angel weathervane atop the chevet. The roofs accentuate the building's Latin cross layout.
- 5 The south tower or "old bell tower"** no longer holds any bells. At a height of 105 metres, it was built in one go starting in 1145. The square base supports an octagonal level and, above that, the eight-sided stone spire which alone measures 47 metres and dates from the 12th century. The transition from the square to the octagon is obtained with openings topped by very sharp gables*.
- 6 The new bell tower** replaced the wooden spire which was struck by lightning in 1506. Jehan de Beauce, a master mason who lived in Vendôme until 1506, was called to Chartres to rebuild the north bell tower. He designed three superposed volumes: the square base on the first level (A), then an octagon (B) supporting the stone spire (C). The octagon holds the second belfry and four bells from 1845. The spire, installed in 1517, rises up to 115 metres. It holds the cathedral's oldest bell, the timbre* dating from 1520. The transition between the octagon and the spire is obtained using a number of gables* and very light flying buttresses.



The fine stone from the valleys of the Seine and the Oise was used to produce the exuberant, detailed sculpted decoration.

- 7 The bays** are made up of a network of stone with complex designs, with bellows* and flowing tracery* characteristic of the flamboyant Gothic style. The frame is sculpted with flowers, foliage and monsters.

Panoramic view over the city

- 8 To the southwest** we can see the Church of Saint Aignan, a bit further on the Church of Saint Pierre, and beyond that on the right a round tower, an old water tower, then further on to the right, the theatre and, in

line with the cathedral, the Church of Sainte Foy. To the right, the former prefecture, headed by Jean Moulin* from 1939 to 1940. In the rear, the former Hôtel des Postes from 1928 houses the Media Library.

- 9 To the northwest** stands the train station from 1934, to the left and over the bridge is "le Compa", the agricultural conservatory.
- 10 To the northeast**, the cathedral overlooks the former Episcopal Quarter. To the left, the half-timbered façades from the 13th century indicate the Loëns cellar, now the Centre International du Vitrail (International Stained-Glass Centre). To the right, the former Saint Charles Seminary in pink brick from the 18th century, then further to the right stands the Episcopal Palace in brick and stone, home to the Musée des Beaux-Arts (Fine Arts Museum).
- 11 Around the spiral staircase**, a very narrow gallery offers an exceptional vantage point over the cathedral and the Church of Saint André from the 12th century, on the banks of the Eure.
- 12 The west façade**, seen from the cathedral square, stands out in the flowing verticality of its lines, produced by the six powerful buttresses and spires rising to over 100 metres. Between the two towers, four levels are superposed horizontally. The first is the level of the three portals (a, b, c). Above this, three bays (e), the largest of which is 11 metres high, the rose window (f) that is 13.50 metres in diameter and the Gallery of the Kings (g) were added in the 13th century. The central portal (a) is dedicated to Christ surrounded by the four symbols of the evangelists, the tetramorph. The two angels holding a crown (d) have given the group of portals the name of "Royal Portal". The one on the right (b) is dedicated to the Madonna and Child, while the one on the left (c) is dedicated to the Ascension.

* Explanations overleaf.