What to know when we go...
Strasbourg: The Bicultural Crossroads of Europe






Strasbourg, with a name that means "city of streets," is the ultimate crossroads. History dates to Roman times, in the 12th century BC, where a Roman garrison established this town along the Rhine River. Over the years it became an important trading location.

The 5th century saw the capture of the city by the Franks, who renamed it Stratisburgum or 'roadside town'. Following the Franco-Prussian War it was annexed by Germany in 1870. Following World War I it became French. During World War II it returned to Germany under Nazi rule and following the war became French again.

After World War II, Winston Churchill called for a union of European nations, with the goal of winning an enduring peace by weaving the economies of France and Germany together. Given that Strasbourg had changed hands between Germany and France so many times, it seemed logical that it be a capital of what would eventually become the European Union. Today, Strasbourg shares administrative responsibilities of the European Parliament (along with Brussels and Luxembourg City).





The delicate Gothic style of Strasbourg Cathedral (begun in 1190, not finished until 1439) is the work of a succession of about 50 master builders.

The cathedral at Strasbourg began, in 1248 as a Romanesque church and the desire was to preserve the integrity and harmony of this earlier style already in place rather than modify it. The Gothic was adapted to work with what was already built.



Take one look at all the relief sculpture over the portals at this main entrance. These Biblical stories and the prophets greeted the visitor – most could not read so the visual imagery was intended to capture the attention and heart of the worshiper with a promise of salvation, redemption, forgiveness and comfort.

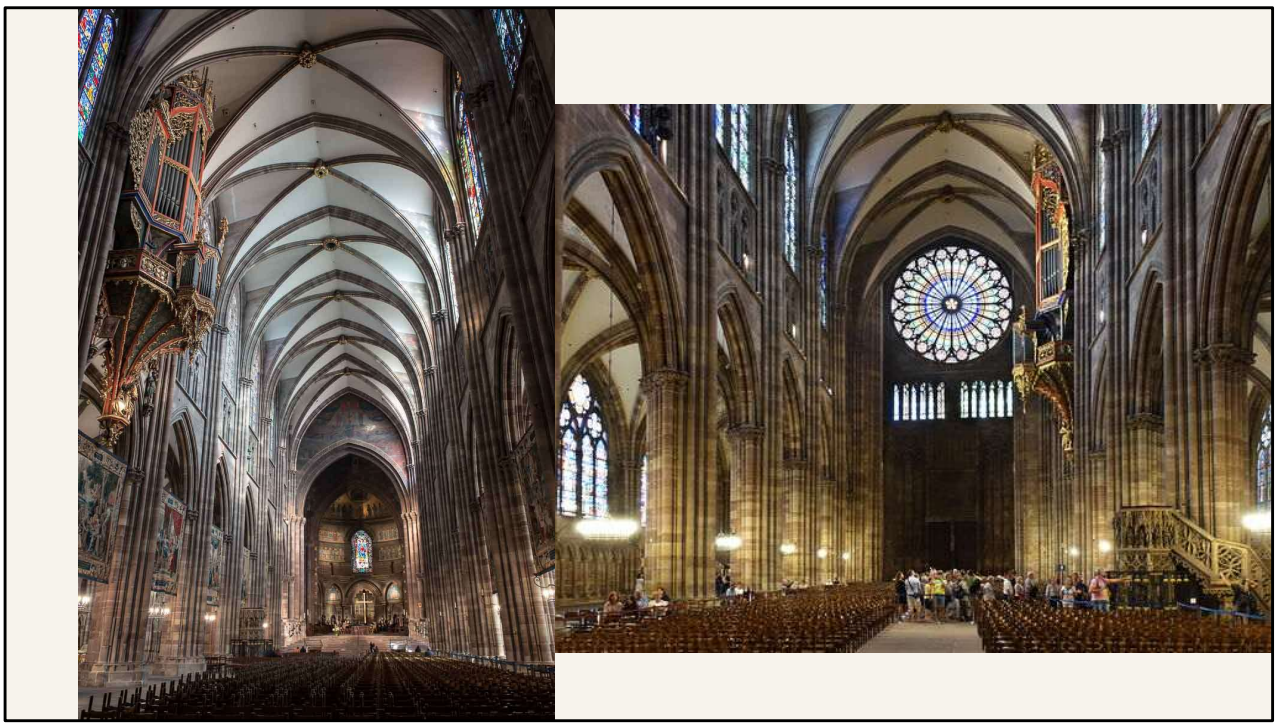


Death of the Virgin, tympanum of left doorway, south transept, Strasbourg Cathedral, Strasbourg, France, ca. 1230.

This is the tympanum of the left doorway of the south transept. It is worth a look since the relief sculpture expresses such profound sorrow through dramatic poses and gestures – and it shows advances in the way they are understanding how to use the semi-circular space.

Note how the 12 apostles gather around the Virgin forming an arc of mourners well suited to the semicircular frame. The sculptor adjusted the heights of the figures to fit the available space – the apostles at the right are shortest and, as many depictions of crowds in the history of art, some of the figures have no legs or feet.

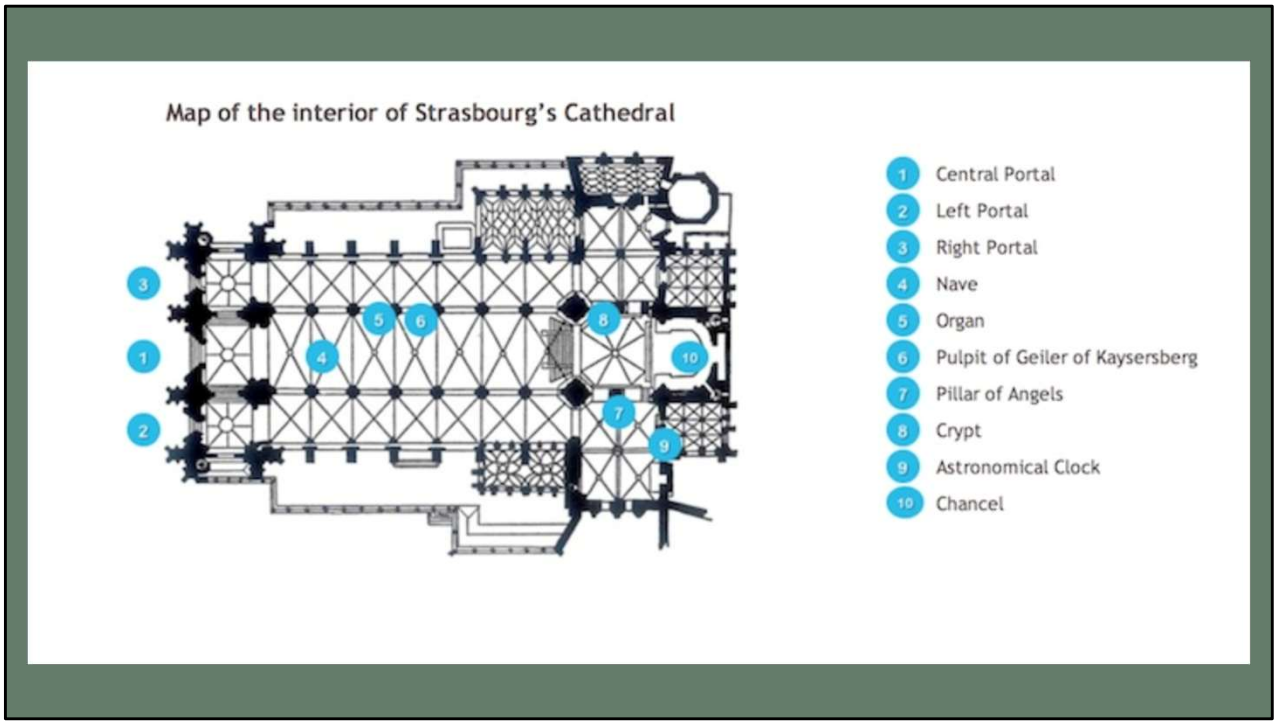
Christ receives his mother Mary's soul (the doll-like figure in his left hand). Mary Magdalene is wringing her hands in grief crouching in front. The sculptor is intent on portraying drama through dramatic pose and by the rippling flow of deeply incised drapery in a very deliberate attempt to stir an emotional response from the observer. He seeks to humanize the figures – to make them appear more natural and this is three hundred years before the Renaissance.



Standing at 466 feet, Strasbourg Cathedral was the world's tallest building from 1647 to 1874 (227 years), when it was surpassed by St. Nikola's Church, Hamburg. Today it is the sixth-tallest church in the world.

An earlier church burned down in the 12th century, and Strasbourg was so wealthy that it rebuilt *très* fancy — with a lacy, innovative design. A matching second tower was planned but was never built out of fear that it would place too much stress on the foundations. The spire dominates the city skyline.

Inside, the marvelous stained glass is the standout — 80 percent is original, surviving from the 12th to 15th centuries. The cathedral's windows were hidden by the French during World War II in southwestern France, then carted to northern Germany by the Nazis, and ultimately saved and returned by the Monuments Men (British and American troops dedicated to returning art to its rightful place after 1945).



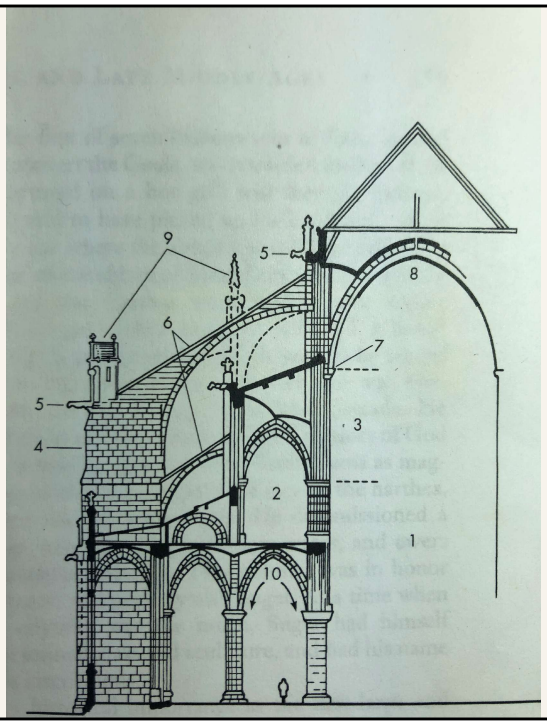
Cathedrals have been part of Christianity from the time of Constantine (306-337). The design and architectural styles have varied from one historical era to another. But in one important respect they are all alike: all cathedrals display a distinctive geometric regularity in their design reflecting an effort to achieve a rational, harmonious, and proportional result. Every part of the building is linked logically, harmoniously and proportionally to the whole.

Once the size of the crossing square is decided, that determines the component size of every other element. In other words, all the principled elements of a design could be automatically determined without additional math calculation.

And, all the features – the pointed arches, flying buttresses, ribbed vaults, soaring ceilings, stained glass windows, pinnacles and turrets – were all developed in service of the desire to flood the interior space with as much light as possible. – the heavenly, spiritual light.

The principal features of a Gothic cathedral:

1. Nave
2. Gallery/Triforium
3. Clerestory stained glass windows*
4. Buttress
5. Gargoyle
6. Flying buttresses *
7. Architectural rib *
8. Vault*
9. Pinnacles
10. Pointed arch*



Grande Ile
UNESCO World Heritage Site
Petite France



The Grande Île was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988. At the time, it was noted that the Grande Île is "an old quarter that exemplifies medieval cities".

Strasbourg was the first city to have its entire city center listed as a World Heritage Site.