

A symbol at the heart of a world conflict

On Saturday 19 October 1914, the cathedral was hit by shellfire. The wooden scaffolding against the north tower and the 15th-century roof timbers were burned. The reddened stone still bears traces of this fire. The cathedral was continuously bombarded for four years, hit by more than 300 shells from the German army occupying forts on the outskirts of the city. Its robust design and the perfection of its assembly saved it from collapse. After the war, plans were made to convert the mutilated cathedral into a memorial.

The restoration

Despite the partial collapse of its vaults, the decision was taken to restore the cathedral. Restorations have continued non-stop ever since, with the last major phase of works, those on the statuary, beginning in 1967. In 2011, as the north tower restoration was completed, the cathedral celebrated its eighth centenary. New stained glass windows designed by the artist Imi Knoebel were installed.

Glossary

Assumption: the taking of the body of the Virgin Mary up to heaven by the angels, after her death.

Belfry: wooden framework supporting the bells.

Bourdon: large bell or its sound.

Canopy: triangular pediment above an opening.

Channel: main gutter.

Chapter of canons: assembly of priests of the cathedral church.

Extrados: external section of the vaults.

John Davison Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960): American businessman and philanthropist.

Project manager: architect.

Tympanum: above a door, triangular space framed by concentric arches known as coving.

Practical information

Average length of visit: 1 hour.

We also recommend a visit to the Tau Palace, where the history of the cathedral and the coronation of French kings are evoked.

Guided tours in French.

Adapted tours for disabled visitors, booking required.



Gift and book shop

A guide to this monument is available in the "Cathédrales de France" collection in the gift and bookshop.

Centre des monuments nationaux
Tours de la cathédrale de Reims
2 place du Cardinal Luçon
51000 Reims
tél. 03 26 47 81 79

www.monuments-nationaux.fr

Towers and roof framework of Notre-Dame de Reims cathedral

High-relief architecture

Fast and successful building work

Several cathedral churches succeeded each other between the 4th and 12th century on the site of the current monument, until fire ravaged the town in the early 13th century.



The cathedral in 1625. Engraving by Nicolas de Son

The first stone of the new building was laid on 6 May 1211. The sculpting of the statues began at the same time, but work on the façade did not commence until 1252. The cathedral, funded

by the chapter*, was in large part constructed in just 60 years. Despite having four different project managers**, its unity is remarkable. The towers, 80 metres high, were only completed in 1416 and 1452; the spires were never added due to a lack of funds.

Victim of the Great War

During the First World War, the roof of the building, previously replaced in 1481, were destroyed by fire. The lead roof melted and dripped through the gargoyles**. The architect Henri Deneux (1874-1969) restored the monument and rebuilt the roof in reinforced concrete. In 1938, the cathedral was reopened for services; it has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1991.

* See back of leaflet for explanations.

** Originals can be seen at the Tau Palace.



The harmonic façade

The façade is divided vertically into three sections, with three portals, the largest of which is in the centre. The two lateral sections are surmounted by symmetrical towers. Horizontally, it has four levels: the portals, the clerestory adjacent to the flying buttresses of the nave, the upper gallery or gallery of kings, and finally the belfries* housing the bells.

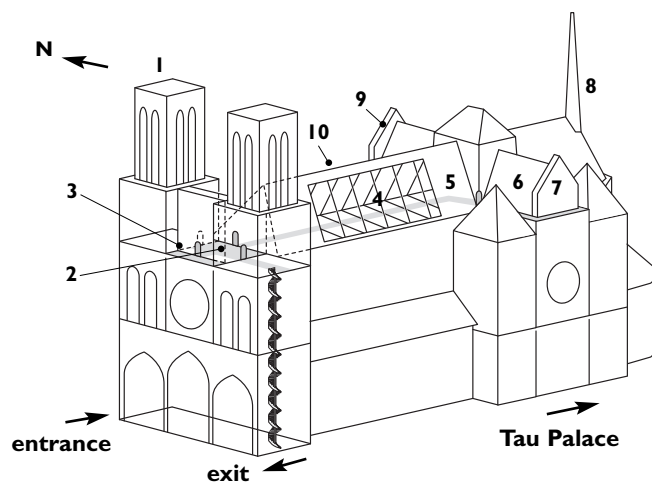
It is distinguished by the absence of spires on the towers and by its portals with protruding porches and openwork tympanums*, requiring the statues to be placed on top of the canopies* which surmount them. The sculptures of each portal comply with a precise iconographic plan: the left portal with the Passion of Christ; the right portal with the Apocalypse and the Last Judgement; and the central portal with the life and glorification of the Virgin Mary, to whom the church is dedicated.

I The north tower

This is the part of the building most affected by the fire of 1914, since the tower was at the time surrounded by wooden scaffolding, the flames from which caused the sculpted stones to shatter under the intense heat. The ascent has 249 steps, often sculpted in threes from a single block of stone.

The upper gallery

2 The terrace situated between the two towers gives us the chance to mention the two bourdon* bells: Charlotte (12 tons), donated by Cardinal Charles de Lorraine in 1570, and Marie (7.5 tons). Nearby, on the north tower terrace, are displayed a few vast statues, removed during the restoration work, along with a bell damaged in the fire.



3 The gallery of kings contains gigantic statues, 4.6 metres tall and weighing almost 8 tons.

The central scene depicts the Baptism of Clovis, flanked by Saint Clotilde to the left and bishop Saint Remi to the right. This gallery illustrates the close relationship of trust between ecclesiastical and royal powers.

The roof

4 The roof framework or “forest” was rebuilt by Henri Deneux thanks to donations from J. D. Rockefeller Jr*. Of innovative design, it was inspired by Renaissance lumber frames, in the style of Philibert Delorme. Made from reinforced concrete, it is now fireproof.

5 The transept crossing demonstrates the skilled assembly of roof framework sections and offers a glimpse of the extradors* of the cathedral’s vaults. Weighing some 1200 tons, the framework supports 400 tons of lead roofing. The visit continues outside with a tour of the roofs from the channels*.

6 The south transept provides a rear view of the towers and the series of flying buttresses. The ridge piece, which protects the upper part of the framework, is decorated with gilded fleurs-de-lys measuring 1.35 metres in height, alternating with trefoils.

7 The gable of the southern arm of the transept is decorated with an Assumption*. Its terrace offers a view over the roofs of the Tau Palace. The bell set positioned at the crossing of the transept is a copy of the 18th century original and plays several melodies inspired by Gregorian chants.

8 The angel spire dominates the entire edifice from its height of 87 metres. The original angel is kept at the Tau Palace, the former bishop’s palace.

9 The gable of the northern arm of the transept is devoted to the Annunciation. The two rampant sides are decorated with 15th century sculptures, including a wild sow suckling its young.

10 The view of the chapter house* courtyard and of the treasury (now the tourist information centre) allows us to imagine the district once reserved for canons.

Exit by passing back under the roof frame towards the south tower stairs.