



St Mary's Church

Bergen's best-preserved medieval church



DEN NORSKE KIRKE
Bergen domkirke menighet

Welcome to St Mary's Church



Tota spes nostra est in morte domini

All our Hope is in the Death of the Lord

No matter who you are or where you're from, welcome to St Mary's Church! You have come to a holy and unique place. While the city outside has changed, this church has been a place where people have come to pray and to worship God for centuries.

Every year, people from all over the world visit St Mary's to experience its long history, beautiful interior and active parish life. We invite you to tour this sacred place, and we hope you leave feeling renewed and with a sense of peace.

History



St Mary's Church is one of the oldest buildings in use in Bergen and has a rich assortment of unique art. It was most likely built between 1130 and 1170. We don't know with certainty who built it, but judging by the decorative details, the stonemasons may have been inspired by architecture in Northern Italy and England.

The church was twice ravaged by fire, in 1198 and 1248. The building is unusually well preserved and has been in continuous use since the late Middle Ages. Before the major restoration between 2010 and 2015, the church had last been restored in the 1860s. At that time, the building's appearance was returned to how it had looked in the Middle Ages.

The interior, however, was made much less ostentatious to conform to Protestant sentiments.

In the High Middle Ages, St Mary's Church was the main church for the citizens of Bergen. Important city government institutions had connections to the church and the churchyard. In 1408 it became the official church for German merchants based in Bergen and remained so until 1766, when it became the parish church for the city's German congregation. It did not become an ordinary Norwegian parish church until 1874. Today, it plays a central role in Bergen as a church, cultural heritage site and concert venue.

Architecture

St Mary's is a basilica, i.e. the body of the church is divided into a tall nave and two lower side aisles with separate roofs. This is a feature borrowed from medieval cathedrals. It is one of few parish churches in Norway with two towers in its west-facing façade. The towers are original but had to be repaired after the fire in 1248. The choir was probably extended at some point, most likely after the 1248 fire.



Altarpiece



The oldest treasure in the church is the altarpiece or reredos, dating from the 15th century. It was made in Northern Germany, probably Lübeck. The screen consists of a central panel and two narrower side panels. Mary, holding the infant Jesus, is depicted in the middle “clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars”. On her right we find St Olav, with St Anthony below. On her left stands St Catherine with her sword and wheel, with St Dorothy below. On the side panels we see all the Apostles, excluding Judas, but with the addition of Paul. All bear their symbols and carry the Book of the Gospel. The hinged side panels can be opened and closed. The cabinet is closed only during Advent and Lent. The closed panels reveal paintings depicting the life of Jesus. The crucifix on top of the altarpiece was added in 1682 and carries the inscription “All our hope is in the death of the Lord” (in Latin).

The pulpit

The pulpit is unique in Norway. It was given to the church in 1676 by a group of prominent German merchants at Bryggen. The use of tortoiseshell and lacquer work are exotic to us and may suggest a connection to East Asia, possibly through the Netherlands. The pulpit and the staircase are decorated with women with various attributes representing the main Christian virtues. These are penitence with a pelican, prudence with a snake, the naked truth, chastity with two turtle doves, patience with a lamb, hope with a dove and the remains of an anchor, faith with a book and cross, and love with two children.

Half spheres above and below the pulpit symbolise the northern and southern hemispheres. Both are decorated with symbolic animals and astrological signs. Around the lower hemisphere are five small cherubs that appear to carry the pulpit, surrounded by gold leaf and fruit garlands. The pulpit underwent major restoration in 1952-1956 and again in 2010-2015.



The portals



The church has three portals in addition to the west portal between the towers. Each of these represents a different phase in the development of portal architecture in the Middle Ages. The oldest is the portal in the northern side aisle, which is simple in style and can be traced back to Roman times.

In the northern wall, we find the most common portal type of the Middle Ages, with its three recessed rows of arches. On the southern side is the late Romanesque grand portal, whose style is typical of 13th-century cathedral portals. Here, each row of arches has its own texture. On either side of the portal and on the pillars, we find ornamental carvings of plants and animals, which are difficult to place in any particular stylistic context. The portal seems to be the result of a blend of influences from different regions.



The choir

The choir walls are decorated with 13 life-size statues of the Apostles and St Paul. Two further statues of Moses and John the Baptist can be found at the back of the church. The statues date from 1634 and include symbols that represent the individuals' personal attributes.

On the church floor are the gravestones of German sea captains, merchants and clergy of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. These stones were collected from all parts of the church and relaid in the choir in the 1930s. By the south wall is a choir stall dating from 1589 and a bible from Nuremberg, printed in 1692.

Epitaphs



Many of the 23 paintings in St Mary's Church are epitaphs – memorials to persons with a connection to the church (priests, merchants, aldermen). There were previously many more but most were removed during the 1860s restoration. On the walls of the nave are faint traces of medieval frescos from the 15th century, which were uncovered in the 1930s.



They are not easy to interpret today, but the Ascension is depicted on the northern wall and on the southern wall we can just see the miracle of Pentecost. On the wall above the choir arch, we see remnants of a depiction of the Day of Judgement, with devils and a large church bell. A crucifix from the 16th century is well preserved above the choir arch.

The organ

The organ was built by Josef Weimbs Orgelbau of Hellenthal in north-west Germany. It has 31 stops (38 ranks), two manuals and pedal. The organ façade was designed by the Swedish architect Ulf Oldæus. The instrument was built in 2014-15 and was inaugurated during the reconsecration of the church on 21 June 2015. The sound is influenced by various German baroque organs.





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