

## Listen to the Story of Holy Trinity Abbey in Vendôme

# History of the abbey, from the 11th century to the present day

## The first Romanesque church

The building of the **minster** was as rapid (some thirty years) as it was ambitious. All that remains of this huge construction (70 metres) laid out **in the shape of a Latin Cross** in 1060-70 are the transept walls.

Other features show the embellishment of the abbey in the 12th century e.g. the Window of Our Lady (currently in the Lady Chapel), the **frescoes** in the **chapter house** and the bell tower.

At the beginning of the 13th century, Holy Trinity Abbey wanted to gain a reputation as a stopover, close to St. Martin's tomb in Tours, on the pilgrims' road to Santiago de Compostela. The transept was then given coloured **vaulting** and decorative carvings.

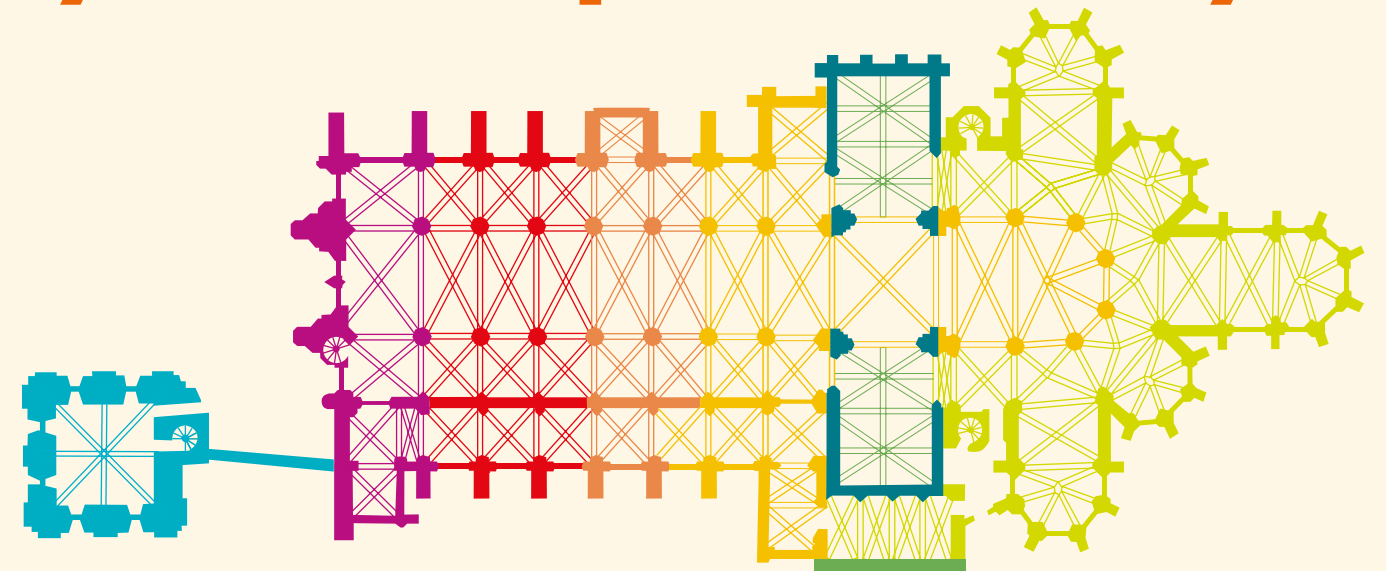
## The new Gothic construction

In 1271, Abbot Renaud IV of Villedieu launched the construction of a new **minster** to replace the Romanesque church. Circa 1280, the lower sections of the chancel were given a vaulted roof and windows.

Circa 1320, plans to demolish the transept were scrapped. At the transept crossing a **vaulted roof** was built and decorative features were added. From 1320-25, the two **spans in the nave**, closest to the transept were rebuilt; they were completed in 1357.

The Hundred Years' War interrupted the rebuilding project. However, at the end of the 14th century, it did not prevent the restoration of the rafters in the radiating chapels and above the Flamboyant Gothic windows in the nave. At the same time, work was carried out in the **abbey buildings (chapter house)**.

A text from 1501 mentioned the need for the work to progress more quickly. Jean Texier alias Jean de Beauce completed the Gothic church with the West Front (and the first **span**) circa 1498-1508.



## From the monks of St. Maur to the Rochambeau Army District

In the 17th century, **Maurist** Benedictines moved into the abbey. The South wing of the **cloister** is the most outstanding example of their work.

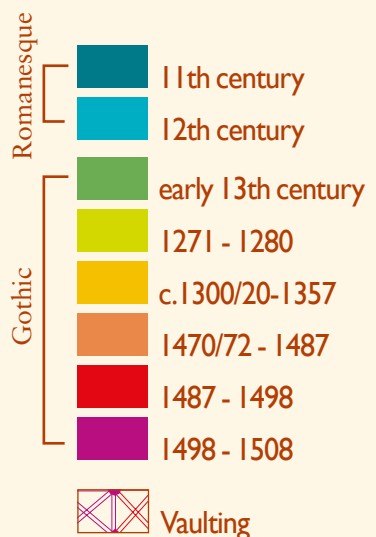
When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, the monks left the abbey.

In 1803, the old monastery was taken over by the Army. An indoor riding ring, stables and barracks were then added to this major cavalry depot, which took the name Rochambeau District in 1886. The 1914-18 war decimated the troops of the 20e Chasseurs à cheval (20th Mounted Rifles) but the military use of the buildings continued when they were taken over by the gendarmerie.

Nowadays, the buildings surrounding the old **cloister** house the museum, music school and a number of cultural associations. The cloister garth is used for free concerts in the summer.



The Holy Trinity Abbey at the 17th century in 3D version © CIAP MG Design.



*“The luxuriant ornamentation on the central doorway immediately catches the attention. Then the eye follows the gable above it to lose itself in the traceried network of the upper bay and continue upwards to the central gable end, built with an austerity that seems to reflect the thinness of the structure and echo the mighty abutments of the flying buttresses.”*

Isabelle Isnard  
“L’Abbatiale de la Trinité de Vendôme”  
Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007

### Further information about the abbey

Sightseeing tours are arranged by the Vendôme District heritage department (Communauté du pays de Vendôme). Visitors accompanied by a guide can access areas that are otherwise closed to the public.

For information, contact the Tourist Office : 02 54 77 05 07

### Centre d'interprétation de l'architecture et du patrimoine (CIAP)

At the museum, discover the abbey on 3D tactile screens at the CIAP.

### Practical Information Vendôme Museum

Cloister, Holy Trinity Abbey – Tel : 02 54 89 44 50  
Open daily except Tuesdays, May 1st, December 25th, January 1st and Sundays from November to the end of March  
From April to end of October  
10:00 to 12:00 am and 2:00 to 6:00 pm  
From November to end of March  
10:00 to 12:00 am and 1:30 to 5:30 pm

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## Sightseeing in the abbey

### The Romanesque granaries (A)

Stretching over a distance of 100 metres, the “granaries” marked the western boundary of the abbey. They housed grain stores, bedrooms, cellars, stables and a prison. Now, they have been turned into houses and shops. Some delightful twinned Romanesque windows (12th century) can still be seen at the corner of Rue de l’abbaye.

### The cloister (B)

The **abbey buildings** retained their original functions until the French Revolution. On the East side were the dorter and **chapter house**, to the South the refectory, the monks’ cells and the novices’ cells and on the West side the guest accommodation. Only the North gallery flanking the church was saved from the demolition planned by the Army in 1907. A fragrance garden enhances the cloister garth, thanks to the enhancement of Vendôme’s gardens that won it “4 flowers” in the national floral competition.

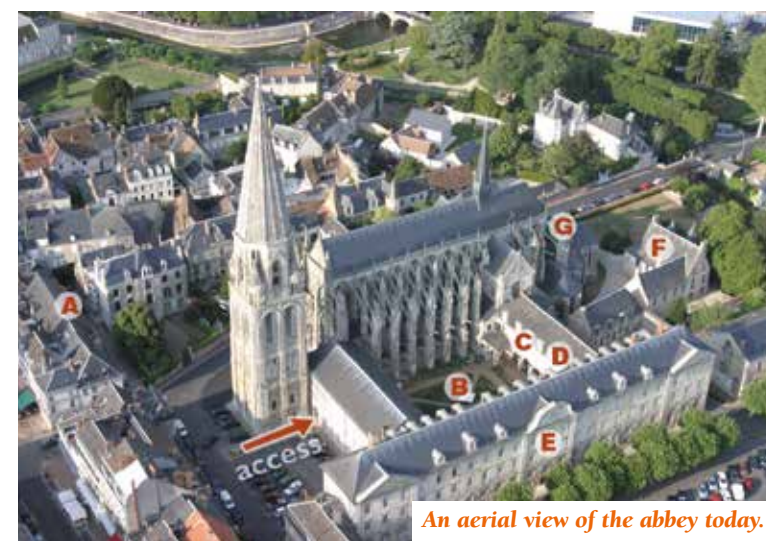
### The chapter house (c)

In 1972, 12th-century **frescoes** were discovered behind the 14th-century walls. This explains why only fragments of the paintings survive and why the colours are so fresh. The most outstanding scene represents the “Miraculous Catch” that occurred after the Christ’s Resurrection (John XXI, 1-14).

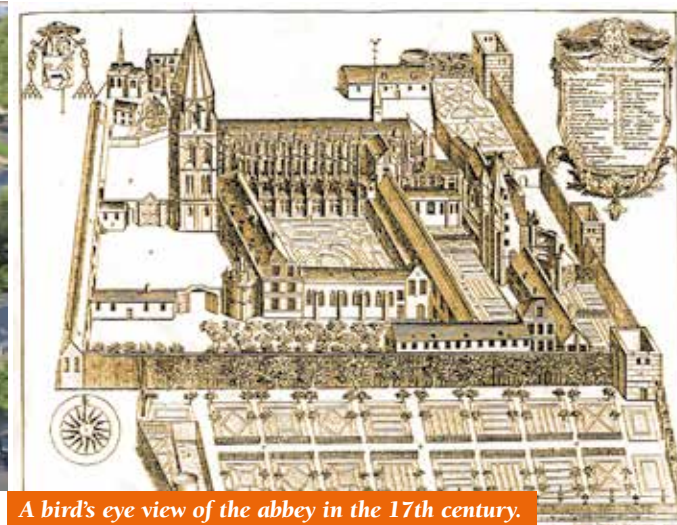


The “Miraculous Catch” is the most dazzling of the frescoes in the chapter house.

© François Langlé



An aerial view of the abbey today.



A bird's eye view of the abbey in the 17th century.

### The museum (D)

Housed in the **abbey buildings**, the museum has extensive, and varied, collections. Among the most remarkable items are Queen Marie Antoinette’s harp, painted panels from the Château de Richelieu, the table used in Babeuf’s trial and faïence pieces made in Rouen and Nevers. Ethnology, geology and archaeology are also explored in the museum.

### The South wing (E)

Designed by Pierre d’Orbacq, the façade was built between 1732 and 1742. Benedictine and **Maurist** symbols (“PAX” and a lamb) decorate this huge façade based on the then popular principle of symmetry.

### The abbot’s lodgings (F)

The Cardinal-Abbot had his lodgings close to the chevet, (east end) of the minster, away from the communal dorters. All that remains of the 15th-century buildings is a part of the abbot’s lodgings.

### The minster chevet (G)

Rebuilt between 1271 and 1320 taking the Romanesque church as its base, this Radiating Gothic chevet gives an indication of the five radiating chapels around the 20-metre tall chancel.



The proportions of the minster chevet are beautifully balanced.



### History in brief...

#### A fairytale legend

One night, in 1032, Geoffroy Martel, Count of Vendôme and his wife Agnes saw three stars fall from the sky into a meadow at the foot of the castle. The Bishop of Chartres advised them to found an abbey dedicated to the Holy Trinity. It was built by Benedictine monks from Marmoutier, near Tours.

### On the square

#### The West Front

The West Front of the **minster** is considered to be one of the most significant examples of Flamboyant Gothic architecture. It is attributed to Jean Texier alias Jean de Beauce who, at the start of the 16th century, was master mason at the cathedral in Chartres.

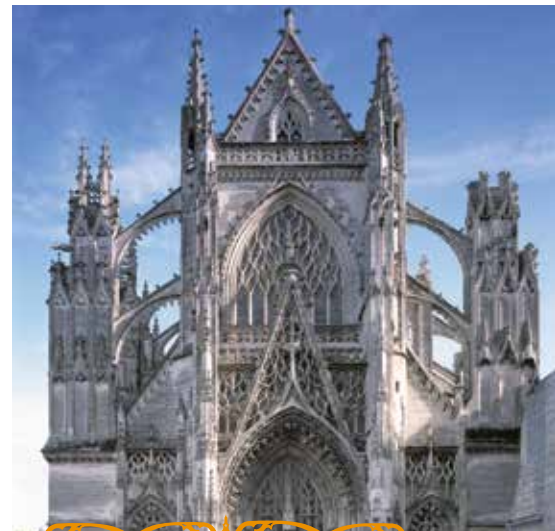
The building combines dynamism and verticality and its tripartite composition is designed to draw the eye upwards and towards the centre. Successive features, finely carved and traceried, take advantage of the gradually thinning walls (from 4.60 metres at the base to 50 cms at the top of the **gable**).

#### The bell tower

The tower dates from the first half of the 12th century, making it a contemporary of the south bell tower on Chartres Cathedral. It is outstanding for the exceptionally ornate decorative carving.

Its seemingly isolated position can be explained by the fact that it was once linked to the original church by a small construction known as the **Galilee porch** now no longer in existence.

Inside, the wooden **belfry** is supported by skilfully assembled stone arches.



© François Laugnie

The Holy Trinity façade is considered as one of the most significant examples of Gothic architecture.

#### The nave

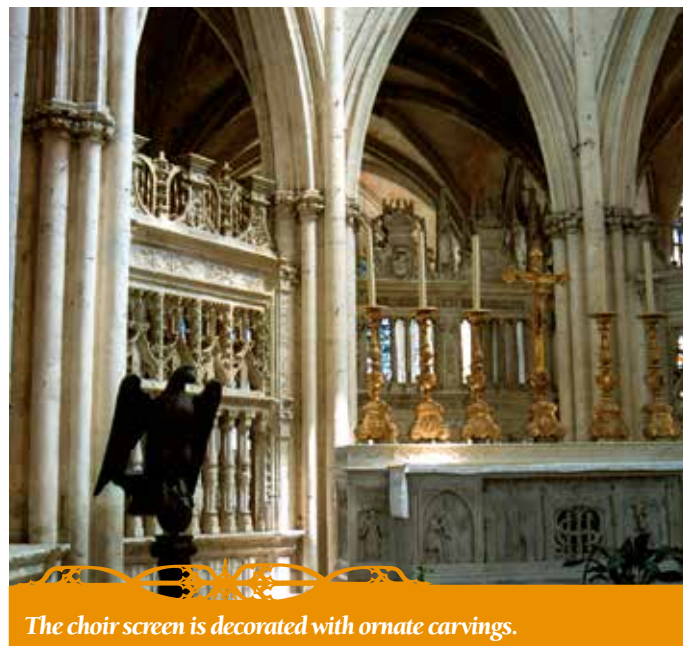
The interior of the **minster** is steeped in a sense of uniformity despite five centuries of work.

From the 13th to early 16th centuries, the Gothic design retained the concept of a three-level elevation i.e. large arches, a traceried **triforium** and clerestory. When work began again after the Hundred Years' War, there was a visible change in the décor. The bundles of colonnettes round the pillars were shaped like **prisms** and **mouchettes** replaced the **quadrilobes** in the hand rails on the **triforium**.



The Romanesque bell tower.

# Sightseeing tour of the minster



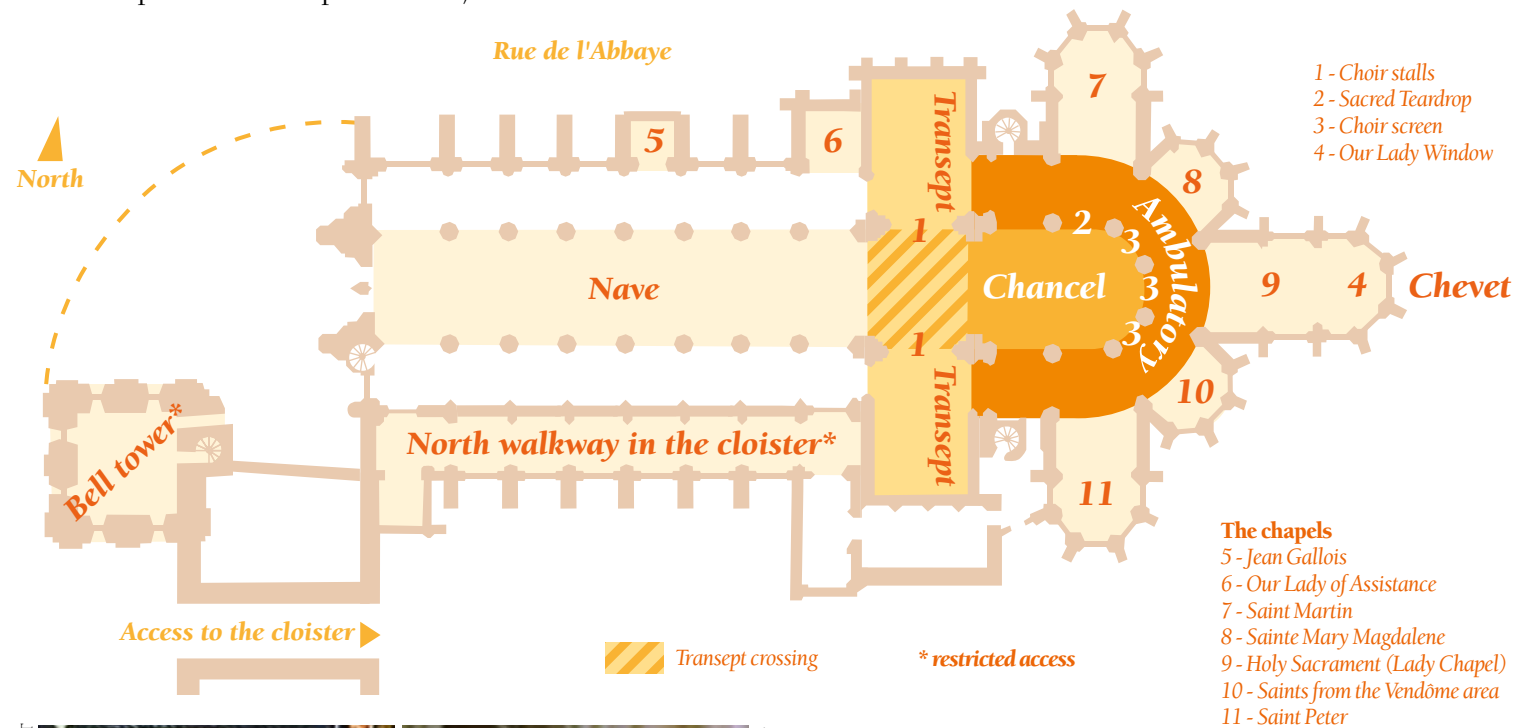
The choir screen is decorated with ornate carvings.

© Animation du Patrimoine de la CPV

#### The transept

The surviving Romanesque transept still bears traces of 13th and 14th-century painting. The yellow ochre and white tones combine with the reds, greens and blues of the **narrative keystones**, that are a feature of Gothic architecture in the Anjou region.

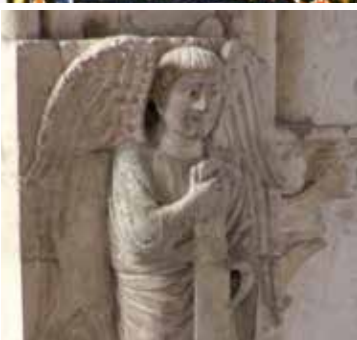
At the transept crossing, four statues decorate the 11th-century Romanesque pillars. On the North side are Mary and the Angel Gabriel (the Annunciation) and on the south side St. Eutropius (his relics are in Vendôme and Saintes) and St. Peter (the abbey had a special relationship with Rome).



A monk copyist (Vendôme library). © IRHT



The Dove of the Trinity by Gaudij (2000).



Angel Gabriel and the Annunciation.



Cardinals and monks from Holy Trinity Abbey.

#### The chancel

In this sacred area originally reserved for the monks, the well-balanced three-level elevation gives the chancel an aesthetically uniform appearance.

#### The choir stalls

The choir stalls were commissioned by Abbot Louis de Crevant (1487-1522) and completed by his successor, Antoine de Crevant (1522-1539). Topped by angel musicians, they have carved **misericords** depicting picturesque scenes of everyday life and the labours of the months. Only one-half of the original seats have survived after they were sold off during the Revolution and reinstalled in 1838.



The misericords on the choir stalls are a truculent illustration of the labours of the months.

### History in brief...

#### A powerful abbey

In the 11th century, the abbot in charge of Holy Trinity held the title of Cardinal. This direct link between the abbey and the Pope ensured that the abbey remained independent until the French Revolution.

The 12th-century bell tower symbolised the importance of the abbey, which had up to one hundred monks during the abbacy of Geoffrey I (1093-1132). During the **Investiture Controversy**, the abbot actively supported Pope Urban II who thanked him by coming to stay in Vendôme for 11 days in 1096.

### The Chapel of the Holy Sacrament

#### The Romanesque stained-glass Window of Our Lady (1125)

Sitting in majesty on a throne of wisdom, the Virgin Mary, wearing a crown, is holding the Infant Jesus. The very pale blue of the Virgin Mary's dress highlights its V-shaped pleats. This is an outstanding window, representative of art in the Loire Valley in the 12th century. Its excellence is obvious in the **mandorla** with its precious decoration, the fine graphic lines of the faces, the extreme elongation of the bodies and the attitudes of the angels flanking the scene and apparently dancing.

Its liturgical importance explains why the window was retained in the church when it was rebuilt in the Gothic period. Since 1956, the window has been in the Lady Chapel flanked by stained-glass windows by Jean-Jacques Grüber.



The stained-glass Window of Our Lady is both an exceptional piece of work and a fine example of 12th-century craftsmanship in the Loire Valley.

### History in brief...

#### A national trial during the Revolution

In 1796, Vendôme was home to the High Court hearing evidence relating to the "**Conspiracy of the Equals**". After a trial lasting for seven months, Gracchus Babeuf and Augustin Darhé were executed and their supporters sentenced to deportation.

On the square in front of the abbey, a commemorative plaque indicates the door (now walled up) through which they left the building for the last time.



A close-up of the choir screen.

## Glossary

**Abbey buildings** : in a Benedictine abbey, they are built on the south side of the church, around the cloister.

**Belfry** : the wooden structure inside a bell tower carrying the bells.

**Chapter house** : a room opening onto the cloister garth, often on the east side, in which the monks would gather every morning for a reading from the Rule of St. Benedict. By extension, it is the place where the chapter of monks met.

**Choir stalls** : the wooden seats reserved for the monks.

**Cloister** : from the Latin "claustrum" meaning enclosure, it is an area in the heart of the abbey used by the monks for meditation.

**Conspiracy of Equals** : the Directoire accused the Equals of conspiracy because they wanted the 1793 Constitution to be applied, with its principle of Equality.

**Frescoes** : wall paintings done a fresco i.e. on fresh rendering.

**Gable** : often a triangular construction above an opening (door or window).

**Gable end** : the upper triangular section of the wall of a building against which the slopes of the roof are placed.

**Galilee porch** : a porch built of stone and projecting from the West Front.

**Investiture Controversy** : in the 11th and 12th centuries, it opposed the Popes and the German Emperors, each seeking the power to name (invest) abbots and bishops.

**Keystone** : the final stone completing the construction of a vaulted roof. It is located in the centre and at the top of the vaulting. A narrative keystone tells a story.

**Latin Cross layout** : a plan in the shape of the Cross on which Christ died.

**Mandorla** : an ornamental almond-shaped decoration..

**Maurist** : a monk from the Congregation of St. Maur, which included most of the Benedictine monasteries in France between the 17th and 18th centuries.

**Minster** : a church belonging to an abbey.

**Misericord** : a piece of wood under the seat of a choir stall that monks can lean against when the seat is raised.

**Mouchette** : an ornamental flame-shaped motif.

**Prismatic** : an angular moulding shaped like a prism.

**Quadrilobe** : an ornamental motif consisting of four rounded leaves.

**Span** : a space in the church between two pillars or two arches positioned one opposite the other.

**Triforium** : a narrow gallery halfway up the wall in a Gothic church.

**Vaulting** : stonework roofing the interior of the church.