

Our Lady of the Assumption

Behind a facade typical of the Renaissance, Our Lady of Villeneuve is one of the finest gothic buildings in the Yonne. Its construction started in the first quarter of the XIII century, around 1215. This church is dedicated to the Virgin as were many of that period, a time when the devotion to Mary became widespread. It is 71m in length, 19m in width and the height to the vault is 22m. The central nave has no transepts and is a fine example of mature Gothic architecture. Even though the construction of the bays was spread out over the XIII and XIV centuries, the overall result is one of unity, for each of the master masons respected the plan of the original architects and the design of the bays. It is only the decorations (the capitals and mouldings of the pillars) which allow the stages of construction to be dated.

The lower section of the Renaissance façade is inspired by the ancient model of the triumphal arch with three doors set in the arch (1550). The upper section of the façade, above the balustrade, was designed by Jean Chéreau, the architect from Joigny. His design is preserved in the Carnot Gallery/Museum. The work was not completed until 1597 the date engraved at the top of the gable. However, the two monumental towers designed by Chéreau, which should have been 40 m in height, were never finished after the town was taken and burnt in 1594. The central door, much wider than the others, is divided by a pier whose elegant dais is adorned with a statue of the Virgin carrying the Christ Child to whom St. John the Baptist offers a basket of flowers. The other statues were destroyed when the "Marseillais" passed by in 1793.

The Gothic influence of Champagne is evident in the interior where the great windows everywhere reduce the number of blind walls to a minimum. There are 41 of them, 23 in the nave, which diffuse light into the church. The main vertical features and the columns, relieved by the passage above the arcades of the side aisles, are of the Burgundy school. However, the circulation gallery, built in the same way at the level of the windows of the side aisles and the ambulatory, are of the Champagne school. The only addition which breaks with this unified style is the arrangement of the choir undertaken between 1756 and 1759 by the architect and sculptor Montpellier with its high altar in marble with angels and corbels, and especially with its rococo decoration of the two palm-tree pillars topped by a triangle with brown and golden rays, symbolising God in Trinity. In the nave only the four great windows to the North of the choir have their original glass of the XIII century preserved showing Christ and his disciples on a light grey background. In the nave can be seen the pulpit, remodelled in the XVIII century with its carved wood from the first half of the XVI century.

The great stained glass windows on the axis of the choir, dedicated to the glory of the Virgin Mary are recent, dating from 1901. They replaced the original windows which had been severely damaged by hail in 1805 and partly hidden by a large XVIII century roof which covered the side aisles and the apse.

The organ is installed on the opposite side of the façade which was built around 1737 by a local craftsman, le sieur Gaumont. The instrument itself is the work of Tribout, finished in the XIX century by Gadault and restored in 1998. It has 27 stops.

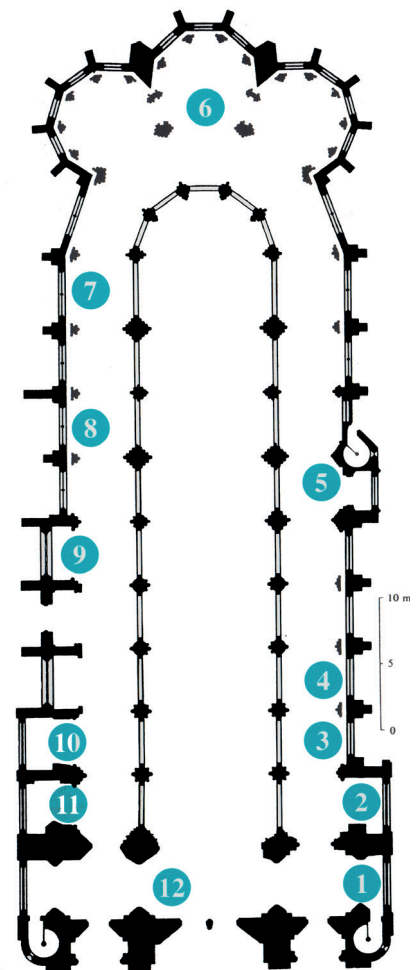
1 The first chapel by the south east side aisle is dedicated to Our Lady of the Virtues. It owes this dedication to the statue of the Virgin with the Bird, which is said to be miraculous. The statue comes from the old Valprofonde Gate or Gate of Our Lady where it was set in the XVII century. It dates from the first half of the XIV century with the curve of the hip characteristic of the Virgins of that epoch. It most likely comes from the Royal Workshops of the Ile de France. The construction of the chapel dates back to the decade of 1550, as attested by the enclosing low wall decorated with the H of Henri II and the interlaced crescents which may be those of the house of Orleans to which he belonged, or perhaps those of Diane de Poitiers. The stained glass window dates from the same period. It shows the life of the Virgin in three scenes. At the bottom, we see her birth in the house of Joachim and Anne; above is her Dormition at the end of her earthly life, and still higher, her Assumption. The double medallion above the lancet arches shows her crowning. The interiors represented and the clothing of the people are those of that time, the XVI century.

In the depiction of the Dormition a figure can be seen in the left hand panel sitting on a bench wearing a red coat with yellow sleeves, holding a book in his hands and wearing spectacles, a deliberate anachronism. He represents a doctor of the Church, a guarantor of the Church's Tradition of the Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin. This feast, which is the patronal feast of the church, is celebrated on 15th August.

2 The second chapel, by the southern side aisle, also dates from around 1550. It was used by the Brotherhood of St. Nicholas to which all those who worked on the river belonged. A rule of the Brotherhood, dating from 1576, stipulated that each "master fisher" should contribute 60 sols paris for its upkeep. The Brotherhood was re-founded in 1820 after the Revolution and lasted until the Second Empire. The decoration of the end chancel evokes the Brotherhood, showing anchors, oars and boat hooks in bas relief. They also surround the boat, representing the nave, in the sculpture around the door. A similar decoration is painted on the pillar in the chapel on the right hand side. The incomplete stained glass window of the 2nd quarter of the XVI century shows five scenes from the life of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors, and the miraculous draft of fishes.

In the South side aisle, there are also several funeral stones of local priests and notables of the XIV and XVI centuries, reset a century ago.

3 The matching window in the third bay shows a Pieta of the beginning of the XVI century which replaced the central scene of a Crucifixion of 1529 of which only two panels remain, to the right and the left. One of them bears an effigy of the Provost of Villeneuve, Jean Dindelle, who donated this piece.



4 The fourth bay has a decorative window from the XIV century in light grey and silvery yellow. In the lancet arches to the left and right are depicted St. Mary Magdalen and St. Catherine in niches with damasked backgrounds (2nd half of the XIV century). In the fifth bay there remain some fragments of a stained glass Last Judgement of around 1540 attributed to Jean Cousin, the artist from Sens. Unfortunately, the fragments have been mixed up before being re-set and the whole completed with little expertise. Christ is shown surrounded by a rainbow in the tympanum. St. John is at the top right, and the Virgin, St. Peter, the archangel Michael and a group of prelates are shown as well.

5 Beneath the bell tower beside the side door one of the pillars of the seventh bay bears a XIII century basin for holy water carved into the column. Its bowl was covered with an elegant dais evoking the military architecture of the Crusades. It is now in a very poor state.

6 The ambulatory, decorated with blind bays with slender columns topped with ogives, or full arches, takes us to the three radial chapels of the chevet. They are linked by elliptical bays. In each of them can be seen to the right of the altar double piscinas above a torus surrounding a trefoil arch with a bouquet of leaves where the lobes meet. The work is of high quality.

The stained glass windows are from the XIX century, copying the style of the XIII century. The first of these apse chapels was once dedicated to St. Vincent, the deacon-martyr of Saragossa. His name sounds in French (vinsang) like "wine blood", hence he became the patron of winemakers whose feast on 22nd January, in the depths of winter, was once a great occasion for popular rejoicing.

The central chapel, where the Holy Sacrament is preserved, is dedicated to the Virgin and decorated with three large statues from the School of Troyes of the XVIII century: Our Lady of Victories, St. Peter and St. Paul. Two fine XVII century reliquaries in gilded wood are exposed behind the altar.

Returning towards the Northern side aisle, note the huge picture of the Good Samaritan above the Sacristy, which was donated by Mme. de Chateaubriand, the wife of the famous writer.

7 In the next bay there is a stained glass picture of the Tree of Jesse dating from the first quarter of the XVI century in the style of Troyes. Unfortunately it is incomplete, and was heavily restored in the XVII and XX centuries. Panels representing David, the Prophets and the Sibyls surround the family tree of the House of David.

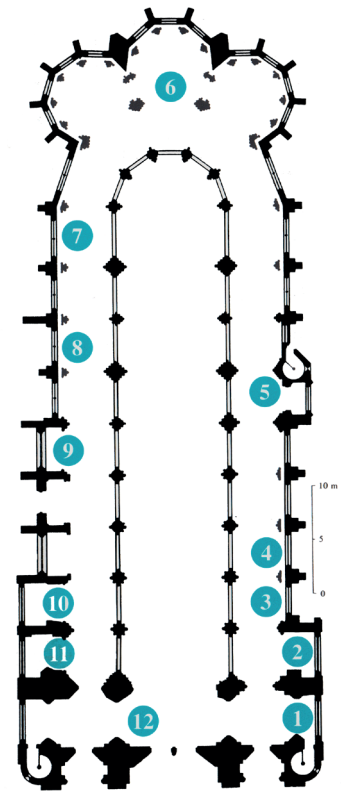
8 Behind the choir organ (1898) there is a plaque in black marble set into the wall which is to the memory of Abbé Etienne Nicolas Pierret (1759-1821) who was curate (1781) then rector (1785) of this church until his death. The street of the Priests, which runs along the South side of the church, is named after him.

9 The first chapel by the North side aisle, going back towards the East, is dedicated to St. Louis. Above the altar, a tapestry of the mid XVIII century shows the saintly king in adoration before Christ's Crown of Thorns which he bought from the Venetians. It shows him at the moment he received at Villeneuve l'Archevêque in 1239. On the opposite wall is an XVIII picture showing St. Jerome. On the low side wall there is a XV century stone sculpture of Christ in bonds (Ecce homo).

10 After passing the old baptismal font of the XV century we come to the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, which preserves behind its low wall a sculpture of the laying in the tomb. In the centre is a gothic Christ in lime wood, which came from the Abbaye de Dilo in the Pays d'Othe. The realism of the crucified one, his members stiff and his abdomen swollen are combined with the expressiveness of his face. The figures in stone of the XVI century surround him. Note the baroque style of the two holy women and the face of Nicodemus. The chapel also contains a gothic chest and two painted panels. One of them shows the Descent from the Cross from the Spanish School of the XVII century; the other, a Virgin and Child of the XVI century. It is inspired by a painting of Adrian Isenbrand of Flanders. It is a work remarkable for its execution and for the intensity of the link between mother and child.

11 The fourth chapel of the Northern side aisle, dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, is noteworthy for its hanging keystones, corbels and dais all in carved stone of the XV and XVI centuries. It contains several polychrome statues: the Virgin, St. John the Baptist and St. Anne teaching. The last chapel, which is closed to visitors, contains a statue of St. Roch (1574) who was once invoked to protect the flocks. There are also several pictures hanging on the pillars at the end of the church; an Adoration of the Shepherds by Prix de Rome Ménageot, and a Madeleine by Cazes which came from the former castle of Prince Xavier de Saxe at Chaumot.

12 Before leaving the church, take a look at the tombstone beneath the organ which was re-set there in the XIX century. In spite of the wear and tear of time, one can still see, on one side and the other of the great cross (XIV century?) the drawings of a square, a compass and two gloves. These were the marks of the master masons, and one may suppose that this stone covered the grave of one of the master builders of Our Lady of Villeneuve.



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Original text Jean-Luc Dauphin ©
Les Amis du Vieux-Villeneuve

