

# THE CHOIR STALLS



The choir stalls, 1522/23.  
North side



Artisan, end of the south stall



Head of a cleric, stall end south side

## The choir stalls

The choir stalls are among Berne Cathedral's finest fittings. Inscriptions show that they were completed in 1523-24, thus originating from the years immediately before the Reformation (1528), when great enthusiasm regarding the construction of the Cathedral, as well as other places in Berne, prevailed. The choir vault also dates from the same period (completed in 1517), as well as the hangings depicting the life of St. Vincent, patron saint of the Cathedral (now in the Historical Museum of Berne). The politician and many-sided artist Niklaus Manuel directed the work (he is the author of the floral ornamental painting of the choir vault), and the joiner and carver Jacob Ruess from Schaffhausen and his journeyman Heini Seewagen executed the valuable oak joinery and carvings. The north (gospel) side of the choir shows a series of busts of the Apostles, and the south (epistle) side has an identical configuration of the prophets. The stall ends depict biblical scenes, while the seats are decorated by figures with witty and ironical portrayals of episodes from the everyday life of the social stations.

The choir stalls are an interesting stylistic departure, being the only part of the fittings and construction elements of the Cathedral to have been designed entirely in the then fashionable style of the (Lombard) Renaissance and partially decorated with grotesques. Manuel and Ruess, who took part in a military campaign in Upper Italy, evidently spent time during the campaign looking at works of art: the pilasters and the blind vaults which decorate the lunettes above the figures on the back walls allude to the then modern models of the recently completed churches by Bramante in Milan, in particular the Santa Maria presso San Satiro. Motives from prints contemporary at the time were also be taken as models.

This stylistic autonomy of the stalls is all the more striking when we consider that even the later parts of the Cathedral were designed in accordance with the long since out-dated late Gothic ensemble. But the exceptional character also emphasises the secular, as well as the artistic, importance of the stalls: in 1484 the parish of Berne purchased its ecclesiastical privileges for the Teutonic Order and founded the Collegiate Chapter, a community of clerics who stood at the head of the church administration. The choir stalls were the symbolic centre of the Collegiate Chapter, which stipulated that the Cathedral was to be conceived as a collegiate church at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Text: Christoph Schläppi, Berne; illustrations: machs na, Ein Führer zum Berner Münster, Christoph Schläppi, Bernhard Schlup, Berne, 1993

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