

THE MAIN DOOR



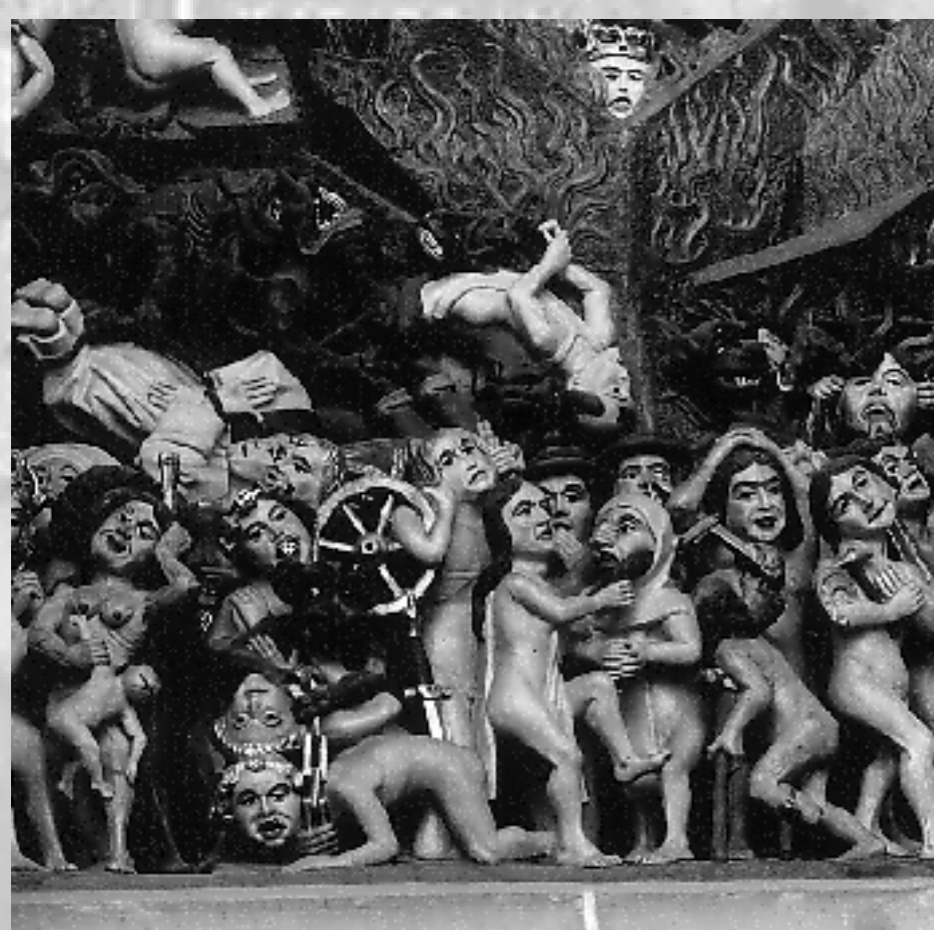
The gates of heaven



The Archangel Michael



Detail from the procession of the blessed



Detail from the procession of the damned

The main door porch

Whereas visitors enter the building via the side doors and the Gerbern Chapel, the Great West Door with its porch has always been the main door of the Cathedral. Following an old tradition, the porch consists primarily of a portrayal of the Last Judgement, accompanied by other biblical scenes and metaphors, thereby presenting the faithful with a drastic reminder of the consequences of their way of life.

The programmatic design of the Last Judgement

Christ as the Judge of the World, throning at the apex of the top archivolt, is flanked by the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and the Twelve Apostles. The middle archivolt bears the figures of eight prophets with inscription-bearing plaques and banderoles, and the inner one shows five angels with the instruments of Christ's torture. The main theme, the Last Judgement, is portrayed on the tympanum, announced by trumpet-playing angels on either side of the traceried rose window. The Archangel Michael with his scales and sword dominates the centre of the scene, to his right (the viewer's left) the blessed are being led to the golden gates of heaven to be crowned by an angel, with martyrs and figures from the Old testament ranged in heaven above them. The damned are shown on the archangel's left accompanied by graphic portrayals of their torments.

Originally, there was a statue of the Virgin beneath the tympanum; it was replaced by a figure of Justice (Daniel Heintz (I), 1575), accompanied by two angels, and below them two craftsmen holding a scroll bearing the date 1421, the year the cornerstone of the Cathedral was laid. The jambs depict the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. The programmatic design is completed by the bosses depicting the Dove of the Holy Ghost, the seven then known planets standing for the days of the week, the symbols of the four Evangelists, the nine choirs of angels and four large Bernese coats of arms representing the city of Berne's self-esteem.

The two paintings on the side walls portray the Annunciation (north wall) and the Fall (south wall).

Later alterations

Surprisingly enough, the main door survived the destruction brought about by the Reformation with little damage, probably due largely to the recognised value of the portal; but its depiction of themes that were equally as important to the new faith and its critical attitude to church dignitaries of the old faith probably also played a part. Over the centuries, however, the portal has been ravaged by moisture and air pollution that have necessitated the repainting of the architectural elements and statues. The most recent restoration was carried out in 1964-91, when all the free-standing figures were replaced by copies and the originals taken to the Historical Museum of Berne. All the original stone architectural elements and the tympanum were restored, and the last repainting in 1913/14 was retouched. The copies of the statues were painted in accordance with the originals, the wall paintings were cleaned, and those near the ashlar jointings retouched and revarnished.

The significance of the main door

The main door of Berne Cathedral is the last Gothic church portal with a comprehensive visual programme. The portal figures by Erhart Küng and the sculptors of his workshop are as distinguished as any of the most outstanding achievements of late Gothic sculpture, and they graphically illustrate the intensity and profusion of religious themes communicated by pictorial and sculptural works in the late Middle Ages.

Text: Dr. Bernhard Furrer; photos: Denkmalpflege der Stadt Bern

Further information: Gesamtkirchgemeinde Bern / Münsterkirchgemeinde /
Bernener Münster-Stiftung
Information stand Gerbern Chapel Tel. 031 312 04 62