



St. Johns's Church

A short guide to the church



From its location just behind the Town Hall, one of Magdeburg's great architectural gems dominates the landscape: St John's Church. The city's oldest parish church still contains traces of the family of Otto von Guericke, the inventor of the vacuum pump. The Reformer Martin Luther was also one of those to preach here.

WINDOWS BY MAX UHLIG: FLAMES, VINES, DRAMA

Fiery colours, blazing light, and high drama. When he designed the six windows for the nave and the seven for the choir of St John's Church between 2014 and 2017, the acclaimed artist Max Uhlig created an epoch-making artwork of destruction and new beginnings which radiates far beyond the city on the River Elbe. In terms of ambition and spatial dimension, the windows constitute one of the major works of their type in Germany since the Second World War. The windows were commissioned by the Magdeburg Board of Trustees for the Reconstruction of St John's Church. Uhlig's design is based on two constantly recurring motifs which underlie much of his work: vegetation and landscape appear in a highly abstract form. In the windows on the South side of the nave, Uhlig's composition uses tones ranging from deep earth to vibrant yellow and green, permeated with flaming red. In contrast, the grapevines whose tendrils climb the windows in the choir are uniformly black. Onlookers are invited to succumb to a sense of fascination and bring their own interpretation to the images. Yet in the vibrant fiery hues of the landscape, one can also perceive the flames which destroyed Magdeburg on several occasions in the past. Similarly, the stylised vines are rampant, symbolising new life. For St John's Church, it is a more than appropriate work: because of the sermon preached there by Martin Luther on 26 June 1524 in the early days of the Reformation, it too is a witness in stone which stands inexorably for renewal and change.

MAX UHLIG

Born 1937 in Dresden | 1951 – 54 apprentice calligrapher | 1955 – 60 studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, Dresden, under Hans-Theo Richter and Max Schwimmer | 1961 – 63 master student at the German Academy of Arts in Berlin under Hans-Theo Richter | between 1964 and 1995 freelance work (working stays from 1971 in Mecklenburg, the Erzgebirge and elsewhere; from 1991 – 2010 in southern France) | 1995 – 2002 Chair at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden | 1996 founder member of the Saxon Academy of the Arts in Dresden | 1999 portrait of Gerhard Schröder for the State Chancellery in Hanover | 2005 working symposium in China | 2007 major exhibitions in Beijing and at the Ningbo Museum of Art.

The works of Max Uhlig feature in numerous collections and museums in Germany and around the globe. Uhlig has won many awards and prizes for his artistic work. His style is classified as non-conformist; he does not follow trends, and his refusal to compromise has enabled him to develop his own unmistakable signature style.

HISTORY

The history of St John's Church can be traced back to the year 941. The two West towers were built between 1207 and 1238 in the aftermath of the major town fire of 1188, creating for the first time the twin-tower façade which was later to be typical of Magdeburg's parish churches. When Magdeburg was destroyed in 1631, its church was reduced to ash and rubble along with the rest of the town. It was left without a successor until 1670. A particularly important feature of the church's interior was the baroque pulpit completed by Tobias Wilhelmi in 1669, which unfortunately fell victim to the air-raids on Magdeburg in 1944 and 1945. Only the base of the pulpit has survived. Following the Second World War, the badly damaged St John's Church served as a memorial. It was not until 46 years after its destruction that rebuilding work began. St John's Church reopened to the public in 1999 and has made a name for itself as an unusual concert, festival and conference venue.

- **941** – An 'ecclesia plebeia' (parish church) is mentioned as existing on the current site of St John's Church.
- **1015** – For the first time in Germany, reference is made to a 'merchant's church' or 'ecclesia mercatorum'.
- **1131** – A new church is constructed as a three-aisle Romanesque basilica.
- **1170** – The church is put under the patronage of the Monastery of Our Lady and given the name 'Johannis evangelistae'.
- **1188** – Rebuilt after the town fire as a cruciform three-aisle basilica
- **1208 to 1238** – The twin-tower façade is constructed.
- **Mid-14th century** – An octagonal sacristy is built in the Northeast corner of the church.
- **15th century** – The basilica is rebuilt as a three-aisle Gothic hall church with six bays.
- **After 1425** – The Late Gothic West porch is added. By now, the church is the town's main parish and town hall church.
- **26 June 1524** – Dr Martin Luther preaches in St John's Church. The town converts to Protestantism.
- **10 May 1631** – The troops of the Catholic League under Field Marshal

Johann Tserclaes, Count of Tilly, storm the town of Magdeburg. St John's Church is destroyed.

- **1670** – The church is consecrated after the rebuilding work is completed.
- **2 July 1686** – Otto von Guericke is laid to rest in the Alemann-Guericke family tomb.
- **1695** – Consecration of the baroque organ by master organ builder Arp Schnitger of Hamburg
- **28 September 1944 and 16 January 1945** – The church is destroyed during the major allied bombing raids.
- **1957** – The North tower is rebuilt.
- **1968** – The church becomes the property of the City Council.
- **1 May 1980** – The South tower opens as an observation tower.
- **6 January 1991** – Founding of the Board of Trustees for the Reconstruction of St John's Church
- **2 October 1999** – Ceremony marking the church's reconstruction
- **12 May 2004** – The South spire is completed.
- **15 January 2008** – Renovation of the belfry in the North tower begins.
- **31 October 2008** – After more than sixty years, the bells ring out once again. The Repentance Bell and the Festival Bell are more than 350 years old.
- **June 2013 – September 2020** – The 14 Late Gothic church windows are redesigned by the Dresden artist Professor Max Uhlig. Because of their dimensions and the techniques used, this series of glass paintings is of national importance. The work was funded exclusively from grants and donations.

OUR TIP: A PANORAMIC VIEW FROM THE SOUTH TOWER

A particular highlight is the impressive panoramic view over the state capital from the 52 m high viewing platform on the South tower. There are 277 steps to the top!



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YOUR TOUR

1. FOYER

- 1.1. Stone coats-of-arms of the City of Magdeburg
- 1.2. Coats-of-arms of the von Guericke family: both sculpted by the Magdeburg master Tobias Wilhelmi and donated by Otto von Guericke in 1674.
- 1.3. The stairs lead to the Otto von Guericke memorial, the ancient family tomb of the Alemanns and von Guericke. Otto von Guericke (1602 – 1686), the mayor of Magdeburg who led the city's negotiations in Münster which led to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, was famous for his hemisphere experiments, which remain popular today, and by which he proved the existence of a vacuum.
- 1.4. The epitaph of Leberecht von Guericke, the grandson of Otto von Guericke.

2. MAIN HALL

- The three-aisled nave of St John's Church forms the main hall; seminar and multi-purpose rooms occupy the bays in the north aisle.
- 2.1. Towards the end of the Second World War, the second-largest baroque organ by master organ builder Arp Schnitger of Hamburg with no fewer than sixty registers was located at the West front. It was consecrated in 1695. The organ front and decorative figures were by Tobias Wilhelmi. Schnitger was commissioned on the recommendation of the von Guericke family in Hamburg. The excellent quality of the organ resulted in St John's Church fulfilling the role of the town's centre of church music from the late 17th century.
 - 2.2. The windows: the muted colours of the windows in the choir are in strong contrast to the vibrancy of those in the South wall. The former are in grisaille, with figurative grapevines creeping and clambering ever upward. In the stained glass on the South side, a multitude of riveting landscape scenes reach giddy heights in fire and earth tones.
 - 2.3. In the Southeast corner is the entrance to the Romanesque crypt. Excavations have revealed traces of the 12th century Romanesque church.
 - 2.4. Near the choir on the East side are six surviving epitaphs from the baroque period of St John's Church.

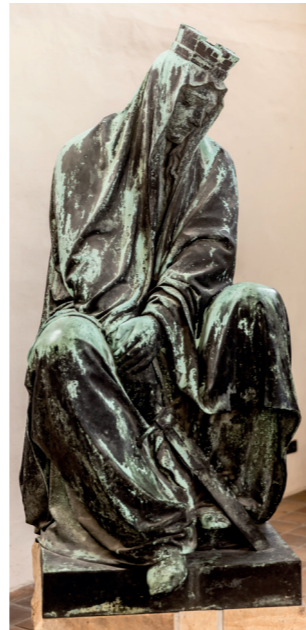
- 2.5. The pulpit base of the richly decorated baroque pulpit created by Tobias Wilhelmi is all that remains

3. SACRISTY

- The sacristy was built in the mid-14th century with a vaulted ceiling as a Late Gothic octagonal structure of equal length and breadth.
- 3.1. It houses fragments of an epitaph salvaged from the ruins of St John's Church.

4. WEST PORCH

- The Late Gothic porch dates from the 15th century.
- 4.1. 'Magdeburg in mourning' (bronze sculpture): designed by Ernst Rietschel to accompany the Luther memorial in Worms, this figure was purchased in 1906 by the Magdeburg industrialist Eugen Polte and gifted to the City of Magdeburg. The sculpture was the only artwork from the former Market Church of St John to survive the 1944 and 1945 aerial bombardments of the 2nd World War completely unscathed.
 - 4.2. Two baroque epitaphs can be seen; one on the North and one on the South wall of the West porch.
 - 4.3. Entrance to the accessible South tower. 277 steps lead up to a viewing platform. The baroque cupola was completed between 1672 and 1675.



In 1686, Otto von Guericke – one of the most important figures in German science and the father of experimental physics, who demonstrated the existence of a vacuum and invented the air pump – was laid to rest in St John's Church. He was also a cultivated diplomat and mayor of Magdeburg, who represented the city during the negotiations leading up to the Peace of Westphalia. The coats-of-arms of the von Guericke family and of the Old Town of Magdeburg have survived in the church.



In 1524, a young Dr Martin Luther (1483 – 1546), a professor at the University of Wittenberg, preached a sermon 'On the True and False Religion' at St John's Church. It proved such a success that the city later turned Protestant. The "forge of thought" (Denkschmiede) which was St John's Church was very influential in encouraging Germany to adopt the Reformation.

The Martin Luther memorial in front of the church was sculpted by Emil Hundrieser in 1886.

5. EXTERIOR

- 5.1. The memorial to Martin Luther was sculpted by Emil Hundrieser in 1886. It commemorates the sermon delivered in St John's Church by Martin Luther on 26 June 1524, which proved decisive for Magdeburg's decision to support the Reformation.
- 5.2. Bronze door by the Magdeburg artist Heinrich Apel with depictions of 'War' and 'Peace' (1983). The sculptures commemorate the two occasions on which Magdeburg was destroyed: in 1631 during the Thirty Years' War and in 1945 during the Second World War.

GROUND PLAN

