

The people of Ulm give everything for their ideal

But does it have to be the tallest tower of all time? Why not! The idea apparently crystallized a few years after the start of construction. To begin with, it was still just fine ink strokes on parchment but they had sketched out a giant that was supposed to put everything that has gone before it in the shade.

Unfortunately, however, human passion often exceeds its knowledge of stability. This would be highlighted in a disastrous fashion generations later.

For many decades, the construction site in the heart of Ulm determined the pulse of the city. Under the direction of the master masons and master builders (the Münsterbauhütte), the workforce continued to hammer and graft away, saw timber and sweated. The people of Ulm not only parted with money but also with objects of all kinds. Whether it was a suit of armour, roof tiles or wood shavings – people gave it for an idea that was bigger than themselves.

As a reward for their daring, the tower grew to a height of 70 metres. While building work continued, services were already being held in the church. Soft sunlight streamed in through the stained glass windows. It was distributed through the geometric shapes that had an effect throughout the entire structure and was a reference to a higher, divine order.



A detail from the oldest known drawing of the tower which is kept in the city archives of Ulm.



The minster before its expansion

Deep cracks appear

During a sermon of all things, on a Sunday in 1492, a fateful event befell the worshippers. Two blocks of stones came away from the tower's arched ceiling and crashed to the floor. People ran out in panic, afraid that everything would collapse on them. Luckily that did not happen and nobody was hurt. Nevertheless, the shock became a turning point.

In a frightening way, it clearly showed just how run-down the Minster was. The tower was in danger of collapsing, and the church itself was in danger of collapsing under the weight of the vaulting. The euphoria crumbled together with the material. Gothic was no longer trendy and Ulm's economic strength was dwindling.

Rough and coarse decay gnaws at the Gothic masterpiece

The Minster continued to be stabilised at great expense but work was stopped on the tower. On the 29th of January 1543, the city council sealed the end of the tower construction. The tower was not even half as high as once planned.

Decade after decade passed the Minster by, its roofs now covered with moss and even small trees were allowed to sprout and grow on the wall offsets. The roof beams were rotting, cornices and rosettes crumbled. The building trembled during strong storms and peals of thunder. Sparrows nested in the sacred halls and provided noisy competition to the sermons through their twittering. The Minster was the landmark of the city but its citizens had become accustomed to its gradual deterioration and state of disrepair.

Giants compete in a new era

It was only in the 19th century that the citizens of Ulm became really aware of the serious damage. All of Germany was now enthusiastic once again about the Middle Ages and its churches. They were being restored and expanded in the Gothic style. In Ulm, the Association for Art and Antiquity became the driving force. After around 300 years of inactivity, the Münsterbauhütte started work again in 1844. However, it was not foreseeable how much the restoration work would cost. Initially, the Church Foundation contributed the funds but, after an internal reform took place, this source collapsed. Initially, state subsidies could cushion this setback. The project was in danger of failing once again.

Meanwhile, the race for the tallest church tower accelerated. After the Strasbourg Cathedral (142 metres) had held the record for centuries, things were now happening every two to four years in rapid succession. Firstly, St. Nikolai triumphed in Hamburg (147 metres), then the cathedral in Rouen, France (151 metres), followed by Cologne Cathedral (157 metres). Ulm wanted a few metres more – for purely aesthetic reasons, as was emphasised when the accusation was raised in Cologne that the city on the Danube wanted to have the highest church tower at any price as a kind of „rivalry“. Now it was up to the citizens of Ulm. Across all religious faiths, they made numerous donations to the evangelical building in which they saw their common heritage represented.



The church towers of Vienna, Cologne, Ulm, Strasbourg, Freiburg, shown in a lithograph of 1843. In reality, the towers of Cologne and Ulm were not yet completed at that time.



The main tower from the inside

A lottery brings success

Enthusiasm was growing not only in Ulm: people, clubs and associations from all over Germany showed themselves to be very generous. In order to build the tower higher as the medieval master builders had intended, this however was nowhere near enough. Therefore, a lottery was launched. This was well received by the citizens. Metre by metre, the tower began to rise steadily upwards.

On the evening of the 31st of May 1890, the people of Ulm gathered in the heart of their city. The tower of the Minster drew their collective gaze up into the sky. They could guess what unconditional faith and ambition must have moved their ancestors. Accompanied by the sound of trumpets, a stone finial as top-piece was set in position. Finally, the Ulm Minster was completed.

And today?

The Ulm Minster is the heart of the city and an attraction for millions of visitors from all over the world. It houses art treasures from various eras, from the Middle Ages through to the present day. These include the choir stalls carved from oak, fascinating gargoyles, and colourful stained-glass windows.

Since 2025, the tallest church spire in the world can be found in Barcelona: it was at this point that the Sagrada Família (172 metres) surpassed the Ulm Minster as the record holder. The Ulm Minster is and remains a testament to and a symbol of the fact that one can indeed rise above oneself – even if it sometimes takes a little longer.

Ulm Minster





A masterpiece of Gothic architecture

The Ulm Minster unites faith, history and magnificence. Numerous steps lead up the church tower which, at 161 metres, was once the tallest in the world. More than 500 years passed before its completion.

Through their own efforts

Where the tower of Ulm Minster ends, the world is silent. Only the icy wind blows through the pointed arches and delicate stone decorations. The church ascends exactly 161 metres and 53 centimetres into the sky.

People in the Middle Ages did indeed dare to dream of this vision. They wanted to make it a reality on their own, without the financial support of a bishop or prince.

Faith and gold lay the foundation

The oldest chronicle of Ulm tells us how the citizens laid the foundation stone for the minster. Let's go back to the 30th of June 1377. It was a time of troubled unrest. In the previous autumn, Emperor Charles IV had besieged the city with his troops. Within the city's society, craftsmen and merchants were wrestling with the city nobility about who is in charge. On this day, however, people peacefully gathered together in the very heart of their city.

A huge construction pit ran deep into the ground. What was being created here was of such dimensions that none of those present would be alive when it would be finished.

A large boulder was slowly lowered into the pit accompanied by the sound of music and prayers. Everyone wanted to lend a hand: some turned the wheel, others held the rope or waited patiently in the pit below. Among them was the former mayor, who had worked towards this moment for years. Now he could finally receive the foundation stone. He positioned it on a layer of mortar and then placed 100 gold coins on top.

Following his example, others also climbed down and placed gold and silver on the stone. Because faith alone was not sufficient in order to build this church.



The start of construction, image of the 17th century

Ulm is becoming increasingly more powerful

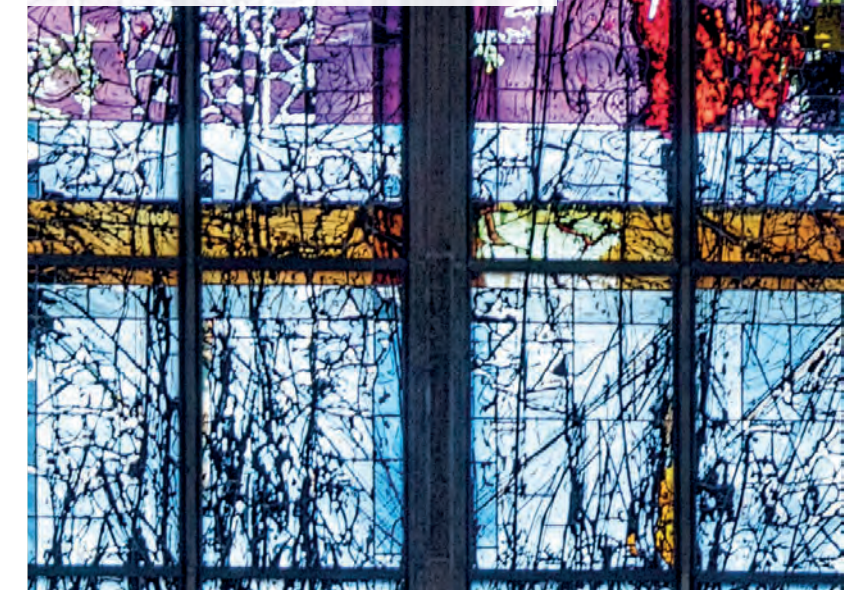
Wherever cathedrals rose majestically towards the heavens in medieval Europe, their construction demanded immense time and effort. In quarries, hundreds of workers struggled with pickaxes and hammers in order to extract blocks out of the rock. The blocks of stone were loaded onto rafts or carted by oxen to the building sites. There, labourers used their muscle strength to pull up the stones by means of rope winches. The architectural style was sublime and flooded with light whilst massive and filigree at the same time. Much later, this would be known as „gothic“.

While elsewhere the clerical aristocracy and rulers were ultimately responsible for financing such ventures, in Ulm the citizens alone bore the costs. And not only that. They were extremely proud of the fact.

Only a city that ranked among the most powerful in the Holy Roman Empire could act with such boldness. A high-quality fabric consisting of linen and cotton which was manufactured here, and known as the „Ulmer Barchent“, was in great demand even in far-away countries. It made the city extremely wealthy. On top of this, as an „imperial city“, Ulm was politically largely independent. Rights that the king had previously held were gradually acquired by the citizenship. Their new-found independence and the self-confidence associated with this are embedded in every stone of the new church. Not only should God be praised but it was also an opportunity to demonstrate their own power.

Visitor information

Entry to the Ulm Minster is free of charge. The tower can be climbed for a fee. All information for your visit can be found on the website of the Ulm Minster parish community: www.ulmer-muenster.de. You can gain an insight into the work of the Münsterbauhütte in the „m25“ urban adventure room which is located in the immediate vicinity of the minster: m25.ulm.de.



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