

Saint Bartholomew's Baptismal Font

Open

*Monday to Saturday from 10 to 12 a.m. and from 2 to 5 p.m.
Sunday 2 to 5 p.m.*

Mass

*Tuesday to Saturday at 6 p.m.
Sunday at 9.30 a.m.*

History

The font comes from the Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts, the “mother-parish” of Liege, which was next to Saint Lambert’s cathedral and served as its baptistery. Before the tower spread, causing parish communities to multiply at increasing distances, it was in fact the only church allowed to dispense the sacrament of baptism. Between 1107 and 1118, Hellin, archdeacon of Liege and priest at Notre-Dame, ordered the brass vessel for his church; this jewel of Mosan art (art of the Meuse valley) may be the work of Renier, a Huy goldsmith during the first half of the XIIth century.

Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts, like the cathedral, was demolished during the French period that followed the Revolution and ended the independence of Liege. In 1804, after the Concordat, the vessel was placed in the former collegiate church of Saint Bartholomew, which had become a parish church. The lid of the font, which must have been brass, like the vessel, with figures of prophets and apostles, has been lost.

To make this world-renowned font into a truly original masterpiece of classicism and technical perfection, the artist succeeded in combining the art of antiquity, Byzantine art and the Mosan tradition. The ceremony of baptism is the single theme developed in the five scenes circling, in high relief, the outer wall of the vessel: the baptism of penitence, preached by John the Baptist, announcing baptism in the Spirit; sanctification of the world (from the Jewish to the Greco-Roman world) both temporal (the centurion Cornelius) and spiritual (the philosopher Craton).

Description

The vessel, placed on a stone pedestal, seems to be supported by oxen, originally twelve (only ten remain). They are both a symbol of the twelve apostles who will carry the message of the Trinity across the world, purifying it by baptism, and the twelve tribes of Israel as well as the twelve oxen which, according to the Bible, in the Book of Kings, supported the “Bronze Sea” at the entrance to the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.

A wavy ground runs all round the font-wall, underlining the singleness of theme, while stylised trees from Byzantine influence separate most of the scenes, also creating a transition between them. In each scene, the main character – the preacher or the baptist – is slightly larger than the characters surrounding him. This is a procedure dear to popular art of all times and countries; but here the artist has composed the scenes in such a way as to make the disproportion seem natural. Each character is identified by an engraved inscription.

1) John the Baptist the Preacher

To the left of the central scene, the Messenger invites penitence from a group of Publicans dressed like rich merchants. They are joined by a soldier wearing defensive armour typical of the XIIth century: chain-mail, basin-shaped helmet, Norman shield hanging behind; his sword, fixed to a baldric, is stuck into a slit in the chain-mail coat.

2) Baptism of neophytes or baptism of penitence

John the Baptist places his hand on the head of one of the young men standing up to his knees in the Jordan. On the river-bank, two disciples watch the ceremony. The attitude and position of the right-hand disciple’s feet indicate his intention of leaving “He who prepares the ways of the Lord” and going with Christ. Note the suppleness of the *neophytes* perfectly modelled bodies.

3) Central scene: the Baptism of Christ

John the Baptist, wearing the cloak of the desert hermits, bends forward and places a hand on Christ's head. Jesus, standing up to the waist in the waters of the Jordan, represented in the conventional Byzantine style, makes the sign of the Trinity with his right hand. The three divine beings are brought together: God the Father appears as an old man bending his haloed head towards the Son and the Holy Spirit is symbolised by a dove. To Christ's left, two angels lean forward, their hands veiled as a sign of respect as in Eastern rites.

4) The baptism of Cornelius

The church embraces the Roman world – the whole of the known world at the time. Saint Peter baptises the centurion Cornelius who here symbolises the material or temporal domain. The Acts of the Apostles report that this Roman soldier, having heard of Christ and his teachings, called for Saint Peter. But Hebraic law forbade the prince of the apostles from entering the house of an unbeliever. Peter then heard the voice of God in a dream and, obeying His command, went to Cornelius' house and breaking the old law, baptised him and all his companions.

5) The baptism of Craton

There is a legend that John the Evangelist, the inspired apostle, may have baptised, at Ephesus, a Greek philosopher who taught people to despise riches. This scene and the preceding one are placed symmetrically with no stylised tree between them.

Craton, the philosopher, opposite the centurion Cornelius, symbolises the spiritual realm and the spread of the Church to the Greek world and “gentiles” of all nations.

Technique

The technique used is known as lost wax casting. The model, moulded in wax, is carefully covered with clay. When dry, this mould or cast is fired: the wax then runs out (so is “lost”) and the cast is filled with melted brass. After cooling and removal of the clay, the work is polished with fine sand, then covered with a fine film of gold.