

9 The Church of the Danube Boatmen

1st District (Innere Stadt), the Church of Maria am Gestade, at Salvatorgasse 12

Of the many churches within the *Innere Stadt*, that of Maria am Gestade (translated variously as »St. Mary on the Riverbank« or »Virgin on the Shore«) is curious for a number of reasons. Together with the Stephansdom, it is one of the few Gothic churches not to have been altered in the subsequent Baroque period, retaining its delicate vaults, tracery and buttresses from the late-14th century. It can be

identified from afar, especially when illuminated at night, by its unusual seven-sided filigree tower rising 56 metres into the air. Incredibly it escaped later demolition only because a contractor could not be found who would take away the rubble! Also unusual is the fact that the nave (the main seating area of a church at the west end) and the chancel (the area directly in front of the altar to the east) are of equal length (the former is usually longer), and that the nave is narrower and built slightly askew. This is due to the steep and restricted terrain here on the edge of a natural plateau, used as a natural defence by both the medieval town and the Roman fort, walls of which were found below the church (see no.12). Of great

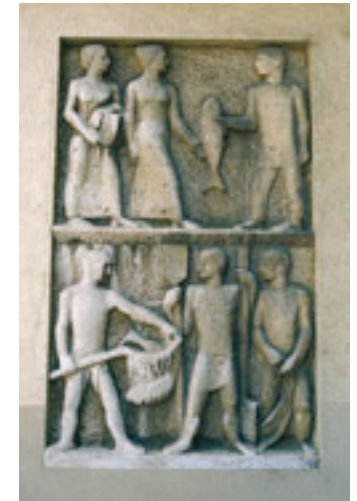


The filigree tower of Maria am Gestade Church from Salvatorgasse

interest are the surviving fragments of medieval painted glass incorporated into the beautiful windows behind the High Altar. More would have survived had Napoleon's troops not used the church as an arsenal and stables during their occupation of Vienna in 1809 (see no. 61). In addition there is a side-chapel containing the mortal remains of Klemens Maria-Hofbauer (1751–1820), named the »Apostle of Vienna« by Pope Pius VII. A trained baker and a founder of the Austrian Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, Hofbauer also cared for the Czech community whose church this has been since 1912.

Outside the main west door, sometimes compared to the prow of a ship, is a flight of stairs that until the 16th century descended steeply to the Alsbach and Ottakringerbach streams which formed the town moat (now the street called Tiefer Graben, meaning deep ditch). This accounts for the popular name of Mariastiegenkirche (The Church of Our Lady of the Steps), as well as the building's age-old connection with the Danube raftsmen and bargees who once passed so close with their cargoes. Over the porch of a modern building in nearby Passauerplatz is a very effective sculpture of the boatmen themselves, who would have used the church.

The nearby Fischerstiege (Fishermen's Steps) also lead down to the riverside where there is a sculpture of fish traders reminding us that their docks and warehouses would once have been here (another sculpture can be found across the canal at Obere Donaustrasse 97). Similarly, on Vorlaufstrasse there is a sculpted salt merchant whose salt barge landing would also have occupied part of the riverbank. This accounts for the streets called Salzgries and Salztorgasse, the Salztorbrücke bridge and also for the presence of the nearby 12th century Romanesque church of St. Ruprecht (Vienna's oldest), Rupert being patron saint of salt miners and first Bishop of Salzburg from whence the valuable commodity came. His statue, hidden amongst trees behind the church, can be seen clutching a barrel of salt.



A sculpture on the Fischerstiege depicting Danube fishermen

Other places of interest nearby: 4, 8, 10, 13