

A „Hare Story“

There are three hares and only three ears, and yet each hare has two.

The Three-Hares-Window in the late Gothic cloister of the Paderborn Cathedral is not only one of the town's landmarks but at the same time the most famous Three-Hares-Motif in Germany.



The hare is a popular motif in both Christian as well as profane art. It can often be found, for instance, in paintings and other pieces of art, and it holds a versatile imagery. In non-sacral art, the hare is often used to represent the prey animal on depictions of hunting scenes. Usually, it can also be seen on spring or fall images where the springing hare stands for happiness. Due to its distinct reproductive instinct, the hare is often interpreted to be a symbol of fertility and physical love.

In Christian art, the hare motif can often be found as well, especially on medieval artwork where the hare once again represents fertility and happiness. Despite being listed in the Bible as one of the impure animals the Israelites are forbidden to eat, it is nevertheless interpreted to be a symbol for the Resurrection of Christ which would also explain the symbolism of the Easter bunny. Furthermore, the hare is attributed to many saints, among them the saint Martin.



Frequently, hares can be found in a group of three. They are rarely ever absent from depictions of Creation and have therefore become a symbol for the Trinity of God. The arrangement of three hares in a circle, as in the famous Three-Hares-Window in Paderborn, however, is an exception. When looking at the window, not the animals themselves should be in the viewer's focus but rather their ears: Each hare has two ears, although there are only three ears in the whole picture. Through this connection, a circle is formed.

This special Three-Hares-Motif can often be encountered in Germany, for example, in the coat of arms of the municipality of Hasloch, in the monastery of Hardehausen near Paderborn as well as in the Cathedral of Münster. However, there are many examples of the motif in other countries and cultures all over the world. The three hares are present in other European countries, for instance, in Switzerland as a painting from 1529 at the church of Lauen near Gstaad, in the monastery of Muotathal near Schwyz or as part of a wrought-iron fence in the village museum of Riehen which is situated between Basel and Lörrach. In France, the hares can be found in the late Gothic Palais des Maison du Cardinal Jouffroy in Luxeuil-les-Bains and in the courtyard of the Alsatian St.-Peter-and-Paul church in Wissembourg. In Great Britain, the motif of the three hares in a circle can be encountered in numerous churches such as, for example,

the Long Melford Trinity Church in the county of Suffolk. However, the symbol is also quite popular outside of Europe, especially in Asia: The Three-Hares-Symbol can be found in many different places ranging from Egypt to China and was presumably brought from China to Europe along the Silk Road.



The original meaning of the Three-Hares-Motif is unclear, but throughout the centuries many possible interpretations have emerged. The motif can, for example, be understood as a symbol of light, with the circle, due to the animals' nocturnality, representing the moon. The more recent interpretation of seeing the Three-Hares-Motif as a symbol of the Trinity of God is, however, an interpretation which is not supposed to correspond to the original meaning. Many historians assume it to be a sort of archetype which has the same meaning in every culture. It, however, remains unclear which meaning that is.



Participants of a guided tour offered by the Paderborn Tourist Information in front of the Three-Hares-Window