

Room 11 English

Gothic sculpture

The wealth of the museum's sculpture collections stems from their history. From the first half of the 19th century, the town house of the Abbots of Cluny that Alexandre Du Sommerard moved into was divided in private apartments. The baths were the property of the City of Paris and used as a repository for all the sculptures removed during restoration work on monuments. When the museum was first created in 1843, the City sold the building and its contents to the State for a symbolic franc, giving access to the collections of mediaeval sculpture masterpieces. In addition, from 1843 to 1907, the museum's attachment to the "Commission supérieure des Monuments historiques" (Historic Monuments Commission) promoted the enrichment of the collection.

The abbey-church of Saint-Denis

The consecration of the west façade of Saint-Denis in 1140 marked a profound transformation in the relationships existing between sculpture and architecture: for the first time, in addition to the large sculpted (or, in one case at least, mosaic-decorated) tympana, the architect Abbot Suger had large statues placed on the jambs, each one carved from the same lump of stone as the columns and hence fully integrated into the architectural whole, taking one step further the process of glorification of the church's entrance begun at the end of the previous century. Adopted again on-site for the portal on the north side (the current Porte des Valois), the idea was rapidly imitated at the cathedrals of Chartres and Paris, and from the end of the decade became an essential component of gothic portals. Removed in 1771, officially to make room for the new procession canopy, but actually as part of an "embellishment" carried out to reflect the tastes of the time – there was disapproval of the decorative excesses of mediaeval architecture –, the column statues of the west façade then disappeared. Of the six heads known to remain today, three are housed in public collections in the United States and the other three are displayed here.

The first to join the museum's collections, the woman's head identified as the Queen of Sheba from the left jamb of the central portal (A. Cl. 23250), is probably the most striking, despite the mutilations giving it a strange look. The extremely decorative appearance of the crown contrasts with the strength of the face, with its firm lips and vigorously sculpted lines.

As with the head of Moses from the right jamb of the right portal (B. Cl. 23312), the pupils are hollowed out to house pieces of glass paste, accentuating, with the colours now having disappeared, the lifelike and severe appearance of these sculptures.

In contrast, the head of an unidentified prophet that comes from the left jamb of the right porta (C. Cl. 23415) has smooth eyeballs, yet presents the same blend of decorative finesse and hieratism, accentuated by the strongly vertical lines of the face.

A few years later, in around 1145, Suger had the capitals of the cloister produced by a workshop of sculptors also active in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The images on these combine a repertory of fantastic animals, mermaids, griffins and hybrid creatures with other faithful replicas of classical motifs. An example of this is this capital, D. Cl. 12119, directly inspired by the marble elements of Paleochristian building (see the capitals in the *frigidarium*, room 9), imitating it to the extent that it prolongs the classical tradition of incorporating the astragal (moulding) on the column and not on the capital as was the usual practice in the 12th century.

The Sainte Chapelle of the Royal Palace on the Ile de la Cité in Paris

The purchase by Louis IX of Christ's crown of thorns from the Venetians in 1239, followed by part of the *arma Christi* (the instruments of the Passion) from Baldwin II, the Latin Emperor of Constantinople, in 1241 led to the launch of what was probably the most prestigious, yet most rapidly completed building project of the 13th century. After less than 10 years, the Saint-Nicolas Chapel of the Cité Royal Palace was replaced by a reliquary made of stone and glass that came into service in 1248. In addition to its rich treasures and no less extraordinary glass decoration, the Sainte-Chapelle also boasted an apostolic college against the building's inner walls, linking, in the spirit of Paul's epistle to the Galatians and, beyond this, the *tu es Petrus et super hanc petram* ("you are Peter and on this rock") concept, the first disciples with the pillars of the Church.

Removed rather brutally in 1797, requisitioned by the *Monuments français* (French Monuments) under the direction of Alexandre Lenoir and then dispersed, the apostles were once more united at the Sainte-Chapelle in 1843, during its restoration led by the architects Duban and Lassus. Of the ten statues that remained, either whole or in part, four were placed once more in the Sainte-Chapelle, with the others being stored in the City of Paris' sculpture repository, then soon to be incorporated in the budding Cluny museum's collection.

Two are now just fragments of drapery, one has been decapitated and all have lost their attributes, making



A. Cl. 23250



B. Cl. 23312



C. Cl. 23415



D. Cl. 12119



E. Cl. 18666

1122-1151

Suger, Abbot of Saint-Denis

1140

Consecration of the West façade of Saint-Denis

1226-1270

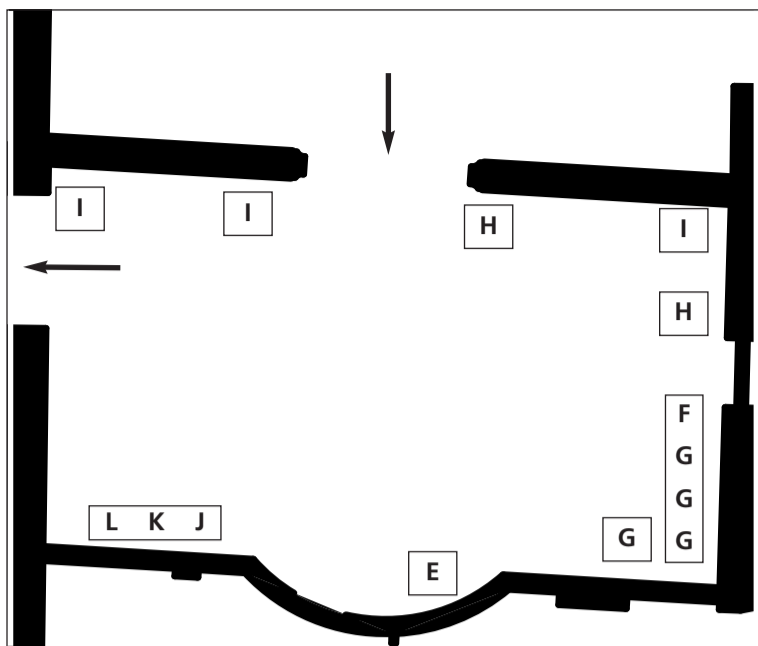
Reign of Louis IX (Saint Louis)

1248

Consecration of the Sainte-Chapelle in the Cité Palace

1771

Removal of the Saint-Denis column statues



identification impossible, with the exception of Saint John (E. Cl. 18666), the youngest of the apostles, traditionally depicted beardless in apostolic colleges.

Similar in their spirit, but rather different in their workmanship, the speed of the project having required the simultaneous employment of several sculptors, these statues represent the peak of Parisian classicism as it had developed over the previous quarter century, following on from the central portal of Notre-Dame de Paris. Whilst they do not possess the dynamic richness of the slightly later sculptures by Jean de Chelles located in the north arm of the transept in Notre-Dame, the balance of the drapery, the softness of the gestures and the equanimity of the faces bear testimony to the serene certainty of an art in its perfection. The gentle melancholy of one of the bearded apostles, his head slightly bent, his gestures modest, contrasts with the tranquil aplomb of the second, the face of whom is directly inspired by Roman busts of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, long identified as being portraits of Seneca.

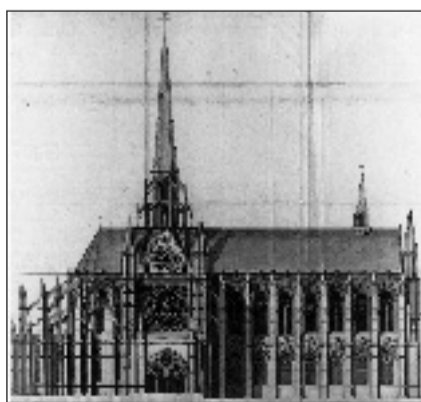
Priory of Saint-Louis in Poissy (Île-de-France)

The memory of Sainte-Chapelle was at the forefront of Philip the Fair's mind when, in 1297, he founded a Dominican priory in Poissy dedicated to Saint Louis, his grandfather canonised this very same year.

The sculpted inner décor differed, however: at the transept, the sainted king and his wife, Marguerite of Provence, along with six of their children, were glorified; a set of angels bearing the *arma Christi* probably derived from an apocalyptic representation, occupied a still undetermined space, on the rood screen, on the choir screen or under the west porch.

Only two of the statues of the Royal family remain: Isabella of France, today housed in its original place in the collegiate

church of Notre-Dame in Poissy, and Pierre, Count of Alençon (F. Cl. 23408).



(fig. 1) Priory of Saint-Louis in Poissy, north side.
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Three statues and the figure of an angel are housed in the museum (G. Cl. 18762, 23246, 23292 and 23441).

These sculptures stand out by the fluidity of their drapery, inherited from the apostles of the Sainte-Chapelle, by the elegance of the gestures, by the bodies with their high waists, by the fine-nosed and narrowed eyes faces, but also by the deformations that the sculptor readily imprinted on the faces of the trumpet-playing angels.

Church of the Saint-Jacques-aux-Pèlerins Hospital

The principle of an apostolic college encircling the church, as had been used in the Sainte-Chapelle, was once more adopted three-quarters of a century later, between 1319 and 1327, in the parisian church of Saint-Jacques-aux-Pèlerins, identification between the apostles and pilgrims being one of the *topoi* (basic themes) of religious rhetoric from the middle of the 12th century at least.

Whilst the majority of the sculptures were produced by Robert de Lannoy, two of them, one of which is housed in the museum (H. Cl. 18759), were the work of a sculptor who may have originated from Norwich (England), but who was totally integrated into the milieu of Paris sculptors at the end of the 13th century, Guillaume de Nourriche. His more nervous style, with more incisive drapery and a more naturalistic face, can be clearly differentiated from the more traditional and more fluid style of Robert de Lannoy (I. Cl. 18756, 18757, 18758 and 18760).

Ivories from the 13th century

The 13th century witnessed a rise in the popularity of ivory-work in France, and especially in Paris. The links that existed between ivory-workers and sculptors in around 1250 are particularly evident in the set of works grouped together round a diptych now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and perhaps originally from Soissons. A fragment of the diptych depicting the Passion of Christ on display in the museum (J. Cl. 417) belongs to this group. The other section is housed in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore (United States). The figures, carved in high-relief and marked with a calm expressivity, are actually reminiscent of the sculpture of the time, and particularly the apostles in the Sainte-Chapelle.

The triptych from the church of Saint-Sulpice in the Tarn region of Franc (K. Cl. 13101) made in Parisian workshops shortly before 1300 is very different in essence. The monumental central figures have a more fluid, suppler elegance, whereas the side sections are more graphic in style.

One of the oldest mirror boxes, "l'Assemblée" (L. Cl. 404), is also the biggest still preserved today. An ivory fulfilling an everyday function, designed to hold and protect a reflective metal sheet, it is obvious from both the quality of the sculpture, reminiscent of that of the Poissy priory, and the theme, that this is an object intimately linked to the Parisian royal court. Rather than a depiction of a contemporary scene, this should probably be seen as an encounter between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Xavier Dectot, curator



F. Cl. 23408



G. Cl. 23292



H. 18759



I. Cl. 18756



J. Cl. 417



K. Cl. 13101



L. Cl. 404

1258-1265

Project of Jehan de Chelles, architect of Notre-Dame de Paris

1285-1314

Reign of Philip IV the Fair

1297

Foundation of the priory of Saint-Louis in Poissy

1319-1327

Robert de Lannoy and Guillaume de Nourriche work at Saint-Jacques-de-l'Hôpital

1805

Demolition of the priory of Saint-Louis in Poissy

1823

Demolition of the church of Saint-Jacques-aux-Pèlerins