From the cathedral to the museum

Auxerre Cathedral, under the invocation of Saint Stephen, housed a wall-hanging dedicated to this saint first mentioned in an inventory drawn up in 1569. In 1726, it was specified that these tapestries were displayed “during major festivals”. Sold to the city’sHôtel-Dieu (hospital) in 1777, it was given up by the hospital in the 19th century. In 1880, the Cluny museum acquired 10 pieces of this wall-hanging, which were subsequently joined, in 1897, by two further pieces which had been purchased by the Louvre museum in 1838.

The coats of arms

There are two types of heraldry shields on the tapestry. The first, simple ones bear “azure with a band of gules accompanied by two golden amphisteres (type of dragon)” (fig. 1), the arms of the Baillet family, well-known Parisian financiers then parliamentarians from the 14th to 16th centuries. The others, party (divided) (fig. 2) or quartered (fig. 3), combine with these arms those “in sable (black) with a silver cross, cantoned with sixteen golden fleur de lys”, belonging to the Fresnes family. All are surmounted by a crosier scroll, an Episcopal insignia. This heraldic motif indicates the tapestry’s commissioner, since they are the coats of arms of the father and mother of John III Baillet, Bishop of Auxerre from 1477 to 1513.

Stephen, the life and legend of the Saint

Stephen holds a very specific position amongst the Saints venerated in the Middle Ages. Mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (book 5 of the New Testament), he was one of the first seven deacons and the first martyr, which explains the exceptional number of churches, especially cathedrals, dedicated to him, along with the early emergence and development of his worship. The Auxerre tapestry is one of the most spectacular examples of this. The twenty-three episodes of the life and legend of the Saint form a very complete cycle, now divided into 12 pieces, 45 metres long, placed on the walls of three consecutive rooms. The story, inspired mainly by the Golden Legend written by Jacques de Voragine, starts in the chapel (room 20), and then continues in rooms 19 and 18. Using a narrative method common in the Middle Ages and not dissimilar in design to today’s cartoon strips, each scene has a short text in French at the bottom, describing the episode depicted, and often has one or more inscriptions in Latin naming the characters or transcribing a quote attributed to one of them. To make it easier to follow the story, a number has been placed under each of the episodes.

A story in twenty-three commented scenes

In the chapel
1. The Council of the Apostles decides to appoint seven deacons to bring to an end the disharmony between the Grecians and the Hebrews.
2. Stephen and the other six deacons are consecrated.
4. Stephen is led before the court of the high priest and accused of blasphemy.
5. The Jews stopped their ears with their hands upon hearing Stephen state that he could see Christ in heaven.
6. Stephen must be taken to Rome and exchanged with that of Saint Laurence.
7. The monks of Saint-Lucien in Beauvais.
8. The body of Saint Stephen is displayed to the angels in the church and restored to life.
10. Gamaliel appears three times to the priest Lucian and marks the tombs of Stephen, Gamaliel, Nicodimus and Abilias with a panier of roses.
11. Saint Stephen’s body is moved in error; the Saint appears during a tempest and saves the passengers.
12. The Bishop of Jerusalem looks for the body of Saint Stephen in vain.
13. Lucian describes his vision to the Bishop of Jerusalem.
15. The widow of the Senator of Constantinople requests permission from the Bishop of Jerusalem to move her husband’s body.
16. The body of Saint Stephen is moved to Rome; the Saint appears during a tempest and saves the passengers.
17. The Emperor orders that the reliquary of Saint Stephen be received by Bishop Eusebius.
18. Eudoxia, the daughter of the Roman Emperor, possessed by a demon, states that the body of Saint Stephen must be taken to Rome and exchanged with that of Saint Laurence.
19. Eudoxia is healed; the angels sing Felix Roma (“O happy Rome!”).
20. The men sent from Constantinople are unable to take Saint Laurence’s body.
21. The body of Saint Laurence is replaced by that of Saint Stephen and Eudoxia is healed; the angels sing Felix Roma (“O happy Rome!”).

Located at the end of the nave and leading to the altar, the choir is reserved for priests in charge, monks or cloistered nuns in monasteries, brothers or sisters in convents, canonists in cathedrals and collegiate churches, and holds specific pieces of furniture destined for clerics: stalls. During the Gothic period, it gradually became the custom to enclose the choir. The section separating the nave from the choir, named the roodscreen or jube (from the first word of the Jube Domine benedicere prayer… “Lord, grant me your blessing”), was placed against the arches, and allowed worshippers to see the celebrant. The surrounding could hold either a fixed or moveable décor inside it. In the 15th century, the expansion of art to tapestry thus led to the commissioning of epic series of tapestries relating episodes from the story of the building’s patron saint, placed above the stalls during festivals or important ceremonies.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Room 18</th>
<th>Room 19</th>
<th>Room 20</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saint Stephen’s Tapestry from Auxerre and the Saint-Lucien of Beauvais stalls</td>
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<tr>
<th>From 1215</th>
<th>1228–1298</th>
<th>1477–1513</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction of Auxerre Cathedral</td>
<td>Jacques de Voragine author of the Golden Legend</td>
<td>John III Baillet, Bishop of Auxerre</td>
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<th>1483–1498</th>
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<td>Reign of Charles VIII</td>
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The style and ornament

The style, ornament and costumes are characteristic of art circa 1500. Numerous formal or decorative elements still hark back to Gothic art, along with, for example, the sections of the coats, broken up with folds or interlocked ends, the trilobe openings or the towers and crenellated walls. The laymen’s clothing, for example the garments of the male characters in scenes 4, 6, 7, 16 and 20, with their tight-fitting hoods or their slashed over-trousers (fig. 4), their hairstyles, their short caps with raised edges (fig. 5), or their hats put on the slant (fig. 6), are typical of the very end of the 15th and of the early 16th centuries.

The creative stages

Art historians are in agreement that the “small patterns” or “small-scale models” for the tapestry were probably the work of an artist trained in Northern Europe, probably Brussels, close to the painter Colyn de Coter. More recently, specific comparisons have been made with a group of choir tapestries, such as that of the Life of Saint Remy in Reims, and stained glass windows, particularly one at the Church of Saint Martin in Montmorency, the life-size models or “cartoons” of which are believed to have been the work of the same artist working in the Île-de-France region around 1500-1550. The latter is believed to be identifiable with Gautier de Campes, known primarily to have supplied the cartoons of two tapestries dedicated to the history of Saint Stephen: the oldest of these – used as a model for the second one, destined for Sens Cathedral and for which two pieces had already been woven in 1503 – may be the one commissioned by Jean Baillet for his cathedral in Auxerre.

As with the majority of tapestries from this period, the weaving location is not accurately known. Several suggestions have been made, with no definitive argument. What is certain, however, is that the main weaving centres of the time were located in the Southern Lowlands, in particular Brussels.

Saint-Lucien of Beauvais stalls

The arrival of the stalls in the museum

The stalls from the Abbey of Saint-Lucien in Beauvais, destroyed during the French Revolution, were successively collected at the start of the 19th century by two of the first collectors of Mediaeval objects: Lucien Cambry, prefect of the Oise département (1807), then the Count of Saint-Morys (1817). They were then placed in Saint-Denis, before being given to the Cluny museum in 1889-1890. Their re-assembly, which also incorporates additional parts acquired in 1970, combines the old elements with modern platforms, backs and armrests.

The commissioner

These stalls had been commissioned by Antoine Du Bois, appointed the commendatory (i.e. lay) abbot of Saint-Lucien in Beauvais in 1492, at the age of only 21 years. A history of the abbey written in the 17th century specifies that they were completed in 1500.

The sculptures on the outside arms

The two outside arms (panels placed at the ends of a row of seats) Ca and Cb refer to the recipient building and the commissioner (Ca). Saint Peter sending Saints Lucian, Julian and Maximian to evangelize the land of Beauvaisis; on the other (Cb), Antoine du Bois is on his knees before his patron saint, the hermit Anthony.

The misericords (or “mercy seats”)

Apart from these two panels, the most significant sculpted elements are the misericords, small horizontal shelves resting on a sculpted console, attached to the underneath of folding seats, to provide monks with some support when standing during services and ceremonies.

What is particularly interesting about these misericords is the variety of sculpted objects on the consoles. Religious and pegan scenes are depicted side by side, including trades, monks’ occupations, feast scenes, from novels or fables. Hence, on the first row (A1 to A11), can be seen a roast cook (A6), a cooper (A8), Reynard the fox preaching to the hens (A4), a preaching monk (A3). On a second row (B1 to B6), the misericords depict genre scenes, perhaps inspired by books or folklore; the last depicts Saint Eustatius in the raging torrent (B6). On the third row (C1 to C11), the theatrical world is depicted: a dancer, an acrobat, a juggler; some scenes are more surprising: a man rolling a globe before him (C3), another one blowing to turn the sails of a windmill (C7).

Should we see in them simply a relaxation of the eyes and spirit, in parallel with the physical relaxation offered by these misericords? Or should we look for a second meaning? A taste for derision is, to say the very least, present: *Reynard’s sermon to the hens* (A4) is probably an ironic allusion to the sermon of the mendicant orders, which “competed” with regular monks.

What is certain, furthermore, is that these subjects sculpted in wood for the Picardy abbot, like the episodes of Saint Stephen’s legend woven for the Burgundy cathedral, reflect the absence in Mediaeval thinking of any clear-cut separation between the real world, often trivial and violent, and the imaginary world, in which the fantastic and sacred abound; the second is just as much a part of day-to-day life as the first, for which it is an outlet.

Elisabeth Taburet-Delahaye, museum director

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**From 1089**

Construction of the Abbey-Church of Saint-Lucien in Beauvais

**End of 11th century-end of 13th century**

Composition of the Roman de Renart (Story of Reynard the Fox)

**1483-1488**

Reign of Charles VIII

**1492-1507**

Antoine Du Bois, commendatory abbot of the Abbey of Saint-Lucien in Beauvais

**1498-1515**

Reign of Louis XII

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