

- * Terms defined in the list below
- A Refers to the room plan
- 1 Refers to the pictures on the sheet

A refined architectural choice

Built between 1485 and 1500 for Jacques d'Amboise, Abbot of Cluny, the townhouse is a synthesis between modernity and tradition. Its architectural repertoire is Flamboyant Gothic, which was regarded as the «modern» style at the end of the Medieval era as opposed to the «ancient» style, inspired by Italy or Antiquity. However, the resolutely Gothic dominance of the edifice must not overshadow the truly innovative nature of its overall design.

The residence of the Abbots of Cluny is the oldest surviving Parisian «hôtel particulier» (townhouse) and undoubtedly the only one, or one of the very first to use the classic *entre cour et jardin* approach (situating the building between an entrance court and a garden) which was to become a leading trend from the 16th to the 18th century. However, the townhouse's master builder had to deal with the complications brought by the Gallo-Roman remains as well as by the constraints inherent to the parcel. The Chapel was built on ancient masonry foundations (northern wall). However, it is the available parcel chosen for establishing the garden at the back of the townhouse which gave the Chapel a unique function in the design of the «hôtel». As there was not enough depth to build a garden perpendicular to the main building, the addition of a small wing set at right angles in which the Chapel was located allowed better management of the narrow space. The resident Abbot and his guests would use the now closed spiral staircase in the corner A of the Chapel to access a vaulted space opening on the garden, which could then be fully embraced in all its length. This feature is less perceptible nowadays due to the expansion of the garden.

Situated on the upper floor at the end of a short wing perpendicular to the main body of the building, the Chapel is the most magnificent space of the townhouse of the Abbots of Cluny. The finest artists of the time were commissioned to create this masterpiece of the Flamboyant Gothic style. It remains in superb condition today, little changed from how it would have looked at the time of its completion in the late 15th century, with the exception of its furniture, glasswork and carved decorations, which are now partly or entirely gone.

As seen from the garden 1, a semi-circular corbel arch* which houses the altar B lays on a pillar separating the two arches of the lower vaulted space accessible from the garden terrace. Atop the pillar, a capital restored in the 19th century shows two angels wearing the blazon of Jacques d'Amboise. The carpentry wood, dated with a method called dendrochronology* was cut in 1497-1498 and used for construction the same year as was usual in the building trade. The small turret* on top of the altar's oriel window* is not made from slate as the rest of the roof, but from lead, and is adorned with a figure of Saint André, with his cross, scallop shells, rinceaux and once gilded-coloured mottos.

A Gothic gem

The Chapel follows a nearly square plan. Its vault boasts an intricate patternwork of soufflets* and mouchettes* 2 between its ribs which fall onto one single central pillar C, in a movement reminiscent of the branches of a palm tree. These patterns which are usually found in the tracery* in bays are used in a more unconventional way here, thus showing the outstanding quality of the work. The only remaining elements of the keystones* are the visible fixation points. The walls of the Chapel are occupied by corbels* surmounted by canopies*. The twelve corbels are a true stone lacework. They did not house the apostolic college as expected but the most influential members of the family of Jacques d'Amboise, shown praying (among whom his brother Georges, a Cardinal and a Minister of King Louis XII of France). The three figureheads D presented on the altar are the only remains of a surprising and peculiar carved animal showing. The statue's corbels convey the animal and vegetal world. Snails 3 and lizards inhabit intertwined cabbage and acanthus leaves.



1 The Hôtel (townhouse) de Cluny seen from the garden. Achille Poiret 1850



2 Details on the vault mouchettes and soufflets



3 Details on the corbel, snail, grapevine and vine leaves

1st-3^d century AD
Gallo-Roman Baths
of Lutetia

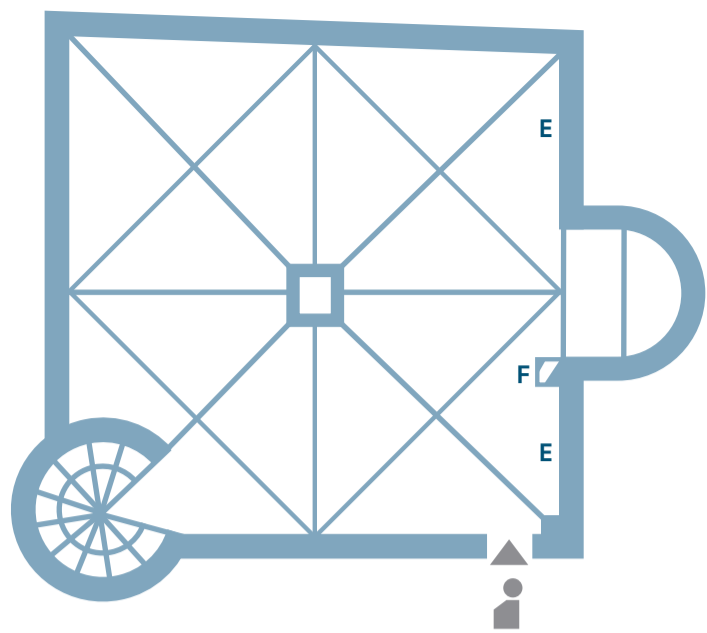
1483-1498
Reign of Charles VIII of France

1485-1500
Building of the Chapel

Circa 1490-1510
Active years of the Master
of the «Très Petites Heures»
of Queen Anne de Bretagne

1497-1516
Guido Mazzoni in France

1498-1515
Reign of Louis XII of France



The Chapel's current condition

The Chapel owes its present state to the restoration conducted in the 19th century by Albert Lenoir, an architect and the son of Alexandre Lenoir, the founder of the musée des Monuments français. Its condition in 1830 resulted from the revolutionary destructions as well as from a long period of careless treatment from several occupants. The townhouse was abandoned by the the Abbots of Cluny in the early 16th century and had to be rented. In 1800, when the Chapel's glasswork was already gone, a surgeon installed an anatomical theatre there; the rows of seats went as high as the corbels. The place was then rented by a printer. Openings were made in the eastern wall **E** and the blazons and corbels were scratched and shaved. The walls were already washed in grey and white during the Old Regime.

A group sculpture representing the Virgin Mary with the dead Christ on her lap accompanied by John the Evangelist and Joseph of Arimathea was placed on the altar. The rough notching on the sill of the bay shows where the piece was situated.

This sculpted group was related to the two feminine (Marie Cléophas **4** and Marie Salomé **5**) figures painted on each side of the altar by an Italian artist. This painter was probably Guido Mazzoni from Modena who is known to have worked for Georges d'Amboise. The painted frames feigning a *trompe l'œil* architectural effect belong to the ancient ornamental repertoire (candelabrum pilaster*, putti on dolphins) in which the Renaissance drew some inspiration. This combination of painted and carved images has only a few contemporary equivalents such as the Crucifixion in the northern transept in the Church of Notre-Dame de Dijon. The cul-de-four*, where are represented God the Father and the crucifixion of Jesus surrounded by angels with the Instruments of the Passion follows the same principle. The nimbus* of God the Father where the sculpture is continued by a few painted phylacteries* is the work of an artist of Nordic origin.

The glasswork disappeared during the Revolution. There is only one remaining panel (presented in room 17) as well as a few fragments of the upper parts of the bays. The model for the Carrying of the Cross **6**, a probable autograph, belongs to the important group of works attributed to the Master of the «Très Petites Heures» (a Christian devotional book) of Queen Anne de Bretagne who probably also designed the models for the tapestries of the Lady and the Unicorn. The Chapel embodies the ambition and the magnitude of the building in which it is housed : a large scale townhouse for which the master builder found innovative and elegant ideas, with considerable financial resources, appealing to a group of artists from diverse backgrounds to work for a mighty commissioner willing to affirm his social standing.

Albert Lenoir's purpose was to restore the Chapel into its original state, which he successfully did. The only non original element was the addition of a fake hagioscope* **F** in the eastern wall by continuing the small niche for the storage of the burettes. This was done at the latest in 1845 and is probably the work of either Alexandre or Edmond Du Sommerard, the Chapel being the central point of the original museum. The pieces on display are not originally from the Chapel but have been specially chosen as examples of works contemporaneous with its construction.

Michel Huynh, Head Curator



4 Marie Cléophas



5 Marie Salomé



6 Carrying of the Cross, glasswork, circa 1500

List of terms

Keystone : a stone piece placed in the middle of a vault allowing it to hold together.

Corbel : an element projecting from a wall with a supporting function.

Cul-de-four : a quarter-sphere vault.

Canopy : a cover made of fabric, stone, metal or wood suspended over a throne, a chair or a statue.

Dendrochronology : a method of dating the wood based on the analysis of the patterns of the a tree's growth rings.

Corbel arch : a construction projected over a pillar.

Hagioscope : an opening through the wall of a church or of a Palatine Chapel to attend the mass from a remote location.

Mouchette : a soufflet (see below) with a pattern made of curves and countercurves.

Nimbus : a ring or a disc that painters or sculptors placed on the head of holy characters.

Oriel window : a corbelled window projecting from the wall occupying one or several levels of a facade.

Phylactery : painted or carved scrolls showing the speeches of the represented characters.

Candelabrum pilaster : a square and flat pillar, adorned with mouldings, often with vegetal motifs.

Turret : a small round masoned tower with a conical roof built with the corbelling technique.

Tracery : the stonework elements supporting the glass in a window forming an ornamental network.

Soufflet : a heart shaped tracery element of varying length.

Photo Credits :

1 et **6** RMN-GP / Jean-Gilles Berizzi, **2** à **5** RMN-GP / Thierry Ollivier

1498-1515
Reign of Louis XII of France

1800
Installation of an anatomical amphitheatre by the physicist Baudot

circa. 1800 - 1832
Diverse occupants in the Chapel

1833-1845
Creation of the hagioscope

1843-1844
Albert Lenoir completes the first leg of the restoration in the Chapel for the opening of the museum