

Glossary

Enclosure: the inner monastery area off limits to laypersons, where monks live cloistered in accordance with the Benedictine Rule.

Ex-voto: painting, object or text placed in a church or chapel, given in fulfilment of a vow or in gratitude.

Hundred Years’ War: a series of conflicts between the kings of France and England from 1337 to 1453. In times of peace, the ‘Grandes Compagnies’, armies of mercenaries left with no source of earnings, would pillage the kingdom.


Masons’ marks: distinctive symbols left by stonemasons to ensure they were paid.

Mont Majour: meaning ‘big mountain’.

Wall-niche tomb: burial niche with a flat bottom in a wall in which to place a tomb.

Information

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The congregation of Saint-Maur

Reformist monks

Originating in 1618 in the great Parisian abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a reformist movement spread through the large Benedictine abbeys across France and resulted in the congregation of Saint-Maur.

Saint Maur was a disciple of Saint Benedict, credited with introducing the Benedictine Rule which was observed in most western abbeys in the Middle Ages, although often laxly following the Wars of Religion. The efforts of the congregation of Saint-Maur, whose activity was particularly earnest in the 17th century, helped to restore strict observance of the Rule.

Cultivated and open minds

Benedictine Rule encourages monks to undertake intellectual work, which revives spiritual reflection and opens the way to scientific research. There were 2,346 books recorded in the inventory of the library at Montmajour in 1739, and over 4,600 in 1790. The monks at Montmajour read works by great minds like Molière, Crébillon, Fontenelle and Cervantès, but also Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*.

Builder monks

Organised in a network, the Maurists instituted a systematic campaign to reconstruct monastic buildings. Montmajour was built in the classical style to be worthy of a palace, marking it out as a venerable site for this new congregation in the southeast of the kingdom.

The cloister’s Romanesque bestiary

The symbolic role of animals

The 12th-century sculptors depicted an animal world based on a sophisticated symbolism designed for the monks’ enlightenment and in praise of the Creator. Each animal embodies a personality and feelings akin to those of humans, a symbolic reflection of a spiritual reality embodying the conflict between good and evil: cat, bear, donkey, goat... Their depictions on the corbels represent animals’ enslavement to humans. The distinction between exotic and mythical animals did not exist in a society where people moved around very little, so these images are accompanied by hybrid compositions and man-eating monsters like the Tarasque. Legend tells that this half-dragon half-lion devoured anyone attempting to cross the Rhône marshland. In the cloister, the monster is represented holding a victim in its jaws.


The presence of human figures

In ancient tradition, humans are represented in the plant-motif decoration of the Corinthian-style column capitals, sometimes as a head among the foliage and sometimes in biblical scenes. The capital facing the entrance of the chapter house* illustrates one of the Temptations of Christ, urging monks to free themselves from the bondage of sin that they would confess in chapter. A scene from Pentecost, in the south gallery, shows the Holy Spirit descending on the apostles through a ribbon that connects them.

Abbey of Montmajour

From Provençal Romanesque style to classical splendour

Builder monks



Just outside of Arles, on a small rocky island surrounded by marshes, Mont Majour* was home to a community of Benedictine monks founded in the 10th century. The chapel of St. Peter was built in the mid-11th century, later followed by an abbey church. The relic of the True Cross conserved in its crypt drew crowds of pilgrims, which led to the construction of the Reliquary Chapel of the Holy Cross outside of the 12th-century enclosure*. In the late 13th century, the abbey’s spiritual power spread all the way from the Isère valley to the Mediterranean thanks to its 56 priories. The abbey was fortified during the Hundred Years’ War*. The reform undertaken by the congregation of Saint-Maur in the 18th century brought with it fresh impetus that materialised in the construction of a new monastery.

An exhibition space

The medieval buildings were listed as historic monuments in 1840 and underwent restoration as of 1862. In 1945, the abbey became the property of the French state. It is now an exhibition venue, hosting part of the Arles ‘Rencontres de la photographie’ festival every summer.

* Explanations overleaf.

CENTRE DES MONUMENTS NATIONAUX

The abbey church of Notre Dame

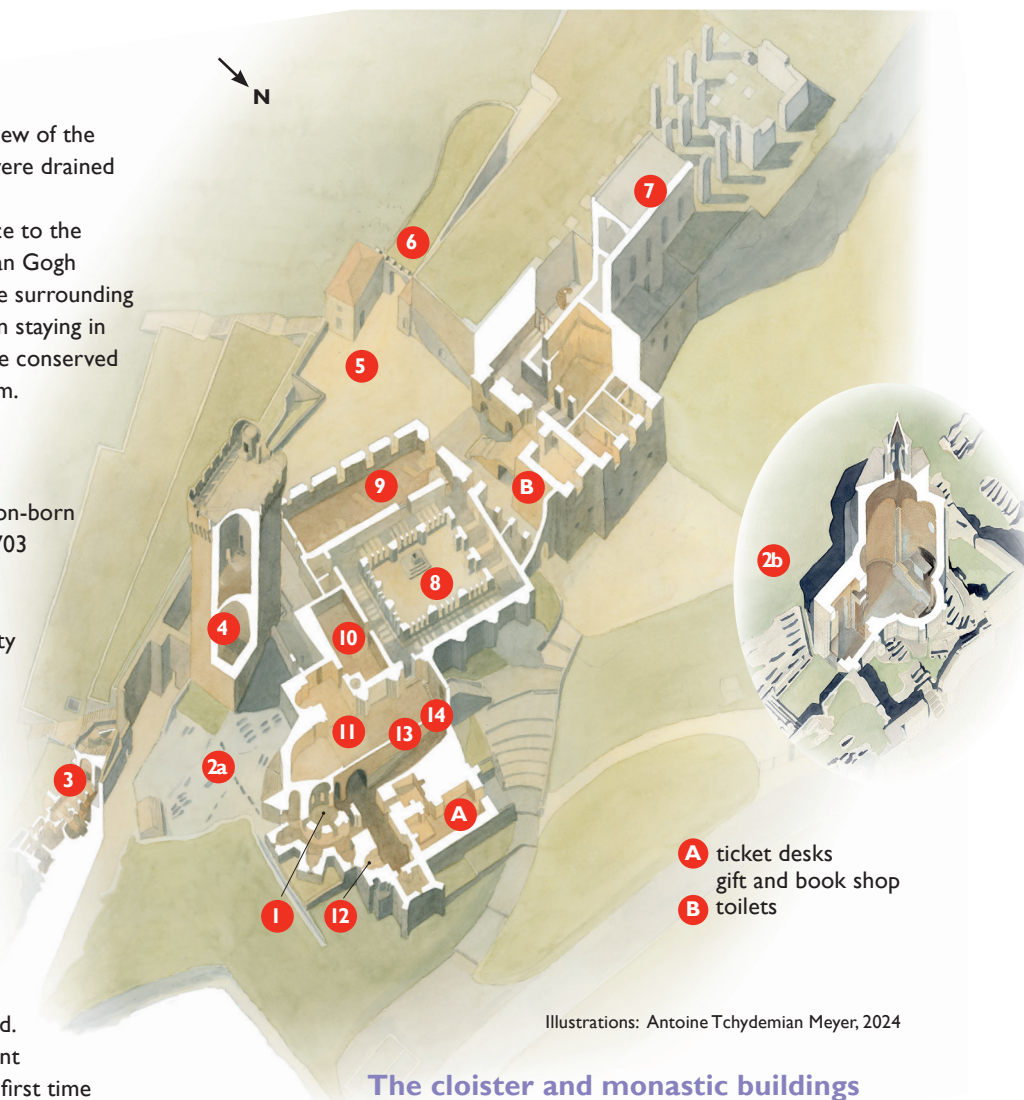
- 1 The crypt** had a dual function, acting as the foundations of the abbey and as the lower church. Shaped to the curve of the land itself and compensating the slope, part of its southern side was dug into the rock. To the north, double arches reinforce the barrel vaulting, a construction method used for amphitheatres in Roman times. This robust design meant that it could support the weight of the abbey church. The pillars and vaults still bear their masons' marks*. The transept and ambulatory lead to seven radiating chapels, which were all used for worship, as the Montmajour monks were also priests and celebrated private services.
- 2a The rock tombs** are a reminder of the funerary vocation of Mont Majour*. The oldest graves have clearly defined grooves for the feet and head.
- 2b The Chapel of the Holy Cross**, visible to the east of the enclosure*, is another masterpiece of Provençal Romanesque architecture. It was built in the late 12th century for people on the "Pardon de Montmajour" pilgrimage, which took place on the feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross, 3 May. A lay cemetery developed around it. This part of the site is not accessible to the public.
- 3 The Hermitage of St. Peter**, a pre-Romanesque semi-troglodyte chapel, is the abbey's oldest architectural ensemble. Access to it is indicated by a figure of St. Peter embedded in the wall.
- 4 The Pons de l'Orme tower**, work on which started in 1369, is one example of the defensive modifications made to the abbey during the Hundred Years' War*. The panoramic view from the top gives a good idea of the site's strategic position, just outside Arles.

The exterior

- 5 The terrace** affords a commanding view of the city of Arles and the marshes, which were drained in 1642.
- 6 The gatehouse** was the main entrance to the abbey as of the 17th century. Vincent Van Gogh drew this part of the site as well as the surrounding countryside on several occasions when staying in Arles in 1888-1889. These drawings are conserved at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

7 The Saint-Maur monastery

The monastery was built by the Avignon-born architect Pierre II Mignard between 1703 and 1719, despite the fact that the Maurists tended to entrust building works to a member of their community with a knowledge of architecture. After it was damaged by fire, Jean-Baptiste Franque was tasked with a second set of works between 1726 and 1728. The two final building campaigns, carried out in 1747 and 1776, gave the monastery its definitive appearance with 16 bays lining the façade. During the French Revolution, the monastery was used as a stone quarry and its roof and roof timbers were stripped. It was not listed as a historic monument until 1921. Open to the public for the first time since the 18th century, the first level is now an interpretation centre. The old cellar, renovated by the architect Rudy Ricciotti in 2000, is located in the lower spaces and is accessed via a glass walkway.



The cloister and monastic buildings

- 8 The cloister** is formed of 4 galleries. In the west gallery, visitors can still see the extensive 12th-century marine graffiti discovered in 1993, including ex-voti* and depictions of major events such as a departure for the Crusades. The 12th-century sculpted corbels depict fantastic beasts. The Romanesque south gallery,

meanwhile, contains sculptures typical of late 14th-century Gothic iconography. The gallery houses the wall-niche tomb* of the Counts of Provence, influential patrons of the abbey. It is the only gallery to have retained its Romanesque capitals, including a Temptation of Christ opposite the chapter house*. The cloister's north gallery was used for burials, as can be seen from the wall-niche tombs*, tomb stones and floor slabs. Its Antique style is similar to that found at Saint-Trophime church in Arles, with fluted pillars and Corinthian capitals.

- 9 The refectory** is partly built into the rock. The spiral staircase near the door led to the dormitory.
- 10 The chapter house** was where the monks, under the authority of the abbot, gathered to listen to the reading of a chapter (*capitulum*) of the Rule of Saint Benedict.
- 11 The abbey church**, dating from the 12th century, is an example of Provençal Romanesque architecture at its prime: a simple Latin cross plan with a single, barrel-vaulted nave and high ceiling. To leave the north wall uninterrupted, as it supports the building's structure against the rock face, interior lighting was provided by the windows of the choir, along with the tall bays of the transept crossing, which were added in the 13th century. Only two of the originally planned five bays were built.
- 12 The Chapel of Notre-Dame-la-Blanche**, in the north transept, still has two wall-niche tombs*, one of which housed the sepulchre of Bertrand de Maussang, abbot of Montmajour in the 14th century.
- 13 The sacristy** was added in the 15th century, and enhanced with a lavabo (washing basin) in the 18th century.
- 14 The archives room**, which also dates from the 15th century, has north-facing windows to provide light for reading and writing.

* Explanations overleaf.