

## Glossary

**Enclosure:** the inner area of a monastery, closed off to lay people, where monks lived in seclusion as set out by the Rule.

**Ex-voto, plural ex-voti:** painting, object or text placed in a church in thanks for a vow obtained or grace accorded.

**Hundred Years' War:** a series of conflicts between the Kings of France and England from 1337-1453. In times of peace, the Great Companies, bands of mercenaries, finding themselves without pay, would pillage the kingdom.

**Mason's marks:** distinctive signs left by stone masons in order to claim payment.

**Mont Majour:** big mountain.

**Chapter house:** place where monks assembled under the authority of the abbot to hear a reading from a chapter of their Rule.

## Practical information

Average length of visit: 1 hour

Guided tours in French.

Tours are suitable for disabled visitors.



### Gift and book shop

The guide for this monument is available in the *Itinéraires* collection in 4 different languages, in the bookshop-giftshop.

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## The Saint Maur congregation

### Reformist monks

The Saint Maur congregation arose from a reform movement, which started in 1618 in the great Parisian abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, before spreading to the great Benedictine abbeys in France.

Saint Maur was one of the companions of Saint Benedict, who drew up the Benedictine Rule observed by most Western abbeys during the Middle Ages, but which after the Wars of Religion was frequently followed only laxly. The Saint Maur congregation worked to have the Rule strictly observed, and was particularly active in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### Cultivated and open-minded monks

The Rule promoted intellectual work by monks, which relaunched spiritual reflection and led to works of scientific research.

In 1739, there were 2,346 works catalogued in the library at Montmajour, and over 4,600 in 1790. The Montmajour monks read Molière, Crébillon, Fontenelle, and Cervantes, as well as Diderot's and d'Alembert's Encyclopaedia.

### Monks and builders

Organised into a network, the Maurists conducted a systematic reconstruction campaign of monastic buildings. At Montmajour their veritable palace, built in the Classical style, singled it out as a major site in the south-east of the kingdom for this new congregation.

## The cloister's Romanesque bestiary

### The symbolic role of animals

The 12<sup>th</sup>-century sculptors depicted an animal world of complex symbolism designed for the edification of the monks and in praise of the Creator. Each animal refers to a character trait and feelings which are comparable to those of men, amounting to a symbolic reflection of a spiritual reality embodying the confrontation between good and evil, with cats, bears, donkeys, goats, and so on. Their depiction on the consoles expresses their subjugation to man.

There was no distinction between exotic and mythical animals in a society in which men travelled but little. The bestiary includes hybrid animals and man-eating monsters such as the Tarasque. The legend says that this monster - half dragon and half lion - devoured people who wanted to cross the Rhône marshes: in the cloister it is depicted with a victim between its jaws.

### The presence of human figures

As in Ancient art, man is depicted amidst the plant decor of the Corinthian capitals on the columns. This can take the form of a head surrounded by foliage, or of a Biblical scene. The capital opposite the entrance to the chapter house, for instance, represents the Temptation of Christ, an exhortation to free oneself from the bonds of sin, which the monks had to acknowledge during the reading of the chapter. A Pentecostal scene in the south gallery represents the Holy Spirit descending upon the apostles via a ribbon linking them.

# Montmajour Abbey

## From Provençal Romanesque to Classical splendour

### Monks and builders



*The abbey in 1846, by Révoil*

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, a community of Benedictine monks settled on a rocky island rising up from the

marshes just outside Arles, the Mont Majour\*. In the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century they built the Chapel of Saint Peter, and then an abbey church. The relic of the True Cross kept in its crypt attracted large numbers of pilgrims, leading to the construction of the reliquary Chapel of the Holy Cross outside the enclosure\* in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 13<sup>th</sup> century the abbey's influence extended from the valley of the Isère to the Mediterranean, via 56 priories. The abbey was fortified during the Hundred Years' War\*. Reforms carried out by the Saint Maur congregation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a phase of renewed vigour and the construction of a new monastery.

### Exhibition venue

The medieval buildings were listed as historic monuments in 1840 and restored from 1862 on. The abbey became State property in 1945. It now serves as a venue for exhibitions, and each summer takes part in the Rencontres de la photographie d'Arles.

\*Explanations overleaf.

## The abbey church of Notre Dame

- 1 The crypt** has a dual function, acting as the foundations of the abbey and as the lower church. It is adapted to the land, compensating the slope, with the southern side dug into the rock. To the north, double arches reinforce the barrel vaulting, a construction method used for amphitheatres in Roman days. Its strength means it can bear the weight of the abbey church. Mason's marks\* may be seen on the pillars and vaults. The transept and ambulatory lead to seven radiating chapels, which were all used for mass, as the Montmajour monks were also priests and celebrated private services.
- 2 The rock cemetery** reminds us of the funerary vocation of Mount Majour\*. The older graves provide a place for the head and feet.
- 3 The Hermitage of St. Peter**, a semi-troglodyte pre-Romanesque chapel, is the oldest architectural ensemble of the abbey. Access to it is indicated by a figure of Saint Peter embedded in the wall.
- 4a The Pons de l'Orme tower**, work on which started in 1369, illustrates how the abbey was modified for defensive purposes during the Hundred Years' War\*. The panoramic views from the top show the strategic position the place occupied just outside Arles.
- 4b The Chapel of the Holy Cross**, visible in the east of the enclosure\*, is another masterpiece of Provençal Romanesque architecture. It was built in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century for people on the "Pardon de Montmajour" pilgrimage, which was held on the feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross, 3 May. A lay cemetery has developed all around it.

## The exterior

- 5 The lower courtyard** has a fine viewing point over the marshes, which were drained in 1642.

- 6 The gatehouse** was once the main entrance to the abbey. 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 held by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

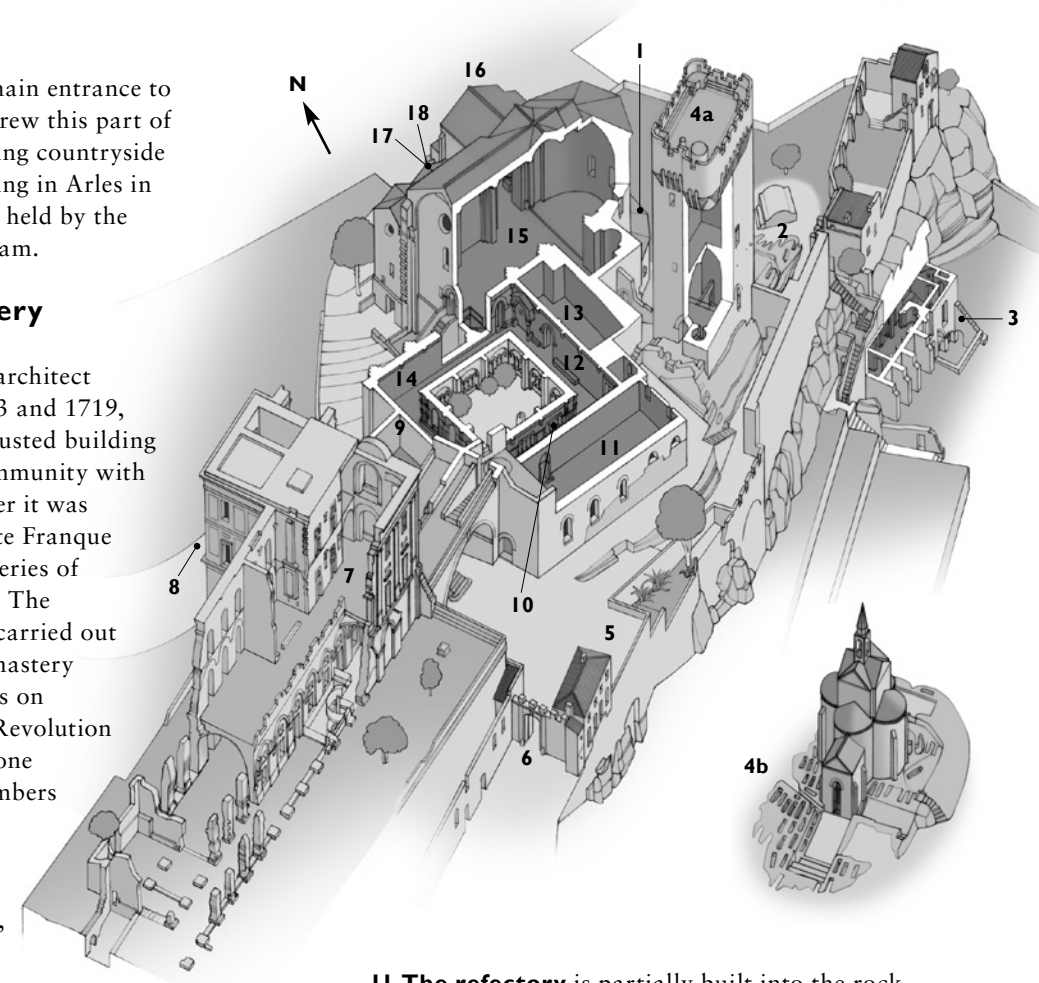
## 7 The Saint Maur monastery

This was built by the Avignon architect Pierre II Mignard between 1703 and 1719, though Maurists normally entrusted building works to a member of their community with knowledge of architecture. After it was damaged by a fire, Jean-Baptiste Franque was put in charge of a second series of works between 1726 and 1728. The two final building campaigns, carried out in 1747 and 1776, gave the monastery its definitive shape with 16 bays on the facade. During the French Revolution the monastery was used as a stone quarry and its roof and roof timbers stripped. It was only listed as a historic monument in 1921. Opened to the public for the first time since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the first level now houses an interpretation centre.

## 8 The old cellar

## The cloister and conventual buildings

- 9 The west gallery** contains many 12<sup>th</sup>-century marine graffiti discovered in 1993, including *ex-voti*\* and depictions of major events such as a departure for the Crusades. The 12<sup>th</sup>-century consoles depict fantastic beasts.
- 10 The south gallery**, a Romanesque structure, has sculptures that are typical of late 14<sup>th</sup>-century Gothic iconography.



- 11 The refectory** is partially built into the rock. The spiral staircase near the door leads to the dormitory.
- 12 The east gallery** houses the wall-niche tombs of the Counts of Provence, who were major donors to the abbey. It is the only gallery to have retained its Romanesque capitals, including a Temptation of Christ opposite the chapter house\*.
- 13 The chapter house\*** was where the monks and abbot held their daily assembly.

- 14 The cloister's north gallery** was used for burials, as may be seen from the wall-niche tombs, tomb stones, and floor paving. Its Ancient style is similar to that found at Saint-Trophime in Arles, with fluted pillars and Corinthian capitals, restored by Henri Révoil in 1862.
- 15 The nave**, dating from 1153 is an example of Provençal Romanesque architecture at its peak, with a simple layout in a Latin cross and a single, barrel-vaulted, very tall nave. In order to have an uninterrupted wall against the rock, the interior is lit by the windows of the choir and by the tall bays above the crossing which were added in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Only two of the originally planned five bays were built.
- 16 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, an abbot of Montmajour in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.
- 17 The sacristy** was added in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and enriched with a wash basin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- 18 The archives room**, which also dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, opens to the north, making it suitable for reading and writing work.