

If Chambord represents one of the most beautiful architectural showpieces of our country, the castle of Blois represents the region's art and history.

A BIT OF HISTORY

Louis of Orleans (end of the 14th century)

Blois is one of the landmarks of the Middle Ages. Early on, a powerful count settled in the town of Blois. In 1391, the estate was bought by the Duke of Orleans, brother of Charles VI. The historians of the time provide some rather juicy gossip about the deal. The previous owner of the property was the old Count of Châtillon. His young wife could not resist the very seductive Duke of Orleans. The duke, always broke, squeezed a lot of money out of the young countess. Châtillon quickly found himself broke and obliged to sell the castle, which the happy duke hastened to buy. Sixteen years later, Louis of Orleans was assassinated in Paris by orders of the Duke of Bourgogne, John II the Fearless (Jean sans Peur). His widow, Valentine de Milan, retired to Blois. She had a melancholy verse engraved on the walls: "Plus ne m'est rien, rien ne m'est plus." (You exist no more, nothing else exists) Inconsolable, she died the following year.

Charles of Orleans (15th century)

The oldest son of Louis of Orleans, Charles, inherited the castle. He was the poet of the family. At age 15, he married the daughter of Charles VI, who died in childbirth. At age 20, he remarried; then left to wage war on the English, who were attempting to invade France. He handled the battle of Azincourt quite badly, and was taken prisoner. His love of poetry helped him endure 25 years of captivity. Returning to France in 1440 (and widowed once again) he married Marie de Clèves – he age 50, she age 14.

Blois was his favorite residence. He knocked down part of the old fortress and constructed more livable habitat. Charles surrounded himself with a small court of artists and scholars, and made Blois a center for poetry. A happy event befell him in his old age. At 71, he finally had a son – the future Louis XII.

The Versailles of the Renaissance (16th century)

The former fortress of the counts of Blois was given new life when Louis XII settled there at the beginning of his reign. Blois became a royal residence and would play a role similar to that of Versailles in the following centuries. Louis XII and his wife, Anne of Brittany, liked it at the castle. The king began with the construction of the living quarters at the entryway, whose façade looked out over a small courtyard. He had a vast terraced garden designed by the Italian gardener (Pacello) at Amboise. It occupied what is now Victor Hugo Plaza and the neighborhood of the train station.

In 1515, Francis I succeeded Louis XII. It was Francis I who was responsible for the most beautiful parts of the castle. His wife, Claude de France, was the daughter of the deceased king. She was raised at Blois, and was very attached to the castle. In 1524, she died of wasting disease – barely 25 years old – after having given the king seven children in just eight years.

The Assassination of the Duke of Guise (1588)

It was under Henry III that Blois played a significant historical role. The States General was convened at Blois on two occasions. In 1576, it was called for the abolition of the Protestant faith. In 1588, Henry of Guise – lieutenant general of the kingdom, head of the Catholic Holy League, the “almighty of Paris”, benefactor of the king of Spain’s support– forced Henry III to convene the States General for a second time. 500 deputies were present, almost all of them behind Guise, who was counting on them to dethrone the king. The king; sensing he was on the brink of disaster, saw assassination as the only way to get rid of his rival. The murder took place in the castle itself, on the second floor.

It was December 23, 1588, around 8 o’clock in the morning. Among the 45 poor noblemen who were the henchmen of Henry III, 20 were chosen to kill the duke -eight of them armed with daggers, concealed under their coats. They were assembled in the king’s chamber. Seated on coffers, they appeared to be conversing peaceably. Two priests were in the chapel of the new study – praying for the success of the coup. The other twelve, armed with swords, were waiting in the old study.

Guise was in the council chamber with a few influential persons. After having spent the night out with a woman of the “flying squadron”, the duke was cold and hungry. He warmed himself by the fireplace and snacked on some Brignoles plums from his candy dish.

Then the Council began. Henry III’s secretary informed Guise that the king has summoned him to the old study. To access it, he had to go through the king’s chamber. The duke entered and the king’s men salute him. He headed off the to left. A hallway led to the study. Guise opened the door and, at the end of the passageway, caught sight of the twelve swordsmen who awaited him. He tried to go back, but the eight men in the king’s chamber cut off his retreat. They threw themselves on the victim. They seized him by the arms and legs, and wrapped his cloak around his sword. The duke, whose strength was prodigious, repelled four of the assailants, and clobbered another one. He dragged the lot of them all the way through the king’s chamber and, riddled with wounds, fell near the king’s bed. Henry III; coming of of his study; moved toward his rival. He is said to have slapped him in the face, yelling, “My God is he big. He seems larger in death than in life!”

Next, the king went downstairs to his mother, Catherine de Medici, and gleefully announced, "My companion is no more! The king of Paris is dead!" "God did not will," replied Catherine, "that you become king for no reason." His conscience cleared, Henry then went to St Calais Chapel to listen to a thanksgiving mass.

The next day, the Cardinal of Lorraine, brother of the Duke of Guise, imprisoned in a dungeon immediately after the murder, was assassinated in turn. His body joined that of Guise in the clothes closet of the new study. They were both incinerated and their ashes thrown into the Loire. Eight months later, Henry III would succumb to the dagger of Jacques Clément.

In 1617, Marie de Medici was banished to Blois by her son Louis XIII. After two years of rather luxurious "captivity", the queen mother escaped. In spite of her portliness, she made her way down a rope ladder into the castle's dry moat by night. After this act of prowess, mother and son reconciled.

Gaston of Orleans, the Conspirator (17th century)

In 1626, Louis XIII, in order to distract his troublesome and conspiratorial brother Gaston of Orleans, gave him the county of Blois and persuaded him to rebuild the castle. Gaston asked the great architect Mansart to design a vast new edifice, which would completely replace the old one. For three years, the work progressed at a good pace. Then, with the birth of the future Louis XIV (and thus no chance for Gaston to ascend to the throne), Richelieu no longer deemed it necessary to continue funding this project and construction stopped. During the later years of his life, the older and wiser Gaston lived in the Francis I wing and beautified the gardens.

The Façade of the "Place du Chateau" (the Castle Plaza)

It is composed of two parts – the States Room, remnant of the former feudal castle (1) and the newer portion, built by Louis XII, in brick and stone (5). In this latter construction, the Italian influence is noticeable in some decorative elements, such as the ornamental panels on the gate. Made of beautifully contrasting brick and stone, it is further enhanced by diamond-shaped black bricks, which add to the refined decor. But the Italian taste for symmetry had not yet taken hold, and the openings are distributed in a whimsical medieval fashion. On the first floor, two windows are on the balcony. The one on the left led to the bedroom of Louis XII. His minister, the Cardinal of Amboise, lived in the adjoining building, destroyed in 1940 and rather poorly rebuilt. When the king and the cardinal went out on their balconies for some fresh air, they could speak informally about the matters of the day. The large gate, in flamboyant gothic style, is topped by a niche containing an equestrian statue of Louis XII. (modern copy) This statue monumentalizes the entrance and gives it a ceremonious character – similar to the Jacques Coeur Palace in Bourges and the Castle of Verger. All the decorative elements are gothic – the hanging arches, the trefoil

copings and the dormer window at the top. The windows have sculpted cul de lampes, where the sauciness common in that époque is shown quite naturally. [First and fourth windows to the left of the gate] To the right of the façade, steps lead to a lovely room with a barrel vault ceiling. There are a few Renaissance motifs, such as the candelabra located over the entrance door.

The Interior Courtyard

On the terrace, overlooking St. Nicolas Church and the Loire, is Foix Tower (2), which was part of the feudal enclosure. The courtyard is surrounded by the successive buildings which make up the castle.

St. Calais Chapel

All that remains of St. Calais Chapel (4) - the king's private chapel - is the chancel, rebuilt by Louis XII. The nave was destroyed by Mansart, when he had the Gaston of Orleans wing built. The stained glass windows by Max Ingrand are contemporary.

Charles of Orleans Gallery (3)

Up until the 17th century, when Mansart began construction of the new castle, the gallery was twice as long as it is now, and it connected the two far ends to the courtyard. It was built in the middle of the 15th century. It is the first building where brick and stone were used together. The gallery is supported by very low archways. Columns with diamond-shaped shafts stamped with fleur de lys and royal ermine intermix with pillars of interposed circles and squares. This is typical of the gothic style.

The Louis XII Wing (5)

It consists of a hall leading to various rooms in the logis (living quarters). It marked an advancement in comfort because, until that time, rooms in castles joined each other directly. At each end, a spiral stairway, housed in a tower, accesses the different floors. The building resembles that of Charles of Orleans – a rare occurrence, as builders in the Middle Ages were not too concerned about congruity in successive constructions. The decor, however, is much richer. Italian motifs appear on the pillars. The Louis XII Logis also shows some originality in having the same layout as the Logis of the Seven Virtues in Amboise. Two symmetrical living quarters, composed of a bedroom and dressing room, are arranged on either side of a central room. In contrast with the Logis of the Seven Virtues, the Louis XII wing at Blois is not a royal logis. In December 1501; the Archduke and Archduchess of Austria stayed there. The royal logis of the king and queen were located in another wing, which was destroyed by Francis I.

The Francis I Wing (6)

The building is located between the Gaston of Orleans wing (17th century) and the States Room (13th century)(1). A dozen years separate the construction of the Louis XII wing and the Francis I wing – twelve years during which architecture evolved. It was the period where one just had to decorate “à la Italienne” in order to impress. In the Francis I wing, the synthesis of France and Italy is more pronounced. It was no longer about carving a few Italian motifs here and there on a gothic ensemble; but about profoundly changing the architectural and decorational forms. And yet; the whimsical tendencies still persisted. The windows correspond to the placement of the rooms, with no concern for symmetry. Sometimes they are close together; sometimes they are far apart. The window casings are sometimes double, sometimes single. The pilasters sometimes flank the windows; other times occupy the middle of the bay.

A magnificent stairway was added to the façade and attracts a lot of attention. Mansart later demolished part of the wing in order to build the Gaston of Orleans edifice, so the stairway is no longer in the center of the façade. It ascends in an octagonal casing. Three of its sides are in the wall and perpetuates the French tradition of the exterior spiral stairway. It has large bay openings. This masterpiece of architecture and sculpture was obviously designed for grand receptions. The casing is hollowed out between the buttresses and forms a series of galleries where the royal court could be present for the arrival of important guests. On the balconies of these galleries stood the honor guard.

As he climbed the stairs, the king could enjoy the spectacle outside and, himself, become the object of the attention of the courtisans, who could watch him from the courtyard. All of the exterior railings are covered with fine sculptures. The decoration is quite detailed and varied. Royal symbols are used in addition to all the usual motifs of the Renaissance.

The Gaston of Orleans Gallery (7)

The classical style, created by Mansart, contrasts sharply with the rest of the building. From the courtyard, the contrast is not favorable. To judge it fairly, one must see it from the outside and imagine how it would look as part of the whole. Of gigantic proportions, it took up the site of the castle and the plaza. With its successive terraces covering the entire neighborhood of the present day train station, it went all the way to the forest.

The Apartments of the Francis I Wing

One goes up to the first floor via the Francis I stairway. The various rooms, many of which have magnificent fireplaces, unfortunately have no furniture. The decoration was restored by Duban, but it is almost too glossy. Under the kings, the smoke coming from the fireplaces, candles and torches quickly darkened the decor.

The First Floor

The most interesting room is the study of Catherine de Medici. It still has its 237 carved wood panels, which hide many secret compartments – one for poison, one for jewelry, another for state papers. Such muraled cabinets were common in Italian studies. The secret compartments were opened by stepping down on a pedal hidden in the skirting board.

The Second Floor

This is the scene of the crime. Since the murder of the Duke of Guise, the rooms have been modified. The king's study no longer exists, as it was incorporated into the Gaston of Orleans wing. Therefore, it is hard to retrace the incident.

The Francis I Exterior Façade (6)

In the course of visiting the apartments, one passes from an inside section to an outside section. The interior part was built up against the medieval enclosure and there was no view to the outside. Francis I could not stand it anymore and decided to tack on a construction with many openings to the exterior, against the ramparts. As this construction was built over a precipice, an additional underbase became necessary.

The two floors of the living quarters and the upper gallery of this façade make it very different from other parts of the building. It brings to mind certain Italian palaces. But here, too, the lack of symmetry in the windows, the watch towers, the balconies, the pilasters, the underbase, is quite French. A lovely row of gargoyles runs underneath the top floor of the logis.

The States Room (1)

The seigniorial room of the ancient castle of the counts of Blois is the oldest part of the castle. It was there that the States General of 1576 and 1588 took place.