

THE JACQUES COEUR PALACE

Jacques Cœur would probably not hold the place in French history that he does were it not for the many constructions he had built throughout France. He had "houses", lodges and trading posts built throughout the kingdom. It is, in this way, that he left his mark in Paris, Tours, Marseille, Montpellier, Pézenas, Béziers, Saint-Pourçain...

But it is in Bourges, his home town, that he built his largest project. In 1443, he began the construction of a palace in the Sainte-Chapelle section of the city at the top of Auron Street, where he owned, by inheritance and by marriage, four houses. (There is, however, a doubt about the one which currently bears the plaque commemorating his birth.)

The project was carried out very quickly under the supervision of Guillot Trépant and Jacquelin Culon, bourgeois from Bourges, and Pierre Jobert, one of his builders. The architect of the edifice is unknown, as were most of the craftsmen and artists who participated in the construction.

Another irony of history: Jacques Coeur never saw his "Grande Maison" completed, where he, nonetheless, gave parties and dinners, notably on the occasion of the the swearing in of his son.

When Jacques Coeur was arrested, Guillot Trépat described the house thus: "unfinished and unfurnished – for the workers going through the place have ruined everything."

The history of the greatest construction project in Bourges – apart from the palace built by Duke Jean – is quite eventful.

The palace was given back to the family of Jacques Coeur on August 5, 1457, and later sold by one of his grandsons on October 7, 1507.

The house of Jacques Coeur had many owners and saw the passing of many illustrious hosts – such as Louis, the future Grand Condé, brought up at the Jesuit school of Bourges.

On March 20, 1682, the magistrates of Bourges bought the palace from Colbert, who had been the owner for three years.

Made city hall, the building experienced a long period decline through the many retrofits and changes.

In 1858, the state and the regional government bought back the palace to set up the tribunal personnel who very quickly found themselves in too small a space, despite the construction of an additional building.

In 1923, the state purchased the ensemble and the magistrates were transferred to the former convent of the Ursulines on Arènes Street.

From that date, the Jacques Coeur Palace was made part of the Historical Monuments, but in a very sad state indeed.

Up until the eve of World War II, Huignard, the chief architect for the Historic Monuments, headed a huge restoration project which sought to recreate the palace's original layout.

Location

The palace of Jacques Coeur is right in the center of Bourges. Like the cathedral and the Palace of Duke Jean, it stands on a Gallo-Roman rampart, which marks a significant difference in elevation. The west side dominated the landscape, and the east side is at the same level as the upper part of town.

The Jacques Coeur Palace has the shape of an irregular quadrilateral, in which the buildings surround a courtyard and present their main façades to the east and west.

The Exterior Façades

The two façades are very different in appearance. To the west, the Gallo-Roman rampart, which acts as a base, is quite visible. Moreover, it was restored at the end of the 19th century. It's made of small cubic stones with horizontal bands of brick. Two old towers further add to its military aspect.

The main tower, called the Chaussée Tower or the Treasure Tower, is not attached to the rest of the buildings. It is round at the bottom and hexagonal at the top; and is reminiscent of the towers at the castle of Mehun-sur-Yèvre, built by Guy de Dammartin, the architect of the Duke of Berry.

The decor of the keep is abundantly sculpted – balustrades decorated with hearts and scallop shells (emblems of Jacques Coeur), cornices with gargoyles; personages sculpted in the corners. A roof once covered the crenels.

The side looking out the street is composed of a grand central pavilion with two doors – a coach entrance and a pedestrian entrance. Above them; there is a chapel, identical to the one of Mehun-sur-Yèvre, built by Guy de Dammartin.

From the street, one sees a balcony covered by a stone canopy, flanked by two absolutely stunning matching windows, where we see two sculpted figures: a woman leaning on her elbows turned toward the right; and on the other side, a man leaning on his elbows turned toward the left.

Above this central canopy, there is a large, arched window with a sculpture of two hearts on which is placed a grand fleur-de-lys. A balustrade and dormer window crown the ensemble, which has an octagonal turret decorated in stone filigree. At the base of the turret, there is a balustrade decorated with hearts and scallop shells – with the famous motto: For a valiant heart nothing [is] impossible.

On either side of the pavilion, the façades of the two wings rest on a base, which at one time had small windows. The only remaining example is located to the left of the pedestrian entrance.

A miniature Book of Days of Jacques Coeur, preserved at the Munich Library, shows that the central canopy once sheltered a statue of Charles VII on a galloping horse, sword raised.

During the French Revolution, the statue disappeared after the "Friends of Liberty" asked for it in a petition dated September 15, 1792. It's quite probable that the statues of the man and woman which adorn the false windows were reversed at that time and originally looked out at the king. This conjecture is substantiated by Jacques Coeur's Book of Days.

The original statue is not unlike the one of Louis XII on the façade of the castle of Blois. Thus, the main façade of the Jacques Coeur palace shows the connection between the king and Jacques Coeur: the fleur-de-lys (emblem of the king) and the heart and scallop shells (emblems of Jacques Coeur).

The Courtyard

The courtyard is strikingly beautiful and diverse. It is even more impressive if one enters by the grand entryway and not by the current visitor's entrance. The large façade of the living quarters (logis) immediately attracts one's attention. Three turrets embellish the façade. The one in the center is ornamented with sculptures apparently symbolizing Jacques Coeur's torture. The tropical trees perhaps represent his travels and the treasures he brought back. Toward the top of the this turret, there are two statues which historians think represent Macée de Léopart – sumptuously dressed – and Jacques Coeur – holding the gavel of the "mâitre des monnaies" (head of the mint).

Other characters also appear on the turret: pedlars, an African, beggars, a woman carrying a pot. Near one of the decorations, one can read the maxim of businessman and statesman Jacques Coeur: Say it, do it, and be quiet about it. The fact that this turret is so richly decorated is an indication that it was once the main entryway to the living quarters.

On one of the other two turrets, the one to the north, there are sculptures of people doing various tasks: washing a plate, grinding in a mortar, turning a spindle, hanging a cooking pot over the fire. This turret was obviously the entrance to the kitchens.

The stairway of the chapel is decorated with scenes showing the preparations for a church service. There is a boy ringing the church bell, a beggar resting on his crutch- begging bowl in hand, and three beautiful ladies rushing with a pageboy, while in the center the altar is being prepared.

The other façades of the courtyard are simpler and less richly decorated. That of the entry pavilion has only one window – identical to the one of the bay overlooking the street – and a stone canopy.

Galleries surround the courtyard. The style of these covered arched galleries (passage ways) was a very popular architectural feature at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance.

The Interior of the Living Quarters (West) – Ground Floor

The pageantry room is located on the ground floor of the living quarters. It shows the attributes and characteristics of a "salle d'apparat" (ceremonial room) of the Middle Ages. It takes up the entire width of the building and is lit by five windows. Its main entrance is connected to the central turret, and there is a second entrance at the south staircase. At the other end of the room, in a corner, one can access the palace's main tower by a stairway.

There are interior doors at the other two corners which lead to other parts of the living quarters.

Before World War II, the architect Huignard restored much of the decor of this room. The central fireplace was restored according to documented sources. Huignard learned from these documents that a monumental fireplace had been located in this ceremonial room. He also learned that the mantelpiece had been decorated with a representation of Adam and Eve. Everything was destroyed sometime in the past. Due to some excavations effectuated on the interior north wall, the architect found the feet of the fireplace, as well as some rare fragments of its original decor, under a floorboard. This is how he managed to recreate the palm leaves, pieces of turrets, crenels and a woman's hand holding an apple.

Starting with these elements, the architect was able to recreate the bulk of the fireplace and a large part of its decor - except for the representation of Adam and Eve, for want of sufficient remnants. He likewise reconstructed a gallery in the northwest corner of the room.

The portrayal of two winged stags in the southwest corner of the room is also part of the decor which Huignard discovered behind the planks of an inner wall. These elements are vestiges of the original decor and are a repeated theme in the tapestries of that epoch in which one was "made of flying stags and the king's coat of arms, being in the grand hotel.

The walls still have traces of paintings which the magistrates ordered at the end of the 17th century.

On the other hand, a search warrant, dated February 26, 1636, informs us that this room consisted of "thirty glass panels, on which the twelve lords of France and several kings of Christianity were represented, all in beautiful painted glass". Unfortunately, no other such writings remain.

A serving hatch was restored and rebuilt by Huignard. The ground floor of the living quarters also has a number of service rooms. One gets to them via a hallway which comes out of the pageantry room. They are also accessible from the grand stairway. There is a servant's hall with a stairway, which goes down to a cellar (a wine cellar perhaps??) located under the keep, and then to a kitchen.

This kitchen is equipped with a clever system of saunas located in a small room where the keystone, which carries the coat of arms of Jacques Coeur and that of his wife, leaves no

doubt as to who the privileged users were. There is also a cloakroom built in the watchtower on the western façade.

The kitchen corridor leads to a small courtyard with a well. Another hallway, where the ticket stand is currently located, leads to a door on the northeasternmost façade on the street.

To the south of the pageantry room, the living quarters has a group of rooms serviced by a corridor which runs along the western façade and by two stairways.

The general layout of the ground floor of the living quarters is typical of medieval architecture. The courtyard stairways were used as entrances as well as getting from floor to floor. Each entrance has a specific function which is designated by the decoration on the tympanum. Each stairway leads to two rooms. As for the pageantry room, it is the central point.

The First Floor and the Attic of the Main Building

On the first floor, the arrangement of the rooms is virtually identical to that of the ground floor. There is a large room, which is the center point, typical of medieval architecture.

The large room is connected to a group of rooms which form an apartment to the south. To the north, three rooms are serviced by a corridor, which runs along the western side and leads to the keep via a secret stairway.

The corridor leads to a stairway which goes down to the saunas on the ground floor and to a mezzanine where one finds a pit, above which the first-floor latrines are located.

The search warrant dated 1636 states, "In the large room upstairs were found sixteen glass panels depicting the coat of arms of Jacques Coeurs and those his allies. In a room called the Galley Chamber, there are six stained glass windows where galleys and ships are depicted in very beautiful paintings." It is in this room on the first floor that the restorers placed the single remaining panel showing a galley, as well as a bas relief of a warship with all sails raised.

The steps in the central stairway were destroyed. The stairway was partially repaired in 1760, but it no longer goes up to the attic where the service rooms are located.

The building's roof structure, in the form of an upside down hull, remains intact. It is unique in that it is not composed of trusses, but rather of rafters. The wood of which they were built came from the forest of Aubigny.

The Inside of the Keep

On the first floor of the keep, there is a room which was once used as a "small council chamber". The magistrates had the room decorated with murals, rediscovered in 1938 beneath a layer of paint. These works, of the painter Longuet, depict pastoral scenes, an "arc de triomphe", a town procession, and the magistrates' coat of arms.

On top of the fireplace is a lovely sculpture, discovered in 1893, of a winged maiden surrounded by flowers, holding a banner bearing the famous motto, "For a valliant heart, nothing [is] impossible".

This motif is reminiscent of many tapestries siezed by Charles VII's men.

A room on the third floor, behind an old iron door, has a carved console containing a strange scene: a passage from Tristan where Tristan finds Iseult in a garden. In the flowing water is reflected the face of King Mark, who is hiding in a tree under the power of the denunciation of his dwarf Froncin, in such a way that the two lovers watch this spectacle. This room - which was called the "cherub room" beginning in the 15th century, perhaps due to decorative elements carved on other consoles, then the "iron door room" or the "town hall treasury room" - housed the municipal archives.

The Gallery Floor

On the floor containing the northern arched gallery, there is a large room; called "the winter room" in 1636. It orginally was connected to the living quarters.

The floor containing the other galleries connected the living quarters and the chapel.

These galleries were heated. The fireplaces in the southern gallery still have their sculpted mantelpieces, restored by the architect Bailly during the Second Empire.

The Chapel

One enters the chapel by the southern gallery bay, where the stairway is. The entrance tympanum shows the Annunciation.

The chapel is lit by two large square windows to the east. The altar is above the west bay.

Two small box seats were built on the north and south walls. Each has a fireplace. These vaulted balconies, which carry the coat of arms of Jacques Coeur and his wife, were obviously reserved for the master and mistress of the house. One can find similar balconies in the Sainte-Chapelle of the Duke of Berry or in the Jacques Coeur chapel in the cathedral.

The chapel's vault is quite remarkable. Two bays are divided into six compartments each by a ribbed vault which drop down to some culs-de-lampe, bearing the coat of arms shield of Jacques Coeur and those of his closest allies: his wife, Trousseau – husband of his daughter Perrette, Jobert and Culon – his associates, as well as his friend, de Bar.

Within the 12 partitions of the vault, twenty angels, holding banners with verses of Gloria and the Song of Solomon, complete the decoration.

Above the altar, in 1461, distinguished visitors could admire "in one painting the Superindendant of Finance , in another the King of France and King René, and many other

lords of the kingdom" and above all "the high altar table, beautifully painted by a grand master."

The inventory of 1636 reveals that "inside the chapel nothing was found, except a table with its latch, also painted on the inside, which is in front of the altar of said chapel."

There were numerous restorations inside the chapel, notably in the 19th century.

In 1865, the painter Alexandre Denuelle designed the ceiling of the chapel. This drawing, currently conserved at the Museum of French Monuments, shows us that the bottom of the severy was rather damaged and that certain angels were partly gone.

In 1869, Denuelle was put in charge of restoring all paintings inside the chapel. A recent study at the research laboratory of the historic monuments show that he "entirely redid the vault, completely respecting the spirit of the paintings"; but his work was not perfect on the lower parts of the walls.

SOME PAGES FROM HISTORY

Jacques Coeur Palace

Jacques Coeur always used the term "grande maison" to refer to his palace. In fact, the word "palace" is a contemporary term, and it never occurred to anyone at that time to use the word "palace". "Grande maison" was well understood in the 15th century to mean a residence of unusually large proportions with sumptuous decor.

Starting in the 16th century, the concept of "private hotel" (hôtel particulier) took hold, and it is with this term that we define the Jacques Coeur Palace. The term of "hotel" was even more suitable when it housed the town hall - or "hotel de ville" - beginning in 1682.

In 1693, the magistrates of the bailiwick also moved into the Jacques Coeur Palace after a fire struck the former palace of the Duke of Berry.

It is in 1820 that the term "palace" appears. In fact, beginning from this date, the royal tribunals and their various agencies were located in the "grande maison". It is in reference to this court of justice that one spoke henceforth about a palace. As for the town hall, it relocated its services to the building next door, now gone, which was called the "hotel de Limoges".

Even though the court of appeals of Bourges left the premises in 1923 to relocate to the former convent of the Ursulines, the term "palace" remained.

The Royal Hotel

The royal court stayed at the Jacques Coeur Palace on two occasions.

In September 1562, the royal army took the town from Protestant troupes. Catherine de Medici and her son, King Charles IX, demonstrated their possession of the town by coming

and staying until the 6th of September. They lodged in the Jacques Coeur Palace, which belonged to Claude d'Aubespine, the Secretary of Finance.

The second stay was under the reign of Louis XIV, when he - accompanied by his younger brother, the Duke of Anjou, and the queen mother, Anne of Austria - made a military-like entrance into the town of Bourges to remain there from the 7th to the 25th of October, 1651, at the Jacques Coeur Palace. The purpose of his presence there was to limit the influence of the Condé clan, very much established in Berry.

He certainly didn't know that he was staying in the same apartment that his adversary, the "Grand Condé, now Duke of Enghien, lived in from 1630 to 1635, from age 8 to age 13, when he did his studies at the Jesuit school of Bourges.

The Jacques Coeur Palace, Court of Justice

For a century (1820 – 1920), the court of justice was headquartered in the hotel Jacques Coeur. Of the numerous and spectacular proceedings which took place here, one can note:

In 1836, the divorce of George Sand and her husband Baron Dudevant was judged in appeal at the hotel Jacques Coeur. Her lawyer was the famous Michel de Bourges, who was her lover.

In March 1849, the trial of the accused of the Paris riots of May 1848, Barbes, Blanqui, Raspail and ten other accomplices, facing charges of insurrection against the government. The guilty were incarcerated in the holding cells created in the palace and the outbuildings From Lamartine and Ledru Rolin to Vidocq, the participants were many, while Barbes and Blanqui quarrelled in front of their judges and supporters.

At the beginning of 1864, it involved a famous writer, Alexandre Dumas who came to support the cause of his daughter, Marie, desiring to end an unhappy marriage, which had been witnessed by two illustrious colleagues – Hugo and Lamartine!

Mérimée and Stendhal

Prosper Mérimée, inspector for the historic monuments, and his friend Stendhal, came to Bourges the 29th and 30th of May, 1837. The Jacques Coeur Palace held their attention and Mérimée declared that this was "the house of a man whose name brings to mind a glaring injustice".

Mérimée lamented the fact that the tribunal set up there had "almost entirely altered the interior layout of the building. All the interior ornamentation is gone."