

The Imprint of the Renaissance

In their design, style and carvings, the columns are characteristic of the early Renaissance in Rouen and Normandy. The North Wing displays themes that enjoyed never-seen-before popularity during the Renaissance: carvings of the Virtues and Sibyls, those women of Antiquity who foretold the coming of Christ, his Passion and his Resurrection. As for the column capitals, which have been preserved better than the rest of the carvings at the Aître Saint Maclou, the Italian influence is mixed together with the mediaeval designs that are so often found in manuscripts of that time.

Pair of Sibyls, North Wing (engraving by E.H. Langlois, 19th century)



This creates a hybrid universe composed of fanciful images from Antiquity (sphinxes*, satyrs and cupids) and from the Middle Ages (heads in the form of leaves, the bust of a bearded man with a cap, and grimacing faces) in a plant-filled setting with elements borrowed from northern Italy (cornucopias and candelabras*).

* Sphinx: winged lioness with a woman's head.

* Candelabra: in architecture, this is a motif representing a lamp.

Practical Information:

Aître Saint-Maclou

Open to the public

Daily

- From 1 November to 31 March: from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.
- From 1 April to 31 October: from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Free entrance

Group Tours

The Rouen Tourist Office offers guided tours for groups, with advance booking.

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“Let's all go to the Aître Saint-Maclou”

Discovering a monument with the senses

This tactile display, designed and built by artist Jean-Baptiste Bouvier, makes the Aître Saint Maclou accessible to all visitors, whether disabled or not. Set up at 180, rue Martainville, this display offers visitors an opportunity to discover the historic, architectural and symbolic cha-

acteristics of the site through a multi-sensorial approach. Three models are used to show the site at different levels: the urban fabric and immediate surroundings, a 3D representation, and life-size reproductions of carvings depicting the Dance of Death.

Information and Bookings for Group Tours and Activities:

Audience development Department,
Art and Heritage
for the City of Rouen

Tel.: +33 (0)2 32 08 13 90

Come Hear the Tale of Rouen, City of Art and History...

... In the company of a tour guide/lecturer certified by the French Ministry of

Culture

Your guide will welcome you to Rouen. He or she knows Rouen in all its facets and will give you the keys to understanding the city, its development and its many neighbourhoods. Your guide is also there to listen. Please feel free to ask him or her any questions you may have.

The Heritage and Tourism Section,

which coordinates Rouen's initiatives as a “City of Art and History”, has developed this self-guided tour. Year round, it organises events and activities for Rouen's residents and for children. Please contact us for more information or for help in planning your event.

If you are visiting in a group

Rouen offers guided tours year round, with advance booking. Further information is available at the Tourist Office.



« Dance! May the circle of dancers be huge and the feast joyous! Dance until daybreak, and then return to your beds of stone. »

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, THE DANCE OF DEATH

Come Hear the Tale of Aître Saint-Maclou

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Informations and réservations:

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Rouen Belongs to the Nationwide Network of "Cities and Regions of Art and History"

The Architecture and Heritage Directorate of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication awards the label “Cities and Regions of Art and History” to communities that bring their heritage to life. This label is a guarantee that tour guides are knowledgeable and competent. From ancient ruins to 20th century architecture, cities and regions present their heritage sites in all their diversity. At present, this network of 130 cities and regions offers you its savoir-faire in all parts of France.

Nearby Attractions

Dieppe, Fécamp, Le Havre, Elbeuf and the Pays d’Auge have all been awarded the label “Cities and Regions of Art and History”.

Aître Saint-Maclou

Since the destruction of Saint-Innocents cemetery in Paris in 1786, the Aître Saint-Maclou, which bore witness to the great plagues that ravaged Rouen, is virtually the only example of a charnel house still standing in Europe.

History

The Cemetery's Origins

This cemetery, or "aitre" in French (from the Latin atrium, meaning an inner courtyard at the entrance to a Roman villa, and by extension a cemetery just in front of a church), was built in the centre of Saint-Maclou parish. Incorporated into the city in 1253, Saint-Maclou was, at the time, one of the city's largest and most populous parishes, as well as the heart of one of Rouen's main activities: textile production. The Aître Saint-Maclou dates from the Black Plague (1348), one of the deadliest epidemics ever known in Europe (according to the chronicler Froissart, nearly a third of the population perished). It took the place of an older cemetery, which had grown too small and which had been located to the north of the church since the 13th century.



From Charnel House to Ossuary

In 1521-1522, confronted with a new outbreak of the plague, the parish decided to increase the cemetery's capacity by building three wings around the yard, each topped with an attic for use as an ossuary. Work was begun in 1526 and completed somewhere between 1529 and 1533. During the epidemics, with both the number of corpses and the risks of contagion increasing, funeral practices changed enormously: bodies were wrapped in a simple shroud and then thrown haphazardly into large pits in the centre of the yard. When the ossuary* was built, gravediggers exhumed the bones after the flesh had rotted away (this process was accelerated by the use of quick lime) and then piled them in the attic space between the ceiling and roof of the buildings.*

* Ossuary: a building in which human bones are kept.

Miniature depicting an ossuary (medieval manuscript)



View from the West Wing of the Aître Saint-Maclou (engraving by E. H. Langlois, 19th century)

A School in the Cemetery

Near the present entrance, the wooden support for a bell serves as a reminder of the site's academic heritage. In the mid-17th century, a new building was built on the south end of the graveyard, using a bequest from Father Robert Duchesne (whose coat-of-arms is carved on the building's facade). It housed a school for poor boys from the neighbourhood, though the cemetery remained in use. In the 17th century, the Christian Brothers, founded by Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, took over the operation of the school. The ossuary buildings were renovated between 1745 and 1749 in order to serve as classrooms. The Christian Brothers stayed until 1907, with the exception of the Revolutionary period (1792-1819), when the site was used for various purposes: a cotton-spinning company, weapons manufacture, and a revolutionary club. In 1779, following a royal decree, the Parliament of Normandy ordered the closure of all graveyards within city walls. Saint-Maclou cemetery was closed in 1781, and was replaced by the Mont Gargan cemetery, which was located outside the city itself.

Robert Duchesne's coat-of-arms (South Wing)



View from the South Wing



Wooden bell support (North Wing)

North Wing, current condition

Historical Monuments and the School of Fine Arts

In 1862, the Aître Saint-Maclou was classified as a historical monument in recognition of its historical and architectural significance. The Christian Brothers' school was replaced in 1911 by a boarding school for girls. When that school closed, the buildings were left in a state of semi-abandonment and then put up for sale. In 1927, the Aître Saint-Maclou became the property of the City of Rouen, which planned to put a museum of Norman art there. In 1930, renovation work was started, but the buildings were not used for any specific purpose until the School of Fine Arts moved there in 1940, after fire had destroyed the Halle aux Toiles. The

Aître Saint-Maclou is still home to the Regional School of Fine Arts to this day, providing nearly 180 students with higher education in the visual arts. The galleries in the South Wing and on the rue Martainville add to the school's renown by exhibiting the work of nationally or internationally known artists.

Architecture

Construction of the Buildings

Three wings were built in the early 16th century on the west, north and east sides of the graveyard. Each built with a stone base, these wings are punctuated by columns with Renaissance-inspired carvings. On top of these columns, a wooden structure of horizontal beams known as top plates and of vertical half-studs* encloses the space meant to serve as an ossuary. Above this space are the framework and the double-sloped roof, interspersed with dormer windows, which enabled sextons to enter the ossuary.

*Half-stud: secondary vertical post in a wooden structure.

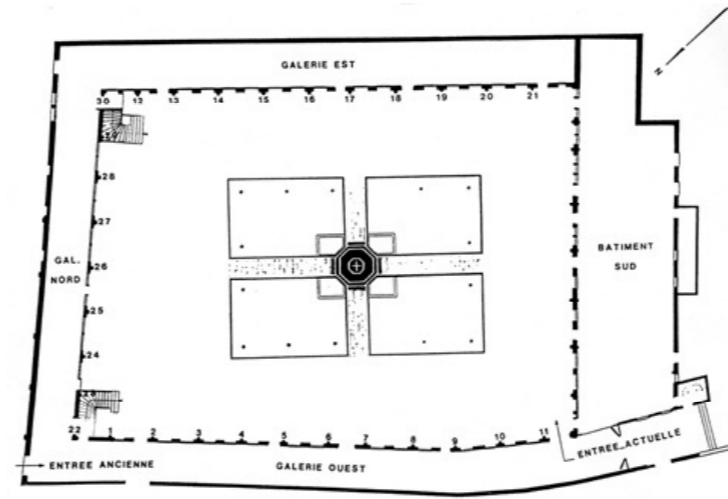


Illustration from the book "L'Aître Saint-Maclou de Rouen" by J. P. Mouilleseaux and B. Vénot (1980)

South Wing

This 17th century building integrates well with the other wings through the use of materials and through the general design of the facade and its decorations. However, it was built with a second story as well as an attic. The school was housed on the ground floor, and the brothers' lodgings were on the first floor. Despite the efforts made to harmonise it with the other buildings, differences are noticeable: the columns rest directly on the



ground and not on a stone base; the planned carvings were never executed, and the stone blocks have remained rough-hewn.* Finally, the capitals do not have the fanciful Renaissance decoration that the others do.

* Rough hewing: An operation that consists in roughly shaping a stone for later sculpting.

18th Century Renovations

This architectural unit remained unchanged until the middle of the 18th century, when a first floor was added, thus radically changing the proportions of the buildings. With the added weight threatening to sag the top plates, the buildings were closed off with timber-and-masonry walls, and windows were installed. Three stairways (the one on the south wing was demolished in 1911) were built at the corners for access to the new first floor. The ossuary was also filled in.

Decor

Funerary Motifs...

The wood carvings that decorated the ossuary can still be seen today, though they were altered slightly by a fire in 1758. The carvings that survived this fire were mounted on new wooden pedestals. On the top plates and half-studs, friezes were carved of macabre objects that would be seen daily in a cemetery: bones (skulls, jaws, femurs, shoulder blades, ribs and hipbones); liturgical objects associated with the funeral mass (stoles, missals, crosses, candles, wafer boxes, fonts, and bells); objects related to the Passion of Christ (nails and whips); and gravediggers' tools (shovels, picks, hoes and coffins).

Engraving by Jules Adeline (19th century)



Dance of Death by Guyot Marchant showing a bishop and a squire (15th century)

... for the Dance of Death

The columns on the West and East Wings include carvings of a series of paired figures enacting the Dance of Death. This was a sort of procession in which Death, depicted as a skeleton clothed only in a shroud, leads the living in a dance. Death gesticulates, prances and hops, while the living seem frozen when faced with the sudden, violent appearance of this figure. These carvings were defaced in 1562 by Protestants during the Wars of Religion, making it difficult to identify them precisely. On the West Wing, we can make out images of lay people with Death on their left, and on the East Wing, the clergy with Death

on their right. The order of procession is based on social rank and power. As such, on the West Wing, the emperor leads, followed by the king, the sword-bearing nobleman and then by other characters who are impossible to identify exactly, though all are dressed in period costume. On the East Wing, the Pope with his Triple Cross is at the head of the procession, followed by the Patriarch, then what appears to be an Archbishop, a Cardinal with the tassels dangling from his hat, a Bishop and an Abbot, the last two bearing a cross. Then, only the final pair is recognisable: Death and a monk. The first Dance of Death was probably painted on the walls of Saint-Innocents cemetery

Decorations on a top plate



Pair of Dancers, West Wing, Aître Saint-Maclou (engraving by E.H. Langlois, 19th century)

in 1424. From there, these images spread across northern Europe, notably through the release of several illustrated editions in the late 15th century by the bookseller Guyot Marchant. The Dance of Death is directly linked to the psychological trauma caused by the incredibly deadly Black Plague and by the repeated outbreaks that struck subsequent generations. However, illness was not the only scourge of the time: famine and war (notably the Hundred Years' War) were also closely associated with it. Anxiety in the face of ever-present death spread throughout the population. The Dance of Death is an answer to this fear, offering a social satire about the quest for honours and riches and affirming the equality of all people after death, without distinction for rank or age. However, the Dance of Death did not lead to any general criticism of society's foundations, since equality was manifest only before God.

