

# Charleston Mercury

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THE PAPERZINE WITH A COSMOPOLITAN ATTITUDE

## Le carnet de France: Le Musée de Cluny

By Martine P. Dulles

Upon your next visit to Paris, I certainly would encourage you to visit (or revisit) the *Musée de Cluny*. Why? Well, on May 12 of this year, the museum was reopened after many years of transformation, and the result is simply spectacular.

It is extremely well located at the corner of the Boulevard Saint Germain and the Boulevard Saint Michel, on the left bank. The entrance is at 28 rue Du Sommerard, in the 5th Arrondissement.

In 2011, the Ministry of Culture, then headed by Frédéric Mitterand, nephew of François Mitterand, French president (1981-1995), decided that the *Musée de Cluny* needed to be refurbished to appeal to more visitors (millions of Parisians walk by and have never entered in) and to be respectful of the new laws for physically challenged persons to access all the rooms. So, the museum closed in 2015, reopened partially in 2018 but was closed again in 2020 for the second phase of renovation. It is now open every day of the week, except on Mondays, Christmas day, January 1, and May 1.

Why is it called *Musée de Cluny* when we know that the Abbey of Cluny is located in the province of Burgundy? In the 15th century the Abbot, Jacques d'Amboise, decided to build a residence in Paris, *l'Hôtel de Cluny*, where novices of the Benedictine Order could live and study in the Latin Quarter, the cultural center of France. The architecture of the building in medieval style and its private chapel in Flamboyant Gothic Style is extremely elaborate. The *Hôtel de Cluny* is considered the oldest and best-preserved medieval building in Paris. It is also built next to the Gallo-Roman baths, dating from the First and Second centuries A.D.

In the 19th century, a wealthy collector of Medieval art, Alexandre Du Sommerard (1779-1842), rented the second floor of the *Hôtel de Cluny* where he lived and displayed his huge art collection. At the time of his death, he had gathered more than 1,500 objects.

The following year, 1843, the France State purchased the *Hôtel de Cluny* and converted it into a museum. Edmond Du Sommerard, Alexander's son, became its first director. He held this post for 40 years until his death in 1885. During his tenure the collection grew up to 11,000 pieces of art, and thankful to him some major pieces which we can still admire were purchased by him, such as the tapestry of *The Lady and the Unicorn* (La Dame à la licorne). Today, the Museum owns 24,000

pieces, of which more than 13,000 are on the premises.

Le Musée de Cluny is the only national museum in France dedicated to Medieval art from Antiquity to the Renaissance. The 21 rooms exhibit the art in chronological order so that jewelry pieces, stone or wooden sculptures, stained glass windows, armor, paintings and other objects of the same century are displayed together in each room.

As you enter the museum, the first room you visit is the *frigidarium*, a vast vaulted room with walls more than 45 feet high that were part of the Gallo-Roman baths. Displayed are Gallo-Roman pillars given to the Roman Emperor Tiberius (reigned 14-37 A.D.) by the Seine boatmen. The pillars were discovered under the Cathedral Notre-Dame de Paris in the 18th century.

You may recall that on the front western façade of *Notre-Dame de Paris* (built in the 12th century) is a horizontal row of 28 statues of kings, known as the Gallery of Kings. Those statues represent the Kings of Judah. However, during the French Revolution, it was believed they represented Kings of France, and so in 1793, the statues were destroyed and left on the ground in front of the Cathedral for many years. Then they disappeared, until 1977, when an 18th century building housing a bank was being restored in the 9th Arrondissement, and low and behold, 21 of the Kings' heads and numerous other pieces of the façade of the Cathedral were discovered in the basement. You may now admire the 21 heads in room n° 5.

The statues you can see today and will see better when Notre-Dame is reopened (perhaps in 2024) were commissioned by the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, when he directed the restoration of Notre-Dame in 1859. (See the *Charleston Mercury* article June 2021: *Cité de l'Architecture*). We remember that the head of Saint Thomas on the spire of the Cathedral was the image of Viollet-le-Duc. Again, according to the definitive book, *La Grâce d'une Cathédrale: Notre-Dame de Paris* (published by *La Nuée Bleue*), the head of the eighth statue from the left, that of King Ela, also appears to be an image of Viollet-le-Duc, which was discovered when the statues were last cleaned in 1990.

Also, during the French revolution, the 12 Apostles of the Sainte-Chapelle (built by the King Saint Louis in 1248) were taken down. Six went to the *Musée de Cluny* where you can see three of them in perfect condition: Saint John, recognizable as a young man, a second named "the Apostle with the head of a philo-



PHOTO COURTESY OF LE MUSÉE DE CLUNY

The famed tapestry of The Lady and the Unicorn.

opher" and the third named "the melancholic Apostle."

In the *Musée*, you can see some of the original circular stained-glass windows from the Sainte-Chapelle, which were taken down in the 13th century, when some of the walls of the Chapel were opened to incorporate 15 new, 50-foot-high stained-glass windows allowing much more light to come in, as was typically done in Gothic style of architecture.

Another treasure in the Museum is the "Golden Rose" which was given to the Count of Neuchâtel by Pope John XXII in 1330, to thank him for his services. This rose is from the treasury of the Basel Cathedral.

But the masterpieces of the Museum are the six tapestries, *The Lady and the Unicorn*, woven in the mid-16th century. They represent a lady, her lady's maid, a lion and the unicorn in a garden of a thousand flowers. The theme for five of them are the senses: touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight. The sixth tapestry is entitled "*À mon seul désir*" (To my only desire). The writers George Sand (1804-1876) and her friend Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870) discovered the tapestries in a small château in the Creuse Region in the southwest of France, and through them the tapestries were purchased by the *Musée de Cluny*. Prosper Mérimée was also the inspector for "*les Monuments Historiques*" of France and one of the founders of the *Musée de Cluny*. He wrote the libretto of Bizet's well-known opera *Carmen*.

These are only a few treasures exhibited, there are many more to be seen including the chapel.

I can only praise the 22nd century "museography" of the Museum. The



PHOTO COURTESY OF LE MUSÉE DE CLUNY

The golden rose given by Pope John XXII.

trilingual labels: French, English and Spanish are well written and very informative. The placement, hanging and the lighting enhance the pieces.

The museum also organizes temporary exhibits. This museum should appeal to everyone, of all ages.

*Bonne visite!*