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“Let these bones live!”: recreating the medieval past within four walls at Musée de Cluny in 1844 and 2017

Fernanda Korovsky Moura ¹

Resumo: O gosto de Alexandre Du Sommerard (1779-1842) pelo antiquarianismo e suas peças de antiguidade coletadas durante a sua vida levaram à abertura do museu nacional Cluny em 1844. O museu foi inaugurado no palácio gótico do século XV hôtel Cluny, onde Sommerard viveu e organizou sua coleção particular. Seu projeto visava recriar o passado por meio de objetos materiais, criando a ilusão de estar de volta à Idade Média. Neste artigo, exploro o legado de Du Sommerard como colecionador e defensor da história material em oposição à perspectiva de Alexandre Lenoir (1761-1839) sobre a organização de museus. Com base nas discussões de Stephen Bann sobre a poética do museu e a visualização do passado, comparo o projeto original de Du Sommerard no século XIX com a organização atual do museu em 2017 e como essas duas abordagens distintas se relacionam com o processo de recriação histórica. A conclusão é que o atual Musée de Cluny se distanciou da abordagem ilusionista de Du Sommerard de recriação do passado. Ele pode ser visto como um "museu irônico", na terminologia de Bann, mas ainda enraizado no estilo metonímico da década de 1970.

Abstract: Alexandre Du Sommerard's (1779-1842) taste for antiquarianism and his collected antiquities during his life led to the opening of the national museum Cluny in 1844. The museum opened in the 15th-century Gothic palace hôtel Cluny, where Sommerard lived and arranged his private collection. His project was to recreate the past by means of material objects, creating the illusion of being back in the Middle Ages. In this article, I explore Du Sommerard's legacy as a collector and advocate for material history in opposition to Alexandre Lenoir's (1761-1839) perspective on museum organization. Based on Stephen Bann's discussions on the poetics of the museum and on visualizing the past, I compare Du Sommerard's original project in the nineteenth-century with the current organization of the museum in 2017, and how these two distinct approaches relate to the process of historical recreation. The conclusion is that the current Musée de Cluny has distanced itself from Du Sommerard's illusionistic approach to the recreation of the past. It can be seen as an "ironic museum", in Bann's terminology, but still rooted in its metonymical 1970s style.

Palavras-chave: Museu de Cluny; Alexandre Du Sommerard; recriação do passado; história do museu; Stephen Bann

Keywords: Musée de Cluny; Alexandre Du Sommerard ; recreation of the past; museum history; Stephen Bann

¹ Doutoranda em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina em cotutela com a Universidade de Leiden
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/5424947613446072>
E-mail: fernandakm@gmail.com





“The ghosts of the Middle Ages are unquiet.”

David Matthews in *Medievalisms: A Critical History*

Introduction

In 1844, Alexandre Du Sommerard’s private collection of antiquities became officially a national museum. Du Sommerard was an antiquarian and, above all, passionate about history. Making his collection available to the public in the 1830s, Du Sommerard wished to create a place where he could recreate the past by means of material objects. In assembling his collection in a fifteenth-century building, Du Sommerard organized the objects in a way that was new at the time. The historian Stephen Bann writes that “at the Musée de Cluny, the aim was to involve all the senses in a spectacle of historical recreation designed to make the past come to life again” (2011, 27). Feeding on the Romantic historiography myth that believed it possible to recreate the past, Du Sommerard offered his nineteenth-century visitors an illusion: the illusion that they were back in the Middle Ages.

Du Sommerard’s life was devoted to history and historical representation. His fascinating project to revive the Middle Ages with material objects caught my art historian attention. Having read about the assembling of his collection and the establishing of the Musée de Cluny, I decided to go to Paris to see the museum as it is in the present time, and to contrast it with Du Sommerard’s nineteenth-century project. The result was a quite distinct approach to the past. In the following sections of this paper, I will write about the museum as a space to reconstruct history; a brief description of Du Sommerard’s life, his views on history and historical representation, and the development of his collection. Finally, I will present an overview of the Musée de Cluny as it was organized in 2017 and discuss how it relates to Du Sommerard’s original project in different ways of viewing the past.

Poetics of the Museum

Stephen Bann’s claim in *The Clothing of Clio: A study of the representation of history in nineteenth-century Britain and France* is that during the nineteenth century





there was a “historical poetics” that was distinctive to that period. It was the emergence of a new way to look at the past (BANN, 2010: 6). In a beautiful metaphor, Bann analyses in his other book *The inventions of history* the advertising poster of an exhibition at the British Museum in 1987 and 1988 entitled “Views of the Past”. On the poster, there is a reproduction of a watercolour by James Lambert of Bramber Castle, in Sussex, from 1782. In this watercolour, it is possible to distinguish two figures looking at the remains of the Norman castle, one of whom is sketching. Based on the exhibition’s title and on the watercolour, Bann poses the following questioning:

In what sense, if any, are these two figures—the artist and his companion—‘viewing the past’? Is there any sense at all in claiming that these attentive observers (and the late eighteenth-century people for whom they serve as surrogates) were not simply considering a piece of architecture in its natural setting, but ‘viewing’ history in one of its contemporary and concrete manifestations? (BANN, 1990: 122)

Such questionings bring awareness to visual representations of the past—such as the ruins of the castle—and how they may evoke a reconstruction of the past itself. By looking at the Norman ruins, the two observers may be stimulated to reflect on the events that took place there throughout the centuries. Through the ruins of the castle, the past becomes real.

Every generation has a distinct relationship to the past: a different way to look back at what happened previously, with a desire to challenge it, or nostalgic longing. Bann calls “poetics of the museum” precisely the “relation of museums and collectors to the ‘historical-mindedness’ of their age” (2010, 78). Museums are interesting objects of analysis to investigate how a particular generation feels about the past depicted in the museum. In this context, Bann believes it possible “to reconstruct the formative procedures and principles which determined the type of a particular museum, and to relate these procedures to the epistemological presumptions of our period” (BANN, 2010: 78). Following Bann’s methodology, I propose to look back at the history of Musée de Cluny since its debut in 1844 and how it related to the historical discourse of the time up to its current organization and how it may reflect contemporary issues in the understanding of history.





Recreating the Medieval World: Du Sommerard and Musée Cluny in 1844

Alexandre du Sommerard (1779-1842) was the key name behind the establishment of the Musée de Cluny in Paris. Passionate about history and an avid collector of antiquities, Du Sommerard challenged the idea that the knowledge of history was contained in history books only. In Sommerard's perspective, material objects could contribute to the same—or higher—degree to understanding the past (BANN, 2010: 78-9). "Du Sommerard thus implies a kind of priority of the historical object over the historical text" (BANN, 2010: 79). As a collector of historical objects himself, he understood the potential of such objects to recreate the past, turning it more palpable.

Du Sommerard's collection began with classical and contemporary French artistic pieces. However, with the Restoration of the monarchy (1815-1830) and the revival of interest in the old regime, the monarchical past was deemed once again worthy of preservation—after the destruction of several classical monuments during the French Revolution. During this time, du Sommerard joined the "Société des Amis des Arts" (Society of the Friends of the Arts) and changed his artistic focus, shifting his attention to medieval and Renaissance objects (BANN, 2010: 79).

In the post-Revolution period, in addition Du Sommerard there was another key figure in the rescuing of national monuments: Alexandre Lenoir (1761-1839), archaeologist and one of the main names in the history of the Musée National des Monuments Français (National Museum of French Monuments). According to Bann, "Lenoir was not so much collecting as salvaging what could be salvaged from the dilapidation and even destruction of French national monuments which followed upon the confiscation of church property by the revolutionary government" (2010: 83). In this sense, Du Sommerard's and Lenoir's aims with the Musée de Cluny and the Musée National des Monuments Français were quite distinct: Du Sommerard proposed to reconstruct the past with the aid of historical objects, while Lenoir wished to safeguard the French national heritage, making it available to the public. Lenoir's museum was closed in 1816, resulting in the great part of its collection moving to Du Sommerard's Cluny, which was recognised as the French state responsibility in 1843 (BANN, 2010: 82-3), one year after Du Sommerard's death. As Elisabeth Taburet-Delahaye, current director at the Musée de Cluny, explains, "after the death of Alexandre Du Sommerard, the State bought in 1843 his collection and the totality of the hôtel of the abbots of Cluny, then rented to different occupants. He also ceded the thermal baths and the lapidary





deposit to the city of Paris”² (2018: 2). Du Sommerard’s son, Edmond, became then the first director of the museum with the joined collections of Du Sommerard and Lenoir (BANN, 2010: 91).

Du Sommerard’s private collection grew to the point of needing to be relocated. Bann explains that Du Sommerard wished to follow a “systematic order” for his items, leading him to auction contemporary pieces and to search for a new place to house his belongings. He “finally solved the problem of space and of order when, in 1832, he succeeded in becoming tenant of the late Gothic town-house of the Abbots of Cluny, adjacent to the Palais des Thermes at the crossing of the Boulevards St-Germain and St-Michel” (2010: 80), the same place where the museum still stands nowadays. In Sommerard’s perspective, housing his collection in an authentic Gothic building would enhance the objects’ potential to recreate the past, since the building was also material history, it was itself a national monument.

Du Sommerard’s project in reconstructing the medieval past at the Hôtel de Cluny is certainly inserted in the bigger movement of antiquarianism. According to Bann, “antiquarians passionately cared for the neglected and decayed objects that they were salvaging” (BANN, 1990: 130). Du Sommerard put an effort in organising his collection of historical objects in a way to envelop the visitor—and himself—in an illusion of being back into the past. As Bann points out, this attitude conforms to the myth of Romantic historiography that believed it possible to resurrect the past (1990: 130).

The illusion created by Du Sommerard’s disposition of objects in a way to reconstruct whole rooms in a medieval style—not a random assemblage of historical objects sorted out according to the century to which they belonged—was that the past was indeed brought back to life in front of the spectator. The museum visitor was *enveloped* by this illusion. An interesting account of a visitor, Madame de Saint-Surin, to the Musée de Cluny in 1835—not yet an official museum then—refers to the illusion of the past being brought back to life:

Lifting up the tapestries across the doorways, we pass into the Room of François I. His bed is there, with elegant caryatids supporting the roof; his armour is laid out on the counterpane; you would think it was the hero resting! Two knights standing at the foot of the bed, with lance in hand and lowered visor, seem to stand guard over their master. At the sight of these pictorial episodes, the imagination is struck and tempted to take the marvel for reality. (BANN, 2011: 26)

² Translated from French: “Après la mort d’Alexandre Du Sommerard, l’État rachète en 1843 sa collection et la totalité de l’hôtel des abbés de Cluny, alors loué à différents occupants. Il se fait aussi céder les thermes et le dépôt lapidaire par la Ville de Paris”.





From her words, it is possible to identify Madame de Saint-Surin's experience of envelopment while at the museum. She felt she was in François I's room and that he could even be there himself. Such is the illusion the organization of the furniture and objects caused on the visitor. As Madame de Saint-Surin points out herself: "the imagination is struck and tempted to take the marvel for reality".

A consequence of antiquarians' desire to reconstruct the past gave rise to a search "to give a more definitive form to their assemblages of objects, and so create distinctive types of environment in which history could be visually experienced" (BANN, 1990: 134). It was the birth of the museums.

Different from antiquarians and art collectors before him, Du Sommerard innovated in the manner with which the historical objects were assembled at Hôtel de Cluny. According to Bann:

Unlike Lenoir, he [Du Sommerard] would strive to achieve the maximum degree of integration of the individual object in the overall effect. His rooms would not be classed under the schematic organisation of the 'century': they would aim to represent, through a fullness of texture and an absolute degree of integration, the reality of *the lived life*³ of the earlier period. (1990: 139)

At the Musée des Monuments Français, Lenoir had decided to divide the historical objects he had collected and salvaged from destruction according to the period to which they belonged. However, no intrinsic link between them could be identified; the only connection binding them was the period in which they were created. Du Sommerard, on the other hand, increased the level of illusion of an enveloping past that was being brought back to life for the museum visitor.

Emile Deschamps, journalist and a guest at the museum in 1834, described his experience as following: "Furnishings, hangings, stained glass, dishes, armour, utensils and jewelry—all has been miraculously recovered and preserved; you walk in the midst of a vanished civilisation; you are as if enveloped by the good old chivalric times, and the cordial hospitality of the master rounds of the *illusion*^{4,5} (BANN, 2010: 82). As Madame de Saint-Surin, Deschamps feels *enveloped* by the medieval atmosphere. Deschamps was aware of the feeling of illusion that the disposition of the objects arose in him.

³ My emphasis.

⁴ My emphasis.

⁵ Translated by Stephen Bann.





Du Sommerard's innovative museum style changed the way history was *viewed*. History was no longer words on a book, dead and fixed; it became dynamic and alive. As Bann puts it, "Du Sommerard's collection, as displayed in the Hôtel de Cluny from the early 1830s, was not only a striking spectacle. It was a new experience. Its capacity to 'envelop' Du Sommerard's contemporaries in an illusion of the past was a direct function of this novelty" (2010: 82). History was then a spectacle to be experienced by the museum visitor. That was a significant change from the way history was perceived in the previous century.

The historian Hayden White discusses this shift in paradigm in the approaches to history in terms of *metonymy* and *synecdoche*. From the classical to the romantic approach to history, White perceives a movement from metonymy to synecdoche: "whilst the part-whole relation in metonymy is reductive and mechanistic, that involved in synecdoche is both integrative and organic. The two elements are 'grasped together', as aspects of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts in isolation" (quoted in BANN, 2010: 85). Based on White's terms, Bann analyses the shift from Lenoir's museum disposition to Du Sommerard's style as also a shift from metonymy to synecdoche. The Musée de Cluny, in this way, is synecdochic, "where the object from the past becomes the basis for an integrative construction of historical totalities" (BANN, 2010: 85). Bann also refers to this shift of paradigm in terms of *specimen* and *relic*. In a metonymic view of the past, each object, or specimen, is valued individually; while in a synecdochic approach to history, the object is seen as a relic, as part of a whole.

Du Sommerard's organization of items at the Musée de Cluny, therefore, illustrates the shift of historical discourse and relationship towards the past from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries: from metonymy to synecdoche; from specimen to relic. That was an extremely innovative way to reconstruct the past within the four walls of the museum. As Bann puts it:

[Du Sommerard's] principle of differentiation was not the mechanistic division of centuries, as in the Musée des Petit-Augustins [Musée National des Monuments Français]: it was a classification which respected the existing distribution of rooms in the Hôtel de Cluny, and the rich associations which they already held. (2010: 86)

The chapel lodged the religious artefacts; the dining-room all objects related to meals; bedding items were hosted in the chambers; and the salon and two galleries received a greater variety of objects (BANN, 2010: 86). For example, the room dedicated to François 1er (1494-1547) was decorated in a sixteenth-century style and with historical objects from that period to reconstruct what the room could have looked and felt like for





the sixteenth-century monarch (See Fig. 1). According to Bann, François 1er’s room “is not simply a matter of monumental sculpture, as in Lenoir’s museum, but of the plethora of objects in domestic use: beds, coverlets, cabinets, chairs, tables and a host of other things too small to identify (but accessible to the visitor, who could peer at them and ponder over them to his heart’s content” (1990: 139). The visitor was not only *viewing* material history, he was also *a part of it*, being inside François 1er’s room.



Fig. 1 - (BANN, 2010: 81)

One interesting example—and one that will serve as a stark contrast to the style of the museum nowadays in the next section of this paper—is the way the chapel was presented to the public. Based on a contemporary account and lithograph, Bann reconstructs what the chapel must have looked like for nineteenth-century visitors of the Musée de Cluny (See Fig. 2), with its “atmospheric effect which has been secured by the accumulation of much ecclesiastical furniture (in some cases ingeniously reconstituted from disparate fragments) and the addition of a mysterious cowed figure close to the altar” (BANN, 1990: 142). The addition of historical religious objects in a thirteenth-century chapel—already of historical significance in itself—gives the visitor the illusion of having been transported back to the Middle Ages, visiting a chapel in the way someone in the thirteenth century could have done. The feeling is indeed overwhelming.





Fig. 2 – (BANN, 1990: 141)

This feeling would most likely have been experienced throughout the visitor's stay in the museum. When entering the Hôtel de Cluny, a gothic building, the nineteenth-century visitor would feel transported to the Middle Ages, being *a part of* the medieval chapel, the medieval dining-room, the medieval chambers, salon, and galleries. As we have seen, this distribution of items that aimed at reconstructing the space as it should have looked like in the past gives the visitor the illusion of the past coming back to life in front of their own eyes; the visitor feels *enveloped* by the past. As Bann explains, "Du Sommerard utilises the whole space available, not offering a privileged vista or viewpoint, but surrounding the spectator with a plenum in which each individual element testifies to a greater whole—ultimately nothing less than the experiential reality of a recreated past" (1990: 142). Avoiding the metonymical characteristic of Lenoir's century divisions—which fragmented the idea of history—Du Sommerard's synecdochic approach restores history to a whole outside of the museum space. In this model, as Bann interestingly points out, "underlying the operation of the synecdoche, which leads us from the part-object to the revived historical user, there lurks the mythic system of 'lived' history, history as 'le vécu'" (2010: 88). History becomes as dynamic as life itself: the objects on display at the museum evoke the lives of previous persons, making history more real than words on a history book.

Shifting paradigms: Musée de Cluny in 2017

When Bann wrote his chapter "Views of the Past" in *The Inventions of history*, the curator of the Musée de Cluny was Alain Erlande-Brandenburg (1937-). Analysing





the current state of the museum at the time, Bann wrote that “the present Musée de Cluny is very far from Du Sommerard’s original ideal—and it cannot be said that it reflects any comparably strong conception of what a historical museum should be” (1990: 143). In 2017, the museum remains extremely far from Du Sommerard’s nineteenth-century project, as I will go on to argue.

The current curator at the museum in 2017 is Elisabeth Taburet-Delahaye, who has been in this post since 2006. In an interview to the magazine *Dossier de l’Art*, Taburet-Delahaye explains that the museum has changed a lot throughout the centuries. After Alexandre Du Sommerard’s death, his son Edmond became the curator until 1885, enlarging the collection from 1.434 to over 10.000 items. As Taburet-Delahaye puts it, “it was during Edmond Du Sommerard’s lifetime that an exceptional collection of art objects representative of the Middle Ages was constituted”⁶ (2008: 2). After Edmond’s death, the direction of the museum was taken over by Alfred Darcel (1818-1893), who established the Musée de Cluny as a museum of decorative arts, which determined the originality of the museum at the time (TABURET-DELAHAYE, 2008: 4). During the Second World War the museum remained closed, after which Francis Salet (1909-2000) became the curator of Cluny in 1948 and its director from 1967 until 1979. According to Taburet-Delahaye, Salet decided to restrict the items displayed at the museum to the medieval period, setting aside all later objects—which constituted a significant moment in the history of the museum. As she explains:

The plan of the museum was inspired by the *Livre des métiers* by Étienne Boileau, who recorded the organization of crafts in Paris in the second half of the thirteenth century. For example, one room was devoted to woodworking, another to textiles, other rooms to goldsmiths and enamellers, ironworkers and upholsterers... Painting and sculpture were grouped in the room devoted to the craft of “ymagier”⁷. (2008: 4)

It was then, therefore, that the museum began to drift away from Du Sommerard’s original plan. With rooms devoted to different crafts, the visitor would no longer feel enveloped by the illusion of the reconstruction of the past. Each room would be devoted to one particular craft, with different objects from different periods and places. The visitor

⁶ Translated from French: “c’est au temps d’Edmond Du Sommerard que se constitue une exceptionnelle collection représentative de l’ensemble des arts au Moyen Âge”.

⁷ Translated from French: “le plan du musée s’inspirait du *Livre des métiers* d’Étienne Boileau qui a consigné l’organisation des métiers à Paris dans la deuxième moitié du XIII siècle. Ainsi, une salle était consacrée aux métiers du bois, une autre aux textiles, d’autres salles aux orfèvres et émailleurs, à la ferronnerie, aux tapissiers... La peinture et la sculpture étaient regroupées dans la salle consacrée au métier d’“ymagier”.





would, no doubt, have an appreciation of how woodworkers, goldsmiths, ironworkers, amongst others, worked during the medieval period, but he/she would not feel to have been transported back to the past.

The official museum guide from 1972 establishes the opposition to Du Sommerard's project:

Engravings and old paintings allow us to imagine with what *picturesque disorder*⁸ the Du Sommerard collection was then presented. It is a romantic taste that had presided over the assemblage of objects. It was a matter of evoking history much more than of giving value to works of art. All the genres, all the periods were mixed up; on the beds rested helmets, cuirasses and gauntlets; on the coffers of the Renaissance, precious Byzantine ivories were the neighbours of enamelled salt salt-cellars, mirrored boxes, and Gothic locks; the most beautiful embroidered hangings disappeared behind Venetian mirrors and trophies of arms; suits of armour, upright, lance in hand, guarded the sleep of the collector [...]. (BANN, 2011: 26)

It is quite interesting that the 1972 museum curator would refer to Du Sommerard's collection as a "picturesque disorder". Bann claims that the curator of the time failed to appreciate "the originality of an installation that, for the first time, was presenting the past not in terms of detached 'monuments', but as a vivid spectacle of interconnected objects, all of which could be woven together to stimulate a coherent narrative of the past" (2011: 26). It was then that the museum shifted its approach to the past, leaving synecdoche aside and embracing metonymy.

Du Sommerard's project was thus short-lived. In the second half of the twentieth century the museum was remodelled and its conception shifted from spectacle to didactics. In 1922 the museum was renamed "Musée national du Moyen Âge – Thermes et hôtel de Cluny", establishing its area of specialization in the medieval past (TABURET-DELAHAYE, 2008: 4). Taburet-Delahaye affirms that the Musée de Cluny evolved from the heritage of an amateur collector to a model museum, serving as inspiration for other museums such as Schnütgen in Cologne, the Cloisters in New York, and Bargello in Florence (2008: 6). As for the future of the museum, the director asserts that the Musée de Cluny is the only national museum in Paris that has not gone through a renovation since the 1950s. As she points out, "the museography of the 1950s has little by little lost its coherence but it has not been replaced by any other conception of

⁸ My emphasis.





ensemble”⁹ (2008: 10). For this reason, she rightly believes the museum is in need of change. She affirms that the alterations that have been made in the past years have focused on one particular item or one group of items; however, it is necessary to present the museum’s collections and values better and more clearly. Nevertheless, Taburet-Delahaye believes the division of the collection according to crafts and techniques elaborated fifty years ago is still relevant for the twenty-first century visitor: “The emphasis on the techniques, their specificities, their diversity, has traversed the whole history of this museum. It is one of the means to enable the public to understand and appreciate the works”¹⁰ (2008: 12). It is, no doubt, one of the ways to present the museum’s collection to the visitor. But is it the most effective one? How does it relate to and challenge Du Sommerard’s nineteenth-century project? How is history represented in the current Musée de Cluny?

Museums change over time; that is indisputable. According to Bann, “the entropy or loss of order which affects a collection of objects with the passing of time is of so high a degree that we can never in practice recover the integrity of the original system or code” (BANN, 2010: 77). In fact, Bann goes on to argue that such a recovery—if indeed possible—would not even be desirable, since the items in a museum collection should be emancipated, and receptive of new layers of meanings that time itself can only add. I strongly agree with Bann’s perspective. A museum and its collection—themselves volatile—should not stop in time, presenting the visitor with the same organization of items as it was when the museum first opened its doors. The museum is a dynamic space that changes every time a new guest walks in, adding his/her own background to the overall experience. Each and every one of us contributes to the everchanging nature of the museum. That is why it was not expected nor desirable to find in my trip to Paris the Musée de Cluny in the exact same way as Du Sommerard left it right before his death.

When reaching the gates to the museum in front of Paul-Painlevé Square in April 2017 after reading about Du Sommerard’s endeavour to create a museum dedicated to national history and to the medieval past in the nineteenth century, I was curious to find out what new layers of meaning had been added to Du Sommerard’s nineteenth-century project. The fifteenth-century building is a striking contrast to the crowded Boulevards Saint-Michel and Saint Germain, filled with international stores and tourists coming and

⁹ Translated from French: “la muséographie des années 50 a peu à peu perdu de sa coherence mais n’a été remplacée par aucune autre conception d’ensemble.”

¹⁰ Translated from French: “l’accent mis sur les techniques, leurs spécificités, leur diversité, a traversé toute l’histoire de ce musée. C’est l’un des moyens de permettre au public de comprendre et d’apprécier les oeuvres.”





going. For me, an enthusiast of the Middle Ages, it was an invitation to go back in time and to reconstruct the Middle Ages within the four walls of the museum. The hôtel is very well preserved, inviting the visitor to enter the castle walls (See Fig. 3)¹¹.

The museum nowadays is composed of twenty-three rooms, most of them following the division according to crafts and techniques. The first rooms are dedicated to temporary exhibitions or rotating presentations of items from the permanent collection. In my visit in April, the first room was dedicated to the art at the end of the Middle Ages from Burgundy in the Netherlands. The room contained mainly sculptures, but also paintings and tapestries from that period and place (See Fig. 4). Apart from a common period and place of origin, the items in display in the room



Fig. 3

had no other connection. This disposition of the works of art makes the visitor aware of being inside a museum, where the objects have been assembled together on purpose artificially in order to give the guest a didactic overview of a fraction of the art during the late-Middle Ages in Burgundy.



Fig. 4

After going through medieval Burgundy, the visitor is taken to Valence and Venice in the fifteenth century; and the topic changes to fashionable workshops. In this

¹¹ All the following photos were taken by me during my trip to the museum in April 2017.





room, the visitor is presented to the work of the Venetian Baldassare degli Embriachi and his *bottega*, which specialised in the production of bone plaques, and the Muslim artists who created vases and plates in ceramic (See Fig. 5).



Fig. 5

After these two temporary exhibitions, the visitor is taken to the areas dedicated to the permanent collection. The first one is the corridor of alabasters, in which alabasters from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries produced in England are displayed (See Fig. 6). This is a rather strange museum room, in my opinion. It looks like a shop window, on which different models and sizes of alabasters were hanged for the client's choice. Unquestionably, the items on display are not ordinary items, but historical pieces from the Middle Ages. However, the way they are arranged invites the viewer to see them as an assemblage of individual pieces, specimens, that bear no relation to a bigger whole. The alabasters were removed from their context, confusing the visitor as to what their functions might have been, where he/she could have found them, and what distinguished one from the other, since in a first glance they all look extremely similar. Once again, the visitor is very much aware of being inside a museum, where objects are assembled together for a didactic purpose.





Fig. 6

The same thing happens in the following room, which presents the visitor with stained-glass works from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The whole room is darkened to give emphasis to the stained-glass pieces that are arranged on the walls in front of a source of light that accentuates the colours of the items (See Fig. 7). This is perhaps the room which is closest to the idea of creating an illusion of being transported back to the past. In the darkened room, the stained-glass windows give the impression that the visitor is inside a medieval church. However, no other items corroborate this illusion. Once the visitor leaves the darkened room, the illusion is lost. Furthermore, the stained-glass pieces belong to different locations and periods. The only link that binds these items together is the material and technique with which they were made.

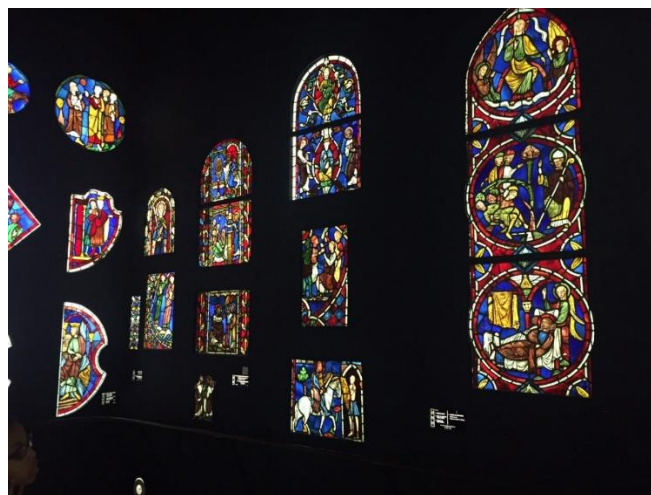


Fig. 7





The suite of the visit takes the museum guest to the corridor of tombstones. This corridor that leads to the thermal baths is decorated with fragments of tombstones that have been arranged on the walls (See Fig. 8). If the visitor is not attentive, these tombstones may go unnoticed, since their colour resembles the colour of the walls, and they may not instantly be recognized as tombstones for having been removed from their original context. According to the museum map available at the museum website, “on the right, the *portal of the Chapel of the Virgin* at Saint-Germain-des Prés is a true jewel of Gothic art from the Saint Louis era and serves as an introduction to the Notre Dame room”. It is indeed an astounding piece of gothic architecture. Nevertheless, removed from its original location and context, the portal loses some of its grandeur as it now serves to mark the entrance to the room of sculptures from Notre-Dame.

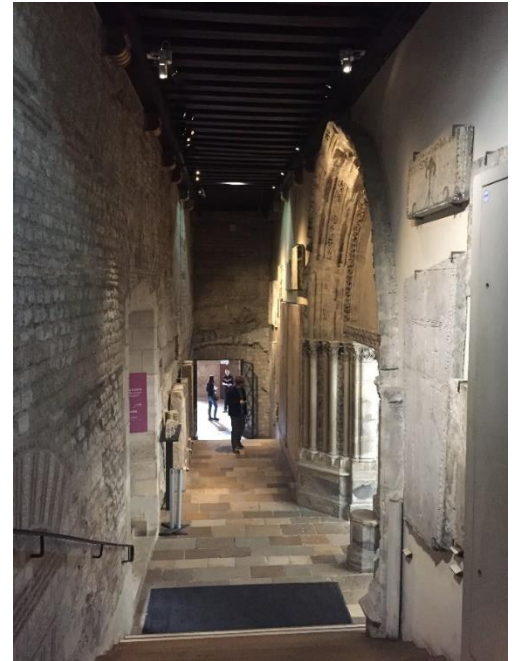


Fig. 8

The Notre-Dame room is located in the Gallo-Roman baths area of the building, one of the oldest parts of the construction. In it, the visitor can see a variety of fragments and sculptures taken from the previous stages of construction of the Notre Dame (See Fig. 9). As the information in the museum map testifies, the items in this room “include the remnants of the *Sainte-Anne portal* (circa 1145) and the twenty-one monumental heads from the gallery of the Kings of Juda (circa 1220-1230) buried during the French Revolution and discovered by chance in 1977, as well as a delightful *Adam* (circa 1260)”. These items are indeed spectacular, but they are fragmented and arranged one next to the other, not leading the visitor to imagine the cathedral as it must have looked in the first stages of its construction.





Fig. 9

As the visitor continues the visit, he/she is taken to the Frigidarium, the furthest room on the ground floor where the ruins of the ancient Northern thermal baths are sheltered. It is an interesting part of the museum, because the visitor *feels* the cold that surrounds that area of the building. The Frigidarium is the cold room in the baths, and its cold waters served to close the skin pores after they had been opened by the hot waters at the Caldarium and Tepidarium. As the museum visitor's senses are evoked, he/she may feel enveloped by an illusion of being back in the thermal baths as they were used around the third century. Several original fragments of architectural and decorative pieces still remain, adding to the feeling of envelopment.

Such experience, however, is disrupted when the visitor continues the visit in the next rooms, dedicated to Romanesque and Gothic items. As the museum map explains, the Romanesque room “contains stone, wood and ivory sculptures: [...]. The ivories inside the display cases illustrate, from the 4th to the 12th century, the evolution of this precious material, much favoured in the Middle Ages”. It is, therefore, an assemblage of different items made of several materials from various periods in the Middle Ages—from the fourth to the twelfth centuries—which present the visitor with a sample of medieval Romanesque art, pointing to the development of the arts throughout these centuries. Nevertheless, the illusion of recreating the past evoked in the thermal baths is completely gone here when the visitor becomes once again aware of being inside a museum, with the historical items didactically categorised for appreciation. Similarly, the Gothic room displays pieces of art from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with a focus on thirteenth-century ornamental sculpture, “when an inclination for truthful and recognizable representation of nature began to flourish on capitals, keystones or mullions coming from prestigious monuments such as the Saint-Martin-des-Champs priory or the abbey of





Saint-Denis”, as the museum map explains. The collection of items is diverse and remarkable. However, the lack of connection amongst the objects renders them an interesting assemblage of historical objects but that do not evoke the feeling of reconstructing the past. Rather, they are there with a didactic purpose.

The visit continues on the first floor of the museum, which shelters eleven different rooms. The first one is devoted to some of the museum masterpieces: the series of six tapestries of the Lady and the Unicorn. The tapestries are arranged on the walls in a circular manner. In the centre of the room there is a small couch where the visitors can sit to better appreciate the beautiful medieval tapestries (See Fig. 10). The room is thus completely dedicated to the tapestries.



Fig. 10

The following is another room dedicated to a variety of medieval artefacts. As the museum map attests:

The sheer diversity of the materials, forms and themes of 14th and 15th century sculpture is amply illustrated in this room. In particular, the art of altar pieces is illustrated by various works. The painted panels feature outstanding pieces such as the *Life of the Virgin Altarpiece*, an English work dating from the first half of the 14th century, and the *Pietà* from Tarascon painted in Provence around the middle of the 15th century.

Once again, the artefacts bear little or no connection to one another, except for the fact that they were all produced during the two aforementioned centuries. It indicates the richness of artistic production of the period, but it fails to convey relations to a bigger whole.

As the visitor resumes the visit at the Musée de Cluny, he/she encounters a corridor called “Passage Du Sommerard”. Interestingly, in the museum map it is referred





to as “The Corridor of the Nation of Picardy”. The museum map was produced in 2004, so the corridor must have been renamed after that date. I was immediately drawn to this corridor, since it bears the name of the founder of the museum, the eccentric collector and history passionate. Nonetheless, what the corridor consist of was quite disappointing. It is again a collection of various medieval objects sorted in no particular order, apparently, such as manuscripts, caskets, candlesticks, amongst others (See Fig. 11).



Fig. 11

The next room is dedicated to goldsmith work. It is composed of several glass windows which display different objects made of gold, particularly religious items, from a variety of centuries in the Middle Ages (See Fig. 12). In addition to being categorised for the museum visitor’s appreciation, the objects are also behind a glass window, which distances the viewer from the historical past instead of enveloping him/her.



Fig. 12





As the visit continues, the visitor encounters the room called “Beauvais choir stalls”, in which some stalls from the church Saint-Lucien at Beauvais (1492-1500) were arranged on three walls of the room (See Fig. 13). The stalls are beautiful woodworks, but, removed from the church environment, they look incoherent. At a first glance, they do not look like church stalls. Furthermore, the room is decorated with tapestries on the walls that served as choir hangings. However, they are from Brussels around 1500; therefore, the stalls and the tapestries come from different locations but were assembled together in this room at the museum.



Fig. 13

As the visit continues, the museum visitor finally reaches the Chapel, one of the main features at the museum, since its majority has remained preserved as it was in the thirteenth century. This is a striking example to contrast how the museum looked like in Du Sommerard’s time and how it looks nowadays. As we saw in the previous section of this paper, the Chapel in the beginning of the museum was decorated with medieval religious artefacts and ecclesiastical furniture, and one vaulted figure in priest’s clothes was placed at the altar (See Fig. 2). An interesting contemporary account collected by Bann from Madame de Saint-Surin regarding her visit to the Musée de Cluny in 1835 refers to her experience when visiting the Chapel:

Most the visitors repaired to the chapel where you can see, in the forms appropriate to the Middle Ages, all the furnishings suitable for a place of prayer. One thing alone seemed to us to contrast with the gravity of the place: this is a statue clothed in priestly robes which is standing before the lectern. When you are on the point of penetrating into the oratory of the widow of Louis XII, you expect to find there a mysterious solitude; and the appearance of this canon of stone, in ceremonial costume, standing, motionless, with a face either pale or illuminated (we could not vouch for the colour of his complexion,





for we shut our eyes), becomes for some a subject of surprise; whilst the others... can only see the bizarre side of this phantom. (BANN, 2011: 26)

In this extract, it is possible to identify Madame de Saint-Surin's expectations when entering the chapel: she wished to "penetrate into the oratory of the widow of Louis XII" and "to find there a mysterious solitude". These extracts demonstrate the visitor's wish to be enveloped by the past, her desire to see the past—in the form of Louis XII's widow's oratory—reconstructed so she could penetrate it. The addition of a vaulted statue performing the role of a silent priest, however, was, in Madame de Saint-Surin's opinion, too much. In Du Sommerard's project to reconstruct the Middle Ages in the museum, there was a thin line between illusion and excessive spectacle. The clothed statue was, perhaps, one step too far.

The Chapel nowadays is extremely far from the nineteenth-century spectacle. According to Bann, "the Chapel is an incongruous element since no one seems to have been able to decide whether it is just another display room, or whether it should show the enhancement, by carefully placed objects, of a space whose character is already decisively marked, in historical terms" (1990: 143). In 2017, I found the Chapel completely empty. There is no furniture, no religious artefacts, and no decorative pieces whatsoever (See Figs. 14 and 15). As I observed the visitors reaching the Chapel, most of them took a look inside, saw its emptiness, and left right away, perhaps believing the room to be unfinished or under renovation. I had the same feeling. Inside the Chapel, I tried to imagine what it must have felt like to be there in the fifteenth century, to reconstruct the past in my mind, but the emptiness of the place made it seem just a museum piece, now dead and only for display.



Fig. 14





Fig. 15

The final rooms at display at the Musée de Cluny may be, perhaps, the closest to Du Sommerard's nineteenth-century project. Each of the three rooms is dedicated to one particular aspect of life in the Middle Ages: devotion, domestic life, and warfare, hunting and tournaments. The museum thus shifts away from the organization according to crafts and techniques. They are the most interesting rooms in the museum, in my view. The first one presents the visitor with historical artefacts used for private and public devotion in the Middle Ages, such as prayer books, books of hours, relics, domestic images, etc (See Fig. 16). The next one displays objects related to how people lived in the countryside or city residences in the late-Middle Ages, which included a fireplace, furniture pieces, information about meals and games, amongst other items (See Fig. 17). And the last one shows tapestries with hunting motives on the walls, hunting-related objects, and a glass window with several pieces of medieval armour, shields, and weapons (See Fig. 18). What I found most significant about these rooms is that all the objects in display in each one of them are thematically related. In this manner, the museum visitor can rely on his/her imagination to fill in the gaps and reconstruct what devotion must have been like in the Middle Ages based on the objects in display; what life must have been like in the countryside or in the city; or how important a role hunting and war played in medieval life. Although the focus is still on individual items, the visitor can imagine the ensemble.





Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18





For the current director at the museum, one of its main strengths is “the close link between the collections and the buildings that shelter them, particularly at the two extremities of the chronology”¹² (TABURET-DELAHAYE, 2008: 6). However, in my view, that is hardly the case. The items of the museum collection are divided in rooms according to their crafts and techniques, bearing little or no relation at all to the building that shelters it. The only connection between the building and the majority of artefacts inside is that they belong to the same period in history, the Middle Ages. These items bear a metonymical relationship to the medieval past: they are fragmentary and reductive; they are not “grasped together”, as Bann puts it; they fail to convey an illusion of the whole.

When pondering over the poetics of the modern museum, Bann suggests the idea of the “ironic museum”. In it, metonymy and synecdoche, specimens and relics, interchange:

Passages and rooms devoted to the metonymic sequence of schools and centuries are interrupted by “reconstructed” rooms, offering the synecdochic treat of a *salon* transported from the Ile Saint-Louis, or a dining-room from a departed Jacobean manor-house. Perhaps the automatic way in which the ordinary museum-goer shifts between these two modes implies a modern replacement for the synecdochic and the metonymic museums: the ironic museum, in which we oscillate between the different varieties of imaginative projection that are required. (BANN, 2010: 91)

In this way, we can see the current Musée de Cluny as an ironic museum, but that still relies too much on a metonymical approach to the past. Certain rooms, as the ones devoted to devotion, domestic life and hunting, or the thermal baths, or even the room dedicated to stained-glass works, provide the visitor with a small sense of envelopment, a feeling that the items in the room are connected to a bigger whole. Nevertheless, the majority of rooms present categorised objects on display with a rather didactic approach. The visitor becomes aware of being inside a museum, where history is dead and for show, and not enveloping and alive.

“Let these bones live!”: Final remarks

Leaving the Musée de Cluny in that afternoon, I felt disappointed. I had been inspired by Du Sommerard’s passionate creation of the Musée de Cluny, and his project

¹² Translated from French: “Le lien étroit qui existe entre les collections et les bâtiments qui les abitent, en particulier aux deux extrémités de la chronologie.”





to reconstruct the past by means of material objects. Retrieving the past is, no doubt, impossible. However, I share Du Sommerard's belief that it is possible to *reconstruct* it.

In this context, there are several ways to *view* the past. One of them is through visual representation. The Musée de Cluny, for instance, offers the visitor the possibility to *view* the Middle Ages through all the items on display at the museum, in an approach more similar to Alexandre Lenoir's perspective of a museum. When Du Sommerard first envisioned it, this process was accomplished by enveloping the visitor in an illusion of the past being brought back to life. The museum artefacts related synecdochically to a bigger whole: religious artefacts and ecclesiastical furniture reconstructed a medieval chapel; domestic items, bedding and other chamber objects recreated a medieval chamber; and so on. Differently from Du Sommerard's nineteenth-century project, the current Musée de Cluny shifted its approach to the past in the 1970s, when the museum was reorganized, dividing the collection according to their crafts and techniques. The illusion of an enveloping past was lost. The artefacts lost their synecdochic relationship to a greater whole, and maintained only metonymical relations to the Middle Ages: fragments of an era.

In 2017, a few rooms have the potential of evoking a sense of reimagining the past in the visitor, such as the rooms dedicated to devotion, domestic life, and hunting and war; in other words, dedicated to aspects of life, and not divided according to their techniques. This disposition of the artefacts allows the visitor to recreate in his/her mind these aspects of medieval life; the visitor not only connects with objects, but with "le vécu", with lived history. Bann calls this type of museum that relates to history interchanging synecdochic and metonymical approaches as "ironic museums". In this sense, the current Musée de Cluny can be seen as an ironic museum, but still rooted in its metonymical 1970s.

As Bann interestingly points out, Du Sommerard "gives pride of place to the process of integration; like so many Romantic myth-makers, he is ultimately vindication a notion of resurrection from the dead—"let these bones live!" (1990: 143). Remarkable bones are stored at the Musée de Cluny, hidden behind glass windows or crafts and techniques rooms. It is time they lived again.





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