

THIRTEENTH CENTURY PAINTED CHURCH FURNITURE AND ITS LATER INFLUENCE

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During the second half of the nineteenth century, a certain amount of church and domestic furniture with painted surface decoration was based upon early medieval models. William Burges (1827–81) in particular, was interested in delving further and further back into the medieval period to find inspiration for his elaborate case pieces that were completely covered in geometric pattern and detailed iconographic schemes. His Yatman cabinet (1858) was modelled on the only two surviving examples of thirteenth century French painted furniture, *armoires* from Noyon and Bayeux. Both were illustrated by Eugene Viollet-le-Duc (1814–79) in 1858 and Burges himself had sketched the Noyon cupboard in 1853.

This article is concerned primarily with the thirteenth century survivals in France and England. It deals with the application of various forms of polychrome surface treatment to thirteenth century ecclesiastical pieces, thereby enabling a more informed study of polychromed ‘revival’ items that appear in English churches today.

The focus is not only on various forms of groundwork, paint media and varnishes, but the integration of painted glass, enamels, simulated enamels, jewels, cameos, gold and silver ornamentation, and Gothic micro architectural features in the original early mediaeval pieces.

Despite a shared political culture in England and northern France in the thirteenth century, at a time when the nobility of England was French and the language of the court was French, a measure of uncertainty still remains as to the extent to which a common material culture had evolved. Although there is a low survival rate of thirteenth century church furniture with any semblance or vestige of an original polychrome surface finish, such as the tomb of William Longespee (c1220) in Salisbury Cathedral (Figure 1), surviving thirteenth century images, manuscripts and accounts relating to shrines such as that of St Thomas Becket, nineteenth and twentieth century records relating to the Noyon Cathedral Armoire, as well as the outcome of conservation work involving scientific analysis of the original surface treatment to the thirteenth century Westminster Abbey Retable, can reveal something more detailed about the scale of innovation that had occurred in northern Europe.

THE SHRINE OF ST. THOMAS

The detail of the Longespee tomb and that of Archbishop Hubert Walter (d.1205) in Canterbury Cathedral made out of stonework to a similar design, suggests a basis for interpreting the thirteenth century painted glass panel depicting St. Thomas Becket emerging from his wooden shrine (figure 2), which had been completed by 1220. This is displayed in one of the surviving Trinity Chapel Miracle Windows of Canterbury

Cathedral made at least fifty years after his death in December 1170.

The wooden shrine, shaped like a sarcophagus or ark was supported on a marble plinth which rested on a painted stone arcaded structure supported by foliated capped columns or shafts which appear to stand on round bases or blocks; a familiar Gothic architectural solution (Figure 3). Whether the shafts then rested on or were secured to a cill structure similar to that used on Longespee and Hubert Walter tombs remains uncertain. The foliate caps to the shafts are very reminiscent of the acanthus leaves carved into one of the original surviving oak faceted columns of the thirteenth century Cope Chest at Salisbury Cathedral (Figure 4).

Furthermore the supporting shafts to the shrine would have been of sufficient height to accommodate 'crippled or diseased pilgrims' who lay down below the shrine. The Trinity Chapel painted glass panel also suggests the extent and nature of the polychrome treatment applied to such thirteenth century pieces of Gothic ecclesiastical furniture. Dean Stanley¹ describes in considerable detail the configuration and surface treatment of St. Thomas's shrine, totally destroyed in the sixteenth century, which would have had sufficient dimensions to accommodate his body and provide some protection from the multitude of pilgrims that visited his tomb. 'The Shrine was built of wood, the sides and sloping roof being ornamented with raised bands, or ribs, forming quatrefoils in the middle, and smaller half circles along the edges. This mode of ornamentation was not uncommon at that date, as is shown upon extent works of the kind. Inside the quatrefoils and semicircles so formed were raised, in like manner, ornaments resembling leaves of three and five lobes. The wooden boards and raised bands were covered with plates of gold, and on the raised bands and ornamented leaves were set the most valuable of the gems. The 'wondrous carbuncle', or *Regale* of France, was doubtless set as a central ornament of one of the quatrefoils. The plain golden surface left between the quatrefoils and semicircles then required some ornament to break the bright monotonous surface, and it was apparently covered with a diagonal trellis work of golden wire, cramped at its intersections to the golden plates. It was to this wire trellis-work that the loose jewels and pearls, rings, brooches, angels, images, and other ornaments offered at the Shrine, were attached. In the interior rested the body of Becket, which was exposed to view by opening a highly ornamented door or window at the ends. The saint's body is visible through one of these in the view.

The windows were occasionally opened to allow pilgrims, probably of the highest orders, who were blind or deaf, to insert their heads. The ridge of the upper part of the roof was adorned with large groups of golden leaves.² This description is based on annotations attached to the Cottonian Manuscript in the British Museum² and a treatise by monk Benedict who became Abbot of Peterborough in 1176.

The dimensions of the shrine made for St John of Beverley in 1292 provides an indicator of the likely scale of St Thomas's shrine. Records indicate that it was 5ft 6 inches long and 1ft 6 inches wide and of proportionate height. The design was to be architectural in style and include statuettes.³

THE NOYON ARMOIRE

Although few records survive of the Noyon Cathedral Armoire, Picardy, since its destruction in the 1914-18 War, its shape is very reminiscent of shrines such as that of St. Thomas Becket (Figure 2).

Records of the thirteenth century Noyon Armoire, include mid-nineteenth century colour illustrations and line drawings prepared by the French architect Viollet-le-Duc (Figures 6 & 8)⁴ and his contemporary the English Gothic revivalist William Burges (Figure 7)⁵, as well as a 1906 photograph of the Noyon Armoire within the Cathedral treasury. This black and white photograph⁶ (Figure 9) assists in validating the colour illustrations (Figures 6 & 7) and the line drawing (Figure 8) in the sense that it confirms the basic structure, configuration and condition of the armoire prior to its destruction.

The special religious purpose and origins of such ecclesiastical armiores and aumbries can be traced to two of the decrees issued by the Fourth Lateran Council, summoned by Innocent III in November 1215.

Canon 20 required that in all churches the Eucharist and the Chrism be kept in properly protected places provided with locks and keys. The intention of this decree being that they may not be reached by rash and indiscreet persons and used for profane or blasphemous purposes.

Canon 62 decreed that old relics may not be exhibited outside of their vessel or exposed for sale. The 1858 illustration (Figure 8) of the Noyon Armoire displays a reliquary stored in one of the upper cupboards. In view of the resemblance of the armoire to a sarcophagus or shrine, one of the original purposes of the armoire was no doubt to house the reliquaries of local saints. In a sense it had the potential to fulfil a role as a multi purpose shrine for Saints portrayed on the panel doors (Figure 6). In view of the apparent destruction to the substructure of the armoire (Figures 8 and 9) including losses to the supporting stiles one can only speculate as to the type of wooden shafts with shaped bases that may have originally existed.

The Parisian clergy of this period were noted for their eagerness and commitment to implementing such decrees and no doubt influenced attitudes adopted in surrounding areas of France. Taking into account the special rôle and purpose of a Cathedral armoire or Grande Châsse it is not surprising that the decorative front and profile of the Noyon Armoire shares a distinctive convention with other types of early Gothic ecclesiastical structures in which Christ or the Virgin Mary are represented as fulfilling a central position or focal point relative to surrounding Apostles or Saints and as appropriate 'The Day of Judgement' or the 'Coronation of the Virgin' scenes.

Gothic sculptured examples, which were often painted in the Middle Ages, include the screen façade at Wells Cathedral (1230) and the multi tiered tympani of the Royal portal at Chartres Cathedral (1145–55), Amiens Cathedral (1240–45) and the St Anne portal of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris (pre 1148). The Westminster Abbey Retable (Figure 10) (1270) followed a similar format although basically on one level. On the Noyon Armoire, Christ is depicted in a Gothic style trefoil tabernacle (Figures 6, 8 & 9) situated at a central upper level amongst Gothic micro architectural rooftop features such as finials, crockets and crenellations which are typically used on reliquaries and shrines of the period. Below are two tiers of panel doors decorated externally, with Saints, and internally, Angels. These panel doors are supported by strap hinges which according to Viollet-Le-Duc's illustrations (Figure 6) appear to be embellished alternately in gilt and a tinned finish. Likewise, the plate locks appear to be treated with a gilt finish. In England, ordinances of 1238 affecting goldsmiths, forbade the plating of base metals with gold and silver.⁷

Salzman⁸ refers to the use of tinned hinges and plain *gaddes* (tin head nails) at Moor End, England as early as 1365 and at Eltham in 1403 when seven pairs of strap hinges were to be used on shutters. Eames⁹ has noted that the strap hinges of the fifteenth century municipal armoire of Malines are probably tinned. '*Ferre' de fer blanc*'.

In the case of the Noyon Armoire, the Saints identified on the panel doors appear to be of local religious and historical significance (Figure 6). They include St Eloi, St Godeberta and St Denis.¹⁰ St Eloi, a goldsmith by training, became bishop of Noyon and Tournai in 642 A.D. and St Godeberta, a nun who sidestepped the lure of the Court of Clovis II, was canonised following her intervention to save the town of Noyon from fire in 676 A.D.

The lower left hand panel door painted with the figure of St Godeberta, which was copied to full size by William Burges (Figure 7) during his travels in Europe commencing in April 1853, displays a typical Gothic iconography comprising fleur de lys and swirling vines or foliage. The translation of this type of painted effect into large swirling wrought iron hinges and reinforcements, depicting foliage, also occurred during the Gothic period and was applied to outer surfaces of armoires and coffers. Note the coffer on the right hand side of figure 9. Further twentieth century photographs of the interior of the Noyon Cathedral treasury identifies another example.¹¹

The interior sides of the panel doors of the Noyon Armoire have angels in various stances playing musical instruments, holding candles and censers (Figures 8 & 9).

According to Viollet-le-Duc the paintwork on the Noyon Armoire was set out on a groundwork of sailcloth glued to boards making up the door panels.¹² Reference is also made to the early method of glue jointing such boards using the *grain d'orge* or a head of barley v-shaped joint. The recipes of Theophile, a twelfth Century monk, quoted in the *Dictionnaire Raisonné du Mobilier, Français* 1858 recommended that groundwork treatment should use a cheese based glue to attach untanned leather of a horse, donkey or cow to the boarding. If unavailable, linen or hemp cloth could be used followed by a light coating of chalk or plaster. Following the application of a paintwork media, a linseed oil varnish should be applied. A transcript of Theophile's recipes had been published in Latin and French in 1843¹³ prior to Viollet-le-Duc's use of extracts in his 1858 *Dictionnaire* referred to above.

Appendix A includes a translation of the relevant section from the *Dictionnaire Raisonné Du Mobilier, Français*.

THE WESTMINSTER ABBEY RETABLE C.1270

Following conservation work, involving scientific analysis, by the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge, in 1998, original polychromatic surface treatment became more evident. Binski¹⁴ writes 'This entailed the involvement of as many specialists as there were techniques: scientists and conservators with expertise in paintings on wood panels, metalwork and glass; and hours of microscopic cleaning to recover paint layers obscured for centuries.'

The Retable (333cms x 97 cms) (Figure 10) comprises four horizontal planks framed with two vertical panels and reinforced with a series of vertical struts. Dendrochronology tests indicate that this structure comprises English and Baltic oak grown between

1235–70. In 1858 Viollet-le-Duc had noted a significant deterioration to a major part of the Retable which is primarily a long rectangle of gilded and painted woodwork divided into five compartments separated by decorative borders incorporating simulated enamels, gemstones and cameos. The first three compartments remain intact. Tabernacle features within the first, third and fifth compartments retain their borders of simulated enamels utilising red and green glass. Appendix B includes translation of the method of making these enamel type decorations, according to Viollet-le-Duc's understanding.

St Peter with the key still remains in the first compartment and Jesus flanked by the Virgin Mary and St John still survives in the third or central compartment but St. Paul with his sword, originally within the fifth compartment, has disappeared since the 1858 records were drawn up.¹⁵ The second and third compartments comprise star-shaped medallions surrounded by deep blue glass. Within the second compartment three of Christ's miracles are displayed. Recent scientific analysis of the Retable has also revealed that a linseed oil paint media had been applied to a groundwork of gesso (gypsum/plaster of Paris). Combined with size the gypsum had been laid partly over a lead white primer and when located under coloured glass it had been silvered.

According to Binski¹⁶ although such a paint media was traditional to northern Europe in this period, the groundwork is what would be expected of mediaeval Italian panel paintings. 'The Westminster Retable is thus the earliest documented instance of the use of true gesso in English panel painting.'¹⁷

The mid-nineteenth century colour illustration by William Burges of a section of the central panel of the Retable¹⁸ (Figure 11), highlights the contribution that the minute three hundred odd simulated enamel plaques (Figure 12) made to the polychrome character of the Retable. Binski¹⁹ describes these as comprising 'delicate painted multi-layered glue and putty structures, often set in thin metal alloy trays and protected by clear glass.' Freestone²⁰ reckons that recent investigations suggest that the plaques utilise forest glass of north European origin. Furthermore he suggests that in the absence of evidence for the production of such fine quality glass in England at this time, they were probably imported from France. Binski²¹ also notes the Retable's special combination of clear and coloured glass overlays and inlays, silvered grounds and figurative paintings were used on the dado arcading to the upper chapel of Sainte – Chapelle, Paris which dates to the 1240s.

Such evidence of shared knowledge in terms of the geographical spread of techniques involving surface treatment and the movements of materials such as wainscot oak for the Retable's superstructure and forest glass to construct simulated enamels,²² assists our understanding of the dynamics of a material culture that was evolving in northern Europe towards a more varied and sophisticated surface treatment involving the use of dyed and gilt leather and silk applied to case furniture by the fourteenth century. Evidence still remains of such materials, trapped below hinges and plate locks²³ which in themselves were often embellished in gilt or tin. For example the oldest door in Westminster Abbey still retains a white vellum trapped underneath the original door lock, in a similar manner to the deep red leather held beneath the decorative ironwork of one of the 13th century cope chests at York Minster.²³

EXTRACTS FROM DICTIONNAIRE RAISONNE DU MOBILIER, FRANCAIS
BY EUGENE VIOLLET-LE-DUC

THE BAYEUX ARMOIRE

This armoire was entirely covered in paintings representing religious figures. The subjects that decorate the panels are white on a red base; the stiles and rails of the armoire are ornamented and set out on a black base with red fillets, and finials in black, white and red. Figure 6 shows half of this armoire which incorporates eight compartments in total.

Although a single thick timber section separates so that the panels open two by two displaying the "cells" separately, one must push one panel after the other in order to reveal the cells of the armoire. Likewise one must open one panel after the other in order to take out the items from each section. One will notice the placement of the locking bolt for simultaneously closing two cell panels on one catch, mounted on the one upright, clearing the opening panel but catching the closed one. Figure 7 shows the details of several hinges. Figure 8 shows a central middle finial incorporating a floral painted cross.

These examples show that the principal ornamentation of this furniture was achieved by means of the hinges and the painting covering the opening panels. The carpentry is of great simplicity: the planks of the door panels are assembled/joined in the "barley grain" (grain d'orge) manner, Figure 9.

Moreover it seems that it was intended to preserve the appearance of a robust and secure armoire. It was not until a much later date that carved decoration was applied to furniture woodwork. However we cannot be sure that before the fourteenth Century there were no carved armoires but observing the rare surviving examples of Roman wood craft suggests that sculpted raised surface panels were similar to what is still conserved in one of the doors of the Cathedral of PUY (Velay). The pine panels of that door included painted images carved 2-3mm, deep. An armoire in the fifteenth Century Cathedral of Munich comprises planks which are similarly worked with a background painted in blue combined with ornamentations retaining a natural wood finish.

NOYON ARMOIRE

But one of the most beautiful ancient known armoires is to be found in the treasury of Noyon Cathedral. The door panels are completely painted on the interior and exterior. The Consecration of that furniture dates back to the final years of the thirteenth century and the top rail is ornamented with sculptural devices. It was certainly destined, like the one at Bayeux, to lock up religious service articles. On the exterior, the panels are covered with fine painting on a crimson damask background and a scattering of white "Fleurs de lis", representing the Saints. On the interior sides are angels playing various musical instruments and holding censers and candles. Small crenellations are cut through the top section, a device frequently used on fourteenth century furniture. Figure 10 shows the arrangement of such armoires. We suppose the open shutters developed in two leaves so

as not to have an awkward overhanging projection when the doors are open. The doors are suspended on wrought iron strap hinges and the painting executed on a sail cloth applied to the wood surface.

Mr Vitet in his description of the Cathedral of Noyon and Mr M Didron in his "Annales Archeologiques" have given a extensive description of this furniture. Extracts from his lectures are included here. We join them at figure 10 in which the two sides of the Noyon armoire are decorated with chevrons painted in black, alternated with yellow chevrons.

The monk Theophile in his "essai sur divers arts" a work that dates back to the twelfth century states the procedure for preparing the door panels destined to receive the painted surfaces. This method appears to have been followed in the fabrication of the armoires in Bayeux and in Noyon. He states; as quoted on page 11 "first one joins the planks with great care, piece by piece and with the aid of a joiner's instrument used by woodworkers. One joins the parts with a cheese based glue", for which the author gives the method of preparation.

"The tablets assembled with this glue, when dry, adhere so well that they cannot be separated neither by humidity nor by heat. One must immediately plane it with an iron made for that purpose. The iron, curved and sharpened inward is fitted with two handles so that it can be pulled by hand. It is used to plane down tables, doors and panels until they fit perfectly. One must promptly cover them with untanned leather of the horse, donkey or cow. After having soaked it in water and removed the hair, one must express the surplus water. In that wet state one shall apply the cheese glue".

In his chapter 19 Theophile indicates the method for covering panels or panel doors. The panels are covered with leather, followed by a light coating of chalk or plaster. He goes to some length recommending the use of linen or hemp cloth, when no leather is available; finally in a subsequent chapter he gives the procedures for painting tables and doors in red or in other colours, with a linseed oil media followed by a coating of varnish.

The taste for furniture more often decorated with paint or carvings appears to diminish by the end of the fourteenth Century; at that period the mouldings and the ornamentation tailored in wood take over in importance and finish up replacing polychrome entirely.

It must be stated there still was joinery and ebonising for the making of edifices. There was a preference for using material in a convenient format, large panels assembled from boards along the grain, but not joined, fitted together in a frame consisting of perfectly dried wood to avoid warping.

During the fourteenth-fifteenth century furniture panels made with planks no greater in thickness than 0.18-0.25cm, became popular, held within frames so as to keep them flat and protect the joinery. The construction and the form of the furniture adopting this new principle changed appearances and caused a veritable revolution in the joinery and ebonising practices.

APPENDIX II

PAINTED GLASS & PLAQUES

It can be observed here (Ref A and B,) that these plaques utilise blue and purple coloured glass. The method of the manufactures is as follows. One starts by glueing beaten silver leaf on glass using a mixture of gum Arabic mixed with a small amount of honey. One then paints on the glass the delicate ornamentation prior to heating it on a very low heat. Place this mixture while still warm on a flat plate and apply the gold leaf; when the plate has hardened one brushes on the gold.

The gilded ornamentation casts a shadow on the silver leaf underneath which produces great elegance and depth of perspective.

The other tableaux (C) is painted in various highlighted gilded colours beneath plain greenish glass. Underneath the painting, which is transparant, one applies a gold leaf and then glues the panels like the others; this creates a shimmering light that does not fade. However one must bring to these work methods considerable care and delicacy, because similar work, if not executed by skilled hands, will resemble those boxes one sells on fairs to the little people to put their ornaments in.

The coloured subjects painted on the gilded or embossed surfaces use eggshell paint very lightly varnished with a covering of boiled linseed oil with gum Arabic. This varnish is spread with the palm of the hand so as to yield a very soft finish.

Some parts of the gilding are similarly varnished to give it warmth and to avoid a metallic appearance, notably in the depths of the impressed metal; because if one were not to take that precaution, the painting would look lifeless and shallow.

After having admired the work of Guillome Beriot we asked him whether he did work of his nature in the apartments of the rich manufacturers: "yes" he said, "I have worked on ceilings and on skirtings thus decorated, repainted fine cloth glued to wood, gildings, embossed plaster and metal and plate glass ware, silver foliage with birds and small figures painted en relief and au natural. I have also made wooden beds, armoires and dressers; but that work is very expensive and these days people prefer furniture in scuplted wood and covered with fine fabrics or tapestries.

TRANSLATED BY W. IRIK

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I am indebted to Michael Legg for sharing his knowledge of historic metalwork and his suggestion that the supporting structure to the Salisbury Cathedral Cope Chest indicates a period structure which had originally been conceived with columns resting on the bases which are now missing.

Many thanks also to Willem Irik for his painstaking translation of extracts from the mid nineteenth century *Dictionnaire Raisonne du Mobilier Francais* by Viollet-Le-Duc.

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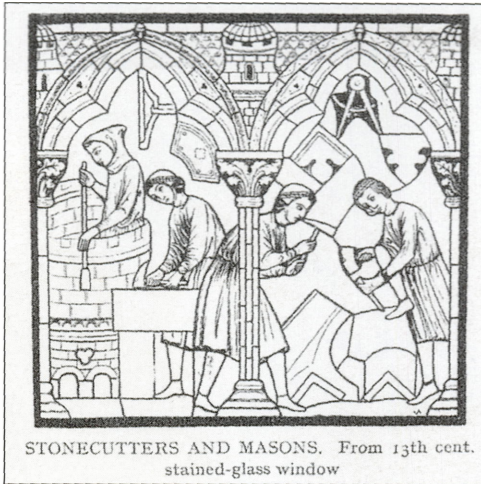


1. Base of the William Longespee tomb, Salisbury Cathedral, c1220



2. Shrine of St Thomas Becket, thirteenth century, depicted in a stained glass panel, Canterbury Cathedral

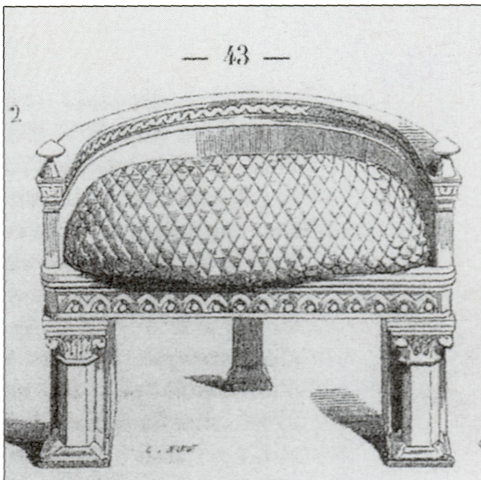
Photo © Sonia Halliday Photographs, Weston Turville



3. Illustration from Didron, *Annales Archaeologiques*, 1845, volume II, p.143 showing an arcade with foliate caps, shafts and bases supporting the arches



4. Foliated caps and faceted shafts on the foot of a thirteenth century cope chest at Salisbury Cathedral



5. Foliated caps and faceted columnar legs with shaped bases on a chair illustrated in E. Viollet le Duc, *Dictionnaire du Mobilier Francais*, 1858



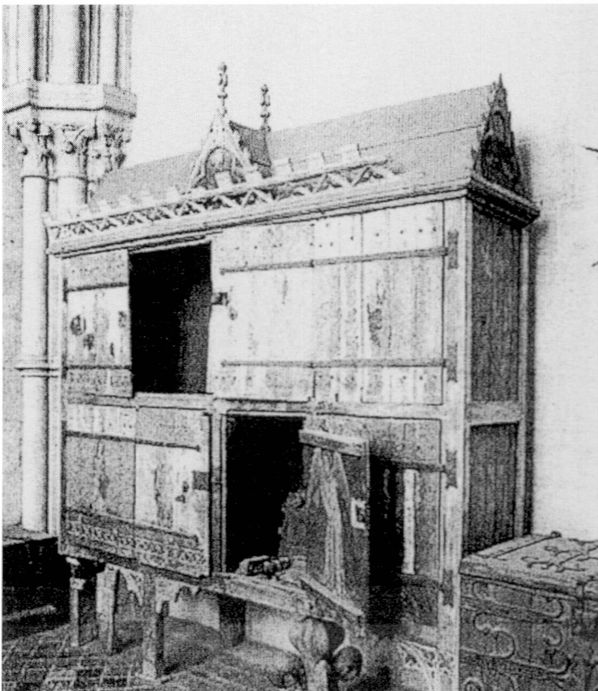
6. Part of Noyon Armoire
illustrated in E Viollet le Duc,
Dictionnaire du Mobilier Francais, 1858



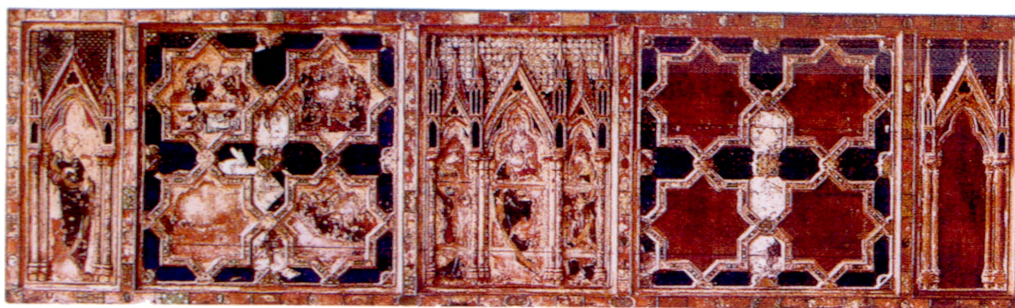
7. St Godeberta panel door copied
by William Burges in 1853



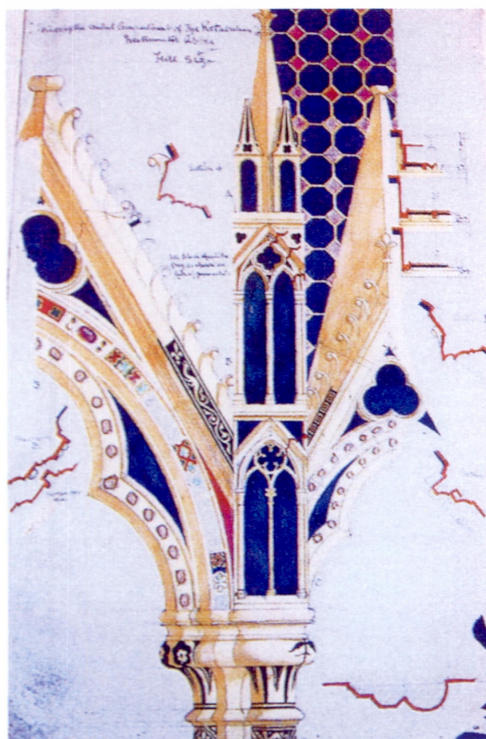
8. The Noyon Armoire illustrated
in E Viollet le Duc,
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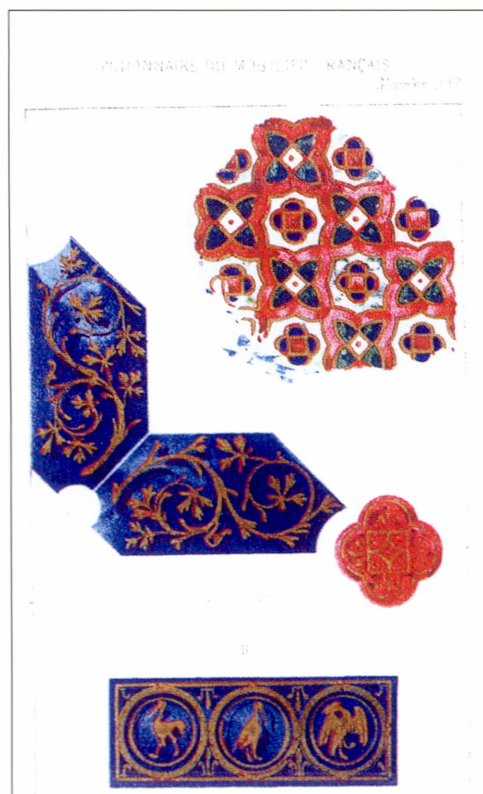
9. The Noyon Armoire in the
Cathedral Treasury.
Photograph taken 1906



10. The Westminster Abbey Retable, c1270
Photo © Dean and Chapter of Westminster



11. Part of the central section of the Westminster Retable copied by William Burges in 1853



12. Preparation of enamels and painted glass. From E Viollet le Duc, *Dictionnaire du Mobilier Français*, 1858