

Musée de Cluny

13 September

The visit to the Musée de Cluny at the end of our first day afforded a bare two hours to take in the riches of this collection, the National Museum of the Middle Ages. Founded in 1843, it sprang from the collection of Alexandre du Sommerard (1779-1842), and comprises roughly the gothic element. Régisseur Florence Ertaud (in the absence of Michel Huynh) guided us through the highly varied collections from all parts of France, dating from the 5th to the 15th century, housed in two outstanding Paris monuments.

A much-studied piece was a grand chest of truly huge dimensions from Poissy in the Île de France. With a sliding top in two parts, and mason's mitres showing on the inside, it housed two compartments. The framed panel front (of local oak) had applied tracery of straight-grained Baltic oak, which was a revelation as the chest was dated to c.1300. It was noted that the first framed panelled chest in UK is considered to be nearer 1500. Reference was made to a Norfolk chest with applied tracery. Many times on this study tour we were to find constructional details that appeared to be in use 100 years or more earlier than we might have expected in England.

Another astounding piece was an oak chest (the caption told us) completely covered in iron sheet. Unfortunately

A detail of the iron-covered oak chest, with decorated straps, in the Musée de Cluny



The deeply carved figures of Christ and the Apostles on a 15th century chest in the Musée de Cluny



we were unable to see inside in spite of serious attempts to gain access. There were four handles at the tops of the legs front and back, and two at each end. The additional metal straps were decorated with heads, the strap terminals with palmette decoration. Perhaps this construction was for secure storage of valuables including fire resistance. None of us could recall a comparable chest.

A northern Italian chest with fine intaglio carving (incised and filled with wax or resin), a carved edge to the lid, and punched decoration around the inside top of the carcass, dated to the end of the 15th century, was considered very early. There was evidence of five pin hinges having preceded the existing tinned strap hinges. Discussion centred on whether the designs for this type of chest were ready made. A 15th century chest from Flanders stunned the senses and had us wondering at the skills of its makers with its depiction of Christ and the Apostles, figures carved deeply out of the solid, with the figures in two tiers over the front, and foliage on the ends. Open dovetails at this date again surprised us.

The well-known Gothic octagonal table with stunning traceried cross supports which slotted together, showed the shaped blocks of wood with central holes attached to the top, which allowed pegs to locate through the related holes in the two cross sections of this wonderful piece of early knock-down furniture. The 15ft long German pine table with painted heraldic decoration, hinged lengthways in the middle, was compared to other known examples, while the complexity of the carving in a 'jousting chest' featuring a tournament scene (walnut, French /Flemish, 15th century) led to comparisons with other rare examples of this amazing art form. Even the breathtaking tapestries of the *Lady and the Unicorn* (c.1490) had us focused on three-dimensional depictions of trestle-ended stools with moulded tops and shapely brackets under the overhang.

We left reluctantly with much still to see, but aware that our senses had worked extremely hard to retain as much as possible of this remarkable collection.

Valentine Butler with thanks to Chris Pickvance for his comments on the Poissy chest