

A Day in Dijon

15 September

Our week in France challenged members and curators alike to enjoy furniture from the medieval and renaissance periods with a sceptical eye for evidence of timber type, finish, carving, repair, honest reproduction and mistaken date. The origin of wood and the furniture made from it can be identified with increasing accuracy by dendrochronology, making changes to previous attributions. The French examples seen demonstrate a liking for adding value to furniture and timber in buildings with finishes of more expensive timber and enhancement with colour.

The **Musée Archéologique** hosted an excellent exhibition on *Bois*. Timber degenerated through immersion in water, rot and infestation was exhibited alongside examples and descriptions of conservation methods. Among the highlights were pre-Christian examples of wooden figures and body parts, including a full-size leg, discovered at a potential temple site, thought to be in request for healing, a tradition continued in Orthodox churches today, where impressed metal body parts can be purchased to hang beside an icon in prayer for healing. A

medieval carved and painted bust had been investigated, then partly restored, to demonstrate the careful process of layering stain and gesso and colour under gilt finish.

The **Musée des Beaux-Arts** contains a magnificent collection of 14th and 15th century French medieval religious paintings on wood. These give a vivid impression of how much the carved timber surfaces in roofs, screens and on figures in medieval churches were once entirely enhanced with colour and gilding. A highlight of the museum was the walnut door of the Palais de Justice attributed to Sambin. Carved and decorated renaissance Burgundian cupboards displayed old and new parts and cabinets valuable enough to be provided with later stands. The keen eyes of members sought to distinguish original from later work.

Another highlight was the display of sculptures of the *Pleurants*, mourners from the tomb of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (1404 -1410). With the tombs closed for renovation, the exhibition of the mourners elicited great admiration for the sculptors who conceived and created them. Each figure is emotionally charged, sculpted in the round, in spite of normally being half hidden deep in a carved niche on the tomb.

Tour of Dijon

The town houses were constructed for the rich bourgeois and holders of office in the court of the Dukes of Burgundy. After the installation of parliament at Dijon in 1480, it was essentially the magistrates and holders of important office who occupied the heart of the town. Up to the time of the Revolution there were more than 100 exceptionally fine buildings set in a small area within the perimeter of the ancient ramparts of Dijon. The ramparts were demolished in the 19th century and replaced by boulevards.

The town has a variety of buildings, the timber-framed medieval houses interspersed with late gothic to

A love-knot entwining the initials AD carved over a door lintel in Dijon



renaissance buildings. Timber framing may be carved and renaissance stone buildings are sometimes richly embellished with carving. The tour began at the merchant's house of three gables, dated 1440. In the rue de Forge the Maison Millier dates to 1483 with pegging replaced by bricks, carved timber columns added to the vertical framing in 1926-7.

The Hôtel d'Henri Chambellin, mayor in 1490, is an architectural joy in flamboyant Gothic style with an open staircase. The house built by Jean Maillard, mayor of Dijon in 1560, is considered high art of the renaissance and due in part to the celebrated architect and sculptor Hugnes Sambin. The decorative work includes crowned heads, lion masks and garlands of fruit and flowers. The three arcades are evocative of the Grotto des Pins in Fontainebleau, which we know to be by Hugnes Sambin (1520-1601). These built expressions of status were significant examples of the wealth of Dijon in the Burgundian period.

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