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This twelfth-century tower and cloister, originally at the foot of Mount Canigou in the Pyrenees, today introduces medieval architecture and art to new generations at The Cloisters in New York City.

Old World Monasteries for New Generations

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The popular image of a medieval monastery – a fortress-like structure isolated on the top of a mountain, with its tower piercing the blue sky and its verdant courtyard garden filled with monks walking to exercise as they meditate on the word of God – comes to mind when one sees the tower and cloister of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa (illustrated on the cover and p. 52). With a covered walkway surrounding a large open courtyard, the cloister was the focal point and heart of the monastery. It was not only used for meditation and reading aloud, but also for the monks' washing.

These medieval buildings of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa were originally located at the foot of Mount Canigou in the Pyrenees of southern France. In 1938, they were reconstructed and opened to the public on upper Manhattan Island, within Fort Tryon Park, as part of The Cloisters, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.¹

The Cloisters' primary creators – George Grey Barnard (1863-1938), the collector and entrepreneur who in 1914 created the first "Cloisters;" John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), the benefactor of the land, complex design, and additional object acquisitions for the collection; and James J. Rorimer (1905-1966), the curator who presided over the construction and would become director of the Metropolitan Museum – viewed The Cloisters as a branch of the museum to educate the new world about the old.²

The Cloisters museum is composed of five different cloisters, a series of chapels, and exhibition halls arranged within a rampart wall crowned by a tower. In three of the cloisters there are gardens patterned after those found in manuscripts, paintings, and tapestries from the Middle Ages. The museum complex contains an original chapter house, a reconstructed Romanesque chapel, a Gothic style chapel, and eight exhibition galleries for medieval sculpture, tapestries (including the renowned *Unicorn Tapestries*), stained glass, paintings, and furniture.³

The reconstructed cloister from the Abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, a Benedictine monastery founded in 878, is the central and largest unit of The Cloisters museum.

According to archeological evidence, the cloister building constructed during the twelfth century measured 156' x 128', but it is only half that size

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CLOISTER AND LOMBARDO-ROMANESQUE BELL TOWER, RUINS OF THE ABBEY OF SAINT-MICHEL-DE-CUXA, FRANCE (founded in 878). Photo: © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

at The Cloisters today. Elements of the original structure were purchased by George Grey Bernard and brought to the United States, but much of the building materials at The Cloisters are modern. The new building materials and architectural design were kept simple. Millstone granite, quarried and cut by hand near New London, Connecticut, was used for the exterior of the building. The warm tones of the stones recall those found in southern France but are more durable and better suited for the climate in New York. The dimensions of the individual blocks were patterned after Romanesque buildings. The red roof tiles were copied from examples excavated at Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa to give it an effect similar to the original.⁴

In its design, the reconstructed tower in The Cloisters incorporates some of the features of a tower still standing at Cuxa in Prades, France (see p. 54). The original tower was part of the monastic rebuilding program of Abbot Oliva (c. 971-1046), an important religious leader of the day. After his travels in Italy, the abbot established several Benedictine monasteries and added architectural features to Cuxa based on northern Italian (Lombardic) and Romanesque design.⁵

When the Abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa was founded, it was a small city with fifty monks, twenty-servants, thirty manuscripts, five hundred sheep, fifty mares, forty pigs, two horses, five donkeys, twenty oxen, and a hundred other large animals. The community began to decline after the twelfth century.⁶ During the suppression of Catholic monastic orders and convents in 1791, the remaining monks of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa departed and much of the stonework was dispersed. However, part of the Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa cloister still survives in its original location and it is, once again, a monastic community.⁷



Just as we use “church” to refer to a local congregation or parish and to the buildings that support its shared activities, so we use “monastery” to refer both to an intentional religious community that lives differently from the world and to the complex of buildings that serve its common life. The term comes from the Greek word *monastērion* for a hermit’s abode. Originally, in fourth-century Egypt, many Christian monks (from *monachos* for a person who is one – i.e., single-minded or focused) chose to live alone. But soon Abba Pachomius (c. 292-346) organized more than five thousand of these monks into the *Koinonia*, a federation of small monastic cities where monks lived in communal houses of forty members, and shared buildings such as a church, refectory (dining hall), and infirmary for the sick.⁸ However, the ground plan and architecture of most medieval European monasteries, like Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, were not inspired by Pachomius’ cities, but by the monastic community Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 547) founded at Monte Cassino, Italy, two hundred years later.

The earliest surviving complete, but idealized, plan for a monastery comes from St. Gall, Switzerland (see p. 57). Ordered by Abbot Heito of Reichenau for Abbot Gozbert as he prepared to rebuild St. Gall Abbey after 830,⁹ this schematic ground plan (44” x 30.5”) is drawn in red ink on five sheets of calf vellum that are sewn together and inscribed with black ink in Carolingian miniscule.¹⁰

The size and complexity of the plan reflect the importance of monasteries as centers of learning and self-sufficiency throughout the Carolingian period, when medieval culture flourished during and after the reign of the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (742-814).¹¹ In its geometric regularity and orderliness (created by a network of parallel and perpendicular axes), the layout resembles a small Roman town or military camp. This resemblance

cannot be coincidental and must be the result of the study of the architectural treatise of Vitruvius and ancient surveying manuals that were copied in the Carolingian scriptoria.¹²

The nucleus of the St. Gall plan is the grouping of principal buildings around a fully enclosed cloister, with the great church on its north side. The longitudinal nave (C) and high altar in the eastern apse (D) of the church are identified on the illustrated plan. At the other end of the nave, a western apse is surrounded by a semicircular porch with two freestanding towers placed in front of it to form the entrance.

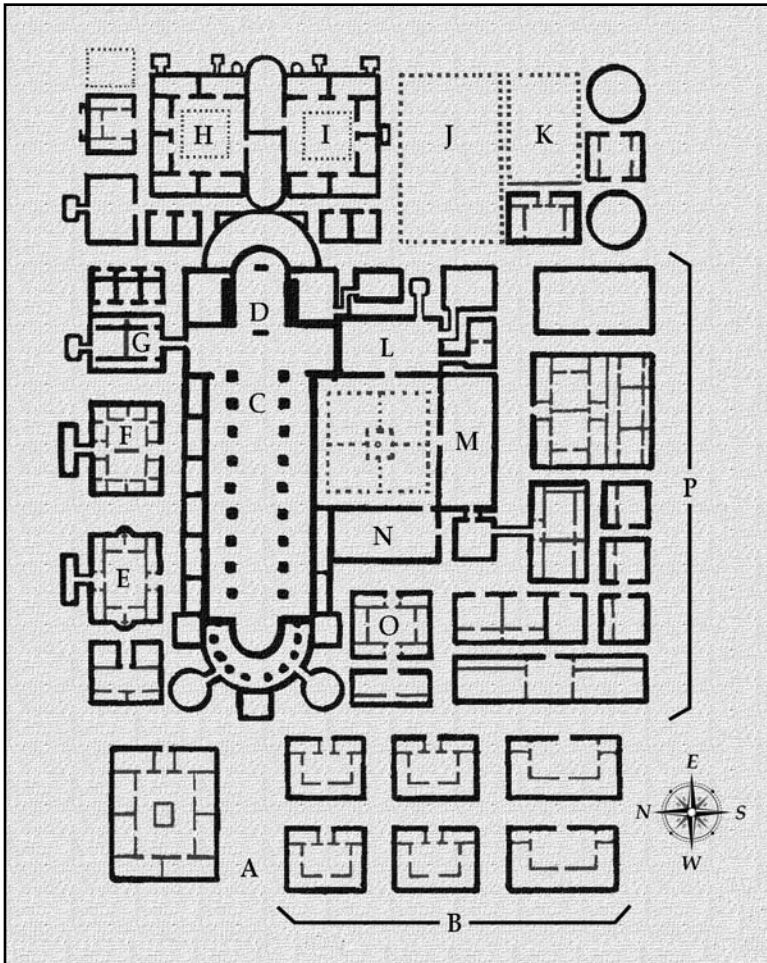
The function of the other monastic buildings determines their arrangement around the great church. To the south is the monks' cloister surrounded by the dormitory (L), refectory (M), and cellar (N). The bakery, kitchen, brewery, mill, press, drying kiln, barn, and workshops (P) are further south, while the animal sheds and servants' quarters (B) and guest house for the pilgrims/poor (O) are to the west at the bottom of the plan and adjacent to the entrance (A). The guesthouse (E) and the school (F) are in close proximity of the Abbot's house (G) on the north side of the community. The poultry sheds, garden and gardener's house (K), cemetery (J), and the cloisters for the novices (I) and the sick (H) occupy the eastern edge of the plan.



The only significant addition to the plan of St. Gall Abbey in later monasteries was the chapter house, or daily meeting room, which was usually placed on the east side of the cloister. The chapter house provided a location for the monks to carry out the communal discernment prescribed in the third chapter of Saint Benedict's *Rule*: "Whenever any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community and state the matter to be acted upon."

The Cloisters museum contains the chapter house from Notre-Dame-de-Pontaut in Aquitaine, France. In the chapter house, the Abbott would sit on a raised, separate seat, while the monks sat on stone benches encircling the room. The illustration here (see p. 58) shows an arcade of three arches at the entrance to the chapter house. The room had natural light from windows on the rear wall – which was plastered and may have been painted. Some paint can still be seen on the ribbing of the interior vaults which provide structural support and decoration. The four converging ribs of each vault are supported by columns; the capitals of these columns feature various patterns, including rosettes, palmettes, and basket-weave as well as carvings of birds and animals.

Before the chapter house from Notre-Dame-de-Pontaut was purchased in the early 1930s and carefully restored in The Cloisters, it had fallen into a dilapidated condition. A victim of the Wars of Religion in 1569 and abandoned in 1791 in the aftermath of the French Revolution, it had been used as a stable during the nineteenth century. At the time of its purchase, the



Drawing based on the PLAN OF ST. GALL, SWITZERLAND (c. 820).

plans for The Cloisters were progressing nicely. Numerous other Romanesque and Gothic architectural elements had been acquired, including thirty doorways, windows, and stained glass. Mr. Rockefeller presented this chapter house and the famous *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for The Cloisters.¹³



The Cloisters, which celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2013, provides a harmonious and evocative space in which visitors of all ages can experience the many medieval traditions of artistic production. The complex design of passageways and galleries shelter the museum visitor in much the

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CHAPTER HOUSE FROM NOTRE-DAME-DE-PONTAUT, FRANCE (Twelfth Century).
The Cloisters, 35.50. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource,
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same way as the cloisters sheltered the monks walking from one building to another. One can only imagine that these old spaces will provide new generations with a place of rest, contemplation, and conversation just as they did for their original monastic inhabitants.

I first experienced *The Cloisters* as an assignment for Dr. Robert Calkins' medieval art history course my sophomore year at Cornell University. Although I had grown up and lived only twenty-five miles from *The Cloisters*, it was that assignment which brought me to this wonderful museum to experience art history and enjoy a sense of serenity I still remember today.

NOTES

1 James J. Rorimer, "The Opening of the Cloisters," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 33:4 (April 1938), 89-97.

2 Mary Rebecca Leuchak, "The Old World for the New': Developing the Design for the Cloisters," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 23 (1988), 257-277. For information on the initial

collection of George Grey Barnard, see Joseph Breck, "The Cloisters," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 20:7 (July 1925), 166-177.

3 Rorimer, 92.

4 Ibid.

5 David A. Hanser, *Architecture of France, Reference Guides to National Architecture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 242.

6 Ibid., 241-242.

7 Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa Cloister, Collection Database (accessed April 6, 2010), www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database.

8 For more information on this period, see William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially chapter 5.

9 Ulrich Kuder, et al., "Carolingian art," *Grove Art Online* (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed April 6, 2010), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T014211.

10 Werner Jacobsen, "St. Gall Abbey," *Grove Art Online* (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed April 6, 2010) www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T075102.

11 At the Synod of Aachen (817), through the efforts of Benedict of Aniane (747-821), the *Rule of St. Benedict* gained acceptance as a way of common life and the Monte Cassino buildings became a widely accepted plan for monastic communities. See Richard Fawcett, et al., "Monastery," *Grove Art Online* (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed April 6, 2010), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T059008.

12 Kuder, "Carolingian art."

13 Chapter House from Notre-Dame-de-Pontaut, Collection Database (accessed April 6, 2010), www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database.



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