Sainte-Chapelle

The **Sainte-Chapelle** (French pronunciation: [sɛ̃t ʃapɛl], **Holy Chapel**) is a royal chapel in the Gothic style, within the medieval Palais de la Cité, the residence of the Kings of France until the 14th century, on the Île de la Cité in the River Seine in Paris, France.

Construction began sometime after 1238 and the chapel was consecrated on 26 April 1248.[2] The Sainte-Chapelle is considered among the highest achievements of the Rayonnant period of Gothic architecture. It was commissioned by King Louis IX of France to house his collection of Passion relics, including Christ's Crown of Thorns – one of the most important relics in medieval Christendom, later hosted in the nearby Notre-Dame Cathedral until the 2019 fire, which it survived.[3]

Along with the Conciergerie, the Sainte-Chapelle is one of the earliest surviving buildings of the Capetian royal palace on the Île de la Cité. Although damaged during the French Revolution and restored in the 19th century, it has one of the most extensive 13th-century stained glass collections anywhere in the world.

Contents

History

Sainte-Chapelle	
Sainte-Chapelle, upper level interior	
Religion	
Affiliation	Catholic Church
Province	Archdiocese of Paris
Region	Île-de-France
Rite	Roman Rite
Status	Secularized since French Revolution
Location	
State	France
Geographic coordinates	48°51′19″N 2°20′42″E
Architecture	
Type	Parish church
Style	French gothic

The Sainte-Chapelle or "Holy Chapel", in the courtyard of the royal palace on the Île de la Cité (now part of a later administrative complex known as La Conciergerie), was built to house Louis IX's collection of relics of Christ, which included the Crown of Thorns, the Image of Edessa and some thirty other items. Louis purchased his Passion relics from Baldwin II, the Latin emperor at Constantinople, for the sum of 135,000 livres, though this money was actually paid to the Venetians, to whom the relics had been pawned. The relics arrived in Paris in August 1239, carried from Venice by two Dominican friars. Upon arrival, King Louis hosted a week-long celebratory reception for the relics. For the final stage of their journey they were carried by the King himself, barefoot and dressed as a penitent, a scene depicted in the *Relics of the Passion* window on the south side of the chapel. The relics were stored in a large and elaborate silver chest, the *Grand-Chasse*, on which Louis spent a further 100,000 livres. The entire chapel, by contrast, cost 40,000 livres to build and glaze. Until it was completed in 1248, the relics were housed at chapels at the Château de Vincennes and a specially built chapel at the Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye. In 1246, fragments of the True Cross and the Holy Lance were added to Louis' collection, along with other relics. The chapel was consecrated on 26 April 1248 and Louis' relics were moved to their new home with great ceremony.

In addition to serving as a place of worship, the Sainte-Chapelle played an important role in the political and cultural ambitions of King Louis and his successors.[4][5] With the imperial throne at Constantinople occupied by a mere Count of Flanders and with the Holy Roman Empire in uneasy disarray, Louis' artistic and architectural patronage helped to position him as the central monarch of western Christendom, the Sainte-Chapelle fitting into a long tradition of prestigious palace chapels. Just as the Emperor could pass privately from his palace into the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, so now Louis could pass directly from his palace into the Sainte-Chapelle. More importantly, the two-story palace chapel had obvious similarities to Charlemagne's palatine chapel at Aachen (built 792–805)—a parallel that Louis was keen to exploit in presenting himself as a worthy successor to the first Holy Roman Emperor.[6]

Groundbreaking	1242
Completed	1248
Monument historique	
Official name: Sainte-Chapelle	
Designated	1862
Reference no.	PA00086259[1]
Denomination	*Église*
Website	
www.sainte-chapelle.fr (http://www.sainte-chapelle.fr)	

The Sainte-Chapelle rises above the rooflines of the Louvre Castle on the Île de la Cité in Paris. Illustration of the month of June from the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* by the Limbourg brothers, c. 1400.

Architecture

The royal chapel is a prime example of the phase of Gothic architectural style called "Rayonnant", marked by its sense of weightlessness and strong vertical emphasis. It stands squarely upon a lower chapel, which served as parish church for all the inhabitants of the palace, which was the seat of government. The king was later recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church. His title became Saint Louis.

Panoramic view of the Lower Chapel

Exterior

The contemporary visitor entering the courtyard of the Royal Palace would have been met by the sight of a grand ceremonial staircase (the *Grands Degres*) to their right and the north flank and eastern apse of the Sainte-Chapelle to their left. The chapel exterior shows many of the typical characteristics of Rayonnant architecture—deep buttresses surmounted by pinnacles, crocketted gables around the roof-line and vast windows subdivided by bar tracery. The internal division into upper and lower chapels is clearly marked on the outside by a string-course, the lower walls pierced by smaller windows with a distinctive spherical triangle shape. Despite its decoration, the exterior is relatively simple and austere, devoid of flying buttresses or major sculpture and giving little hint of the richness within.

View of the chapel from approximate position of the Palace gateway (lower parts obscured by much later buildings)

No designer-builder is named in the archives concerned with the construction. In the 19th century it was assumed (as with so many buildings of medieval Paris) to be the work of the master mason Pierre de Montreuil, who worked on the remodelling of the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis and completed the south transept façade of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris.[7] Modern scholarship rejects this attribution in favour of Jean de Chelles or Thomas de Cormont, while Robert Branner saw in the design the hand of an unidentified master mason from Amiens.[8]

The Sainte-Chapelle's most obvious architectural precursors include the apsidal chapels of Amiens Cathedral, which it resembles in its general form, and the Bishop's Chapel (c. 1180s) of Noyon Cathedral, from which it borrowed the two-story design. As has often been argued however the major influence on its overall design seems to have come from contemporary metalwork, particularly the precious shrines and reliquaries made by Mosan goldsmiths.[9]

Metal also appears to have been used in the structure. Though the buttresses are substantial, they are too close to the vault to counter its side thrust. Metal elements such as iron rods or chains, able to support tension, must have been used to replace the flying buttresses of previous structures.

Interior

The Parisian palatine chapel, built to house a reliquary, was itself like a precious reliquary turned inside out (with the richest decoration on the inside).[10] Although the interior is dominated by the stained glass (see below), every inch of the remaining wall surface and the vault was also richly coloured and decorated. Analysis of remaining paint fragments reveals that the original colours were much brighter than those favoured

by the 19th-century restorers and would have been closer to the colours of the stained glass. The quatrefoils of the dado arcade were painted with scenes of saints and martyrs and inset with painted and gilded glass, emulating Limoges enamels, while rich textiles hangings added to the richness of the interior.


Stained-glass windows interior
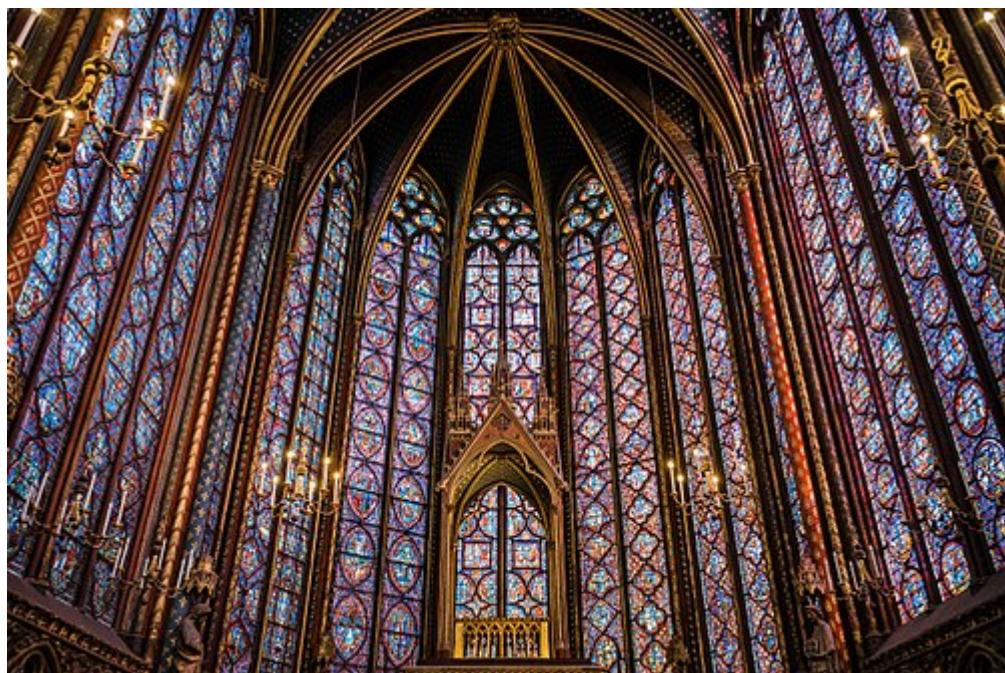
Above the dado level, mounted on the clustered shafts that separate the great windows, are twelve larger-than-life-sized sculpted stone figures representing the twelve Apostles (six of these are replicas—the damaged originals are now in the Musée du Moyen Age). Each carries a disk marked with the consecration crosses that were traditionally marked on the pillars of a church at its consecration. Niches on the north and south sides of the chapel are the private oratories of the king and of his mother, Blanche of Castile.

Stained glass

The most famous features of the chapel, among the finest of their type in the world, are the great stained-glass windows, for whose benefit the stone wall surface is reduced to little more than a delicate framework. Fifteen huge mid-13th-century windows fill the nave and apse, while a large rose window with Flamboyant tracery (added to the upper chapel c. 1490) dominates the western wall.

Stained-glass windows of the Sainte Chapelle

Despite some damage the windows display a clear iconographical programme. The three windows of the eastern apse illustrate the New Testament, featuring scenes of The Passion (centre) with the Infancy of Christ (left) and the Life of John the Evangelist (right). By contrast, the windows of the nave are dominated by Old Testament exemplars of ideal kingship/queenship in an obvious nod to their royal patrons. The cycle starts at the western bay of the north wall with scenes from the Book of Genesis (heavily restored). The next ten windows of the nave follow clockwise with scenes from Exodus, Joseph, Numbers/Leviticus, Joshua/Deuteronomy, Judges, (moving to the south wall) Jeremiah/Tobias, Judith/Job, Esther, David and the Book of Kings. The final window, occupying the westernmost bay of the south wall brings this narrative of sacral kingship right up to date with a series of scenes showing the rediscovery of Christ's relics, the miracles they performed, and their relocation to Paris in the hands of King Louis himself.[11]

Joseph sold by his brothers

King Saul and David

Daniel and Dream of Nebuchadnezzar

Later reception and restoration

The Parisian scholastic Jean de Jandun praised the building as one of Paris' most beautiful structures in his "Tractatus de laudibus Parisius" (1323), citing:

Ceiling of the Lower Chapel

> that most beautiful of chapels, the chapel of the king, most decently situated within the walls of the king's house, enjoys a complete and indissoluble structure of the most solid stone. The most excellent colors of the pictures, the precious gilding of the images, the beautiful transparence of the ruddy windows on all sides, the most beautiful cloths of the altars, the wondrous merits of the sanctuary, the figures of the reliquaries externally adorned with dazzling gems, bestow such a hyperbolic beauty on that house of prayer, that, in going into it below, one understandably believes oneself, as if rapt to heaven, to enter one of the best chambers of Paradise.

O how salutary prayers to the all-powerful God pour out in these oratories, when the internal and spiritual purities of those praying correspond proportionally with the external and physical elegance of the oratory!

O how peacefully to the most holy God the praises are sung in these tabernacles, when the hearts of those singers are by the pleasing pictures of the tabernacle analogically beautified with the virtues!

O how acceptable to the most glorious God appear the offerings on these altars, when the life of those sacrificing shines in correspondence with the gilded light of the altars![12]

Damage during the Revolution

Much of the chapel as it appears today is a re-creation, although nearly two-thirds of the windows are authentic. The chapel suffered its most grievous destruction in the late eighteenth century during the French Revolution, when the steeple and baldachin were removed, the relics dispersed (although some survive as the "relics of Sainte-Chapelle" in the treasury of Notre Dame de Paris), and various reliquaries, including the *grande châsse*, were melted down.

19th-century restorations

The Sainte-Chapelle was requisitioned as an archival depository in 1803. Two metres' worth of glass was removed to facilitate working light and destroyed or put on the market.[13] Its well-documented restoration, completed under the direction of Félix Duban in 1855, was regarded as exemplary by contemporaries[14] and is faithful to the original drawings and descriptions of the chapel that survive.

21st-century restorations

The Sainte-Chapelle has undergone various stages of restoration from the 1970s onwards. Air pollution, the elements, and the large number of visitors all cause damage to the stained-glass windows. Also, in 1945 a layer of external varnish had been applied to protect the glass from the dust and scratches of wartime bombing.[15] This had gradually darkened, making the already fading images even harder to see.[16] In 2008, a more comprehensive seven-year programme of restoration was begun, costing some €10 million to clean and preserve all the stained glass, clean the facade stonework and conserve and repair some of the sculptures. Half of the funding was provided by

Exterior view of Sainte-Chapelle, 1903

private donors, the other half coming from the Villum Foundation.[15] Included in the restoration was an innovative thermoformed glass layer applied outside the stained-glass windows for added protection. The project was completed in 2015 in time for the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Louis, who had ordered the construction of the church.[17]

Sainte-Chapelle today
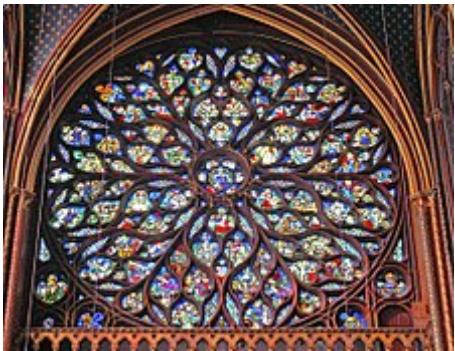
The Sainte-Chapelle has been a national historic monument since 1862.
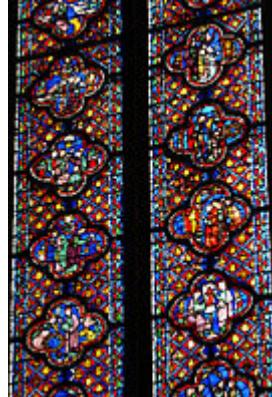
Located near the Métro station: *Cité*.

Gallery

The chapel's rose window

Detail of a stained-glass window
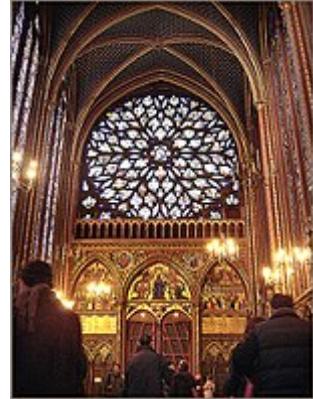
Detail of a stained-glass window depicting a baptism. (Now located at the Musée de Cluny.)

Sculpture

Interior

Interior

Statue of Louis IX

Sainte-Chapelle interior

Other *Saintes-Chapelles*

Prior to the dissolution of the Sainte-Chapelle in 1803, following the French Revolution, the term "Sainte-Chapelle royale" also referred not only to the building but to the *chapelle* itself, the choir of Sainte-Chapelle. However, the term was also applied to a number of other buildings. Louis IX's chapel inspired several "copies", in the sense of royal or ducal chapels of broadly similar architectural form, built to house relics, particularly fragments of Louis' Passion Relics given by the King.[18] Such chapels were normally attached to a ducal palace (e.g. Bourges, Riom), or else to an Abbey with particular links to the royal family (e.g. St-Germer-de-Fly). As with the original, such "Holy Chapels" were nearly always additional to the regular palatine or abbatial chapel, with their own dedicated clergy—usually established as a college of canons.[19] For the patrons, such chapels served not only as public expressions of personal piety but also as valuable diplomatic tools, encouraging important visitors to come and venerate their relics and showing their connection to the French crown. Notable *Saintes-Chapelles* in France include:

- Bourbon-l'Archambault: Founded c.1310 by Louis IX's grandson, Duke Louis I de Bourbon to house a fragment of the True Cross
- Chambéry: Founded c. 1400
- Châteaudun: Founded 1451

- Bourges: Founded 1392 by Duke Jean de Berry decorated with sculptures and stained glass by André Beauneveu. Now destroyed.
- Riom: Founded 1382 by Jean de Berry
- Saint-Germer-de-Fly Abbey: A very similar structure, also called the Sainte-Chapelle, was erected twelve years after the Paris chapel as an addition to the abbey church.
- Vincennes: Founded 1379 at one of the favourite Valois royal palaces by Charles V
- Vivier-en-Brie: Founded 1358 by the future Charles V while he was still the Dauphin

As the status of Saint Louis grew among Europe's aristocracy, the influence of his famous chapel also extended beyond France, with important copies at Karlštejn Castle near Prague (c. 1360), the Hofburgkapelle in Vienna (consecrated 1449), Collegiate Church of the Holy Cross and St. Bartholomew, Wrocław (c. 1350) and Exeter College, Oxford (1860).

References

Notes

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Further reading

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See Also

- French Gothic architecture
- Gothic architecture
- Gothic cathedrals and churches
- French Gothic stained glass windows
- Rayonnant

External links

- Official website (http://sainte-chapelle.monuments-nationaux.fr/) (in French)
- Sainte Chappelle Entrance, Surround View (https://web.archive.org/web/20100920072234/http://fromparis.com/panoramas_quicktime_vr/sainte_chapelle_03_nb/) (QuickTime needed to view)
- Sainte Chappelle Choir, Surround View (https://web.archive.org/web/20101007084629/http://fromparis.com/panoramas_quicktime_vr/sainte_chapelle_02/)
- Sainte Chappelle 1st Floor, Surround View (https://web.archive.org/web/20101007194558/http://fromparis.com/panoramas_quicktime_vr/sainte_chapelle_01/)
- L'Internaute Magazine: Diaporama (https://web.archive.org/web/20060922201410/http://www.linternaute.com/sortir/patrimoine/ile-de-france/paris/edifices-religieux/sainte-chapelle/1) (in French)
- Architectural description (http://www.cosylogis.com/en/paris-france/paris-historical-monuments-france/sainte_chapelle.htm)
- Informative Article From 1921 On Sainte Chapelle (https://web.archive.org/web/20070701201127/http://www.oldandsold.com/articles08/paris-travel-17.shtml)
- Information of the windows of St. James Chapel, replica of the Sainte Chapelle (http://www.windows.org)
- List of the relics bought by Louis IX (http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/n56part5.pdf)
- Visit the Sainte Chapelle in 360° Photosphere (http://cuicui.be/france-paris-sainte-chapelle/)