

EXHIBITS

Art Gives an Intimate Look At the Great Men Who Built France

This article deals with two museums on opposite sides of the United States, and seemingly very disparate art objects. What unifies them is the history of a great nation-state, France, and its contribution to universal culture.

One object is the chalice of the Abbot Suger, which was shaped under the guiding mind of this Twelfth Century nation-builder who gave Gothic cathedrals to the world. The other is the *Hours of Simon de Varie*, a precious manuscript of c.1455 with five miniatures from the hand of Jean Fouquet, France's great Renaissance painter,

which is now divided between two collections, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California, and the Royal Library in The Hague. This manuscript's history is closely tied to the creation of the modern French nation under King Louis XI and his allies.

The *Hours of Simon de Varie* was featured in a special exhibit honoring Fouquet at the Malibu Getty Museum from April 26 to July 10, while Suger's Chalice is on permanent display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Both are described and lavishly illustrated in two new books: *The Hours of*

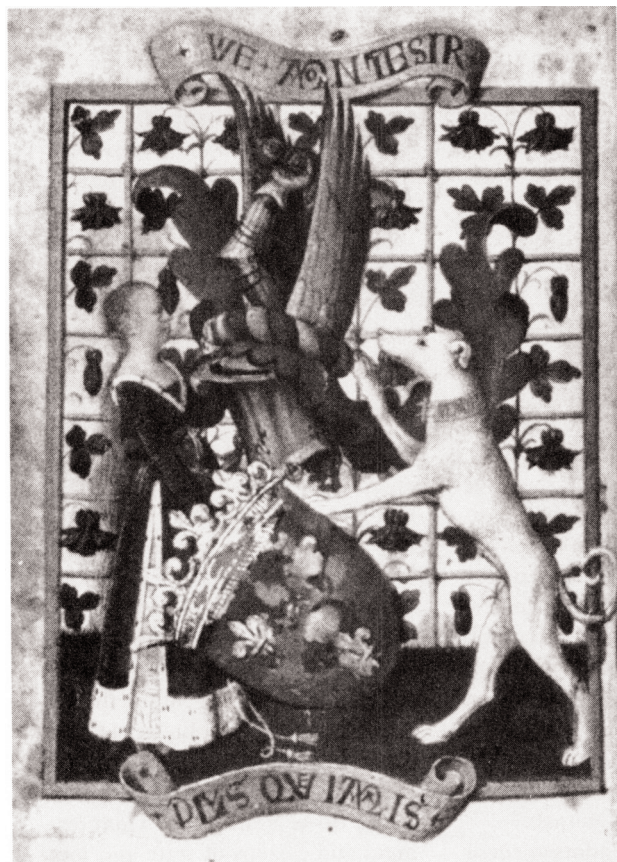
Simon de Varie, by James H. Marrow with a contribution by François Avril (Getty Museum Monographs, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, in association with Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, 1994) (slip-cased, 249 pages, \$95.00); and *Western Decorative Arts, Part I* (The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and Cambridge University Press, London, 1993) (cloth-bound, 331 pages, \$160.00).

The entry on Suger's chalice in the new catalogue is written by Pamela Vandiver of the Smithsonian Institution's conservation and analytical

laboratory, and dwells heavily on technical details. According to Vandiver, the chalice is one of nine liturgical vessels that Suger added to his Abbey church. This one was reserved for use on the altar dedicated 850 years ago to St. Denys, the martyr and protector of France.

The cup of the chalice, a semi-precious sardonyx, was chiseled and polished into a fluted cup in antiquity, presumably in Alexandria in the time of the Ptolemies, c.200 B.C. The flutes impose a regular pattern over the marbled veins of the red, black, and white stone. We do not know who the original owner was, but by A.D. 1140 it had found its way into the hands of Suger, an avid collector of antique gems, who had it reset as a chalice, adding unusual double filigrees of gold notched wire, precious stones, and double pearls (the jewels were replaced long since with paste glass).

The chalice would have quite a tale to tell if it could speak. In 1567, during the Catholic-Huguenot religious wars, the Royal Abbey of St.-Denis near Paris, where the chalice had been part of the treasury for over three centuries, was sacked. In 1791, in fulfillment of the law nationalizing the monastic orders, it was taken away from St.-Denis and deposited at the National Cabinet of Medals and Antiquities, part of the French state collections. The French Revolution not only deposed the monarchy, but its anti-clerical wrath led to the devastation of many churches, looting and disursing religious artifacts. The chalice was stolen and smuggled out of the country by an Englishman in 1804, and remained hidden from view in an English private collection until it was finally sold to a dealer sometime before 1922, and purchased by the Pennsylvania millionaire Joseph Widener, who



J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu

Jean Fouquet, "Coat of Arms Held by a Woman and a Greyhound," from the "Hours of Simon de Varie."



The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Left: *The chalice of Abbot Suger, on display at the National Gallery of Art. Top:* *This 1633 drawing of the chalice shows the hyperbolic curve of the original foot, prior to a modern-day restoration.*

bequeathed his art collection to the National Gallery.

Suger, as the remnants of the Royal Abbey of St.-Denis which date from his lifetime reveal, had an keen sense of negative curvature. In the setting of his chalice, the foot originally extended out in an elegant hyperbolic curve, such that a perpendicular line drawn from the outer rim of the foot would have been tangent to the internal curl of the cup handle above it. We know this from a watercolor drawing made of the chalice in 1633 [SEE illustration]. The present-day, simple-conical form is the result of a restoration made in modern times.

Suger Refused To Be Small

Suger became abbot of St.-Denis in 1122. During the Second Crusade he was a Regent of France. At his death this man, who had spent his life as a monk and abbot, was declared a Pater

Patriae. His epitaph reads: “Small of body and family, constrained by twofold smallness, / He refused, in his smallness, to be a small man.”

Suger was an able administrator, an acute businessman, one of the first medieval historians, and an outstanding patron of the arts. Art historian Erwin Panofsky was the first to first prove we owe the launching of “Gothic architecture” to this extraordinary man’s rebuilding of the Royal Abbey of St.-Denis. His influence over King Louis VI led to the creation of France as a centralized power, capable of subduing the various feudal lords whose armies, wealth, and dominion often matched those of the titular monarch.

The Royal Abbey was the home church of the French monarchy, where all the royal crowns and coronation robes were kept, and the kings of France were buried. Tradition said

that the patron saint of France, Dionysius (Denys), and his two companions, Sts. Eleutherius and Rusticus, were martyred on the site of the Abbey. Denys was believed to have been a Greek disciple of St. Paul, converted by the great missionary apostle in Athens in the first Christian era, and later sent from Rome to evangelize Gaul; and to him were attributed the theological works of a Platonist who actually lived in the fifth and sixth centuries, Denys the Areopagite.

Suger read deeply in this Pseudo-Dionysius, who was the source for his metaphysics of light, but he was most intensely influenced in theology by the greatest of Christian Platonists, St. Augustine. The inscription which he had placed on the golden doors of the west facade introduces his thought: “Marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the craftsmanship of the work. / Bright is the noble work, but, being nobly bright, the work / Should brighten the minds, so that they may travel, through the true light, / To the True Light where Christ is the true door.”

Inside the sanctuary, the resplendent liturgical vessels and other altar furnish-

ings were just as important as the stained glass and pervasive light. “We profess that we must do homage also through the outward ornaments of sacred vessels,” Suger wrote. “Thus, when—out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven, and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.” [Quoted from E. Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and Its Art Treasures*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1979).]

Louis XI and Private Devotion

When Suger’s nation-building project was resumed in the Fifteenth Century by the Dauphin of France, later known as the “Spider King” Louis XI, a new factor had entered, and this was the rise of a merchant middle class and the notion of the unique role of the individual. Private devotions, rather than the public liturgy, inspired the greatest art.

As the Getty Museum’s elegant volume on *The Hours of Simon de Varie* explains, “The book of hours was the characteristic private prayer book of the late Middle Ages, containing standardized texts used especially by the laity.” It “contained only material for private devotions: its contents did not have to be recited and its standardized texts could be used selectively according to personal need. “The needs in question were those shared by the majority of believers in the late Middle Ages. There were reasons both practical and spiritual for individuals to reckon dates and follow the course of religious feasts, to review the biblical texts that outline Christ’s redemption of humankind, to praise and beseech Mary, Christ, or the Holy Spirit (each believed capable of interceding in essential ways in the lives and fates of individuals), to



J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu
Jean Fouquet, “Simon de Varie in Prayer,” from the “Hours of Simon de Varie.”

pray for the dead or dying, and to ask for forgiveness from sins or for the intercessions of saints.”

Often, a book of hours was the first and only book a person possessed. The texts were usually complemented and enhanced by handcrafted decoration and illustration. Never cheap, and often very costly, they could be afforded only by a small group, primarily royalty, nobility, and wealthy members of the emerging merchant and bureaucratic classes.

Fouquet and Louis XI

Historical research on Jean Fouquet’s patron reported in Francois Avril’s essay “Simon de Varie, Patron of the Hours,” sheds light on Fouquet’s role both in his work on this manuscript and more broadly. For although he was royal painter to Charles VII, yet it seems plausible to associate Fouquet’s advanced art with Louis XI, the son who schemed against his foolish and wicked father in order to rebuild the French nation-state. The checkered

careers of the de Varie brothers, the patron Simon and Simon’s brother Guillaume—both of whom became leading financial and commercial advisers and agents to Louis in Languedoc at his accession to power—show how numbers of individuals involved in Charles VII’s court were actually working for the Dauphin.

Fouquet had spent key years of his youth in Florence and Rome, from the end of the Council of Florence in 1444 through part of the pontificate of Nicholas V, the first real Renaissance Pope (1447-55). He was surely in the orbit of Fra Angeli-

co while in Florence, and he brought back to France his own, highly original variants on the Florentine style, including his own spherical perspective and a personal technique of using gold, previously employed by artists to create a flat, decorative effect, as a means of generating spatial illusion.

Like all the best northern European and Italian artists of the era of the Council of Florence that unified the Greek and Latin churches, Fouquet “westernized” typical motifs of Byzantine icon painting. The highly original “Madonna and Child” from The Hague portion of the *Varie Hours*, in which the Child’s head is covered by part of the Virgin’s robe, is just such an adaptation of a Byzantine model [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. And to the Getty portion belong two dazzling Fouquet pages, the first “new” Fouquet works discovered since the beginning of this century: a seated Virgin and Child, and the facing page portrait of Simon de Varie kneeling with his family coat of arms.

—Nora Hamerman