

Forgotten or hidden under whitewash for many centuries, precious examples of Medieval and Renaissance frescoes have survived at Rochechouart Castle. One set entirely covers the walls of the *Hunt Room* with lavishly coloured paintings that date from 1490 and depict a day's stag hunt around Rochechouart. Nearby, a set of grisaille frescoes (1530) decorate the *Hercules Gallery* illustrating scenes from the life of the aforementioned mythological hero. Together they constitute a rare ensemble demonstrating the transition from late Medieval polychrome frescoes to the emblematic grisaille-style adopted in 16th century France.

Situated at one end of the castle wing that separates the inner courtyard from Rochechouart town opposite, the hunt frescoes are painted on the walls of an ante-chamber that would have led to the lord's private quarters. Visitors arriving here were meant to be impressed by the nobleman's superior tastes, wealth and rank.

Running around the room, above a lower painted decorative frieze, the scenes show stages of the stag hunt in progress, set against a backdrop of Rochechouart Castle and its environs. Representations of hunting with hounds are frequent in Medieval art. The sport was considered a pastime only for royalty and aristocrats and its depiction an excellent opportunity to paint the protagonists as courageous king-like warriors. The events of the day-long Rochechouart hunt can be read chronologically from left to right as a series of scenes.

A ritual banquet opens the day, featuring a ceremonious presentation of the quarry's droppings. A couple seated on a raised dais in front of the table are probably guests of honour. The gentleman wears a Knight's Order of Saint Michel medallion around his neck while his Lady sports the initials "L" and "A" in honour of the royal couple, Louis XII and Anne de Bretagne. Evidence is slim of the King and Queen ever having visited Rochechouart Castle, but the inclusion of their initials in the painting was a symbol of loyalty to the throne. A man next to the couple, is the Viscount himself, identified by the finery of his clothes and the armorial red and white colours of the Rochechouart family.

Portraits of Viscounts Jean and Anne de Rochechouart can be seen in the doorway that leads to their erstwhile family bedchamber in the Lion Tower. François, their son, is presumed to be paying homage to his parents in the barely legible inscription above the woman's head.

Three scenes therefore make up the fresco paintings; ritual presentation of droppings symbolic of the imminent rise to the status of Viscount, a procession of nobles in hierarchical order among whom a Franciscan monk appears to be hiding and finally the actual hunt complete with an idealised



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view of the castle. In the background there are intimations of the Viscount's prosperous running of his dominions: Rochechouart town sits safely behind fortified walls, surrounded by well-planted orchards and happily dancing subjects.

A strangely isolated male figure accompanied by an as yet undeciphered inscription, is painted as if hiding behind the door. A knife and cut-off tongue lie on the table in front of him. It is thought he may be some kind of warning directed towards visitors waiting in the room, alternately visible then hidden as the door closes and opens.

The Hunt Room frescoes benefited from Major restoration work carried out between 1986 and 1991.

1. Banquet scene depicting ceremonial presentation of the droppings of the beast to be hunted before couple symbolising King Louis XII and Queen Anne of Brittany.
2. Killing of the stag; one of the huntsmen dispatches the quarry with a knife as a horn signals its capture.



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The Labours of Hercules fresco cycle occupies what once was the castle's Grand State Room (aula magna). It is an extremely rare example of French Renaissance wall painting and only rediscovered in 1965.

Use of grisaille (shades of grey or of a single colour) is indicative of the first half of the 16th century, when it occurred not just in painting but also in enamels and stained glass. The fashion may have risen in the wake of advances in printing and engraving. A North European influence has been detected in the clothing depicted in the Rochechouart frescoes including reference to the German artist Albrecht Dürer and the Venetian Zoan Andrea Valvassore. Calligraphic captions in Gothic letters are written in Old French rather than the local Occitan language of the area.

Columns decorated with lozenge patterns or ornamental annulets frame each classically inspired scene, yet the accoutrements of the figures all are contemporaneous to the 16th century. The story of Hercules, his triumphs and his labours, unfolds through twelve episodes plus two additional panels illustrating the death of Hercules killed with a poisoned tunic and a representation of the god Jupiter. There remain some scenes that are too faded or damaged to be restored.

The figure of Hercules is associated with strength and power. He was one of the symbols used to represent the French King. Adoption by the Church was based on a comparison with Samson struggling to overcome his sins. On a simpler level, he is held up as a man who accepts the challenges destiny throws at him.

On the left as you enter, the fresco cycle begins with the birth of Hercules, killing snakes sent by Juno and so accomplishing his first labour under the astonished eyes of his mother Alcmena. Alternating between triumphs and labours, the scenes continue chronologically along the walls, passing from the Nemean Lion and Hercules wrestling with King Achelous to his combat with the Lernean Hydra. The Pillars of Hercules recounts the moment when our hero with one blow opens up a passage through the Mediterranean. The twin pillars he carries symbolise African and Spanish landmasses either side of the Straits of Gibraltar. Next comes his tenth labour



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of stealing Geryon's oxen which is followed by the least preserved section of the fresco covering the battle with Antaeus the Giant, capturing Cerberus and fighting Centaurs. At last we reach the apples in the garden of the Hesperides before encountering the Centaur Nessus who attempts to carry off Hercules' lover. A return to the third Labour can be seen in the background of this scene which shows the capture of the Ceyreineian hind. Ochre-coloured drawings here are probably corrections added at a later date. The death of Hercules concludes the cycle, showing Mount Oeta stripped of trees used to build the hero's funeral pyre. Leaving the gallery, you pass under the gaze of Jupiter, father of Hercules, who opens up for him the gateway to the Elysian Fields.

1. Hercules fires an arrow dipped in the blood of the Lernean Hydra to kill Nessus the centaur who is carrying off Hercules' wife. In the background, Hercules appears again, club in hand about to capture the golden-horned Ceryneian hind.
2. Fragment from the Battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths. Hercules helps the Lapiths retrieve their womenfolk from the hands of centaurs inebriated by drinking wine at the wedding of Pirithous, King of the Lapiths.
3. Detail of Hercules' First Labour, slaying a giant lion that was terrorising the citizens of Nemea. The Rochechouart family emblem can be seen at the top of the right-hand column.
4. Hercules is recognisable through his traditional attributes of a quiver of arrows, a club, a lion-skin cloak or crown of laurel leaves.

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