

Frescoes at the château de Rochechouart

The château has rare examples of frescoes dating from the end of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance which remained hidden from view for centuries. Covering the entirety of the room and brightly coloured the fresco in the Salle des Chasses dates from the beginning of the 16th century. It portrays a day spent hunting deer in the grounds of the château, preceded by a royal banquet. Later, dating from about the 1530s, the Galerie d'Hercule boasts a large scale grisaille fresco retracing events in the life of the mythological hero. These two series, which were created at an interval of just a few decades, are remarkable in that they offer a rare combination of the colourful wall frescoes that are characteristic of the style of the end of the Middle Ages and grisaille paintings (shades of grey only) which is an emblematic innovation of 16th century art.

LA SALLE DES CHASSES



An aristocratic fresco

The reconstruction of the Château de Rochechouart at the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the following century included the decoration of the lord of the château's living quarters. The *fresque des chasses* (fresco portraying hunting scenes) is on the first floor of the castle (which is the floor reserved for use by the lord of the château) in the wing overlooking the courtyard and town. This room appears to have been a kind of ante-chamber, a chamber for withdrawing which communicated with the lord's private chamber, which no longer exists, in the tour du Lion by means of a passage.

Intended for receiving visitors only, this room has no fireplace and was only furnished when it was used to welcome visitors. Its decor therefore symbolised the tastes, wealth and rank of the lord of the château.

On two registers separated by trimming we can see a series of hunting scenes in

Rochechouart forest, below the château ramparts. This was a widespread theme in medieval art as it was the noblest form of entertainment. It is also a demonstration of strength and power depicting a courageous lord and "war king". It confirms his protective ascendancy over the town and the inhabitants of his viscounty. This painting offers a comic book style illustration of the successive episodes in a day's hunting. It is narrated chronologically, with the scenes following on from each other from left to right.

It was the subject of a restoration programme between 1986 and 1991.

A pictorial programme

- Opening scene: the banquet

The opening scene is a banquet scene which is also known as the presentation of the droppings. In front of a table, a couple is sitting below a dais: they are the guests of honour. They may be identified by their finery. The man wears an Order of Saint Michael pendant (one of the military orders of French knighthood). On the woman's fine clothes we can make out two Gothic letters, namely

- The procession: the portrait of a lordly court

The procession sets off. Very hierarchical, the procession is made up guests who will take part in the hunt, guests of honour, then second rank guests, most notably the women in coaches, followed by minor nobles and in likelihood a few rich members of bourgeois society. Amongst them, a curious gaunt figure is a Franciscan monk, recognisable in his brown homespun monk's hooded V-neck habit. A man of African origin wearing curial livery is holding the bridle and guiding the mount of the main character in the procession: this presence reveals the quest for the different and the exotic among the leading figures of the kingdom at the dawn of the Renaissance.

The procession is a society event that requires a certain ceremony. The richly adorned horses, the hunting dogs, the finely worked horns, the rich clothing and arms of all the participants and the coach sculpted with the Rochechouart colours are a demonstration of the lord's wealth and power.

- The representation of the château and town of Rochechouart: a story within a story

The lord of Rochechouart wished to have the château and town of Rochechouart portrayed. However, we do not know whether every part of the building had been completed or whether it is simply a majestic, idealized representation of the château as it had been designed and planned. We can also see some parts of the château that no longer exist, for example the chapel, which was destroyed in 1576. The château, combined with the town walled with ramparts, is in some ways a representation of the Viscount's good government, with rich orchards at the foot of the walls and people dancing as a background to the hunting scene.

"L" and an "A", the initials of the royal couple formed by Louis XII and Anne de Bretagne. By placing the king and queen of France in this position of honour when they had never travelled to visit Rochechouart is a way of paying homage to them and demonstrating that the lord is one of the king's men, a loyal servant. At their sides, we can see the Viscount of Rochechouart, easily recognisable in his finery and through the colours of his clothes (white and red are the Rochechouart colours). In the foreground, a kneeling huntsman presents guests of honour with the droppings of the animal that will be hunted displayed on leaves. These droppings provide clues as to the animal's physical state and its whereabouts.

- A deer hunt with hounds

1 - Chasing the deer

Ahead of the procession, we can see the lance scene. The handler of the hounds has found the deer's trail thanks to his hound. Hunters armed with lances set off on its trail. The hounds, which were tied together, are released to chase the deer. As usual at the start of each hunting scene, a rider sounds his horn.

2 -The standing kill

We move straight on to the animal in its death throes. The exhausted deer, tracked down and wounded by the hounds, has been stopped in its tracks. Unable to go any further, it is now at the mercy of the hunters.

3 - The lying kill

The deer, now lying down, is finished off with a knife by one of the huntsmen whilst the catch is announced by sounding the horn.

4 - Butchering

Two hunters open up the animal along the length of its underbelly using their knives. This butchering scene normally precedes the highly ritualized feeding of the intestines as a reward to the dogs, which is not depicted in the Rochechouart fresco.

- A strange couple (passage leading to the tour du Lion)

In the Salles des Chasses, a couple is portrayed in the corridor leading to the corner tower, known as the tour du Lion. The colour of their clothing shows that they are part of the Rochechouart family. One of the currently accepted theories is that they are Jean and Anne de Rochechouart, to whom their son François is paying tribute. We can see traces of a badly damaged inscription above the lady.

- The corpulent man: the unknown person behind the door

A bald, obese figure sitting at a table with a knife is hiding behind the door. He is depicted independently of the other registers and has an inscription that has not been deciphered. Next to the knife on the table lies a red object (possibly his tongue that has been cut out?). His role and identity are still something of a puzzle, even though he appears as a key figure.

LA GALERIE D'HERCULE



A rare example of French Renaissance grisaille frescoes.

Situated on the first floor of the château, which was reserved for use by the lord, in the apartments overlooking the courtyard and town, this work was created in the grand state room (aula magna).

This collection, which was partially exposed in 1883, but remained whitewashed, was rediscovered in 1965 and today remains one of the very rare examples of this kind of work to have survived in France.

The use of grisaille marks the renewal of the illustrative methods that were in use in the first half of the 16th century. It is also found in stained glass and enamelling. This taste for grisaille may have originated with the development of engraving, which, from the late 15th century, meant that works of art could be disseminated on a much wider scale. Engravings of different origins were used here to serve as iconographic models for different scenes. We can see the Scandinavian influence in several costumes, along with a reference

to the German artist Albrecht Dürer and the Venetian Zoan Andrea Valvassore. The handwritten captions in Gothic letters that accompany each scene are in Old French ("langue d'oïl", apart from a few words), although the usual language at Rochechouart was "langue d'oc". If we look closely at the way the models circulate, this "book of engravings" traced on the walls may date back to around 1530 and be almost contemporary with another series dedicated to Hercules in Haute-Vienne, sculpted on the rood screen in Limoges cathedral.

The other great novelty in this ensemble is the inspiration from Antiquity with a theme that has been taken from mythology. Each image is separated by a decorative column, some of which are ringed and some of them with diamond shapes. However, the protagonists' weapons and armour are depicted in a contemporary style.

The labours and the exploits of Hercules reflect the tastes of the wealthiest in society, who used his effigy to decorate their homes, and even identified with him and the virtues of courage and bravery with which he is associated (courteous Hercules). Hercules is a symbol of power since he is one of the images of the King of France. Hercules is presented as the ultimate man of virtue. Attached to the Christian religion, Hercules is seen as a new Samson fighting against sin. He is also, more simply, the man who accepts the trials of destiny in order to achieve eternal salvation.

The Life of Hercules

Hercules is known first and foremost for his twelve labours. Here we are concerned with an account of his life, from the hero's first labour after his birth depicted near the door through to the gallery, to his death. We are shown six exploits and six labours, to which two extra panels are added (Jupiter, Hercules and the tunic). The restorers were unable to recover certain scenes, which had been heavily erased.

- **1st panel Jupiter**

Depicted above the door, Jupiter commands the entire Hercules series. The father of Hercules by Alcmene, he allowed him entry to the Elysian Fields after his death as a reward for his exploits.

- **1st feat: Hercules and the snakes**

Jupiter's wife, Juno, jealous of her husband's terrestrial love affairs, sent two snakes into Heracles' cradle to suffocate him. Demonstrating superhuman strength and protected by the god Hermes, Hercules strangled the two snakes in front of his mother Alcmene.

- **1st labour: The lion of Nemea**

Driven mad by Juno, Hercules killed his wife and children. To punish himself, he undertook the twelve labours ordered by his cousin Eurystheus. Hercules freed the city of Nemea from a giant lion whose skin would now make him virtually invincible (it could withstand any blows from a blade). This first labour is the only part of the series in which the Rochechouart family arms appear (at the top of the right-hand column).

- **2nd feat: Combat between Hercules and King Achelous**

The god and river king Achelous and Hercules were both in love with Deianeira. A fight broke out between the two suitors. Achelous turned himself into a man with a bull's head, then into a "dragon", before finally taking on the appearance of a bull. Hercules forced him to surrender by ripping off a horn that Achelous exchanged for another, which later became the horn of plenty.

- **2nd labour: The Lernaean hydra**

This monster, whose many heads multiplied every time one of them was cut off, was conquered by Hercules with the help of Iolaus who used a firebrand to cauterize the open stumps.

- **3rd feat: The columns of Hercules**

During the journey that led him to Geryon, Hercules found himself on a spit of land and decided to leave behind a souvenir of his visit. So he hit the ground hard, thereby opening up the Mediterranean and creating the Straits of Gibraltar. The two mountains that separate Africa and Spain are symbolized by the two columns placed on his shoulders.

- **3rd labour: The cattle of Geryon**

Eurystheus wanted to offer the cattle of Geryon as a sacrifice to Juno and asked Hercules to go and collect them. Geryon, who was born with three heads, six hands and three bodies joined at the waist, fell victim to an arrow shot by Hercules, who then went off with his herd. The three-headed shepherd, Cacus, stole part of the herd, but Hercules drew him out of his cave located below the Aventin Hill and killed him, thereby liberating

Rome (symbolised by the town in the background) and the surrounding area from the clutches of the evil shepherd.

- **4th feat: Hercules and Antaeus**

Antaeus, the giant son of Poseidon and Gaia (the Earth), had the habit of wrestling with strangers who passed through his land. He was invincible, his strength being renewed every time he touched the ground, and he used the bodies of his victims to consolidate his father's temple. Hercules started to wrestle with him and eventually realized what it was that made Antaeus invincible. He managed to defeat him by holding him aloft (here, head downwards) until he died.

- **4th labour: Hercules and Cerberus**

Eurystheus asked Hercules to bring him back the dog Cerberus, guardian of the underworld. Hades, god of the underworld, agreed on the condition that Hercules captured Cerberus without weapons. On this representation, we can see the Styx (the river leading to the underworld) in the left-hand section. Cerberus is wearing knights' armour.

- **5th feat: Hercules' fight against the Centaurs**

Invited to the wedding of Pirithous, the king of the Lapiths, whom Hercules had just freed from the underworld with Hippodamia, the drunken centaurs tried to rape Hippodamia and other Lapith women. Hercules helped the Lapiths to recover their women.

- **5th labour: The garden of the Hesperides**

Eurystheus told Hercules to bring him back a golden apple from the garden of the Hesperides, as this was a guarantee of immortality. This garden was reserved for the gods and guarded by a dragon (of which we can still see two claws) and by Atlas' daughters, the Hesperides. Hercules persuaded Atlas to go and fetch the fruit in his place while he replaced him under the celestial globe.

- **6th feat and 6th labour : The centaur Nessus / The hind with the bronze hooves (the Ceryneian Hind)**

Hercules and his wife Deianeira were preparing to cross the river Evenos in flood.

The centaur Nessus said to Hercules that he would help his wife. But instead he tried to attack her. Hercules fired an arrow covered in the blood of the Lernaean hydra. Nessus, dying and looking to seek revenge, soaked a tunic in his poisoned blood and offered it to Deianeira, saying that the tunic had the power to make her husband faithful. In the background of this scene, we can see Hercules near a stag with a hammer in his hand. This is in fact the hind with the bronze hooves (and golden antlers). Having been prohibited from spilling its blood, he fires an arrow between its bone and the tendon. However, it takes him another year to pursue the hind, exhaust it, immobilizes it and lift her on to his shoulders and take her back to Eurystheus. The other characteristic of this scene is that, following restoration, two representations of Hercules appeared side by side, one in black, the other in a blood-coloured ochre. One theory is that one of the two drawings is a "pentimento", or an alteration in the painting's composition by the artist.

- **2nd panel: Hercules' second fit of madness**

Deianeira was jealous and used Lychas, Hercules' messenger, to give her husband the tunic that Nessus had given her. Hercules put the tunic on and felt his skin being burned by the poison. He became mad with pain and killed Lychas.

- **3rd panel: The death of Hercules**

Deianeira realized her error and committed suicide. As life was no longer anything but pain for Hercules, he pulled up all the trees on Mount Oeta to build a funeral pyre and asked to be burned to death. However, Jupiter allowed him entry to the Elysian Fields after his death as a reward for his exploits. This is the apotheosis of Hercules.