



FOCUS

SAINT-VINCENT'S CATHEDRAL RESTORATION WORKS



CHALON-SUR-SAÔNE
UNDER THE
MICROSCOPE



VILLE
& PAYS
D'ART &
D'HISTOIRE

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Model

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1. Aerial view of the cathedral complex around St-Vincent

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2. View of the cathedral complex of Chalon-sur-Saône from the chevet — Engraving by Jean-Baptiste Lallemand, 1780

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AN EXCEPTIONAL BUILDING

A PRESERVED CATHEDRAL COMPLEX

The existence of a bishopric in Chalon-sur-Saône is documented as early as 449, and archaeological excavations have revealed traces of at least one building predating the current structure. In 879, texts refer to a council held in Chalon, attended by Pope John VIII, in the Carolingian cathedral of the city.

The present cathedral was built starting in 1080, at the heart of a full cathedral complex.

Indeed, any medieval city with a bishopric possessed such a complex, generally comprising the cathedral, the bishop's palace, the canons' living quarters (often individual houses arranged around a cloister), as well as a school and a hospital or Hôtel-Dieu, particularly intended for pilgrims. In some cities, this episcopal district was enclosed by its own walls. Most of these complexes have since disappeared, often leaving the cathedral as the only surviving element, sometimes standing alone on an open square.

In Chalon, a significant part of the ensemble has survived: the "Grand Cloître", now cut through by a street but still surrounded by former canons' houses; the "Petit Cloître", restored and reopened to the public in 2019; and the episcopal palace on Rue de l'Évêché, now converted into residences. Only the

episcopal school—replaced by the municipal "Collège"—and the Hôtel-Dieu—replaced by the "Hospital for the Poor Sick"—disappeared as early as the 16th century..

A FORMER CATHEDRAL

The status of St-Vincent's Cathedral is also exceptional: today it is no longer a cathedral in the eyes of the Catholic Church, and is considered a simple parish church by secular authorities.

In effect, the building lost its cathedral status after being abandoned during the Revolution and converted into a Temple of Reason. In 1801, when the Concordat restored Catholic worship in France, Napoleon decreed that there should be only one bishopric per département. Historically, Saône-et-Loire comprised three dioceses: Autun, Chalon and Mâcon. It was decided that Autun would retain the bishopric, Mâcon would become the préfecture, and Chalon would be strengthened as the economic capital through the construction of a quay upstream from the St-Laurent bridge.

However, in 1854, parishioners from Chalon and Mâcon succeeded in having the bishop's title "Bishop of Autun, Mâcon and Chalon".

During the separation of Church and State (1905), it was decided that Catholic buildings built before 1905 would be divided as fol-



lows: cathedrals would fall under State responsibility, whereas parish churches would be maintained by the municipalities. Since Chalon-sur-Saône no longer had a resident bishop, Saint-Vincent was classified as a parish church under municipal care. It remains an active place of worship with a Catholic “assignor” (affectataire), the parish of Saint-Just de Bretenières.

ROMANESQUE AND GOTHIC BUILDING CAMPAIGNS

Built from the 11th to the 16th century over seven successive work campaigns, Saint-Vincent Cathedral features characteristic elements of both Romanesque and Gothic architecture. As tradition dictates, construction began with the choir, followed by the transept, the nave, and finally the façade—though earlier sections were often reworked for technical or aesthetic reasons. Thus, for example, the current choir combines a Romanesque arcade level with a Gothic upper structure crowned by a stone rib-vault.

Little is known about the medieval façade before the 15th century. The construction of the north tower—known as the “large tower”—by Bishop Jean de Poupet is recorded in 1467. Comprising three levels, it

completed the older “small tower”, forming a typical twin-tower Gothic façade. This heterogeneous façade, altered in the 17th century, is known to us through Rancurel’s city plan (1573) and a Lallemand engraving from 1780.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Major destruction occurred during the “Huguenot” attack in 1562. In the 17th century, in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation and new artistic tastes, many Gothic features disappeared (tombs, choir stalls, rood screen, chancel). This was when the great organ and monumental portal were installed.

REVOLUTIONARY TURMOIL

On 2 November 1789, the Constituent Assembly ordered the seizure of Church property. Across France, monuments of the “hated Ancien Régime” were sold off or destroyed. At St-Vincent’s, in late 1793 the Revolutionary Committee decreed the melting of gold and silver objects, removal of furnishings, dismantling of wrought-iron chapel gates, and taking down of the bells. The cathedral became the “Temple of Reason”, and in January 1794 the municipality ordered an estimate of materials that could be sold by demolishing the towers. Destruction began in March and ended in 1795.

3. Interior of Saint-Vincent's Cathedral, may 2011

© J.L. Petit

4. Former cathedral façade, 1780, engraving by Jean-Baptiste Lallemand

© Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF

5. Façade of Saint-Vincent's Cathedral from Place Saint-Vincent, 2024

© Ville de Chalon



A NEW FAÇADE FOR SAINT-VINCENT'S

After the Concordat (1801), Saint-Vincent's was closed to the public for safety reasons. Rebuilding the towers was postponed due to lack of funds. In 1822, local architect Zolla submitted a façade design, deemed insufficient by the Conseil des Bâtiments Civils. The renowned Lyon architect Antoine Chenavard proposed a new design, which was accepted and launched in 1827. Serious structural issues slowed progress, necessitating wooden props. By 1829, the south tower had reached 16 m, the north 12 m, but funding ran out and work stopped.

It resumed in 1837 under Parisian architect Georges Lebas, after Chenavard withdrew. Lebas remained faithful to Chenavard's concept, consolidating the earlier façade's portal and continuing the tower construction and buttressing. In 1844, with a reduction in the price of dressed stone and some work carried out directly by the city, a new estimate was prepared. Despite the council's negative opinion, Fondet, the city's surveyor-architect, completed the reconstruction in 1847, and also built the organ gallery.

NATIONAL RECOGNITION

Saint-Vincent's Cathedral was listed as a Historic Monument in 1903, except for its façade, which was classified in 1991. As noted by Lau-

rent Barrenechea, Regional Conservator of Historic Monuments for Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, this late protection (historical listing has existed since 1830) demonstrates that, after protecting monumental sites representative of a single era in the 19th century ("the Middle Ages", "the Renaissance"), the early 20th century began to value hybrid buildings whose national significance is undeniable.

This protection means that the State oversees the scientific and technical aspects of restoration or maintenance work. The owner benefits from subsidies, and all such work must be carried out under the supervision of a Chief Architect of Historic Monuments.

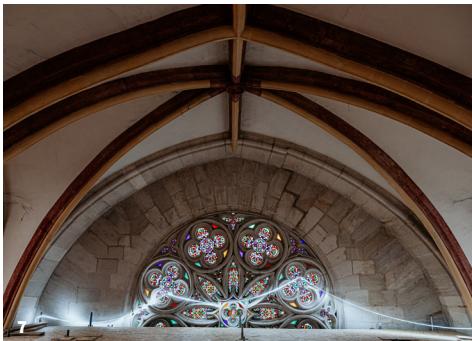
AN EXCEPTIONAL RESTORATION PROJECT

THE INTERIOR OF THE BUILDING AS IT WAS MORE THAN 150 YEARS AGO...

From 1865 onwards, under the impetus of Abbé Gardette, a vast programme of works began inside Saint-Vincent Cathedral. As Chief Architect of Historic Monuments Frédéric Didier explains, this was less a restoration of the building than an "embellishment" in the 19th-century sense of the term: the liturgical furnishings were renewed, new deco-



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rative schemes were created, and new stained-glass windows installed. This large-scale campaign was completed around 1870.

Since then, only occasional operations had been carried out, mainly following the destruction of most of the stained-glass windows in August 1944 (caused by the explosion, at the railway station, of a German munitions train). From 1945 to 1951, Pierre Choutet created contemporary stained-glass windows, lighter in tone, according to the instructions of Chief Architect of Historic Monuments André Sallez.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS LINKED TO THE WORKS

At the request of the Regional Archaeology Service, archaeologist Benjamin Saint-Jean Vitus, from the National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research (INRAP) in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, was commissioned to carry out a survey in summer and autumn 2023 in connection with the restoration of the cathedral interior. His work focused on the south-east wall, leading from the apsidiole to the Jeune Foucaude Chapel and the Notre-Dame-de-Pitié Chapel.

The remains of a church predating the current cathedral—very likely dating from around the year 1000—were discovered beneath the chapter house, the Jeune Foucaude Chapel and the Notre-Dame-de-Pitié Chapel. This building may have been designed in direct relation to the canons' cloister, the entrance to which lay just a few metres away.

When he returned in September 2025, the archaeologist carried out investigations in the choir, uncovering the foundations of the Romanesque apse. He was able to establish that this apse had been built partly on the line of the Roman city wall.

COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF SURVIVING POLYCHROMY

Wall-painting specialist Morgan Hubert, from the ARCAms workshop (*), surveyed the whole cathedral in preparation for the current works campaign. While the decorative schemes in the chapels remained fairly legible, those in the nave and choir had largely been scrubbed with wire brushes, probably in the 19th century. However, using a few surviving elements—incised joints and traces of polychromy on the vaults—it was nonetheless possible to reconstruct a hypothetical 16th-century state.

(*) ARCAms : Atelier de Restauration et Conservation d'Art Mural et Sculptures polychromes

6. Detail of the high altar and elevation of the choir, March 2024

© City of Chalon

7. Detail of the rose window and the nave vault during restoration works, summer 2024

© City of Chalon

8. Interior of the cathedral after the removal of artworks and furnishings. At the back, the high altar under protective casing, 13 March 2024

© City of Chalon



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AN EXCEPTIONAL MOMENT

The fire at Notre-Dame de Paris on 15 April 2019 sent shockwaves through France and around the world. The vulnerability of great monuments, particularly cathedrals, suddenly became apparent to the wider public, which has since taken a keen interest in the restoration of the Parisian church. Numerous reports and exhibitions have been devoted to the work, which was even highlighted during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games on 26 July 2024. Public interest has been at its peak since December 2024, when the Paris cathedral reopened.

The Ministry of Culture's departments decided to carry out condition surveys on the 87 cathedrals owned by the French State, with a view to preventing and limiting any future disasters. A national "Cathedral Plan" comprising 58 measures was therefore launched and is gradually being implemented for each building. The audits are underway. In Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, a special dispensation allowed the former cathedral of Chalon-sur-Saône to benefit from this expertise in 2024, even though it does not belong to the State. The results will be taken into account in future improvements.

THE OVERALL PROJECT

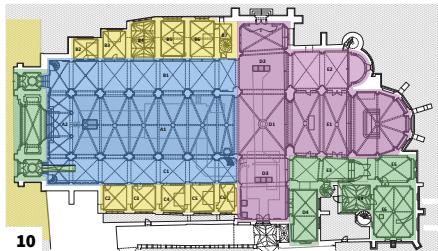
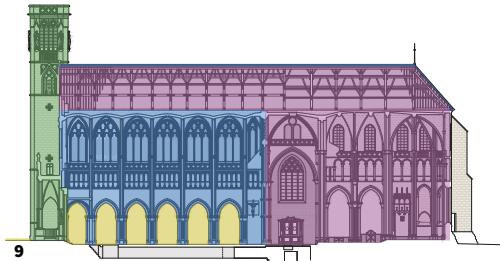
From 1991 to 2007, Chief Architect of Historic Monuments Frédéric Didier conducted several campaigns to restore the entire exterior of the cathedral, ending with the stabilisation of the west façade. The weight of the towers, resting on inadequate foundations laid on unstable ground, had caused the façade to subside southwards in the early 21st century. Cracks began to appear, both on the façade itself and inside the building, in the first bays of the nave.

It was therefore necessary to drill and pour concrete micropiles through the existing foundations down to the layer of sand and gravel, some 21 metres below current ground level, to anchor the structure in more stable soil. Once this consolidation had been completed, the façade could be restored and, in turn, the first two bays of the nave.

The interior restoration works, initially planned to follow on from this, were postponed because urgent and extensive restoration was needed in the canons' cloister. The cloister underwent a true renaissance and was able to reopen to the public in September 2019.

Today, the restoration project for St-Vincent's Cathedral concerns the entire

Phase 1 : nave, north and south aisles, roofs
 Phase 2 : transept, choir, north aisle of the choir, attics
 Phase 3 : chapter house, sacristy, Jeune Foucaude Chapel, south aisle of the choir, Notre-Dame-de-Pitié, towers and terrace, crypt
 Phase 4 : side chapels off the nave, forecourt



interior of the building: nave, transept, choir, chapels, sacristy and chapter house. The aim is to carry out a comprehensive cleaning of the stone surfaces, while preserving and highlighting traces of the different periods, in particular the major 19th century campaign. The project also includes improving accessibility, and completely overhauling the electrical network, lighting and acoustics. Special attention is being paid to fire safety (detection systems, dust removal in the roof spaces, installation of dry risers, safe access routes and fire doors in the attics, etc.).

In addition, the roof has been treated across its entire surface with moss removal and biocidal treatment. Following a public procurement process launched by the City of Chalon-sur-Saône, as contracting authority, Frédéric Didier, of the 2BDM agency, was appointed as lead architect. Contracts were awarded to the companies in the first quarter of 2024. The project received approval from the Regional Conservation of Historic Monuments within the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs (Ministry of Culture).

WORK PHASING

The first phase of works, from March to December 2024, focused on the restoration of the nave, its aisles and the entire roof structure.

In 2025, the worksite moved to the transept and the choir, also including interventions in the roof spaces. Complementary archaeological excavations, following on from those carried out in 2023, were conducted in this area over the same period.

During these two phases, the cathedral was filled with a “forest” of scaffolding. It was therefore decided to close the entire building to the public. Partial reopening, both for worship and for visitors, took place on 17 September 2025.

In 2026, the built elements adjacent to the choir will in turn be restored: the north aisle (initially planned for 2025), the sacristy, the chapter house, the chapel called “Jeune Foucaude” Chapel and the Notre-Dame-de-Pitié Chapel. Accessibility works will also be carried out at the opposite end of the building, under the entrance towers.

Finally, in 2027, the side chapels off the nave will undergo a meticulous restoration campaign, and the forecourt will be redesigned. The total cost of the works is currently estimated at 5,145,000 million euros excluding VAT.

9. et 10. Elevation and plan showing the phasing of the restoration works at Saint-Vincent Cathedral
© 2BDM

11. Polychrome carved wooden statue of Saint Reine being moved to a dedicated storage facility, 6 March 2024
© City of Chalon



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REMOVAL AND CONSERVATION OF THE COLLECTIONS

In preparation for the restoration of the cathedral interior, 435 objects were inventoried, 70 of which are protected as Historic Monuments, being outstanding works of national interest. Other items are also listed, but as part of the protection granted to the cathedral building itself. Most of these works belong to the municipality; two are State deposits and a few are owned by the parish.

For reasons of both conservation and efficiency on the building site, it was far more practical to remove all movable objects that could be moved and group them together in a dedicated storage facility.

Juliette Barbarin, officer in charge of non-museum movable heritage for the City of Chalon-sur-Saône and Deputy Curator of Antiquities and Works of Art, first commissioned condition surveys from conservator-restorers. One survey covered all the objects: they were inventoried, their dimensions, weight and state of conservation were assessed. On this basis, it was determined which objects would remain in situ and under what conditions, and which would be transferred to the storage facility for the duration of the works.

Specific studies were carried out on certain particularly valuable or complex objects. This

was the case, for example, for the high altar, the pulpit, a 17th century altarpiece painted by Jean Tassel, the stone canopy in the choir, and the 16th century tapestry usually hung in the Notre-Dame-de-Pitié Chapel.

In February 2024, over a period of three weeks, a team of around twenty people (specialist art shippers, conservators, conservation technicians), led by a conservator specialising in preventative conservation, was mobilised. Their work involved placing protective papers over all polychrome areas liable to flake off, whether painted or sculpted; erecting scaffolding to take down works hung high on the walls; and treating them against mould. The objects then had to be dusted, packed and finally transported to the storage site.

For objects which, due to their size, weight or fragility, could not be moved, wooden protective casings were built during the same period: thus, the pulpit, the organ, the high altar and the sculpture of Christ at the column were each encased individually, and three large paintings, nearly 4 metres high and weighing some 500 kilos, were crated. For the organ, a ventilation system was installed, as recommended by the technical adviser from the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté.



12. Cleaning of the aisle vault with latex,

25 April 2024

© City of Chalon

13. View of the restored nave from the scaffolding on the choir side, early 2025

© City of Chalon

14. Discovery of polychromy on a keystone, April 2024

© City of Chalon

15. Work on the neo-Romanesque painted decoration uncovered in the nave, summer 2024

© City of Chalon

During this detailed survey and close observation of the objects, it became apparent that some had been infested by insects. To halt the damage and prevent it spreading to other furnishings, these items were set aside and subjected to a dynamic anoxia treatment (they were placed in sealed chambers where the oxygen was replaced with nitrogen for four weeks) from August to October 2024, in order to destroy eggs, larvae and adult insects. The objects then received a preventative insecticidal treatment.

The return of the objects to the cathedral, and the restoration of the most soiled or damaged works, will be carried out in line with the completion of each phase of the works.

PHASE 1 : 2024, THE NAVE AND ITS AISLES

From March to December 2024, the restoration of the cathedral began with work on the nave and its aisles. The aim was to clean the stone surfaces and continue the work carried out on the first two bays of the nave in 2006–2007.

A vast scaffolding structure was erected over the entire length and width of the nave and aisles, from floor to vaults. The company Dufraigne was responsible for cleaning the

stone, repointing and masonry work, floors and new plaster coatings. The techniques used for the restoration of the interior are the same as those employed in 2006–2007.

To clean the heavily soiled stone, Frédéric Didier had in 2006 resorted to what was then an experimental technique: the use of a peelable latex gel, derived from rubber cultivated in Indonesia and Thailand,





harvested and mixed with specific additives. The product is sprayed onto the surfaces, dries for 24 to 72 hours while trapping all impurities, and is then removed by hand as a single film. This technique generates no dust, is harmless both to the historic fabric and to those applying it, and penetrates every surface irregularity. It was this gel that was used to clean the blackened stones of Notre-Dame de Paris after the 2019 fire; it was employed again in 2024 in the nave of St-Vincent's Cathedral.

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Based on traces of polychromy found in the nave and on the vaults, the final appear-

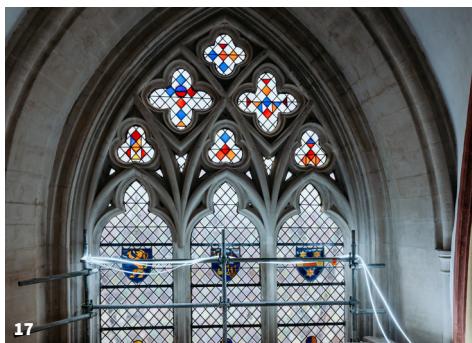
ance—similar to that of the first two bays previously treated—aims to evoke the state of the building in the 16th century. The ribs of the vaults have been highlighted with yellow- or red-ochre renders. Traces of original incised “false joints” have been preserved. A different treatment was chosen for the rear of the façade, which dates from the 19th century: there, the “false ashlar” pattern with white joints has been recreated across the entire wall.

Moreover, the presence of scaffolding along the full length of the nave and the cleaning of the stone made it possible to rediscover traces of polychromy (yellow ochre, red ochre, blue, gilding, etc.), notably on certain Romanesque capitals and on the coats of arms of the bishops decorating the nave's keystones (15th and 16th centuries), as well as on the wall arches of the high windows. In the former case, an “archaeological treatment” was applied, consisting of simply consolidating the surviving colours. In the latter, in order for the decoration to remain visible from the floor, the colours were reapplied across the entire painted surface.

Colour traces were also found on the pointed arch between the nave and transept, decorated with highly coloured chevron motifs. These features were analysed and similarly brought back to life.



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In the last bay of the nave, the ARCAMs workshop also worked on a 19th-century painted scheme in neo-Romanesque style, probably created during the major campaign of the 1860s, perhaps to set off the large crucifix placed in this part of the building. Later covered with a false ashlar pattern with white fillets, this imposing decoration—yellow and red ochre in colour, with an architectural composition extending up to the triforium gallery—has been uncovered and restored.

At the same time, *Atelier Art Vitrail* restored the stained-glass windows in the nave and west façade.

Saint-Vincent's Cathedral has suffered major damage over the centuries (Wars of Religion, French Revolution, the 1944 explosion), which has repeatedly destroyed its stained glass. As a result, only a single 19th-century window remains in the nave: the rose window in the façade. The high-level windows of the nave all date from after the Second World War.

The rose window has a central medallion showing St-Vincent surrounded by arabesques. The whole is the work of Clermont-Ferrand master glass-painter Émile Thibaud, who played a major role in the mid-19th-century revival of a “neo-archaeological” Gothic-inspired stained glass in France. His work here dates from around 1866. The window

was already extensively restored in 2005, as it had been severely affected by movement in the building caused by unstable ground.

The high windows of the nave are all fitted with stained glass created between 1945 and 1951 by master glass-painter Pierre Choutet, after the destruction of the earlier windows in August 1944. Born in Chalon in 1920, Choutet settled in Paris, where he founded the Société des Vitrails d'Art des Gobelins, responsible for numerous contemporary stained-glass creations in post-war France.

Here, the commission was to depict, at the centre of each window, the coats of arms of the bishops of Chalon from the 12th century



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16. Rose window in the west façade: Portrait of St Vincent surrounded by arabesques, Émile Thibaud, master glass-painter, c. 1866
© City of Chalon

17. Stained glass showing the arms of Burgundy and of Bishops Jean Rolin and Jean Germain, Pierre Choutet, master glass-painter, 1945–1951
© City of Chalon

18. Removal of the lower stained-glass panels in the nave, June 2024
© City of Chalon

19. Installation of a lead drip tray, September 2024
© City of Chalon



up to the French Revolution, set within openings mainly filled with lightly tinted glass.

The restoration first required a detailed inventory, assigning a strict reference number to each panel so that it could be precisely located before, during and after the intervention. It was also essential to protect the panels remaining in place during the building works. As the stone surfaces were being cleaned with sprayed latex, including near the windows, there was a risk of splashes on the coloured glass. The stained-glass specialists therefore installed protective sheeting over all the nave windows in July 2024.

In order to cut back the stained glass at the lower sections of the nave windows and thus improve the cathedral's future ventilation, it was necessary to remove the lower panels of each nave window in summer 2024. To avoid leaving the building open to the elements during this phase, custom-cut plexiglass sheets were installed in their place.

Once removed, the lower panels of the nave windows were carefully transported by the Art Vitrail team to their workshop near Auxerre. There, a detailed condition report was drawn up: broken pieces were recorded and marked with stickers for identification,

and photographs were taken before restoration. The metal saddle bars and perimeter lead cames were removed so that the broken glass pieces could be replaced. Once the new glasses had been cut and fitted, they were reinserted into the mullions. New border cames were then installed all around, and the whole soldered.

Next came the “putty”: a paste made of whiting and linseed oil was worked under the wings of the lead cames to stiffen and waterproof the panel. The saddle bars were then refitted, and the solder joints “aged” so that they matched the original metal.

To remove condensation water running down the interior face of the windows—water that could stain the newly cleaned walls—lead drip trays were made in situ. Their role is to collect this water and channel it outside the building. Installing these elements required slightly trimming the stained-glass panels.

All the “lead lines” (the metal armatures that support the stained glass) were then stripped, followed by the application of a passivating coat (to halt rust damage) and two coats of anti-rust paint whose colour was chosen in consultation with the Chief Architect of Historic Monuments.



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After the putty, all the panels were cleaned after masticing with demineralised water, sometimes enriched with 5% acetone in cases of heavy soiling.

This first restoration phase was also an opportunity to carry out general, in-depth maintenance of all the building's roofs, to ensure effective watertightness across the entire complex.

The company Placier interceded in November–December 2024 using a hoist, both on the nave and choir roofs, which, since an over enthusiastic restoration in 1892, have been covered with slate, and on the roofs of the aisles (flat tiles) and chapels (curved tiles). The work involved replacing broken tiles and slates and clearing blocked gutters to prevent leaks that might damage the newly restored interiors. The company was also tasked with treating the moss and lichens that had built up on all the roofs.

In the roof structure—oak for the nave, softwood over the choir—few defects were found. However, dust, fungi and wood-boring insects were detected, and cleaning and appropriate treatments were carried out.

Discreet but essential and substantial work was also undertaken by the electricians, who removed obsolete installations and replaced them with compliant, safer systems that highlight architectural details and facilitate movement for all, while keeping cabling as unobtrusive as possible and limiting new drilling.

Directional sound systems (able to carry sound from the choir clearly to the back of the church) were also installed along four of the nave piers.

Finally, the Bouvier sculpture workshop was involved in cleaning and restoring notable elements such as funerary slabs laid in the nave, the stoup, and other features. The workshop was also commissioned to produce plaster casts of two Romanesque capitals—“The Abduction of Alexander” and “Cain and Abel”—now on display in the Espace Patrimoine.

Taking advantage of the scaffolding, the company On Situ carried out 3D scanning of all the Romanesque capitals in the nave, with a view to helping art historians to better understand these elements and to improve their interpretation for different audiences.

20. Hoist intervention on the slate roof of the nave, November 2024

© Grand Chalon

21. Making the mould of the capital representing the story of Cain and Abel, summer 2024

© City of Chalon

22. Roof structure and vault after cleaning, 2024

© City of Chalon

23. Latex cleaning of the oculus at the crossing of the transept, December 2024,

© City of Chalon



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PHASE 2 : 2025, TRANSEPT, CHOIR, NORTH AISLE AND ATTICS

In November 2024, dismantling of the scaffolding in the restored nave began, while new scaffolding was erected in the choir and transept. This installation was completed in early February 2025. To protect the restored parts, a large tarpaulin separated the nave from the active worksite. The large-format paintings that remained in the building during the works were moved into



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the nave, and the casing around the organ was removed. As the last bay of the nave is included within the scaffolded area, the pulpit remains inside its wooden casing.

The company Dufraigne was then able to start cleaning the stone surfaces, again using latex. As in the nave, painted decoration appeared in the choir, but in greater quantity and variety; it has been fully reinstated.

Old Romanesque windows were also uncovered in the transept.

In the attics above the stone vaults, the entire network of walkways has been upgraded by the carpenters: timber floors have been rebuilt, guardrails installed, and lighting fitted. This will make maintenance operations easier and provide safer, more effective access for firefighters in the event of a blaze. Large fire-retardant cloths have been installed to compartmentalise the roof spaces and limit any potential fire spread. The fire-safety system has been extended into this vulnerable zone.

To address recurring leakage problems on the terrace roof between the two façade towers, a new zinc roof was installed across the whole surface in 2025.

It was also in 2025 that the “locksmiths” (seruriers), responsible more broadly for metal



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24. Discovery of polychrome chevrons on the pointed arch between transept and nave, 2024
© City of Chalon

25. General view of nave and choir, October 2025
© Jean-Luc Petit

26. Restored chevron decoration in the foreground, view towards the crossing and choir, October 2025
© Jean-Luc Petit

27. Elevation of the choir, October 2025
© Jean-Luc Petit

elements within the building, intervened for the first time. Their tasks included cleaning and repainting the grille of the choir triforium, the gallery running between the ground-floor arcades and the high windows.

The partial reopening of the cathedral after this second phase took place on 17 October 2025. However, the works will not be fully completed until after phases 3 (2026) and 4 (2027).

REDISCOVERIES AND REVELATION

Although a number of preparatory studies and diagnostics had made it possible to outline the main stages of the work, Frédéric Didier and the 2BDM team readily admit that phases 1 and 2—in the nave, transept and choir—were full of surprises. First, as we have seen, from an archaeological point of view, but not only that. Previous probes had not revealed the impressive quantity of polychromy eventually uncovered on the walls and vaults of the nave, transept and choir.

Above all, the decision to close the building completely during this period proved decisive, as it allowed the installation of enormous scaffold structures from which, once cleaning was completed, all those involved gain a better overall understanding of the building, which in a sense revealed itself.

At that point, the City's departments (as

contracting authority), the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté (in charge of scientific and technical oversight of Historic Monuments), the 2BDM agency (as project manager) and the contractors jointly developed a rigorous system, starting from studying the surviving painted remains, they determined whether or not it was possible to identify a coherent decorative scheme. When such a scheme could be confirmed (and only in that case)—



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for example, by finding recurring decorative elements consistent with the envisaged iconographic programme—the decoration was reinstated. As Frédéric Didier explains, this deciphering process is akin to reconstructing a text: by gradually assembling fragments, you eventually recover words, then sentences. Here, entire decorative schemes were reconstructed.

The restoration approach therefore evolved as these discoveries progressed.

Although it is not yet possible to date all these painted decorations precisely, it is clear that the polychromy now visible allows the building to be seen much as it would have appeared to worshippers at the end of the Middle Ages or the dawn of the Renaissance, when the construction of the nave vaults was being completed.

Everywhere, the pigments found are entirely mineral, and this is the first layer of decoration applied directly to the bare stone, which tends to confirm that it dates back to the Middle Ages. Moreover, no stencils were used; there is no systematic repetition or symmetry. The painting is free in its execution—features that, again, are consistent with medieval practice.

There are, however, differences between the various parts of the building, and it is

not certain that all these decorations are exactly contemporary with one another.

Thus, as noted above, the nave vaults were painted in red and yellow ochre and adorned with “voussoirs” (the parts of the arches near the keystone) and keystones decorated in bright colours, sometimes with gilded highlights, probably from the time the vaulting of this part of the building was completed, i.e. the late Middle Ages.

The ribs of the transept and choir vaults are decorated with the same red-and-yellow polychromy as the nave, but enriched with black fillets framing a “stone-coloured” strip in the centre.

The transept arms, whose vaults are older than those of the nave, are decorated, along their pointed arches, with brightly coloured chevron motifs alternating brown, yellow, blue and bare stone. These chevrons echo those already mentioned on the pointed arch between nave and transept.

As for the choir, whose architecture dates from the 13th century, it boasts a rich painted programme which may be original or slightly post-date the construction. It includes:

- round the high windows, a “false harpage” pattern (rectangles of red framed with a black line, imitating an arrangement of



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ashlar blocks), over which run, at the level of the pointed arch, stylised flower motifs, resembling lilies, in black and white, each different in its detail;

- the continuation of the red and yellow ochre polychromy on the arches, extending onto the columns and colonnettes of the choir;
- a fully painted balustrade, in a deeper red than that framing the high windows, running at their base;
- the same red polychromy on each arch of the triforium gallery, but with double black fillets and a stone-coloured strip between them, again imitating ashlar or brickwork and setting off the carved figures above the capitals, all different;
- the reinstatement of varied black-on-white patterns in the upper sections of the columns, below the capitals decorated with cabbage-leaf motifs.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF CHURCHES AND COLOUR IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Although, around the year 1000, the landscape was said to be covered in a “white mantle of churches” (to use the words of Cluniac monk Raoul Glaber), and although these buildings now generally appear “colourless” to us because their polychromy has

vanished, it is important to remember that colour was very present in the Middle Ages, particularly in sacred architecture.

As leading colour historian Michel Pastoureau reminds us: “Medieval man loves colours. For him, they are synonymous with light, joy and security. They are also one of the components of beauty, especially from



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*Michel Pastoureau, *Figures et couleurs étude sur la symbolique et la sensibilité médiévale, Le léopard d'or*, 1986

28. Romanesque capital in the nave with polychrome decoration, 2025

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29. General view of the cathedral from the organ gallery, October 2025

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30. Detail of a Gothic capital surmounted by a head in the choir triforium gallery, October 2025

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31. Rediscovered Romanesque window in the transept, October 2025

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the 12th century onwards: beautiful is what is clear, bright, luminous. For colour is nothing other than light modified by contact with objects and, received by the eye, taking on coloured nuances (...) Thus, all colours are part of the metaphysics of light and, as such, are an emanation of God.”

While white, red and black dominated the early Middle Ages—and red was then “the colour par excellence”—a linear, hierarchical scale emerged between the mid-11th and the 13th century, running from white to black via red and blue (which became a fully-fledged colour in its own right, which had not previously been the case). Each colour is ambivalent in symbolic terms, and the same hue can represent both a virtue and the opposite vice, depending on the context in which it is used. Thus, red here most likely symbolises strength, courage and above all charity, while yellow, especially when heightened with gold as on the heraldic shields on the keystones, can represent wealth, nobility or even faith.

WHITENESS OF THE STONE AND ROMANESQUE WINDOWS

The discovery of polychromy almost makes us forget how much the cleaning of the stone has once again revealed the building and its sculpture: the Romanesque capitals of the nave and choir, and the large canopy,

characteristic of Flamboyant Gothic, which now surmounts the bishop’s chair in the choir but may originally have crowned the tomb of Bishop Jean de Poupet at the end of the 15th century, in the chapel dedicated to that illustrious family, a chapel which has since disappeared.

The works have also led to other rediscoveries: Romanesque windows in the transept arms, which had been blocked up, and the entrance portal to the Poupet Chapel in the choir, a typical Renaissance doorway. All these elements will gradually be studied and highlighted.

The St-Vincent’s Cathedral worksite now continues while the building is once again accessible to the public. This document will be updated regularly to keep you informed of new developments on this remarkable site.

«THE CATHEDRAL, LIKE THE PLAIN, LIKE THE FOREST, HAS ITS OWN ATMOSPHERE, ITS OWN SCENT, ITS OWN LIGHT, ITS CHIAROSCURO, ITS SHADOWS.»

Émile Mâle, Religious Art in 13th Century France, 1898.

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The Architecture and Heritage Interpretation Department,

led by the Architecture and Heritage Officer, organises numerous initiatives to help residents—young people and adults alike—and visitors discover the city’s rich architectural and heritage assets, with the support of professional tour guides.

Nearby, the towns of Autun, Auxerre, Besançon, Bourges, Dijon, Dole, Joigny, La Charité-sur-Loire, Langres, Moulins and Nevers hold the “Ville d’Art et d’Histoire” label; the Auxois area, the Charolais-Brionnais area, the area between Cluny and Tournus, and the Montbéliard area hold the “Pays d’Art et d’Histoire” label.

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