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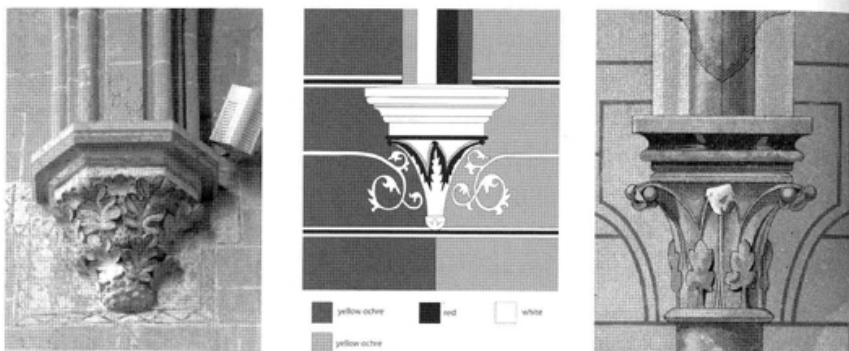


FIG. 1 (above left) Ourscamp Abbey (Oise), infirmary, detail of vault polychromy. (Photograph: Géraldine Victoir)

FIG. 2 (below left) Saint-Jean-aux-Bois Abbey (Oise), detail of the nave capital. (Photograph: Géraldine Victoir)

FIG. 3 (below centre) Ourscamp Abbey (Oise), infirmary, detail of a capital after a drawing from Laisné (1852). (Drawing: Jane Heinrichs)

FIG. 4 (above right) Ponchon (Oise), parish church, detail of the east choir wall. (Photograph: Géraldine Victoir)

FIG. 5 (below right) Château de Coucy (Aisne), drawing of a lost capital with polychromy, from *La peinture décorative en France du XIe au XVIe siècle*, Paris, 1889.

## Nature in Architecture: The Vegetal World and Architectural Polychromy in Northern France from the Mid-Twelfth to Mid-Fourteenth Century

GÉRALDINE VICTOIR

The intrusion of the vegetal world into northern French Gothic architecture by means of sculpture is well known. From the generic twelfth-century water-leaves to the more naturalistic thirteenth and fourteenth-century oak, maple and ivy leaves, capitals and keystones were often conceived with vegetal forms in mind, even though these were inserted into architectural structures which owed nothing to the natural world. What is less clear is how those elements were painted, and if the use of colour differentiated the foliage from the exclusively architectural forms. Vegetal motifs were not only used by sculptors, but were also painted on walls. Like painted capitals, they are seldom considered for themselves. This paper surveys changes to the use of vegetal motifs in northern French Gothic architectural polychromy and decorative wall painting. Drawing mainly upon examples from the southern part of Picardy, directly north of Paris, it will attempt to understand the role of these media in the incorporation of motifs from the natural world within architecture.

The polychromy of the Sainte-Chapelle, built by Louis IX at the Palais de la Cité in Paris, gives us a magnificent image of a Gothic building, shimmering with gold and expensive colours, in a vision that recalls precious reliquaries.<sup>1</sup> This lavish scheme, heavily restored in the nineteenth century, but based on medieval remains, is an exception in thirteenth-century building decoration from northern France. In fact,

architectural polychromy from the mid-twelfth to the mid-fourteenth centuries can be so inconspicuous that it is often overlooked. An extremely simple motif, masonry pattern, was frequently used as a base to convey an idea of the church as an architectural structure. In addition, time and man have had a strong impact on those old schemes, which now mostly appear fragmentary to us. Nonetheless, between the mid-twelfth and mid-fourteenth centuries a series of changes can be traced that demonstrate the development of polychromy within an architectural context.<sup>2</sup> Thus this paper will explore whether painters were affected by the same increasingly naturalistic tendency noticeable among sculptors.

Before 1200, most Gothic buildings north of Paris presented a remarkably stone-like aspect to their viewers. The stones were not left bare, but they were covered in a stone-coloured lime and sand plaster, with white masonry pattern imitating the joints on all the architectural parts; walls, vaults, mouldings and columns.<sup>3</sup> The capitals and other sculpted elements were either covered with a thin layer of tinted lime or, alternatively, left bare and probably polished. Around 1170, for example, the celebrated capitals in the choir of Saint-Leu-d'Esserent (Oise), which are notably similar to those of Canterbury Cathedral, had this primarily stone-like appearance, like the monolithic columns supporting them, while the rest of the choir was decorated with white masonry patterns.<sup>4</sup> There was thus no differentiation of colour between the architectural structure and foliage ornament. More generally, the absence of strong colours is typical of Early Gothic buildings north of Paris. Although capitals were clearly made up of vegetal motifs, they visually remained stone elements and part of the architecture. Thus, not only did figurative painting disappear from churches, a phenomenon often observed by scholars, but the simple treatment of walls gave precedence to the architecture over decorative aspects of the building.<sup>5</sup> Nothing interfered with the play of light on mouldings, and churches were made to look as if they were strongly built with neatly cut, high-quality lime-

stone. At that period, painted vegetal motifs were entirely absent from the walls of buildings.

The typical polychromy of the first half of the thirteenth century brought structural differentiation to surfaces and articulation: the walls and vaults were covered in masonry pattern on a yellow ochre ground, while the ribs and the columns were often white, for instance in the infirmary of the Cistercian Abbey at Ourscamp (Oise), built *c.* 1220 (FIG. 1).<sup>6</sup> Concurrent with this type of polychromy, another scheme, characterised by red masonry pattern on a whitewash, was extremely popular. However, in this region of France, the white masonry patterns on ochre ground were preferred for all important buildings.<sup>7</sup> In this context, capitals were treated like other architectural elements and were either left white or yellow, or were subtly decorated with white and red designs. In the church of the Benedictine nunnery at Saint-Jean-aux-Bois (Oise), built in the 1220s, the painter outlined the edges of the leaves, a simple device to sharpen their visual effect (FIG. 2).<sup>8</sup> At Ourscamp, the sober crockets were ornamented with fake leaves imitating the more elaborate capitals of the period (FIG. 3). At Chartres Cathedral (Eure-et-Loir), the capitals were plain white.<sup>9</sup> The treatment thus varied from one case to another, but in each case the painters treated foliage in the same way that they treated mouldings, namely as an architectural feature. Thus the relation to the vegetal world remained a generic one, as much for the painter as for the sculptor.

In the same period, stylised vegetal and geometrical motifs were introduced in spandrels around arches and windows. These designs reveal the urge felt by artists and/or patrons to embellish buildings whilst still preserving the architectural features as the dominant overall visual effect. At Saint-Jean-aux-Bois, spirals and other patterns adorn the west wall dado arcade and a fleuron is still to be seen above one of the capitals. In the infirmary at Ourscamp Abbey and in the early thirteenth-century choir of the parish church of Ponchon (Oise), elaborate fleurons occupied spaces free of masonry pattern, mainly in the spandrels above

some of the oculi (FIG. 4). Notably, the records show that one of the corbels in Ourscamp's infirmary was flanked by delicate scrolls (FIG. 3).<sup>10</sup> Providing a frame on the wall around capitals does not seem to have been an uncommon practice and is also found at Saint-Jean-aux-Bois (FIG. 2). However, what concerns us here is the association between architectural motifs (the masonry pattern) and vegetal motifs. A similar use of leaves was once to be seen at the Château de Coucy (Aisne), as shown on a drawing by Gelis-Didot and Laffillée (FIG. 5).<sup>11</sup> The linear frame was doubled with another one terminating in red trefoils, echoing the red-painted leaves in front of the crockets. At Ourscamp, the white scroll also echoes the white-painted leaves, but the design is even more subtle, since it is the masonry pattern itself which turns into a scroll when approaching the vegetal forms of the capital. In these examples, vegetal motifs are used for their graphic possibilities rather than for an evocation of the real vegetal world. However, the painters showed great sensitivity in their choices: at Ourscamp Abbey, the painters chose to decorate the windows and oculi with forms found in monumental design, for example a frieze of miniature arcading, while the capitals are framed with vegetal forms echoing their own.<sup>12</sup>

A shift in the colouring of foliage seems to occur around the middle of the thirteenth century, precisely when the well-known naturalistic capitals of Reims Cathedral and Saint-Denis Abbey appear. These are followed slightly later by capitals at Saint-Urbain at Troyes and Southwell Minster Chapter House.<sup>13</sup> While the original polychromy of those examples is not known (either scraped off or unpublished), other contemporary cases suggest that the new tendency towards a precise rendering of real plants did not go unnoticed by painters. In the Lady Chapel of Saint-Germer-de-Fly (Oise), built between 1259 and 1272 by Abbot Pierre de Wessencourt and stylistically close to Saint-Urbain at Troyes, the keystones take the form of leaves recalling ivy and other existing plants (FIG. 6).<sup>14</sup> Significantly, they were originally painted green on a red background. The capitals, the gable crockets, as

well as the frieze between the dado level and the windows were similarly painted. The sculpted vegetal motifs thus acquired a "descriptive" dimension thanks to their form as well as their green leaves.<sup>15</sup> The vivid polychromy also emphasised the architect's use of space and structure, in stark contrast to the rest of the architecture, which was plastered and ornamented with white masonry pattern, and to the stained glass windows of the nave, which were in grisaille.<sup>16</sup> Two areas were underlined by the use of colour: the western wall dado, which received figurative painted medallions, and the apse, adorned with figurative band windows and perhaps a painted dado.<sup>17</sup> Between those two poles, the nave dado level, with its blind arcade supported by green and red capitals and topped by an equally colourful frieze of crockets, formed a strong horizontal line leading the gaze towards the altar (FIG. 7).

Although the polychromy has to be understood within its architectural context, the case of Saint-Germer-de-Fly suggests that the observation of and quest for a vivid depiction of plants in carved stone during the second half of the thirteenth century not only concentrated on form, but also on colour. This interest is demonstrated by various foliage sculptures preserved in lapidary collections, such as a pendant from the chapter house at York Minster, which retains green painted leaves on a red background similar to that on unrestored capitals still *in situ* in the vestibule of the chapter house.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, few green leaves remain on capitals in Picardy. An isolated example is found on a capital in the small parish church of Rousseloy (Oise). One reason for this rarity may be the loss of polychromy during nineteenth and twentieth-century cleaning, especially for those sculpted details which priests and architects were so keen to restore to their so-called 'original purity'.<sup>19</sup> But the surviving examples also suggest that different approaches were taken at different sites. At least two other types of capital polychromy were used concurrently to this effort towards descriptive colouring. The first is characterised by the use of the more common and significantly cheaper white and yellow- and red-earth pigments, for instance in the south chapel of

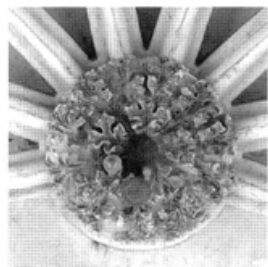


FIG. 6 (below left) Saint-Germer-de-Fly Abbey (Oise), Lady Chapel, detail of the apse keystone.  
(Photograph: Géraldine Victoir)

FIG. 7 (above) Saint-Germer-de-Fly Abbey (Oise), Lady Chapel.  
(Photograph: Géraldine Victoir)

FIG. 8 (below centre) Bray Priory (Rully, Oise), detail of a choir boss with remains of blue and gold.  
(Photograph: Géraldine Victoir)

FIG. 9 (below right) Noyon Cathedral (Oise), detail of north-aisle capital with ■ green, ■ red and □ white polychromy.  
(Drawing: Jane Heinrichs)

the small parish church at Montigny-lès-Condé (Aisne). The second is partially inspired by the Sainte-Chapelle: foliage may have been highlighted not by 'natural' colours, but by 'precious' colours to emphasise the significance of the space.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the decoration of the Sainte-Chapelle, however, this treatment was usually limited to keystones, for instance those painted blue and gold c. 1260 in the Augustinian chapel of Saint Victor at Bray (Rully, Oise), which was otherwise covered in white masonry pattern (FIG. 8).<sup>21</sup> However, two further examples suggest that, by the first half of the fourteenth century, green and red capitals had become rather common, whether associated with descriptive leaves or not. At Saint-Leu-d'Esserent Priory, the north aisle of the nave was devoted to the parishioners. Around the second quarter of the fourteenth century, the parishioners decided to refurbish this space and had the early thirteenth-century capitals painted with green leaves on a red background.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Noyon Cathedral was entirely painted for the third time in the 1310s. The scheme, based on masonry pattern, with white ribs underlined with red hollows, included red, green and white capitals (FIG. 9).<sup>23</sup> The twelfth-century crockets were used as a base for coloured decoration. Green was chosen for the parts most easily associated with leaves, although red sometimes also appears on the crockets and green is also used on the astragals. In these two examples the choice of colour cannot be explained by the naturalistic form of the sculpture, because the polychromy was applied to the stylised crockets more than a century after the sculpture was completed. However, we can infer that if, in the fourteenth-century, modernising an old building by giving it up-to-date colours implied painting capitals with green leaves on a red background, then this type of polychromy must have been common in the latest, fashionable buildings. Painters and patrons must have had important examples as models, examples where descriptive leaves were painted vivid green.



FIG. 10 Ponchon (Oise), parish church, west nave wall.  
(Photograph: Géraldine Victoir)

Painters in northern France, working together with sculptors to transform stone into vivid foliage, were certainly aware of the new tendency towards the observation and reproduction of nature. We could thus expect a similar approach from them in two-dimensional church decoration. However, the use of vegetal motifs tending towards naturalism in wall painting of the Rayonnant period is rare. Instead, strongly styl-

ised scrolls and stencilled flowers had a major place in wall decoration. Friezes were used as frames, on and around arches and as a way to structure large plain walls. Among many examples, the recently restored dormitory of the monks in the priory of Saint-Maurice at Senlis (Oise, 1260s) was adorned by a simple frieze of scrolls crowning the wall.<sup>24</sup> In the nave of the parish church at Nesles-la-Vallée (Val-d'Oise), scrolls with rosettes appear on the nave arcades' intrados.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the thirteenth century, and during the fourteenth century, such friezes were used together with geometrical patterns, seemingly without distinction. In the nave of the parish church at Ponchon (Oise), alternating palmettes, twisted ribbons and elaborate scrolls frame a figurative register as well as the door and windows (FIG. 10).<sup>26</sup> All these examples can be considered as simple and popular art, which perhaps explains why naturalistic motifs were not attempted, but when we turn to more elaborate wall paintings in this region of France, for instance the altar imagery in the south transept of Beauvais Cathedral (Oise) or the extremely lavish scheme in the refectory of the royal nunnery at the Moncel (Oise), vegetal patterns are absent altogether.<sup>27</sup>

There are, however, some examples of a developing naturalistic tendency in works of two-dimensional art elsewhere, though these seem to have been confined to high-quality production, produced for patrons who often belonged to court circles or to the highest tiers of the clergy. An exceptional painting was added to one of the domed vaults of Cahors Cathedral between 1316 and 1324, under the episcopacy of Guillaume de Labroue, a figure close to the Pope and director of the scribes and illuminators' workshop at the Papal Library at Avignon.<sup>28</sup> The figures are framed by architectural canopies, separated by friezes of descriptive foliage (vine with grapes). The green leaves and stems are placed on a red background.<sup>29</sup> The same colours and care for naturalism are to be found in the Windmill Psalter (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.102) in the late thirteenth century.<sup>30</sup> These two examples are evidence of a similar trend to that previously noted

in the polychromy of capitals: the green leaves are detached on a red background, like those of the painted capitals of Saint-Germer-de-Fly, Noyon and Saint-Leu-d'Esserent. The other colour scheme mentioned earlier for painted capitals, namely that related to the "precious" polychromy of the Sainte-Chapelle, as well as to precious metalwork using architectural vocabulary such as the shrine of St Gertrude at Nivelles, presenting gilded naturalistic leaves on the gables, also finds echoes in two-dimensional art.<sup>31</sup> For instance in the stained glass windows of the Lady Chapel of Rouen Cathedral the borders are decorated with bright yellow foliage.<sup>32</sup>

Two conclusions can be drawn from this preliminary investigation. The first concerns the role of colour in the depiction of motifs taken from the natural world in Gothic buildings in northern France. As far as sculpted foliage polychromy is concerned, it seems that some examples from the second half of the thirteenth century can be related to an increased attention to natural colours. However, the diversity of cases and the existence of various trends suggest that relating foliate sculpture to the natural world was not the main focus of architectural painters. Naturalism, or rather descriptivism, depended more on the sculptor's work, while the painter sometimes gilded the finest form of ivy or painted an old-fashioned crocket green. Similarly, if we turn to decorative wall painting, it seems that painters were more interested in filling surfaces or framing architectural structures than in detailing specific types of plants.

The second conclusion concerns the evolution of taste during the first two centuries of Gothic architecture. The stone-like appearance of buildings in the second half of the twelfth century was replaced by a growing interest, commencing in the early thirteenth century, in decorative patterns. However, even then, images inspired by plants were used like geometrical forms and served a graphic as well as a structural purpose. Similarly, foliage decorated with bright polychromy became usual from the mid-thirteenth century onwards. These developments

towards a greater number of painted decorative elements (whether polychrome sculpture and mouldings, or wall painting), however, remained relatively unobtrusive within Rayonnant architecture. Elements borrowed from the vegetal world, whether descriptive or not, continued to be confined to definite zones, visually inserted into the non-natural structure of a building. The vast majority of such buildings continued to be decorated with large areas of masonry pattern. Thus architectural polychromy generally respected the architectural nature of the buildings, simply embellishing them with accents inspired by the natural world.

## GÉRALDINE VICTOIR

Most of the paintings discussed in this paper have so far been published inadequately or not at all; many of the observations presented here were made during the production of an inventory of all vestiges of twelfth to fourteenth-century wall paintings in Picardy undertaken as preliminary research for my PhD, written under the supervision of Paul Crossley and David Park, who I want to thank for their constant support. My gratitude also goes to two anonymous readers and to the editors of this volume for greatly improving this paper.

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