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Medieval glories : gold and ivory at Louvre-Lens

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A radiant exhibition of European treasures demonstrates that showing old art in a new museum can enhance both



Descent from the Cross ©Musée du Louvre



Angels of Saudemont ©Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Arras

Can a regional museum, just two-and-a-half years old, a determinedly unspectacular low-rise aluminium construction built over a former pit-head and surrounded by slag heaps, challenge half a millennium of art history? *D'Or et d'Ivoire*, opened this week at Louvre-Lens in northern France, is a show of gorgeous, refined, rare and precious decorative objects and sculptures. There are luminous stained-glass panels, ivory mirrors engraved with scenes of courtly love and games of chess, the tender gold-painted wooden "Angels of Saudemont" (with metre-high wings still intact), and a limestone "Virgin and Child" carved with tumbling roses like a wild garden.

All date from 13th-century France and are here to propose a rereading: that Parisian Gothic was not only an apogee of medieval culture but that it also had an influence, in its fluid forms, human focus and interest in nature, on the beginnings of a new art in 14th-century Tuscany. Lens unravels a dialogue between Paris and Pisa, Siena and Florence that chips away at the canonical view of the early Renaissance, refuting the Italian/Tuscan nationalism of Vasari and suggesting instead European cross-currents driven by evolution, not revolution.

The setting is perfect: Lens's long, ever-unfolding exhibition gallery has a big shuttered glass roof that allows diffuse grey light softly to envelop monumental pieces in stone and marble, while smaller works — enamels, illuminated manuscripts — shine like jewels spotlighted in alcoves.

Unexpectedly, 21st-century minimalism mimics the simplicity, openness and sense of weightlessness of a Gothic cathedral.

The sculptures that launch the show, works by the great architects of Nôtre-Dame, Jean de Chelles and Pierre de Montreuil, are immediately resonant of the cathedral's grace, liveness and lucidity. De Chelles' animated limestone "Head", representing one of the bearded, coiffed, exotic Magi, commands space with grave psychological presence: wise, wary, alert, dignified yet emotionally engaged.

De Montreuil's broken, incomplete "Virgin and Child" is even more affecting. Created for the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, lost in the French Revolution and excavated in 1999, it is a remarkable example of expressive detail — almond eyes, finely carved eyelids, slight smile of mother turning towards child — and theatrical elongation of the figure.



Maître Honoré's illuminated parchment, *La Somme le Roi*, 1295 ©The British Library Board

As it is unfinished, it also reveals sculptural practice: how curves and folds of drapery build up to convey volume and dynamic effect. Finally, there is the devotional aspect: restored to Saint-Germain's chapel in 2009, de Montreuil's "Virgin" now bears a livid black scar — the stone was recently charred when a worshipper lit a candle while praying to it. Lens has installed these arresting works face-to-face with towering polychrome wooden figures — a crucified Christ, Virgin, St John — made in Prato, Tuscany, during the same period. The superior finesse of the Parisian figures is beyond question. Mid-13th-century Italy still looked to age-old, tight, flat Byzantine models, and its cities were too fraught with local wars to prioritise the arts. By contrast, Paris was an unrivalled cultural capital whose population doubled between 1200 and 1300.

The show's strengths are independent thinking and displaying medieval art in a fresh, bright way. This show amplifies the context of a medieval boom city. Bookshops offered costly illuminated manuscripts such as Maître Honoré's *La Somme le Roi* (1295). Intellectual institutions blossomed under enlightened patronage such as that of Jeanne de Navarre, commemorated here in a delicate limestone likeness — high cheekbones, fashionable wimple, supple body beneath exuberant gown — in which she holds an architectural model of her College of Navarre. And the market for luxury was decisive: it was via portable goods such as ivories, silverware and books, exported across Europe from ateliers on the Ile de la Cité, that the Parisian aesthetic chiefly reached Italy. A highlight here is seven exquisitely detailed gold and ivory figures comprising the "Descent from the Cross" — solemn, grief-stricken, serpentine forms, with draperies accentuating flow of movement and gestures of mourning, which are stylistically close to monumental sculpture of the period. Dispersed and vandalised during the revolution, these were reunited in 2011 and constitute the only surviving complete miniature devotional group made for private worship. Did Italian sculptor Nicola Pisano see such pieces? Trained in Naples, seat of Emperor Frederick II, who was an enthusiast for both classical and French art, Pisano was certainly aware of Parisian Gothic by the time he arrived in Pisa around 1248. His first child Giovanni was born there, and father and son dominated Tuscan sculpture for decades, blending antique and Byzantine tradition with borrowings from Parisian elements.

The faces of Nicola Pisano's marble "Group of Three Apostles" (1270) here are classically derived, but co-curator Xavier Dectot argues that the treatment of their sweeping coats is "directly inspired by contemporary Parisian ivories". And as late as 1310, Giovanni Pisano's "Virgin and Child", with folded drapery emphasising the movement of the mother carrying the infant, is a quintessential Gothic work. His wonderfully weathered marble was made for the church of Santa Maria della Spina in Pisa; it is among several sculptures here whose visit to Lens has been possible because they have, within the last decade, been removed from exterior façades — and replaced with copies — for conservation reasons.



This show benefits significantly from recent archaeological research and restoration projects, but its true strengths are independent thinking and a flair for displaying medieval art in a fresh, bright way. In fact, the show's argument, while not yet mainstream, is not way-out either: it falls within academic ventures over the past half-century to collapse the chasm between the medieval and modern eras. In the 1950s Erwin Panofsky drew attention to the humanist breadth of Gothic architecture, and Ernst Gombrich suggested that Giotto owed much "in his aims and outlook to the great sculptors of the northern cathedrals" because "in real history there are no new chapters and no new beginnings".

But art-historical conjecture takes at least a generation to translate into accessible, visually striking displays. Louvre-Lens succeeds because it has the best of both worlds: freedom from the shackles of tradition but also access to its weighty parent institution in Paris for loans and cultural capital. From Margate to Marseille, 21st-century galleries built for urban regeneration almost always concentrate efforts of the contemporary; *D'Or et d'Ivoire* proves that showing old art in a new museum marvellously enhances both.

One of the Angels of Soudemont, 1270-1300

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'D'Or et d'Ivoire: Paris, Pise, Florence, Sienna, 1250-1320', Louvre-Lens, to September 28. louvrelens.fr

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