

Bishop Jean Baillet and the Architecture of Auxerre Cathedral

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When Jean Baillet took possession of the diocese of Auxerre in 1478, after negotiating its transfer in 1477 from his predecessor, Enguerrand Signart, he inherited an unfinished cathedral. Its general configuration is suggested in figure 1. The

building consisted of a 13th-century chevet, an entry block rising a few courses above the three portals and covered by a temporary roof, nave side aisles, a vaulted south arm of the transept, and the three eastern nave bays with their high vaults.¹ The most recent construction had taken place in the north arm of the transept, where in 1415 canon Jean de Molins and others had provided funds for the portal on the Bishop's side of the cathedral.² This project may have risen to the triforium level on the lateral walls, and to the springing of the portal arch on the terminal wall. It was not completed due to the difficult times in France and in Burgundy between the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 and the reestablishment of royal authority in Auxerre in 1483.

Jean Baillet was a member of a family that supported the interests of Louis XI, in contrast to Enguerrand Signart, who had been the confessor of Duke Charles of Burgundy, killed in 1477. When Baillet took possession of the diocese, he found the finances of the bishopric in a precarious state following years of conflict in the Auxerrois.³ As he worked to reestablish his position and its possessions, his first concern

regarding the cathedral building was for the unfinished north arm of the transept. Jean Baillet appears to have supplied both motivation and funding for this project. His escutcheon appears on the keystone of the high vaults in the north arm (as it does also on the St. Etienne tapestries); these vaults were probably completed *circa* 1500.



Once the transept had been finished, the Bishop and chapter turned their attention to the unfinished nave and the façade block. Lebeuf tells us that the Bishop's escutcheon was placed on the southwest tower of the west façade, and his 19th-century editors add that the chapter contributed a sixth of its annual revenue to construction at the west, beginning in 1500.⁴ Another document cited by Lebeuf indicates that construction was continuous between 1500 and 1522.⁵ By 1525 the northwest stairs had reached the top of the façade's second level, as indicated by an inscription on the interior stair wall. Also, as part of the new effort in the western nave, by 1511 the westernmost nave chapel on the north was ready for use.⁶ Therefore, by the time of Jean Baillet's death in 1513 a new project for the completion of the nave and façade had been established and was well underway. It included raising the façade to a level that would buttress the clerestory section of the two western nave bays, as well as the high vaults of the three western bays. The cathedral profile *circa* 1520 is suggested by figure 2. The cathedral was brought to its final medieval state during the tenure of Jean Baillet's successors, the two Bishops Francois de Dinteville I (r. 1513-1530) and Francois de Dinteville II (r. 1530-1554).

My hypothesis concerning the building projects formulated during the episcopacy of Jean Baillet is that they were developed in an atmosphere of informed stylistic consciousness that had only recently come to the Auxerrois. As patrons, the Bishop and chapter seem to have been aware that they could choose from among three stylistic vocabularies, depending upon the context of an individual project. First, they could employ the ogee-based vocabulary of the late Gothic, the “current” mode. Second, they could choose to work with a “historic” formal vocabulary, in this case the mode we now term Rayonnant Gothic. Third, they could choose to adopt aspects of the new, classicizing vocabulary that was being imported into France from Italy. It is exactly during the tenure of Jean Baillet that we begin to see these three options being exercised selectively at the cathedral. What is remarkable about the choices made at the cathedral is that they result in a harmonious ensemble. The Auxerre decision-makers seem to have

had an instinct for continuity that allowed them to avoid clashes of visual effects.



In support of this hypothesis, we will consider 1) the north arm of the transept and its relationship to the earlier south arm, 2) the west façade elevation, 3) the clerestory design in the western nave bays, and 4) the western chapel on the north side of the nave.

1. The north arm of the transept.

Among the most striking effects in the cathedral is the architectural conversation

between the designs of the two transept terminal walls. The south arm, begun and completed in the 14th century, is decorated on its lower half with a system of blind tracery that is based on single-curved, interlocking geometric forms. Its upper window is composed of four lancets supporting a rose based on a rotated pentagon (figure 3).



The north arm, although planned in the 14th century as a mirror to the south arm, was left incomplete after the campaign of 1415. Beginning in the 1480s the project was continued, but its formal vocabulary was modified to reflect an interest in sinuous, interpenetrating ogee motifs. Its lower wall answers the design challenge thrown across the transept, as does its window zone, with its four lancets surmounted by a dodecagonal rose

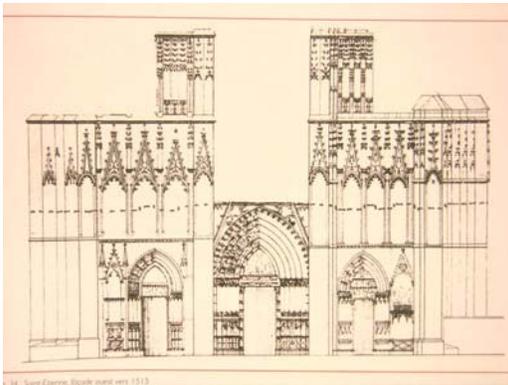
element (figure 4). Despite irregularities in its side walls, the patrons succeeded in achieving a unity of effect by maintaining the basic rhythm of the wall and window divisions, while permitting a change in decorative vocabulary. The result is a subtle and interesting interplay of historic and current decoration across the axis of the main interior space.

On the exterior, a similar set of relationships was maintained. The south arm portal has for its subject St. Etienne, patron saint of the cathedral and role model for the canons. The north arm has St. Germain as its sculptural subject, the local role model for positive episcopal conduct. The 14th-century sculpture on the south portal is framed in a

series of paneled spaces reminiscent of designs for liturgical objects, while the 15th-century sculpture on the north portal is organized into a frieze of scenographic units. These units include small figures, often crowded together, acting against shallow spaces indicated by diagonally placed architectural elements. The interrelationships among the figures, and the use of small classicizing framing devices recall a similar mixture of elements in the St. Etienne tapestries.

In this case, then, we find a respect for the solutions of the past (the south arm), the deployment of the dominant current style (the north arm), and a hint of forward-looking scenographic settings in the arrangement of the north portal exterior sculpture. We should not interpret this situation as fortuitous, but rather as evidence of enlightened consciousness on the part of the patrons.

2. The west façade elevation.

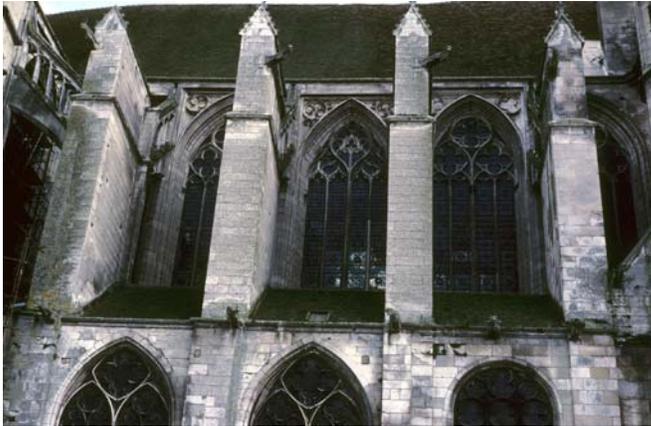


The west façade block of the cathedral had been erected to a point just above the first cornice during the mid-to-late 13th century. It stood considerably west of the limit of the Romanesque nave; it was not until the 14th century that new side aisles linked the Gothic cathedral to its partially completed façade block. When the north arm was being completed, attention turned to raising the façade block to a point that would allow the western bays of the central nave to be completed. The documentary evidence cited above places the commencement of this work *circa* 1500.

It is very interesting to note that a decision was made to retain existing masonry to a height 5 to 7 courses above the first cornice (figure 5, broken line). This decision meant that the new program respected the spacing of the bases that had been set in place atop the cornice in the 13th-century program. The character of the decorative arches that are related to these bases changes at their springing level; above that point the decoration uses the ogee to create a more contemporary effect, although it is kept in check within a system of gable and pinnacles. Along with the second level of the façade, the inner one-third of the third level was constructed to provide buttressing for the clerestory level of the nave, which rises to the third cornice. Thanks to the fact that the north tower was never completed, we can see this phase clearly in its present arrangement. At the time of Jean Baillet's death in 1513, both towers probably looked like the present north tower, and the present western window had not yet been constructed (figure 5).

In the case of the façade program of the early 16th century, care was taken to make a smooth transition from the less decorated surfaces of the 13th century. The existing arrangement was respected, but contemporary effects characterized by series of vertical consoles, niches and pinnacles, resulting in horizontal bands of light and shade, are increasingly apparent as the program moves upward from one zone to the next. The modern casual viewer perceives continuity in the vertical development of the façade and tower program thanks to the subtlety of the adjustments from one design to the other. Classicizing detail is not apparent until one arrives at the cupola atop the north tower stair. It is clear that conscious choices were made about an appropriate mode for the façade; it was to be judiciously applied, late Gothic decoration.

3. The western nave clerestory.



The progress of the façade program allowed the builders and patrons to turn their attention to the two bays of the nave that had yet to receive their upper walls, the present second and third bays of the nave.

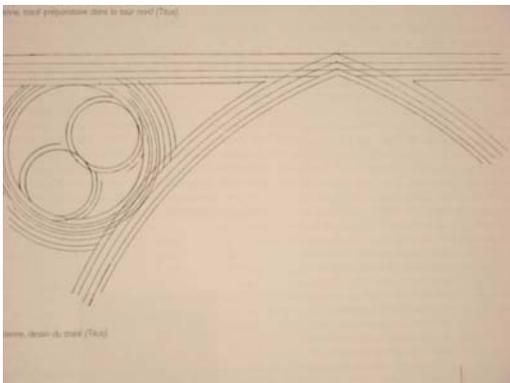
The eastern pair of nave clerestory windows had been constructed in the first quarter of the 14th century. Their rayonnant design provided a model for the remainder of the nave design, although their recessed spandrels were dropped in the interest of developing a thicker, sturdier upper wall section. When looking at the north side of the nave clerestory, we see that each bay has its idiosyncrasies (figure 6). Especially apparent is the ogee vocabulary of the middle bay, the fourth, which was the last to be constructed before the eastern three bays were vaulted at the very end of the 14th century. This is the only example of flamboyant design among the nave clerestory windows.

When the builders and patrons considered how to close the two-bay gap between the fourth bay and the façade block, they decided to return to the “historic” style of the eastern bays, effectively isolating the more recent flamboyant solution in the fourth bay. That is, there was a return to single-curved forms in the window tracery and in the spandrel decoration in the bays designed after 1500 and glazed in the 1520s. This choice reinforces the demonstrated concern for continuity and respect for the existing building on the part of the patrons. The conscious nature of the choice is underscored by the

concurrent decision to use ogee paneling to decorate the interior surfaces of the towers in the first bay of the nave. The latter mode represents current 16th-century practice, employed in an area that would not be considered to be part of the series of nave windows. Here again we encounter a concern for a historicizing, unified approach in a specific context, side by side with a more current décor.



Apparently when the patrons decided to use the historicizing forms of the rayonnant to finish the upper nave, its design vocabulary was not current for the builders. In order to work out the desired geometry, wall engravings were made at full scale in the second level of the north tower to work out the relationship among molded components (figures 7 and 8). The engravings are located on two walls whose position is just below the former gap in the nave clerestory. At the time they were made no roof would have blocked the view from the engravings up to the location of the two bays that were unfinished. That is, there is a logical, positional relationship between the engravings and the location where their design was to be applied. One of the engravings is concerned with window tracery patterns, and the other with the framing elements of the windows and their spandrels (figure 7). In our example, the latter of the two, the goal of the engraving seems to be the correct placement of the trefoil motif in the spandrel, so that it “points” properly toward the corner of its frame. This design was used in the third nave bay, but there was not enough room for it in the second bay due to the encroachment of the west tower. The existence of, and need for, the engravings underscores the intent of the patrons to achieve



a specific effect that was for them linked to the history of their cathedral. It represents a case of the phenomenon that it is now fashionable to term “memory.”

4. The north side chapel at the third nave bay.



As mentioned above, this chapel was ready to receive its founder in 1511. Its location was the only one remaining for a chapel on the north side of the nave. For our purposes, it represents the employment of an

integrated, classicizing approach to the decoration of its terminal wall in the first decade of the 16th century. Its delicate foliate decoration, its linear pilasters, and its round-headed tracery forms set it apart from the other nave chapels (figure 9). One thinks of the pilasters that separate scenes in the St. Etienne tapestries in conjunction with the architectural elements found in this chapel. In this case we encounter a single patron who was permitted to depart from the dominant artistic modes that characterize the cathedral. On the other hand, this new mode represents the effects that were enjoying increasing favor with patrons of high rank in the early 16th century.

If we consider the overall situation at the cathedral *circa* 1510, just toward the end of Jean Baillet’s tenure as Bishop of Auxerre, we find that a sustained effort was underway to complete and embellish the cathedral. No architectural activity is reported in the chevet, although Lebeuf tells us that Jean Baillet was laid to rest in its axial

chapel,⁷ which implies a sculptural ensemble. As the patron of the series of St. Etienne tapestries, one might argue that he “redecorated” the choir in an appropriate, up-to-date manner. The north arm of the transept had recently been enclosed and decorated, and the unfinished western bays of the nave and the adjoining façade were under construction. *Circa* 1510 the three distinct stylistic modes identified at the beginning of this essay were all in use. Rayonnant “historic” elements were under construction in the nave clerestory area, “current” late Gothic elements were under construction in the mid-level section of the façade block, and new classicizing effects were to be seen in canon Cochet’s chapel. In addition, the referential character of the recently completed north arm fully supports the view that the patrons carefully considered the design options available to them.

Lebeuf’s estimate of Jean Baillet is that he expended his energies on projects that would restore the integrity and finances of the diocese after a particularly conflicted era. He initiated work on the cathedral that was continued by the chapter and by his successors after his death. He appears to have enjoyed a good and productive relationship with the chapter, which made a generous financial commitment to the building campaign beginning at least by 1500. Jean Baillet seems to have stimulated this renewed interest in patronage by championing the project to complete the north transept arm, whose sculptural decoration features St. Germain, the model of episcopal concern for the welfare of the region.

In our time we seem to take for granted the remarkably integrated effect presented by the cathedral. In our reception and use of St. Etienne, it is easy to forget that the Gothic structure was built over a period of 330 years, a time span that is difficult for most visitors to grasp. It would be as if Versailles were just being completed in 2000 (instead

of being restored), and that despite changes in artisanal practice, we were able to weld seamlessly the old with the new. Artistic change, strongly tempered by an awareness of past achievements and current possibilities: that is what Jean Baillet and the cathedral chapter were able to accomplish during their period of custodianship at St. Etienne.

¹ The dating suggested in this paper was developed in my dissertation, “The Architectural History of Auxerre Cathedral,” Princeton University, 1984. Documentary evidence is lacking for many sections of the cathedral; for those sections comparative monuments are important. In this essay, detailed discussion in support of sequences has been omitted to focus on contextual issues.

² Jean Lebeuf, *Mémoires concernant l’histoire civile et ecclésiastique d’Auxerre et de son ancien diocèse*, M. Challe et M. Quantin, eds., Auxerre et Paris, 1851, t. 2, p. 45. Lebeuf is our principal source for the activities of the Bishop and chapter during the 15th and early 16th centuries, since he had access to documents that disappeared in the aftermath of the Revolution.

³ Lebeuf, p. 90-94.

⁴ Lebeuf, p. 94.

⁵ Lebeuf, “Preuves,” no. 338.

⁶ A. Vidier et L. Mirot, *Obituaires de la Province de Sens*, Paris, 1909, t. 3, p. 265. *9 oct. Eodem die Anainus Cochet, hujus ecclesiae canonicus, vita functus est, et sepultus in capella Beate Mariae Laurentanae juxta turrim, ab ipso fundata. (1511)*

⁷ Lebeuf, p. 101.