



royal monastery of Brou

at Bourg-en-Bresse church & museum

The masterpiece of an emperor's daughter

An act of love

Built in the early 16th century, Brou is the masterpiece Margaret of Austria, the daughter of Emperor Maximilian I of Hapsburg and Mary of Burgundy, had built to commemorate her love for her late husband Philibert the Fair, Duke of Savoy.



A religious foundation

Saint-Pierre de Brou is built on the site of a Gallo-Roman then Burgundian necropolis. Shortly after the death of Philibert in 1504, Margaret set out to fulfil the vow made by her mother-in-law Margaret of Bourbon to rebuild the dilapidated priory.

A political move

Based in Mechlin, Margaret of Austria, Regent of the Netherlands for almost a quarter of a century, oversaw the work on the monastery which was to house three tombs: her own, Philibert's and his mother's. Margaret died in 1530, shortly before the work was completed and without having ever seen it. Brou was listed as a historic monument in 1791, and in 1921 part of the monastery buildings were passed on to the town of Bourg-en-Bresse and the municipal museum was opened there.

Glossary

Chapter house: the place where the monks met to read a chapter of their rules and take decisions on important matters.

Cross-ribbed vault: supported by at least two diagonal ribs, and two transversal arches, called double arches.

General Superior: the monk in charge of the material needs of the community.

Misericord: a ledge fixed onto the back of a stall enabling the monks to sit discreetly during services whilst appearing to be standing.

Reredos: the vertical decor behind the altar.

Recess: a funeral niche made in a wall.

Rood screen: a partition separating the choir from the nave.

Sybils: pagan prophetesses who were supposed to have announced Christ's coming.

Practical information

Visit takes on average: 1 hour 30 minutes

Guided tours. Audio-guide tours.

Tours suitable for disabled visitors.



The Centre des monuments nationaux publishes a collection of guidebooks about French monuments, translated into several languages. Éditions du patrimoine publications are on sale in the bookshop-giftshop.

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The princely tombs

The symbols of great dynasties

The stone recumbent statues recall the power of the great princely dynasties. Inaugurated in the 12th century with the Plantagenet necropolis in Fontevraud, this tradition flourished at the Abbey of Saint Denis where Saint Louis had sixteen recumbent statues of monarchs sculpted and placed in the transept intersection. In the 15th century, the Dukes of Burgundy, ancestors of Margaret of Austria, had magnificent tombs built in Dijon. Margaret's project was part of this movement, seeking to match the tomb that her father, Maximilian, had had built in Innsbruck or that ordered by her rival, Anne de Bretagne for her parents in Nantes cathedral.

Recumbent, cadaver and weeping statues in Brou

Designed by Jean Van Roome, also known as John of Brussels, the tombs were sculpted by a Brabant workshop, as shown by their mannerist style. The great recumbent statues are by Conrad Meit, a German artist in the court of the Princess at Mechlin who came to Brou in 1526. The layout of the tombs of Margaret of Austria and her husband was inspired by princely funeral rites, where a model in state apparel was displayed on a state bed above the coffin. Above, the recumbent statue was a realistic portrait at the time of death; below, the cadaver, naked but for a shroud, was represented according to Medieval tradition: hoping for the Resurrection, the transfigured face turned to the east and the eyes open to a new dawn...

A museum in a monastery

Ancient sculptures

The refectory has some ancient sculptures from the church in Brou and other religious institutions in the area. The group with Saint Philibert, Philibert the Fair and Saint Andrew are the only surviving elements of the original sculpture on the west gate of the church in Brou, which was damaged during the Revolution.

Paintings

Upstairs in the former cells, the following are displayed: 16th- and 17th-century Flemish and French art, art in the style of Caravaggio, 19th-century landscapes, troubadour art and more recent works. The portraits of Margaret of Austria and Charles V by Van Orley are of note, as is *The Swan Hunt* by Jan Brueghel the Elder. Works by Gustave Doré are exhibited along with paintings by Jean-François Millet and Gustave Moreau.

Decorative art

There is a set of Renaissance furniture from the Lyon region and 19th-century Bresse furniture, as well as a collection of Meillon faience.

Modern art

In terms of paintings, the museum has an emphasis on “contemplative” abstract works: silent, bare and meditative art, in keeping with the atmosphere of the monastery.

dessin de J.-C. Gohin. Illustration Tour pour plaines conception Plein Sens. Andars. réalisation beau fixe traduction Caractères et cetera.impression Néo-Typo, avril 2008.

Royal dimensions

The site is unique in France with three cloisters, two chapter houses*, and over 4 000m² of common rooms for just twelve monks.

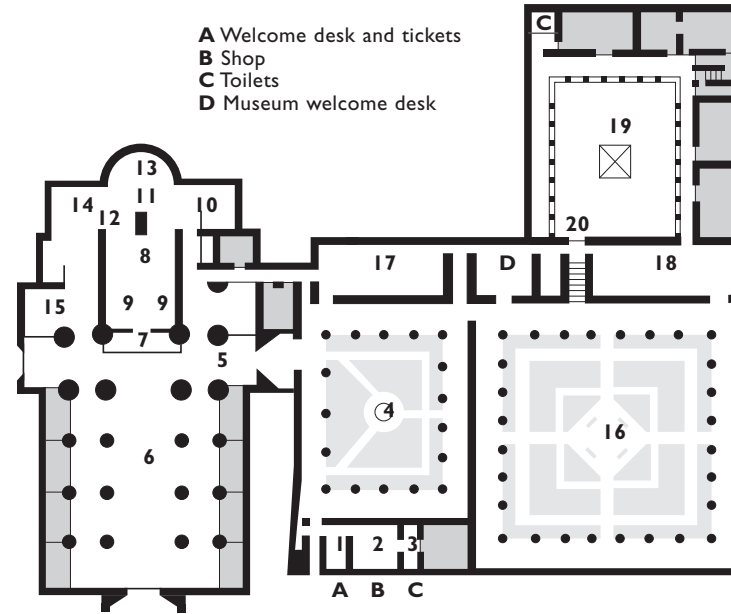
The first cloister

- 1 2 3 The guest building** was designed to accommodate Margaret of Austria and her retinue.
- 4 The first cloisters** on the ground floor were surrounded by galleries with ribbed vaults*, and the upstairs galleries with ceilings. It was a 'buffer zone between the outside world and the monks' community where guests could stay.

The church (1513-1532)

The church is a High Flemish Gothic masterpiece built by Loys Van Boghem, the master builder from Brussels chosen by Margaret of Austria.

- 5 The south transept** is decorated with a stained-glass window telling the story of Suzanne. Antoine de Montecuto's chapel opens off to the right. This chaplain to the princess is represented on the Emmaus Pilgrims' stained-glass window.
- 6 The ribbed-vaulted* nave**, lined with side aisles and chapels, with bare walls, imposing pillars and plain glass windows is intentionally sober to contrast with the richness of the choir.
- 7 The rood screen***, taken over by an exuberant proliferation of stonework, gives a foretaste of the splendid choir.
- 8 The immense, richly decorated choir** is decorated with stone latticework. Pink and white rendering on the vaults gives a stone cladding effect. The floor was originally paved with coloured tiles of which there are just a few remains near the tombs.



- 9 The oak stalls** on either side of the choir are finely worked. The scenes and characters from the Old Testament to the south and from the New Testament to the north, with their restless forms, are from a Flemish workshop, whilst the misericords* are probably the work of Bresse artists.
- 10 The tomb of Margaret of Bourbon**, dug in a recess* in the south wall, is surrounded by rich decorations. The weeping statues are reminiscent of those at the tomb of the Dukes of Burgundy in Dijon.
- 11 The tomb of Philibert the Fair** is in the middle of the choir. Ten elegant Sybils* watch over it from the surrounding niches.
- 12 The tomb of Margaret of Austria**, with its huge stone canopy with statuettes, is reminiscent of the imposing beds of state used for princely funerals.

- 13 The five stained-glass windows** in the choir were made between 1525 and 1531 from drawings made in Brussels. The central window, made following sketches by Dürer, shows the appearances of the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene and the Blessed Virgin.

The side windows are devoted to the princely couple: on the left Philibert the Fair being presented by Saint Philibert of Tournus, and on one and a half panes the heraldry of his ancestors (the Houses of Savoy and Bourbon); on the right there is the same layout for Margaret of Austria with Saint Margaret, and the coats of arms of the Houses of Hapsburg and Burgundy.

- 14 Margaret of Austria's chapel** has a particularly refined decor: a white alabaster and black marble bench and multi-coloured keystone decorations. The great stained-glass window of the Assumption is inspired by Dürer, and the upper "Triumph of the Faith" frieze by Titian. A huge alabaster reredos*, by Brabant artists, is devoted to the "Seven Joys of the Virgin".
- 15 The Gorrevod chapel** has a stained-glass window recording Saint Thomas's incredulity, and representing Laurent de Gorrevod, the Governor of Bresse, Knight of the Golden Fleece, and his wife Claudine de Rivoire. The former master altar of the church is now in this chapel.

The great cloister

- 16 The great cloister**, majestically laid out, has the same structure of upper and lower galleries as the first cloister, and was built for the monks to walk in. Two parts of a 1985 sculpture by the American Richard Serra invite visitors to walk round these cloisters.

The main convent building

- 17** The municipal museum is now in the **main building**. It used to house the sacristy, the north chapter house*, south chapter house* and the stairs leading to the cells in the 'dormitory'.
- 18 The refectory** is the largest room with ribbed vaulting* in the monastery.

The third cloister

- 19 The third cloister** was for utilitarian buildings, and thought of after work had begun. It consists of three upper and lower covered galleries in the Bresse style, abutting the west side of the main building which was already built. Not far from the refectory, they led on the south side to the kitchen and warming house, and on the east side to the ovens, General Superior's* office, the servants' quarters and a prison. Paved with pebbles, it has a well covered with a pavilion roof. A 1990 work by the German sculptor, Ulrich Rückriem has been placed along the northern gallery. These four pillars commemorate the abbots of Brou buried in the church.

The sleeping quarters

- 20 The sleeping quarters and cells** were on the first floor of the main building. There were around twenty cells along a large corridor called a "dormitory" with a stone lantern on the corner of the landing.