

Patrons rescue the Cathedral in the Medieval City of Vaison la Romaine

The tradition of patronage in Vaison-la-Romaine

Vaison has had a powerful tradition of patronage since ancient times.

As far back as antiquity, Caius Sappius Flavius, a wealthy citizen of Vaison who lived between the end of the reign of Claudius and 75 AD, left two bequests to the commune in his will. The first, representing a substantial sum, was intended to provide a revenue in the form of interest and the second was used to "adorn the portico in front of the thermal baths with marble"

Over the centuries, Vaison has always attracted local and national collectors who have enriched themselves with antiquities discovered in Vaison. In the 19th century, the antiquities market supplied the world's greatest museums: the Louvre, the British Museum, St Germain en Laye, Avignon, Florence, Geneva, Toronto....

Recently undertaken by the Belisama archaeology association, a census of objects found in Vaison-la-Romaine and scattered around the world revealed the existence of more than 1,500 items.

It wasn't until the beginning of the 20th century, with the arrival of Canon Joseph Sautel and the interest of successive mayors, that we saw the emergence of a genuine enhancement policy, paving the way for the arrival of patron Maurice Burrus.

Joseph Sautel followed in the tradition of patron archaeologists by financing the start of the work himself, and was rewarded with the discovery of the ancient theatre in 1907, in particular the effigies of the imperial couple Hadrian and Sabina, and the emperors Claudius and Domitian.

This time, the name of Vaison was at the forefront of Provence's archaeological sites.

But this was without counting on the clear-sightedness and political courage of the mayor at the time, Paul Buffaven, who decided to acquire the Puymin estate and opened up rooms in the town hall to display Sautel's discoveries.

By keeping the imperial statues on the town's grounds, the town put an end to the ban on remembrance that had hitherto applied to it. A museum was built and Paul Buffaven was appointed its curator.

Act I of Vaison's history was therefore played out thanks to this enthusiasm for Roman history. The elected representatives were keen to turn the small farming town into a French Pompeii.

At the time, the town was on the tourist and cultural itineraries of the lower Rhône valley. From the 1920s onwards, theatre companies, including those from the Comédie Française and the Odéon, regularly came to perform plays inspired by ancient drama.

Act II of Vaison-la-Romaine's destiny was about to unfold.

The meeting between Maurice Burrus, a wealthy industrialist from Alsace with a passion for antiquity, and Jules Formigé, the architect in charge of historical monuments, was an enthusiastic one, and Maurice Burrus chose Vaison because it suited his interests as a discoverer. The mayor of Vaison at the time, Ulysse Fabre, was convinced of the merits of his requests and authorised him to explore the municipal land on the slopes of Puymin hill. His dream as a patron of the arts became a reality. He invested considerable financial resources in uncovering and restoring the remains of the opulent ancient city of Vasio.

He acquired the land at La Villasse, where public buildings, thermal baths, private residences, shops and a large cobbled street were discovered. He set about embellishing the cleared sites with gardens.

He rebuilt the ancient theatre to provide the city with a prestigious cultural and entertainment venue. The Fêtes d'art organised by the Société des Amis du Théâtre Antique in 1935 bear witness to this.

The involvement of the patron Burrus, following the discoveries made by J. Sautel, illuminates the history of archaeology in Vaison. He was declared an honorary citizen of the town of Vaison-la-Romaine.

And so, thanks to the commitment of successive mayors, the Ministry of Historic Monuments, discoverers and patrons, the village of Vaison, which became Vaison-la-Romaine in 1924, paved the way for its future as a beautiful city of art and culture.

The exemplary collaboration of the state, local authorities and civil society in all its diversity has helped to rebuild the age-old ties that intensely unite its present-day inhabitants with its predecessors. This cooperation continues to this day, with another patron of the arts, **Léonard Gianadda**, involved in the renovation of the cathedral in the upper town, which was started by the AECM association, Les Amis de l'Église de la Cité Médiévale, with the support of the municipality of Vaison-la-Romaine.

The History of the Cathedral located in the Medieval City

The upper town, also known as the medieval town of Vaison la Romaine, lies on the hill overlooking the modern town built in the valley on the banks of the river Ouvèze. In the shadow of the castle of the Counts of Toulouse, the latter protected the population for centuries.

Vaison la Romaine has 2 cathedrals, the one built in the 11th century, where services are held today, and the cathedral of Sainte Marie de l'Assomption, built in the 15th century, in the medieval town on the top of the cliff overlooking the Ouvèze. It became the seat of the diocese of Vaison until the French Revolution. On 6 March 1791, the Comtat Venaissin and Avignon were united to form a single département. Avignon became the capital, as well as the seat of the only remaining bishopric. The other cathedrals in the département became simple churches.

In Vaison, the cathedral of Sainte-Marie de l'Assomption was abandoned in 1897 in favour of the cathedral on the plain, which once again became the parish centre after five centuries of interruption. The Haute Ville church is still occasionally used for concerts, due to its magnificent acoustics, and more rarely for worship. But the building is slowly falling into disrepair. The Town Hall carried out a number of repairs, not all of them successful (using cement). In 1992, the building was closed for safety reasons. Despite this situation, the cathedral was listed in its entirety in 1994 as a monument under National protection.

Revival initiated by citizens of the Upper Town.

The inhabitants of the Haute Ville never accepted the closing of their church with no prospect of reopening. Some of them wrote letters to wealthy personalities asking for financial assistance for its restoration. Finally, in 2009, 18 residents of the Upper Town joined forces to set up the apolitical and secular association "Les Amis de l'Église de la Cité Médiévale (AECM)" with Paul Meierhans as chairman. Within a few months, they had grown to around a hundred members, and the support of the mayor was secured. 90% of upper town residents were now members. An initial subscription limited to the residents of the upper town raised almost €10,000.

The first visit to the building was a shock. The mural in the 4th chapel on the right was dripping with water. The church was cluttered with all kinds of rubbish and damp was everywhere. The mayor authorised us to deal with the most urgent matters. The water leak on the fresco was immediately contained. "Toitures en Provence" carried out an overhaul of the entire roof at cost price. The bill was paid in full by a resident of Haute Ville, and the church has

remained watertight to this day. "Provence Portes Anciennes" rebuilt two essential doors at cost price, paid for by the Banque Populaire.

Serge Boyer, deputy of the mayor, in charge of the town's monuments, launched the clean-up operations with the participation of elected representatives and a large number of volunteers. It was a great success. The church was cleared of a huge amount of rubble and other waste. The work sessions facilitated dialogue between AECM members and elected representatives. Photographic reports are sent to all members. The newspapers are full of reports. The conservation of our church, and above all its forthcoming reopening for concerts and other cultural activities, has aroused great enthusiasm among the residents of Vaison la Romaine and also among the participants in the 2010 Choralies (National Choir Festival). In May 2010, AECM was recognised as a charity of general interest, giving the association the right to issue tax receipts and granting important tax deductions to donors. At the end of 2010, our association had 200 members and 14 donors had already contributed €18,000 to the work ahead. The Town Council unanimously approved the 2011 budget, with €30,000 earmarked for the church.

An auction of works of art donated by artists and other donors brought in nearly €15,000. The exhibition at the Ferme des Arts (major exhibition hall) during the week preceding the sale raised AECM's profile and enabled visitors to appreciate the work of many artists from Vaison and the surrounding area.

Small-scale volunteer work camps were continuing under the direction of Serge Boyer.

In the spring of 2011, the AECM, in collaboration with the Commune, hired a heritage architect to carry out a diagnosis and define the repair and restoration work required. The architect confirmed that the church was watertight, a prerequisite for work on the interior to restore safety. However, the DRAC (Regional representative of the national Ministry of Culture) experts continue to demand a complete restoration of the roof, at an estimated cost of €500,000. But how can one attract sponsors for a building that is closed to the public?

Fortunately, in September 2009, several members of the AECM attended a conference on "Archaeology and Patronage" organised by the BELISAMA association, which informed of the many possibilities concerning heritage, patronage and subsidies. One piece of news in particular caught Paul Meierhans's attention: the European directive recommending that **monuments be repaired and used** rather than allowed to deteriorate for lack of funds. With the help of the Mayor, the DRAC could be convinced to apply this directive. In December 2011, the work required to open the building to the public was underway. To everyone's satisfaction, the work was completed on schedule before the end of 2012. The Commune and the AECM were each contributing €40,000.

The date for the reopening of the church was set for 3 to 5 May 2013. Preparations for the event, under the direction of Serge Boyer, involved around fifty volunteers on an almost daily basis. The Commune was contributing with 2 full-time employees. Repair and waxing of the woodwork, thorough cleaning of the 8 chapels, whitewashing of the cemented surfaces with appropriate pigments. Repair of damaged marble by a stonemason, paid for by the AECM. Restoration of plaster objects by an artist, member of the AECM. Objects belonging to the church but stored elsewhere were brought back, cleaned and displayed in the church. This work was carried out in a warm and friendly atmosphere, all orchestrated with skill and bonhomie by Serge Boyer, who **sadly passed away in July 2016**.

Finding a “job” for the cathedral.

In 2014, the church was open to the public. A member of AECM's board suggested to apply the famous quote by E. Viollet-le-Duc, architect and theorist 1814-1879: "**The best way to preserve a building and keep it alive is to find a job for it**".

In 2015, on the initiative of two founding members, concerts and exhibitions were organised, increasing the appeal of the former cathedral. In 2016 and 2017, this programme was strengthened by fruitful partnerships with renowned musical associations and with local and regional artists. Some 40,000 visitors were recorded for the summer of 2016.

The recently elected new chairman, Patrick Neyrat, relaunched the roof renovation project with the DRAC and reactivated the public subscription campaign to help finance it. However, despite all the publicity and strong popular support, the project was making no headway, with one delay after another.

Why has the project been blocked?

Essentially because of the imperative need, rightly expressed by the DRAC, to carry out work to reinforce the solidity of the cliff on which the church is built, before any work is carried out on the building. A geological survey carried out in 2011 revealed that the rock was extremely fragile. The cost of the work at the time was almost €500,000.

The problem was to find enough public funding for this work, which no sponsor was interested in and for which the DRAC was neither involved nor legally competent.

The cathedral rescued a second time.

Paradoxically, it was the intervention of a sponsor that broke the deadlock.

In 2017, Patrick Neyrat had the good fortune to meet a Swiss patron of the arts, Léonard Gianadda, who loved Vaison la Romaine.

Léonard Gianadda had a long tradition as a patron of the arts and culture. He had created a prestigious foundation in Martigny, Switzerland, the “Fondation Pierre Gianadda”, which hosts exhibitions of painting and sculpture in partnership with the world's leading museums, as well as concerts featuring great international performers.

Patrick presented him the restoration dossier for the cathedral and he took him on a tour. He spontaneously gave us €10,000.

A few months after his visit, Léonard Gianadda offered to finance the manufacture and installation of contemporary artistic stained glass windows to the tune of €200,000 and, in addition, donated €30,000 to the AECM for the installation of the windows. For the creation of the stained glass windows, he selected the artist Kim En Joong in agreement with the municipality and the AECM. This artist is world-renowned for his numerous works in France and abroad. Kim en Joong has created stained glass windows for some of the world's most famous spiritual centres and monuments, including Evry Cathedral, Chartres Cathedral, the monastery at Dax, the abbeys of Ganagobie and Fontfroide, and the basilica at Brioude. But the patron also made the unusual demand that the DRAC approve the project in no more than 6 months.

Aware of the value of this proposal, the DRAC reversed the order of priorities for the work, waiving the requirement for us to carry out the work on the cliff first, and gave its approval in 4 months.

The installation of the windows required the restoration of the east facade of the building, the bays and the roofs of the east chapels, all of which were in a very poor state of repair (there was a visible risk of collapse of the chinking at the corners), at a cost of €500,000, funded by the town, the AECM, the DRAC and the Département.

The creation of the artistic work by Kim En Joong, financed by the Martigny patron, has mobilised the various players in the town and government organisations. It was impossible

for them to refuse this magnificent gift, which enabled the launch of this major project for the cathedral, under the direction of Didier Repellin, chief architect. The artistic windows have been inaugurated on 26 October 2019.

Help from a National Lottery

But the situation was once again the same as it was before the patron's intervention. The DRAC reiterated its demand that work must be carried out on the cliff. However, the situation was now very different. Thanks to the sponsor, the town of Vaison was now the owner of a highly valuable work of contemporary art, housed in a building erected on land that is in danger of collapsing. The case perfectly meets the definition of an endangered masterpiece.

Patrick then turned to the "Fondation du Patrimoine" and, with its help, submitted an application to the "Fondation Stéphane Bern" as part of the "Loto du Patrimoine", *arguing that the building and the artistic masterpiece it contained were in danger.*

The AECM were awarded the grand prize for the Vaucluse region of €203,000.

This sum was the initial contribution to the financing for the work to reinforce the cliff, of an estimated cost of €600,000. The town's administration needed 3 years to complete financing of the project by the various local authorities.

The work started in October 2023 and was completed in July 2024.

The extreme fragility of the rock was noted during the works by the technicians in charge of the works, confirming the risk of the building collapsing.

A retaining vault was rebuilt under a corbelled chapel during the works (financed by the Drac, the city and the AECM).

The patron Léonard Giannada died in December 2023, but his contribution to safeguarding Vaison's heritage did not stop there.

Since the installation of the stained glass windows at the end of 2019, he had continued to donate substantial sums every year when he visited Vaison, with a view to the complete restoration of the cathedral.

To date, the association AECM has €400,000 available to invest in the work.

This sum, added to the contribution from the DRAC and the usual local authorities, would be enough to complete the entire restoration of the roof.

In July 2024, representatives of the DRAC, the commune of Vaison la Romaine and the AECM have agreed to complete the restoration of the roof and the outside of the building in 2025. The planning work of the project will start in fall 2024.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that **without the intervention of patrons:**

- The association AECM, its members and its more than 100 donators
- Léonard Gianadda
- The Fondation du Patrimoine
- The Fondation "Stephane Bern"
- The board and especially its chairman,

the cathedral in the medieval town of Vaison la Romaine

- *Would never have been reopened in 2013*
- *Might have collapsed either because of the dilapidated state of its east facade or because it was swept away by the fragility of the cliffs*

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