

The Amazing French Cloisters of New York

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The Cloisters Museum, built on the banks of the Hudson River between 1935 and 1938, owes its existence to an American sculptor who fell in love with medieval art and was driven by a crazy project: to transport cloisters from southwestern France, the last remnants of plundered abbeys, across the Atlantic.



@ *Passé Simple*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, located in the heart of Manhattan, is one of the largest museums in the world. But the MET, as it is commonly known, also includes another building, The Cloisters. This museum is less known to the general public due to its distance from the usual tourist circuits. Overlooking Fort Tryon Park, 7 miles north of Manhattan, The Cloisters is well worth a visit. Unique in the world, it serves as the medieval art department of the MET.

When you walk along one of the small paths winding through the park, you can see the bell tower of a church in the distance. The effect is striking. It feels like being transported to the Pyrenees, near a Romanesque abbey.

Before entering this monument with medieval architecture, you pass by arcades from the Gothic priory of Froville (Meurthe-et-Moselle) and are then transported to the Middle Ages.

The jewel of the museum? Four cloisters that gave the museum its name. They are called "Cuxa," "Saint-Guilhem," "Trie," and "Bonnesfont." These names refer to four abbeys in southern France, specifically in the Occitanie region: Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa (Pyrénées-Orientales), Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert (Hérault), Bonnesfont-en-Comminges (Haute-Garonne), and Trie-sur-Baïse (Hautes-Pyrénées). By what miracle did this little piece of France end up here on the banks of the Hudson, in the largest American metropolis?

On the Trail of the "Antiques"

This incredible story is linked to the journey of an American artist and art collector, George Grey Barnard (1863–1938). Born in Pennsylvania, Barnard arrived in Paris in 1883 to become a sculptor. After attending the Beaux-Arts, one of his creations ("Struggle of the Two Natures in Man," now at the MET) caused a sensation, attracting the attention of Rodin and, more importantly, Alfred Corning Clark, founder of Singer sewing machines, who became his patron. Barnard's career was launched. Buoyed by this success, he returned to New York in 1895, married Edna Monroe, and settled in the Washington Heights neighborhood (near the future site of The Cloisters). ...

Puzzle On the banks of the Hudson, a few kilometers from the beating heart of NYC, stands this surprising building, inspired by Catalan Romanesque style. Since 1938, it has housed 5,000 medieval works and four reconstructed Occitan cloisters, including Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert under its glass roof and Trie-sur-Baïse in the open air.

Stone on the Move Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa (Pyrénées-Orientales) lost part of its Romanesque decor – here, in 1913, a cart loaded with columns and capitals leaves the abbey – after George Grey Barnard, during a second stay in France, turned to the art market: he acted as an intermediary with Parisian antique dealers to facilitate the purchase of medieval pieces for wealthy clients. Upon Barnard's death, the Metropolitan Museum of New York acquired his fabulous private collection and began constructing the MET museum, The Cloisters, which was inaugurated in 1938 after three years of work.

In 1896, the death of his patron, Alfred Corning Clark, forced Barnard to find other sources of income. While teaching sculpture at the Art Students League of New York, he realized how little American students knew about stone carving. For too long, they had been taught sculpture only by working with clay and plaster.

Barnard wanted to show them medieval works to introduce them to the art of Gothic sculptors—a pivotal realization for the continuation of our story.

In 1902, the state of Pennsylvania commissioned Barnard to create a monumental sculpture, the most significant project ever entrusted to an American artist. Barnard decided to return to France to complete this task and settled in Moret-sur-Loing a year later. However, by 1906, the funds allocated to him were exhausted, and he had only completed half of the commission. To survive, George Grey Barnard turned to the trade of "antiques."

At the beginning of the 20th century, the term referred to ancient art objects and their highly lucrative trade. Paris was a hub where antique dealers negotiated with the wealthiest individuals, such as the Rothschilds or Rockefellers. To source historical elements, they employed art dealers. Barnard became one of them and worked for one of the most influential Parisian antique dealers, Georges Joseph Demotte. He traveled through the French provinces in search of antiques, as the country was teeming with ruined monuments, thanks to the Wars of Religion and the French Revolution, when many religious buildings, turned into national properties, were demolished or converted into quarries. This trade proved far more lucrative for Barnard than his work as a sculptor!

During his quest, he became aware of the richness of cloister decorations, particularly their capitals. At that time, billionaires were fond of monumental reconstructions to adorn their villas. Cloisters were ideal candidates. Moreover, selling an entire cloister was far more profitable than negotiating individual pieces. Barnard understood this well. In 1906, antique dealer Louis Cornillon offered him a lot containing several dozen sculpted capitals.

The Treasures of Occitanie

These elements came from the Abbey of Gellone, in Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert (Hérault). This Benedictine abbey stands in the Hérault gorges, about 40 km from Montpellier. A masterpiece of Romanesque art, it is now classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and houses several remarkable relics. After the Revolution, its cloister was dismantled, and its elements were scattered. Pierre-Yvon Vernière, a member of the archaeological society of Montpellier, managed to save about 166 sculptures from being looted. Upon his death in 1875, his collection was sold to Cornillon and then to Barnard. However, Barnard realized that two capitals belonged to the cloister of another abbey, Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa.

The Canigou Massif dominates the Pyrénées-Orientales. At its foot lies the Abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, in Codalet (Pyrénées-Orientales), founded in 840, which still preserves the largest pre-Romanesque church in the country. Its cloister was built in the 12th century. Like Saint-Guilhem, it was dismantled during the Revolution. When Barnard arrived in Cuxa in January 1907, the fragments of this cloister were scattered throughout the region.

In just over ten days, he made a miraculous find and acquired about forty capitals. He bought them for about twenty dollars each, a significant sum for the local population, who considered these sculptures as worthless debris. Barnard also purchased the twelve arcades of the Bains-Saint-Michel, an establishment that had reused an entire section of the cloister—its dismantling required very complex work, and Barnard had to wait several years to recover it.

During the winter of 1906–1907, Barnard continued his investigations further west, in the Hautes-Pyrénées, the former province of Bigorre. In December 1906, he visited Tarbes and met the Marquis de Gestas. The Marquis showed him a collection of 33 capitals, columns, and bases, which he had purchased in 1894 from the nephew of a local scholar, Alcide Curie-Seimbres. Barnard bought the lot for 5,000 francs. These relics came from the Carmelite convent of Trie-sur-Baïse, an old bastide located 25 km away. Other remnants of the Trie cloister were used to reconstruct the cloister of the neighboring Abbey of Saint-Sever, which had been destroyed during the Revolution.

In the 19th century, some of these remnants were sold and moved to Tarbes to build a decorative cloister in the city center, at the Massey Garden. Barnard's search then led him to Haute-Garonne, where the ruins of several abbeys were located. One of them, Bonnefont-en-Comminges, had a Gothic cloister.

Like the one in Trie-sur-Baïse, it was dismantled during the Revolution, and parts of it later reappeared as a decorative cloister (similar to the one in Tarbes) in the Eugène-Azémar Square in Saint-Gaudens.

The Richest Man in the World

At the dawn of the 20th century, billionaires were fond of monumental reconstructions.

In 1913, Barnard returned to Prades to retrieve the arcades of the Bains-Saint-Michel, which had been dismantled and purchased in 1907. However, since 1909, Edmond Sans, an architect from the Monuments Historiques, had been working to annul the sale. The scandal became national, and Barnard had to act quickly, as the threats to the export of art objects from France were increasing. He realized he needed to change his strategy to save his purchases of antiques.

Barnard decided to donate the arcades of the Bains-Saint-Michel to France as a gesture of gratitude for the artistic education he had received during his time at the Beaux-Arts in Paris. This act helped improve his image, portraying him as a sort of benefactor. Finally, in late 1913, 120 crates containing the Barnard collection, including fragments of Occitan cloisters, left the port of Le Havre.

The shipment narrowly escaped the foundational law protecting historical monuments, which was enacted on December 31, 1913.

In January 1914, the shipment arrived in New York and was stored at Barnard's residence. A building was constructed there to display his collection. This temporary museum resembled a French monastery. The Barnard's Cloisters—the first medieval art museum in America—opened its doors before Christmas. The success was immediate. Barnard demonstrated great creativity in showcasing his collection. At dusk, accompanied by medieval music, guides dressed as monks led visitors through the museum by candlelight. The interior resembled a church with a glass roof. The space incorporated cloister elements arranged on two levels. The lower level featured columns and capitals from Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, while the upper level displayed reconstructed galleries from the cloisters of Trie-sur-Baïse and Saint-Gaudens. The larger cloister of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa was reconstructed outside the building. These Cloisters marked a turning point in museum design.

Barnard became a pioneer in the art of monumental collection. His primary intention was to share his love for medieval sculpture with the American public, but he also sought to sell his collection to a major institution. Two curators from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, impressed by his museum, invited the richest man in the world—John D. Rockefeller—to finance the acquisition of Barnard's collection for the MET. At the time, Rockefeller was funding the construction of churches and museums, as well as the restoration of monuments in Europe, such as the Palace of Versailles. He negotiated intensely with Barnard, who, facing financial difficulties, ultimately agreed to sell his collection for \$600,000, though he had initially asked for \$1 million. After the purchase, the MET began constructing a satellite museum dedicated to the Middle Ages. In 1928, Rockefeller financed the transfer of Barnard's collection to the top of Fort Tryon Park, on land he owned, just a few hundred meters from Barnard's Cloisters.

Thanks to 3D technology, the rebirth of French cloisters and Barnard's Cloisters

Very early on, the question arose of rebuilding the ruined cloisters. The challenge is colossal, but nowadays it is possible to do so... virtually. The Abbey of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert was a pioneer in this field. In the late 1980s, Swiss architect Philippe Lorimy and Dassault Systèmes proposed a 3D reconstruction of the cloister. Fifteen years later, thanks to 3D scanners, the MAP ('Models and Simulations for Architecture and Heritage') laboratory of the CNRS refined this reconstruction (opposite).

It now includes the digitisation of the remains that are still in place and those on display at the MET Cloisters. The same approach was adopted for the of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa in 2014. As part of the film *Cloisters, l'odyssée des cloîtres* (Cloisters, the odyssey of the cloisters) produced by *Passé Simple* and broadcast in 2025 and 2026 by *viàOccitanie* and *Histoire TV*, these digital twins were refined and completed by the company's team of computer graphics designers in close collaboration with experts from each site (Géraldine Mallet and Olivier Poisson) and benefiting from the latest advances in photo-realistic 3D rendering. This documentary made it possible to restore the two other travelling cloisters before they suffered the ravages of time :

– Trie-sur-Baïse and Bonnefont-en-Comminges – and Barnard's Cloisters, the proto-museum built by Barnard in the early 20th century, which foreshadowed the current museum. Using VR headsets, visitors can now explore these monuments from the past.

The construction of the museum, named The Cloisters Museum, took place from 1935 to 1938. There was some hesitation about what form it should take: a castle or a cathedral? In the end, it resembled an abbey whose bell tower was strongly reminiscent of that of Cuxa. Barnard, who devoted himself to sculpture, was rarely invited to the site. In 1936, he received the gold medal from the Institute of Arts and Letters in recognition of his talents as a sculptor. He died two years later, on 24 April 1938, a few days before the inauguration of The Cloisters museum. When it opened on 10 May 1938, the press was full of praise. However, in his opening speech, Rockefeller made no mention of Barnard, the man behind this museum, which is unique in the world...

The cloister of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa occupies a central place. As the Barnard collection was not sufficient to reconstruct the entire ensemble, facsimiles of capitals and columns were commissioned in France to fill in the gaps. The curators added a garden to help create what the American public sees as the archetype of a medieval monument.

Located in the west wing of the museum, the Saint-Guilhem gallery appears to be a miniature clone of Cuxa. At the time of reassembly, little was known the appearance of the second floor, which has since disappeared. It was simulated based on the Saint-Trophime cloister in Arles. Finally, a glass roof was built to protect the sculptures.

The reassembly of the two cloisters of Trie and Bonnefont was more complicated. They are located on the lower level of the museum. As the Trie cloister had completely disappeared, curator James J. Rorimer took inspiration from the cloister in the Massey Garden in Tarbes. The 'Unicorn Tapestry', displayed in a nearby room, served as a model for the design of a romantic garden – the setting for Spielberg's West Side Story in 2021.

The fourth cloister is named 'Bonnefont,' but we now know, thanks in particular to the research of art historian Céline Brugeat, that it is actually a complex reconstruction of fragments from several other cloisters in Occitania. The ceremonial cloister visible in Saint-Gaudens served as a reference for formalising its New York namesake. With only two galleries, it offers an exceptional view of Fort Tryon Park, the Hudson River and Manhattan.

The Cloisters also houses the largest collection of medieval European art on the American continent, with more than 5,000 works. This museum is, in a way, the realisation of the dream of a lover of France who, beyond futile and irrelevant controversies, saved these jewels of the past from oblivion. May George Grey Barnard be eternally thanked at a time when new technologies are making it possible to reconstruct the original cloisters.

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