



TARASCON CASTLE

René d'Anjou Art Centre

Visit document



A BIT OF HISTORY

A PROVENCE FORTRESS *blending Gothic and Renaissance*

Tarascon Castle, built during the first half of the 15th century, is one of the most exquisite fortresses in France. It is the perfect example of a building which blends Gothic and Renaissance styles through its architecture and decor. The castle, built on a rather low rock, at the intersection of overland routes and waterways linking Provence and Languedoc, takes on the role of a monumental-sized sentinel. Until 1481, it controlled the political border of the Rhône which flows along its base. A link between the towns of Avignon and Arles, throughout the Middle Ages Tarascon was the territorial base for the Counts of Barcelona's expansion and conquest, then that of the Dukes of Anjou, who had become Counts of Provence. To reinforce his power in the region, Louis II, Duke of Anjou (☞1384-1417) and Yolande of Aragon (☞1400-1417) launched the construction of the building overlooking the Rhône in the autumn of 1400, which would finally be completed in 1411. Their son Louis III (☞1417-1434) commissioned the building of the wing overlooking the town between 1429 and 1434. The King's

Master of Works, Jean Robert, was the architect.

René I (☞1434-1480), heir to the County of Provence, took possession of the castle in the state it is still in to this day. He bore the prestigious titles of King of Naples, of Sicily and of Jerusalem, Duke of Anjou, of Bar and of Lorraine, Count of Provence and of Forcalquier.

René I only made decorative and comfort-enhancing changes to this dwelling. During the countless times he stayed there, he made the castle a venue for meeting, for celebrating and turned it into a prestigious place.

USED FOR IMPRISONMENT *for civilian and military prisoners*

As the seat of the Count's sovereign power, the castle was used from the very beginning as a place of detention. In 1480, a Catalan prisoner, supporter of the King of Aragon, King René I's enemy, was imprisoned there. In two of the cells, he carved incredible graffiti illustrating warships, merchant ships and religious and secular etchings. The castle's role as a prison was intensified between 1642 and 1926. The site was used in turns as a prison, a



short-stay jail and a correctional centre. The rooms were transformed into collective and individual cells. During the French Revolution, Robespierre's supporters were executed here in 1795. Hundreds of pieces of graffiti, related to this history, remain to this day, carved by Spanish soldiers, British and Dutch sailors and bear witness to the Euro-Mediterranean wars of the 17th and 18th centuries.

AN EXCEPTIONAL MONUMENT *at the heart of the Arles region*

Tarascon Castle, towering some 45 metres high, dominated the landscape to the north of Arles for a very long time. Today, however, it has been 'dethroned' by the LUMA-Arles Foundation tower, standing 56 metres tall, the work of architect Frank Gehry. The castle's monumental size leaves its mark on the scenery of this area between the Alpilles and the Rhône. Its terrace offers a breathtaking vista over the river, the plain, the Alpilles and the Montagnette. The castle's remarkable state of preservation stems in particular from restoration and maintenance work carried out by several architects of the Department

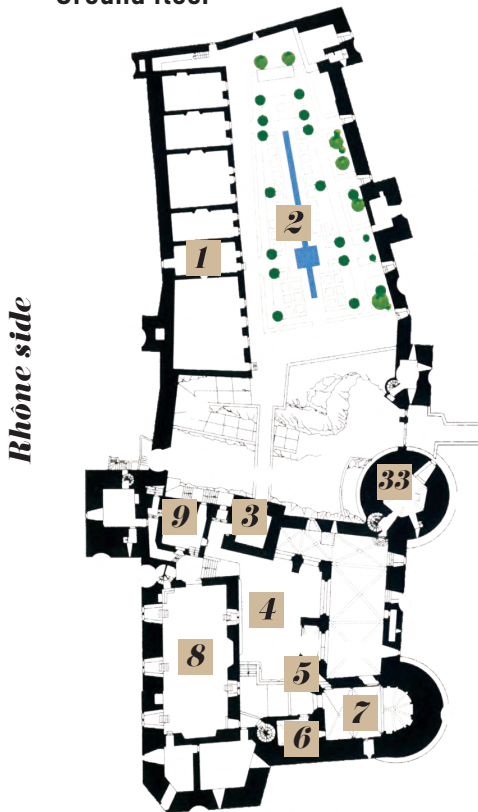
of National Historical Monuments. The castle which has been open to the public since 1933 became the property of the Tarascon municipality in 2008.

RENÉ D'ANJOU ART CENTRE, *Pursuing history...*

Tarascon Castle – René d'Anjou Art Centre today brings heritage and contemporary creation harmoniously together through the Gallery of Fabulous Animals. This cultural project focuses on the wealth of painted and sculpted decors which adorn the monument's ceilings and rooms. It echoes the legend of the Tarasque, whose race through the streets of the town is now acknowledged by UNESCO as one of the Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The 2009-created Art Centre showcases works of art commissioned from contemporary artists, such as Christian Lacroix, Françoise Pétrovitch, Christian Gonzenbach, Dominique Angel, etc. The Princes of Anjou's passion for the arts is therefore pursued at the very heart of this exceptional monument.

VISIT ITINERARY

Ground floor



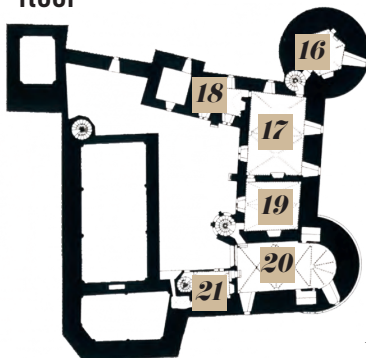
1st floor



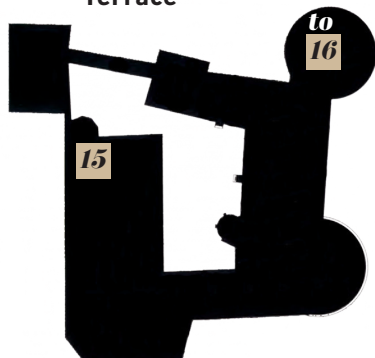
2nd floor



3rd floor



Terrace



Town side

CASTLE OUTER COURTYARD

1 SERVICE QUARTERS

The kitchens comprise five rooms equipped with hooded fireplaces. The doors open out towards the outer courtyard ('commons' side) and the garden. They are topped on the outside by badly-damaged sculpted reliefs, illustrating the various occupations: a small barrel connotes the servant responsible for beverages, the cupbearer.

2 OUTER COURTYARD

The garden is protected by the towers and the wall-walk along the curtain walls. On the north wall, bullet holes bear witness to the siege which took place in June 1652: King Louis XIV's soldiers fought the castle garrison who were rebelling against the King's coming to power.

3 DUNGEON

The dungeon controls the access to the seigniorial dwelling. The old wooden drawbridge was replaced by the stone bridge in the 17th century.

4 CEREMONIAL COURTYARD

It links the various parts of the seigniorial dwelling. The oratory of Isabella Duchess of Lorraine (1400-1453), René I's first wife, is located to the left of the stairway turret. The busts of René I and his second wife, Jeanne de Laval (1433-1498), can be found in a niche, highlighted with a Latin inscription: "*These divine heroes, illustrated by the lily of France and by the Cross, move forward together, and prepare their departure to the heavens*".

5 LARGE CELLAR

It comprises a large underground room where oil and wine was conserved in jars back in the 15th century. From time to time, the cellar was also used as a prison cell-dungeon.

6 CANTORS' CHAPEL

René I had this chapel designed in 1448-1449 for young cantors who took part in religious services. Inside, an opening leads to the high altar. The chapel floor is strewn with graffiti made by French and Belgian prisoners during the First World War.

7 CHAPEL OF THE VIRGIN

The keystone of the choir illustrates the Coronation of the Virgin. The corbels, on the downsides of the vaults, feature old men, elders, allegories of the prophets from the

Old Testament, and vine leaves. During the 19th century, inmates from the prison carved graffiti on the entrance door posts.

8 BANQUET HALL

The hall is illuminated by large windows and decorated with a larch-wood ceiling. In the Middle Ages, it was where meals were taken: a sink and a hatch for food waste, discharging out towards the Rhône, were installed for this purpose. It was also the great stateroom where the prince received his guests. In the 18th century, it was transformed into a collective cell as we can see from the graffiti carved by British Royal Navy officer-soldiers.

9 PANTRY

A bread oven, the remains of the pantry, is located on the ground floor of a tower which was partially destroyed, probably as a result of fire.

CASTLE RHÔNE SIDE 1st FLOOR

10 GREAT HALL

This room was used as a dining room and stateroom by Louis II and Yolande of Aragon (1384-1442). Here, the ceiling has retained its small painted panels, known as 'cloisoirs'. They feature imaginary animals, characteristic of Medieval bestiaries. The walls are studded with graffiti carved by British prisoners during the 18th century.

11 LOUIS II'S CHAMBER

Louis II's chamber is equipped with a latrine, mullioned windows and a built-in fireplace. A graffito from the Revolutionary era is carved on a wall and represents a Republican column adorned with the scales of justice, a Phrygian cap and two tricolour flags.

12 CHAPLAIN'S CHAMBER

The chaplain, master of religious services stayed in this room. In the 1470s, René I had a wooden gallery built which offers a view over the chapel and leads to the ceremonial staircase.

CASTLE RHÔNE SIDE

2nd FLOOR

13 **LARGE CHAMBER (RETREAT ROOM)**
The large cabinet or retreat room was used as a chamber. Below its majestic vaulted ceiling, the corbels are decorated with vine leaves and coats of arms, which were originally painted, featuring lilies and Jerusalem crosses, emblems of the Dukes of Anjou.

14 **LARGE DRESSING ROOM**
The inventory of furniture drawn up in 1457 reveals that this large room, equipped with two fireplaces, was used as a dining room, then a storeroom. British prisoners left their mark here with numerous pieces of graffiti on the south wall.

15 **TERRACE**
The terrace offers a panoramic view over the Rhône, the Church of Sainte Marthe, Tarascon's historic centre and the plain, the Alpilles, the Montagnette, Mont Ventoux and Luberon. Crenellations and machicolation surround the terrace, which towers 45 metres high. Gargoyles adorned with fantastic animal decors cling to its walls.

To move on to the 2nd part of the visit, head for the north-east tower.

CASTLE TOWN SIDE

3rd FLOOR

16 **SMALL CHAMBER**
This small chamber hosts ogival vaults. One of the corbels features a character crouching down, dressed in noble clothing, with his head covered with a 'houppelande', a hooded mantle characteristic of the 15th century.

17 **LARGE CHAMBER**
The castle captain, in charge of the garrison, was accommodated in these apartments. Unlike the Rhône-side wing, the fireplaces in the town-side wing are sculpted instead of being built in. The corbels are decorated with animals and a grimacing character.

18 **SMALL CHAMBER**
In the Middle Ages, this room, reserved for the captain's use, was probably a bathroom. The terracotta floor tiles were laid during the 18th century. The walls are covered with

graffiti of British warships, equipped with rows of cannons.

19 **CAPTAIN'S CHAMBER**
The captain had a private chamber with a fireplace. The arch downsides are decorated with corbels featuring bats, characters and an eagle.

20 **UPPER CHAPEL**
During the Middle Ages, the upper chapel was reserved for the Prince. Although the close entourage could attend the religious services, only the Prince and his wife had oratories, on either side of the nave. The painted coat of arms of Louis III, Duke of Anjou, adorns the choir keystone. A large stained-glass window illuminates the chapel. The chapel drew its architectural inspiration from the Popes' Palace in Avignon. The corbels are adorned with vine leaves and clusters of grapes, evoking Christ and the Eucharist.

21 **STEAM CHAMBER**
The steam chamber was a bathroom where the floor was heated in the same way as steam baths during Antiquity. It was reserved for the Prince and shows the importance placed on bodily hygiene and cleanliness during the Middle Ages.

CASTLE TOWN SIDE

2nd FLOOR

22 **RENÉ I'S CHAMBER**
This chamber was occupied by René I when he stayed here from 1447-1449. The ceiling was totally restored in 2000. The window, overlooking the town, is equipped with large stone seats, known as 'coussièges' or window seats. During the 18th century, British Royal Navy officer-soldiers carved ships, texts, horses, cannons, etc. on the walls.

23 **WRITING CABINET**
The writing cabinet was used by René I and by his favourite illuminator-artist, Barthélemy d'Eyck († around 1472). The latter painted illuminated manuscripts illustrating works written by the Prince.

24 **MARGUERITE OF CHAMBLEY'S CHAMBER**
The room was occupied between 1447-1449 by the wife of the Seneschal Louis of Beauvau (1409-1462), Marguerite of Chambley (around 1423-1456). It contained a private room like that of the Queen's.

25 LARGE CHAMBER

These apartments let us imagine the splendour of the Medieval décor in the Prince's dwelling. The ceilings were restored in the 1960s. On the closoirs, we can make out a court lady accompanied by her dog, musicians, companion and fantastic animals. The decor was probably created under Barthélémy d'Eyck's supervision, around 1450.

26 WRITING CABINET

We are led to believe that the Seneschal's wife had her own writing cabinet as the 1457 inventory mentions the existence of a writing case-ink well. The Medieval ceiling was repaired in the 18th century to accommodate a collective prison cell.

27 HEXAGONAL CHAMBER

This non-restored ceiling is one of the few remaining examples of the interior structure, characteristic of ceilings made before 1435. The large larch-wood beams were fashioned with wood from the Lower Alps and transported by waterway to Tarascon.

CASTLE TOWN SIDE **1st FLOOR**

28 SMALL CHAMBER

The ceiling of this chamber is partially blackened from smoke from the fireplace. However, we are able to make out a decorative wooden frieze, the only one existing in this castle. The walls are etched with graffiti from civilian and military inmates imprisoned during the 18th century before and during the French Revolution.

29 LARGE CHAMBER

The fireplace is adorned with the Beauvau family's lion coat of arms. Pierre (1380-1435) and Louis were advisors and confidants to the Dukes of Anjou and, in turn, each bore the title of Seneschal. As representatives of the princes, they were in particular in charge of the building work of the castle hand-in-hand with the King's Master of Works, Jean Robert. During certain stays here, the chamber was also occupied by the princes' wives.

30 SQUARE CHAMBER

The right-side window upon entering this chamber leads to a partially-destroyed private oratory, reserved for the queens. Only a platform remains visible from the ceremonial courtyard. The door, protected

by a grid, leads to the latrines and to a former oratory, whose vaulted ceiling is decorated with painted clovers.

31 SMALL CHAMBER

During the Middle Ages, this room was used as a chamber by the princes' confidants.

32 DUNGEON CHAMBERS

Three chambers were built on top of each other in this tower: we can see the trace of flooring in the walls. The upper floors were only accessible by ladders. Part of the arsenal for defending the castle was housed here.

CASTLE TOWN SIDE **GROUND FLOOR**

33 CATALAN PRISONER'S CELL

The walls of this chamber are covered with graffiti dating back to the end of the 15th century (around 1480). They were most likely etched by a master shipbuilder of Catalan origin, an opponent of King René I. We do not know precisely why he was imprisoned. The graffiti illustrates warships (galleys, fustas (or foists) and merchant ships (carracks). On one of the walls a scene illustrates naval warfare where six Catalan and Anjou ships oppose each other. It depicts the battles for taking control of the Kingdom of Naples, of Sicily and of Jerusalem, fought against the Princes of Aragon. Around the entrance door, we discover an altar dedicated to the Virgin and table games - chess and trictrac, an ancestor of backgammon - which were highly fashionable during the Middle Ages.

**Leave this chamber and exit
by the gallery and ceremonial
courtyard.**

Thank you for visiting.

DISCOVER *the Gallery relating the castle's history*

Explore the history of the fortress's successive inhabitants, including the Counts of Provence, the Counts of Barcelona, the Dukes of Anjou, the Kings of Naples, of Sicily and of Jerusalem, the military and civilian prisoners. A one-of-a-kind tour into the heart of the history of France, of Europe and of the Mediterranean.



ADVENTURE THROUGH *the Gallery of Fantastic Animals*

Head off on a quest to discover the fantastic painted and sculpted animals which decorate the castle's ceilings and walls. A visit enhanced by the work of art commissioned from Christian Lacroix, focusing on the theme of the Tarasque, the dragon of the Rhône, Tarascon's totemic animal.



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PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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