



Abbé Lecoutre he is an artist

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Les Amis de l'Abbé Lecoutre

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Saint-Quentin church in Wirwignes

The church stands as a glorious monument to human perseverance and devotion to a higher cause. It was in this same spirit our great cathedrals were raised (Craufurd et al. 1914 page 76).

It is without doubt “an extraordinary place”, the work of “a great artist” (Arnaud 1988 page 181).

Many thanks to Jean-Marc Pierru for his guided tour of Saint-Quentin church. His meticulous work in recording Abbé Lecoutre's inscriptions (Pierru 2023) was an invaluable guide, drawing our attention to several aspects of his work and to details we might otherwise have missed.

Thanks to Thibaud Dapremont and Sarra Mezhoud, doctoral students in art history, for their gathering of documents on Abbé Lecoutre.



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Abstract

Among the priests who restored their churches, Paul Amédé Lecoutre (1830-1906) – Abbé Lecoutre – unquestionably has a special place. Rarely has the expression “his church” been so accurate, because the church of Saint-Quentin in Wirwignes in the Pas-de-Calais, which he spent 40 years of his life enlarging and decorating, is truly his work.

The church has been praised as “a masterpiece of popular art,” “a pioneering monument in the emergence of naive art in France in the last third of the nineteenth century,” etc. But however flattering they may be for Abbé Lecoutre’s art, these qualifiers are reductive and actually minimise its scope and substance. This is what we intend to demonstrate here.

In a preamble serving as an introduction, we present successively his history, his work and his church. We then take a closer look at Abbé Lecoutre’s main works (all listed as historic monuments). The presentation is structured in three parts, in which we successively ask whether his art is conventional, popular, naive.



Abstract

Parmi les prêtres qui ont restauré leur église Paul Amédé Lecoutre (1830-1906) – l’abbé Lecoutre – a indiscutablement une place à part. Rarement l’expression “son église” aura été aussi exacte, car l’église Saint-Quentin de Wirwignes dans le Pas-de-Calais, qu’il a passé 40 ans de sa vie à agrandir et décorer est véritablement son œuvre.

L’église a fait l’objet de qualificatifs élogieux: “chef d’œuvre d’art populaire,” “un édifice pionnier dans l’émergence de l’Art naïf en France dans le dernier tiers du XIXe siècle,” etc. Mais, pour flatteurs qu’ils soient pour l’art de l’abbé Lecoutre, ces qualificatifs sont réducteurs et en minimisent en réalité la portée et la teneur. C’est ce que nous nous proposons de démontrer ici.

Dans un préambule servant d’introduction, nous présentons successivement son histoire, son œuvre et son église. Nous nous livrons ensuite, sans que cela soit exhaustif, à un examen approfondi des principales réalisations de l’abbé Lecoutre (toutes inscrites à l’inventaire des monuments historiques). L’exposé est structuré en trois parties dans lesquelles nous nous demandons successivement si son art est conventionnel, populaire, naïf.

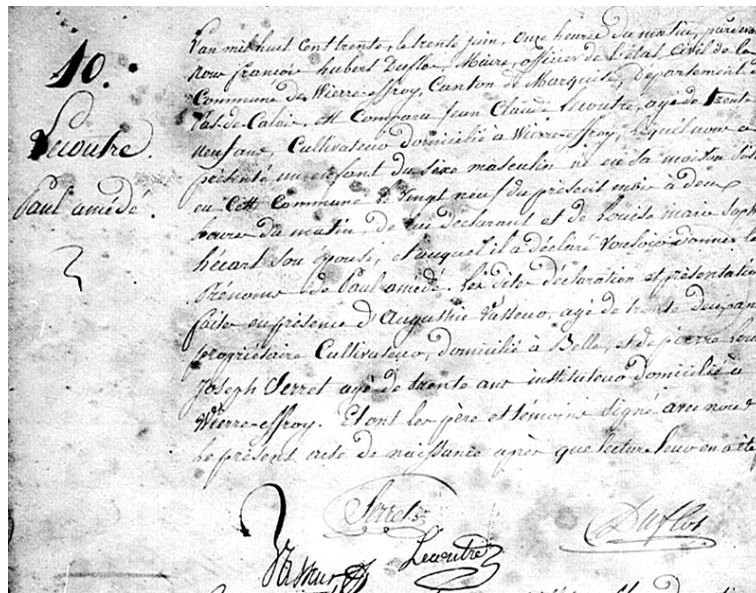
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His story

Birth and youth in Wierre-Effroy

Paul Amédé¹ Lecoutre was born on 29 June 1830 in Wierre-Effroy, a dozen kilometres north of Wirwignes. His father, Jean Claude Marie Lecoutre (1791-1873), married Louise Marie Sophie Hécart (1796-1862) and was a cultivator. Paul was the seventh of their nine children.



Abbé Lecoutre's birth certificate (AD 62 5 MIR 889/3 Wirwignes page 533)

In 1857 he was a priest in Calais, as we know from the marriage contract of his brother Hubert Joseph to Virginie Désirée Émilie Telliez on 11 February 1857 in Wierre-Effroy, for which he was a witness. In 1863, after a short spell in Agny near Arras, he became the parish priest of Wirwignes, succeeding Abbé Constant Cousin (1825-1896), who had left for Audinghen; he remained in this position until his death in 1906. The Wirwignes census, from 1866 to 1896, shows that he lived there with his sister Geneviève Marceline, nine years his senior, who died in 1898. Various nephews, nieces, grand-nephews and grand-nieces also lived with them.

The church restoration project and its realisation

It was in 1867, after a pilgrimage to the holy places (Lecoutre 1867), that Abbé Lecoutre conceived the project to restore the church.

Abbé Lecoutre wanted to turn the church into a monumental catechism to enable parishioners to understand the Bible through its furnishings and interior decoration. The project was carried out from 1869.

¹Amédé derived from the Latin words **ama** and **deus** means “loved by God.” We use the spelling Amédé, which appears in the birth certificate of of Abbé Lecoutre, but we also find the spelling Amédée, which appears in certain documents concerning him.

A situation favourable to the project

In Wirwignes, before Abbé Lecoutre arrived, the *conseil de fabrique*, which administered the parish, had decided to extend the church. According to Abbé Cousin's description in 1861, apart from the 16th century choir, the church was of little interest and was too small for the population of the village.

The church, as it stands today, consists of a single nave and two distinct sections: the choir, in the 16th century ogival style, is quite high and, according to the assessment of Monsieur de Villiers, general vicar, who visited the church in 1856, is very remarkable. However, the current vault is only an imitation of a ceiling vault. The lower part has no merit; restored in an unintelligent and pitiful manner a few years ago, it is of poor effect, especially the small and badly constructed windows. It is finished off by a very old square tower, unfinished and too low, the lower church. It is topped by an insignificant bell tower, which gives the church an ungraceful and even unpleasant appearance. The interior furnishings consist of a very old and remarkable carved oak high altar, a balustrade also in carved oak and highly esteemed by connoisseurs, a suitable and fairly beautiful pulpit, a confessional in good condition, and two small side altars between the lower church and the choir, which are in no way distinctive. Eight beautifully carved oak stalls have recently been placed at the top of the choir. There is a very old stained glass window in the back of the church. Behind the church is a sacristy (Cousin 1861).

This expansion project obviously involved considerable costs, requiring outside help with the approval of the city council, as well as a great deal of red tape. The bishop had an important advisory role, but the final decision had to be taken by the higher administration. The necessary funds also had to be obtained and managed through additional means, such as bequests, donations and legacies.

All the steps Abbé Lecoutre had to take were cumbersome. But with the support of the *conseil de fabrique*, he found himself in a situation that was really conducive to his project. He therefore became the master builder and principal craftsman of a considerable restoration project, practically a reconstruction, in which he was in turn architect, painter, sculptor, mosaicist, etc. He devoted the rest of his life to the project, building virtually all the interior furnishings and decorations himself, which of course considerably reduced the cost of the project. He enlisted the help of the renowned engineer Emile Gérard (1839-1899), a native of Boulogne-sur-Mer, to draw up the plans for the bell tower, and the equally renowned Charles Lévêque (1821-1889), a glass painter from Beauvais, for the stained glass windows. Both are knights of the Legion of Honour.

All that remains of the church that Abbé Lecoutre found on his arrival is the choir and part of the bell tower, which were linked by a narrow nave that was lower than the choir, which had to be widened and raised. In 1876, the "lower church" was demolished and eight side chapels were created. In 1879-1880, a new level and spire were added to the bell tower, based on drawings by Emile Gérard. In 1882, new stained glass windows by Charles Lévêque were installed.

In 1887, on 25 August, the church was consecrated by the Bishop of Arras, Désiré Joseph Dannel (1822-1891). Rodière (1910 page 550) describes the commemorative inscription in white marble for this consecration. The structural work was completed by then, but Abbé Lecoutre continued to fit out and decorate his church. From the walls to the vault, there were hardly any surfaces that escaped his tools – brushes, chisels, wood chisels. . . . He covered the walls and pillars with marble mosaics that he had cut himself, and inscribed an impressive number of religious quotations. The result is a decoration of extraordinary abundance, revealing an unprecedented wealth of detail to the observant eye.

ANNO DOMINI MDCCCLXXXVII DIE
 25 MENSIS AUGUSTI, EGO DESIDERATUS JOSEPHUS
 DENNEL EPISCOPUS ATREBATENSIS, CONSECRAVI
 ECCLESIAM ET ALTARE HOC IN HONORE S^TI QUIN-
 -TINI, ET RELIQUIAS SS. MARTY^N BONIFACII
 ET PUDENTIANÆ IN EO INCLUSI, ET SINGULIS
 XFIDELIBUS (sic) HODIE UNUM ANNUM, ET IN DIE AN-
 NIVERSARIO CONSECRATIONIS HUIUSMODI IPSAM
 VISITANTIBUS, QUADRAGINTA DIES DE VERÂ INDUL-
 -GENTIÂ IN FORMA ECCLESIE CONSUETA CONCESSI.
 ADERANT RR. DEPOTER VIC. GEN., LECOUTRE PAR. HUIUS ECCLESIE,
 DE LENCUESAING MAG. DEC. CALAIS, NOEL DEC. DESVRES, FOURDINIER CRE-
 -MAREST, THERY PAR. HALINGHEN, BLIN COURSET, GUCHE RIN-
 -XENT, DE LAMARLIÈRE LO.

Inscription commemorating the consecration of the church in Wirwignes on 25 August 1887



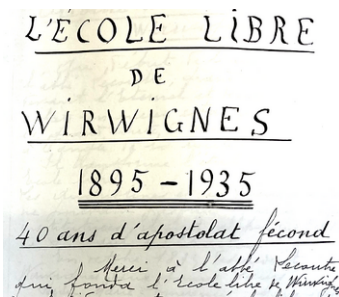
1879-1880 Drawing by Emile Gérard

Other achievements of Abbé Lecoutre

Abbé Lecoutre built premises for the Wirwignes Catholic youth group:

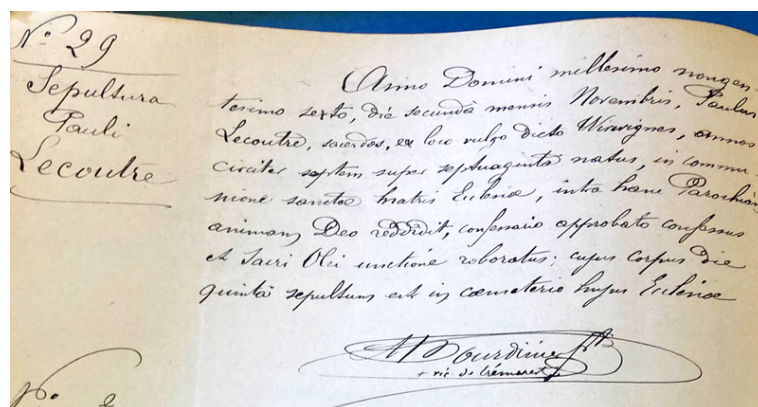
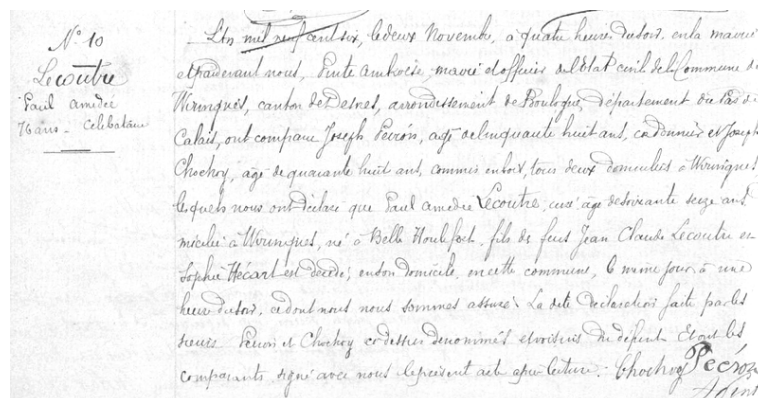
Ses mains ont construit l'humble local qui abrite nos séances² (Auguste Ferton, Funérailles 1906).

Abbé Lecoutre founded a free school in Wirwignes in 1895.



Death of Abbé Lecoutre 2 November 1906

He gave all his love to his church. On Friday 2 November 1906, as he was finishing painting the vault of heaven, he fell from the scaffolding and killed himself, aged 76. Could anyone have imagined a different ending? He now lies at the foot of his church. Although the account of this accident in oral tradition seems likely, his death certificate states that he died at his home (where he was transported). A Latin record drawn up by Charles Amable Fourdinier (1826-1912), parish priest of Crémarest, indicates that he received the last rites.



Abbé Lecoutre's death certificates in French (AD 62 3 E 896/16 Wirwignes page 108) and in Latin (Arras: Diocesan Archives)

²His hands built the humble premises that house our meetings

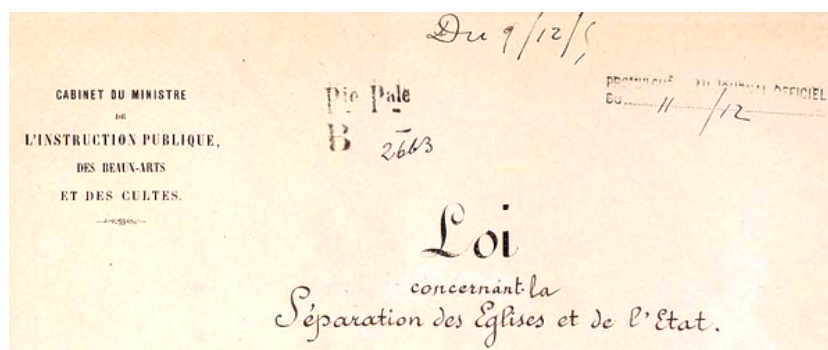
The cure's grave, just outside the church on the north side, bears this inscription: "A la mémoire de M. l'Abbé Paul Lecoutre, curé de Wirwignes pendant 43 ans, 1863-1906, pieusement décédé dans sa paroisse le 12 Novembre 1906, dans sa 77e année;" but the church is his real monument, for it will long preserve his memory (Craufurd, Manton & Manton 1914 page 76).



The sobriety of Abbé Lecoutre's tomb and his epitaph, desired by those close to him, reflects his virtues of devotion and humility. It invites us to pay tribute to this extraordinary man, and to reflect on his human qualities, in particular "his intelligent zeal and uncommon artistic sense, and his admirable tenacity," which the Dean of Desvres underlined during his funeral (Funérailles 1906).

A difficult final year

The year 1916 was undoubtedly a difficult one for him, as he had to comply with the law on the separation of Churches and State, which was promulgated on 9 December 1905 and came into force on 1 January 1906.

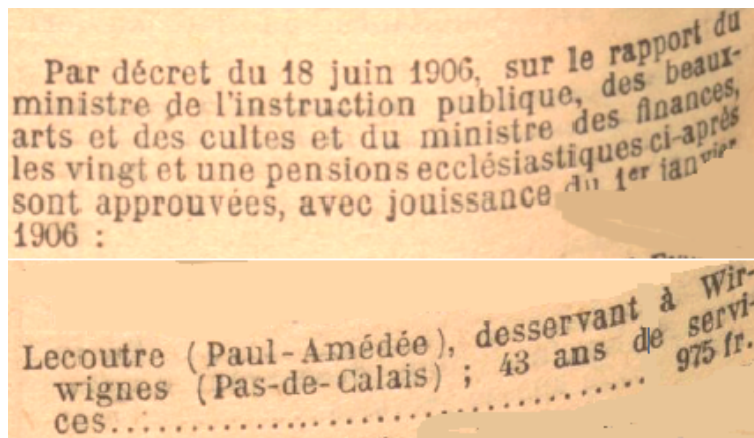


On 1 March 1906, an inventory of the Wirwignes church and all related property was drawn up by the estate agent. This provoked a strong reaction from Abbé Lecoutre. On behalf of the members of the parish council, he wrote a letter of protest, which was appended to the inventory. He argues that

Restaurée, rebâtie en grande partie, meublée et ornée par les seules ressources et le travail du curé elle est incontestablement la propriété de la cure et de la communauté catholique (Les Amis de l'abbé Lecoutre 2023a).

Restored, rebuilt for the most part, furnished and decorated by the resources and work of the unquestionably the property of the parish and the Catholic community.

The publication in the *Journal officiel de la République française* on 21 June of that year of his pension with entitlement from 1 January was undoubtedly also a painful ordeal for him.





His work

At Abbé Lecoutre's funeral on November 5, 1906, the Dean of Desvres paid tribute to his work, recalling that

the colossal task, begun and completed by him alone, of enlarging and ornamenting the church, a veritable poem in stone, which will long attest to both his intelligent zeal and uncommon artistic sense, and his admirable tenacity³ (Funérailles 1906).

Lecoutre's work was long ignored by the French. The Montreuil historian Roger Rodière (1870-1944) described the restoration of the church as *strange*, implicitly criticising Abbé Lecoutre for having removed the epigraphs.

...restaurée ou plutôt refaite à neuf en ces dernières années, de façon étrange, elle a perdu dans ces travaux presque tous ses monuments épigraphiques (Rodière 1910 page 550).

...restored or rather rebuilt in recent years, in a strange way, it has lost in these works almost all its epigraphic monuments.

They are the British, W. D. Craufurd, E. Manton and E. A. Manton, who in 1914 in their travel guide *Peeps into Picardy* gave it a glowing description (Craufurd et al. 1914 pages 74-76).

In the little village of Wirwignes – some three miles off, hidden away from the world – there is to be seen a remarkable monument to human perseverance and determination. Probably few will have heard of, or indeed will ever hear of, this little village church; still, those who do visit it must bow their heads in reverence before the work, done by a simple curé, to the glory of his Maker. He worked unceasingly, and, unlike the Lady of Shalott, who left her task to gaze at the passers-by, stuck to his work until he was able to see his long-wished-for ideal completed, his life-work accomplished ere he died. The curé decorated this church almost entirely by his own handiwork. The only assistance he received was by the gift of marble for his mosaics and colours for his paintings. All the side chapels, of which there are a great many, are done in mosaic, with slabs of marble in various designs to form a dado on either side of the altars. No two chapels are alike. The Stations of the Cross, sculptured in stone and tinted, are let into the wall round the church. The pillars are each painted with different designs, some quite excellent. The two large pillars supporting the chancel arch are coated with marble mosaics, as in the inner walls of the church, including the space under the centre tower and the baptistery. The floor is marble. The altars are all of carved stone, with the exception of the high altar, which, with its altar rails, is Renaissance, and of carved wood. Many of the super-altars in the chapels are most curious in design, especially the representations in the chapel of St. Joseph, of the Virgin and Child and St. Joseph in ordinary beds, with bedclothes. These are done in relief, with gold background. Small coloured statuettes of the saints are all round the centre chancel arch, in niches, and again on pedestals above the capitals of the pillars throughout the church. The pulpit deserves special attention. The pedestal represents the “Fall” – the figures of Adam and Eve being about half life size, whilst the Tree forms the support in white marble. Behind, on the pillar, is a figure of Christ, also in relief.

The church stands as a glorious monument to human perseverance and devotion to a higher cause. It was in this same spirit our great cathedrals were raised. The cure's grave, just outside

³le travail colossal, commencé et achevé par lui seul, de l'agrandissement et de l'ornementation de l'église, véritable poème de pierre, qui attestera longtemps et son zèle intelligent et son sens artistique peu commun, et sa ténacité admirable.

the church on the north side, bears this inscription: “À la mémoire de M. l’Abbé Paul Lecoutre, curé de Wirwignes pendant 43 ans, 1863-1906, pieusement décédé dans sa paroisse le 12 Novembre 1906, dans sa 77e année;” but the church is his real monument, for it will long preserve his memory.

For such recognition in France, we had to wait until 1933 with an article by Arnaud De Corbie in *Le Télégramme du Pas-de-Calais* entitled “*Comment un curé de village – digne successeur des prêtres bâtisseurs du Moyen-Age – passa 43 ans de sa vie à agrandir, embellir et décorer son église – l’église de Wirwignes, qui est aujourd’hui l’une des plus curieuses et des plus émouvantes du pays boulonnais*”⁴ (De Corbie 1933).

One hundred years after his death his work is officially recognised

A milestone was reached on 6 January 1982, when a large number of Abbé Lecoutre’s works were listed as Monuments Historiques. The Ministry of Culture’s *collectif objet* lists 20 protected objects (Les Amis de l’abbé Lecoutre 2023b), the most important of which are his works of art⁵. In fact, the number of objects is considerably higher, with some listed items grouping together several objects (for example 43 statues).

Shortly before, Dominique Arnaud had published a glowing article in *La Voix du Nord* of 21 August 1981 entitled “*L’EGLISE DE WIRWIGNES: vieux message d’un curé de campagne, mais aussi chef-d’œuvre d’art populaire*”⁶. In 1988 the same author devoted a section of his *Guide du Boulonnais et de la Côte d’Opale* to the church at Wirwignes, which he described as “an extraordinary place”, the work of “a great artist” (Arnaud 1988 page 81).

A study carried out under the scientific supervision of Véronique Moulinié in 2010 highlights the time it took for Abbé Lecoutre’s work to finally be officially recognised (Moulinié 2010 page17).

For decades, the cultural authorities showed little interest in these installations. The stubborn silence they maintained about this astonishing decoration is a clear indication of the contempt in which they held them at the time. In 1982, a long list of objects from the church was placed on the Supplementary List of Movable Objects. Lecoutre’s statues were overlooked. Similarly, in 1993, a letter from J.-P. Blin, from the Heritage Department, requesting that a file be compiled on the subject, does not seem to have received the slightest response. No doubt it was too early. The context was not favourable.

It was not until the early 2000s that things changed. In 2002, a letter from Patrick Wintrebert, the departmental curator of objets d’art, to Jacques Philippon, the regional curator of Monuments Historiques, drew his attention with an explicit reference to *Facteur Cheval*:

I have the honour of drawing your attention to the parish church of Wirwignes, which in my opinion deserves protection as a historic monument. The building is particularly noteworthy for its decoration, which is unique in the department.. It is the work of the parish priest Paul-Amédée Lecoutre who, like facteur Cheval, spent forty years of his life covering the walls with mosaics, sculpting nearly a hundred statues and creating the furniture. (*Archives du Musée d’Art Moderne Villeneuve d’Ascq*).

⁴How a village priest – worthy successor to the priest-builders of the Middle Ages – spent 43 years of his life enlarging, embellishing and decorating his church – the church of Wirwignes, which today is one of the most curious and moving in the Boulonnais region.

⁵A notable exception is the oak tabernacle dating from the fourth quarter of the 17th century, which was even classified as a Monument Historique by decree on 20 September 1982.

⁶THE WIRWIGNES CHURCH: an old message from a country priest, but also a masterpiece of popular art.

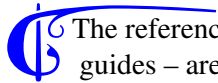
The result was not long in coming, and the church was listed as a Historic Monument by decree on 2 May 2006, one hundred years after the death of Abbé Lecoutre. However, its classification⁷ will be refused. Michel Cabal, a psychiatrist and art brut enthusiast, was one of those actively involved in the application to list the church in Wirwignes.

**It was therefore by decree dated 2 May 2006 (reference 2006 D 6324)
that the church was listed as a Historic Monument.
Hundred years after the death of Paul Lecoutre**

L'arrêté met en avant le caractère novateur de l'œuvre de l'abbé Lecoutre.

Considering that the church of Saint-Quentin in Wirwignes is of interest from the point of view of history and the history of art, sufficient to make its protection desirable as a total work of art, an original creation by Abbé Lecoutre, and a pioneering building in the emergence of naive art in France in the last third of the 19th century.

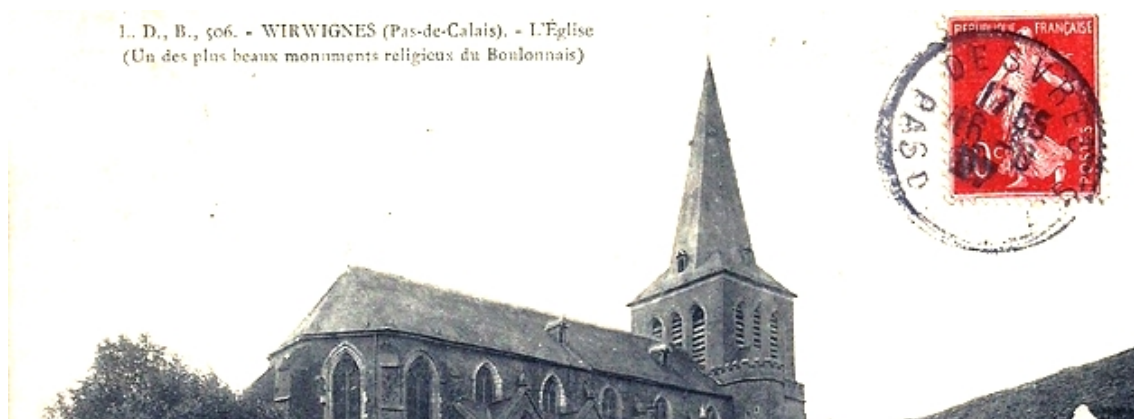
Bibliography on the work of Abbé Lecoutre

 The references mentioned above – mainly a few newspaper articles and mentions in tourist guides – are interesting because they show how Abbé Lecoutre's work was perceived. We should also mention the pioneering and invaluable work of Jean-Marc Pierru from Wirwignes, who has made an inventory of Abbé Lecoutre's achievements and his inscriptions.

This led to the creation of presentation panels in the Wirwignes church, followed by a summary text (Pierru 2023). This also contains a summary of the parish archives, with a history of the church at Wirwignes and an account of Abbé Lecoutre's pilgrimage to the holy places (Lecoutre 1867). It should be noted that he continued the work of his father Elysée Eugène Léon Pierru (1914-1996) who had previously written notebooks.

⁷Buildings whose conservation is of public interest from the point of view of history or art are classified as historic monuments." This is the highest level of protection. Listed buildings are those which, without justifying a request for immediate classification as a historic monument, are of sufficient historical or artistic interest to make their preservation desirable." Another distinction: Classification is carried out at national level and inscription only at regional level.

His church



Wirwignes church in 1906

The church of Saint-Quentin in Wirwignes

The Mérimée database, which provides data on France's monumental and architectural heritage, gives the following historical description of the church, which was included in the inventory of Historic Monuments by order of 2 May 2006:

The first church was probably built in the early 12th century. Until 1876, a building known as the "*basse église*," serving as the nave. The base of the bell tower may date from this period. At the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century, a new choir was built. Modifications were made to the bell tower during the 17th century. Restorations from 1812 to 1863. In 1867, after a trip to the Holy Land, Egypt and Italy, Abbé Lecoutre wanted to turn the church into a monumental catechism, enabling parishioners to learn about the Bible through its furnishings and interior decoration. The project was carried out from 1869. Eight side chapels were created along the length of the *basse église*, which was destroyed in 1876.

The bell tower was raised by one level and a spire was added in 1879-1880 to the designs of engineer Emile Gérard. In 1882, new stained glass windows were installed by Charles Lévêque. Between the wars, the chapel of the Virgin Mary was transformed into a Lourdes grotto with false rocks made of reinforced cement. This building was an essential milestone in the genesis of naive art, which exploded in the 20th century (POP 2006).

A monument unique in the world

Looking at its rather ordinary exterior, anyone who has never heard of the church of Saint-Quentin in Wirwignes might be surprised by the postcards from the early 20th century showing it as **one of the most beautiful religious monuments in the Boulonnais**, and by its inclusion in the inventory of **Historic Monuments**. You have to enter the church to understand the reasons for this.

... visitors' eyes widen in astonishment. Under the spotlights, the walls, vaults and columns abound in colour and ornamentation: paintings, marble mosaics, sculptures, pious inscriptions... This decor, a little overloaded but a naive testimony to an enthusiastic faith, is the work of Abbé Paul Amédée Lecoutre (*La Voix du Nord* 2005).



Clearly, one cannot talk about the church at Wirwignes without associating it with Abbé Lecoutre, whose work it is so completely and where everything speaks of his deep faith.

Rarely has the expression "his church" been so accurate, for this church is truly his work (Open Churches France 2019).

This is made clear by the welcome panel created by the Christian community of Wirwignes.

Abbé Paul-Amédée Lecoutre himself, parish priest of Wirwignes from 1863 to 1906, a priest-builder and precursor of naive art, who died on the job on 2 November 1906, invites you to visit this church. He spent his days modelling, transforming, sculpting and decorating it. We hope you will enjoy immersing yourself in his work, which he intended to be a veritable monumental catechism.



But when you enter the church for the first time, you'll probably never see this panel, so overwhelmed are you by the spectacle.

*Colores vitae maiores factae sunt, et vita ipsa maior facta est, quia in ecclesiam eius est*⁸.

Adapted from Grau (2023) - See conclusion

⁸The colours of life have become greater, and life itself has become greater, because it is in its church.

Abbé Lecoutre was master builder of the restoration and extension of the church of Saint-Quentin in Wirwignes, and designed the entire interior decoration.

Each scene created by Abbé Lecoutre tells us two stories, the story it represents and its own story. For example, the marble statue supporting the pulpit shows us the biblical episode of the sin of the tree of knowledge, but also gives us an insight into the artist who created it - what was his vision of this scene? how did he depict it?...



A modern, avant-garde catechism

To formulate his message, Abbé Lecoutre painted or engraved a large number of phrases, turning his church into a veritable “stone poem.” There are both Latin and French inscriptions, and their sources are very diverse. The choices he made reveal the precepts that were close to his heart. Together with all the elements of the decoration, from which they are inseparable, these inscriptions make up Abbé Lecoutre’s illustrated catechism. At the time, it was astonishingly modern. With hindsight, Abbé Lecoutre appears avant-garde. His catechism was even provocative, at least in two respects.

The use of the French language for texts from the Bible

Faced with the rise of the Protestant Reformation, which encouraged the dissemination to a wide audience through translations into the vernacular languages, the Catholic Church felt the urgent need to reaffirm its doctrine: the Word of God is transmitted through Scripture supported tradition. It convened the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which in 1546 the Latin version of Saint Jerome, the *Vulgate*, was given unquestionable authenticity and declared faithful to the original texts; but, contested by the humanists of the Renaissance, it was revised and the final edition was published in 1592 under the auspices of Pope Clement VIII. Little by little, the notion of authenticity hardened within the Catholic reform movement, and this official version remained fixed for more than three centuries. At the same time, there was still a great deal of mistrust of versions in vulgar languages, which were suspected of paving the way for heretical doctrines.

Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Presentation of the *Biblia sacra Vulgatae editionis*

This 1592 version, known as “*Vulgate sixto-clémentine*,” close to the version published two years earlier by Pope Sixtus V (Sixtus V 1590) was the official reference of the Catholic Church until 1979, with the publication in a single volume of the current *Nova Vulgata* final edition approved and declared “typical” by Pope John Paul II (Nova Vulgata 1979).


At the time of Abbé Lecoutre, the *Vulgate sixto-clémentine* was the official official source of the catechism, and reference to the vulgar language versions languages often aroused suspicion. It is true that the many French translations often take greater or lesser liberties with the Latin text, sometimes distorting the meaning.

The *Vulgate sixto-clémentine* and the *Nova Vulgata* are not themselves free of criticism the addition of punctuation marks, which did not exist among the Latins, who used *scriptio continua* (continuous writing), which can alter the meaning. This is why we will refer to a version in Latin without punctuation, which seems to us closer to the original texts, that we will refer to (Biblefr 2001), and we will we will give our own translation, as literal as possible.

The reference to apocryphal texts

Abbé Lecoutre makes extensive reference to apocryphal texts (not officially recognised by the Church), particularly concerning Anne and Joachim, Mary’s parents, and the life of Joseph.

Examples illustrating some aspects of the catechism

 Above the large side arches, Abbé Lecoutre painted, in circular escutcheons, French phrases from the Old Testament that have now become difficult to read, some of them even illegible.

The Old Testament

Here are three examples and their origins.

Dans toutes tes actions souviens-toi de ta fin et tu ne pécheras jamais⁹

in omnibus operibus tuis memorare novissima tua et in aeternum non peccabis (Livre de Sirac chapitre 7 verset 40)

Bannis la colère de ton cœur et le mal de ta chair car l’adolescence et la volupté sont vanité¹⁰

aufer iram a corde tuo et amove malitiam a carne tua adulescentia enim et voluptas vana sunt (Ecclesiaste chapitre 11 verset 10)

Le frère qui est aidé par son frère est comme une ville forte¹¹

frater qui adiuvatur a fratre quasi civitas firma et iudicia quasi vectes urbium (Proverbes chapitre 18 verset 19)

The following text is engraved in a shield on the wall to the right of the side door:

J’ai entendu les prières. La maison que tu m’as élevée je l’ai sanctifiée et adoptée pour le lieu de mon repos. Là mon nom sera glorifié. Là montera vers mon trône la fumée des sacrifices. **Là seront mes yeux et mon cœur à jamais¹²**

This text appears to be a free adaptation of verse 3 of chapter 9 of the first *Book of Kings* in the Old Testament, which he seems to have interpreted personally, removing some passages and adding others (the common passages are in bold):

⁹In all your actions remember your end and you will never sin

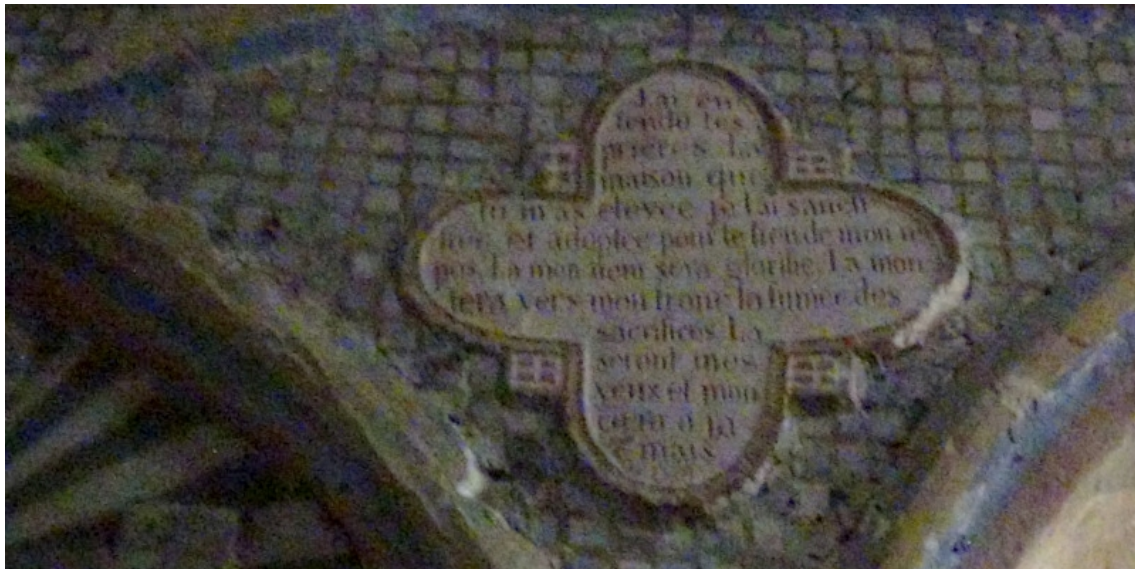
¹⁰Banish anger from your heart and evil from your flesh for youth and pleasure are vanity

¹¹The brother who is helped by his brother is like a strong city

¹²**I have heard the prayers. The house you raised up for me I have sanctified** and adopted as my resting place. There my name will be glorified. There shall the smoke of sacrifice ascend to my throne. **There shall my eyes and my heart be for ever**

dixitque Dominus ad eum exaudivi orationem tuam et deprecationem tuam qua deprecatus es coram me sanctificavi domum hanc quam aedificasti ut ponerem nomen meum ibi in sempiternum et erunt oculi mei et cor meum ibi cunctis diebus

and the Lord said to him **I have heard your prayer** and your supplication to me **I have sanctified this house which you have built for me** to put my name there for ever and **in this place my eyes and my heart will be for ever**



The Ten Commandments

God's Ten Commandments are carved in marble on the pointed arches of the six large side arches. There are a great many versions of the Ten Commandments, often with significant differences. The one chosen by Abbé Lecoutre can be found in *the Alphabet français, divisé par syllabes, pour l'instruction des jeunes enfants* published in 1863 (Alphabet français 1863 pages 15-16). This is most likely the reference he used. The rhyming form and rhythm of these ten commandments make them easier to understand and memorise, in line with Abbé Lecoutre's aim. Here again, he was a precursor, since his version is very close to that of the Catholic Church, now official, which is slightly different but with the same rhymed form (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2023).

	Abbé Lecoutre	Official version (in 2023)
1	Un seul Dieu tu adoreras et aimeras parfaitement	Un seul Dieu tu aimeras et adoreras parfaitement
2	Dieu en vain tu ne jureras ni autre chose pareillement	Son saint nom tu respecteras, fuyant blasphème et faux serment
3	Les dimanches tu garderas en servant Dieu dévotement	Le jour du Seigneur garderas en servant Dieu dévotement
4	Tes père et mère honoreras afin que tu vives longuement	Tes père et mère honoreras, tes supérieurs pareillement
5	Homicide point ne seras de fait ni volontairement	Meurtre et scandale éviteras, haine et colère également
6	Luxurieux point ne seras de corps ni de consentement	La pureté observeras, en tes actes soigneusement
7	Le bien d'autrui tu ne prendras ni retiendras sciemment	Le bien d'autrui tu ne prendras, ni retiendras injustement
8	Faux témoignage ne diras ni mentiras aucunement	La médisance banniras et le mensonge également
9	L'œuvre de la chair ne désireras ou en mariage seulement	En pensées, désirs veilleras à rester pur entièrement
10	Biens d'autrui tu ne convoiteras pour les avoir injustement	Bien d'autrui ne convoiteras pour l'avoir malhonnêtement

Prayers in French

On the ceiling of the chapel of Saint Anne, Abbé Lecoutre painted extracts from the *Litanies de Sainte Anne*, a classic prayer (some of the words are illegible):


Ste Anne, aïeule de Jésus-Christ, Ste Anne, mère de Marie
 Ste Anne, épouse de Joachin
 Ste Anne, belle-mère de St Joseph
 Ste Anne, arche de Noë
 Ste Anne, arche de l'alliance du Seigneur
 Ste Anne, mont d'Oreb
 Ste Anne, racine de Jessé, arbre fécond
 Ste Anne, joie des anges, fille des patriarches, gloire des Saints, nuée [claire? éclatante? lumineuse?]
 Ste Anne, vase rempli, miroir des dévotions, Ste Anne rempart [de l'église]
 Ste Anne, assistance des chrétiens
 Ste Anne, délivrance des captifs
 Ste Anne, consolation des personnes mariées, Ste Anne mère des veuves
 Ste Anne, protectrice des veuves

Each sentence is followed by the acronym PPN, "*Priez Pour Nous* (Pray For Us)."

It may come as no surprise to see these prayers in French, but this was very modern for the time, since it was not until the decree *ubi et orbi* of 30 September 1852 that Pope Pius IX granted as a favour the fact that **official prayers in Latin or Italian could, without prejudice to Indulgences, be recited in any language** (Pallard 1859 editor's note). As a result, French translations began to appear, for example *La Rançon des âmes du Purgatoire*, a collection of prayers translated by Abbé Louis Pallard published in 1859, which contains the Litanies of Sainte Anne on pages 532-533 (Pallard 1859). In contrast, *L'Office de la Sainte Vierge*, published in 1852, contains only the prayers in Latin (Office de la Sainte Vierge 1852).

Abbé Lecoutre's text does not appear to correspond to any of the French translations and we can be fairly certain that he gave his own translation of the Latin text.

Other stories

 The history of the church in Wirwignes does not end with Abbé Lecoutre. In particular, the following elements can be mentioned.

From the chapel of the Virgin to the grotto of Lourdes



The Chapel of the Virgin Mary was the first to be built when the church was converted by Abbé Lecoutre in 1869. Originally, its walls were covered in marble and the two-sloped ceiling was richly painted. The stained glass windows were clearly visible. Together with the chapel dedicated to Saint Quentin, it forms the transept of the church between the triumphal arch and the choir.

In 1927, on the initiative of the parish priest at the time, Abbé Pierre-Marie Bayeux, the chapel was transformed into a Lourdes grotto to commemorate the miraculous cure of a young woman from Wirwignes, Lucie Caron, during a pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1923. She was officially blessed on 5 February 1928.

This grotto, with its false rocks made of reinforced cement, alters the beautiful balance achieved by Abbé Lecoutre, but after all, it's part of the history of the church.

Christ on the cross

The *Christ en croix*, in polychrome wood, displayed above Abbé Lecoutre's confessional, was blessed on Palm Sunday, 30 March 1958. An article by Guy Bataille in *La voix du Nord* recounted the event (Bataille 1958).



In the proceedings of the *47ème Congrès Archéologique de France* held in 1880 we read that Abbé Lecoutre also carried out research, which unfortunately came to nothing, to find an ancient stained glass window in the church depicting Christ on the Cross (Congrès Archéologique de France 1881 page 363).

It could probably be the “very old stained glass window” in “the back window of the church” mentioned by Abbé Constant Cousin, parish priest of Wirwignes (Cousin 1861).

The tabernacle



The varnished oak tabernacle is a listed Historic Monument dating from the 4th quarter of the 17th century; it crowns the high altar redesigned by Abbé Lecoutre (see Wimet 1979-80).

Notre Dame de la Reconnaissance

Although the statue of *Notre-Dame de la Reconnaissance* is outside the church, it continues the story of Abbé Lecoutre and the cult of *Notre-Dame de Boulogne*, which he perpetuated in Wirwignes and which is still celebrated today. This statue, blessed on 6 July 1947 stands at the crossroads of Rue de Crémarest, Rue du Pot-au-Feu and Rue du Valinglin. Its history was recounted in an article in *Nord Littoral* (J-F.L. 2014).

At the dawn of the Second World War, on 6 August 1939, Father Léopold Duhautoy was appointed to Wirwignes. A great patriot, the new parish priest shared the fears of his new parishioners about the rumours of war coming from the East.

His fears were justified when, less than a month after his arrival, he witnessed the mobilisation of around sixty of his followers.

Abbé Léopold Duhautoy turned to the Virgin Mary to help protect his parishioners from the fighting and violent bombardments of the war. He wrote a message that was placed in an envelope wrapped in a tricolour ribbon and laid at the feet of the Virgin Mary in the grotto of Notre Dame de Lourdes in the village church. The message read: “If you deign to grant our request, we promise to show you our gratitude after the war, to go on pilgrimage on foot to your shrine of **Notre Dame de Boulogne** in as large a number as possible and to erect a magnificent statue in your honour,” reports Jean-Marc Pierru, a local history buff.

270 residents walk to Boulogne

At the end of the war, all the soldiers returned and the village emerged unscathed from the conflict. The parish then honoured the promise it had made to the Virgin Mary. It was the pilgrimage oath that was kept first. On 17 August 1945, 270 inhabitants walked to Boulogne. Two years later, on 6 July 1947, an impressive procession blessed the statue of “Notre-Dame de la Reconnaissance.”

Even today, parishioners continue to turn to the protectress of their village. Every year, after a ceremony in the church of Saint-Quentin, they go to the foot of the statue to say a few prayers. “It’s good that in our village this tradition is carried on from generation to generation, even if there are fewer participants,” confides Jean-Marc Pierru.



A conventional artist?

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1. The canonical texts

In Abbé Lecoutre's time, the official source of the catechism was the "canonical texts" of the *Sixto-Clementine Vulgate* which were the official source of the catechism¹. They were an important source of inspiration for him. We refer here to a Latin version without punctuation, which is closer to the original texts (Biblefr 2001). We give our own translation, as literal as possible.

The side door: The Annunciation and the statue of Saint Paul

It is in fact a set of three doors, executed by Abbé Lecoutre, which together with the outer door form an airlock. Their faces inside the church are sculpted. The right side door depicts Saint Paul holding a book symbolising his writings and a sword evoking his martyrdom. The left door depicts Saint Peter holding a book symbolising his writings and the keys to the salvation of souls and to paradise. The central door depicts a scene from the Annunciation.



The Annunciation

The richly sculpted central double door reproduces part of the scene from one of the Annunciations painted by the Italian painter Fra Angelico, who died in 1455. This is the Annunciation of Cortona, painted around 1433-1434 and kept in the Diocesan Museum of Cortona, around a hundred kilometres from Florence. We have retained only the part corresponding to Abbé Lecoutre's sculpture.

He needed a copy, probably an engraving of this Annunciation, to reproduce it, but Abbé Lecoutre's work is not a simple copy, it is a transposition into another art form. The style is so well rendered

¹It has since been replaced by the *Nova Vulgata* (1998).



that Arnaud de Corbie, without knowing the original painting, was able to observe: “the artist was obviously inspired by some painting of the Italian school” (de Corbie 1933).

The choice of this Annunciation to convey his message was certainly no accident. It is a major work of the *quattrocento* (the 1400s), the century of the first Renaissance in Italy. Today, it is the subject of much comment. In particular, the art historian Daniel Arasse, a specialist in the Italian Renaissance, has made a particularly remarkable study of it (Arasse 1999). We will return to this Annunciation later.

Fra Angelico painted in gold letters a dialogue from chapter 1 of the chapter of the *Gospel of Luke*, which describes the announcement made to Mary by the angel Gabriel.



The angel Gabriel said to Mary (excerpt from verse 35):

SPIRITUS SANCTUS SUPERVENIET IN TE
ET VIRTUS ALTISSIMI OBUMBRABIT TIBI

Mary's response of submission to God's will is an excerpt from verse 38:

ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI [FIAT] MIHI SECUNDUM VERBUM TUUM

In support of her answer, Mary's folded hands, looking at the angel with gentleness and restraint, express her modesty and her submission to the Lord's will: "here is the handmaid of the Lord let it be done to me according to your word" (verse 38). In the same way, the angel's index finger pointing upwards seems to evoke the coming of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps also suggests "**you have found favour with God**" (verse 30), while the one pointing towards Mary reinforces the message "will come **on you** and **take you** under his shadow." The attitudes show mutual respect.

On Mary's leg is a Bible which she was reading, which shows her to be a learned woman, in accordance with the word *cogitabat* (verse 29) which expresses meditation, deep thought, and she is troubled (verse 29).

quae cum vidisset turbata est in sermone eius et cogitabat qualis esset ista salutatio [29]

et ait angelus ei ne timeas Maria invenisti enim gratiam apud Deum [30]

et respondens angelus dixit ei Spiritus Sanctus superveniet in te et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi ideoque et quod nascetur sanctum vocabitur Filius Dei [35]

dixit autem Maria ecce ancilla Domini fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum et discessit ab illa angelus [38]

She hearing him was troubled by his words and thought what might be this salutation [29]

and the angel said to her Do not be afraid Mary you have indeed found favour with God [30]

and answering the angel said to her the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and therefore the one who will be born holy will be called Son of God [35]

Mary then said behold the handmaid of the Lord let it be done to me according to your word and so the angel left her [38]

It is interesting to consider three other Annunciations painted in the same century, which convey a different message. As before, we will only consider the part corresponding to the sculpture by Abbé Lecoutre.

- Another Italian painter, Melozzo da Forli (1438-1494), also produced a very similar version, which is kept in the Pantheon in Rome. A copy by the French painter Jean Lefevre (1882-1975) is at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris.
- Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) also painted a similar Annunciation, one of his earliest works produced between 1472 and 1475, which is on display at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.
- Fra Angelico later painted another Annunciation, a fresco located at the top of the staircase leading to the monks' cells in the San Marco convent in Florence.



The essential differences in the painting by Melozzo da Forli are that Mary is standing and the Bible is not depicted; rather than her erudition, the emphasis is on Mary's purity symbolised by the fleur-de-lys held by the angel.

In Leonardo da Vinci's Annunciation, Mary was also reading the Bible before the angel arrived, but she is rather distant, with her hand resting on the book which is placed on a desk in front of her. The importance of this reading is shown by the deliberately exaggerated length of her arm.

Together with the richly carved table, this attitude accentuates the impression of a learned woman from a wealthy family. Mary has a sculpted, mature figure, contrasting with her youthful face, her left hand seeming to express her agreement with the Lord's will rather than her submission. Leonardo's painting shows Mary as being more than just a "gestational mother", which is indicated by the light that illuminates her and by the choice of colours, which seem to diminish the role of the Angel Gabriel. He appears humble, even obsequious given the position of his hands, at the service of Mary, whose purity is emphasised by the bouquet of lilies.

One of the differences in Fra Angelico's second version is that the angel's hands are crossed like Mary's². We can see that the decoration is much simpler than in the other Annunciations. We will return to Fra Angelico's two Annunciations in the chapter *7Epilogue 2: A Popular Artist?*

Saint Peter and Saint Paul

Saint Peter is sculpted on the inside of the left side door, with a book and the keys to the salvation of souls and to Paradise. Abbé Lecoutre appears to have been inspired by the statue of Saint Peter on the Ponte San Angelo in Rome.

Saint Paul is sculpted on the right side door on the inside with a book and a sword. The message is the same as that of the 18th-century statue of Saint Paul in the former cathedral of Saint-Papoul (Aude), as the two representations are very similar.



The book and the glaive refer to Paul's mission as an evangelist, his writings and his struggle. So in his second *Epître to Timothy* in chapter 4 verse 7 he said to him:

Bonum certamen certavi cursum consummavi fidem servavi
I fought a good fight I finished my race I kept the faith

In the same way, in his *Letter to the Ephesians* chapter 6 verse 17 he tells them:

Et galeam salutis adsumite et gladium spiritus quod est verbum Dei
And take the helmet of salvation and the glaive of the spirit, which is the word of God

Paul is referring to the words of Jesus recorded in the *Gospel of Matthew* chapter 10 verse 34:

Nolite arbitrari quia venerim mittere pacem in terram non veni pacem mittere sed gladium
Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth I have not come to bring peace but the glaive

²This is also the case in a third Annunciation by Fra Angelico, painted earlier (probably before 1430) and now in the Prado Museum in Madrid.

We can see these words as being in line with the fact that Jesus is a protester, who radically opposes an established system, as he shows by driving the merchants out of the Temple.

Abbé Lecoutre chose to depict the sword thrust into the ground as a symbol of peace restored, in keeping with the words of Paul “I finished my race.”

The New Testament stained glass window

The twenty-four scenes in the two New Testament stained glass window reproduce 19th-century engravings, as illustrated by “the Resurrection of Our Lord,” “the Crucifixion of Jesus” and the “Multiplication of the Loaves.”



Although reproductions of these engravings can still be found today, it does not seem easy to trace their origins. The quality of the reproduction is remarkable, with all the details of the characters,

their clothes and the decor. It is therefore likely that Abbé Lecoutre set these engravings in the stained glass window, leaving it to the glass painter to reproduce the engravings from the originals. The engravings have been trimmed to a greater or lesser extent in order to show the essential elements more clearly. In particular, in the scene “Jesus crucified,” the two other crucified figures on either side of Jesus in the original engraving have been removed (see crucifixion stained glass window below).

It should be noted that the scenes are not presented in chronological order, and that it seems impossible to find a logical order for them. This is clearly the result of a deliberate choice by Abbé Lecoutre, designed to provoke questions.

The crucifixion stained glass window

In the stained glass window depicting the crucifixion of Jesus, which could be called “Jesus on his cross and the good and bad thieves” (see below), the large size of the scene and the care taken in the execution of all the details make it truly spectacular, with a striking rendering of the characters’ attitudes. We will confine ourselves here to the depiction of the three crucified figures. The lower part of the scene, which is not reproduced here and depicts several figures, also merits analysis, but this is beyond the scope of this article.



In the crucifixion scene in the New Testament stained glass window (see above), Abbé Lecoutre removed the other two crucified figures. In the original engraving, they were shown dead, with their heads hanging down, which from a religious point of view had no meaning and was therefore of no interest to him.

The four canonical Gospels tell of two malefactors being crucified with Jesus. The *Gospels of Mark* and the *Gospel of Matthew* say that both insult Jesus, but in the *Gospel of Luke* one of them respects him.

The stained glass window clearly shows the two men in opposing attitudes, which corresponds to the description given in chapter 23 of *Luke's Gospel*, and is reinforced by the presence above them of the Angel and the Devil. The banners are inscribed with excerpts from this chapter.

The good thief on the left says to Jesus:

Domine memento

which is an excerpt from verse 42 – *et dicebat ad Jesum Domine memento mei cum veneris in regnum tuum* – and he said to Jesus **Lord remember** me when you come into your Kingdom. and Jesus answered him:

Amen dico tibi hodie mecum eris [in] paradiso

which is an excerpt from verse 43 – *et dixit illi Jesus amen dico tibi hodie mecum eris [in] paradiso* – and Jesus said to him **and I say to you today with me you will be [in] Paradise**.

The wicked thief on the right says to Jesus:

Si tu es Christus salvum

which is an extract from verse 39 – *unus autem de his qui pendebant latronibus blasphemabat eum dicens si tu es Christus salvum fac te met ipsum et nos* – one of the malefactors hanging on the cross reviled him **if thou be Christ save thyself** and us also.

The inscription **I.N.R.I.** at the top of the cross, initials of *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudæorum* corresponds to verse 38: *erat autem et superscriptio scripta super eum litteris græcis et latinis et hebraicis hic est rex Iudæorum* – There was also above him an inscription in Greek and Roman and Hebraic letters this is the king of the Jews.

It was Pope Francis himself, in his general audience on Wednesday 28 September 2016 (*Il Perdono sulla croce*), who took care to explain Abbé Lecoutre's message (Francis 2016):

[Come ha mostrato l'Abbé Lecoutre nella sua chiesa di Wirwignes,] nell'ora della croce, la salvezza di Cristo raggiunge il suo culmine; e la sua promessa al buon ladrone rivela il compimento della sua missione: cioè salvare i peccatori.

[As Abbé Lecoutre has shown in his church in Wirwignes,] at the hour of the cross, Christ's salvation reaches its apogee and his promise to the good thief reveals the fulfilment of his mission: to save sinners.

Pope Francis explains Abbé Lecoutre's message (2016)

The first [malefactor] insulted him, as all the people insulted him, as do the leaders of the people, but this poor man, driven by despair said: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself, and us too." This cry bears witness to man's anguish in the face of the mystery of death and to the tragic awareness that only God can provide the liberating response [...] Jesus saved us by remaining on the cross. We all know that it's not easy to stay on the cross. on our little daily crosses [...]. By dying on the cross, innocent between two criminals, He attested that God's salvation can reach every human being in any condition, even the most negative and painful. God's salvation is for everyone, without exception. . .

This was the first malefactor. The other is the one known as the "good thief". His words are a marvellous model of repentance, a concentrated catechesis for learning to ask Jesus for forgiveness. He begins by addressing his companion: "You don't even have the fear of God, even though you are suffering the same pain!" He thus underlines the starting point of repentance: the fear of God. But not fear of God, no: filial fear of God. It is not fear, but the respect we owe to God, because He is God. [...] It is this trusting respect that helps us to make room for God and rely on his mercy. Then the good thief declares Jesus' innocence and openly confesses his own guilt: "For us it is justice, we pay for our deeds; but he did nothing wrong." Jesus is therefore there on the cross, to be with the guilty: through this closeness, he offers them salvation. [...]

Finally, the good thief addresses Jesus directly, invoking his help: “Jesus, remember me when you come with your kingdom.” He calls him by his name, “Jesus,” with confidence, and thus confesses what this name indicates: “the Lord saves.” This is what the name Jesus means.” [...]]

Whereas the good thief speaks in the future tense: “When you come with your kingdom,” Jesus’ answer was not long in coming; he spoke in the present tense: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” At the hour of the cross, Christ’s salvation reaches its climax; and his promise to the good thief reveals the fulfilment of his mission: that is, to save sinners . . .] Jesus is truly the face of the Father’s mercy. And the good thief called him by name: “Jesus.” It’s a brief invocation, and one we can all say many times during the day “Jesus.” “Jesus,” simply. Do this throughout the day.


But the parishioners of Wirwignes did not have to wait for Pope Francis to explain.

The Charles Lévêque mark

This stained glass window bears the personal mark of Charles Lévêque, who was in the habit of using images of the location in the background of his stained glass windows. This can be seen, for example, in the details of the stained glass window in the chapelle de la Vierge in the church of Saint-Alexandre in Bédarieux (Hérault), depicting “a presentation of the infant Jesus”, and in the stained glass window in the church of Saint-Martin in Prissac (Indres), depicting King Saint Louis. The first shows the town of Bédarieux in the background, while the second depicts a château that is undoubtedly that of the Garde Giron. Charles Lévêque’s mark takes on a very special flavour here, as it is Wirwignes that the master glassmaker has depicted below Christ. The church of Saint-Quentin is easily recognisable. This mark appears in several stained glass windows, including the towns of Amiens and Saint-Quentin in the windows illustrating the life of Saint Quentin, and the church of Paray-le-Monial in the stained glass window in the Sacré-Coeur chapel.



The high altar: The virtues

 Abbé Lecoutre modified the high altar dating from the second half of the 17th century, adding statues and bas-reliefs on two of his favourite themes: the apostles and the virtues.



The base of the altar, preceded by a black veined marble step decorated with a mosaic, is original; it is adorned with black marble spiral columns to which Abbé Lecoutre added carved wooden statuettes representing the apostles. It is surmounted by a remarkable oak tabernacle from the same period (see Wimet 1979-80).



The right-hand side of the high altar

On the upper part, Abbé Lecoutre created a series of bas-reliefs that blend in perfectly with the classical appearance of the whole. These bas-reliefs represent angels holding banners inscribed with virtues. We will restrict ourselves here to the right-hand side of the tabernacle.



The five virtues at the top

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correspond to verse 2 of chapter 12 of the *Book of Isaiah* (Old Testament), with piety on the left half of the tabernacle, top right:

*et requiescet super eum spiritus Domini spiritus
sapientiae et intellectus spiritus consilii et fortitudinis spiritus scientiae et pietatis*

and upon him will rest the spirit of the Lord, the spirit of **wisdom** and the the spirit of **intelligence**
and the spirit of **counsel** and the spirit of **strength** and the spirit of **science** and the spirit of **piety**.

Curiously, in the majority of French versions of the Bible, *pietatis* has become “*crainte de Dieu* (fear of god)” or an equivalent expression. Nowadays believers speak of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, including both piety and the fear of God, to show that these are virtues that are higher than the others, because for them they are divine virtues. Reference is often made to Saint Thomas Aquinas (circa 1225-1274), who formalised these seven gifts, for example:

Considerantes enim aliqui quod, inter septem dona, quatuor pertinent ad rationem, scilicet **sapientia, scientia, intellectus et consilium**; et tria ad vim appetitivam, scilicet **fortitudo, pietas et timor** (Thomas de Aquino 14ème siècle *quaestio 68 articulus 1*).

The five virtues at the bottom begin with the three theological virtues that have God as their object

FOI ESPERANCE CHARITE

set out in verse 13 of chapter 13 of the text of First Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians:

nunc autem manet **fides spes caritas** tria haec maior autem his est caritas
at present, whereas there remain **faith hope charity** of the three the greatest is charity

Abbé Lecoutre added to these three virtues

CONFIANCE HUMILITE

These bas-reliefs were undoubtedly inspired by the Romanesque tympanum of the abbey church of Sainte-Foy in Conques (Aveyron), built in the 11th and 12th centuries (Séguret 2009).



Tympanum from the abbey church of Sainte-Foy in Conques (11th-12th centuries)

In 1838 Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870), writer and inspector of Monuments Historiques, thanks to whom the Conques abbey church was listed by the Monuments Historiques that same year, wrote:

... The spaces at the back (between the pediments and the top of the area) are filled with angels of smaller proportions and in different attitudes, most of them holding banners bearing the names of the theological virtues: **FIDES • SPES • CARITAS • CONSTANCIA • VMILITAS** (sic) (Mérimée 1838 page 182).



But Prosper Mérimée was mistaken about one of the two banners, which are indecipherable today: as Abbé Lecoutre shows, it is clearly **CONFIDENTIA** (TRUST).

Finally, the side panel, which follows **HUMILITY**, shows

DOUCEUR PATIENCE CRAINTE D.D.



Thus we find the three virtues of verse 2 of chapter 4 of the *Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*:

cum omni **humilitate** et **mansuetudine** cum **patientia** subportantes invicem in caritate
with all **humility** and **gentleness**, with **patience**, bearing with one another with charity

to which Abbé Lecoutre added the fear of God [CRAINTE D.D.] (see above).

2. The apocryphal texts

Abbé Lecoutre did not hesitate to call on apocryphal texts, not officially recognised by the Catholic Church, thus showing himself to be both provocative and innovative.

The Nativity of Jesus

The chapel of the Virgin Mary was the first to be created by Abbé Lecoutre, in 1869. The centre of the altar triptych depicts a nativity scene in one of the traditional forms of its time, and still today.



The place is a stable with a wooden rack at the back. This is in line with the description given in verses 7 and 12 of chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel:

et peperit filium suum primogenitum et pannis eum involvit et reclinavit eum in praesepio quia non erat eis locus in diversorio [7]

[and the Angel of the Lord said to the shepherds]

et hoc vobis signum invenietis infantem pannis involutum et positum in praesepio [12]

and she gave birth to her first-born son, wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn [7]

[and the Angel of the Lord said to the shepherds]

and this will be the sign for you you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger [12].

Luke uses *in praesepio* a word which, as the Latin dictionary Gaffiot shows, originally meant a stable (*étable*) or, more generally, a pen for cattle (*parc pour les bestiaux*). It could also be a manger (*mangeoire*), which would be consistent with the Greek version of the Bible in which the word *φάτναι* is used, meaning manger.

præsēpĕ (-sæpĕ), is, n., præsēpēs (-sæpēs), is, f., præsēpis (-sæpis), is, f., præsēpĭum (-sæpĭum), īī, n., ¶ 1 parc pour les bestiaux; [ordint] étable, écurie: VARRO R. 1, 13, 6; VIRG. En. 7, 275 | crèche, mangeoire: VARRO R. 2, 5

A surprising representation

In the guide *Peeps into Picardy*, the authors are astonished that the new-born baby (like Joseph in another chapel) is found in “ordinary beds.”

Many of the super-altars in the chapels are most curious in design, especially the representations in the chapel of St. Joseph, of the Virgin and Child and St. Joseph in ordinary beds, with bedclothes.

Craufurd, Manton & Manton 1914 page 75

This is obviously not a usual representation, as Jesus is most often lying on straw. Perhaps Abbé Lecoutre wanted to convey an impression of serenity, well-being and peace?

The authors of *Peeps into Picardy* mention the Virgin, the Child and Joseph, but if you look closely you will see that there is no Joseph. With Mary on the right of Jesus, Abbé Lecoutre has placed another woman on the left, a representation that is clearly not usual. Abbé Lecoutre may have inscribed texts in the chapel that would shed some light on the subject, but only the altar survives after the chapel was transformed into a grotto of Lourdes in 1927¹. However, closer examination shows that this is one of the “midwives of the Nativity” mentioned by Jacques Poucet. (2016).

During childbirth, the ancient apocrypha (*Gospel of James*, XVIII-XX, pp. 98-101, *EAC I*; *Pseudo-Matthew*, XIII, 3-5, pp. 133-134, *EAC I*; *Life of Jesus in Arabic*, II-IV, pp. 212-213, *EAC I*) generally involve female characters, who seem to be midwives by trade and who are apparently summoned as such.

Called by Joseph or linked to him, they arrived after the event and were therefore of little help to Mary. In fact, their essential role was to be credible witnesses to the miracle represented by the virginity of the woman in childbirth (Poucet 2015 pages 8-9).

These midwives are absent from the canonical texts. According to the Apocrypha, there are two midwives, Zabel, who immediately believes in the miracle, and Salome, who is initially incredulous.

She [Salomé] even asks to verify *de tactu* this virginity, which leads to two successive miracles. The unbeliever immediately loses the use of his hand, which is dried up or burnt. This first miracle is followed almost immediately by a second: the victim asks for forgiveness and his hand is returned (Poucet 2015 page 9).

It is Salome who is depicted in Abbé Lecoutre’s nativity scene. This is shown by her pious attitude and the position of her hands, the right in an attitude that may evoke prayer, and the left, close to the newborn’s head, which appears petrified. This story of the two midwives has rarely been depicted. Two early paintings are exceptions, as the theme seems to have been subsequently abandoned.

In the Nativity by the Flemish painter Robert Campin (c. 1375–1444), the “*Maître de Flémalle*,” preserved in Dijon’s Musée des beaux-arts, several figures are shown, including Salome letting her parched hand hang down. The Nativity by the Italian painter Lorenzo Lotto (c. 1480–c. 1556), housed in the Santa Maria della Scala museum complex in Siena, also shows Salome with her hand rigid. She stares at Mary, who appears impassive. In both paintings, unlike Abbé Lecoutre, Joseph is present at the scene.

¹ following the miraculous cure of a young woman from Wirwignes, Lucie Caron, during a pilgrimage



Three Nativity scenes: Abbé Lecoutre, Robert Campin, Lorenzo Lotto

Saint Anne and Saint Joachim

Anne and Joachim are the parents of the Virgin Mary. Their names do not appear in any Old or New Testament texts. The story of Mary's conception is found in the progospel of James the Less.

And behold, the angel of the Lord flew to her, saying: "Hannah, God has heard your prayer; you will conceive and bear children, and your race will be famous throughout the world." Hannah said: "Long live the Lord, my God; whether it be a boy or a girl whom I beget, I will offer him to the Lord, and he will devote his whole life to divine service." And behold, two angels came to her, saying: "Joachim, your husband, is coming with his flocks." The angel of the Lord came down to him, saying: "Joachim, Joachim, God has heard your prayer, your wife Anne will conceive. [...] And behold, Joachim came with his flocks, and Anne was at the gate of her house and she saw Joachim coming with his flocks, and she ran and threw herself around his neck, saying: "I now know that the Lord God has blessed me, for I was a widow and am no longer; I was barren and have conceived." And Joachim rested the same day in his house (Brunet 1848 pages 116-117).

This apocryphal text recounts the couple's sterility, the two angelic messages to Anne and Joachim, and Mary's birth. It is the basis of the belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, i.e. that in her conception Mary was preserved from original sin.

The central bas-relief of the altar dedicated to Saint Anne depicts the Nativity of Mary in a rather unusual way.



Anne appears to be praying, while Joachim points with both hands to a banner bearing the words in capital letters

ELLE SERA LA MERE DU MESSIE (SHE WILL BE THE MOTHER OF THE MESSIAH)

Marie is shown in a medallion above her parents.

A more common representation of this scene, which seems to reproduce an icon of unknown origin, shows Anne and Joachim in a different position.

Joseph's marriage and death

A fundamental figure, Saint Joseph appears very rarely in the canonical Gospels, and only in those of Matthew and Luke. It was not until 8 December 1870 that Pope Pius IX officially declared St Joseph “for perpetual memory” “Patron of the Universal Church” with the decree *Quemadmodum Deus* (Pius IX 1870). This undoubtedly determined Abbé Lecoutre to dedicate a chapel to him, but to depict scenes from Joseph's life he had to refer to apocryphal texts.

Joseph's marriage

In particular, the canonical Gospels do no more than evoke the marriage of Joseph and Mary. Thus in verse 20 of chapter 1 of the *Gospel of Matthew*, where the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him:

Joseph fili David noli timere accipere Mariam coniugem tuam quod enim in ea natum est de Spiritu Sancto est

Joseph son of David do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit

It is only in apocryphal texts that this marriage is actually explained (see Poucet 2014).



Bas-relief “Mariage de St Joseph” and stained glass window in the church of Notre Dame in Domérat (Allier, France)

Abbé Lecoutre represented the “Mariage de St Joseph” in the left bas-relief of the altar dedicated to St. Joseph. The scene corresponds to the description found in the *Romanz de saint Fanuel*, an early 13th century apocryphal manuscript in Old French (Chabaneau 1889 page 31 verses 1217-1220):

Quant l'evesque de la loi
 Les miracles que Dex i fist
 A Joseph la virge espousa
 Qui a grant honor la garda

This event has been represented many times. It is more often referred to as the marriage of the Virgin Mary and it is not very common for there to be only the three main characters, Mary, Joseph and the bishop, a representation that can nevertheless be found in stained glass windows. One of the closest to Abbé Lecoutre's bas-relief is in the Romanesque church of Notre Dame in Domérat (Allier). In particular, Joseph is portrayed as a young man and not as an old man, as is often the case².

This stained glass window appears to correspond to part of the painting "The Marriage of the Virgin" (1504) by the painter Raphael (1483-1520), one of the major artists of the Italian Renaissance, now in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan. Raphael himself drew his inspiration from the painting by his master Perugino, painted shortly before, which is kept at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Caen.



Note that in Raphael's painting, as in the stained glass window, the bishop is tilted slightly to his left, and therefore turned towards Mary, seeming to place greater importance on her. Abbé Lecoutre did not retain this posture, the bishop standing up straight; so he gives the same importance to Mary and Joseph, but there is probably another reason as well, to which we will return in chapter 10 *Epilogue 3: Un artiste naïf?*

Joseph's death

The canonical Gospels are equally silent on Joseph's death, and as for his age at the birth of Jesus, we are reduced to a wide variety of hypotheses.

Abbé Lecoutre represented the "*Mort de St Joseph*" in the central bas-relief of the altar dedicated to Saint Joseph. The scene, in which he is surrounded by Jesus and Mary, corresponds to the

²About Joseph's age at the birth of Jesus, there is a wide variety of assertions, ranging from a young man of 18 to an old man, but there is never any conclusive reference to an ancient text.

account given in the apocryphal text *The story of Joseph the Carpenter*, a manuscript of which there are three versions, two in Coptic and one in Arabic, probably from the 6th century. Gustave Brunet has provided an annotated French translation (Brunet 1848 pages 17-51). Anthony Alcock did an English translation, in which it is said of Joseph that “he was like a youth, having reached the age of 111 years in a good old age” Alcock (2012 page 7). This story can be seen as the origin of the cult of “the good death” (see hereafter).



Bas-relief “Mort de St Joseph” *and stained glass window from Monistrol-sur-Loire (Haute-Loire, France)

Abbé Lecoutre’s bas-relief can be related to a stained-glass window in the Saint-Marcellin church in Monistrol-sur-Loire (Haute-Loire), dating from the 19th century. This was inspired by the late 17th century gilded wood bas-relief by sculptor Pierre Vaneau, “*la mort de saint Joseph*” in the chapel of the former Ursuline convent in the same town, which itself appears to have been made after an engraving by Nicolas d’Origny dated 1688. Both representations seem to have been inspired by the same source.

Pope Benedict XV, in the *motu proprio Bonum Sane* of July 25 1920, confirms Joseph’s death in the arms of Jesus and Mary (Benedict XV 1920):

Sed praecipue, quoniam praesentissimus morientium adiutor merito habetur, cui Iesus ipse cum Maria morienti adfuerint, Venerabilium Fratrum erit illa piorum sodalitia, quae Ioseph pro decedentibus exorando condita sunt, hit a Bona Morte, ut a Transitu S. Ioseph, ut pro Agonizantibus, omni auctoritatis suae suffragio et favore prosequi.

But above all, since he is rightly held to be the most faithful helper of the dying, having died with the assistance of Jesus and Mary, our Venerable Brethren will have the duty of inculcating and encouraging, with all the prestige of their authority, the pious customs instituted to implore Joseph in favor of the dying, such as the Good Death, the Trepas of Saint Joseph and for the Agonizing.

Thus, Abbé Lecoutre shows Saint Joseph as the patron saint of good death, surrendering himself to God surrounded by Mary and Jesus.

Was Pope Francis aware of Abbé Lecoutre’s catechism? In his general audience of February 9, 2022, he confirms that this death is his official version, if not the church’s canonical version (Francis 2022):

*E proprio a partire da questa, oggi vorrei approfondire la speciale devozione che il popolo cristiano ha sempre avuto per San Giuseppe come patrono della buona morte. Una devozione nata dal pensiero che Giuseppe sia morto con l'assistenza della Vergine Maria e di Gesù, prima che questi lasciasse la casa di Nazaret. **Non ci sono dati storici, ma** siccome non si vede più Giuseppe nella vita pubblica, si pensa che sia morto lì a Nazaret, con la famiglia. **E [come dimostra il bassorilievo del l'abbé lecoutre]** ad accompagnarlo alla morte erano Gesù e Maria.*

And precisely from this, today I would like to elaborate on the special devotion that the Christian people have always had for St. Joseph as the patron saint of the good death. A devotion born from the thought that Joseph died with the assistance of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, before the latter left the house of Nazareth. **There is no historical data, but** since Joseph is no longer seen in public life, it is thought that he died there in Nazareth, with his family. **and [as evidenced by the bas-relief by abbé lecoutre]** to accompany him in death, Jesus and Mary were there.

Emphases added



3. The modern texts

In his Catechism, Abbé Lecoutre devoted a great deal of attention to modern events, post-dating the Bible. He obviously researched Saint Quentin, the patron saint of his church, and Notre-Dame de Boulogne, which was certainly close to his heart. He also used texts published in his own time for events that were contemporary with him, such as the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at La Salette and Lourdes.

The life of Saint Quentin

Abbé Lecoutre obviously did a great deal of research into the life of Saint Quentin, the patron saint of the church. Among the manuscripts that tell the story, one known as “*L’Authentique ou Livre de la passion de saint Quentin, dit manuscrit du chanoine Raimbert*,” is dated to the late 11th or early 12th century. It belongs to the basilica erected in the town of Saint-Quentin. This Latin work, the author of which is not mentioned (it may have been the religious Raimbertus), contains, in addition to the life of Saint Quentin, several sermons, a note on the discovery of Saint Quentin’s body by Eusebia and two books of miracles attributed to the martyr’s intervention. Riboulleau and Guiochon’s description of the twenty-four illuminations in the manuscript summarises the life of Saint Quentin.

[...] The illuminations detail the main stages of the saint’s apostolate and martyrdom. Saint Quentin leaves Rome **with companions** to preach in Gaul. In Amiens, he is questioned by **the prefect** Rictiovere, then **thrown into prison**. Saint Quentin is interrogated by Rictiovere. Saint Quentin is **flogged**. Rictiovere orders that the saint be taken to prison again. **An angel** delivers him from his prison. Saint Quentin **preaches the Gospel in Amiens**. The crowd is baptized. The prefect drives out those who deny the false gods. Rictiovere tries to seduce Quentin with promises. The saint’s limbs are dislocated, he is flayed with iron rakes, burned with torches, and made to drink a drink made from lime and vinegar. Rictiovere put him in irons and orders that he be taken to Rome. A stop is made at Augusta de Vermandois (the future town of Saint-Quentin) and Rictiovere has brooches and nails forged. The brooches are driven into the saint’s shoulders and the nails into his fingers. After praying to God, Saint Quentin is beheaded. His body and head are secretly immersed in the Somme River. Her soul is led to the heavens by angels. The ornamentation is based on interlacing, scrolls, foliage, geometric motifs and monster heads. (Riboulleau & Guiochon 2008 page 2).

Two books on the life of Saint Quentin were published shortly before Abbé Lecoutre’s work. The first is an annotated reproduction of an Old French manuscript preserved in the archives of the Saint-Quentin church in Louvain (Belgium), written and drawn around 1300 (Everaerts 1874). The second tells of his life, his cult and the restoration of his pilgrimage (Mathieu 1878).

Abbé Lecoutre inscribed his own version of the life of Saint Quentin in French on the chapel ceiling. Several phrases are found in the book of Matthew, but with a different translation. However, the origin of certain phrases seems difficult to establish. In particular, we have found no text mentioning the date “around 295” for Quentin’s arrival in Gaul.

On the eastern side. Quentin, a patrician, comes from Rome to Gaul around 295 to preach the Gospel as an apostle of Christ. He confirms his words with dazzling miracles With the sign of the cross, he gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the mute, movement to the

paralysed. Hell unleashes its fury, Rictiovarus rushes in. But Quentin praying: O my God, do not forsake me, but snatch me out of the hands of the sinful man, the godless man who despises your law. He questions him. "The supreme nobility is to worship the creator of heaven and earth" replies the martyr. Lying on the easel, torn by whips, he gives thanks to God.

On the west side. From the sky a voice is heard "Courage and constancy Quentin, I am with you." And the executioners fall over, unable to get up, and are cruelly tormented. The saint did not feel the torments. He is taken to the darkest dungeon. An angel delivers him "Get up and go out, preach the true faith in the city." 600 people convert and the guards themselves. His limbs are dislocated, beaten with iron chains, doused with boiling oil, burnt with flaming torches and quicklime. Nails are driven under your fingernails, brooches into your body. His head is cut off. His soul is seen flying away, a white dove in the sky. His tomb is glorious. Saint Quentin, pray for us.

The stained glass windows

Abbé Lecoutre has devoted two stained-glass windows to Saint Quentin. The leftmost window in the chapel dedicated to this martyred saint had Mr. and Mrs. Séneca as benefactors.



In chronological order: Mission de St Quentin et de ses compagnons (left bottom) – St devant le proconsul (right centre) – St Quentin conduit en prison (left centre) – St Quentin flagellé (right top) – St Quentin dans la prison visité par un ange (left top) – St Quentin prêchant à Amiens (right bottom)

It has similar features to the New Testament window, with similar-looking figures, but we were unable to find engravings depicting the six main scenes. These correspond to the episodes highlighted in bold in the previous description.

As with the New Testament stained glass window, Abbé Lecoutre did not place these six scenes in chronological order. The scenes depicting the torments inflicted on the saint have also been removed. These tortures show real cruelty, even if this is mitigated by a kind of endearing naivety often displayed by the illuminators of the period, a naivety that might reveal their embarrassment at depicting a torture scene that they knew only from the texts they were to illustrate.

It is also interesting to compare the scene “St Quentin conduit en prison” (St Quentin being taken to prison) chosen by Abbé Lecoutre with the one in the Louvain manuscript. In the latter, the two soldiers, although not really frightening, threaten St Quentin, who appears submissive, whereas in the former they simply escort the saint, who retains all his dignity.



“St Quentin conduit en prison” – Abbé Lecoutre et manuscrit de Louvain

The other stained glass window seems to have been inspired by different sources. Its six scenes are also placed out of order. Four represent other scenes from the life of Saint Quentin: **St Quentin martyred**, **St Quentin baptising converts**, **St Quentin beheaded**, **The St martyr at the gates of St Quentin**. The other two, which deserve particular attention, are devoted to a later event: the discovery (referred to by Abbé Mathieu as “the first invention”) of his body by Eusebia more than fifty years after his death. The story of this event is told by Abbé Mathieu, from a 9th century Latin manuscript entitled *Vitae et passiones martyrum*¹ (Mathieu 1878 page II), which is said to be an authentic copy of the original Passion of the Saint, written in the second half of the 4th century by an eyewitness. According to this eyewitness, Saint Quentin was the son of a Roman senator by the name of Zeno.

Abbé Mathieu relates the story of Eusébie (Mathieu 1878 pages 126-127):

God used a Roman lady called Eusebia, remarkable for her great wealth and even more so for the distinction and nobility of her origin, to accomplish his plans. She had many servants and a high standard of living. But afflicted by God, who wanted to save her from the temptations of the pride of life, and blind for nine years, she never stopped praying fervently and humbly imploring the Lord's mercy and omnipotence.

[...]

an angel appeared to her from God and comforted her, saying: “Eusebia, your prayer has been answered. Get up and leave for Gaul. There, find out about a place called Auguste de Vermandois, on the banks of the river Somme. Take note of the place where this river is crossed by the road that leads from Amiens to Laon le Cloué: search there and you will find the body of Saint Quentin, my Martyr, under the water.

¹Collette (1771) published a copy in his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Vermandois*.

The first scene, entitled “Ste Eusébie reçoit la mission de chercher le corps de St Quentin,” (St Eusebia receives the mission of finding the body of St Quentin) is from the previous episode.



After a long journey that takes her to the place indicated by the angel, the story continues (pages 128-130).

Now she meets an old man called Erodianus, and eagerly questions him:

- Where is the place, or municipe, called Auguste de Vermandois?
- Le voici, tout près d’ici, répondit le vieil homme.

[...]

And Eusebia, redoubling her prayers and entreaties:

- I beseech you, she said, in the name of the Lord, at least show me where the public highway crosses the river Somme?

Erodianus showed it to him, saying, Here it is.

Then the saint got down from her chariot [...] She had scarcely finished her prayer when the place where the holy body was buried under the water was all shaken. There was a shudder on the surface of the river. Then the body of the Martyr began to float on the waves; and the head also sprang up and floated, coming from another place. The flesh was neither swollen nor livid; it was white as snow, and a sweet smell wafted from it, like that of a field full of roses, especially blessed by the Lord. Then the holy and pious lady took the venerable body and wrapped it in a white shroud, intending to bury it in the city (or camp) of Vermand.

The second scene, entitled “Elle interroge le vieil Herodiau” (She questioned the old Herodiau), faithfully reproduces this episode. Of particular note is the presence of the old man, whose name is given in the French form Herodiau, with his head separated and shrouded.

This is not the case with traditional illuminations depicting the discovery of Saint Quentin’s body by Eusebia, such as the one in “Canon Raimbert’s manuscript,” or one from the 14th century, and one from around 1470. The latter is not even realistic, as the head is not separated from the body. It is therefore not implausible to think that Abbé Lecoutre drew the scene himself. In any case, he was bold enough to depict an event not recognised by the Catholic Church, which is clearly a legend. Although Abbé Mathieu described Eusebia as a “saint,” she has never been canonised. and there is even no proof of her existence.

The stained glass windows bear the personal mark of Charles Lévêque (see the crucifixion stained glass window), who added the town of Amiens to the background in the scene “*St Quentin prêchant à Amiens*” and the town of Saint-Quentin in the scenes “*Quentin conduit en prison*” and “*Elle interroge le vieil Herodiau*.”



Traditional illuminations depicting the discovery of Saint Quentin's body by Eusebia



The altar

The triptych at the base of the chapel altar probably also depicts scenes from the life of Saint Quentin. Strange creatures are to be found here, and further study seems necessary.

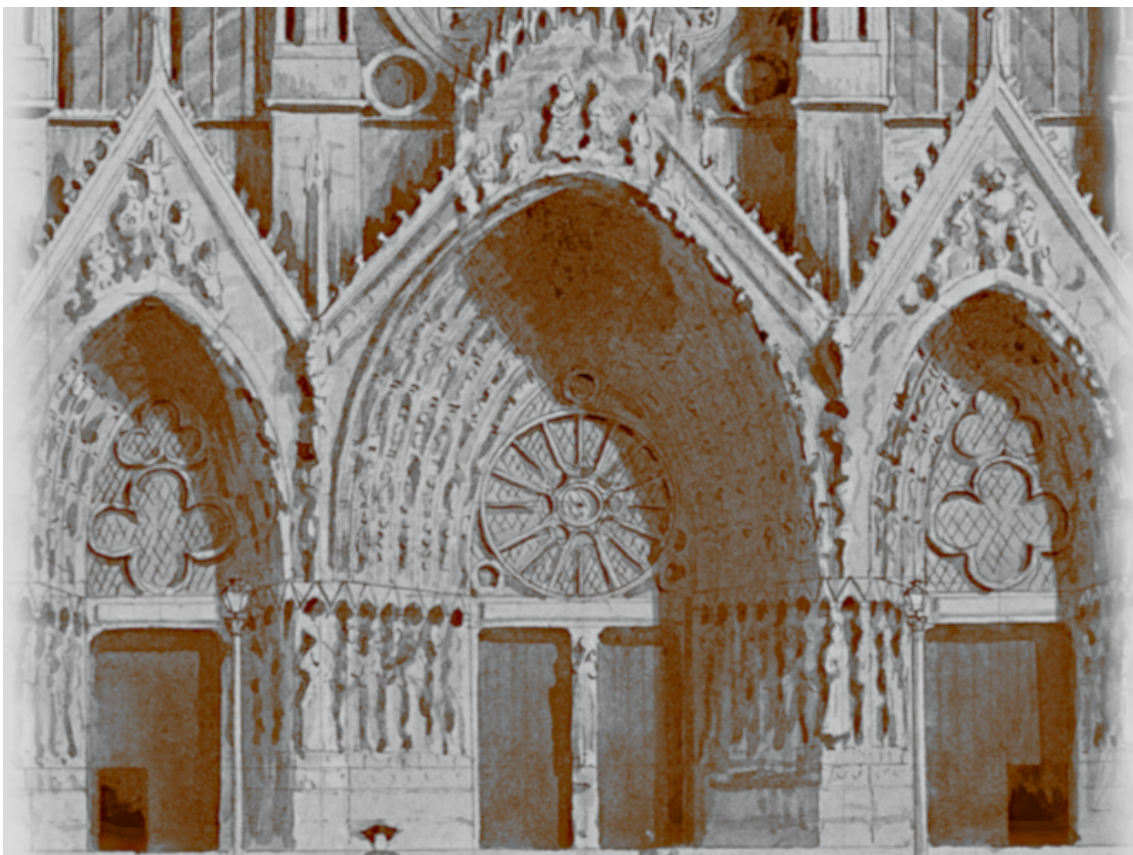


A Gothic cathedral

The altar in the sacred choir represents the façade of a Gothic cathedral. There's little doubt that it's the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Reims, one of the major achievements of Gothic art in Europe, built from 1211 onwards and playing an important role in French history. Twenty-five kings have been crowned in the cathedral, the most recent being Charles X in 1825, five years before Abbé Lecoutre was born.



To adapt to the dimensions of the altar, Abbé Lecoutre had to modify the proportions of the façade, but his design is very elegant, with a predominance of vertical lines that preserve the slender appearance.



On the right wall, Abbé Lecoutre has carved, in Gothic letters, the first 11 of the promises made by Jesus Christ to Saint Marguerite-Marie, to encourage true devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which is also devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

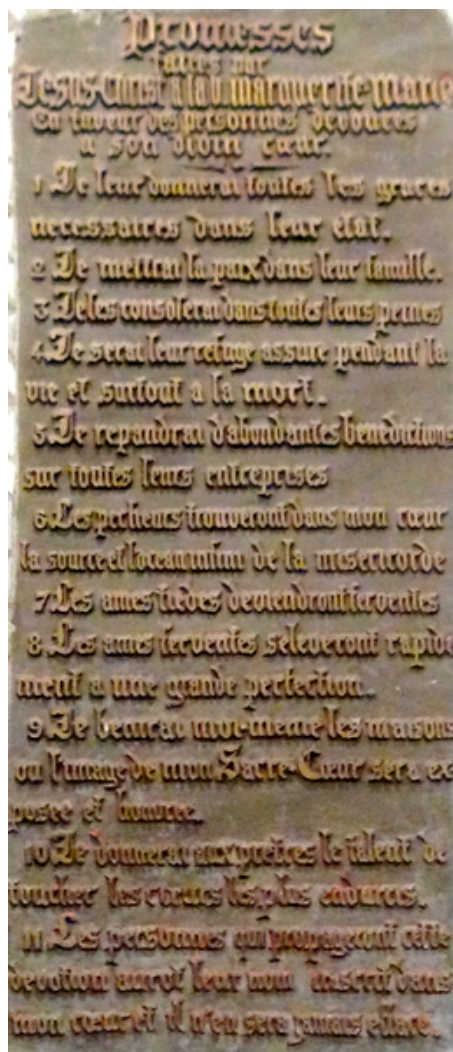
He eliminated the 12th promise:

I promise you in the excessive mercy of My Heart that My all powerful love will grant to all those who receive Holy Communion on the First Fridays in nine consecutive months the grace

of final perseverance; they shall not die in My disgrace, nor without receiving their sacraments.
My divine Heart shall be their safe refuge in this last moment.

This may be due to its length, but it may also have been a deliberate choice not to include the threat of “final penance” for those who fail to comply with the communion rite.

Sister Marguerite-Marie, born Marguerite Alacoque (1647-1690), a nun of the Visitation order in Paray-le-Monial (Saône-et-Loire), had several visions of Christ from 1673 onwards. She did much to promote the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, first in her monastery, then throughout the Catholic Church. Marguerite-Marie was beatified on September 18, 1864, and canonized in 1920.



1. I will give them all the graces necessary in their state of life.
2. I will establish peace in their homes.
3. I will comfort them in all their afflictions.
4. I will be their secure refuge during life, and above all, in death.
5. I will bestow abundant blessings upon all their undertakings.
6. Sinners will find in My Heart the source and infinite ocean of mercy.
7. Lukewarm souls shall become fervent.
8. Fervent souls shall quickly mount to high perfection.
9. I will bless every place in which an image of My Heart is exposed and honored.
10. I will give to priests the gift of touching the most hardened hearts.
11. Those who shall promote this devotion shall have their names written in My Heart.

The confessional

The confessional is such an integral part of Catholic religious furniture that we might think its origins go back a long way. It is, however, linked to “modern” achievements. It was only after the Council of Trent that confession was practiced privately in an enclosed space. The Council, convened in 1545 by Pope Paul III and not completed until 1563 under Pius IV, recognized the *Vulgate* as the official Latin version of the Bible. the confessional booth is therefore a “modern” object.



St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan, is often credited with its origin.

The confessional, built by Abbé Lecoutre in 1878, is in the same spirit as the altar in the sacred choir, evoking a kind of cathedral with its towers surmounted by angels and its statuettes in niches. This is a remarkable, highly elaborate, masterpiece in painted stone. The door to the central lodge, the confessor's, demonstrates Abbé Lecoutre's talents as a woodcarver. A fairly traditional feature, the upper part is inspired by the infill – the carved stone frame – characteristic of Gothic bays, such as the one in the cloister of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Constance in Germany (14th century).



Filling - Gothic cloister of Notre-Dame de Constance cathedral (14th century)

Abbé Lecoutre's main message is inscribed on a banner surrounding a dove with outstretched wings:

recevez le Saint-Esprit les péchés seront remis à ceux à qui vous les remettrez²

This is an extract from verses 22 and 23 of chapter 20 of the *Gospel of John*. This extract conforms to the translation given in the “*Grande Bible de Tours*” published in 1843 and republished in 1866 (Bourassé et Janvier 1866) in a luxurious edition illustrated by the famous artist Gustave Doré (1832-1883):

ayant dit ces mots il souffla sur eux et leur dit **recevez le Saint-Esprit³** [22]

*hoc cum dixisset insuflavit et dicit eis **accipite Spiritum Sanctum***

les péchés seront remis à ceux à qui vous les remettrez

et ils seront retenus à ceux à qui vous les retiendrez⁴ [23]

quorum remiseritis peccata remittuntur eis quorum retinueritis detenta sunt

This message is underlined by the cul-de-lampe at the base of the ceiling rafters:

Ô Jésus Pardon

Two inscriptions are carved in marble on the walls. One is verse 1 and an extract from verse 2 of *Psalms* 130 (often numbered 129 in accordance with the Greek version of the Bible), the *De profundis*, the prayer for the departed:

²receive the Holy Spirit, sins will be remitted to those to whom you will remit them

³having said these words he breathed on them and said to them **receive the Holy Spirit**

⁴sins will be remitted to those to whom you will remit them and they will be retained to those from whom you will retain them

du fond de l'abîme je crie vers vous Seigneur – Seigneur écoutez ma voix⁵
de profundis clamávi ad te Dómine – Dómine exáudi vocem meam

The other is a phrase attributed to the Bishop of Arras:

**à qui dira 5 pater ou 5 ave les dimanche, mercredi ou vendredi
ou ses prières du matin ou du soir, un jour quelconque, 40 jours d'indulgence⁶**
Arras, 15 sept 1878. L'évêque.

We can therefore see that this sentence was added after the chapel was built, the date of which is indicated in a marble escutcheon: "*Chapelle construite aux frais de la Fabrique 1871.*"

Apparitions of the Virgin Mary

G On the altar of the chapel dedicated to Saint Antoine (originally the chapel of the Sacred Heart of Mary), Abbé Lecoutre depicted three apparitions of the Virgin Mary recognized by the Catholic Church, two of which occurred during his lifetime.

Notre-Dame de La Salette⁷

The bas-relief on the left, dedicated to Our Lady of La Salette, who appeared in 1846 to two shepherd children, Maximin Giraud and Mélanie Calvat, is clearly inspired by a pious image such as could be found at the time.



Notre-Dame de Lourdes

The bas-relief on the right, dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, who appeared eighteen times to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, was also inspired by a pious image.

⁵from the depths of the abyss I cry to you Lord – Lord hear my voice

⁶who says 5 pater or 5 ave on Sunday, Wednesday or Friday or morning or evening prayers on any day, 40 days of indulgence

⁷Abbé Lecoutre, on his way back from pilgrimage, passed through La Salette (Lecoutre 1867)



Notre-Dame de Boulogne

Abbé Lecoutre naturally dedicated the central bas-relief to Notre-Dame de Boulogne, whose story is told by Abbé Daniel Haigneré (1864). The Blessed Virgin appeared in 633 or 636 in a chapel in the upper town of Boulogne, while a ship without sailors or oars arrived in port with a statue of the Virgin, made of wood in relief, holding the infant Jesus on her left arm. The representation can be compared to the engraving on the first page of Haigneré's book and to a painting, very similar but with the two angels permuted, which hangs on the chapel wall.



Abbé Lecoutre has chosen a figuration similar to that in Haigneré's book, but with two differences characteristic of his message: Mary looks at Jesus and holds him more firmly, and the two angels move the boat forward, using the rudder and oar respectively.

4. Epilogue 1: A conventional artist?

Abbé Lecoutre's work obviously refers to the canonical biblical texts, but he did not hesitate to use apocryphal texts as well, as in the case of the life of Joseph, about which the earliest texts provide little information, or the Nativity of Jesus, each time making choices resulting from in-depth reflection. He also researched later events, in particular the life of Saint Quentin, the church's patron saint.

He kept perfectly abreast of events that occurred or were reported during his lifetime, such as the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at La Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1858), the history of Notre-Dame-de-Boulogne (Haigneré 1864), and Prosper Mérimée's "discovery" of the Romanesque abbey church at Conques (Mérimée 1838).

His background

There's no doubt that Paul Amédé Lecoutre is a highly cultured man. He came from a patriarchal family, as it was then called, respectable and very Christian, and quite wealthy. His father Jean Claude Marie Lecoutre (1791-1873), married to Louise Marie Sophie Hécart (1796-1862), was a farmer. He was undoubtedly a well-educated man, who knew how to read and write, as can be seen from his fine signature, appended next to that of schoolteacher Pierre Serret (to be discussed later) who is a witness, at the bottom of Paul Amédé's birth certificate. At least his wife knew how to write her name, which was not very common in those days (and the same goes for all his brothers and sisters).

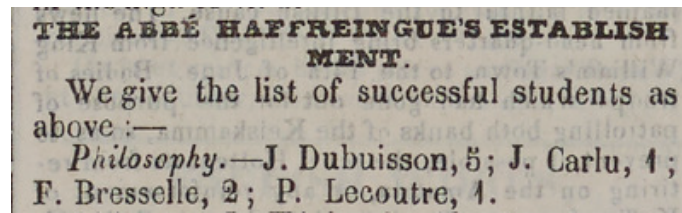
A close-up of a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored paper. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style and reads "Paul Amédé Lecoutre".A close-up of a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored paper. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style and reads "Sophie Hécart".

The future Abbé Lecoutre was the seventh of their nine children. Although we do not know all the details of his background, we can reasonably assume that he was educated at the Wierre-Effroy communal school by Pierre Serret, a public school teacher who was close to the family, and received his religious instruction from Abbé Jean-François Blaquart, who was also very close to the family. The latter undoubtedly also gave him a taste and a desire for church restoration.

He was a learned priest and art lover. He decorated his church with paintings and panels he had unearthed himself. He also acquired three paintings from the Musée de Boulogne in exchange for the donation of the old baptismal font (ACADEMIC - Wierre-Effroy 2023).

Abbé Blaquart has also published two books on the religious history of Wierre-Effroy, including the life of Saint Godeleine.

The future Abbé Lecoutre was then a pupil at the Institution Haffreingue in Boulogne-sur-Mer, which taught the minor seminary, until the age of 21, in 1951, when it is attested that he did brilliant studies and was awarded a prize for philosophy (The Boulogne Gazette 1851 page 1).



The Boulogne Gazette 1851, **446**, Saturday, November 10, page 1

He undoubtedly continued his education at the major seminary in Arras. This gave him an in-depth knowledge of the fundamental religious texts, both official and apocryphal, which formed the basis of his work.

Richard Honvault tells us about the boulonnais clergy at that time:

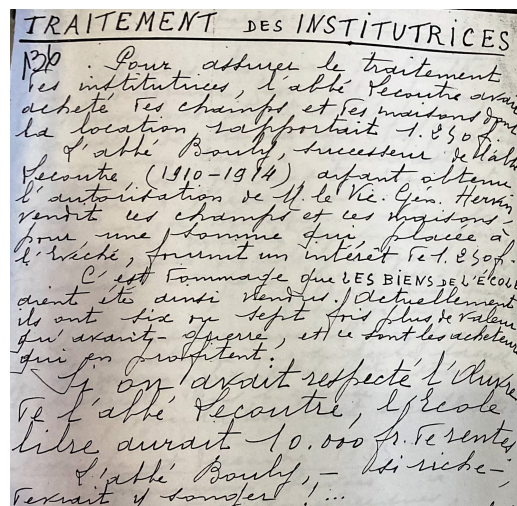
It's a clergy made up of strong personalities concerned with the culture of results, free from convention, above all pragmatic. It does not matter which path is taken, as long as Faith prevails (Honvault 2017).

He cites the aforementioned Abbé Daniel Haigneré (1824-1893), archivist for the town of Boulogne-sur-Mer, great scholar and renowned historian, and Abbé Alexis-Timothée Bouly (1865-1958), who is presented as “the father of French radiesthesia” (he coined the word “radiesthesia”). To these we can add Abbé Lecoutre, who is clearly also an illustration of this definition of the boulonnais clergy.

Daniel Haigneré was a pupil of schoolteacher Pierre François Joseph Lecoutre. He and Jean Claude Marie, Paul Amédé's father, had the same great-grandparents, Philippe Lecoustre and Jeanne Potterie. Canon Lefebvre provides us with this interesting description of Paul Amédé Lecoutre's education at the Wierre-Effroy school:

At the school in Alincthun, where he was sent, young Daniel [Haigneré] soon became the best pupil of Pierre-François-Joseph Lecoutre, a good and respectable teacher, devoted to his modest duties. In those days, there were few books in rural schools: the Catechism, Sacred History, Childish and Honest Civility and Christian Duties formed the pupil's entire baggage; under the teacher's dictation, one wrote oneself Grammar, Arithmetic and Geography. Despite these primitive methods, the young pupil's rapid progress astonished the worthy teacher (Lefebvre 1895 page 8).

Abbé Bouly was Abbé Lecoutre's successor at the Wirwignes church. It's fair to say that his brief time here did not make Abbé Lecoutre forgotten, as he sold the houses purchased by Abbé Lecoutre for the free school, which obviously did not leave parishioners with fond memories.



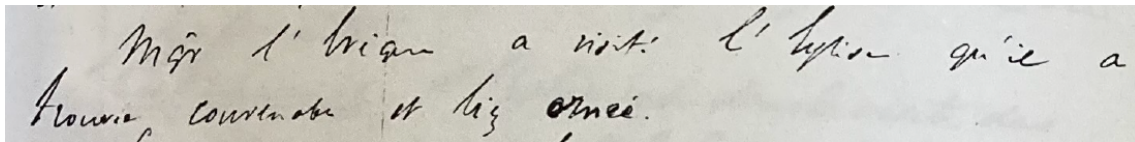
A conventional artist?

Abbé Lecoutre's first creations are therefore strongly guided by a figuration that can be described as conventional, based on the reproduction of existing works from a more or less widely accepted tradition. This applies in particular to the *antepedium* (decoration of the front) of the six side altars, the high altar, the side door, the confessional and the baptismal font, not to mention the stained glass windows whose scenes he chose and arranged. But it's important to realize that he first had to bend to social constraints to get his work accepted by the *conseil de fabrique*, whose approval he needed.

His conventional achievements enabled Abbé Lecoutre to obtain the approval and recognition of the *conseil de fabrique*. For example, the altar of Saint Joseph was approved in 1875:

Le Conseil examine et loue le nouvel autel de St Joseph et remercie Mr le curé du travail qu'il a fait¹.

This subsequently allowed him many more liberties. But he had given sufficient proof of his legitimacy for the Bishop of Arras Alfred Casimir Alexis Williez (1836-1911), who visited the church in 1904, to find it, if not conventional, at least "convenable." It is not known whether he judged the decoration to be to his taste but he commented "bien ornée" (well adorned).



Report of the Wirwignes *conseil de fabrique* 1904

¹The Council examined and praised the new altar at St Joseph's and thanked the parish priest for the work he had done.

A popular artist?

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5. The popular figurations: Examples

With his conventional representations, Abbé Lecoutre was able to reassure his parishioners, who were rediscovering traditional, relatively familiar images for a church, images. But, in return, it hardly aroused their curiosity. It is certainly for this reason that he then turned to new forms of expression, likely to address them more directly and raise their questions.

The announcement of the flight to Egypt

The upper part of the altar dedicated to Saint Joseph features another triptych, presumably of a later date. This one clearly shows Abbé Lecoutre's evolution. While it seems inspired by some traditional engraving, notably the draping of the vestments, the faces have a more popular appearance. We'll note the highly expressive positions of the arms and hands. In particular, Joseph's sleeping position expresses his attentiveness to God.



The texts engraved in gold letters are taken from verse 13 of chapter 2 of the *Gospel of Matthew*:

*qui cum recessissent ecce angelus Domini apparuit in somnis Ioseph dicens
surge et accipe puerum et matrem eius et fuge in Aegyptum
et esto ibi usque dum dicam tibi futurum est enim ut Herodes quaerat puerum ad perdendum eum*

After they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream saying

LEVEZ-VOUS PRENEZ L'ENFANT ET SA MÈRE ET FUYEZ EN EGYPT

[arise and take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt]

and stay there until I tell you because Herod will be looking for the child to put him to death

Abbé Lecoutre shows Saint Joseph asleep, an unusual depiction for his time. As with the stained glass window of the crucifixion, its message is explained by Pope Francis in his speech (in Spanish) on 16 January 2015 in Manila, Philippines (Francis 2015):

Yo quisiera decirles también una cosa personal. Yo quiero mucho a san José, porque es un hombre fuerte y de silencio y en mi escritorio tengo una imagen de san José durmiendo y

durmiendo cuida a la Iglesia. [...] Pero, al igual que san José, una vez que hemos oído la voz de Dios, debemos despertar, levantarnos y actuar.

I would also like to tell you something very personal. I have great love for Saint Joseph, because he is a man of silence and strength. On my table I have an image of Saint Joseph sleeping. Even when he is asleep, he is taking care of the Church. [...] But like Saint Joseph, once we have heard God's voice, we must rise from our slumber, we must get up and act.

In support of his argument, the Pope refers to verse 11 of chapter 13 of the *Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans*:

Et hoc scientes tempus quia hora est iam nos de somno surgere nunc enim propior est nostra salus quam cum credidimus

And that knowing the time it's time to wake up at last from our slumber now it's a fact our salvation is closer to us than when we believed

Abbé Lecoutre's even rarer depiction of Mary and Jesus asleep reinforces this message.

And the statue of Saint Joseph asleep has become a popular and even commercial object:



This beautiful 17-centimetre French hand-crafted statue in reconstituted stone depicts Saint Joseph asleep. The finishes are handmade.

One might think that the author of this statue used the same source as Abbé Lecoutre, who really is a precursor, with the added talent.



Also available in hand-painted resin, made in Italy by skilled craftsmen, in a slightly different version.

Jonah and the big fish

Subsequently, Abbé Lecoutre, while continuing to draw his inspiration from it, distanced himself more and more from traditional figurations, moving towards an art that could be considered more primitive, more naive. Thus his bas-relief depicting the prophet Jonah and the big fish ("the whale"¹), is a continuation of the previous triptych, but a departure from most representations. Note the richness of the details with the boat to the right of the fish, trees to represent dry land and the city of Nineveh at the top.

¹In the Latin version of the Bible, Saint Jerome in the *Book of Jonah* literally translates the Hebrew into *piscis grandis*, big fish (chapter 2 verse 1), and in the *Gospel of Matthew* we find the word *cetus*, sea monster or big sea fish (chapter 12 verse 40). However, it is most often equated with a whale.



In the Bible, the story is told by Saint Jerome in chapters 1 and 2 of the *Book of Jonah*. At the beginning of the book, the prophet, who refuses to obey God's order to go and announce Nineveh's destruction, flees in a boat with his companions, triggering a terrible storm. His companions ask him what they should do to him to calm the sea.

et dixit ad eos tollite me et mittite in mare et cessabit mare a vobis scio enim ego quoniam propter me tempestas grandis haec super vos [1-12]

et tulerunt Ionam et miserunt in mare et stetit mare a fervore suo [1-19]

et praeparavit Dominus piscem grandem ut deglutiret Ionam et erat Iona in ventre piscis tribus diebus et tribus noctibus [2-1]

et oravit Iona ad Dominum Deum suum de utero piscis [2-2]

et dixit Dominus pisci et evomuit Ionam in aridam [2-11]

and he said to them take me and throw me into the sea and the sea will indeed be calm for you for I have caused this great storm on you [1-12]

and they took Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its turmoil [1-19]

And the Lord prepared a great fish so that it swallowed Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. [2-1]

and Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the bowels of the fish [2-2]

and the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land [2-11]

The most common representations evoke Jonah's stay in the fish by showing him in the fish's mouth, with only his head out or his entire torso visible, with his arms forward (Traineau-Durozoy

2018). The scene generally expresses a certain violence, with unleashed elements to evoke God's wrath and, more often than not, a rather deformed and threatening monster, brutally vomiting Jonah and inspiring fear in him. One of the exceptions is the painting by Louis Brandin, painted in the first half of the 17th century, which shows a relatively serene scene despite a turbulent background (this painting is now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen). The depiction of Abbé Lecoutre is rather similar, with a fish that has calmed down after rejecting Jonah, whose attitude is quite similar to the one in the painting, but even more relaxed and confident. This representation takes on its popular value by excluding any notion that might frighten the viewer.



Jonah and the big fish: Abbé Lecoutre (seen in symmetry) and Louis Brandin

The statues of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, which are also on the pulpit, give a similar image of peace. Saint Peter is holding the sword by the blade, with the hilt pointing towards the ground, which is a very rare, if not unique, representation. Abbé Lecoutre's statue of Saint Paul can be contrasted with the one in front of the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome. Basilica in Rome.



Saint Peter and Saint Paul (Abbé Lecoutre) and statue of Saint Paul in front of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome

By a curious twist of fate, the sword on the statue of St Michael the Archangel slaying the dragon at the top of the church has been broken (but is this a chance occurrence?), as if to contribute to the impression of peace.



The baptismal font

The baptismal font is a popular tradition. It is located at the entrance to the nave in a baptistery, a sort of small chapel, whose floor and walls are covered with marble mosaics. The canted basin of the baptismal font is set into a sculpted, veined (black and white) marble base surmounted by a heptagonal block.



Its bulb-shaped lid is reminiscent of a Byzantine church dome. However, this type of lid can be found in churches where it would be difficult to claim Byzantine inspiration. We can also see a helmet in reference to the words of the apostle Paul in the *Letter to the Ephesians* (chapter 6

verse 17):

et galeam salutis adsumite et gladium Spiritus quod est verbum Dei
And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God
(See the sculpture of Saint Paul on the side door)

In building the baptistery, Abbé Lecoutre appeared to follow the general rules laid down in Xavier Barbier De Montault's treatise on the practice of building, furnishing and decorating churches according to canonical rules. This treatise, published in 1878 and therefore probably later, largely reproduces the prescriptions of Saint Charles Borromeo published in 1577 (Borromæi 1855). In any case, Abbé Lecoutre followed these rules (Barbier De Montault 1878 pages 105-106), given that it would have been difficult to create a round or octagonal shape for the chapel: *ur la chapelle*:

The baptistery is the place where the sacrament of baptism is solemnly administered. After the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, this one must be more ornate than the others and distinguished by a special decoration, similar to the subject.

This chapel must be carefully enclosed with railings or a turned wooden chancel: a simple balustrade would not suffice. The door is locked.

The plan is a square, as at Saint-Jean de Poitiers; a round, as at Pisa and formerly at Saint-Jean-le-rond in Paris; but more usually an octagon. The square is rare: it signifies the four cardinal points towards which, in memory of the four rivers of the earthly paradise, the priest throws the baptismal water during the blessing of the font.

For the baptismal font, however, he rejected the recommended octagonal shape:

The octagonal shape is given to baptismal fonts and baptisteries because the number eight symbolises the salvation, resurrection and beatitude acquired through baptism, as expressed by Saint Ambrose in two verses quoted by Gruter in his collection of inscriptions:

*Octogonum sanctos templum surrexit in usus,
Octogonus fons est munere dignus eo.
Hoc numero decuit sacri baptismatis aulam
Surgere, quo populis vera salus rediit.*

Abbé Lecoutre's baptismal font is a very rare creation. Because of its heptagonal shape, it does not correspond to conventional figurations. Abbé Lecoutre preferred the number 7, which evokes completeness and perfection and has always fascinated people, giving rise to countless interpretations. In addition to the 7 days of creation, this number is cited a great many times in the Bible.

6. Comic strips and popular cartoonists

Abbé Lecoutre forerunner of the Christian comic strip

Many of Abbé Lecoutre's works, such as the triptych depicting the Annunciation of the Flight into Egypt, can be seen as comic strips.

... la bande dessinée est un art populaire et une manière de faire lire les enfants¹

(Aurélié Filippetti, French Minister of Culture – The Angoulême International Comics Festival 2013).

The similarity is perhaps even more striking for the “panelsboxes” on the high altar, where the angels are the figures and the banners are the phylacteries² contenant les vertus.



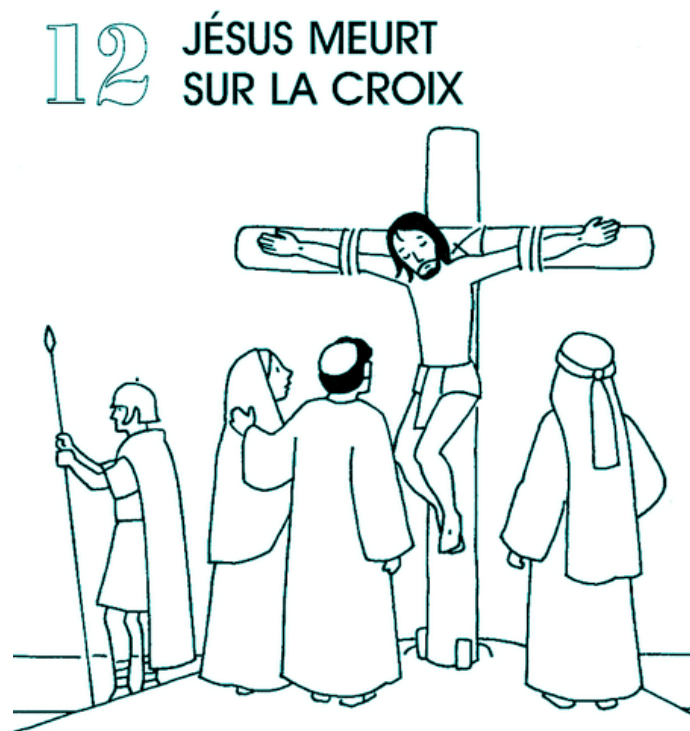
The stained glass windows, the designs for which were chosen by Abbé Lecoutre, also depict scenes from the Old and New Testaments and tell stories from the lives of saints, most of them with captions, which is not very common. of saints, most with legends, which is not very common.

Similarly, the Stations of the Cross, whose stations are explained within the frame itself, which again is quite unusual, can be read like a comic strip.



¹...comic strips are a popular art form and a way of getting children to read.

²It is interesting to note that the term phylactery, now used to designate the “speech bubbles” in comic strips, has religious origins: Among the Jews, it is a small cubic box containing strips of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah.



One might think that Abbé Lecoutre inspired this modern comic strip

Abbé Lecoutre and popular cartoonists

Dominique Arnaud (1981) says that art lovers might think of the multitude of details that make up Dubout's drawings, or of the Palais du Facteur Cheval, which embodied his dreamlike ambition. Albert Dubout (1905-1976) is considered one of the greatest French cartoonists of the 20th century, if not the greatest. His work is unquestionably a form of popular expression.



Abbé Lecoutre will forgive this daring comparison, but is not his Eve's ingenuous expression both the opposite and the complement of Dubout's affected mannerisms of the eternal feminine?



7. Epilogue 2: A popular artist?

In the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, art historian John Russell Harper gives a definition of folk art that applies remarkably well to Abbé Lecoutre, whose aim was to hold the attention of his parishioners:

Folk art embraces a wide range of artistic works, **a mixture of naivety and sophistication, cultural tradition and individual innovation**. Although varied definitions abound, folk art in general falls into 2 categories: cultural and individual. Cultural art has an ethnic basis (eg, French, English, German, Polish, Ukrainian), tends to be conservative, and reflects the common ethos in a community; **individual art is innovative**, the expression of a unique if sometimes eccentric personality. Whether they are paintings, sculptures, carvings or objects embellished with pictorial and decorative motifs, **all folk-art products have popular appeal**. **The people who fashioned them intended them to interest the ordinary citizens who were their neighbours, friends and acquaintances** [emphases added] (Harper 2015)

In this definition, “popular” (folk) is taken in its original sense from the Latin *populus*, people understood as a limited and well-defined entity: the inhabitants of a constituted state or city, the Roman people, the Syracusan people, etc., and we might add the people of Wirwignes. There is not necessarily the idea of art aimed at a vast public, which refers to the Latin *vulgus*, the crowd, the multitude, the common people.

In his presentation of the church at Wirwignes, Dominique Arnaud (1981) highlights four aspects of Abbé Lecoutre’s work – popular art and naive art, borrowing from the masters of the past and inventiveness:

Could [the art lover] imagine everything about this unique creation, this superbly naive monument to popular art that has borrowed from the masters of the past while retaining its freshness of invention?

A popular artist?

Abbé Lecoutre’s main motivation is undoubtedly to be found in the above definition of folk art. But this does not mean that his art can be confined to this category.

On the upper part of the altar in the Chapelle du Sacré Coeur, Abbé Lecoutre depicted the Nativity of Jesus for a second time in an extremely simplified way, retaining only the manger and the infant Jesus and adding the light of a star illuminating the latter. This evolution enabled him to better adapt to his audience.



In the first Nativity, his audience was above all the *conseil de fabrique*, which had to accept him. It was only after this that he was able to address his parishioners directly, using figurations that would be more accessible to them. The simplicity of the scene is accentuated by the striking effect of perspective provided by the position of the star in the corner, whereas it is traditionally situated above the cot, and by the inclination of the manger.

To illustrate the ambiguity of any arbitrary classification, let's take the example of Fra Angelico. A comparison of his Cortona Annunciation with his later fresco (circa 1440-1450) for the Florentine convent of San Marco reveals a similar evolution: the artist, while reproducing his work, adapted it to the audience: in the first case, the wealthy cloth merchant Giovanni du Cola di Cecco, for whom the chapel in which it stood was intended, and in the second, the monks of the convent. The contrast between the opulence evoked by the first Annunciation and the monastic destitution of the second is striking.



Fra Angelico's Annunciations: Cortona (left) and Convent of San Marco (right)

It could also be said that in Fra Angelico's Annunciation, as in Abbé Lecoutre's Nativity, the first figuration calls for a kind of intellectual game in which you have to interpret a coded message conveyed by clues that are more or less visible at first glance, such as the position of the hands, and so on. This should please those who want to discuss every detail; In Cortona's Annunciation, for example, the column in front of Mary would be the traditional symbol of Christ. Proof of this can be found in Mary's response to the angel *ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI [FIAT] MIHI SECUNDUM VERBUM TUUM* the word *FIAT* that makes up the Incarnation is hidden by the column: it would pass inside it, in order to preserve the mystery of the Incarnation (Arasse 1999), which is amplified by the fact that the text is written backwards and from right to left. Etc.

In contrast, in the Annunciation in the Convent of San Marco, Fra Angelico removed most of the clues, including the Bible. This pared-down approach invites the monk to deep reflection and real meditation. This is what Abbé Lecoutre encourages us to do. His second Nativity of Jesus seems to invite us to question ourselves and to scrutinise the star, in the manner of Galileo

(1564-1642) with his astronomical telescope¹. The comparison is not accidental, as we know that Galileo spent a large part of his youth in Florence, and that it was the technique of perspective used by the artists of the *quattrocento* that helped him to understand what he was seeing through his telescope.

Perspicere et intellegere

Going beyond its initial “popular appeal,” Abbé Lecoutre’s work is now aimed at everyone, believers and non-believers alike, and not just his parishioners. Those who want to obtain answers by explaining the smallest details can refer to the very many commentaries that have been made on these two Annunciations. Sklerijenn (2009) provides a summary of these. This text undoubtedly contains elements that can be applied to other works by Abbé Lecoutre.

For example, we could try to explain every detail of this bas-relief, which is the right-hand part of the triptych on the altar of the chapel of the Virgin Mary (the centre being the Nativity of Jesus).



Perspective

Taken from Late Latin *perspectivus*, “relating to optics, perspective,” derived from *perspicere*, “look attentively,” itself composed from the intensive prefix *per-* and *specere*, “look”

Intelligence

Taken from Latin *intellegentia*, *intelligentia*, “action of discerning, of understand”

Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française, 9ème édition

“Perspective” and “intelligence” in their original meanings – to look attentively and understand (*perspicere et intellegere*) – this is what Abbé Lecoutre invites us to do with his “populars” figurations.

In a way similar to Abbé Lecoutre’s reinterpretation of the Nativity, the great British artist David Hockney (born 1937), who in 2018 became the world’s most expensive living painter with a painting that sold for 90.3 million dollars, has created a “variation” of the Annunciation from the Convent of San Marco that pays homage to Fra Angelico and simplifies the scene even further.

¹ Could anyone imagine any other instrument than Galileo’s telescope for looking at the sky from Nazareth?

... a variation on Fra Angelico's Annunciation, from the convent of San Marco in Florence, but much enlarged. To the left, the space leaks beyond the palisade - which appears in the 1437 fresco - and to the right towards a meadow and night - Hockney's invention.

Le Monde (2017)

Yes, I've always wanted to put you at the centre. There are some old paintings that do this very well, those by Fra Angelico for example. I love Fra Angelico, and Piero della Francesca. They are the two great masters of space and figures. There was a reproduction of Fra Angelico's Annunciation in a corridor at Bradford Grammar School, where I was a pupil. I've always known it, always loved it. There's something so obvious about this painting! When I'm in Florence, I go to the Convent of San Marco every morning to see it.

Libération (2017)



Perspicere et intellegere?

**Instead of explaining the smallest details, we might prefer
the eloquent sobriety of David Hockney.**

A naive artist?

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8. The naive figurations: Examples

The monumental pulpit, located against the south jamb of the triumphal arch, is one of Abbé Lecoutre's last creations and the crowning glory of his work¹.



¹It replaces the old wooden pulpit that he modified in 1877.



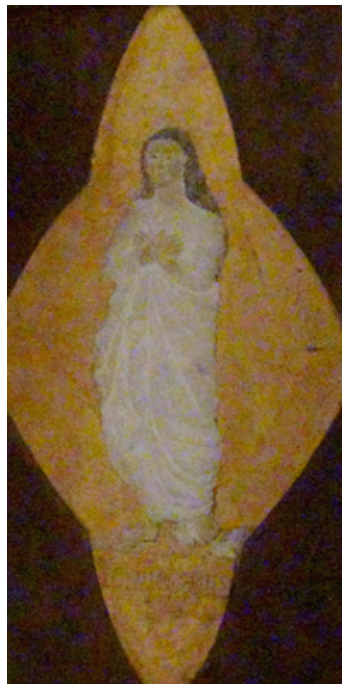
The pulpit itself rests on a plinth made from an enormous block of Carrara marble, depicting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. On the pulpit, Abbé Lecoutre has taken up themes he has dealt with previously: the apostles, the virtues, and he has reproduced figures and scenes from the Old Testament. Bas-reliefs depict Jonah and the big fish, Jacob's dream, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Elijah at Horeb. Others depict the theological virtues – faith, hope and charity – and the cardinal virtues – prudence, fortitude, justice and temperance, the latter on the door at the top of the staircase. The bas-reliefs are separated by statues of figures, including Saint Peter, Saint Paul and Judas Maccabaeus, as well as the four evangelists - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

De Corbie (1933) gives the following description:

Adam and Eve, standing in the middle of a field of lilies, listen to the pernicious words of the serpent wrapped around the symbolic apple tree, whose enlarged branches support the pulpit itself.

The virtuosity and truthfulness with which the artist has treated the masterly bunch of lilies representing Paradise on Earth and the bushy, skilfully simplified branches of the Tree of Good and Evil leave us dumbfounded.

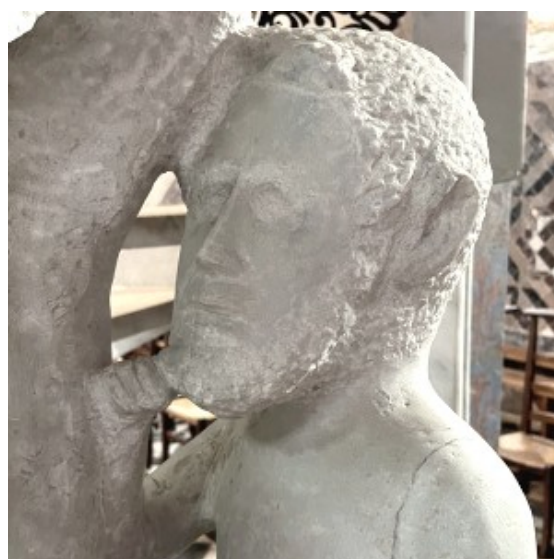
The engraved panels are reminiscent of the sumptuous leaves on a Japanese screen.



The ensemble, which has often been considered a typical example of naive art, can be seen as an essential chapter in Abbé Lecoutre's catechism. It alone would merit a full study. We will confine ourselves here essentially to analysing "the dream of Jacob" ("Jonah and the big fish" was dealt with in chapter 5 *Popular figurations: Examples*).

Adam and Eve


While Adam and Eve can be seen as naive figurations, the work with the field of lilies and the snake also has a conventional aspect.



In the film by Zazzi (2002) Louis Harlé, former mayor of Wirwignes, tells us that for the characters in Adam and Eve, Abbé Paul took as his models his neighbour, “le père Pécron,” and his “*cousine de Colembert*.” This resemblance to characters known to all his parishioners, by adding a particular popular dimension, with a touch of humour, could only fuel their reactions. This was undoubtedly the effect Abbé Lecoutre was looking for.

His neighbour was shoemaker Joseph Marie Pécron (1847-1915). There is little doubt that the “*cousine de Colembert*” is Marie Rose Gomel² (1877-1960). In 1886, she lived with Abbé Lecoutre and his sister Geneviève Marceline Lecoutre (1821-1898)³. She is the abbé’s great-niece (not cousin). This would place the sculpture of the Adam and Eve statue around the mid-1890s.

Jacob’s dream

 Jacob’s dream – or ladder – is described in verses 10 to 22 of chapter 28 of the *Book of Genesis*. We will limit ourselves here to the three verses relating to the dream itself, the others relating to the character of Jacob are beyond the scope of our subject.

cumque venisset ad quendam locum et vellet in eo requiescere post solis occubitum tulit de lapidibus qui iacebant et subponens capiti suo dormivit in eodem loco [11]

viditque in somnis scalam stantem super terram et cacumen illius tangens caelum angelos quoque Dei ascendentes et descendentes per eam [12]

et Dominum innixum scalae dicentem sibi ego sum Dominus Deus Abraham patris tui et Deus Isaac terram in qua dormis tibi dabo et semini tuo [13]

When he came to a certain place and wanted to rest there after sunset He carried stones that lay under his head he slept in the same place [11]

and he saw in his dreams a ladder set on the earth with its top touching the sky also angels of God ascending and descending through it [12]

and the Lord leaning on the ladder saying to himself I am the Lord the God Abraham your father and the God of Isaac the land on which you sleep I will give to you and to your descendants [13]

This passage from the Old Testament was taken up again in the *Gospel of John* in verse 51 of chapter 1. It’s Christ speaking:

et dicit ei amen amen dico vobis videbitis caelum apertum et angelos Dei ascendentes et descendentes supra Filium hominis

and he said to him truly truly I say to you you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man

It is interesting to compare Abbé Lecoutre’s bas-relief with two paintings depicting the same scene, one from the 16th century and the other from the 19th century.

The first, dated 1620, is a work by the Flemish painter Frans Francken the Younger (1581-1642), kept at the Santa Cruz Museum in Toledo. It is faithful to the text, with Jacob asleep below and the Lord above, linked by a ladder on which two angels descend and two others ascend.

The second, dated 1847 and housed in the Musée de Grenoble, was painted by Alexandre Laemlein (1813-1871), a German-born artist who became a naturalised French citizen in 1835. Moving away from the text, he focuses on Jacob, lying in the foreground with his arms outstretched, and God the Father, placed in the centre, almost at the bottom of the steps⁴. Above God, a number of angels ascend and descend, but find themselves in a gloom, while the light that descends from

²She indeed married Alfred Casimir Brunet on 2 July 1910 in Colembert, a neighbouring commune of Wirwignes (AD 62 M 4220 Colembert pages 139-140).

³Recensement 1886 Wirwignes AD 62 M 4220 page 2.

⁴It would be difficult to imagine God on a scale.



heaven illuminates God and Jacob. Théophile Gautier (1847 page 3) recognised a certain merit in this painting, in which he found several influences:

the angels and mystical figures look proud and stand on the steps with with a certain exaggerated swagger and a certain contoured taste, half-Florentine, half-Rococo, sprinkled with a bit of Cornelius, which are not lacking in effect.

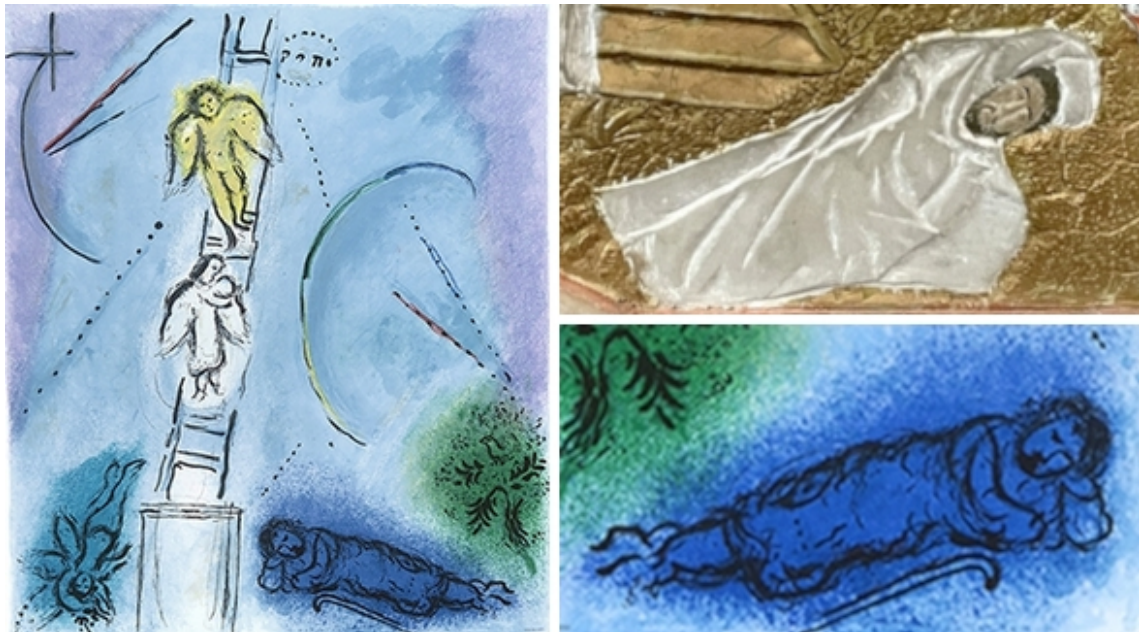
Far from the sometimes outrageous influences on religious paintings of his time, Abbé Lecoutre has produced a refined version, retaining only the essential elements of the scene.



Jacob below, lying on a stone, and the Lord above, bear a clear resemblance to the painting by Francken the Younger.



Jacob is serenely asleep, like Joseph in the bas-relief of the flight into Egypt. Like Laemlein, Abbé Lecoutre represented the angels not on a ladder, but on steps. These convey a respect for God, enhanced without heaviness or ostentation by the gold, and, like the ordinary beds in the scenes of the nativity and Joseph's death, appear both more reassuring than a ladder and more familiar to the viewer. In contrast to the two previous paintings, the decor is essentially limited to palm trees and clouds. A poster by Chagall, printed as a lithograph by Mourlot in 1975, displays a similar sobriety. Marc Chagall (1887-1985), born in Belarus, naturalised French in 1937) was Jewish. He did a considerable amount of work illustrating the biblical message and depicted Jacob's dream on several occasions. One might think that Chagall's Jacob, whose work does not belong to any particular school, was inspired by that of Abbé Lecoutre.



Note that in Jacob's poster the angel seen falling in the lower left-hand corner implicitly represents an angel who has ascended. Chagall takes up the Jewish interpretation of the *Midrash*, the rabbis' commentary on the sacred texts: the ascending angels symbolise the four exiles of the Jewish people – Babylon, Persia, Greece and Edom – and they are therefore condemned to fall.

Some elements of interpretation

In fact, even if we confine ourselves to Christians, few episodes in the Bible have probably given rise to so many different interpretations (see Hammann 1986). Virtually all of them emphasise the duality of the rise and fall of the angels. Thus Clarke (1817 *ST JOHN CHAP. I. 51*), commenting on the *Gospel of John*, sees in it the fact that

by the angels of God ascending and descending, is to be understood, that a perpetual intercourse should now be opened between heaven and earth, through the medium of Christ who was God manifested in the flesh

It is on the meaning of this relationship that interpretations differ. We will mention just three here.

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas saw in the ascending angels “what belongs to contemplation,” and for the descending angels, “what belongs to action” (Hammann 1986 page 35). In the 17th century, Bossuet gave an interpretation based on a quasi-divine conception of charity: “the same charity that fills angels and men moves them differently.” Charity “lifts mortal men from earth to heaven, from the creature to the Creator,” and on the contrary “pushes heavenly spirits from heaven to earth, and from the Creator to the creature” (Hammann 1986 page 39).

It was the Protestant Martin Luther, in the 16th century, who emphasised the descending angels, reversing the order of movement described in the biblical texts.

The descending and ascending movement [reversal of order] of the angels on the ladder expresses the two movements of holiness (sanctification): first, holiness, which descends to us through the divine word, makes us holy, without our doing anything to deserve it [. . .]. The second movement, the ascending of the angels, is the “holiness of works;” it is the justified believer who responds to God. However the holiness of man is not “pure,” and only the downward movement, that which arouses faith through the word, is “pure” (Hammann 1986 page 37).

In addition, Abbé Lecoutre gives an astonishing impression of perspective, to which we will return in chapter 10 *Epilogue 3: A naive artist?*

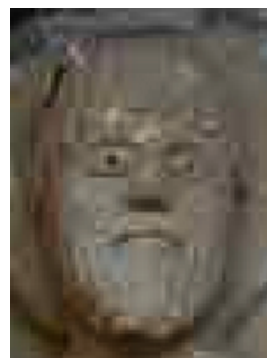
Naive, popular, conventional?

It is also interesting to compare Abbé Lecoutre’s statues with those of the apostles in the tympanum of Perse (12th or 13th century), the former parish church of Espalion (Aveyron), a priory dependent on the Abbey of Conques. (Séguret 2009 and see chapter 1: *The canonical text*).



Abbé Lecoutre

Archaic?



Tympan de Perse

9. Abbé Lecoutre and Facteur Cheval

When it comes to French architecture, the key figure in naive art is Joseph Ferdinand Cheval (1836-1924), a contemporary of Abbé Lecoutre. Known as the “Facteur Cheval,” he became famous for having spent 33 years of his life, from 1879 to 1922, building a palace called “*le Palais Idéal*” (the Ideal Palace). This palace, located in Hauterives in the Drôme, was the first French monument to naive architecture to be listed, and is therefore considered to be the benchmark of its kind. The official *Palais Idéal* website gives the following presentation.

April 1879. Ferdinand Cheval, a rural postman aged 43 at the time, stumbles upon a stone so strange on his rounds that it awakens a dream. A true self-taught man, he devoted 33 years of his life to building alone a dream palace in his vegetable garden, inspired by nature, postcards and the first illustrated magazines he distributed. Every day, he travelled some thirty kilometres to make his rounds in the countryside, collecting stones with the help of his trusty wheelbarrow. His dream palace was completed in 1912. In the heart of a luxuriant garden, he imagined an uninhabitable palace, inhabited by an incredible bestiary – octopus, doe, caiman, elephant, pelican, bear, birds... But also giants, fairies, mythological characters, or even waterfalls, architecture from every continent. An architectural work as unclassifiable as it is universal. Unique in the world, the Ideal Palace has inspired artists for over a century. Independent of any artistic movement, built without any architectural rules, the Ideal Palace was admired by the Surrealists, and was recognised as a work of art brut (Official website of the Palais Idéal – Facteur Cheval <http://www.facteurcheval.com/>).

It was in 1969 that André Malraux, the French Minister of Culture, decided to classify it, saying of the Ideal Palace:

What is the Ideal Palace? It is the only example of naive art in architecture. Naive art is a banal phenomenon, known to all, but which has no architecture... At a time when naive art has become a considerable reality, it would be childish not to classify the only naive architecture in the world, when it is we French who are lucky enough to possess it, and wait for it to be destroyed.

Similitudes

There are some striking similarities.



Abbé LECOUTRE



Facteur CHEVAL

Beyond these similarities, there are a number of points in common.

- By virtue of their profession, they are in close and constant contact with the inhabitants of their villages.
- Both were inspired by their travels, the former actual, the latter imaginary. While the Abbé travelled to the Holy Land, Egypt and Italy, the postman fed his imagination from the travel magazines and postcards he distributed on his rounds. It was also representations – engravings, paintings, religious images, etc. – that served as the main inspiration for Abbé Lecoutre.
- While the Bible and the Gospels were obviously Abbé Lecoutre's main guide, they were also a source of inspiration for Facteur Cheval, since the Ideal Palace features the grotto of the Virgin Mary, the four Evangelists, a Calvary with angels and pilgrims. By an astonishing coincidence, he created in his palace a grotto dedicated to Saint Amédée, patron saint and lord of Hauterives, which he spent three years working on. Amédée de Clermont, born around 1110 into the family of the lords of Hauterives, was Abbot of Hautecombe and then Bishop of Lausanne.
- They procured the basic materials for their work themselves, the marble of Marquise for the abbé, the stones found during his tour for the postman. Abbé Lecoutre even brought back some stones from his trip to the Holy Land, which were obviously of modest dimensions, but which he placed there as relics. For example, at the top of each part of the triptych on the altar of the chapel of the Sacred Heart, he set a stone, the reference to which he engraved in the marble: John the Baptist for the one on the left, the Holy Sepulchre for the one in the centre, and the Mount of Olives for the one on the right. He did the same at the four ends of a cross placed above the altar in the chapel of Saint Anne.



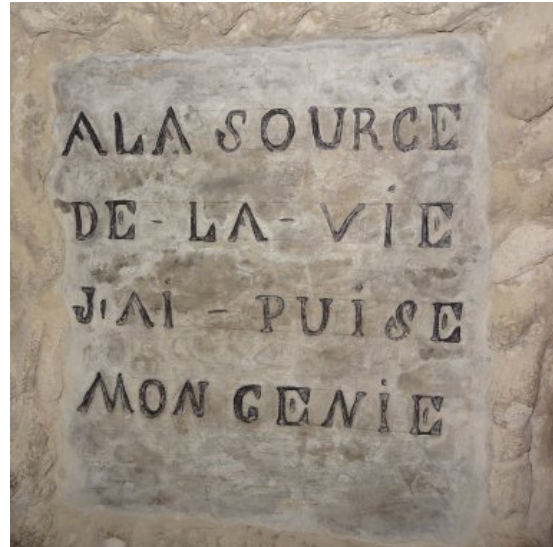
- It's hardly surprising that humility, defined in the Bible as gentleness, modesty and self-denial, features prominently on the altar of the church in Wirwignes. Facteur Cheval seems to be responding to Abbé Lecoutre by saying that he has no doubts about his genius.

The many visitors who come each year to admire my masterpiece all leave delighted and enthusiastic, thanking me greatly for all the trouble and hard work I have put into building this 8th Wonder of the Dauphiné, of France and even of the world, it is said (Official website of the Palais Idéal – Facteur Cheval <http://www.facteurcheval.com/>).

But this is not necessarily incompatible if you agree with the words of the character in Bernanos, also a country priest in the Pas-de-Calais, in Ambricourt, less than 50 kilometres from Wirwignes:



Abbé LECOUTRE



Facteur CHEVAL

Self-doubt is not humility; in fact, I believe it is sometimes the most exalted, almost delirious form of pride (Bernanos 1936 page 1222).

Différences

There were, however, fundamental differences between the two men: the audience they wished to address, their educational background, their initial knowledge of artistic techniques, and the means at their disposal.

The target audience

Facteur Cheval wrote about his own tomb, which he also built:

Many visitors also come to visit him after seeing my “*Palais de rêves*” and return home amazed, telling their friends that it’s not a fairy tale, that it’s the real thing. You have to see it to believe it. It’s also for Eternity that I wanted to come and rest in the Field of Equality (Official website of the Palais Idéal – Facteur Cheval <http://www.facteurcheval.com/>).

While Facteur Cheval awaits visitors from all over the world, Abbé Lecoutre focuses on his parishioners. His “tomb of silence and endless rest”, as he called it, which is the most visible burial ground in the Hauterives cemetery, is contrasted with the discretion of Abbé Lecoutre’s grave in the Wirwignes cemetery.

School training

Facteur Cheval was truly a self-taught man.

Joseph Ferdinand Cheval came from a fairly poor farming family and worked with his father. His school attendance was therefore very limited. He started school at the age of 6 and left when he was 12 (Official website of the Palais Idéal – Facteur Cheval <http://www.facteurcheval.com/>).

Initial knowledge of artistic techniques

In this area too, Facteur Cheval was a self-taught man, completely unaware of the rules of architecture and following an entirely empirical approach. In particular, to make his Ideal Palace stand


upright, he had to invent or reinvent various construction techniques, notably appearing as one of the precursors of reinforced concrete.

On the other hand, it is hard to believe that Abbé Lecoutre could have been totally ignorant of construction methods and artistic techniques. In particular, it seems hard to believe that he could have displayed such talent as a cabinetmaker and woodcarver without a minimum of technical knowledge.

He undoubtedly received at least some instruction during his studies. He may also have acquired certain techniques from what he read. For a man who was obviously observant and skilful with his hands, having seen craftsmen or artists at work may also have been a formative factor. The notions of geometry that he had learnt also appear to have been essential, for example to his creation of a seven-sided baptismal font.

The means at their disposal

Abbé Lecoutre did not experience the same difficulties as Facteur Cheval, who had to make do with what he had. He was able to acquire the land needed to build his palace, but he started from nothing. It was he and he alone who gathered the materials, transporting the stones in his wheelbarrow at nightfall – pebbles, sandstone, flint, tuff, etc. – to which he added oysters and shells from Marseille. To assemble them, he had to obtain more than 3,500 sacks of lime and cement, as well as scrap metal.



10. Epilogue 3: A naive artist?

According to André Malraux, who decided in 1969 to classify the *Palais Idéal du facteur Cheval*,

[Naive artists] dare to believe that time is nothing, that death itself is an illusion, and that beyond misery, suffering and fear [...] for those who know how to see, breathe and hear, there is an everyday paradise, a golden age with its fruits, its perfumes, its music [...] an eternal Eden, where the springs of youth await to erase wrinkles and fatigue (Malraux undated)

This statement applies to Abbé Lecoutre. But it is only a description of the artist's state of mind, not a definition of his art.

Michel Thévoz's definition of naive art is generally accepted:

A naive painter, according to the most common definition, is a self-taught artist, generally from a working-class background, with only a rudimentary culture, or at least one alien to the "culture of the educated." [...] As for his style, we can sense his commitment to meticulously rendering reality, without submitting to the canons of conventional figuration, which makes him akin to child realism. Perhaps it is this paradox that essentially characterises the naive painter: his inability – very fertile – to conform to the academic principles he claims to embrace (Thévoz 2016 page 87).

But it certainly does not apply to Abbé Lecoutre.

A naive artist?

Abbé Lecoutre was a great scholar (see chapter *Epilogue 1: A conventional artist?*), well versed in construction methods and artistic techniques, in particular the rules of perspective combined with a knowledge of geometry. As for know-how, it seems difficult that he could have displayed such talent as a cabinetmaker and woodcarver without a minimum of technical knowledge, acquired through his studies and reading. To take just two examples, how else could he have drawn his reproduction of Fra Angelico's Annunciation or a heptagonal shape for his baptismal font? For a man who was obviously observant and skilful with his hands, watching craftsmen and artists at work may also have been a formative factor.

Abbé Lecoutre's lesson in perspective

If an example were needed, one of the bas-reliefs in the pulpit representing Jacob's dream – or ladder – is particularly illustrative.

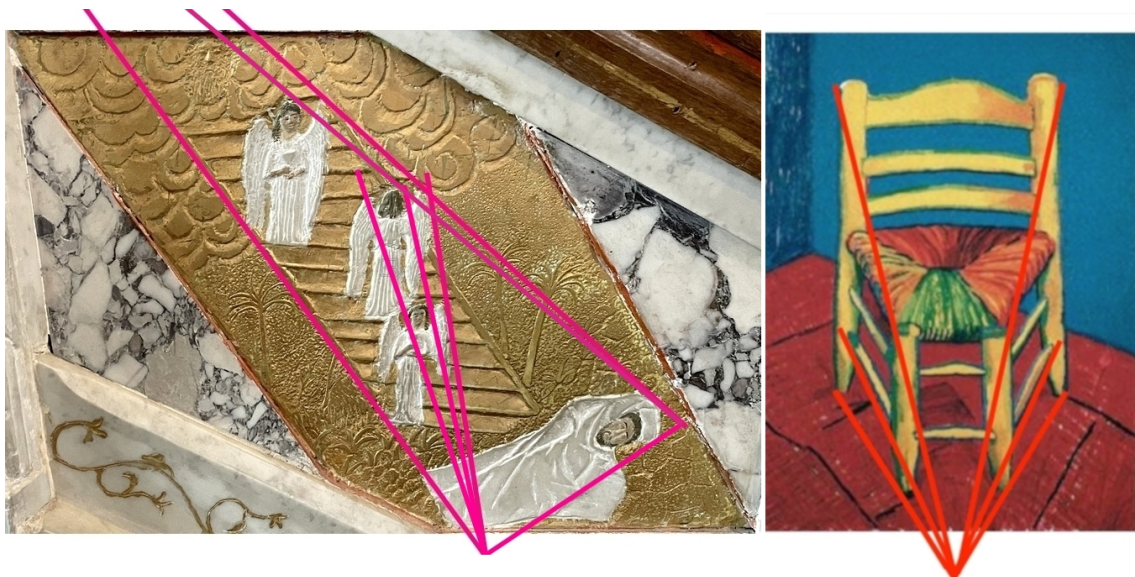
Here, Abbé Lecoutre gives us an astonishing lesson in the use of the rules of perspective. To understand him, we can compare his work with the painting by his famous contemporary Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), "Vincent's chair with his pipe (1888)," and the version produced 100 years later in 1988 by the great British artist David Hockney (see chapter 7: *Epilogue 2: A popular artist?*)

Abbé Lecoutre, like Van Gogh, does not use the canonical rules of perspective, but both exaggerate these rules with steps and tiles that are not parallel. The result is an effect of vertigo that gives the impression that the ground for the latter and the steps for the former are tilting towards us (and towards Jacob for Abbé Lecoutre).



Jacob's Ladder and Vincent's chair by Van Gogh (left) and by David Hockney (right)

Abbé Lecoutre accentuated the effect by using what is now recognised following Father Pavel Florensky's article published in 1919 as the *reverse perspective* (Florensky 2002). David Hockney's chair, which appears to emerge in front of the painting, highlights this principle. Abbé Lecoutre goes even further by using a twofold inverted perspective. As with the chair, a forward vanishing point takes us as close as possible to the subject of the work, and in the case of Abbé Lecoutre to Jacob asleep, while a second vanishing point takes us skywards. The ladder is thus a real link between Jacob – and therefore us who look at him and the earth – and God. In this way, the ladder is thus a real link between Jacob – and therefore us who look at him and the earth – and God. The impression is heightened by the size of the three angels, which is also the opposite of the classical rules, with the closest subject being the smallest.



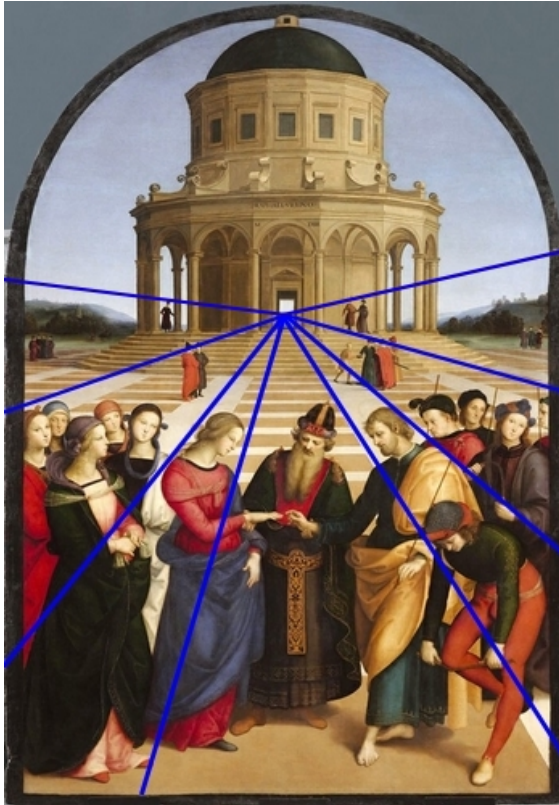
In Van Gogh's painting, the painter's presence is evoked only by his pipe and tobacco. Hockney goes so far as to remove these elements¹ and, by the force of perspective, we can still imagine Van Gogh sitting in the chair. Would we not have the same sensation of still imagining the angels if we erased them in Abbé Lecoutre's Jacob's dream?

We have already mentioned the effect of perspective associated with the popular "scene" of the nativity on the upper part of the altar in the chapel of the sacred heart (chapter 7 *Epilogue 2: A popular artist?*). But Abbé Lecoutre also used inverted perspective in conventional representations.

Consider again the bas-relief of the death of Saint Joseph (chapter 2 *The apocryphal texts*). The

¹In another painting, also dating from 1988, he has only depicted the pipe.

painting by Raphael that inspired it is a masterly illustration of the rigorous use of the classical rules of perspective with a vanishing point in the centre of the painting, corresponding to the entrance to the building. By depicting only the three main characters, Abbé Lecoutre moves this vanishing point out of the scene, into the sky. However, by changing the bishop's posture by straightening him up, he makes another use of perspective, which is no less rigorous. This is also in line with his desire to give Joseph the same importance as Mary, unlike Raphael.



We are therefore led to wonder whether the judgement of naivety
abbé Lecoutre's work is not itself naive.





Concluding remarks

The examination of Abbé Lecoutre's work presented here, even if it considers his main achievements, is only partial. An exhaustive study would certainly reveal other aspects of his work. A detailed examination of the various artistic techniques he used would also be a valuable contribution. However, this should not call into question the following conclusions.

Abbé Lecoutre clearly had an in-depth knowledge of religious texts – both ancient texts, official and apocryphal, and modern texts, particularly those published during his lifetime – which formed the basis of his work. He was also obviously familiar with a very large number of religious works of art, drawing his inspiration from a wide variety of sources, including Gothic art, Romanesque art and the Italian Renaissance, as well as more recent engravings and the pious images that were widespread in his day.

Given his objective – “to transform his church into a monumental catechism,” which imposed strict limits – he was able to demonstrate an astonishing eclecticism with original creations that expressed his message. But its church is nonetheless strikingly harmonious architecturally, with a surprising balance of shapes and colours.

Both in the countless texts he inscribed in his church and in his artistic works which, together with these texts, make up his illustrated catechism, Abbé Lecoutre often appears as a precursor, taking into account and even anticipating the evolution of the Catholic Church. At the time, the use of French for quotations from the Bible and for prayers was truly innovative and could even be considered provocative.

Whether, for example, the order of the virtues in the high altar, or in contrast the lack of order in the scenes in the stained glass windows, or again the representation of Salome in the nativity scene, his choices always appear deliberate and carefully thought through.

The fact that he chose Fra Angelico's Annunciation for one of his first works is particularly revealing. By placing at the entrance to his church this painting, considered to be one of the greatest achievements of the Florentine school, with its impressive mastery of perspective, Abbé Lecoutre could have us believe that he anticipated that Fra Angelico would become the universal patron saint of artists a century later. It was with the *motu proprio* of 3 October 1982 that Pope John Paul II beatified this Dominican monk, Giovanni of Fiesole, known as Fra Angelico, one of the greatest Christian artists in history. Two years later, on 18 February 1984, he proclaimed him the universal patron saint of artists. In this *motu proprio* (John Paul II 1982) the Pope quotes testimonies from contemporaries of Fra Angelico who describe a man who could certainly have been a model for Abbé Lecoutre:

homo totius modestiae et vitae religiosae (Giuliano Lupaccini (m. 1458), *Cronaca di S. Marco*, cod. n. 370, fol. 6V, in Bibliotheca Medicea Laurentiana, Florentiae, asserv.)

A totally modest and religious man

floruit et multis etiam virtutibus idem / ingenio mitis religione probus (Domenico Da Corella (m. 1483), Theotocon, cod. G 2.8768, fol. 79r, in Bibliotheca Nat. Florentina asserv.)

flourishing in many virtues / gentle in spirit honest in religion

Given the richness of his inspirations, we could say that Abbé Lecoutre's work is at once conventional, popular and naive, and no doubt use many other designations.

But, without passing qualitative judgement on Abbé Lecoutre's art, the similarities that can be found with such renowned artists as Fra Angelico, Raphaël, Vincent Van Gogh, Marc Chagall and David Hockney, and also with major works of architecture, both Gothic and Romanesque, show that this art cannot and should not be confined to one category.

We therefore think it more appropriate to say of Abbé Lecoutre:

He is not a conventional artist

He is not a popular artist

He is not a Naïve artist

He is an artist

For Abbé Lecoutre, who devoted his life to his church, could there be any other conclusion than a Latin quotation? This one is not taken from the Bible or the classics, but from a book written entirely in Latin (without translation) and published in... 2023.

***Colores vitae maiores factae sunt,
et vita ipsa maior facta est,
quia in ecclesiam eius est.***

The colours of life have become greater,
and life itself has become greater,
because it's in his church.

Adapted from Grau (2023)

*“Colores vitae maiores factae sunt, et vita ipsa maior facta est, quia in tabulis pictis eius est.”*²

²In the book *De Civitate Angelorum* (From the City of Angels) written by Donatien Grau, this quotation is precisely a description of David Hockney's painting.

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