

The Iron Door Mountings from St.-Léonard-de-Noblat

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF VERA K. OSTOIA

AMONG THE MOST INTERESTING examples of medieval ironwork at The Cloisters is a group of French door mountings, now attached to the double wings of the door that leads into the Fuentidueña Chapel (Figure 1). The group consists of two floriate crosses, two bars with similar floriate finials, and two animals, whose tails end in matching floriate tufts. The animals are especially remarkable for the large foliate clusters issuing from their mouths (Figures 2, 3).¹

For probably more than six centuries these mountings were riveted to the double door at the foot of the bell tower of the church of St.-Léonard-de-Noblat, a small town about fifteen miles east of Limoges, in the department of Haute-Vienne. The church was classified as a *monument historique* by the French government in 1857. Between 1880 and 1890 the building underwent restoration, and the door mountings were taken to Bordeaux for some minor repairs. Unfortunately, the ironworker entrusted with this task went bankrupt before its completion, and the contents of his shop were sold. It seems, though, that the church authorities of St.-Léonard were somehow able to recover their door mountings, for in 1900, 1906, and 1913 these were described and illustrated as in situ (Figure 4).² In 1921, however, the mountings were said to have disappeared,³ and in about 1925 they turned up in the possession of Sumner Healey, a dealer located in Bordeaux and New York.

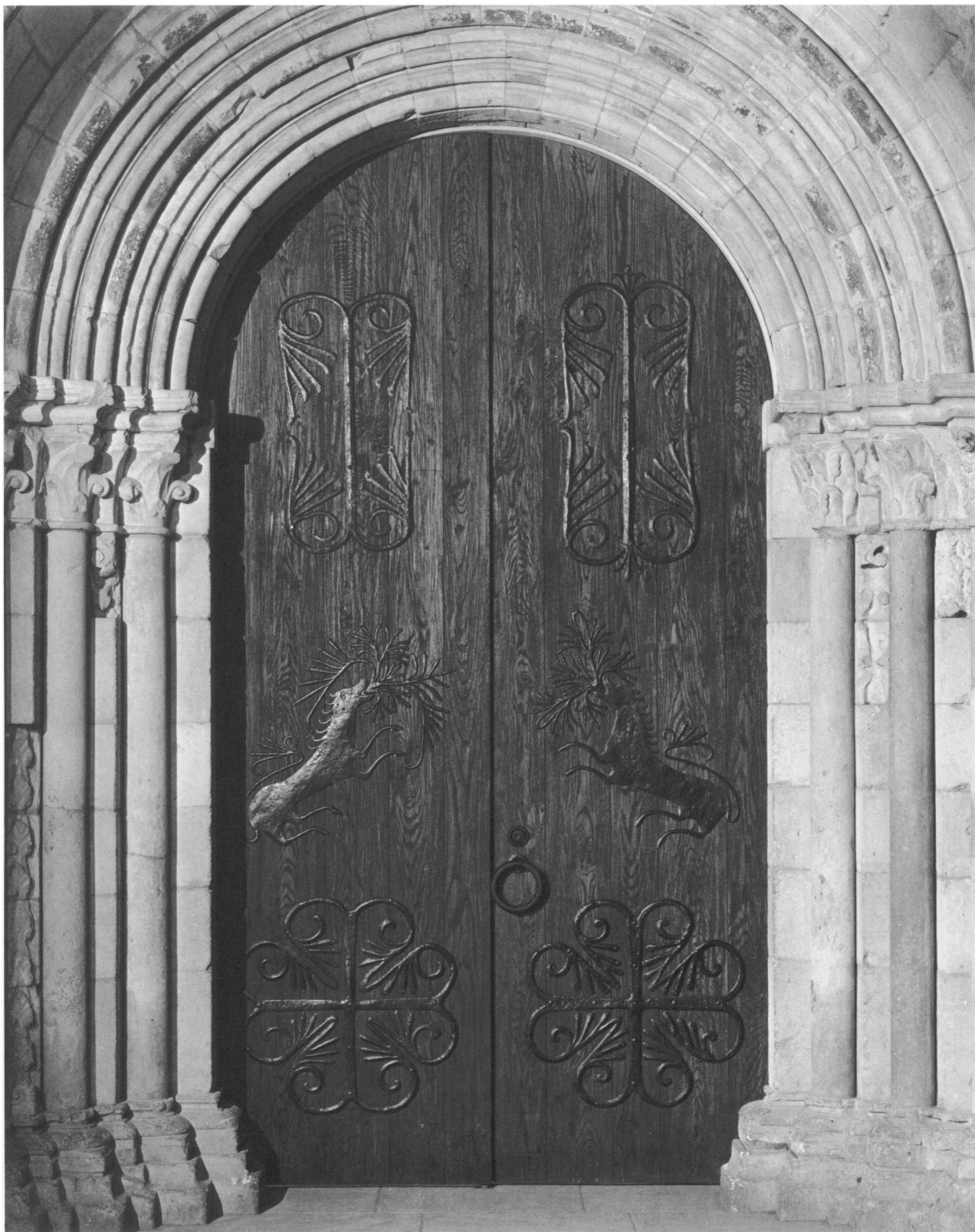
Healey sold the mountings to the sculptor and collector Elie Nadelman, who had them installed in his Museum of Folk Art in the Riverdale section of New York City. In 1938 the Nadelmans sold them with several other objects to the New-York Historical Society. In October 1943 six of the mountings, minus the two crosses,

were put up for auction at the Parke-Bernet Galleries by a "N.Y. State Educational Institution"⁴ and were bought by the Brummer Gallery. When the group was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1947, it was known to be incomplete and a search was made for the missing pieces. These were found to be still on the premises of the New-York Historical Society, and subsequently they were given to the Museum through the courtesy of the society's director, R. W. G. Vail, in 1950.

From their earliest publication in 1857,⁵ the mountings have been generally accepted as among the most important surviving examples of ironwork of the Romanesque period. Yet their possible iconographic significance has never been examined.

The bracing bars were apparently purely structural elements (Figure 5),⁶ and the crosses are ornaments to be expected on any church door. More problematic are the two animals, which have been variously interpreted as "chevaux marins," "deux lions qui tenaient dans leur gueule un bouquet de feuilles," "running horses," or simply as "fantastic beasts." The foliate elements issuing from their mouths were even described as sprays of seaweed in the auction catalogue of 1947.⁷

In heraldry, however, two animals are represented with emissions from their mouths: one is the fire-breathing dragon, and the other is the panther (Figure 6), whose breath is of a different, more attractive nature. Interestingly, when the animal mountings first appeared in a Metropolitan Museum publication, in an article by James J. Rorimer of June 1951, it was in the context of The Cloisters Treasury, on the doors of which they were then fastened; by coincidence they were published along with two beakers from the Bavarian town of Ingolstadt,



1. Door mountings from St.-Léonard-de-Noblat (Haute-Vienne), French, 11th–12th century, on the modern doors at the entrance to the Fuentidueña Chapel. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, The Cloisters Collection, 47.101.81–86, Gift of The New-York Historical Society, 1950, 50.65.1,2



whose arms happen to be a blue panther emitting what Rorimer called “tongues of red flame.”⁸

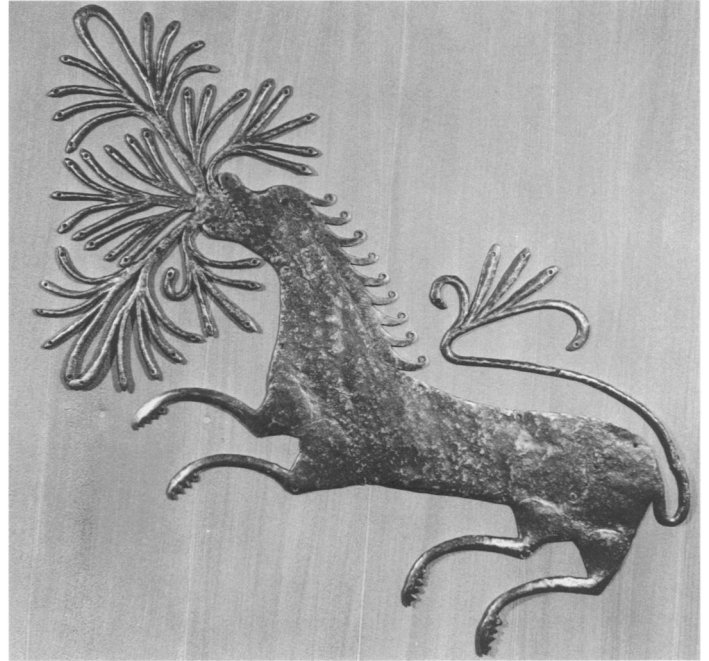
According to the bestiary, that authoritative medieval handbook of interpretative zoology:

There is an animal called PANTHER which has a truly variegated colour, and it is most beautiful and excessively kind. Physiologus says that the only animal which it considers as an enemy is the Dragon.

When a Panther has dined and is full up, it hides away in its own den and goes to sleep. After three days it wakes up again and emits a loud belch [one version has “a lofty, sweet, ringing sound”], and there comes a very sweet smell from its mouth, like the smell of allspice. When the other animals have heard the noise, they follow wherever it goes, because of the sweetness of this smell. But the Dragon only, hearing the sound, flees into the caves of the earth, being smitten with fear.⁹

Thus, the foliate branches of the door mountings from St.-Léonard would be the “sweet smell” from the panther’s mouth made visible as cloudy vapors, like breath on a cold day.

2, 3. Details of the door mountings from St.-Léonard



The bestiary’s descriptions of the real or imaginary nature of its subjects are always followed by moralizations. Those that relate to the panther make it clear that this animal is a symbol of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who snatched us from the power of the dragon—that is, the Devil—when he came out of his death-sleep and “emitted a mighty noise breathing sweetness.” Therefore, just as an odor of sweetness comes from the mouth of the panther, causing all the beasts to follow it, so men should hear the voice and follow the sweet commands of Christ.¹⁰ Originally, when the iron mountings were still in place on the doors of St.-Léonard’s bell tower, there were two figures of birds perched above the right-hand panther (see Figure 4). These birds were probably meant to represent the creatures attracted by the panther’s lovely noise and the sweet smell; possibly they were even meant to represent the lovely sound itself.

In any case, for a meaningful decoration of the door of a church tower, where the ringing of the bells was a call to the faithful to come together and hear the sweet word of the Gospel, a better symbol than the panther could hardly be found.



NOTES

1. James J. Rorimer, *The Cloisters: The Building and the Collection of Medieval Art in Fort Tryon Park*, 2nd ed. (New York: MMA, 1951) p. 100, fig. 56; 3rd ed. (1963) pp. 129–130, fig. 61; and Bonnie Young, *A Walk Through the Cloisters* (New York: MMA, 1979) p. 13, ill. p. 12 (the misprint “Noblac” for “Noblat” occurs in both books). The group, which in its present state shows numerous restorations (cf. Figures 1 and 5 with Figure 4), consists of eight pieces, the clusters issuing from the animals’ mouths being separate mounts.

2. Henry-René d’Allemagne, *Serrurerie ancienne à l’Exposition Universelle de 1900* (Paris, 1902) p. 32; idem, “Les Pentures de portes au Moyen Age,” *Congrès Archéologique de France*, 73rd session (1906) p. 523, ill. opp. p. 524; René Fage, “L’Eglise de St.-Léonard et la chapelle du Sépulcre,” *Bulletin Monumental* 77 (1913) p. 51,

4. The door mountings at St.-Léonard. After Allemagne in *Congrès Archéologique de France* (1906)

ill. opp. p. 50; and Mme Serge Gauthier, “Recherche sur la date des pentures romanes de St.-Léonard au Musée des Cloîtres à New-York,” *Bulletin de la Société archéologique et historique du Limousin* 84 (1954) pp. 3–14, fig. 1a–c, ill. opp. pp. 10, 11.

3. René Fage, “St.-Léonard, église,” *Congrès Archéologique de France*, 84th session (1921) p. 96, ill. p. 95.

4. Sale cat., Parke-Bernet Galleries (New York, Oct. 13–14, 1943) lots 200 (“... Wrought Iron Ornaments, French XVII Century. Two wall pieces in the form of seaweed sprays”), 211 (“Pair Wrought Iron Ornamental Signs, XVII Century. In the form of running horses with fantastic scrolled manes and tails”), 217 (“... Two Door Ornaments, XVI–XVII Century. Two rectangular panels with scrolled ends, one with fleur-de-lis terminals”); all these were from a “N.Y. State Educational Institution.”

5. Abbé J. Texier, *Dictionnaire d’orfèvrerie, de gravure et de ciselure chrétiennes* . . . (Paris, 1857) col. 1297.

6. Originally these bars were functional braces, holding the boards of the door together (Figure 4). At The Cloisters they were first mounted on the doors to the Treasury and attached horizontally. In their present location they have been turned 90° and attached vertically, in order to fit the narrower space available on the doors to the Fuentidueña Chapel (Figure 1).

7. Texier (1857): “Des chevaux marins, dont la bouche vomit des enroulements de feuillages”; Fage (1913): “des lions tenant des bouquet de feuilles dans leur gueule”; idem (1923): “deux lions qui tenaient dans leur gueule un bouquet de feuilles”; Parke-Bernet (1943): “running horses”; Gauthier (1954): “grands quadrupèdes pourvus de crinières, de griffes mal distinctes, de longues queues remontant sur l’échine; leurs flancs étirés et la position de leurs pattes leur confèrent l’allure stylisée des lions sculptés aux premiers chapiteaux romans; leur gueule crache une végétation de rinceaux”; and Young (1979): “The leaping animals may have been intended as lions, since they have manes and clawed feet, but may also be examples of the fantastic beasts that held such fascination for the medieval artists and craftsmen. Issuing from the animals’ mouths are floral sprays.”

8. James J. Rorimer, “The Treasury at The Cloisters and Two Ingolstadt Beakers,” *MMAB* n.s. 9 (1951) pp. 249–259, ill. p. 249 (see also p. 258 for an illustration of the Ingolstadt panther); and Klemens Stadler, *Deutsche Wappen: Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bremen, 1964–71) IV, “Freistaat Bayern,” p. 80, ill. entry: Ingolstadt.

9. T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts, Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (New York, 1954) pp. 14–17.

10. Richard H. Randall, Jr., *A Cloisters Bestiary* (New York: MMA, 1960) p. 9, ill.; and J. L. Schrader, “A Medieval Bestiary,” *MMAB* 44:1 (1986) p. 15, ill. p. 14. The panther illustrated by Randall and Schrader is from the Unicorn Tapestries. Schrader (p. 15) illustrates the tiger by a group of “tigers with ramiform tongues” on a capital from the Fuentidueña Chapel, ca. 1160; conceivably these animals were meant to represent panthers emitting their sweet-smelling breath.



5. The door mountings from St.-Léonard on the doors of the Treasury at The Cloisters, 1951–61



6. Heraldic panther, German, ca. 1375. After H. G. Ströhl, *Heraldischer Atlas* (Stuttgart, 1899)