Cistercian Adventures in Glass

From Noirlac to Conques

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Abstract

Stained glass windows created by Jean-Pierre Raynaud and Pierre Soulages for the Abbeys of Noirlac and Conques employ a minimalistic style sensitive to their Romanesque contexts but also express qualities one might call Cistercian, even though only one of the commissions was created for an actual Cistercian abbey. As a form of monasticism, “Cistercian” signifies values of simplicity, poverty, and austerity presented by the founders of the Cistercian Order as essential to the monastic life and embodied in the rigor of their architecture. Natural light is a key element in Cistercian fenestration, differing significantly from the display of color associated with Gothic stained glass. I argue that a form of neo-Cistercianism is evident in and exemplified by the works of Raynaud and Soulages for their respective abbey commissions, in which an aesthetic of restraint and economy aims, above all, to treat the configuration of light as the primary consideration.

Keywords

Jean-Pierre Raynaud – Pierre Soulages – Noirlac – Conques – stained glass – Cistercian – Bernard of Clairvaux – Abbot Suger
1 Enlarging the World

The whole world + the work = the whole world

Martin Creed, Work no. 232, 2000

It is tempting, when reflecting upon the work of Pierre Soulages and Jean-Pierre Raynaud, to invoke the well-known formula concocted by the British artist, Martin Creed: “The whole world + the work = the whole world.” Usually expressed in bright neon across the façade of significant buildings, it is sometimes described as Creed’s artistic manifesto, yet it is one that prompts ambivalent readings. Some see in it a resigned, even despairing, comment on art’s negligible impact on the world, especially an art of such minimal economy as Creed’s tends to be. More positively, however, it could be claimed that Creed’s illuminated copula makes an astute theological point, by drawing our attention to what the poet and artist David Jones once called a doctrine of creation as gratuitous, mirrored in artistic creativity itself. The work brings something new into the world but remains part of that world. Yet who is to say “the whole world” of the first clause is equal to that of the second, since it is a world altered through creative addition? The world plus the work is still the world, an addition to the world that remains in and part of that world, but a larger world, animated and enriched by the imaginative, creative act. This may well be true of all substantial works but seems more tenuous when applied to those whose appearance in the world is in a sense minimal, approaching what, in the work of Raynaud, is referred to as le presque rien, the almost nothing that indicates an extreme asceticism at the heart of his practice. This partiality for le presque rien would determine his window designs for the abbey of Noirlac, a commission he received in the 1970s from the French Ministry of Culture as part of a restoration program. It has been said of this commission that a mark of its success is how inconspicuous the windows are, such is the effortlessness of their integration into the fabric of the building. Here the enlarging of the observable world is so minimal as to be virtually invisible. But what is the nature and source of this minimalism? I believe it can be loosely situated within the framework of a modern Cistercian aesthetic (notwithstanding the caution with which one should speak at all of aesthetics in a medieval context). I do not make this claim simply because Noirlac is a Cistercian abbey. Later I will argue that Soulages’s windows for the abbey of Sainte-Foy, Conques, are equally Cistercian, despite the abbey’s entirely non-Cistercian history. Instead, my supposition is based on a form of minimalism intrinsic to both artists’ œuvres that, when applied to an ecclesiastical environment, could be said to reflect a Cistercian tradition of harmony, simplicity, rigor and order, reflected in an architecture stripped of
all artifice. There are limits to this assertion, both regarding artistic intention and the historical authenticity of Cistercian austerity. However, it has enough of a basis to be a claim worth making.

2 The Cistercian Aesthetic Environment

Il est impossible d’être pauvre avec plus de noblesse.

MÂLÉ in Lillich, 312

If, as I will argue, the minimalistic approach of Raynaud and Soulages complements the aesthetics of Romanesque Cistercian architecture, it would be helpful to be clearer about what constitutes a so-called Cistercian aesthetic. In an interview for the journal Arts Sacrés, Dom Olivier Quenardel, Abbot of Cîteaux, identified two “accents” in the monastic tradition: Cluny and Cîteaux. Cluny principally celebrates the mystery of the incarnation as the manifestation in flesh of God’s glory (cf. Col. 2:9). The Christ that one sees on the tympana of Cluniac monasteries like Moissac or Vézelay is the Christ in Glory of the transfiguration or the apocalypse. Cîteaux, on the other hand, celebrates the mystery of the incarnation principally as the mystery of love. Christ’s beauty is celebrated through his kenosis or shedding of divine attributes (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9) (Quenardel 76). The Cistercian order was founded in 1098 at Cîteaux in protest at the luxuries of the Cluniac order, seeking to return to the original spirit of simplicity, poverty, humility and devotion to prayer and work set down by Saint Benedict. This life of denial had a marked effect on the visual environment of the order, impelling architectural severity, sparse ornamentation, and a rejection of figurative sculpture. “The Cistercians observed the rule of Saint Benedict to the letter,” says the art historian and medievalist, Georges Duby; “their great houses were to be of the utmost simplicity; bare and austere, without decoration or useless adornment, revealing the plain honesty of the architecture” (1998, 88). In her informative study of Cistercian fenestration, Helen Zakin makes the claim (demonstrable to all appearances) that Cistercian architecture followed a principle of subtraction: whatever was considered extraneous to the aesthetic environment was eliminated in order to accentuate that which remained, an indispensable remnant serving sacramental as well as iconographic purposes (150). By contrast, the Trappist monk, Père Marie-Anselme Dimier, offers an alternative interpretation of what he calls Cîteaux’s “annihilation” of all distracting form, color, and ornament, one closer in spirit to the Cluniac accent. It was to visibly express the absolute transcendence of God’s glory beyond everything human or worldly. Nothing, he argues, expresses
more clearly the profound logic of Cistercian austerity than this objective (1962, 39). Dimier is among those who have argued that Cistercian architecture is neither merely contingent nor expedient for Cistercian purposes but rather a direct expression of Cistercian spirituality (1987, 789). For the early fathers of Citeaux architecture and spirituality were closely intertwined; the character of their architecture entirely related to the spiritual reform they enacted. Architecture is thus seen as the means to promote a twofold purpose:

... on one level, as providing a functional, isolated enclosure that ensures the *opus Dei* of the monks and their strict obedience to the Rule, and at a deeper level, as a translation in stone of Cistercian spirituality, oriented exclusively toward the individual monk’s mystical need for interiorized contemplation, shielding him from sensory and societal distractions.

**Sternberg 2013, 22**

In outlining this widely shared view, Maximilian Sternberg is critical of its cogency. Although it has achieved broad consensus and thus historical authority, it remains a contested source of debate within modern scholarship. For all those who, like Zakin and Dimier, believe a correlation between a way of life and aesthetic principles is readily apparent, there are those, like Sternberg, who challenge this aestheticized narrative. A specific point of dissent is the analogy drawn, especially from the 1960s onwards, between Cistercian architecture and modernist principles. Sternberg’s recent work in this area argues convincingly for a reappraisal of this aesthetic relationship. He concludes that the idea that Cistercian architecture produced a distinctive and conspicuous aesthetic style, based on certain predominant architectural traits, is a retrospective construct by post-war art historians, the result of a “de-contextualized, modern(ist) aesthetic gaze” (2013, 262). In effect, says Sternberg, Cistercian architecture is treated “as a modernism *avant la lettre*” (2012, 938). A question thus hangs over the interpretation of the material remains of extant Cistercian structures. But as we will see, even without this modernist gloss, the image of the monastic environment as the expression of an austere, sober and disciplined religious gravitas is supported by one of their most celebrated texts and today forms the physical context for interventions from contemporary artists.

Less contentious, and of far greater relevance to the argument presented here, is the perceived relationship between Cistercian spirituality and Cistercian fenestration. This spirituality extends to the subtle treatment of light, which, Zakin argues, could be said to count among the most important characteristics of their architecture (144). Cistercian abbeys are notable above all for what Duby names a “luminous sobriety” (2000, 57) with the emphasis on nat-
ural daylight, direct, diffused or reflected, rather than projected color. As Duby explains, in his writing on the art of the Cistercians, light is a “master-word” for Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, and was best exploited architecturally through the flood of light allowed by grisaille rather than the more subtle effects of colored stained glass (2000, 57). This is not to suppose that an even, saturated light, brightening all corners of the Cistercian space, was the desired effect but, rather, a play of light and darkness, producing both illuminated and penumbral areas. In painting, grisaille is a monochromatic way of creating illusory three-dimensional depth using only shades of grey; in glass it similarly indicates a restricted palette and generally refers to glass that is clear, colorless or predominantly white. Grisaille aimed for maximal light combined with minimal distraction and deliberately eschewed the use of strong colors, since color, it was claimed, “attracts the eye and excites the imagination” (Kinder 41). Cistercian ornamentation sought to subdue the senses and thereby focus the mind, an idea explored recently by the curator of an exhibition on monochromatic art:

Minimally decorated monastic spaces adorned exclusively with works in black and white marked a shift from the stimulation and concerns of the outside world of colour, to a simplified meditative space in which the mind and the eye could focus without distraction.

Sliwka, 27

Under Saint Bernard the stringent rules of the Cistercian order enforced a frugal aesthetic environment in which the windows were to be as rigorously plain as the architecture. Thus grisaille was a calculated choice for an economy of spiritual efficacy, reflecting the austerity of the architecture and spiritual method of the order. Unlike the saturated colors of stained glass which interrupt the subtle harmonies of light and shadow for which Cistercian architecture is so renowned, grisaille produces a neutral, relatively colorless effect, unsullied by imposed and unnatural coloration. This quality prompted the inspired choice of Raynaud for the commission to create new windows for the Cistercian abbey of Noirlac. Émile Mâle’s oft-quoted words in praise of the refined parsimony of Cistercian grisaille—“one cannot be poor with greater nobility”—might be applied with equal generosity to Raynaud’s solution to his brief.
The Abbey of Noirlac, built in the twelfth-thirteenth century, is one of the principal sites of Cistercian monasticism (fig. 1). The medievalist René Crozet, writing in 1932, described it as a pure example of extreme Cistercian sobriety, though conceding that much of its original character had been lost over the centuries through misuse and neglect, including all traces of its original grisaille windows (22). Fragments of Cistercian grisaille survive elsewhere, however, giving us some idea of what was originally there. Noirlac was officially designated a historic monument in 1862 and thus accorded some protection following centuries of maltreatment; it became a publicly-protected monument in 1909 with three major phases of restoration commencing in 1950, the second of which included, between 1975 and 1977, the installation of 63 windows by Jean-Pierre Raynaud, assisted by the master-glaziers Jean Mauret and Mireille and Jacques Juteau. His project for Noirlac comprises near-colorless windows of varying transparency using different grades of transparent or semi-transparent glass to modify the luminous intensity of the interior. Each window is bordered with opalescent bands, mimicking the alabaster of an earlier age and visually defining a threshold between opaque stone and transparent glass, the internal and external world. The design is completed by a leaded orthogonal grid overlaying the glass, or rather superposed grids of differing complexity and weight, according to their position within the abbey complex (fig. 2, fig. 3). Conventionally, leading in stained glass is a necessary structural constraint; here it becomes a compositional device integral to the work, augmented at times by a deliberate yet subtle misalignment in the overall pattern to produce a disjuncture between grids, unsettling the symmetry of the scheme and introducing a modern touch to what could otherwise be mistaken for a faithful representation of the past. The finished effect delivers a minimal addition to the architectural space, one sensitive to the abbey’s original Cistercian character; so convincingly, it is said, that many visitors assume the windows to date from the original construction (due in part, no doubt, to Raynaud’s use of a mixture of faux antique and thickly corded glass used in restoration whose surface texture and internal structure is fabricated to imitate the imperfections of antique glass).

Can one justify the claim that what we see at work in Raynaud’s deceptively simple windows for Noirlac is Cistercian in character, however well the sparseness of design reflects the Cistercian tradition. Is it true to say, as Geneviève

La dépouillement extrême correspondait à l’idée que je me faisais du sacré.

RAYNAUD, in FABRE AND DUBY, 89
Breerette does in *Le Monde* (1), that Raynaud prepared the ensemble of windows with absolute respect for the Cistercian rule, thereby demonstrating that modern artists can effectively marry their vision to ancient religious spaces? It is certainly the case that Raynaud was recommended for the commission on
the basis of the disciplined stringency of his work, which, it was felt, admirably suited the severity of the Cistercian style. At the time this was most clearly represented by La Maison, a personal project beginning in 1969, to entirely overlay the interior of his house at La Celle-Saint-Cloud with white ceramic tiles. The two projects were closely connected, both seen as an experimental implementation of lines in the construction of space. In an interview in 1984 he was explicit about this connection:

I am highly attuned to the problem of lines. Their ordered structure imposes its order on the space. I approached the problem of stained glass uniquely in terms of lines. They really are secretions of the house: there is no dissociation.

Open to the public from the early 1970s and demolished in 1993, La Maison was an experiment in architectural space, a kind of blind blockhouse or bunker, every internal surface covered with a grid of square white tiles, grouted with a specially produced, intensely black cement, and initially closed off from the outside world except for a single long deep-set gun-slit window at the back of the house that allowed natural light to enter. Raynaud conceived it as an enclosed and clinical environment without furniture or ornament save for a
carefully placed vase on a tiled pedestal or, evoking something more crypt-like, Etruscan funerary objects. Critics described it as an empty, blank, or zero space, a tabula rasa functioning as a workshop or laboratory for creative experimentation, but also as a place for meditation and seclusion—a deliberate act of separation from the world like a monastic cell (Fabre and Duby 75; Bouisset 16). If *La Maison* influenced the designs for Noirlac, the abbey experience had an impact upon future work on the house. After Noirlac, Raynaud reopened its windows, using designs directly lifted from the abbey project.

Equally evident in the white tiles and black seams of *La Maison* and the designs for Noirlac is the transposition of lines into gridded squares, a motif central to Raynaud’s oeuvre. Never the solo square but, rather, a surface covered with a grid of squares, perfect form and pure environment united in a gesture of restrained uniformity, impersonal neutrality, and geometrical modernity.
That there is a continuity of form in his work for Noirlac seems clear, even if wrought in different media. But it also discloses his understanding of a commonly identified factor in Cistercian architecture: its basis in the geometry of square and cube, indebted to Augustine’s perfect 1–1 ratio (Simson 48–49). The ideal architectural form, as described by the thirteenth century architect, Villard de Honnecourt, is “a church made up of squares” (Bucher 91), a modular system expressing pure geometrical harmony. This architectural principle of ad quadratum, clearly evident in the plan of Noirlac, is based on a traditional Benedictine plan in which the square cloister garth provides the template or primary form for the whole monastic structure.

Simple, regular, repeated forms have been the vehicle for Raynaud’s thinking throughout his career and, in the case of Noirlac, provided the artist with the most direct means to enunciate a sense of the sacred. For the sober environment of the abbey, nothing less than a stripped-down, minimalist rigor would do, not only because it reflected his own visual language but more emphatically because such “extreme asceticism,” as he framed it when looking back on the commission, “corresponded to the idea I had of the sacred” (Fabre and Duby 89). This tells us something about the shape of the sacred in Raynaud’s world but not why he invokes it in the first place. Duby’s answer is to reiterate the commonly voiced assertion, given particular force by André Malraux, that art is the new sacred. Where art once served to revere, it has itself become the object of reverence. Or, otherwise put, art now serves a spiritual function once the prerogative of the sacred. The works of Raynaud, says Duby (and he is not merely thinking of Noirlac), “seem to me to operate on this ground, that is, in relation to what we may call the sacred” (cited in Piguet 1992, 27). This strikes me as far too reductive and avoids the specificity of what was at stake. To Raynaud, it seems clear that the asceticism of his work is analogous to the austerity of the Cistercian aesthetic found at Noirlac. “The Cistercians and I,” he proposed, “share a certain mindset, a minimalism, and a taste for silence” (cited in Gonzales 25). Raynaud’s attitude toward the commission, apropos his responsibility as an artist, exemplified the respect, humility, and circumspection demanded by the abbey’s sacral atmosphere of silence and withdrawal:

An artist can only consider the making of a window if he fully accepts to be at the service, and in accord with, the building, his approach bringing love, modesty and decision. My first concern was to intervene with sufficient discretion so as not to clash with the stone … I wanted to approach it, and gently place one by one the small glass squares, to live the adventure of stained glass.

Raynaud, in Durand-Ruel and Martelaere, 69, modified translation
As adventures go, it was characteristically understated. Raynaud understood that there are times when the artist’s almost invisible presence is required, when sensitivity to a site demands the utmost restraint or, to return to Raynaud’s term, when what is required is *le presque rien*. He was perfectly aware that he could not treat Noirlac as a blank canvas onto which to project his ideas. He had to work with and alongside a sacred space charged with a symbolic and religious history established long ago. Indeed, Raynaud’s task seemed to be a further act of restoration, “to add a lost Cistercian touch to the bare space” (Linder 138). So successful was this addition that today it seems an inherent element of the architecture, so subtle as to be barely noticeable. Writing at the turn of the millennium on the renewal of sacred art in France, Anne Dagbert held up the commission as exemplary, judging approvingly that “Raynaud’s work at Noirlac [had] adapted itself perfectly to the austerity of the Cistercian aesthetic and attained a rare perfection, a complete rapport with the architecture” (169). Even if he was informed more by his own strict sense of ascesis than any fidelity to Cistercian values as such, a degree of “spiritual kinship” was evident, creating an ambience, claims Christine Blanchet, that the Cistercians themselves might have advocated (33, 35). Monastic retreat from the world and its frivolities, the abbey as a physical symbol of the spiritual realm, and light as a material manifestation of the immaterial are all somehow present at Noirlac. As such, Raynaud’s commission is seen as a historic turning point in modern
stained glass, referred to by Anne-Marie Charbonneaux and Norbert Hillaire as the “rupture of Noirlac” for its profound renewal of the potential offered by the conjunction of modern art and sacred spaces (19). Yet, this notion of rupture is clearly inadequate in Raynaud’s case, since his proposal is so evidently attuned to the Cistercian tradition. If it is a rupture, then, it is “a rupture with the time of ruptures,” a disruption of, or disturbance in the apparently inexorable passage of art’s secularization, and thus, paradoxically, “the expression of a continuity—a lost unity of art and religion” (19). This lost unity finds expression in the gridded grisaille-like form of the windows and, more manifestly, in the natural light they amplify.

4 The Adventure of Conques: A Search for Clarity

C’est une lumière que j’ai cherchée, pas un verre.

SOULAGES, in PIGUET 2009, 43

Raynaud’s minimalist approach to the windows for Noirlac had a decisive influence on subsequent stained-glass commissions, especially those oriented toward what Jean-Pierre Greff has labelled “post-Minimalist aesthetic geometry” (54) by artists such as Jean-Pierre Bertrand or Aurelie Nemours. In particular, it set a precedent for Pierre Soulages’s far more ambitious experiment for the magnificent eleventh-twelfth century Romanesque abbey of Sainte-Foy, Conques from 1987 to 1994, a prestigious and substantial request comprising 104 windows in total (fig. 4). Early in the process, Soulages had a firm notion of what he wanted: a glass receptive to variations in the intensity of natural light but appearing to be the very source of that light, “a living light, you might say, held in the glass itself” (Soulages, in David and Finance, 39). He understood that the quality of light in a religious edifice is integral to its sacred character; his task was to find a configuration of light sympathetic to that character. From the very beginning, therefore, he chose to consider not what design or imagery would be appropriate to the space but rather what illumination and atmosphere: “I searched for a light, not a glass” (Piguet 2009, 43). Nevertheless, translation into material terms meant searching for a glass able to subtly modulate and transmute light into “an emotional value, an interiority, a metaphysical quality in accord with the poetry of the architecture and its function as a place of contemplation and meditation” (Heck and Soulages 57). Of equal importance to the artist was that it should be an illuminated but enclosed environment, confining one’s visual field to the sacramental interior and prohibiting all views of the exterior world beyond its walls. Although both
Raynaud and Soulages thought it essential to foster an atmosphere of enclosure, Raynaud was content to allow the external world (above all the natural world) to be visible. For Soulages, by contrast, it was imperative to eliminate totally the exterior view, to underline the sense of an enclosed world, free of all external distractions, open only to the passage of light that must necessarily enter the space. If this technique solicits an impression of confinement, it is counteracted by the transmission of a diffused white light that is by all appearances immanent to the space, emanating as it were from the building itself.

To these ambitious ends he made several hundred experiments, working with major stained-glass workshops and master-glazier, Jean-Dominique Fleury, to find, and in the end by necessity invent, a glass that would achieve the desired effect. The result is a milky white glass, entirely opaque yet translucent and responsive to the fluctuations of daylight from dawn to dusk. From within, the windows appear luminous, subtly imbued with warm or cool tones depending on the strength of light (fig. 5). By contrast, from outside the windows are like shutters, as impenetrable as the stone façade, as if the building refused all possible intrusion (fig. 6). This doubling was achieved via a dual process of liquefaction and crystallization at high temperatures, fusing fine and coarse grains within the glass, thereby producing both opacity and luminosity; this creates two states coexisting in the same piece of glass to differing degrees, giving the glass a rugged, granular finish (fig. 7). An unforeseen but pleasing effect of the process was a subtle but palpable coloration of the untinted glass, cold bluish-grey or warm orange-ochre, rose or yellow, depending on the strength of light passing through and the position of each window within the abbey. This chromatic play of light, like thin glazes of color emerging from the white medium, relies upon the complementary relationship of inside/outside. Fluctuations in the intensity of light affect not only the brightness of the interior but also the appearance of the glass itself, producing chromatic variations through a play of reflection, absorption, transmission and diffusion. However, unlike more traditional stained glass, it does not discolor the natural and varied colors of the walls, built from three types of stone: yellow limestone, red sandstone and blue schist. At Conques, says Marie Renoue, in her extensive and complex semiotic analysis of the windows, “it is not the glass that colors the light but, paradoxically, the light that colors the glass” (137). The effect is rarely very pronounced, requiring subtlety of vision or, in Renoue’s terms, “chromosensitivity,” and willingness to tarry, on the part of the viewer, in order to be perceptible. Its internal radiance is never excessive, never dazzles, while its external face sometimes gleams like a polished mirror and sometimes appears as dull and lifeless as a metal blind.
FIGURE 5  Window, interior view, Abbey of Sainte-Foy, Conques
PHOTO: J.-F. PEIRÉ—DRAC OCCITANIE
Figure 6   Window, exterior view, Abbey of Sainte-Foy, Conques
Photo: J.-F. Peiré—Drac Occitanie
Having achieved a quality of glass suited to his purpose, the designs themselves were a natural progression from his paintings of the time. Each window is reduced to a minimalist composition of glass, leading and transverse saddle bars, uniformity of repetition relieved by subtle, modulated variation. Like Raynaud’s designs—but unlike conventional stained-glass windows where leading and saddle bars are a necessary support for the image but a kind of visual interference—Soulages’s windows rely upon these elements for their structure, meaning and rhythm. They play an aesthetic and compositional, as well as structural role, and turn the windows into vertically layered polyptychs, an effect equally evident in his all-over black paintings, called *outrenoir*, for which he has come to be best known. The gracefully arcing waves of supple lead lines, arranged in sections and moving from pane to pane, evoke a sense of weightless ascendance and movement, a flow of forces counterposing the rigorous horizontality of the transverse bars and downward gravitational pull of the abbey’s perpendicular masses. Sometimes a relationship between contiguous windows is evident—movement sketched out in one is picked up by another in the adjoining bay—and sometimes a clear break separates one from another. Similarly, within each window the series of lead curves trace a journey that is sometimes broken by a saddle bar and resumed in a higher section, or flows across it with renewed momentum, the bar acting as a kind of visual pause before their continuation. In an abbey that accentuates a narrow, lofty verticality, the windows’ horizontal axes project a sense of motionless stability and structure, while the gently curving mullions, bending upwards in rhythmical formation, invert the weight of lead and bars with an airy and sweeping fluidity, in parallel waves that cross the bays like contours or “furrows in a field of light” (Heck and Soulages 12). Throughout, Soulages shows no desire to enforce a sense of symmetry, to which he has very often declared an antipathy. Instead, the repeated motif creates a sense of asymmetrical unity through differentiated repetition, described by Éric de Chassey, an astute interpreter of Soulages’s work, as “a sort of basso continuo” unifying one’s experience of the rhythmic ensemble (114). This unity is served despite variations in the luminous intensity of the glass itself. Despite the use of the same material throughout, there is no sense of a uniform finish. No strip of glass is identical to its neighbor. Each has its own imperfections, depth of color, density of grain and variations of texture, the process of production creating natural differences in its composition.

What led Soulages to seek such an outcome, and to willingly devote so many years of labor and experimentation to bring it to completion? He had been approached several times by the Ministry of Culture with invitations for ecclesiastical commissions, which he consistently refused principally on the grounds of having no interest in creating work for a religious space. Only when the abbey...
Figure 7  Window detail, Abbey of Sainte-Foy, Conques

Photo: J.-F. Péiré—Drac Occitanie
of Sainte-Foy was proposed did he relent, almost certainly due to its personal significance to his artistic trajectory. His “adventure” with Conques, as he often calls it, began as a twelve-year-old visiting the abbey on a school trip. It was, he says, “the place of my first great artistic emotions” (Duborgel 5), profoundly impressing upon the young Pierre a nascent ambition to be a painter: “Faced with the shock and emotion that the space and its dimensions produced in me, I realized that the only important thing in life was art” (Pauli 13). But there was a further biographical dimension to this story. By his own account it was his memories of Conques as a child that urged him toward his particular solution to the brief: to recover the illuminated atmosphere that had so profoundly affected him but which had, by the early 1950s, all but disappeared. The simple blank-glazed grisaille windows Soulages had seen as a schoolboy had been replaced with neo-medieval stained glass by Pierre Parot and Francis Chigot, in a labored expressionistic style typical of the period that significantly darkened the interior. When visiting Conques at the commencement of the commission, Soulages admitted his shock and sadness at seeing such “violently colored” glass in place (Encrevé 285). In his view, it had turned a place of light into a gloomy crypt.

In preparing for Conques, then, Soulages was guided by three strong motivating ideas: to restore the light that had been lost; to leave untouched the natural coloration of the stone; and to respect the character of the Romanesque architecture. He admits to no directly religious motivation as such but refers time and again to the je-ne-sais-quoi of St. John of the Cross, an awareness of the unknown sought by the mystic but achieved only by chance or accident, rendered in the translation favored by Soulages as “un je-ne-sais-quoi, qui s’atteint d’aventure” (Soulages 123). Key to this adventitious je-ne-sais-quoi in relation to the commission for Conques is how one’s phenomenological experience of the space places emphasis on the light within the building rather than the determinate source of light passing through the windows, registering as a coalescence of an ordinary and an extraordinary light (Chassey 108); a kind of lambent, numinous sheen:

The light is no longer visible as a particular phenomenon, even if it keeps changing according to the hours and seasons, but as a light in itself, emanating from the place as a whole rather than from clearly identifiable sources.

Chassey, 108

This indeterminate luminosity creates the impression of circumambient light irradiated from the object rather than through the object, as if the glass is less a...
channel for and more a surface of sometimes radiant, sometimes diaphanous light. An aesthetic and theological inheritance is discernible in this observation, albeit diverging from its original meaning. Louis Grodecki, the distinguished French art historian renowned for his work on Romanesque stained glass, once wrote that “glass signifies the truths of the faith more directly than other art forms not because it is image or representation, but by virtue of its material properties and effect” (39). Giving body to light’s immateriality, it proffers the most direct manifestation of divine proximity. Here we find a close correlate between arguments for the theological expressiveness of light and the phenomenological qualities of Soulages’s windows. They do not communicate meaning as such; they do not tell a story or illustrate a religious history. They form a relation with the architecture, creating an environment conducive, perhaps, to religious experience, or an appreciation of beauty or mystery. This synthesis of art and architecture, light and stone, ancient and modern is, in Soulages’s considered opinion, equally open and accessible to believers and non-believers as a site of profound experience. The abbey, he says, offers “a place of meditation for non-believers, a place for the contemplation of beauty and, for believers, a place of prayer: it all coincides, it all works together” (Soulages, in Bougault 2019, 40). This is what Valerie Bougault dubbed Soulages’s “Roman itinerary,” a faithful and sympathetic response to the abbey that combined renewal through contemporary artistic expression with restoration to a perceived moment of authenticity—biographical, historical and, indeed, religious—that resonates with the spirit of a monastic past. And she adds a surprising corollary:

The translucent glass, a distant reminder of medieval alabaster, presents no obstacle to the external light that invades the church. It is a light, at once clear and diffuse, of varying intensity, which seems to spring from the very material of the walls, resembling, at its heart, the image of divine light... “Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house and the place where your glory resides.” Bernard of Clairvaux, after almost nine centuries of waiting, has finally found his artisan of Cistercian light.

Bougault 2002, 87

Such approbation is well deserved, but we can go no further without admitting an important caveat. As Bougault is perfectly aware, along with anyone familiar with the abbey of Sainte-Foy, it is not and never has been Cistercian. Soulages’s sensitivity to the Romanesque is frequently commented upon, but what justification can there be for assuming a similar affinity in his work for a so-called Cistercian aesthetic? Establishing a Cistercian pedigree for Raynaud
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is relatively straightforward. Not only are his own ascetic tendencies, as applied to Noirlac and projects such as *La Maison*, sympathetic to what Louis Lekai calls the “Cistercian spirit of dignified severity” (270), his commission was for an actual Cistercian abbey. Yet arguably a more nuanced, modern interpretation of Cistercian aesthetics can be found in the work of Soulages for Conques. One might even say that the case for Soulages’s Cistercian provenance is, if anything, even stronger. When some write approvingly of “the entirely Cistercian feeling of peace” (Andréani 37) that suffuses the abbey it is apparent that Cistercian here represents a certain type of monastic expression, whether justified or not in this context, that Soulages is thought to have channeled. Soulages’s Cistercian sympathies, so frequently invoked as the guiding spirit of his project for Conques, is embodied in the figure of Bernard of Clairvaux, the reforming monk of religious life and art, for whom stained glass windows had to be “albae fiant, et sine crucibus et picturis” (white and without crosses or images) (Turcat 50). This sympathy is evident in the visitor material produced for the Centre Pompidou’s Soulages retrospective in 2009, which drew a clear line of affiliation between the economy of Soulages’s work and the Cistercian tradition:

The walls of Cistercian abbeys, whether in the Gothic or Romanesque style, are bare of all decoration, devoid of statuary, so as to leave room for the simple variations brought about by the light penetrating the spaces of contemplation. The windows are colorless so as not to alter the light of the heavens, varying with each hour of the day as its reflections play on the waxed flagstones of the floor. [Here] we find the central principle of Soulages’ art: showing little so as to highlight what there is to see.

The relative emptiness and bare walls of Sainte-Foy as experienced today, though not entirely without decoration, present few distractions, leaving the eye to focus on the light illuminating its spaces. As such, Soulages has said of his windows that they draw the attention of the viewer not to themselves but to the architecture of the abbey—and by extension to its sacral function (Villepelet 128). This is a difficult claim to test for those of us whose visit to Sainte-Foy is primarily to see the windows. The Centre Pompidou text, however, is making a broader point, that in Soulages’s art the spirit of the Cistercians is palpably expressed, not only in his windows but in his painting too. The crucial factor in Soulages’s black paintings from the late 1970s onwards is their receptiveness to light, his material not black paint as such but the light reflected by and through the blackness of the pigment. Through a combination of different textures and finishes the hefty materiality of paint gives birth to a mercurial
play of animated light, subtle or dramatic as the case may be. Light becomes, as it were, an immanent living element of the canvas. For this reason Soulages first spoke of these paintings as *noir-lumière* (black light) to designate “a light that cannot be dissociated from the black that reflects it” (Soulages, in Gooding, 9). Later he coined a neologism to better describe their effect—*outrenoir*, or beyond black—indicating that this phenomenon is a transmutation of black, not merely a reflection of its surface, one that inverts the black paint’s viscous materiality into “luminous clarity” (Lequeux 39). Thus *outrenoir* is not so much a technique as a principle of painting based upon black’s inherent potential to materialize light.

Coming as it did in the midst of an increasingly profound engagement with the painterly effects of all-over blackness, the commission for Conques might have been seen as, at best, a digression in Soulages’s development and, at worst, entirely unsuited to his artistic path. Hence, the public cries of horror that he would fill the abbey with black windows! This reaction fundamentally misunderstood the importance of light as an integral element of his work. Whether working in black pigment or white glass, Soulages is motivated by the single and same idea: to reveal the luminosity latent in both. Indeed, Soulages has made it clear that one should not underestimate the extent to which everything he does is linked to his windows for Conques; rather than an exceptional episode they can be seen as the “linchpin for understanding his overall enterprise” (Adams 170). As such, a distinct comparison can be made between the windows and the *outrenoir* paintings, the one operating as a counterpart to the other, suggesting a very strong formal and conceptual relationship between them. As Soulages is always at pains to remind us, the one illuminates our comprehension of the other.

One of the most directly observable indications of this correspondence is the formal comparison that can be made between the Conques commission and the *outrenoir* paintings produced during this period which contrast densely striated bands with smooth staccato strokes. Far from being a digression, here one sees a clear continuation of Soulages’s modus operandi, above all in those many paintings that combine canvases to form closely abutting polyptychs, heralding the polyptych form of the window designs for Conques. Like the windows, these canvases were joined to produce not a series of images but a single, segmented ensemble: a means, claims Soulages, of introducing rupture or discontinuity into the continuity of a surface (223). Soulages’s stained-glass motifs are like more regulated inversions of the black paintings, saddle bars performing the same intervallic role as the interstices between canvases. These structural breaks are especially evident in the series of polyptychs from 1985–1986, all comprising four bracketed canvases that maximally express the same
contrasting motif of oblique, flat foreground strokes against densely lined backgrounds; here the family resemblance is unmistakable.

If the “adventure” of Conques is evident in the evolution of Soulages’s artistic language it has also been a continual source of inspiration, playing an affirmative role in his creative development. The lexicon of terms used to describe his corpus is essentially the same, using an idiom consonant with a Cistercian sensibility. The economy of means pursued by Soulages in his painting is said to verge on austerity, even parsimony, reflecting his continual renunciation of everything superfluous. Soulages himself proposed that the outrenoir paintings utilize “the greatest austerity to achieve the greatest richness” (cited in Moulin), echoing that marriage of poverty and nobility that Mâle so appreciated in grisaille.

5 The Cluny-Cîteaux Controversy

Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house and the place where your glory resides.

Psalm 26:8

The comparable language used to describe the black paintings and the white windows points to something fundamental to arguments for a veiled Cistercianism in Soulages’s work. It places the windows for Conques on one side of a twelfth-century theological and aesthetic dispute that divided opinion over the transcendent glories of multi-colored glass compared to the devotional and liturgical benefits of natural light in an uncluttered architectural space. Known as the Cluny-Cîteaux controversy for the two major monastic traditions that were its principal proponents—Cluniac and Cistercian—it was symbolized as a doctrinal disagreement between black monks (Benedictine) and white monks (Cistercian) over the form that monastic life should take. This controversy can be seen most clearly in the differences of viewpoint regarding church ornamentation expressed by two contemporaries—Suger, the Benedictine abbot of Saint-Denis, and Bernard, abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Clairvaux—who both produced written testaments in defense of their contrary positions. Arising around the same time from within the same monastic intellectual milieu and written by two abbots who knew each other well, these two treatises are considered to be among the most informative written testimonies we have regarding medieval attitudes toward art.

As an ecclesiastical pictorial form or visual mode, stained glass was inevitably drawn into this debate, seen by its defenders as the medium most capable
of expressing the concept of God as light, and operating as “a symbolic ‘bridge’ between the eternal and ineffable realm of the divine spirit and the temporal world of human perceptual experience” (Temple 77). For Suger, following the Cluniac tradition, a theology of “Divine Light” was well served by the visually complex and heightened coloration of stained glass, presenting the worshipper with precisely the kind of “sensory saturation of the holy place” that concerned Bernard (Rudolph 1990, 65). Suger justified the use of costly materials and elaborate, richly ornamented glass as works made in honor of God and argued for their value as visual exegesis. The contemplation of material things could act as a conduit to the immaterial as, in Suger’s words, “the dull mind rises to truth through that which is material, and, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion” (cited in Panofsky 23). For Suger, contrary to the ascetic extremes of the Cistercians, sumptuous decoration and architectural splendor were perfectly compatible with spiritual ends. At Saint-Denis the radiating chapels of the ambulatory were designed precisely to exploit the effects of colored glass in the enlarged Gothic windows of Suger’s new architectural program “by virtue of which the whole [church] would shine with the wonderful and uninterrupted light of most sacred windows, pervading the interior beauty” (Suger, in Panofsky 101). By contrast, the monastic reformer, Bernard, had no time for the “dangerously Cluniac” idea that God delights in opulence (Kidson 8). He offered a very different vision of the appropriate aesthetic environment for monastic communities. His most significant objection to such artful contrivance was that it would prove a spiritual distraction, concerned that worshippers will “admire the beautiful more than they venerate the sacred” (Rudolph 1990, 11).

Bernard of Clairvaux’s Apologia ad Guillelmmum Abbatem (c. 1125), in which these admonitions were expressed, has long been considered key to an understanding of the medieval mind in its attitude toward the place of art in the church. It was written at the request of William of Saint-Thierry in regard to the controversy over forms of monastic life that had arisen between traditionalists and reformers, chief among whom was Bernard. Although the Apologia was a treatise dealing not with art and aesthetics as such but with monastic spirituality, and nowhere outlines principles of art and architecture, in effect it presented a directive for an “aesthetics of moderate ornamentation” defined by utility and necessity as “the new aesthetic criteria” (Martins 219). In monastic life, Bernard extolled the virtues of obedience and self-denial; in the monastic environment, a concentration on essentials. If he condemned such embellishments as colorful stained glass or sculptural complexity it was not because he was insensitive to their qualities but precisely because he was alert to their seductive charms, their capacity to distract from piety.
This is a relatively modern interpretation. Bernard has long been saddled with the reputation of appreciating neither art nor beauty. Nineteenth-century apologists for medieval religious art persistently denounced Bernard as a philistine lacking all aesthetic sensitivity or dismissed him as an “instinctively iconoclastic” puritan “dominated by violent prejudices against religious art” (Rudolph 1989, 98). Bernard’s position, however, is far more nuanced. Although he certainly displays what Otto von Simson disparaged as an “iconophobic bias” (43) where monastic life is concerned, he does not do so for what one can call the secular church. Cathedrals, he concedes, “have to make concessions to the sensuous imagination of the laity” (Simson 43). Bernard was speaking as a monk to monks, whose solemn discipline and renunciation of worldly pleasures demanded a more rigorously austere environment than that expected of the church. In essence, Bernard was drawing a distinction between what Madeline Caviness calls different “viewing communities” (68). If material ornamentation could be justly employed to inspire devotion in “a carnal people, incapable of spiritual things” (Bernard of Clairvaux 64), it was a very different matter for those whose vocation called them to spiritual maturity.

Whatever the nature of Bernard’s personal aesthetic sensibility, his Apologia is above all a hortatory call to prioritize the contemplative life and to avoid whatever impedes it. Why introduce superfluous imagery into the sacred space when it can only be a distraction for the devout and thereby retard their spiritual growth? Such imagery may have its place in the church but not in the cloister. Art as such is not the problem—after all, the word “art” makes no appearance in the Apologia—only that which detracts from the inner journey and outward devotion of the monastic vocation. In practical terms, the Cistercian aesthetic that Bernard was instrumental in formulating was based upon an ascetic rule rather than an iconoclastic imperative. Denouncing curiositas in favor of necessitas, it sought to suppress everything superfluous in the name of abstinence, humility and simplicity, resulting in a kind of “luminous clarity” (Pousse 87, 94), an evocation of divine presence through absence. In simple terms, a Cistercian aesthetic is therefore based upon a triple renunciation: of color, of individual expression (what today we might call the hand of the artist), and of figuration, which presents the visible to the detriment of the invisible (Duby 1998, 75). In an essay on Cistercian architectural purism that goes furthest in corroborating Sternberg’s suspicions, François Bucher argues that the unity of Cistercian architecture with its “purist ideal of austerity” presents us with “a tangible monument to their thinking,” such that “even if we knew nothing of the Cistercians except their buildings we would be able to deduce the character of their movement” (89). Bucher goes so far as to propose a kind of Cistercian modernism, “whose aesthetic ideals might best be characterised by
Mies van der Rohe’s maxim: ‘Less is more’” (90). Marie Alamir-Paillard makes this connection explicit in arguing for the “presque-rien” (96) of modernist architecture as an extension, resurrection or transcription of a Cistercian aesthetic, unwittingly echoing a key theme of Raynaud’s work.

Here it seems the modernist minimalism of both Raynaud and Soulages echoes the medieval modernism of post-war scholarship promulgated by the first wave of Cistercian specialists—Bucher, Dimier, and Aubert—and labelled more recently Cistercian minimalism (Martins). Ironically, Bernard’s articulate defense of the new reform movements within monasticism is said to have converted Saint Benedict’s sixth-century Rule for monastic life into a conspicuously and characteristically Cistercian style, blending theological ideas with current advances in the prevailing Romanesque manner (Lekai 264–265). As we have already seen, none of this is uncontroversial. Nevertheless, it has long been interpreted as setting an aesthetic agenda for the Cistercian reform through the transcription of Bernard’s alleged antipathy for, and distrust of, art into doctrinal policy. Whether Cistercian architecture was indeed the expression in stone and glass of Bernardine religious precepts or is in truth the result of centuries of misuse, attrition, and over-zealous architectural conservation, it produced a propitious visual grammar for the interventions of those quasi-neo-Cistercians, Soulages and Raynaud, in the twentieth century.

6 The New Cistercians

For a work of art to be Cistercian ... it should spring from and foster an uncompromising spiritual authenticity.

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There are those who assume that a religious environment will inevitably induce spiritual authenticity in a work of art. Dom Angelico Surchamp, for example, imagines the occurrence of a kind of alchemy whereby all that is base and secular becomes holy merely by its entrance into the sacred precinct: “Art, in itself profane, becomes religious the instant it is put to the service of religious subjects or buildings” (27). In a similar vein, Michel Faucher suggests that despite the lack of personal faith among artists like Raynaud, Soulages, and their contemporaries, the sacred force of churches, abbeys, and cathedrals is such that they impel an artistic response both authentic and profound (42). This is far too simplistic and, in some respects, demeaning to the efforts made by Soulages and Raynaud in fulfilling the demands and responsibilities of their commissions. Many examples of weak or inadequate solutions could be cited to con-
Neither Raynaud nor Soulages have spoken of their windows in overtly religious terms. Soulages, in particular, has always resisted attempts to overlay his work with numinous or spiritual affect and resolutely avoids the kind of mystical references associated with artists like Reinhardt, Rothko, or Newman, despite the superficial parity of the *outrenoir* paintings with some of their works. In an interview for *Arts Sacrés* Frère Philippe Markiewicz pressed Soulages on the rapport his paintings share with the sacred, the spiritual, and the religious (Markiewicz and Faton 68). But for Soulages, if he were to admit them at all, it would be with the condition that a fundamental difference divides the church’s understanding of these terms and his reading of them. In his view, the sacred, the religious, and the divine (to use his chosen triad) are three very different human experiences that tend to be incorporated under the rubric of the religious. The divine, if it exists (he confesses to being agnostic on this point) is beyond human comprehension, something we simply cannot know. The sacred is not of this order. It is a dimension of human experience we can all inhabit, manifested in the reverence felt before a work of art. Indeed, art, he proposes, is as much the gateway to revelations of the sacred as religion. This is a sacred broad in scope, close perhaps to Mircea Eliade’s sense of the sacred as an aspect of human consciousness rather than a sign of transcendence. Raynaud’s motivations are more inscrutable, yet as we have seen he is also conscious of a certain presence of the sacred in his methods and thinking.

How does that sensitivity to the sacred translate into a feeling for the religious traditions associated with Noirilac or Conques? By all appearances, Raynaud’s commission demonstrates an affinity with Noirilac’s Cistercian aesthetics and consequently sympathy for the Cistercian tradition, a tradition, says Duby, “respectfully but freely followed and prolonged into the present day by the artist” (2000, 57). But it is equally viable to discern in Soulages’s art the influence (conscious or unconscious) of that tradition. In an insightful essay from 1980, for example, Bernard Ceysson noted that “Soulages is a great admirer of the simplicity and grandeur of Cistercian architecture, where the structural elements are not concealed by decoration but left deliberately bare” (18). As such, Ceysson continues, the work of Soulages in its economy of means “cannot but remind us of the rise of Cistercian art and the complete simplicity insisted upon by Bernard of Clairvaux in the face of the sumptuous display of ornaments that Suger considered fit decoration for the House of God” (28, 30). That is quite a leap but it echoes a judgment, made by Duby around the same time, that Soulages’s work could be justly nominated “Cistercian painting” (1980, 28), thereby placing Soulages in the unusual position of being the sole exponent
of an unhistorical genre. He said this in homage to the pared-down spirit of Soulages's work that would later seem so admirably suited to the architectural character of the abbey. So many of those who have written on Soulages over the years have made reference to the Cistercian sensibility infusing his work that a consensus emerges, one which, even if debatable, should be given serious consideration.

As we have already noted, Conques is not of Cistercian origin, although it is sometimes assumed to be. This is a modern gloss put upon the denuded abbey. Unlike Noirlac, which has long ceased to be a functioning monastery and today operates as an international center of monastic studies and artists' retreat, Conques is still a consecrated space with a monastic community of Benedictine monks. Even so, in a publication specially produced to commemorate the completion of the commission, Christian Heck argues that we can, in all conscience and without false comparison, treat the windows of Sainte-Foy as an example of the Cistercian style (Heck and Soulages 17). Going further, in Architectures de Lumière, a publication sponsored by the Ministry of Culture to commemorate twenty-five years of artist commissions, the whole of Soulages's oeuvre, certainly since the origin of the outrenoir paintings, is seen as a modern engagement with the spirit of Cistercian art (Charbonneaux and Hillaire 47). Perhaps this explains why Pierre Encrevé, the author of Soulages's Catalogue Raisonné, thought it fitting to draw Soulages into the theological controversy between Suger and Bernard, positioning the artist firmly within the latter's camp. The aesthetic choices made by Soulages, he argues, are “assuredly” indebted to the arguments made by Bernard rather than those proposed by Suger (285). Benoît Decron, Director of the Musée Soulages in Rodez, is more circumspect regarding the sources of Soulages's inspiration but arrives at much the same conclusion vis-à-vis the windows. Although Soulages “is on the side of the concrete realities of architecture” rather than one side or the other of a theological and aesthetic dispute, it was “the white glass of the Cistercians” that he chose to fill the windows of Conques (36).

What each of these critical responses invites us to accept is that Soulages's work for Conques delivers not only a truly modern Romanesque, but a specifically Cistercian Romanesque, a contemporary intervention faithful to a Cistercian spirit of sobriety in a Benedictine environment receptive to it. Soulages's

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1 As Duby acknowledges, there is no such thing as Cistercian painting. Nevertheless, he proposes the existence of one example: that of Soulages (1980, 26, 28).

2 As a caveat to this idea, it is worth noting that the relative emptiness of the abbey may be misleading. Some art historians have postulated that the decorative sculptural program at
solution for Conques arguably reflected the avowal of simplicity we associate with Bernard’s reformist mandate, especially when compared with the windows it replaced, but even prior to the commission the names of Soulages and Bernard had been linked by writers, critics and historians, conscious of an analogous relationship between the artist’s work and something authentically Cistercian. Even so, the filiation should not be overplayed. An important consideration for this debate is that in preparing for their respective commissions Soulages and Raynaud did so not as conservators, anxious to preserve historical authenticity, or as adherents to a religious tradition, but as twentieth-century artists, responding to the abbeys as they are now rather than how they once were or may have been. But in doing so they adverted to the uncompromising aesthetic conventions and spirituality of an earlier age. Crucial to Soulages’s approach was that, as he explained, “I did not want to modify, nor add anything to what is already there” (cited in Faucher 42). “From the outset,” he declared elsewhere,

I was motivated solely by the will to serve this architecture as it has come down to us, respecting the purity of the lines and proportions, the modulated hues of the stones, the orchestration of the light, the life of such a particular space.

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His attitude echoes that of Raynaud and is reflected in Duby’s writing on the work of both artists, above all in his conviction that their windows magnificently capture the genius loci of the two abbeys. He sees them as the natural inheritors of Cistercian dépouillement (austerity or sobriety). Speaking of Noir- lac, but equally true of Conques, Duby applauds the way in which the distinction between the modern artist and the ancient site disappears: “the integration is perfect” (1998, 101). But does either commission adequately fulfill Stiegman’s criteria for Cistercian art as springing from and fostering “an uncompromising spiritual authenticity” (9), whatever the quality of their aesthetic solutions? And does their arguable status as Cistercian stand or fall on the answer to this question?

The challenge faced by every artist commissioned to create work for a medieval ecclesiastical space—one raised in a significant colloquy between Soulages and Jacques le Goff, possibly the most famous French historian and medieval-

Sainte-Foy was never completed, especially when comparing the visual richness of the tympanum with the bareness within (Renoue 80–81).
ist of his time—is how an artist can reconcile the ancient, the modern, and the sacred in a manner sensitive to the space and generous to the art or, otherwise put, how an artist can be faithful both to the past and to his contemporary context. What le Goff urges us to remember is that a monument is not fixed in time; it changes because its place, its meaning and its function changes through time (Soulages and le Goff 11). An artistic commission for a medieval abbey is part of that historical continuity, opening a dialogue between the past and the present. This is broadly true of commissions for the cathedrals of Nevers, Reims or Cologne (to take a few significant examples) where solutions have been found that aim to be sensitive to the sacred environment while remaining resolutely modern. To add an element of the contemporary world to an historic monument, these works seem to say, by no means betrays its past or identity as a witness to the past, since every society invests its architectural inheritance with the visual expressions of its own age (Araujo 13). In this respect, however, Noirlac and Conques appear to present rather different outcomes, for here the element of the modern appears as a strand of a medieval—and, moreover, Cistercian—past. To make this argument, one must understand that the term “Cistercian” in these artistic and critical contexts encodes a certain set of ideas. It signifies above all an aesthetic of restraint and economy in which the configuration of light is of utmost importance. When we consider the Cistercian legacy to ask if and how Cistercian ideals are materialized today, Noirlac and Conques present evidence of a seamless synthesis of medieval architecture and contemporary art, achieving, by minimalist means, Cistercian ends. They contribute a further episode to what Surchamp has celebrated as “the admirable adventure of Cistercian art” (23). Such adventures in glass teach us that the present and future relevance of religion to its cultural context relies not upon a closed adherence to tradition but openness to future reinterpretations, reiterations, and reinscriptions of that tradition via an art that enlarges the world while remaining part of that world, fulfilling Creed’s maxim with which we began.

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