SEEKING LEGITIMACY: ART AND MANUSCRIPTS FOR THE POPES IN AVIGNON FROM 1378 TO 1417

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Pressured by the French king and Roman politics, the 14th-century popes shifted the Church’s capital from Rome, their long-established center of power, to Avignon by 1309.1 After the papacy returned to Rome in 1377, an opposition papacy established itself back in Avignon. This move caused the Great or Western Schism in the Catholic Church (1378–1417), the longest span in which more than one individual claimed to be pope. This paper will discuss how each pontiff in Avignon during the Schism left his mark on the city, on the palace, and on the papal art and book collections.2

To grasp the place of art in relation to the popes in Avignon from 1378, an introduction to their papal predecessors is necessary. Clement V (1305–14) instigated the move of the papacy to Provence.3 His decision to remain in Avignon created a chain reaction of alterations to the city, not least of them the influx of people to form and serve his court. John XXII (1316–34), former Neapolitan courtier and Avignon bishop, established a large bureaucracy to support his court.4 He took over the Avignon episcopal palace as the pope, redecorating and building around it.5 He also began actively to replace the papal library that

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4 See Mollat, The Popes at Avignon, pp. 9–25.

5 John XXII used a French painter from Toulouse, Jean Dupouy, to decorate his chapel and audience hall; see Dominique Vingtain and Claude Sauvageot (photography),
never arrived in Avignon. Benedict XII (1334–42) and his successor
Clement VI (1342–52) firmly settled in the city on the Rhône River.6
They constructed a new papal palace to replace the bishop’s manor in
two segments: Benedict XII’s massive fortress and Clement VI’s elegant
chateau.7 This large palace and the art and books within it played an
integral role in establishing the popes’ presence, manifesting their power
and wealth, and affirming their authority in the new papal capital.8 The
next pope, Innocent VI (1352–62), was a legal scholar who used his time
trying to cleanse the papal court of luxury and corruption and, through
his legate, trying to regain papal authority in his states in Italy.9 Despite
his austerity, he too spent money to decorate the existing palace and to
procure books. (Blessed) Urban V (1362–70) came to the papal throne
as a devout Benedictine, a respected canon law professor, and a skilled
diplomat.10 He attempted to use all of those skills towards garnering
peace in many parts of Europe, not least in Rome. He did manage
to return to the Eternal City from 1367–70, but the instability of the
Papal States forced him back to Avignon. Despite his interest in leaving

6 See Mollat, The Popes at Avignon, pp. 26–36, 37–43. On Clement VI, see Diana
7 For the most recent and thorough publications on the palace’s construction,
decoration, and history, see Monument de l’histoire, ed. Vingtain; and Vingtain and
Sauvageot, Avignon. On the pre-history of papal palaces, see Enrico Castelnuovo and
Alessio Monciatti, “Préhistoire du Palais des Papes,” in Monument de l’histoire, ed.
Vingtain, pp. 116–21. For the most thorough early publication on the palace, see Léon Honoré Labande, Le Palais des papes et les monuments d’Avignon au XIVe siècle, 2 vols. (Marseille, 1925).
8 Radke discussed this aspect of the physical and symbolic in 13th-century papal
palaces; see Gary Radke, “Form and Function in Thirteenth-Century Papal Palaces,” in
Architecture et vie sociale: L’organisation intérieure des grandes demeures à la fin
du moyen âge et à la Renaissance, ed. Jean Guillaume (De Architectura/Colloque) 6
(Paris, 1994), pp. 11–24. Regarding the attitudes of contemporary papal chroniclers to
the building of the palace, see Theis, “La figure du pape bâtisseur,” pp. 30–34.
9 See Mollat, The Popes at Avignon, pp. 44–51.
10 See Mollat, The Popes at Avignon, pp. 52–58.