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# BENEATH THE LIMEWASH, THE LEGEND OF THE CENTURIES... AND OF THE PAINTINGS

**A meticulous worksite atmosphere greets us inside the charming little church of Saint-Calixte, nestled in the lush folds of the Louron valley. Here, a dedicated team of restorers is bringing centuries-old wall paintings back to life, some of which had long been covered. The support of the Clément Fayat Foundation proved decisive in enabling these skilled artisans to intervene.**

The church of Saint-Calixte stands at the edge of the village of Cazaux-Fréchet (Hautes-Pyrénées), nearly 1,000 meters above sea level. *"For now, access is easy, but sometimes in the heart of winter, the snow makes the site unreachable,"* smiles Alain Lacoste. It takes more than that to discourage this seasoned restorer, who applies his expertise to private buildings and religious monuments across France. By founding Atelier 32, in 1995, he chose to specialize in the conservation and restoration of wall paintings and movable heritage objects.



Cazaux-Fréchet





# 01.

## Restoring and Revealing a History Book

Currently, Alain Lacoste's teams are working to uncover Renaissance decorations hidden beneath limewash. Over the centuries, this Romanesque building has undergone numerous transformations, and its walls read like an open history book: an apse adorned with Romanesque paintings, partly concealed by Gothic-period layer; 16th-century decoration in the north chapel—restored last year—and a nave topped with its French-style ceiling; finally, a gilded wooden altarpiece from the 18th century, and so on.

These successive layers reflect the tumultuous history of this Hautes-Pyrénées region, long marked by numerous battles in the Middle Ages against the Saracens. Legend has it that the valiant knight Calixte fell here under Moorish assault around the 10th century. In gratitude, the villagers built this church to honor his bravery.



The first consolidation work in the north chapel's vault began in April 2022, funded by the Heritage Lottery. *"That was essential, as the vault was at risk of collapse,"* acknowledges Alain Lacoste. The restoration of the Renaissance paintings, undertaken by Atelier 32 in 2025, was made possible thanks to the Clément Fayat Foundation's support. *"Without this patronage, it would have been impossible. Small municipalities cannot afford such works,"* notes the restorer, who also appreciated the Foundation's swift decisions-making in backing this heritage project.



# 02.

## Probing Before Removing the Plaster

For ancient structures like Saint-Calixte, restoration teams first carry out a diagnostic survey, submitted to the regional heritage conservation authority. Stratigraphic soundings help detect painted decorations beneath the lime, date them, and assess their state of preservation.

According to Alain Lacoste, *"In the apse, the 12th-century paintings are highly deteriorated. Those in the nave and the chapel are fragmentary, but together they will form a beautiful 16th-century ensemble once restored."*

Alain Lacoste's profession is akin to a treasure hunt, full of surprises. What will they find beneath the lime coatings? *"As we remove the plaster, we reveal painted decorations buried for centuries. It's thrilling—we never know what we'll find."* Restorers work with utmost care to avoid further damaging these ancestral drawings. *"When we uncover the paintings, they're often in poor condition—lifting, flaking, losses...—and we perform several operations to preserve and restore them. One involves injecting consolidants with syringe to strengthen the paint layer."*

# 03.

## Balancing Intervention, Restraining the Gesture, Respecting the Work

These specialists of the pictorial layer use the term lacuna when part of a painted design is missing. Their work follows a strict protocol, as Alain Lacoste explains:

*"We don't invent anything. All decisions are always made in consultation with the heritage conservation authority and the architect overseeing the site. If the lacuna is too large, we apply a sand-and-lime-tinted plaster. It is out of the question, for example, to redraw a missing figure or an erased face. We are not here to create."* In such cases, restorers use *tratteggio* technique - a fine-line retouching technique that gives an illusion of continuity from a distance, while revealing the restoration work up close.

A small lacuna in an well-preserved decor or repetitive pattern may be filled in, *"but always with a slightly lighter tone, to clearly show that it's a reconstruction."* This approach reflects the evolution of heritage philosophy: it's no longer about hiding imperfections or the ravages of time, but about careful consolidation and respectful rehabilitation. The restorer ensure that their work also becomes part of the monument's ongoing history.

When the church was built, the Louron valley traded actively with Spain and benefited from the influx of gold from the Americas. This prosperity enabled local communities to decorate their churches with commissioned artworks, such as those of Melchior Rodiguís, who painted Saint-Calixte's Renaissance decor. From the top of his scaffolding, where his team labors with precision and patience, Alain Lacoste estimates that seven to eight months will be needed to complete the restoration.

Saint-Calixte, as it always has, will wait patiently for the revival of its hidden splendors.



Interview with **Alain Lacoste**, restorer of the mural paintings of the Church of Saint-Calixte in Cazaux-Fréchet.

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