

# The Treasures of Saint Pierre

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## An artist revisits French cathedral's past — in colorful glass beadwork

ANGOULÊME, FRANCE

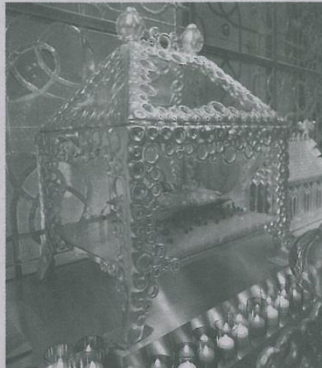
Jean-Michel Othoniel creates a showcase of religious treasures

BY CLAUDIA BARBIERI

A year after unveiling his "dancing fountains" in the newly reimagined Water Theater Grove at Versailles, the French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel is finishing another piece of spectacular theatricality, this time in the southwestern French town of Angoulême.

In the remains of a former bell tower and an adjoining, deconsecrated chapel in the cathedral of Saint Pierre, Mr. Othoniel has created what he describes as a totally immersive artwork, a three-room grotto in blue, gold and silver that serves as a showcase for about 200 liturgical objects and vestments from the cathedral's past.

Destroyed and rebuilt several times over the centuries, the cathedral combines a 12th-century Romanesque front with a 19th-century neo-Romanesque body designed by Paul Abadie, the ar-



Left, one of about 200 liturgical objects and vestments on display. Right, a stained-glass window at the cathedral.

chitect of Sacré Coeur de Montmartre in Paris. For the project, which has taken eight years from design to completion, Mr. Othoniel sought to stay within the Romanesque stylistic tradition, translated into his own idiom of colorful glass beadwork.

"I am interested in how an artist can delve into the past and revisit and rework classic designs," he said in an interview last month. "Abadie already worked with the original Romanesque design. I'm following him, in a continuum."

The result, which will open to the public on Sept. 30, has similarities to his Versailles fountains — not surprisingly, since Mr. Othoniel worked on them in parallel. But where the fountains play on the intricacies of baroque choreography, the motif in Angoulême is more geometric. A braided Roman-knot maze winds across a blue stained-glass window speckled with gold and is repeated in the rooms' hand-printed wallpapers and patterned cement-tiled floors.

The window itself is mantled in a crocheted-like aluminum valance that is echoed in the glass-beaded pedestals and vitrines that display the objects.

Those artifacts, mainly in gold plate and paste glass, are modest in value but

rich in the spirit and color of 19th-century romantic medievalism. Mr. Othoniel's vitrines display gilded and decorated chalice, thuribles (incense burners), monstrances (for displaying relics), chasubles and stoles.

"The aim has been to retranscribe the spirit of the age, the popular fervor of the late-19th century," said Pierre Cazenave, the French Culture Ministry's regional curator of historic monuments, who commissioned the project with the bishop of Angoulême. "You need to understand the emotion in an object to understand its sense. That's exactly what Jean-Michel has done."

The second half of the 19th century was "a very proactive period for the church," Mr. Othoniel said, noting it was the time when Lourdes, also in southwest France, emerged as a place of mass pilgrimage and miracle cures after reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary in 1838. "It was a time of spontaneous religious activity" and the Angoulême treasures reflected that spirit, he said.

"I'm really happy to be working here," Mr. Othoniel added. "Because France isn't just the monuments of Paris. It also has rich and interesting places, in terms of the history of art, in the provinces."