

OTHONIEL COSMOS OU LES FANTÔMES DE L'AMOUR

PALAIS DES PAPES - TEXTES LONGS ENG.

Le Cloître Benoît XII

Astronomers have been using astrolabes to study and understand the movement and laws of celestial bodies since Antiquity. The device enables users to measure the height of a star and determine the best time and direction to observe it. An 11m high spherical gold sculpture sits on a pedestal inside the cloister, creating a sense of smooth orbital calm. Its beads are stars and planets making their way around an eye in the middle of the cosmic chaos.

Astrolabe by Jean-Michel Othoniel isn't designed to provide a scientifically accurate view of the universe; it's designed to map out the artist's mind for his audience. This sculpture is like a personal compass where visitors can explore the artist's cosmogony.

Astrolabe, 2025

La Chapelle Saint-Jean

When you step inside Saint-Jean Chapel, you come face to face with The Tomb of Love set into the oratory floor. A man-sized opening inside this artwork draws our eye inside to the flamboyant unknown depths. An understated piece made of blue bricks to match the lapis-lazuli in the frescoes. This installation harks back to the silk paper prints of bodies that the artist began his career with. During the same period in the mid-80s, Jean-Michel Othoniel directed a production entitled *La Tombe*, the refuge where he performed his own burial. *Le Tombeau de l'Amour* (the tomb of love) could be interpreted as a reversal of his performance as the tomb's occupant, the ghost of love, has clearly escaped its resting place to guide audiences through Avignon. The gold glowing from the vault contrasts with the tomb's frosty exterior, suggesting the holy presence of an absent body. The tomb becomes a mirror, beckoning in audiences to cross the threshold and embrace their dreams.

Le Tombeau, 2025

La Chambre antique du Camérier

Instead of the precious items housed in the chamberlain's apartments, a gravity-defying stack of one thousand glazed metal bricks takes pride of place. The mirrored concretion looks like it's ruptured out of the earth yet melts into the space by reflecting the original medieval murals and frescoes, like a stage design made up of archaeological strata. Jean-Michel Othoniel has drawn inspiration from yardangs, rocky desert formations formed by wind erosion, to create this sculpture like a plume of smoke, whose rising movement is set in stone and frozen in time. There is nevertheless a dark side to the beauty underpinning the artist's work. Yardang is like an ectoplasmic cloud escaping the depths of the Earth, absorbing reality and reflecting a diffracted vision of the world, a disturbing image, ready to collapse and take everything down with it.

Yardang, 2025

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La Grande Trésorerie

A large, dark knot set into the Grande Trésorerie's woodwork floats above the floor. The inky black beads and ever-changing shape as you walk around it make it an unfathomable sculpture. The Borromean ring first appeared in the artist's vocabulary in 2009. The mathematical figure is related to wild knots and formed by three interlinked circles that can't be separated from each other but can be broken apart when one of the three is cut or removed. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan used the Borromean ring in analytical experiments in the 1970s to simplify the interaction between reality, symbolism and imagination (R.S.I.). This mysterious sculpture sees Jean-Michel Othoniel connect Lacan's theory to his own research into the transfiguration of reality through art. *Le Nœud de Lacan* transforms the Grande Trésorerie into a sprawling mental space where the artwork is the heart.

To love is to make connections. To love is to be bound to another. Jacques Lacan

Le Nœud de Lacan, 2022

Le Trésor Bas

A snake-like sculpture of black glass beads coils around the main stone pillar in the vaulted underground Trésor Bas. Its eye-catching shape and curling motion through the air bring to mind a lasso wielded by an invisible hand on the floor. *Le Grand Lasso* continues the artist's exploration of movement that he began in the 2000s with a decade of installations capturing the shape of a ricochet, lasso and tornado. This giant lasso is more than an abstract concept of movement; its formal and structural complexity makes it a mathematical masterpiece, like Jean-Michel Othoniel's other works of art. The mirrored glass creates an infinity of reflections as the beads mirror each other and diffract the surroundings.

Le Grand Lasso, 2011

Les Jardins pontificaux

The griffin fountain stands at the foot of the ramparts in the papal grounds like something out of a medieval courtly love story. Jean-Michel Othoniel has brought the gardens a new glass and gold fountain inspired by the mythical creature it's named after. Fresh, crystal-clear water gushes from the beast's claws, bringing to light the foundations of the artist's imaginary world. It could be the fountain in *Le Roman de la Rose*, the Fountain of Love where Astrée and Céladon gaze at their reflections, or the fountain in the story of Daphnide and Alcidon, Urfée's poetic tribute to the Fontaine de la Sorgue spring beloved by Petrarch. It captures both a sense of refuge and solitude as well as passion and literature. Legend has it that the fountain of love was built by a magician on his daughter's tomb and the water bursting from its enchanted spring reflected her heart, not her face. Visitors strolling through the garden can take time out by Othoniel's *La Fontaine des Délices* where they are free to love, think and daydream.

La Fontaine des délices, 2025

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Le Grand Tinel

60 unframed paintings hang in two rows on the huge wall of the Chambre des Festins. They were painted between 2017 and 2025 and have never before been displayed in France. Their white gold leaf backgrounds set the scene for fluid, colourful and apparently abstract shapes. Painstaking observation of nature brings these peonies, roses, chrysanthemums, wisteria and passion flowers to life in a spectacular collection united for the first time. The artist showcases his passion for painting and flowers, binding the abstract to the sensual. Jean-Michel Othoniel continues his impassioned quest to reveal the secret meaning behind flowers outside these walls at the Requier Museum, which plays host to his *Herbier Merveilleux* and other paintings inspired by botany.

Passiflora, Wisteria, Rose, Lotus, Kiku Chrysantème, Plum Blossom, Orchidée, Sakura, 2017–25

La Chapelle Saint-Martial

The frescoes inside Saint-Martial adorn the chapel walls and arches with lapis-lazuli blue, a torn shred of sky where the body of Christ hangs. Jean-Michel Othoniel got as close as possible to the deep royal blue to build a tomb of mirrored blue bricks whose inner walls are paved with golden bricks. This gleaming tomb lies in the middle of the chapel like a lonely island, the final resting place of dead love destined for resurrection. The artist was also inspired by a painting by Nicolas Poussin, *The Arcadian Shepherds*, painted in 1638 and part of the Louvre's collection. It depicts shepherds trying to decipher the epitaph "ET IN ARCADIA EGO" ("Even in Arcadia I am to be found") on a tomb. The phrase is a philosophical reflection on grief and remembrance of bygone happiness: «the Arcadians are not so much warned of an implacable future as they are immersed in mel- low meditation of a beautiful past» (Erwin Panofsky). Jean-Michel Othoniel strives for the same pure beauty with his artworks that, far from being the result of a melancholy search for paradise lost, are a gateway to regain a wonderful reality.

Le Tombeau de l'Amour, 2025

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La Chambre de Parement

Twelve sculptures inspired by the zodiac constellations hang from the oak beams to form a glittering night sky. Their tangled strings of mirrored glass beads form a design and colour palette true to each knot. These artworks in every shade of blue, green, purple, amber and brown are studded with large silver or gold bead stars. In the early 2010s, Jean-Michel Othoniel learnt of the wild knots and reflection theory by the Mexican mathematician Aubin Arroyo. The artist and scientist began a fruitful dialogue and long collaboration where sculptures of infinite reflections bring the mathematical theory to life. Les Constellations is a piece that reflects their connection, uniting two seemingly opposing subjects: astronomy and astrology, science and religion. The in-depth research and abstract beauty of these twelve pieces bring us two visions of the cosmos and its function, the first a study of the stars and the second a fictional take on the heavens. The pope's antechamber is transformed into a planetarium where everyone can reflect on the incredible yet intimate world of the celestial vault.

Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces, 2025

La Chambre du Pape

Depictions of nature are everywhere in the Palais's iconography, but the finest example is the pope's private apartment. Scrolls of vines, bindweed and oak trees take centre stage in an epic fresco against a sky blue backdrop. As often happens when he brings his art to a historical landmark such as the Louvre in Paris or the Gardens of Versailles, Jean-Michel Othoniel draws inspiration from his setting to create never-before-seen artworks. A knotted tobacco-coloured glass sculpture inspired by bindweed creeps over the stone hearth in the corner of the pope's bedroom. The artist echoes the natural decor, creating a land straight from a fairytale as the building merges with his art. Visitors are whisked away to a peaceful, leafy pavilion where a prince slumbers.

Le Liseron, 2025

La Tour des Anges

Visitors can scale the wooden staircase to the upper floor to see what's left of a tower between the Chambre du Pape and Grande Chapelle. Colourful Murano glass artworks seem to float like stars in the majestic space that Jean-Michel Othoniel calls the Tour des Anges (Tower of Angels). Two of his signature sculptures emerge from the crystal-clear chaos: Colliers and Amants Suspendus. Jean-Michel Othoniel made his first necklaces in 1997 with the help of the glass studios on Murano island. Flying in the face of contemporary art's rejection of the notion of beauty, the artist seeps us in emotion as these dazzling, larger-than-life necklaces take audiences on a deep dive into a wonderful dreamland. These sculptures are both jewellery and mandorlas that provide a repository for absent bodies. There's also a sense of anthropomorphism to the sensual Amants Suspendus sculptures. The vertical row of beads ending in a larger sphere brings to mind a lover's body with their teardrop shape and title. It conjures an imaginary romanticism in which we can all see ourselves, as fragile lovers can also be the angels around us.

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Colliers, Amants Suspendus, 2025

La Grande Chapelle

The Grande Chapelle is a grand sanctuary where time seems to stand still, just like the four giant Cosmos making their début appearance in the Gothic vaults. The mobiles are 5m in diameter and cluster around a core and concentric circles of gold leaf beads which refract the pale light flooding in from the tall stained-glass windows in Clement VI's vast chapel. The planets' trajectories are like halos around a sun made of gold, the precious metal born of the chaotic explosion of dying stars. Jean-Michel Othoniel pays tribute to the science of the universe that the popes secretly consulted, making this once religious site a night sky observatory where shooting stars surge up like the ghost of love's burning tears. A tempestuous river of 7,500 blue glass bricks winds its way along the nave's floor. As the moon and sun exert their influence over the seas and oceans, the journey of the stars charted by astrolabes sets a rhythm for the sculpted waves in the glassy water. The words of Gaston Bachelard come to mind in this peaceful landscape bubbling with distant swarms: "The night sky is the slowest of the natural moving bodies. It is the number one moving body in terms of slowness. This slowness gives it a gentle and soothing character." (Air and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Movement, 1943).

Cosmos, Rivière Bleue, 2025

La Sacristie Sud

In accordance with Catholic tradition, every Sunday during Lent the pope would give a golden rose to a distinguished guest, sovereign, church or sanctuary. This blessed solid gold ornament in the shape of a thornless rose symbolises Jesus and the Passion of the Christ. The origin of the religious ceremony remains a mystery and few golden roses from the Middle Ages still exist. The oldest we know of to date is in the Cluny Museum's collections. Pope John XXII commissioned the goldsmith Jacobi di Sienna Minuchio to make it in 1330 for Rudolph IV, Count of Neufchâtel. After the Western Schism, the popes settled in Avignon and continued to honour powerful people and religious sites by giving them the golden rose. In tribute to the tradition, Jean-Michel Othoniel has installed a large, thornless, beaded rose covered in gold leaf in the Sacristie Sud. It brings his dream garden in the Palais des Papes and beyond to fruition. The gleaming radiance of his rose pays homage to the ghost of love joining the artist and visitors on their pilgrimage through Avignon.

Gold Rose, 2025