

# Tour Saint-Jacques

By Paul B. Franklin

Hidden beneath scaffolding and tarp for the past nine years, the Tour Saint-Jacques was unveiled last July after a painstaking restoration. The now spic-and-span belfry, which has loomed over the Right Bank at the corner of Rue de Rivoli and Boulevard de Sébastopol for nearly 500 years, once again occupies pride of place among Paris' numerous ecclesiastical monuments.

The €8.3M overhaul is the fifth since the municipality acquired the bell tower in the 1830s. Constructed between 1509 and 1523, it originally served as the steeple for a much older church dedicated to Saint-Jacques-le-Majeur (St. James the Greater). The house of worship was re-christened Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie in the mid-1200s in honor of the "bouchers" (butchers) who dominated the parish and neighborhood. These same merchants contributed funds to raze the bulky medieval tower and build its flashy, 62-meter replacement in the Flamboyant Gothic style.

Saint-Jacques thrived relatively unscathed until the Revolution. In 1790, however, it was ransacked; the State sold it seven years later. While the stones comprising the structure were dismantled and sold one by one, the orphaned steeple miraculously escaped destruction. Thanks to the efforts of astronomer and politician François Arago, the city acquired it at auction in 1836.

During the Second Empire, as Baron Haussmann reconfigured the district to facilitate traffic and troop movement through the capital, the Tour Saint-Jacques underwent its initial and most radical transformation. The base was reinforced and pierced, creating two intersecting archways. The upper bays were glazed. Many of the damaged statues were replaced with copies. Jean-Louis Chenillion re-sculpted the figure of St. James the Greater as well as the symbols of the four Evangelists (a lion for St. Mark, an ox bull for St. Luke, an eagle for St. John and a human for St. Matthew) who crown the summit. The former sculpture depicts the church's namesake dressed as a pilgrim, a reminder that the building once served

as a central meeting point for spiritual wayfarers traveling to the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, where his relics are housed. Nineteen different French artists were enlisted to sculpt likenesses of the 19 additional saints who bedeck the niches of the campanile's upper stories. A statue of Blaise Pascal also was installed be-



neath the lower archways in 1856 to commemorate the mathematician-physicist's experiments with barometric pressure conducted at the site. Finally, Haussmann cordoned off the area surrounding the tower to form one of Paris' first municipal gardens. The refurbished steeple was designated a historic monument in 1862.

City authorities initiated the recent project at the dawn of the millennium after chunks of stone began precipitously to plummet from the façade, endangering the lives of passersby. The park was closed, the monument shrouded and a thorough assessment of its condition launched. The five-year study uncovered significant problems due to age, the elements and pollution. Renovations commenced in March 2006. Fragile surfaces have been reinforced using chemical and laser techniques. Irreparable elements, like the figures of St. Roch and St. Leonard, have been refashioned in blocks from the same quarry that provided the stone for the 16th-century spire. Unfortunately there are no plans to allow visitors to ascend the tower and contemplate the spectacular views.

Even though work will continue until spring 2009, the Tour Saint-Jacques is already a sight to behold. For the first time in a generation, one can appreciate fully its mesmerizing decorative flourishes and ornate tracery, both as intricate and ornate as lace embroidery.

• Tour Saint-Jacques: Square de la Tour Saint-Jacques (corner of Rue de Rivoli and Boulevard de Sébastopol), 4th.