

The château interior

The southwest tower

Basement



▲ Koki Watanabe, Oval Possession, 1999-2006

Koki Watanabe, a Japanese artist living in France, created his first Oval Possession in Marseille in 1999. In 2002, as part of the annual art festival, Art dans les Chapelles (Art in the Chapels), the installation was displayed in the chapel of Saint Gildas in Bieuzy-les-Eaux. The town of Pontivy then decided to commission a permanent installation for the château. Bought with help from Morbihan regional council and the French national savings bank, the work, which is a light and sound installation, was placed in the southwest tower in 2006. Globes made of resin enclose marine objects collected from the Breton shoreline – seaweed, shells, etc. Each globe hangs by a metal rope down which runs a thin stream of water. The drops of water slide across the surface of each globe and, as they fall into the bowl below, they produce different sounds depending on the shape of the globe. Deliberate lighting effects created using penlights complete the work.

Ground floor



▲ Fireplace from the Château of Coët-Candec

The fireplace of the Great Hall, in polychrome stonework, dates from the sixteenth century and came from the Château of Coët-Candec in Locmaria-Grand-Champ near Vannes. In 1960, this building was in danger of falling down and so, to prevent the destruction of two fireplaces and a serving hatch, the town of Pontivy decided to buy them and install them in the Rohan family château. The fireplace in the Great Hall is decorated with a wealth of heraldic motifs* relating to the Chohan family, owners of Coët-Candec Manor from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century.

First floor



▲ Roof beams

The unpainted, stone fireplace has piers decorated with bunches of grapes and vine leaves, and is of a type often found in the region at the end of the fifteenth century. The room was restored in the 1960s, but the woodwork is original. The ceiling that used to conceal the roof beams was not replaced during restoration so that the remarkable work carried out by carpenters at the end of the Middle Ages could still be seen.

*Heraldic motifs: Representations taken from coats of arms

Parapet walk

Small shutters with a hole cut in the centre, designed for crossbows to be fired through, once covered the openings that today afford almost a full 360-degree view of the town. Two latrines – simple flagstones with holes cut in them and placed over a channel set into the thick walls and leading out into the moat – have been preserved at the far end of the parapet walk.

The west gallery

The series of male and female saints from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, positioned at the start of the gallery, comes from the parish of Moustoir-Remungol, twenty kilometres south of Pontivy. Bought by the tourist board in 1929 – ostensibly to avoid them being dispersed at a time when the original building housing them was falling into ruin – the figures were given to the town of Pontivy and were subsequently installed in the château in 1984.



▲ Statue of Saint Margaret

The fireplace at the far end of the gallery, like the one in the Great Hall, comes from the Château of Coët-Candec. It also is decorated with polychrome heraldic motifs* accompanied by quotes in Latin from religious texts.

Successive residents of the château

The Rohan family stayed from time to time at the château until the end of the eighteenth century. The château is then occupied in succession by:

- The regional civil service in the form of the Sous-préfecture and Pontivy civil court room (1800-1839)
- General Bernadotte, commander-in-chief of western forces responsible for fighting the Chouans, or Royalist insurgents, who sets up his headquarters here in May-June 1801
- The Kermaria nuns who set up a boarding school for girls (1841-1884)
- A Breton museum founded by Jérôme Le Brigand in the late nineteenth century
- The town sports club (La Garde Saint-Ivy), the scouts and a few Pontivy families (housed in the west gallery that is divided into rooms for this purpose) during the first half of the twentieth century, except for the period 1939-1940
- During the Second World War, Polish troops and Breton separatists (June-September 1940).

Northwest tower

Parapet walk



The walk encircles the most imposing of the château's towers, which has a 60-metre circumference.

◀ Parapet walk

Duchess' bedroom



◀ Wood panelling on the ceiling

Converted today into a small film theatre, this chamber was traditionally the place where the Duchess of Rohan slept when staying at Pontivy. Its decor – decorated wood panelling on the ceiling and neo-classical pilasters* surrounding the screen – is characteristic of the eighteenth century.

The north gallery



The stone mullion* and transom* windows overlooking the moat, which were blocked up in the nineteenth century, were restored in the twentieth century. The openings on the courtyard side were enlarged and wrought iron balustrades added in the eighteenth century. The pegged wooden parquet floor was reconstructed using original fragments found during restoration.

◀ Window with stone mullion and transom

*Pilaster: Vertical, slightly prominent, rectangular decorative feature.
*Mullion: Vertical piece in window tracery.
Transom: Horizontal piece in window tracery forming a cross with a mullion.



▲ Altarpiece from Saint-Ivy Chapel

The chapel

Sober in style with a blue, wood-panelled ceiling, the chapel is lit by a Gothic arch window. The chapel was extended to the east at the end of the nineteenth century following the collapse of the adjacent tower. The chapel was restored to its original size during restoration work supervised by René Lisch in the 1960s.

The polychrome bay in stone set into the north wall comes, like the two fireplaces mentioned above, from the Château of Coët-Candec. Formerly featuring a central opening, in its original location it was used as a serving hatch.

The altarpiece comes from Saint-Ivy Chapel in the centre of Pontivy. The chapel is still used on special occasions for Protestant worship.

A chapel dedicated in turn to Catholic and Protestant worship

- **Around 1500** ▶ When first built, the chapel is used as a Catholic place of worship dedicated to Saint Meriadec.
- **1560** ▶ A committed supporter of Reformation ideas, Viscount Henri I of Rohan founds the Protestant church of Pontivy.
- **1589** ▶ During the wars of Religion, the château is occupied for 9 years by the Catholic forces of the Duke of Mercœur.
- **1598** ▶ The Edict of Nantes brings the Wars of Religion to an end. In accordance with its terms, Protestants are granted six places where they can celebrate weddings. The chapel of Pontivy is one of them.
- **1686** ▶ One year after the Edict of Nantes was revoked, the chapel is returned to Catholic worship.
- **1794-1841** ▶ It is unclear what the chapel is used for.
- **1841-1884** ▶ The chapel is used by the Catholic nuns of Kermaria.
- **1884-1974** ▶ The chapel serves various purposes. In particular, it is used as a gym by the local sports club, La Garde Saint-Ivy.
- **1974** ▶ Josselin de Rohan rededicates the chapel to Protestant worship.



Château of the Rohan family





The château in 1954, view of northwest corner

Timeline

- Around **1120** ➤ Creation of the Viscounty of Rohan.
- Around **1150** ➤ The first château, known as Les Salles, is built on the banks of the Blavet, below where the present château stands.
- 1342** ➤ Les Salles Château is destroyed by the English during the Duchy of Brittany War of Succession (1341-1364). Details of its rebuilding are unclear. In 1456, the site is given to the Franciscans who build a monastery here.
- Middle of **15th** century to beginning of **16th** century ➤ The present-day château is constructed. The main part of the building is due to Jean II, Viscount of Rohan from 1462 to 1516. The château is probably habitable as from 1485.
- 1603** ➤ The Viscounty of Rohan becomes a Duchy-Peerage*.
- 17th, 18th and 19th** centuries ➤ The château is altered and updated.
- 1954** ➤ Left to fall into ruins, part of the château's west wing collapses.
- 1955-1972** ➤ Under the supervision of René Lisch, chief architect for historic monuments, the château is restored.
- 1972** ➤ The château is opened to the public.

Ownership

Classed as a historic monument since 1953, the Château of Pontivy belongs to the Rohan family. That same year, the town of Pontivy signed a 99-year emphyteutic lease* making it responsible for maintenance, restoration and development of the château.

*Duchy-Peerage: Land conferring the title of duke and peer.
*Emphyteutic lease: Long-term lease in return for payment of modest fees.

The main facade

Predominantly defensive appearance

Constructed at the turn of the sixteenth century, the château of Jean II was not, at that stage, influenced by the Renaissance style. It was one of the last fortified châteaux to be built in Brittany and represents a fine example of military architecture seeking to adapt to developments in artillery.

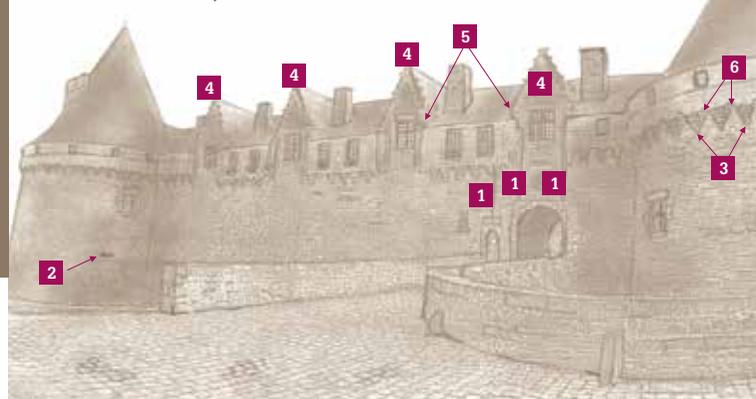
Imagine you are standing in front of the château at the end of the fifteenth century:

- There are no windows.
- From the foot of the slope, the château is hardly visible, and the surrounding moat is much deeper – the counterscarp* was levelled at the beginning of the twentieth century with the soil that was removed being used to fill in the moat.
- Two drawbridges reinforce the château's defences. Three vertical grooves **(1)**, evidence of the drawbridge lifting mechanism, are still visible above the doors – small door for those on foot and large door for carriages – leading to the courtyard.
- Walls at the end of the fifteenth century tended to be made thicker in order to withstand cannon fire. Here they are over 5 metres thick in places!
- For the same reason, towers are increasingly squat. Projecting sharply from the curtain wall* and protected by the countescarp*, the towers provide the moat with broad defensive cover while offering a minimal target for cannon fire.
- Embrasures* **(2)** reinforce the site's defences.

The château under siege

1488: While still unfinished (although habitable since 1485), the château is besieged by the forces of the Prince of Orange during the Duchy of Brittany War of Independence.

1589: During the French Wars of Religion (Les Guerres de la Ligue), the Catholic forces of the Duke of Mercœur take over the château, occupying it for the next 9 years.

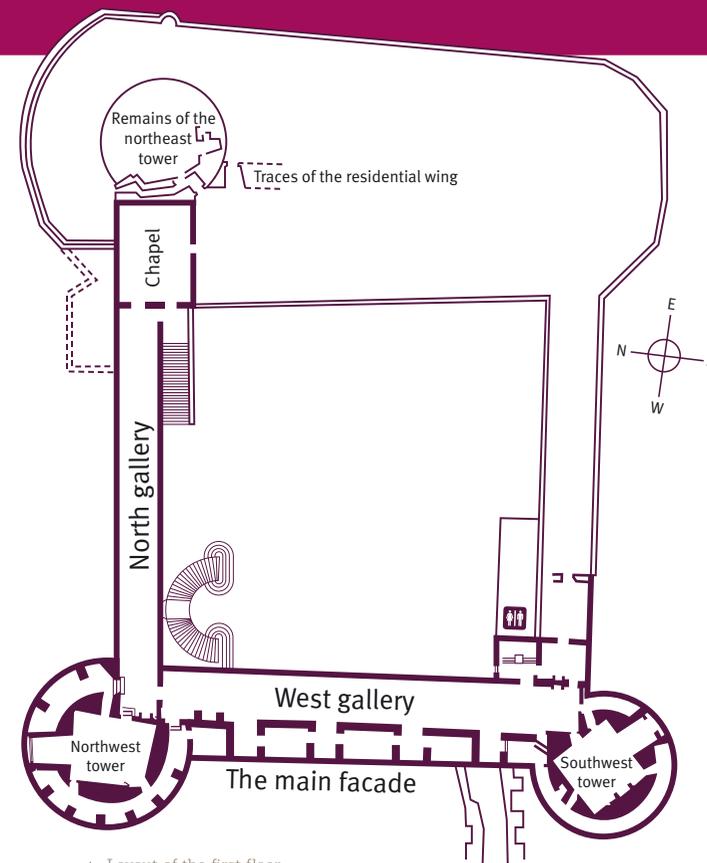


*Counterscarp: Outer slope of the moat on the attackers' side (escarp: inner slope of the moat on the rampart side).

*Curtain wall: Section of wall between two towers.

Embrasure: Loophole in a wall adapted for firing cannon or guns.

*Loophole: Opening in a wall for firing through.



▲ Layout of the first floor

Some Breton features

- Materials: The château is built from schist and granite extracted from quarries near Pontivy.
- Breton machicolations*: The parapet walk, still clearly visible on all the towers, is supported by elaborate corbels* featuring typically Breton projections **(3)**.

Attention to decorative detail

- Defence being the primary concern did not prevent those building the château from adding a few decorative touches, such as crocketed gables **(4)**, sculpted animals or prominent figures at the base of gables **(5)**, and fine craftsmanship on the parapet walk corbels* that are linked by a series of ogee arches **(6)**.

*Machicolations: A stone gallery at the top of a wall with openings in the floor for firing or throwing missiles at the enemy.

*Corbel: Stone feature jutting from a wall and supporting a weight.

The courtyard

Layout

The irregular, four-sided layout of the château is flanked by a round tower at each corner. Only two residential wings remain – to the west and north. The residential wing that originally stood to the east was converted into an artillery terrace in the seventeenth century and transformed into a decorative garden in the eighteenth century. No evidence has been found confirming the existence of a residential wing on the south side. Only two of the four corner towers have been preserved. The northeast tower was destroyed in the nineteenth century. The existence of the fourth, southeast, tower is still being investigated.

An original rainwater drainage system

There are no gargoyles, but there are down pipes topped with animal sculptures. This original system has been preserved on the north facade and is symbolic of the attention to decorative detail paid by those involved in building the château at the end of the fifteenth century.

North facade of the château ➤ courtyard



Grand staircase



Typical of the Louis XV style, this double-flight staircase with wrought iron railing was added in the eighteenth century. The statue of Saint Meriadec, standing in the niche, was sculpted by Daniel Le Vaillant in the second half of the twentieth century. It is a reminder of the claim by the viscounts of Rohan to be descended from the saint, who was believed to be the son of King Conan, considered the first king of Brittany. At the time, the viscounts used this fake family connection to enhance their prestige.

◀ Statue of Saint Meriadec

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