

THE QUINZE VINGTS
IN PARIS
THE OLDEST INSTITUTE
FOR THE BLIND IN THE WORLD

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For 35 years I have had the privilege of directing one of the services of the oldest hospitals for blind people in the world, the Quinze Vingts, which was founded 700 years ago. With this foundation, the principles of aid to the blind were laid out in the middle ages. Our hospital was founded in the spirit of charity. The principles are still alive today and remain the basis for our attempt to guarantee happiness to impoverished invalids.

Why the name Quinze Vingts? Quinze means 15 and Vingts 20 in French. Fifteen times 20 equals 300. The French people of the middle ages counted in this manner, by 20's. They would say 6 vingts (6 times 20) for 120. In our modern language the expression quatre vingts (4 times 20) or 80 still exists. Thus, Saint Louis founded the Quinze Vingts to house 300 blind people.

According to legend, he created the hospital for 300 knights returning from the crusades. This, however, can not correspond to the truth, since these knights lacked nothing, being land owners and sovereigns. The institution was created for the poor, which makes it the first social foundation of this kind. It seems certain that the calamities which Saint Louis experienced on the long crusade particularly his seeing

the dreadful disease the name of which was later to become trachoma, induced a deep compassion in his heart.

The exact date of the founding of the institution is not known. The site where the first Quinze Vingts was located seems to have been purchased prior to 1260. The transaction seems to have taken place on an estate belonging to the Archbishop of Paris, who was compensated for the property. A bull from Pope Alexander IV dated July, 1260 gave the Pope's blessings and conceded indulgences. The Edict (open or charter) of the foundation is said to have been dated March 25, 1264, but the document has never been found. Nevertheless, a letter of patent dated 1262 and a second one dated March 25, 1269 are considered valid documents. In fact this latter date is considered the true date of foundation of the Quinze Vingts and its anniversary is still celebrated by the blind. From these facts one can draw the conclusion that slightly before 1270, the brotherhood of the poor blind people of the King, "les Pôvres Aveugles du Roi" was established on the site named "Enclos du Champ Pourri" (enclosure of the rotten field). This enclosure was not the site where the Quinze Vingts is now located, rather it was placed on part of the grounds where today the Louvre Palace is situated. The house stood just in front of the French Theatre outside the old Paris town walls (which were built by Philip Auguste), and near the gate Saint Honoré where Joan of Arc was wounded by an arrow. The original complex consisted of a large courtyard having a well in its center, an infirmary with a chapel (the Saint Nicaise chapel), stables, an enormous granary, a churchyard, and a four story house. Later, some of these buildings were removed to make room for the construction of the Louvre, the Rambouillet Hostel, and the Palais Royal.

The early organization, as envisioned and established by Saint Louis, has not been modified throughout the centuries. Even today the blind live under the same rules that were issued to guarantee them both the advantages of a collective society and the benefits of independence.

Three hundred blind persons were grouped in this confraternity. The chief Almoner to the King supervised the proper execution of the rules and had the right of search. The inmates called themselves brothers and sisters, although they were not monks. Their houses did not constitute a religious congregation. They did not make vows of chastity. They did not renounce the usufructuaries of their properties but, as in a monastery, they gave themselves and their properties without their usufructuary to the house. For the longest time the institution carried the designation of a church or Hostel of Quinze Vingts. In fact the enclosure constituted a parish where the sacraments were given. The register is still there and has been carefully preserved. From the beginning, the 300 blind were granted very great privileges by Saint Louis, especially that of begging in the churches. All the Kings of France confirmed and maintained these privileges. Philip IV in 1312 gave them a

badge depicting a lily made of saffran colored rough serge. It was sewn onto their clothes and allowed them to be recognized as official beggars. They received the revenues from fines imposed for baking underweight bread and those derived from the sale of confiscated houses. They did not pay taxes and their reputations were so high that they always won their cases in court.

The enclosure provided every sort of industrial activity. There were even hair-dressers. Magnificent gifts were given to the inmates. The gift by Pope Julius of two golden candlesticks has remained famous, because it was stolen by the poet François Villon. The fortune of the 300 was immense and stemmed from alms and legacies.

The most famous legacy was Nicholas Flamel's gift of his entire fortune. He was a famous alchemist considered to have discovered the secret of the philosopher's stone; when dying, he sought to be forgiven for his opulence and for the devil gold he had made. His last will was hand written on parchment and is still preserved in the Archives of the Quinze Vingts. It contains a famous secret nobody can understand. In addition, the Quinze Vingts institution owns numerous old houses in Paris, and there are farms and villages such as Vinantes and Louvres in which the majority of the property is owned by the Quinze Vingts.

The legacy given by the Monk Cantin Courtin dating from 1520 was to have a most peculiar fate. This monk of questionable character bequeathed a vineyard situated on the slopes of the Montmartre Hill. The site is now occupied by the Folies Bergères Theatre, which is thus owned by the Quinze Vingts. Few people are aware of the fact that, when they are enjoying their evening admiring the beauties at the Folies Bergères, they are indirectly contributing to the hospital for blind people. In that same year, 1520, the murderer of Jean Sans Peur donated his house, situated in Charlemagne Street, in order to obtain forgiveness.

However, all of this beautiful arrangement came to an end. The privileges of the inmates of Quinze Vingts contained the seeds of corruption. The enclosure became the center of questionable transactions and licentiousness due to its income privileges. After noblemen and rich neighbors had complained to the King, many blind men were dismissed to live with their families. In 1745, only a few brothers remained. The King then gave an order to build a great residence: large, comfortable, and beautiful. In 1766, new brothers settled in this magnificent house, but three years later the complex was pulled down forever.

In 1875, the Quinze Vingts became involved in a strange affair, the chronicles of which were used by the novelist Dumas in 'The Affair of the Diamond Necklace'. Louis XVI was reigning peacefully and enjoyed general respect. The great Almoner of the Quinze Vingts was a brilliant and rich personage of high birth. His name was Cardinal Louis Rene Edouard Prince de Rohan. The Queen had an ardent

desire for a certain necklace. Louis refused to buy the piece of jewelry, the cost of which, at that time, equaled that of a large ship. The Cardinal bought the necklace from the jewelers Boehmer and Bassenge with the intent to give it to the Queen. The delivery took place in a very romantic setting in the moonlight. The Cardinal, deceived by the perfidious Madame de la Motte, took her for the Queen, kissed the bottom of the robe, which he believed to be royal, abandoned the jeweled necklace to the hands of a woman whom he thought to be the Queen and went back exulting with pride.

Marie Antoinette, who had no knowledge of this fraud, never received the necklace. Madame de la Motte broke it up and sold the most beautiful stones in England, but she was discovered and died quartered on the "Place de Greve". The Cardinal was still its legal buyer, so he needed to pay the enormous sum which he did not possess. He had an idea: since he was the master of the enclosure of the Quinze Vingts, why not sell it? He called upon a society of real estate agents, the Sequin company, and sold the enclosure.

Now it became necessary to house the displaced blind people and to transport them with their belongings, their chapel, the bones from their cemetery, the whole ossuary, the grave tablets and the entire treasure of their archives. Near the Saint Antoine gate of the city, there was a site well suited to the inhabitants of the Quinze Vingts enclosure. The black Musketeers of the Queen ("Black" because of the colour of their hair) had at one time been settled there in barracks made especially for them by Mansard, but the buildings were abandoned. The barracks were hurriedly transformed and the underground vaults arranged to collect the bones of deceased donors and blind people under the chapel.

The barracks of Mansard had been built around a square yard planted with lime trees. Though simple in their lines, the buildings were well balanced. It is said that d'Artagnan, the hero of 'The Three Musketeers', lived there. The three other Musketeers, Athos, Portos and Aramis, are fictional creations of Alexandre Dumas.

Events occurred rapidly. As the blind settled down in their new quarters, the Cardinal was sacrificed to the angry Marie Antoinette. He was imprisoned in the Bastille and forced to compensate the blind men in the amount of 1,000,000 francs. He was banished in June 1786 and died in exile in Germany. Louis XVI recognised a part of the debt of his Almoner and gave the blind men 250,000 golden pounds from his own privy purse.

The extraordinary part of this story is that the Prince of Rohan had created a clinic for the surgical treatment of eyes. A tablet was to be affixed to the wall, but the inauguration never took place. The tablet still exists. Nevertheless, 40 beds were put at the disposal of the patients in the "rue de Charenton".

For the first time the idea of temporary hospitalization with external consultation was put into practice in France. Moreover, the Almoner gave permission to "anatomize" the eyes of dead patients. These events took place in 1780.

The Cardinal's debt to the blind men has been recognized by all successive governments in France throughout revolutions, political upheaval, kings and emperors, and it is, without any doubt, the reason that the Quinze Vingts still exists.

The Quinze Vingts inhabitants are no longer housed in the barracks of the Black Musketeers. The barracks were destroyed and a modern hospital for the blind and the treatment of eye diseases was built at the same site in 1975. The original regulations have persisted.

After many alterations from 1522 to 1836 and again in 1925, the blind live with their families at the institution, having the right to free lodging, consisting of a room with a vestibule and a utility room. If they have several children they have several rooms. Everyone lives in complete freedom, keeps his own house, receives his friends, cooks his own food and even keeps his own fire. One cannot find such freedom for hospitalized blind people anywhere else. There is neither a collective dormitory, nor a dining hall with meals eaten at appointed hours. Such had been the will of Saint Louis based upon the French ideal of freedom.

The license accorded to the blind to tend their fireplaces at home was considered very alarming. But according to the legend, when laying the foundations of the institution, Saint Louis declared "You will never burn", and in over 700 years all fires have spontaneously and miraculously extinguished themselves.

The present requisites for admission are: (1) to be blind (the blindness being proved by a certificate of an ophthalmologist), (2) to be 42 years old for women and 46 for men, and (3) to be able to keep house unaided. The boarders come from every part of France.

Blind men or women receive 80 francs a day. They are allowed to marry outside the institution, or to choose a husband or wife from within the institution. They may marry "clear-sighted" people, as they name those of us who can see.

The good sighted widows may stay indefinitely in the hospice on the condition that they have lived for 10 years, lawfully married, with the same blind man.

The sighted men must leave the hospice after the death of their wives. Very often they hastily contract a new marriage with another blind woman. This is proof that the house is a good one.

A director named by the Health Minister takes care of the house. There is also an Almoner named by the parson of the neighboring parish.

At the end of the eighteenth century an insightful man attempted to completely renew the regulations for the blind: Valentin Haüy recognized that material alms alone were not sufficient. He recognized the need for the blind to stop begging and learn a craft, so that they could live on their own. Thus, workshops for handicrafts were opened in the Quinze Vingts. Today, the need for workshops no longer exists, as the blind work in town.

The more beautiful records pertaining to the hospital are today kept in an archive, they are magnificent specimens of seals of the Kings of France, from Saint Louis to Louis Philippe. There are 6,500 documents, containing letters of patent from François I to Louis XVI with the authentic signatures of the Kings of France. The accounting books of the hospital since its foundation, and the cases that have gone to law with the signatures of the most famous jurists are all invaluable pieces for anybody wishing to study medieval laws or the medieval way of life.

No other hospital has such a long tradition. It seems that Saint Louis himself thought of having doctors at the Quinze Vingts; and the Cardinal de Rohan founded a clinic during the move to the barracks of the Musketeers. But, as previously mentioned, the clinic did not survive.

The idea of adding to the institution a hospital specializing only in ophthalmology was realized in 1865. A few years later, Gambetta gave it the statute of the first French ophthalmological institute by granting a free examination to all Frenchmen from any part of the Empire.

Near the barracks, a pavilion that was a poor imitation of the Louis XIII style was built to house the new hospital. Its success was immediate and considerable. Crowds of patients came, and the place at once became too small. It was, nevertheless, necessary to be content with it, and many generations of oculists worked there in incredible discomfort. In spite of this, the fame of the Quinze Vingts clinic increased, and today its name is recognized beyond the French borders.

Although the hospice has remained unchanged for 700 years, the new hospital is of such importance that it could not continue to live within its old, shallow walls. A new and imposing building has been constructed. Unfortunately, in making room for the new building, it was necessary to destroy the history laden barracks of the Musketeers. The walls were falling into ruins, the dampness was unbearable and the timberworks of the roofs were rotting. With melancholy we see the gray, dull cement take the place of this harmonious landmark of old Paris. Yet the demands of modern hospital technique must be recognized. It is not possible to promote a forward-looking hospital, with new surgical methods, within old and septacentenarian walls.

The new hospital will become the first true French Ophthalmological Center, fully equipped to perform its triple mission of treatment, teaching, and research.

Today conceptions regarding the blind have changed. It is no longer considered desirable to put them into what may be called a "concentrationary" system, rather it is desired to help them to live in freedom; able to assume all the responsibilities of an independent way of life. We speak of social promotion for them. This is the reason that the Quinze Vingts is building (next to the hospital for prevention of blindness), institutes for rehabilitation of persons blinded early in life.

One institute is for reeducation in the daily living and one institute is for professional rehabilitation. The only blind men and women who will be kept housed and pensioned in the hospital are those who cannot be rehabilitated.

Although the underlying concepts seem to have changed considerably since the middle ages, in fact, they are the same. They are all derived from the primary desire of Saint Louis: freedom! Our regulations must not add deprivation of freedom to the most cruel infirmity of blindness. This is the message that we have received from our holy King through the centuries and we must keep it alive.

The administrators of the new institute will never forget the richness of its glamorous past. They are proud of a 700 year tradition, and they are aware that beyond the centuries they will always be servants of the ideal of charity.

Summary

The Quinze Vingts of Paris is the oldest institution for the blind in the world. It was founded in 1265 by King Saint Louis. According to legend it was intended for three hundred blind knights returning from the crusades, but in reality it was for three hundred impoverished blind people and was the first social institution in France and in Europe. The name comes from the fact that during the medieval period, numbers were stated as multiples of twenty instead of ten as is used today. Thus one would use fifteen times twenty instead of two hundred, hence Quinze Vingts. The institution was ruled by the kings of France, who delegated their authority to an administrator chosen from the great families of France. This tradition was maintained during the Empire and the Republic. The statutes of the institution are still a model for the care of the blind. The Quinze Vingts played an important part in French history. It is recalled by the infamous theft of the Queen's necklace that occurred during the reign of Louis XVI. Removed, destroyed, and many times rebuilt during the centuries, the Quinze Vingts is at the present time the first French Institute of Ophthalmology. It combines an asylum for the blind with a modern eye hospital for treatment and study of ocular pathology.

**DUBOIS-POULSEN, A. — Les Quinze Vingts à Paris:
la plus ancienne institution pour les aveugles dans le monde**

Resumé

Les Quinze Vingts à Paris sont la plus ancienne institution pour aveugles dans le monde. Ils ont été fondés en 1265 par le Roi Saint Louis. D'après la légende ils étaient destinés à 300 chevaliers aveugles revenant des croisades, mais en réalité ils l'étaient à 300 aveugles pauvres. Ce fut ainsi la première institution sociale en France et en Europe. Comme à l'époque médiévale, les nombres étaient multipliés par vingt et non par dix, quinze fois vingt est ainsi égal à trois cents. L'institution était dirigée par les Rois de France, qui déléguaient leur pouvoir à un administrateur choisi dans les grandes familles de France. Cette tradition a été maintenue pendant l'Empire et la République. Les statuts de l'institution constituent encore un modèle pour les soins à donner aux aveugles. Les Quinze Vingts ont joué un rôle important dans l'histoire de la France. Rappelons l'incident bien connu du collier de la Reine pendant le règne de Louis XVI. Déplacé, détruit et maintes fois reconstruit au cours des siècles, les Quinze Vingts sont actuellement le premier institut français d'ophtalmologie. Ils groupent un asile pour les aveugles et un hôpital moderne pour le traitement des malades et l'étude de la pathologie oculaire.

**DUBOIS-POULSEN, A. — Los Quinze Vingts de Paris:
el más antiguo instituto del mundo para los ciegos**

Resumen

El hospital Quinze Vingts (los Quince-Veinte) de Paris es una de las instituciones para ciegos más antigua del mundo. Fue fundado en 1265 por el rey San Luis. Según la leyenda estaba destinado a 300 caballeros ciegos que volvían de las Cruzadas, pero que eran en realidad 300 ciegos pobres. Fue así la primera institución social en Francia y en Europa. Como en la época medieval los números se multiplicaban por veinte y no por diez, quince veces veinte daba 300 de ese modo. La institución estaba dirigida por los Reyes de Francia quienes delegaban el poder a un administrador elegido entre las grandes familias de Francia. Esta tradición fue mantenida durante el Imperio y la República. Los estatutos de la institución son todavía un modelo en lo que se refiere a los cuidados que deben darse a los ciegos. El hospital Quinze Vingts desempeñó un rol importante en la historia de Francia. Recordemos el incidente del collar de la Reina durante el reino de Luis XVI. Desplazado, destruido y varias veces reconstruido a través de los siglos, el hospital Quinze Vingts es actualmente el primer instituto francés de oftalmología. Agrupa un asilo para ciegos y un hospital moderno para el tratamiento de los enfermos y el estudio de la patología ocular.

**DUBOIS-POULSEN, A. – Das Quinze Vingts in Paris:
das älteste Blindeninstitut der Welt**

Zusammenfassung

Das Quinze Vingts in Paris ist die älteste Einrichtung für Blinde auf der Welt. Es wurde 1265 von König Ludwig, dem Heiligen, gegründet. Nach der Legende wurde es für dreihundert blinde, von den Kreuzzügen zurückkehrende Ritter gegründet, in Wirklichkeit aber war es für dreihundert arme Blinde bestimmt. Dementsprechend war es die erste soziale Einrichtung in Frankreich und in Europa. Da die Zahlen während des Mittelalters mit zwanzig und nicht mit zehn multipliziert wurden, ergibt sich fünfzehn mal zwanzig, somit dreihundert. Die Einrichtung wurde von den Königen von Frankreich geleitet, die ihre Machtbefugnisse an einen Administrator delegierten, der unter den großen Familien Frankreichs ausgewählt wurde. Diese Tradition wurde während des Kaiserreichs und der Republik aufrechterhalten. Die Statuten der Einrichtung sind noch heute ein Vorbild für die Blindenfürsorge. Das Quinze Vingts spielte in der französischen Geschichte eine große Rolle. Wir dürfen an die bekannte Geschichte von der Halskette der Königin während der Regierung Ludwigs XVI. erinnern. Abgerissen, zerstört und viele Male wiederaufgebaut während der Jahrhunderte, ist das Quinze Vingts die an erster Stelle stehende französische Einrichtung für Ophthalmologie. Sie vereingt ein Blindenasyl und ein modernes Krankenhaus für die Patientenbetreuung und die Erforschung der Augenkrankheiten.

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