

## Ceilings and cupolas

### GREAT TROMPE L'ŒIL DÉCOR

At the beginning of the 17th century, as part of a religious zeal supported by the Counter Reformation, new sanctuaries were constructed, inspired by Italian examples. The cupolas were a favourite adornment for these sanctuaries, both a sign of technical prowess and a renewed symbolic link with God.

These architectural works gave a new look to the landscape of Paris and provided a grandiose place in which the dogmas of the Catholic Church were illustrated by artistic talents such as Mignard in Val de Grâce Church (1663) and La Fosse in the chapel at Les Invalides (1692). The form of the cupola is particularly suited to the representation of celestial visions whose verisimilitude is based on the effects of illusionist perspective. The model for these great painted decors comes from the 16th century, with Correggio's work in Parma Cathedral. Artists in France had been trained in the Italian school of painting and continued this legacy.

In the 17th century, a desire for clarity took over. False architecture was used to structure spaces, accentuate the effect of elevation and create a contrast with the celestial world shown by an open sky where God, the Angels, prophets and saints would sit in their majesty. The 18th century preferred more flexible solutions in which the clouds freed themselves from the architecture and invaded the entire picture. The great illusionist decors were therefore often part of a system which combined architecture, painting and sculpture, similar to theatrical stage design. They allowed painters to distinguish themselves by demonstrating their virtuosity and originality within a French school which was increasingly distancing itself from the Italian models.

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(15th) 70 Rue de Vaugirard

**Saint-Joseph-des-Carmes Church**, transept crossing

Walther Damery (1614-1678)

**Elijah Taken up to Heaven, circa 1644** Following the Council of Trent, the Order of Carmel was reformed in 1593 and divided into the Great Carmelites and the Discalced Carmelites. The latter were called to Paris in 1610 and set up on Rue de Vaugirard. Their church, which was completed in 1630, has a cupola in the

transept crossing. As the circle had been perceived as the most perfect geographical shape since the Renaissance, the cupola seemed to be the favoured medium for the divine presence.

The painting of the decor was entrusted to the Liège artist Walther Damery in around 1644. A few years previously, he had made a journey to Italy, where he had familiarised himself with the new Baroque trends. The subject represented was very probably defined in close collaboration with the Carmelites who, in the spirit of the Counter Reformation, used art to proclaim the truth and glory of the Catholic religion compared with heresy.

The calotte shows a painting of the prophet Elijah, the mythical founder of the Order of Carmelites, being taken up to Heaven in a fiery chariot surrounded by angels; he drops his cloak through space onto his successor Elisha. Behind a trompe l'œil painted balustrade at the base of the drum, disciples contemplate the prodigy. Framed by fluted pilasters, four statues painted in grisaille show saints from the Order of Carmelites. Damery's decor is one of the few remaining examples in Paris of a vast illusionist work in the Roman style and is no doubt one of the earliest. It is a compromise between two major, opposing trends in Italy in the 1630s: that of the great, bustling compositions by Pietro da Cortona featuring a large number of people, from 16th century Emilian paintings, and that of the search for simplification and the concentration of the theme into a few, highly individualised figures, as favoured by Sacchi. The motif of the chariot drawn by horses seen da sotto in su (from a low angle) is inspired by the decor of Aurora painted by Guercino at the Ludovisi casino in Rome. The composition is clearly divided into two separate registers, the celestial sphere (calotte) and the terrestrial world (drum), connected by the explosion of clouds and the prophet's cloak suspended in the air. The lower register, punctuated by the verticality of the false pilasters, contrasts with the swirling scene in the cupola which is less well ordered by the painter, who was no doubt more restricted by the framework. The alternation of the real and trompe-l'œil architectural elements (openings and recesses) has the effect of merging the space occupied by the decor and that occupied by the spectator.

The decision to depict the precise instant which precedes Elisha's receipt of the cloak is a typically Baroque process which causes a certain tension and allows the painter to play on the gestures and expressions of the different characters surrounding the scene.



(16th) Place Saint-Sulpice

**Saint-Sulpice**.... Chapel of the Virgin

François Lemoyne (1688 – 1737)

### **The Assumption of the Virgin, fresco, 1730 –1732**

In November 1730, the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice, Languet de Gercy, commissioned the painter François Lemoyne to create the decor for the cupola of the Chapel of the Virgin. The artist, already famous for his great religious decor (see next notice), was then enjoying a certain amount of fame at the Court of Versailles.

Assisted by his student Nonotte, Lemoyne devoted himself to the work at Saint-Sulpice for two years and delivered his work in 1732.

The chosen theme was that of the Assumption. Lemoyne followed a classical route; the cupola, showing the sky, was entirely painted with concentric clouds in which figures can be seen. Different groups can be distinguished, although Lemoyne took care not to give his composition too marked a hierarchy. Part of a pyramid structure, the Virgin is suspended above Saint Pierre and Saint Sulpice (the two patron Saints of the church) and is welcomed by twirling angels. Below, around the whole circumference of the vault, the artist represented angels holding biblical symbols of the Virgin (Tower of David, rose, lily, star, mirror, etc.) as well as the saints associated with the cult of Saint Mary (Saint Augustin, Saint Dominique, Saint Bernard, Saint Jean Damascène and Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie). Following the fire which damaged the decor in 1762, the restoration was entrusted to the painter A. F. Callet, who added several characters to the procession, including the parish priest Olier and his parishioners.

Despite the profusion of figures and the bustling nature of the composition, the work as a whole has a great clarity thanks to the clever "signposting" narrative put in place by Lemoyne. By increasing the number of gestures in the assembly pointing towards the Virgin, the spectator's eyes go naturally towards the main scene. This process also has the effect of calling the faithful to witness and making them part of the divine mystery. With this decor, Lemoyne demonstrated his virtuosity in handling a work on a ceiling and earned the admiration

of his contemporaries, who willingly compared his work with the painted cupolas of Val-de-Grâce church (Mignard) and Les Invalides (La Fosse). However, it is difficult for us to judge the fresco technique, unsuited to the hygrometry of Paris, on a purely visual level, as fires and successive restorations have considerably altered its original qualities.



(17th) 1 Rue Montalembert

**Saint Thomas d'Aquin**, Saint Louis Chapel

François Lemoyne (1688 – 1737)

### **The Transfiguration, 1723 – 1724**

Located behind the high altar, Saint Louis Chapel was originally a second choir constructed by the monks of the Novicia Church of the Jacobins in 1722. It included a series of panelling and stalls decorated with sculptures showing parallel scenes from the Old and New Testament and framing paintings by Brother André on themes from the life of Christ and the Virgin. The Dominicans continued to make their church match the taste of the times by having a new high altar built in polychrome marble and gilt bronze. Together with Lemoyne's decor, the sculpted glory which connected these two spaces is the only remaining element of this work which was completely broken up during the Revolution.

Biographies of Lemoyne recall that the artist "offered to paint the ceiling for a derisory sum", considering it the opportunity to prove his talents as an interior decorator and to broaden his repertoire which until then had been limited to romantic mythologies. The effects of his success were immediate, as he was almost simultaneously commissioned to create the ceiling of the Chapel of the Virgin in Saint Sulpice (see previous notice) and that of the Hercules drawing room at Versailles.

The decor, begun in 1723, was completed in the second half of the following year, when the artist returned from a trip to Italy. His sensitivity to the Italian models had previously been stimulated by the presence in Paris of several Venetian artists between 1715 and 1720, including Sebastiano Ricci (accepted as a member of the Royal Academy) and Pellegrini (creator of the decor on the ceiling of the Hôtel de Nevers [Nevers Mansion] in 1719).

The subject represented is the Transfiguration, or the moment when a celestial voice reveals the divine nature of Christ to the Apostles. The composition is clearly structured. The bottom of the scene is occupied by Pierre, Jacques le Majeur and Jean surprised at prayer on Mount Thabor. Their proximity to the spectator underlines their role as intercessors with the faithful. In the middle of the scene is the transfigured Christ, with open arms, surrounded by Moses and Elijah. He is represented *da sotto in su* and seems attracted by the divine light which shines above the clouds. The sombre expanses of the exterior part of the decor contrast with the central shaft of light, creating the impression of ascension.

Groups of angels commentating on the revelation are shown at the bottom of the composition, interspersed with the four evangelists whose sculptural appearance recalls that they are the medium of the New Testament.

Although certain elements are linked to Roman Baroque culture (grisaille designs which extend the architecture, such as the false balustrade, the use of drapery, etc.), Lemoyne acts as the representative of a new French tradition marked by the Venetian masters, which cultivates clear colours, halftones and open compositions.



(1st) 24, Rue Saint-Roch

**Saint Roch**, Chapel of the Virgin

Jean-Baptiste Pierre (1714 – 1789)

### **The Assumption of the Virgin, mounted canvas, 1749–1756**

Jean-Baptiste Marduel, the parish priest of Saint-Roch from 1749 to 1787, designed for his church a great decoration plan, whose programme was similar to a theatrical design. The cupola painted by Pierre is an

integral part of this work, which today is largely altered. In 1750, Marduel took over the project for the Chapel of the Virgin, begun by Jules Hardouin Mansart and, following a competition, entrusted the work to a team of artists consisting of a sculptor (Falconet), a painter (Pierre) and an architect (Boullée).

For the altar, Falconet created a marble group of sculptures showing The Annunciation and an immense glory of golden rays with the heads of cherubs. An opening in the clouds offered a view of the adjoining Calvaire Chapel from which showed Christ on the Cross in contre-jour. The glory led the eyes towards The Assumption which Pierre painted in the cupola. Painting, sculpture and plays on light in the architecture combined to highlight the role of the Virgin in the achievement of the divine plan.

The meaning of this series of works is now obscure, as the sculptures of The Annunciation disappeared during the Revolution (they were replaced by The Nativity sculpted by Michel Anguier for the Val-de-Grâce) and the Calvaire Chapel was extensively changed.

The cupola painted by Pierre also suffered during the Revolution, but various restoration campaigns returned it to its former brilliance.

When Pierre was commissioned to create this decor, he was already a famous painter, considered by his contemporaries to be a specialist in large compositions. The subject of the cupola he decorated at Saint Roch was the triumph of the Virgin welcomed into Heaven by the angels and the great figures of the Old and New Testaments. It is a traditional design for a Marian oratory, widely found in the Italian churches Pierre studied during the five years he spent in Rome. The composition is in three parts, defined by the light in such a way that the Old Testament appears in the shade, which serves to highlight the New Testament. The empty space in the centre of the cupola, the absence of architectural elements and the lack of a well-defined hierarchy among the groups (that of the Virgin, although situated in the most brightly lit part, is neither the highest nor the most important), distinguish the decor of Baroque creations and link it to a typically French subdued, rocaille vision. Diderot still heavily criticised the work of his contemporary, whom he reproached in particular for the “lack of unity and links” in the composition.

Saint Joseph des Carmes

Saint Sulpice

Saint Thomas d'Aquin

Saint Roch



Due to the provisions of the Concordat, signed in 1801 between France and the Holy See, which ratified the Revolutionary seizures of the clergy's possessions and transferred the property of the parish churches and their offices to the communes, the City of Paris currently owns around one hundred religious buildings, including a large number of Catholic churches.

The Concordat regime, which remained in force until the 1905 law separating Church and State, proved to be advantageous for religious buildings belonging to the commune. Making the works of art confiscated during the Revolution available to the clergy and an active policy of commissioning decors and constructing new buildings made the churches of Paris an artistic series of buildings of exceptional richness covering the major periods of French art, from the Classical era to the modern period.

The Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of Paris is currently responsible for conserving this considerable heritage. It is in charge of its inventory, maintenance and promotion as well as the restoration work necessary to conserve the buildings which house it.