

On the trail of Nicolas Ledoux

FROM THE CARNAVALET MUSEUM (4TH) TO THE LA VILLETTE ROTUNDA (19TH)

Most of the Parisian architecture produced by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806), one of the most brilliant architects of the Enlightenment, disappeared during the 19th century. Today the few remains of the hundred or so sites in Paris and the provinces are a reminder of the inventiveness of this artist, which led to him being classed as one of the non-conformist architects of his era. Inspired by Greek and Roman Antiquity as well as the Italian Renaissance and English Palladianism, Ledoux sought to develop an “enlightened classicism” with moral and philosophical values similar to those of the Encyclopaedia movement, through innovations in form liberated from academic dogma.

Born to a modest family of traders, the young native of Champagne went “up” to Paris, where he received a sound education from the Beauvais College in Paris, on a scholarship. Then after five years’ apprenticeship in an engraving workshop, the young Ledoux took part in the free architecture course run by Jacques-François Blondel, a great theoretician during the reign of Louis XV, who trained most French and foreign architects in the second half of the 18th century. After this academic education, Ledoux learned his trade with Louis-François Trouard, acquiring the new “Grecian” style.

At the age of twenty, he produced his first work, the decoration of the Café Militaire (Military Café), which elevated him to the ranks of fashionable architects.

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1 Carnavalet Museum

Decoration of the Café Militaire (Military Café)

Founded in 1762, the Café Militaire (Military Café), which was reserved for officers as was customary in all garrison towns, was located on the ground floor of a block built in 1761 on Rue Saint-Honoré and decorated in the Grecian style. The building was destroyed in 1855 during work on Rue de Rivoli carried out under Napoleon III and Haussmann. The decorations were brought to the Carnavalet Museum. Basking in praise from the press, Ledoux successfully signed off his first work: “In this Capital there is a café with noble new decorative details that are causing quite a stir. This is the Café Militaire (Military Café), Rue Saint-Honoré. (...) Everything there is rich, grand and simple, and exudes beautiful, wholesome antiquity. Mr Ledoux, who designed and executed this

decoration, is displaying the rarest of talents...” Elie Fréron, *L'année littéraire* (The Literary Year) (1762).

The decoration of the *Café Militaire* (Military Café) combines the classic vocabulary of ordered architecture with decorative forms that “speak” on the theme of the warrior’s rest. The inner space of the café is made up of twelve columns with pike and laurel patterns topped with winged helmets, alternating with wainscoting adorned with trophies of arms and mirrors.

Decoration of the drawing room at the Hôtel d’Uzès (Uzès Mansion)

The Hôtel d’Uzès (Uzès Mansion) was built in 1768 by Ledoux for François-Emmanuel de Crussol, Duke of Uzès, on the site of the former Hôtel de l’Hôpital (Hospital Mansion) on a vast piece of land between Rue Montmartre and Rue Saint-Fiacre. It was demolished in 1870. The decoration of the drawing room at the Hôtel d’Uzès (Uzès Mansion) attests to Ledoux’s quest for innovation in the area of decoration.

Ledoux broke away from the tradition of mid-height wainscoting, preferring high wainscoting entirely covering the walls.

The sculpture on the doors and panels were made by J.B. Boiston from Comté, following models by Joseph Métivier.

The attributes of war and the arts affixed to tree trunks adorn the wainscoting panels. The leaves of the doors are decorated with symbols of the different parts of the world: Europe is symbolised by a horse, Asia by an elephant, Africa by a dromedary and America by an alligator. This theme, inspired by the doors produced for the Tuileries under Louis XIV, is a manifestation of the “return to grand taste”, as are the Apollos radiating from the lower panels.



Hôtel d’Hallwyll (Hallwyll Mansion)(3rd) 28, rue Michel-Comte

The Hôtel d’Hallwyll (Hallwyll Mansion) is the only remaining example of Parisian domestic architecture built by Ledoux. The Hôtel d’Hallwyll (Hallwyll Mansion) was considered by his contemporaries to be one of the most modern hotels in the Marais in the late 18th century.

Shortly after finishing the decoration of the *Café Militaire* (Military Café), in 1766, Ledoux was commissioned by Franz-Joseph d’Hallwyll, a Colonel of the Swiss Guard, and his wife Marie-Thérèse Demidorge, to convert the Hôtel Demidorge (Demidorge Mansion), the former Hôtel de Bouligneux (Bouligneux Mansion). The architect made good use of the old street-facing building with a symmetrical, monumental composition of the façade, treated with bosses in the Italian Renaissance style, and an axis emphasised by a door with Tuscan columns atop a tympanum adorned with Graces. Behind this set of buildings enclosing the service quarters was a courtyard containing the main building, which had no specific architectural order and had smooth walls and indentures for bosses. Ledoux also displayed a real talent as a landscape architect when designing the garden.

Considering that “(...) as there are very high walls on all sides of the garden, any planting whatsoever would have detracted from the salubrity of this dwelling...”, Ledoux designed an atrium lined with galleries of Doric columns that acted as a garden, with water flowing from two upturned urns at the end - a theme that predated the saltworks at Arc-et-Senans - on either side of a niche containing a Grace. A painted trompe-l’oeil backdrop on the blank wall of the Carmelite convent on Rue Montmorency extended this piece of landscape architecture and offered the apartments “an agreeable viewpoint”, in the style of the Picturesque current that had developed in painting.

3 The Pantin Barrier or La Villette Rotunda(19th) Place de Stalingrad

With his experience of the saltworks at Arc-et-Senans under his belt, Ledoux was called upon by the Ferme Générale to produce the customs offices of the Wall of the Fermiers Généraux (Farmers-General) which were designed to collect taxes on goods coming into the capital. As soon as the project was approved by Louis XVI, Ledoux sketched out the plans for the customs offices, which he conceived of as “Propylaea” or monumental entrances to the city. He also intended to display the culmination of his architectural work, the “modernised” reinvention of the antique to further the ideal of progress advocated by Enlightenment philosophy. The Pantin Barrier or La Villette Rotunda is one of the four barriers in the Wall of the Fermiers Généraux (Farmers-General) that remain out of the original fifty made by Ledoux. As symbols of the Old Regime, many

ideas, which he explained towards the end of his life in *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des mœurs et de la législation* (Architecture considered in relation to art, mores and legislation) (1804).

Décor du Café Militaire,
musée Carnavalet



Décor du salon de
compagnie de l'hôtel d'Uzès,
musée Carnavalet



Hôtel d'Hallwyll



Rotonde de la Villette

