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Intimating History: (re)-furnishing Versailles for Louis-Philippe's Musée d'Histoire de France (1834–1837)

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Abstract

The constitution and opening of the *Musée Historique de Versailles* counts as among the most important undertakings of nineteenth century French cultural policy. It appeared as an explicit manifesto for national reconciliation, in the context of the constitutional monarchy's desire to establish its historical place in the long line of princes and regimes that were considered as the builders of a millenary nation. It appeared also as the best way for the public authority to preserve the castle, since the end of the Revolutionary period had presented each changing regime with the difficulty of dealing with this exceptional monument both in symbolic terms and in relation to its maintenance.

Introduction

Versailles as a museum was inaugurated in June 1837 on the occasion of the Royal Prince's, the duke of Orléans', wedding. The event was thus an obvious way of associating of the story of the new dynasty with a recollection of France's history. The building had been the object of huge transformations and included spaces dedicated to a variety of topics. The *Galerie des Batailles* and representations celebrating the Empire period and the July Monarchy itself were located in the South wing. In the North wing, a collection of carved portraits of historical figures from the Middle Ages to the Modern history was represented, along with the *salles des Croisades*, while in the *corps central*, public access was granted in the State Apartments (*les Grands appartements*). Meanwhile, the private apartments (*appartements intérieurs du roi* and *appartements de la reine*) were reserved for the use of the king and queen as spaces for reception and display, establishing a more private museum accessible only on the basis of royal invitation. The museum hosted a collection mostly displaying cycles of paintings and sculpture of the different periods and fundamental episodes in France's national history in a narrative manner. This narrative approach reflected the political statement of the July Monarchy, eager to unite society in common praise for national pride despite the stark political divisions that marked the period.

If the art collection at Versailles has been the object of much research and numerous publications, beginning with the work by Charles Gavard in the very first decade of its opening, and up until more recent decades, from Thomas Gaetgens and Claire Constans; yet the part played by the furniture in these rooms has obviously not yet enjoyed enough attention from historians or art historians. For the new museum, the furniture was principally provided according to orders from the Royal Household. Most of these pieces were public benches made by the habitual furniture deliverers to the French court. Other pieces were older items taken from the Royal Collection at the *Garde-Meuble*, but apart from these, Versailles, which had been an empty place for decades, appears as a completely new adventure in terms of refurbishment.

Furniture as a companion to the narrative of display

The most important type of furniture ordered were undoubtedly the benches and stools intended for the display galleries. Of these, the most common was a particular model of very strong and simple design.



Figure 1: Louis-Alexandre Bellangé, public bench, 1836, Versailles, musée national du château.

It is not clear how many of these were actually made, nor how many were displayed. According to the archives, Louis-Alexandre Bellangé delivered 392 benches, for public use, plus a set of 75 stools, intended for the museum guards, between September 1835 and September 1838. But this only concerns Bellangé, and we know today that many other benches displayed at Versailles bear the stamps or marks of other craftsmen such as Jacob, Munier, Leys, to mention only those with a signature of some kind. The very sober and simple design can easily be understood as adequate to the large number of pieces supplied, as well as to their purpose. These were to be used by the public as seating during the visit, therefore they had to be strong, numerous and of course as cheap as possible to acquire. It is also worth considering that these seats, which were also intended for painting and sculpture rooms, had to be aesthetically subdued and not disturb the visual experience of the narrative cycles of history paintings and sculptures. But there remains a puzzle. Some of the prints published by Gavard in his album of views of the new Versailles Museum show very clearly that some of the benches were not in fact on display for the public, but protected by iron balustrades¹. According to Gavard, the rooms in which one could see this were the rooms dedicated to the Napoleonic period, and a room called the “*salle des Résidences royales*”, displaying a choice of painting showing the different palaces and castles from the royal household under the *Ancien régime*. On the contrary, it is remarkable that such a disposition did not occur in the other parts of the castle, such as the rooms dedicated to the French Revolution and the revolution of 1830, nor for that matter in the Hall of mirrors. The very presence of balustrades gives the impression that the point of these benches was not only to provide possible points of rest to the visitors, but, despite their simplicity and lack of décor, they also seem to belong to the *mise en scène* of the interior itself.

The interpretation I give to this is that we are probably facing a late manifestation of the protocol rules within a French regal palace relative to the furnishing of a state apartment. In the 1830s, despite a certain simplification of protocol desired by Louis-Philippe, the proper rule appropriate to the furnishing of a royal palace still followed a Napoleonic organization dating from 1804. From this, it is clear that the benches were invested with the same importance as seats intended to furnish waiting rooms and antechambers; audience rooms, however more prestigious, were furnished by more courtly looking X-shaped stools.

Public benches, displayed in the museum, but in effect out of reach for the public, may therefore be interpreted as pure objects of protocol, intended to remind anyone that while a museum dedicated to the Nation, Versailles remained discretely but surely a royal residence, and that it was necessary to demonstrate this in some places within the palace. In a certain sense, we are confronted with the participation of furniture in a museographic narrative. By visiting the palace, the public of the 1830s and 1840s had access to a plethora of episodes from French history; yet by facing protocol furnishing, and being clearly prevented from using it, the people were also placed in the position of a distant spectator to the show of court, which in the context of Versailles appeared as a concept belonging to both the present and the past.

Today, there would be no sense in placing a simple looking and brand new bench, in theory intended for people to sit on it, within the museum, out of reach of the public; such a thing would look absurd, especially considering that it would appear to be a completely unnecessary expense. However, under Louis-Philippe, this display mechanism materialized a certain distance between the place and its new visitors, indicating that the public, while citizens of a common

history, still remained in the king's castle, and they were maintained at a different status from that of the courtiers. This notion also illustrates the interesting concept of the palatial space as an environment for public education in History during Orleanist France.

The display of furniture as part of the narration

Another aspect deserving development is the role given to furniture as a direct element for the museographic narration. From this point of view, the initial museography of Versailles was obviously designed to celebrate two concepts: decorative unity within some of the historical rooms, as well as the illusion of travelling into the past. Creating a decorative sense of unity was a clear motive for the delivery made by Bellangé in association with Pierre-Gaston Brion, of a suite of benches and stools in neo-Louis XIV style.



Figure 2: Louis-Alexandre Bellangé, public bench for the Hall of Mirrors, 1835, Versailles, musée national du château.

These were designed to fit the architecture of the Hall of Mirrors and the adjacent “*salons de la Paix*” and “*de la Guerre*”. Probably due to the location, the decision was first made to spend a little more money on their design than on the benches discussed above, and secondly, that their design shouldn't be modern but try to respect the spirit of the place and lend a coherence to the memory of the *Grand Siècle* so that the spectator would experience it as completely as possible. In the same spirit, two pier tables and one other clock stand were commissioned from Brion, produced in a curious personal reconceptualization of Rococo style.



Figure 3: Pierre-Gaston Brion, public stool or the Hall of Mirrors, 1835, Versailles, musée national du château.

Another cabinetmaker, Hurel, delivers in 1836 an armchair and a holy water fount intended for a room reconstituted and designed as the confessional cabinet of Louis XIV, and we see here the other purpose of furniture in the museum in a positive sense, which was to provide a restitution of historicity.

Relative to restitution, a pertinent presentation of the King's Bedchamber was crucially important for the general program of the *corps central* of the castle. As a consequence, the administration relied on Jacob-Desmalter in 1834 to deliver the wooden components for a regal bed, integrating an upholstery garniture dating from the late seventeenth century and thought to have belonged to the original bed of the Sun King.

Figure 4: Alphonse Jacob-Desmalter, bed for the King's bedchamber, 1834 (photographed in 1857), Versailles, musée national du château. Please see the image at the RMN website:
<http://www.photo.rmn.fr/cf/htm/CSearchZ.aspx?o=&Total=230&FP=23042160&E=2K1KTSG4QAA99&SID=2K1KTSG4QAA99&New=T&Pic=190&SubE=2C6NU09QO1DK>

The cabinetmaker here develops a sort of stylistic mixture between late Empire style and neo-baroque vocabulary made of scrolls and acanthus leaves with the iconic irradiated mask in the centre. Here we are facing an excellent example of nineteenth century reconstitution of a lost historical object. Considering the crucial importance of the Royal Bedchamber in the *Ancien régime* court ceremonial, its presence was necessary for the Versailles Museum to narrate the history of the French Monarchy in its décor.

In this context, it is no wonder that the public was not told about the modern making of such a bed. The critic Jules Janin, in describing his visit to Versailles for the museum's opening describes visitors as being seized by emotion confronted with the possibility of entering a 17th century regal space². That same day, the countess of Boigne is in the same state of mind, convinced that she is facing the bed in which the Sun king slept and died³. She described the experience of the bed as the keystone moment of her visit. It is interesting to notice that, again according to Janin, the State bedchamber was actually named "*chambre du Lit*" rather the "*chambre du roi*"⁴. The illusion of actual historicity of the new Jacob-Desmalter bed survives the July Monarchy as attested by its presence in history paintings from the Second Empire, such as a scene by Navlet from 1861 (Versailles, MV8559) and the famous *Molière breakfasting with Louis XIV* by Gérôme from 1862 (private collection, 1862).

Notes

¹ Especially visible in *Vue de la Salle de Marengo*, by J. Huguenet, in Ch. Gavard, *Versailles, Galeries Historiques, dédiées à S. M. le Reine des Français*, Paris, 1837–1848.

² J. Janin, *Fontainebleau, Versailles, Paris*, Paris, 1837, p. 149–158.

³ Adélaïde d'Osmond, comtesse de Boigne, *Mémoires, récits d'une tante*, Paris, 1999, pp. 507–508.

⁴ J. Janin, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

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