

LOUIS LE VAU AT THE COLLÈGE MAZARIN: ROME IN PARIS?

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The former Collège des Quatre-Nations, which, thanks to Napoleon, became the palace of the Institut de France, has always been admired for the successful harmony of its architecture and for its integration into a palatial universe that is without doubt one of the most beautiful of known urban sites. The recent redevelopment, now nearing completion, of the famous semicircular forecourt restored to its former—lower—level and overlaid with small paving stones, has improved the overall view and enhanced the strong elements of the composition, the two pavilions and the chapel and the graceful curved wings that unite them².

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² R.A. Franklin, *Histoire de la Bibliothèque Mazarine et du Palais de l'Institut*, Paris, 1860, reissued 1901, and *Recherches historiques sur le collège des Quatre-Nations*, Paris, 1862; H. Lemonnier, *Le Collège Mazarin et le palais de l'Institut (XVII-XIX siècle)*, Paris, 1921; L. Hauteœur, "Du Louvre à l'Institut", *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, March 1963. A thesis on Louis Hauteœur's work was submitted by Miss Caroline Poulain to the *École des chartes* [School of Palaeography and Librarianship] on 22nd March 2001; *La chapelle du collège des Quatre-Nations. 1661-1962. Le tricentenaire d'un bâtiment. La coupole de l'Institut de France*, Paris, Vincent-Fréal, 1962, texts by André Gutton. See also A. Gutton, "La restauration de la coupole de l'Institut", *Les Monuments historiques de la France*, January-March 1963, and Y. Christ, *Dictionnaire des églises de France. Paris et ses environs*, 1968, pp. 35-36.

Numerous studies have been made of the building, both of its institutional history and its architectural analysis, notably by Louis Hauteœur and by Albert Laprade, and more particularly in 1962 during the restoration of the cupola to its original design through the care of the architect André Gutton. New research, in particular that carried out by an American historian, Mrs Hilary Ballon, was an added incentive to broaden this analysis and obtain a better grasp of the profound originality of Louis Le Vau's work.

In 1657, Cardinal Mazarin had chosen the young Louis XIV's principal architect to undertake the construction of the Collège des Quatre-Nations, a foundation that would ensure his posthumous glory through the education of the king's new subjects acquired by his able politician, and Le Vau had had the ingenious idea of erecting it opposite the palace of the Louvre, on the Left Bank. It needed the eye of a visionary architect to imagine that an old tower and rampart perched on the irregular bank of the river and at right angles along a ditch full of fast-flowing water could make way for an esplanade overlooking the Seine, the location of a theatre-like structure offering the most magnificent vista to the royal apartments of the Louvre.

It has been noted that during the last twenty years of his career, Le Vau had mixed two different sources of inspiration, the classical and the baroque, styles which, according to the traditional vision of the arts, are often considered to be contradictory. This quite original fusion can be observed in the châteaux of Vaux-le-Vicomte, Vincennes and Versailles, as well as in his participation in the construction of the new palace of the Louvre. At the Collège Mazarin, it is even more noticeable

in the association of the high-roofed French-style pavilions with the buildings' low wings shaped into a concave forecourt, an obvious reminder of the recent admirable developments in the Eternal City. Rome in Paris? This form of urbanism, till then unknown in France, glorified in Paris by the enormous panorama of the river, and now treated with the same respect as the Grand Canal in Venice, must have astonished his contemporaries.

The chapel itself also bears the traces of Italian influence, as can clearly be seen by examining Le Vau's series of alternative drawings, the latest—and final—of which coincided with Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sojourn in Paris in 1665, when the latter was invited by Colbert to propose a new façade for the Louvre. The more "Roman" layout, in both senses of the term, of the drum and the cupola could easily have reflected in Le Vau's mind a new awareness of his rival's creations.

To begin with, it is important to remember that the decade from 1660 represented a crucial period in the evolution of French taste and in the history of Franco-Italian artistic relations, notably illustrated by two sojourns, Bernini's brief stay in Paris and Nicolas Poussin's long residence in Rome, —two acknowledged luminaries in Europe at that time, as Mr. Marc Fumaroli reminded us in connection with Poussin's *Sainte Françoise Romaine*, recently acquired by the Louvre. It was in fact during those years that the Collège Mazarin was erected, an original, even atypical construction uniting two "styles" — classicism and baroque—, thought to be contradictory, but are they as contradictory as tradition would have them be?

Le Vau between baroque and classicism

From the middle of the 1650s, as Hilary Ballon has pointed out³, Le Vau's art was constantly fluctuating between one influence and the other, as if two temperaments were inhabiting the creator, on the one hand movement, shadow and light, illusion, theatre, accompanied by a certain amount of freedom in the use of architectural order, and on the other calm, balance between parts, monumental proportions, repetitive order. With the power of French Renaissance tradition, coming from Pierre Lescot and Philibert de l'Orme and their successor Salomon de Brosse, we find united the sources of inspiration that endow the Collège Mazarin with its exceptional character and flavour⁴.

It should also be noted that in the 1660s, characterised, soon after the Fronde followed by Nicolas Fouquet's downfall, by the surge of the monarchy and the installation of a new system of government, politics remained in the forefront both in circles of power, and in social and cultural circles, and conditioned the regime's "grand designs", which were thus endowed with a strong symbolic charge since they were to reveal the glory of the king and the wealth of the kingdom. The rivalry between old clans,—the Frondeurs versus Mazarin's

³ Hilary Ballon, *Louis Le Vau. Mazarin's College, Colbert's Revenge*, Princeton, 1999.

⁴ *L'Institut et la Monnaie, Deux palais sur un quai*, Paris, Délégation à l'action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1990, texts by Édouard Bonnefous, Nicole Felkay, André Gutton and Anne-Marie Laffitte-Larnaudie; *Le palais de l'Institut de France*, Beaux-Arts Magazine, special edition, 1995, with an excellent introduction by Claude Mignot, pp. 8-22. For information on Louis Le Vau and his early work in civil architecture, mention must be made of the works of Cyril Bordier, *Louis Le Vau premier architecte du roi*, vol. 1, Paris, Laget, 1998 and of Alexandre Cojannot "Louis Le Vau. Les débuts d'un architecte parisien (1612-1654)", *Positions des thèses de l'École nationale des chartes*, Paris, 2000.

supporters—had left its mark. François Mansart, Le Vau's senior and great rival who died in 1666, was no stranger to it, having often served the former⁵. The younger Le Vau was to serve Louis XIV and Colbert, but having outlived his usefulness to Colbert's politics, the minister made no effort to save him from disgrace.

The Collège des Quatre-Nations

When Cardinal Mazarin died, aged 59 on 9th March 1661 at the château de Vincennes, he was at the peak of his glory. Having at first despised him, the French were forced to recognise his achievements : he had brought them peace, both at home and abroad. The huge fortune (between 35 and 40 million livres) he had amassed in dubious circumstances was offered to the king who found himself obliged to refuse this embarrassing legacy⁶, but Mazarin had made other arrangements in the public interest.

His model, the cardinal de Richelieu, was the founder of the new Sorbonne school, and had commissioned his favourite architect, Jacques Lemercier, to build it. Mazarin had long been thinking about a similar project to which he could link the erection of his tomb that was to lie in the chapel associated with the institution—just as Richelieu lies in the chapel at the Sorbonne—,but he wished to enrich it with an additional element for the benefit of the educated public, the

⁵ *François Mansart. Le génie de l'architecture*, edited by Jean-Pierre Babelon and Claude Mignot, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.

⁶ Despite this total refusal, some of the works from Mazarin's collection passed into the royal collections. Cf. Patrick Michel, *Mazarin, prince des collectionneurs*, Paris, R.M.N., "Notes et documents des musées de France", N° 34, 1999, 665 pages.

installation of his fabulously well-stocked library⁷. On 8th December 1656, he had written to his agent in Rome, the abbé Elpidio Benedetti, to ask him to find an architect in the Eternal City who could propose a suitable project. The Fronde was over by this time, and the all-powerful minister was once again in control of the kingdom. He could now afford to concentrate on ensuring the future of his name.

Three years later, a major event reinstated the idea proposed in 1656. The treaty of the Pyrenees, signed in November 1659, at one and the same time secured a lasting peace, the decline of Spain, the enlargement of France's territories and the marriage of the young Louis XIV. The projected school thus acquired a new political importance, since its foundation was now inscribed in the glorious pages of the history of France as written by the generous cardinal. On 6th March 1661 the cardinal's notaries drew up the college statutes in precise detail; they were included in his will and preceded his death by just three days.

The name chosen for the new institution was fortuitous since by using the term "Quatre-Nations" [four nations], the cardinal was adopting the former university term of "nation", without distancing it too much from its original meaning. It traditionally described large geographical zones uniting French and foreign students divided by language (the four nations of France, England, Normandy and Picardy); it now described the young foreigners who, thanks to the minister's successful politics, had become the new subjects of the king through the treaties of Münster and of the Pyrenees, and who were to be taught to become good French

⁷ Claude Dulong, *Mazarin*, Paris, Perrin, 1999, and "Les origines du Collège des

citizens, catholic and French-speaking. The cardinal bequeathed the necessary sums for the provision of educational fees and board for 60 scholarship holders, “children of the gentry and principal middle-class families”, with a marked preference for the former. As the cardinal had stated, again echoing Richelieu’s thought, “The gentry will always take precedence over the middle classes”. Coming second after the nobility, the gentry had at all costs to be allied to the service of the king.

The young men, chosen by the cardinal according to their birthplace in the united Crown territories, were thus divided into four “nations”, i.e. four languages of origin: 20 from Flanders, Artois, Hainaut and Luxemburg, 15 from Alsace and other Germanic territories, 10 from the Roussillon, Conflent and Cerdagne, and finally 15 from the Pignerol and,—should we be surprised?—, from the Papal States, for the training of budding young Mazarins destined to serve the king of France.

This institute of national “assimilation”, officially registered in the list of Paris university colleges—unlike Francis 1st’s *Collège royal*, formerly renovated by Henry IV under the name *Collège de France*—was to include an major innovation: a riding, dance, fencing and mathematics academy for 15 of its pupils, a complement judged to be indispensable for all aristocratic education. Finally, the library located in the Palais Mazarin, in the rue de Richelieu, was to be moved to a building adjoining the college. The chapel was to house the benefactor’s tomb.

For this great project to be put into effect, Mazarin provided in his will the sum of 2 million livres for the construction, and for the

maintenance another 45,000 livres of revenue from the Hôtel de Ville and from his abbey at Saint-Michel-en-l'Herm in the Vendée. The foundation was to be a concrete example for centuries to come of the cardinal's political legacy and a reminder of his double career as servant of the pope and of the king. It stood as a sign of confirmation, at the end of the Fronde, of the unity of Church and State, and as a symbol of the glorious path to be followed by the young monarch whose reign was about to begin.

The choice of architect

Mazarin would doubtless have been content with a modest building erected in a part of the city where land was not too expensive. He did, however, attach great importance to the commission of his tomb and the abbé Benedetti was initially instructed to sound out the universal artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini. The great man, not knowing where the tomb was to be erected, declined.

For the construction of the college buildings, the cardinal had first thought of the Italian Carlo Rainaldi, but the negotiations came to nothing. In 1657 he decided to consult Jean-Baptiste Colbert, his confidant and steward since 1651. Colbert suggested three highly-placed French architects, well known to Mazarin: Louis Le Vau, François Mansart, who had been commissioned to work on the Palais Mazarin but who had subsequently lost the commission, and Pierre Le Muet, who was completing the convent of Val-de-Grâce for the queen mother.

The cardinal gave Colbert carte blanche and his choice of Le Vau was accepted. Two conclusions can be drawn from this. The first, that

Mazarin was not resolutely determined to employ an Italian architect. Although he is often perceived as the propagator of Roman baroque and the person who introduced Italian artists to France⁸, it must be remembered that the movement was initiated by Richelieu and that Mazarin himself, far from introducing great Italian gestures on his own initiative, excluding the project of the Theatine convent to which we will return later, allowed the French their artistic freedom and made no attempt to cramp their style. The second conclusion is that the accepted choice of Le Vau who, since 1654—when he succeeded Lemercier—, had been principal architect to the king, gave a quasi official stamp to the cardinal's commission, as always following Richelieu's example.

Le Vau had already been commissioned by the cardinal to build the new palace at Vincennes (1654-1660) where Mazarin had reserved a whole wing for himself to be shared with the queen mother, giving rise to speculation; and he had confirmed the greatness of the monarchy by piercing into the old medieval surrounding wall a triumphal arch that opened out onto the park and forest. He had also worked for the rich and powerful, including President Lambert on the île Saint-Louis, the Minister of Finance Bordier at Raincy and superintendent Fouquet at Vaux. Finally and most importantly, he was in charge of the delicate building operations of the Louvre.

The architect lost no time in accepting and sketched a first draft, which Colbert passed on to Mazarin on 22nd June 1657. The cardinal thought it too grand, and Benedetti continued his negotiations in Rome

⁸ There are several articles by Madeleine Laurain-Portemer on this subject, notably "Le Palais Mazarin à Paris et l'offensive baroque de 1645-1650", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1973, LXXXI, pp. 151-168.

from where he sent, in 1660 and 1661, further drawings for the cardinal's tomb, executed either by his own hand, or by Maurizio Valperga⁹.

Meanwhile Le Vau continued to work on the project. The drawing of 1657 is unknown, but it is virtually certain that the site had already been chosen: the location of the Tour and the Porte de Nesle. The architect's intention was to build a large square courtyard—similar to the place Royale (now place des Vosges)—surrounded by barracks for the Royal Guard, which already presupposed a link with the Louvre via a bridge.

Three years later, at the end of 1660, Le Vau's great concept reappeared as part of the general project for the new Louvre whose plans fortunately still exist (kept in the Louvre museum). Mazarin had obviously been in possession of this document. Le Vau once again proposed for the cardinal's foundation the still undeveloped site opposite the Louvre on the Left Bank, thus integrating the new monument in a group of royal buildings located in the Seine landscape, beyond the Pont-Neuf. There was a call for the creation of a new town, like the new districts close to the Piazza del Popolo, in the Rome of Alexander VII.

In order to substantiate the cardinal's wish, Le Vau had thus chosen the most magnificent and most inconvenient location in Paris. The most inconvenient and therefore most expensive: a sinuous and uneven riverbank, the Tour de Nesle standing on a mound overhanging the river, Philippe Auguste's rampart reinforced on one end by a tower, as well as the nearby fortified gate; a ditch into which flowed a former

⁹ The drawings are kept in the national library in Turin and were identified by Hilary

stream transformed into an evil-smelling sewer and crossed by a bridge; and finally private houses straddling the city wall.¹⁰ The most magnificent because it allowed the buildings and the urban space opposite the old Louvre to be developed as a counterpart to the apartments of the king and the queens, in the south wing that Le Vau had been commissioned to double in length, after erecting a high pavilion crowned with a dome in the central axis.

Through Le Vau, and no doubt through Colbert, the Mazarin foundation thus moved up to another level: it was now a royal project. On the 1660 plan, the buildings were arranged around a courtyard shaped like an elongated rectangle. In the centre was a portico of eight columns crossed by a passageway leading to neighbouring streets. At either end of the two short wings built at right angles and traversed by another pair of gateways leading towards the quays, stood two pavilions on the bank of the Seine, while the college buildings surrounded a square courtyard located at the back, to the left of the central portico. The esplanade was extended by a hemicycle jutting out onto the river and linked to the palace of the Louvre by a bridge, appropriately dubbed the “Bridge of Peace” after the recent treaty of the Pyrenees, which had put an end to the long Spanish war. Allegorical statues were dotted along this crossing, in a French architect’s

Ballou, *op.cit.*, pp. 134-139.

¹⁰ It is exceptional for construction files of the period to include a summary of existing buildings. It is however the case for the file relating to the college buildings, which includes the plan and elevation of the Tour and the Porte de Nesle, the Hôtel de Nesle and the rampart, as well as the plans for the projected buildings, with the original layout shown in dotted lines; the drawings were presented to the executors of the will and initialled by them and by Le Vau on 23rd June 1665 (Archives nationales [National

thoroughly Roman plan recalling the triumphal bridge leading to the Castel S. Angelo.

The choice of a location

Less than two weeks after Mazarin's death, Colbert called together the other four executors of the cardinal's will and appointed members of a committee in charge of operations, whose deliberations for the years 1661-1668 and 1673-1680 have fortunately survived (and are now in the National Archives). His position vis-à-vis the king was not yet assured and the order of the day was doubtless to simplify the project and make savings, and therefore to abandon Le Vau's great project.

The idea had already been proposed, during the cardinal's lifetime, to move the college and the deceased's burial place to another of his foundations to which he had bequeathed his heart, the Theatine convent, already under construction a little further down on the banks of the Seine, in a relatively undeveloped area (the present quai Voltaire), with its chapel dedicated to Saint Anne the Royal, designed by the Piedmontese Maurizio Valperga, who was later replaced by the monk Guarino Guarini. Objections flew from every direction: both from the Theatines themselves and from the Sorbonne, which was very hostile to the installation of a college within a congregation. Available land or buildings were sought elsewhere, in the university quarter: suggestions included the Cardinal Lemoine college and even the Luxembourg palace.

Months passed. The now more powerful Colbert, having brought down Fouquet, had decided to return to the original plan: Le Vau's

Archives], N III Seine 2, 3 and 1). Reproduced, notably, by A. Gutton *op.cit.*, footnote 4,

masterly concept, integrated in the great Louvre project in which the minister wanted to interest Louis XIV, if possible by diverting his attention from the pleasures of Versailles. It also gave the minister the opportunity to make an important gesture in favour of urbanism and the subsequent modernisation of the capital.

Finally, in January 1662, Le Vau was asked to propose a new design on the same theme. He sacrificed the Bridge of Peace, a costly construction that was not strictly necessary due to the proximity of the Pont-Neuf, and instead gave the quay, which borders the courtyard, an elegant layout that could be admired from the Right Bank. The masonry took the form of an escarpment wall punctuated by successive projections, in imitation of the one he was at that time erecting on the opposite bank, at the foot of the southern façade of the Louvre; it was also decorated, according to an engraving by Israël Silvestre, with the cardinal's heraldic fasces.

The semicircular projection, criticised by the municipal authorities because it encroached on the Seine, was abandoned, but the drawing for the hemicycle was kept and transposed to the other side of the courtyard. From being convex, it became concave, affecting the layout of the buildings themselves, and the courtyard eschewed its somewhat cramped rectangular layout in favour of a lively and harmonious development inspired by the semicircular courtyards of contemporary châteaux, such as those of his rival François Mansart at Berny and Blois, or the former façade of the Château de Vaux, which Le Vau had himself just built for Fouquet. This kinetic device can also be seen on the

pp. 32 and 33 and by N. Felkay, *op.cit.*, footnote 9, pp. 58-60.

façade of the church of Saint Agnes of Borromini, on the Piazza Navona, but it had appeared earlier with Andrea Palladio, at the Villa Trissino, inspiring the Frenchman Antoine Lepautre to produce a creative plan for a palace, engraved in 1652 in a collection well known to contemporaries.

The theatre-like architectural design, enclosed on either side like a courtyard, was not intended to enhance the activity on the Left Bank, since it blocked it visually, if not functionally, but its layout was undoubtedly influenced by the Louvre on the opposite bank.

At the same time the landscape of the river was valued for itself, as it had begun to be under Henry IV with the completion of the Pont-Neuf and the construction of the place Dauphine and of the west banks of the île de la Cité. The Seine was treated like a great artery, and even compared to a Grand Canal bordered with churches and palaces. This surpassed Rome, this was Venice. Since the beginning of the century, Dutch painters such as Abraham de Verwer (there are several almost identical landscapes in the Carnavalet museum, one dated 1637), Egbert van der Poel, Renier Zeeman and Hendrick Mommers planted their easels on the site and offered pundits picturesque views depicting the river with the Pont-Neuf, the Louvre, the Hôtel de Nevers or the Tour de Nesle, rapidly relayed by sketchers and engravers, from Jacques Callot and Silvestre to Antoine Aveline and Chaufourier. The landscape artists' interest preceded the decision of the developers of the Collège Mazarin, which was depicted in similar landscapes by French painters between 1665 and 1670 (five anonymous paintings in the Carnavalet museum).

Le Vau's architecture

The general layout, which was not much altered at the time the project was started, was well detailed in the 1662 plans. Standing on either side, like theatre uprights, are two large pavilions with high-pitched roofs, a peculiarity of French civil architecture inherited from medieval towers. This type of pavilion already existed on the site. Thus on the Right Bank, one could admire at the Louvre the King's pavilion designed by Pierre Lescot, and on the Left Bank, where the palais de la Monnaie [the Mint] stands today, was the Duke of Nevers' large brick and stone pavilion built by Baptiste du Cerceau in 1582. The transformations at the Hôtel de Nevers undertaken by François Mansart for the Secretary of State Henri de Guénégaud had not altered the pavilion's imposing mass, clearly visible on the Dutch landscapes mentioned above¹¹. Towards the west, along the quai Malaquais, the private mansions, recently built on Queen Marguerite's former estate between 1620 and 1630, also bore pavilion-shaped wings (nos. 11-13, 17...).

At the centre of the arrangement stands the college chapel. Designed on a central plan and crowned with a dome, both recurrent themes of contemporary Italian architecture, it provides the central triumphal motif and acts as a harmonious counterpart to the domed pavilion which Le Vau had just completed in the centre of the Louvre's south façade, —as a result of the enlargement of the wing and the alteration to its general layout caused by the erection of the colonnade, that dome no longer exists. In between these three strong elements

tending inexorably towards the vertical, Le Vau designed two low wings curved into quarter-circles, which he had intended to top with terraces and which would eventually be covered with discreet low-pitched roofs. The wings provided communication through passageways, on the right with the local streets, on the left with the college itself.

The project whose rough outline is described above was the object of a series of drawings presented by Le Vau on 21st January 1662 and offered a few days later on 11th March for examination by the king who found them “very beautiful”. They are kept at the National Archives and at the National Library.

The buildings of the college itself were arranged around three successive courtyards that could be reached, as mentioned previously, through an entrance cut into the left wing of the square. The first or main courtyard, and the most elaborately designed, roughly described a hexagonal shape, imposed by the area of available land and the need to move the remainder of the buildings very far to the left and at an angle, along Philippe Auguste’s rampart, and to design a curved corner entrance. In subsequent plans, Le Vau cleverly transformed this geometric figure into an oblong with cut-off angles, the long sides of which bear the projection of the traversed residential buildings, the entrance building and the principal’s building, while the short sides are embellished by two facing columned porticos topped with pediments. One leads towards the chapel (just like the lateral façade of the Sorbonne chapel on the college courtyard), the other towards the library installed in the left pavilion on the quay and in an adjacent wing. Allegorical figures

¹¹ The house was acquired in 1670 by Mazarin’s niece the Dowager Princesse de

decorate the pediments, Justice and Strength (by Desjardins) on one side, Temperance and Prudence (by Legendre) on the other. A sundial bearing an inscription has been painted on one of the cut-off corners for the edification of the pupils; similar ones can be seen on the tower of the Collège de Clermont built by the Jesuits (now the Lycée Louis-le-Grand).

Having crossed the building housing the principal's apartments, we come to the second courtyard, a very large rectangular space enclosed on the left by a pavilion¹² and by the ruins of the former surrounding wall, against which the great wing containing the Institute's meeting halls was only erected in 1839 by the architect Hyppolyte Lebas. On the right stands the long, architecturally austere, central building, whose only decoration is supplied by the fasces, emblems of the cardinal, in the upper band under the dormer windows. On the ground floor were the classrooms, dining rooms and the hall of deliberations, the bedrooms occupied the upper floors¹³. The third courtyard housed the so-called "kitchens". Much narrower than the previous one, as it backed on to a large piece of land adjoining the rue Guénégaud where Le Vau had planted a garden, it is bordered by lower buildings intended for domestic services: stables, kitchen, laundry, servants' quarters. This last courtyard contains a well still bearing its ironwork decoration,

Conti. It was demolished in 1771 to make room for the hôtel de la Monnaie.

¹² Of identical design to the projecting sections punctuating the great college building opposite, this pavilion was built onto the end of the new wing by Lebas, who took great care over the general harmony.

¹³ A. Franklin, *Histoire de la bibliothèque Mazarine et du Palais de l'Institut*, Paris, 2nd edition, 1901.

and which can be reached directly through a gate opening onto the rue Mazarine.

On the courtyard, opposite the left pavilion which houses the library, the right pavilion was known as the “Arts” pavilion because it was destined as “an academic establishment intended for four different teachers”: one to teach architecture, geometry and stonecutting, another to teach fortifications, moving forces and war machines for engineers; a third to take charge of the existing painting and sculpture school which was inadequately housed in the Louvre; a fourth to teach mathematics, astrology¹⁴, cosmography...in short, it was a small version of the Institut de France,—doubtless an idea of Colbert’s, which established a strong link with the library in the left pavilion, and in this way transformed Mazarin’s project into an artistic and intellectual centre¹⁵. These instructions figure clearly on a plan of the college dated 13th August 1662 (“the four schools of architecture, mathematics, painting and sculpture/for engineers in fortifications”), however this early project was abandoned.

The ground floor of the buildings on the square was embellished with a continuous series of arcades traversed by rectangular openings, crowned with bull’s-eye windows and accommodating shops; above these were mezzanine floors housing living quarters, a useful means of obtaining rent that had already been exploited in the houses on the place Dauphine, and subsequently by Antoine Lepautre in the central buildings on the rue de l’hôtel de Beauvais. It is known that a commercial art

¹⁴ Astronomy.

¹⁵ N. Felkay, *op.cit.*, footnote 8, p. 59.

centre or shopping arcade—selling prints, paintings, books, jewellery—flourished here, giving the square and the quay the especially lively atmosphere so well illustrated at the beginning of the 19th century by new British landscape artists such as Richard Bonington, T.S. Boys and William Parrott.

Beyond the college, along the rue des Fossés, known as the rue Mazarine, whose path traced the former covered way running alongside the open sewer (which had to be enclosed in piping), Le Vau proposed erecting the riding school which the cardinal intended especially for the pupils, and between the two institutions, 16 houses of homogeneous, if not uniform, architecture, along the rue Mazarine and at right angles to the rue Guénégaud whose location would provide the college with extra revenue. This was a typical idea of Le Vau, who had been one of the active builders and promoters of the île Saint-Louis. The houses were built¹⁶, nos. 5 to 17 and 19 to 23 still exist, the architecture having been later occasionally modified, as in the rue Guénégaud. Le Vau's sober design survives, especially at nos. 7, 9 and 11, which are listed as historical monuments. There are two fine carriage entrances. The riding school, which so irritated the University for being alien to its educational principles, had to be abandoned.

Le Vau conceived the group of college buildings with the elegance and virtuosity of an illusionist whose exhibited artistry could fool the less attentive among us. He was forced to take this difficult course because the apportioned area of land followed the line of the old rampart and was therefore out of alignment, but he wanted to maintain the

impression of a centred layout and symmetrical buildings; however, Le Vau took pleasure in overcoming these difficulties and he did it with astonishing ease and freedom of draughtsmanship. Walking down the rue Mazarine to the crossing with the rue de Seine one can appreciate the successive set-backs punctuating the lower façades of the chapel and the central buildings, and understand how closely the former private residences surrounded the land conceded to Le Vau. The existing houses were only demolished in the 20th century to give the area more space and ease the traffic at the bevelled junction of the two streets; the demolitions allowed for the extremely artificial creation of the square Gabriel-Pierné and the square Honoré-Champion (1947) at the location of no. 1, quai Malaquais, which had been bought by the City in 1914 and was subsequently demolished during the major extension of the rue de Rennes down to the quay.

The art of illusion is seen in the treatment of the first courtyard of the college, whose south-western wing is no more than a decorative support without much substance, and whose majestic porticos only house narrow passageways cut into one of their lateral ends. Here Le Vau repeated the clever device he used for the Hôtel Lambert on the île Saint-Louis, where the great portico with pediment erected at the back of the courtyard appears to be the main entrance to the principal residential building, whereas in reality it only houses the staircase that leads to the apartments located in the wings, the most beautiful of which stretch out to the right towards the garden and look out on the Seine.

¹⁶ Detailed plans and even elevations are known, as well as a section on a drawing by Le Vau (National Library, Prints, Va 263d). Reproduced by Mrs Ballon, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

There is a similar illusory effect in the treatment of the college rooftops, made up of independent juxtaposed roofs of different plan and height. Thus the view for the pedestrian using the passerelle des Arts is one of low roofs describing an initial arc that respects the vertical accents of the pavilions and the chapel, but in the background to the left, the high-pitched roofs of the college give a clue to the location of the real house. We should also mention the colossal order of the pavilions' Corinthian pilasters, —a Le Vau characteristic that can be found at Vincennes, Vaux, the Hôtel Lambert..., and to which the architect daringly juxtaposed the two small superimposed Ionic and Attic orders of the curved wings, for which he was criticised by purists such as Jacques François Blondel and Quatremère de Quincy—; analyse the bold horizontal lines that run between the buildings, architraves and cornices melting into each other; and recognise the dimensions, peculiar to Le Vau, of some of the almost square casement windows, with and without moulded frames, which light up the storeys of the courtyards.

The construction of the college buildings began during the summer of 1662, after the contractors' submissions were received, and according to the drawings made in the preceding January, which were displayed in Le Vau's own house to satisfy enthusiasts' curiosity¹⁷. After the destruction of the Tour and the Porte de Nesle, the ground appeared so unsteady that the foundations had to be reinforced with piles. By 1663 the pavilions had been built as far as the cornices, as can be seen on some of the Paris landscapes painted at the time, and they were then covered with their high-pitched roofs. Their design had not been

¹⁷ N. Felkay, *op.cit.*, footnote 8, p. 59.

modified since the initial plans, but they were set back to aid traffic flow and avoid impeding the neighbours' view; their decoration was finally limited to the large flame ornaments so familiar in Le Vau's work.

The college chapel

If the design of the pavilions remained unchanged, that of the chapel was considerably altered in the architect's mind. It must be remembered that it had to meet several requirements: to stand as a signal in line with the Louvre, in some way embodying the arrival of the king on the Left Bank in order to appropriate the view from his palace; as a memorial to the late cardinal whose tomb was to be simply erected in the heart of the building under the cupola; and finally as a building intended for worship, both for the public entering via the central door and for the college students and their clergy coming in from the main courtyard via a side entrance. Le Vau chose a central plan, much favoured at the time and showing the architect's genius to great advantage, around an oval core, a shape he liked and which he had already used in two different ways for the main drawing rooms of his châteaux at Raincy and Vaux. On this occasion he inserted the oval,—locating the large perpendicular diameter at the entrance—, into a Greek cross set into a square¹⁸.

The chapel was without a doubt the principal piece, the one for which Le Vau produced numerous plans as he knew he would be judged mainly on its design, at a time when religious architecture held

¹⁸ The oval plan was used by Jules Hardouin-Mansart for the chapel of the Virgin in the church of Saint-Roch (1706-1710), and copied in the 19th century at Notre-Dame of Versailles.

undisputed precedence. At the end of 1663, when the pavilions had already been erected as far as the cornices, the chapel had not yet been started. Work began the following year, but was interrupted for nine months until September 1665. Le Vau was therefore still reluctant to give the final “go-ahead”. However, Mrs Ballon has observed that this late hesitation coincided with Bernini’s sojourn in Paris (June-October 1665); he had been summoned by Colbert to neutralise the inefficiencies for which the minister criticised Le Vau in the construction of the new Louvre, and to propose the final plans for the great monumental eastern façade of the palace.

As we learn from the invaluable diary, edited by Fréart de Chantelou¹⁹, that Bernini wrote during his sojourn, the two men kept an eye on each other during those crucial weeks.

While Bernini expressed his misgivings about the solidity or otherwise of the foundations of the Louvre’s east wing planned by the French architect, Le Vau learned of his rival’s successive projects. The first drawing Bernini had sent from Rome in 1664 depicted an elaborate façade enlarged in the centre by an oval-shaped pavilion hollowed out on either side by two semicircles. These baroque undulations are actually reminiscent of Le Vau’s own work: the façade facing the garden at Vaux-le-Vicomte with its domed oval drawing room, and even the project for the Collège Mazarin. By contrast, Bernini’s subsequent drawings illustrate a cold rigidity. All the drawings proposed Italian-style roofs, hidden behind the continuous line of the balustrade.

¹⁹ Paul Fréart de Chantelou, *Journal du voyage du cavalier Bernin en France*, published by L. Lalanne, Paris, 1885, reissued Aix-en-Provence, 1981; new edition by Milovan Stanic, Macula 2001.

The Frenchman was undoubtedly fascinated by his rival's genius, as an Italian historian, Guglielmo de Angelis d'Ossat, had already observed in 1984: "*Le Vau architetto berniniano suo malgrado*"²⁰, "Le Vau imitating Bernini in spite of himself". Indeed, it is clear that from that date onwards the subsequent drawings produced for the Mazarin chapel illustrate a new sensitivity towards Bernini and the work of his compatriots. This influence can be seen in the third plans (1664-1665), and again in the fourth and final plans (September 1665).

The changes affected not only the general plan of the building, which was simplified but, more importantly, the treatment of the central piece, the dome. Le Vau chose an oval interior plan set, externally, within a circle. He had initially planned to build the drum above the large arcades by erecting a truncated cupola complete with pendentives, such as at the Val-de-Grâce and later at the Invalides, but he finally opted for a cylindrical drum placed directly over the columns and arcades of the central space, an arrangement which more closely resembles the Roman Pantheon. High arched windows replaced the drum's rather skimpy square windows of the first drawings. The hemispherical cupola covering the drum was left bare of any architectonic decoration; although it had been promised to a great painter, Charles de Lafosse, he never produced the great allegorical composition expected of him. Finally, the closed cupola received no light from the lantern that served only as the external crowning of the dome. This is the only point at which the 1962 restoration differs from Le Vau's original design since

²⁰ Title of his contribution to the collective work, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini, architetto et l'architettura europea del Settecento*, Rome, two vols., 1984. Cited by Mrs Ballon, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

it was deemed necessary to provide plenty of light to the space under the cupola.

This new layout meant that the architect was once again forced to create an illusion. Whether one viewed the large diameter of the oval, close in size to the diameter of the circle within which it is set, or the small diameter, much smaller than the diameter of the same circle, the difference in the thickness of the drum wall had to be concealed both interally and externally. Double-glazing was therefore installed in the splay of six of the eight large bays in order to hide the thickness of the wall at that point²¹.

Moreover, the eight windows also had to give the appearance on the outside of large uniform arched bays, but the identical openings on the inside would have looked too delicate, hence the subterfuge of only introducing real arched bays on the two major axes and replacing those in the diagonals by rectangular bays (which are only visible from the outside, set into a large arched splay). These rectangular bays are crowned with medallions sculpted by Desjardins, representing the twelve apostles, in four groups of three (two of them were restored by the sculptor Paul Belmondo during the last restoration). The medallions also crown the letters SL, a reminder of the dedication of the chapel to Saint Louis, another royal gesture, while Mazarin's emblems (stars and fasces) are more discreetly placed.

On the spandrels of the arcades beneath the drum, Desjardins had also sculpted prone figures representing the eight Beatitudes, which were lost during the building works that took place in 1805; however

the beautiful inscription, borrowed from a verse by the prophet Ezekiel²², on the frieze of the entablature was fortunately preserved.

Finally, we are witnessing the abandonment of French-style solutions and of what one could call “Mansart mannerism” for a more Italian formula. During the restoration, it was in fact observed that the walls had originally been painted to imitate marble and the capitals had been gilded, as Louis Hauteœur has noted. This change also aimed for a more monumental simplicity: thus the columns of the façade portico are smooth and no longer fluted, the niches have been abandoned, perhaps betraying a sign of the influence of Carlo Maderno’s façade of Saint Peter that François D’Orbay was able to admire during his visit to Rome.

The change also affected the sculpted decoration of the same façade. The two prone figures of Science and Vigilance, attributed to Desjardins or to Le Hongre, adorn the pediment. Large figures of standing men, evoking Roman silhouettes, were originally intended to embellish the cornice. There are eight on the first drawing of 13th August 1662, eleven on Silvestre’s, undoubtedly erroneous, engraving, and thirteen, i.e. Christ and the apostles, on the second plan of 1664-1665. They were eventually replaced by twelve seated figures representing the evangelists and Church Fathers grouped in pairs; the work was executed by six artists, who were paid in April 1676. The change, dictated by a new aesthetic choice—a more peaceful composition—was

²¹ This arrangement was well understood by J. Fr. Blondel, as can be seen on a detailed plan of one of the plates in his *Architecture française*, vol. 3, no. 1, pl. 3.

²² For the exegesis of Ezekiel’s astonishing citation, see André Damien, *L’Institut de France*, Paris, “Que sais-je?”, 1999, p. 78-80.

also in answer to the college's iconographic programme: honour was to be given to men of letters and thought, the apostles were reserved for the interior decoration of the dome. The seated statues visible on François d'Orbay's plan of execution (the drawing dates from a little after 1673), and later on 19th-century engravings²³, disappeared at the time of the French Revolution.

As to the forecourt itself, the influence of great Roman creations can still be detected in the addition of significant motifs: two obelisks (Le Vau had first placed them in the cornice of the chapel in his 1662 drawing) in the hollows of the wings and the pavilions, and two fountains, again recalling those in the Piazza Navona. These four motifs were not executed.

In order to make a proper analysis of the actual layout and compare it with the original plan visible on some paintings (one in particular, dated about 1670, in the Carnavalet museum), it must also be remembered that, during the second half of the 19th century, the requirements of the traffic had on two occasions forced the enlargement of the quay, thus encroaching on the area occupied by the pavilions. With the mooring of the passerelle des Arts, it is clear that the monument's relation with the Seine has been irreparably altered.

Completion

²³ On the plate in J. Fr. Blondel's *Architecture* and on engravings by Chaufournier and Martinet (1782) the statues are seated; on another, according to a drawing by Testard, they are standing. The figures do not appear in early 19th-century views. Cf. *L'Institut et la Monnaie*, footnote 17, pp. 27 and 83-87.

The erection of the Mazarin chapel was finally under way and its shell was completed in 1670, coinciding with the death of Le Vau. Meanwhile, the feelings of Colbert, superintendent of buildings since 1st January 1663, towards Le Vau had much altered. Having already had his fingers burnt on a personal level through certain errors committed by the architect on the Hôtel Bautru in the rue des Petits-Champs, which he had bought for his personal use, Colbert followed the building work on the college with a critical eye and refused to pay out of the Royal Treasury the huge amount over budget that the cardinal's two million livres could not cover: the purchase of the land and the excavation works had swallowed up one million even before the first stone was laid.

Le Vau was not short of ingenious ideas for finding alternative financial resources, but the workers were not paid and he was accused of having pocketed the money intended for their salaries²⁴, thus forcing the start of an enquiry. At the same time, the architect-businessman had launched into a risky venture from which he was expecting large profits: a royal manufacture of cannons in the Nivernais. A resourceful man, in 1650 he had already started up a tinsplate manufacture in Normandy. Although Colbert had encouraged the cannon enterprise, which suited his economic policy, he only granted it minimal financial aid: 60,000 livres. When Le Vau died in 1670 he was bankrupt, and Colbert watched him fall without lifting a finger to help him.

The disagreements with the minister could have been aggravated, as Mrs Ballon suggests, by a divergence in aesthetic choices, which is

noticeable in the discussions that took place on the completion of the Louvre. To display the glory of the king, Colbert wanted a calm and grandiose regal style and shied away from the flamboyance and dislocations of baroque style. The “colonnade” was the ideal solution for this conception. Officially, it was the result of reflections by a committee comprising, under the minister’s chairmanship, the architect Le Vau, the painter Le Brun and the doctor Claude Perrault, but it would seem that tradition was justified in remembering the latter as the true originator, as Michael Petzet has recently reminded us²⁵. Perrault chose the great Vitruvian design, the uniform alignment of the bays, the colonnade as seen in classical temples perched on a solid stylobate, the suppression of French-style roofs, and it is this design that Le Vau necessarily adopted for the Louvre’s southern façade. He also used it for the new palace at Versailles, thus illustrating the variety and flexibility of his genius; but the minister was unconvinced by the coexistence of both inspirations in the architect.

Finally, let us recall that at the death of Le Vau in 1670, the construction of the chapel was still unfinished and it was left to François d’Orbay to complete it²⁶.

²⁴ He received 3,000 livres as the college architect, his partners Lambert and d’Orbay 1,200 (N. Felkay, *op.cit.*, p. 59).

²⁵ Michael Petzet, *Claude Perrault und die Architektur des Sonnenkönigs*, Deutscher Kunstverlag, Munich, Berlin, 2000, 596 pages.

²⁶ Two commemorative inscriptions of the works have been preserved; of similar manufacture, they were probably commissioned by Vaudoyer. One, now located under the entrance portico of the cupola in the main courtyard—“Dating from the reign of Louis XIV this beautiful monument...”—informs us that the chapel was erected by d’Orbay according to Le Vau’s plans. The other, which today is situated in the chapel next to the statue of Sully—“Dating from the reign of Napoleon...”—refers to the work completed by Vaudoyer. Cf. A. Gutton, *op.cit.*, footnote 4, caption to Fig. 46.

Although the chapel was more or less completed in 1674, work on the construction of the college lasted until 1688.

At that time Mazarin's remains were still lying in the chapel of the château de Vincennes, in a temporary tomb. The installation of the monumental tomb was belatedly submitted by d'Orbay on the advice of the Academy of Architecture, which in 1675 announced its opposition to the central position proposed by Le Vau, on the grounds that it would block the view of the main altar from the entrance. Thus it was not until 1689 that Louvois,—Colbert's successor—commissioned the sculptors Antoine Coysevox, Jean-Baptiste Tuby and Etienne Le Hongre to execute the tomb; it was erected in 1693, according to the design provided by the architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart, against the arcade at the back and on the right-hand side, opposite the entrance used by the residents of the college.

Meanwhile, in March 1688, the king signed the letters patent containing the statutes of the college, and term started in the following October, while the library was not open to the public until 1691.

The college, placed under the jurisdiction of the Sorbonne, enjoyed a great reputation, coming second after the Collège Louis-le-Grand, and its classes were open to external students known as *martinets* [literally: swift]. Numerous celebrities can be counted amongst its former pupils: François de Pâris (known as le diacre Pâris), Philippe Néricault (known as Destouches), Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (the Elder), Henri Louis Cain (known as Lekain), President Hénault, Jean d'Alembert, Antoine de Lavoisier, Jean Bailly, Charles Calonne, Charles de

Beaumont (known as the chevalier d'Éon), Alexandre Lenoir, Marc Antoine Désaugiers, Jacques-Louis David²⁷.

Thus, apart from the riding school, the cardinal's wish was realised, thirty years after his death. His name was only given to the street which runs alongside the college and not to the forecourt but, by a curious turn of history, the quay was later named after his niece Anne-Marie Martinozzi whom he had married to a prince of the blood and former Frondeur, the Prince de Conti, owner of the former Hôtel de Nevers before it was replaced by the Hôtel de la Monnaie.

Jean-Pierre Babelon

²⁷ It was in the recreation ground that the future critic of the Academy schools was hit by a stone that broke one of his teeth; this resulted in a tumour that permanently deformed his face.