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# **A study on the decoration of higher education établissements in ParisEtude sur le patrimoine peint et sculpté des établissements d'enseignement supérieur parisiens**

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## **ENGLISH SUMMARY**

A Study on the Interior Decoration  
of Higher Education Establishments in Paris

by

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Foreword

In order to offer an overall view of the subject and at the same time to take into account the history of every particular building, this essay is divided into three sections. A general study of the painted and sculpted decoration of higher education establishments allows us to define the problems specific to that type of decoration and to consider the main iconographical themes. An index gives access to the collections of each institution and offers an analysis of every particular work. The index is completed by a series of plates. A double paging enables the reader to find both in the catalogue and in the plates all the works that are mentioned in the text.

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Sources

We based our research work on the archives of the 'Direction des Beaux-Arts' and of the 'Direction des bâtiments Civils et des Palais Nationaux' (arch. Nat., F 21); however, these documents allow us to trace back only the

history of the works achieved on public commission. And thus, because of the variety of the research bases, we had to go through the stock of archives produced by the various institutions. These are kept either at the 'Archives Nationales' ('Ecole Normale Supérieure'...) or in the establishments themselves ('Ecole Polytechnique', 'Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées'...). The archives of the City of Paris and of the 'Direction du Patrimoine' ('Monuments Historiques') gave additional information on our subject. Several information centers ('Musée d'Orsay', 'Musée National de l'Education', 'Musée d'Histoire de la Médecine'...) facilitated our research in many areas. And finally, the consultation of photographs - of crucial importance to know the buildings and works now demolished or altered - was the final step in our investigation; we found them in public collections ('Bibliothèque Nationale de France', 'Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris'...) and in private ones ('Agence Roger-Viollet'...). This latter work allowed us to increase the number of our plates. We also wish to underline the importance of printed sources, especially useful in the study of representation phenomena.

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### Introduction

The higher education establishments (i.e. universities and 'grandes écoles') erected in the nineteenth century are utterly different from the medieval university buildings. The decoration of these buildings also presents some constant features. The first instances of new-style university buildings date from modern times. The eighteenth century saw the construction of the first lecture rooms for medical and surgical studies, buildings that foreshadowed the palaces of science typical of the end of the nineteenth century. The 'Ecole de Chirurgie' of Gondoin exemplifies that evolution. Special attention is given to the decoration of these buildings, and it presents new features. Moreover, the origins of several institutions of higher education also

date back to the Age of Enlightenment ('Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées', 'Ecole Vétérinaire'). The other parts of the institutional system were organized during the French Revolution (the university structures of the old regime disappeared while the 'grandes écoles' were created) and at the time of the Empire (foundation of the 'Université Impériale'). This period of major changes saw the creation of new establishments that were also new types of human communities, with a way of thinking and representing themselves different from that of the colleges, nations and faculties of the old society. And so, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, innovation was both institutional and architectural. That situation created the conditions necessary to the birth and development of particularly numerous decorative projects whose evolution, over a period of nearly one hundred and fifty years, went in parallel with the stylistic changes and with the history of the institutions.

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First part

The general conditions of decoration

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Chapter I

The main stages in the decoration of higher education establishments

For want of money and premises, few were the institutions that developed a policy of decoration of their buildings before 1850. In compensation, a great number of works were commissioned under the Second Empire. During the Third Republic, the government took a special interest both in further education and in the fine arts - and the institutions themselves expressed the wish to embellish their buildings and to celebrate their past. These two elements lead to a tremendous increase in the richness of decoration. The Great War caused the realizations to be stopped, but the inter-war years

were quite prolific again, whether in war memorials or in the decoration of the new buildings. With the second world war however there started a long period when nothing new was produced. From the 1960s onwards, crucial changes - institutional and artistic, but also economic and social - lead to the questioning of the previous aesthetic and thematic options. The days of great ornamentation were drawing to an end.

## Chapter II

### Forms and functions of decoration in university buildings

Commemoration. From the concern with the commemoration of a person or of an event originate many a sculpted or painted ornamentation - busts, for instance, or, at a collective level, war memorials.

Education. Since they are placed at the heart of the places where knowledge is imparted (lecture rooms and libraries), a great number of pictorial decorations are endowed with a didactic mission, or, more generally speaking, are in praise of knowledge.

Embellishing. In the buildings belonging to the university palace type, the function of the different elements of decoration is to embellish the areas of reception and of teaching. Apart from the decorative programmes planned in common, one has to underline the splendid effect produced by the juxtaposition of different forms and styles of decoration in one single place.

## Chapter III

### The origins of university decoration : the problem of funds

Commissions are at the origins of a great number of decorative realizations, especially during the Second Empire and the Third Republic. An artist obtains the commission, usually after the direction board of the institution have expressed their wish to have a work done for them. Sometimes, too, it is the architect who decides on the decoration ('Ecole Coloniale', 'Sorbonne'). Once it

is done, the work is examined by a fine arts inspector, and then delivered to the establishment.

Subscription, unlike commission, implies the whole of the members of the institution, and it also relies on the solidarity network existing between the latter and society at large. The inauguration is a very important ceremony that, in later commemoration, throws the light on the relationships within the institution and with the exterior world.

Gifts, purchases, patronage are the other modes of funding. Gifts can be quite numerous, but they are usually limited to small-size works such as busts.

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## Second part

### The assertion of the self : the idea of a community

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## Chapter I

### Founding a community

#### The surroundings as the expression of the unity of time and place

A special relationship to time. Related to the question of the decoration of further education establishments, one has to underline the importance of the way the time-measuring instruments are represented, and the use to which they are put within the community. More generally speaking, the assertion of an autonomous time, different from that of society at large, having its own celebrations and its own tempo, along with its expression in works of art, is a way to assert the life of the community.

Unity of place. Similarly, the representation of the emblematic places in the history of an institution gives the community an anchoring for its memory (the cupola of the Sorbonne chapel for instance).

## Chapter II

### Forging the image of the community

Portrait galleries and bust collections. These series of works, that come from the accumulation of dissimilar objects rather than group commands, are the most ancient forms of representation of the communities. The group is defined by the gathering of its most prominent members in one single place. The status and duties of the characters represented in painting or sculpture vary according to the institution. When these figures are placed in the great hall, they play an important role in the ceremonies (such as the defence of a thesis) that mark the entry of a new member in the group.

Group paintings - or how to represent a whole institution in large decorative paintings. Due to their important size and to their careful composition, such works are not only an image of the community but also a manifestation of its power and its fame. From the mere representation of an important historical event to that of celebrities, past or present, in an imaginary place, that type of representation resorts to both realistic and idealistic domains, and helps us to understand how the community is perceived and dreamt by its members.

Synthetic representations of the community : the father-figure and the mother-figure. The representations of the founders often are particularly polished. Sometimes quotations or attributes are added, enhancing the role of the father-figure within the group. The same phenomenon can be observed for the mother-figure, i.e. in the painted or sculpted allegories symbolizing the institution. These representations are not very common, but always first-rate.

## Chapter III

### Asserting the community. The institution and the others

The images of the community (and especially the large decorative paintings) often permit one to relate it to other entities. Among them, the State and the

Nation have a prominent place. The State depicted by the head is common in the University of Paris. It mirrors the long history of the relationships between the latter and the central power, laying emphasis on the periods of harmony. As for the 'grandes écoles', they favour the representation of the Nation, seeking always to emphasize their independance, and at the same time their usefulness as a place where the élite is formed (La Poule aux oeufs d'or [The goose that laid the golden eggs] in the 'Ecole Polytechnique').

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Third part

The assertion of the self : the idea of a specificity

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Chapter I

The systems of representation

The elements of a speech, whether pictorial or sculptural, oratorical or literary, when endowed with a special meaning tending towards the definition of a specific feature of the community responsible for that speech, constitute various representations of that community. When several figures having the same meaning are gathered together, then one knows the main representational tendencies that the members of one community elaborated through the years. And finally the way these various tendencies are organized and the links that one can establish between them thanks to the multiple significance of most works of art enable us to acquire a thorough knowledge of the systems of representation of an institution.

## Chapter II

### The variety of the systems of representation

The systems of representation of some institutions can be characterized precisely by the absence of any works of art (E.N.S. Saint-Cloud), or by the restricted place given to them. Even though this situation is partly due to the lack of money, it also indicates a wish for restraint and modesty - as we can read in the archives.

In art schools, the production of works belonging to certain aesthetical conceptions is the reflection of the teachers' artistic ideal : the 'Ecole des Beaux-Arts' and the 'Ecole des Arts Décoratifs' illustrate two opposite points of view. But most of the time it is the representation of the oldboys' professional activities that is used as a medium for the assertion of the community's specificity.

The systems that are particularly rich lead to the elaboration of an ideal school and to the idealization of its members. The 'Ecole Centrale', the 'Ecole Polytechnique' and the 'Ecole Normale Supérieure' are the epitomy of that type of representation.

## Chapter III

### How to understand the systems of representation

That diversity invites further commentary. If the elaboration and the enrichment of the representations of a community develop first and foremost in accordance with its own history, there are still great stages that are common to several institutions : first a phase of sedimentation during the first half of the nineteenth century, then a period of flowering and of diversification that lasted until 1939, and finally a time of questioning of the traditional image of the communities that reached its peak with the society crisis of the 1960s. The systems also evolve in accordance with the various artistic trends, of which the works of art are the manifestations.

The diversity of the systems is parallel to that of the schools (history, statute regulations, functions) and to the social background of their members. From that point of view, there is a link between the system of representation and the esprit de corps characteristic of some 'grandes écoles'.

Finally, these types of representation have to be related to those of other communities. It is typically the case for military schools, whose systems of representation have many points in common with those of the elite units.

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Fourth part  
Images of knowledge

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Chapter I  
Science and the sciences

The images of the community and of its specificity represent the external side of the decoration of higher education establishments as much as the images of the world of science (which fully participate in the celebration of progress and its actors) form the internal side of this decoration and merge into a larger movement.

An ancient tradition. Representing Science as a female allegorical figure is an ancient tradition. In the same manner, a subject (such as law) or a concept (such as justice) are often represented that way. This tradition remained alive during a large part of the century, and then it gave way to other, more complex representations.

Science and the sciences. At the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of science was represented in two ways. As far as the female allegory was concerned, the goddess bearing a torch gave way to the sterner figure of the

secular virgin such as Puvis de Chavannes painted her in 'Le Bois Sacré' (The Holy Wood) - in which she embodies the Sorbonne. Quite often, Science of the stern countenance is one element of a pair, and the more amiable figures of Fantasy or of Nature are placed in opposition to it. The figure of the great man is another means of representation of the concept of science, which he embodies, while putting forward at the same time the practical aspects of a domain. Whether he is an historian (Michelet), a chemist (Pasteur), or an astronomer and mathematician (Arago), the multiplicity of his representations is a token of his universality - and he escapes from the strict limits of the representations of the institution from which he comes.

Diversity of the representation. The various subjects can be represented either individually or at the heart of groups whose organization is meaningful.

## Chapter II

### Man and knowledge

Man and Science. The confrontation of men with knowledge was one of the favourite topics of decorators. Some of them, such as Albert Besnard, integrated that revelation of knowledge at the heart of the representation of the evolution of humanity, but more numerous are the artists who gave a symbolic and synthetic vision of that phenomenon. These figures are to be compared with those that show the unveiling of nature as an object of science. In any case the representations are given a gender : nature laid bare is symbolic of the female, passive principle, while science epitomizes the male, active concept.

The birth of the scientist. Here, the confrontation of men with knowledge is represented through works that depict scientific research; it goes from paintings showing scholars of the Enlightenment to white-gowned researchers in ever more modern laboratories. After 1920, the artists throw a more ambiguous light on the scientific activity : the benefactors of humanity

turn into strange beings who seem far away from reality. The image of laboratories follows a similar evolution.

Handing down knowledge is another form of representation of the relationship between men and knowledge, laying emphasis on the teaching. To the traditional images (characterized by timelessness or by the reference to ancient masters) are opposed the representations of the new ways of teaching : experiments, practical work, fieldwork.

### Chapter III

The irrational. In opposition to the numerous representations of science and its universe are many images evoking sexuality, desire, and the fear of death. All these figures are major themes of the turn-of-the-century culture. And so, to see them on the walls of the schools is not surprising.

A world of nymphs. Women may embody science, but they are also often shown as fundamentally passive beings deprived of reason. See the decoration in the refectories of the Sorbonne as an example.

Weariness of life and fear of death. The refusal of a world governed by reason is expressed through the withdrawal within oneself (Albert Besnard) or the infatuation for ruined civilizations and twilight atmospheres (René Ménard). The image of a golden age seen as the triumph of humanity is then denied. In the same manner, the sensuous mourners on the memorials show well enough how reason renounces its claims when confronted with the anguish of death, supremely irrational phenomenon : eroticism supersedes science. The irrational was triumphant after 1918, when the death of millions of young men ratified the defeat of reason and the loss of faith in science, since it was unable to ensure the well-being of humanity. The grief of war memorials is the reflection of that surrender to irrational impulses.

A new approach to knowledge. This latter is sometimes dissociated from the ideas of science and reason. The bas-reliefs of the new faculty of medicine

give a very encompassing vision of knowledge : oracles, prophets, sacrifices and exorcisms are placed side by side with the lessons of the masters of the olden days.

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### Conclusion

The second world war brought decoration to a radical end. In the years after, various factors went against the resumption of decorative policies : the surrender of the model of the university palace for that of the campus, the institutional transformations in universities and, most of all, the identity crisis affecting every single community. Not only new decorative programmes were not elaborated, but the old ones too, considered obsolete as for their style or their meaning, often fell into oblivion, and some of them were demolished. The representation of the institutions, once the identity crisis of the 1970s was overcome, found other mediums : logos, ephemeral celebrations, gala evenings. One has to wait for the 1980s to see the renewal of an interest for old decoration, thanks to the rediscovery of the last century's art. However, the renewal of the decoration in some establishments, particularly in the 'Ecole Polytechnique', seems to be even more promising for the future of the decoration of university buildings, so that the multiseular link between art and knowledge may be perpetuated.

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### An inventory of the patrimonial riches of further education establishments in Paris

This inventory is divided into chapters, each one dealing with a particular establishment. Each chapter begins with an introduction devoted to the history of the institution and to the architecture of the building - and then

comes a presentation of the general conditions of the decoration of the building. Finally the names of the authors along with the details about the different works are given alphabetically.

Collège de France. Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures. Ecole des Mines de Paris. Ecole Nationale de Chartes. Ecole Nationale de la France d'Outre-Mer. Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées. Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs. Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Ecole Nationale Vétérinaire.

Ecole Normale Supérieure. Ecole Normale Supérieure d'Enseignement Primaire de Jeunes Filles de Fontenay-aux-Roses. Ecole Normale Supérieure d'Enseignement Primaire de Saint-Cloud. Ecole Normale Supérieure Jeunes Filles. Ecole Polytechnique. Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. Ecole Supérieure de Physique et de Chimie Industrielles de la Ville de Paris. Institut d'Etudes Politiques. Institut National Agronomique. Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales. Université de Paris, Faculté de Droit. Université de Paris, Faculté des lettres, Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie. Université de Paris, Faculté de Médecine (Rue de l'Ecole de Médecine). Université de Paris, Faculté de Médecine (Rue des Saint-Pères). Université de Paris, Faculté de Pharmacie. Université de Paris, Faculté de Sciences, Institut de Chimie. Université de Paris, Faculté de Sciences, Institut de Physique.

Université de Paris, Sorbonne (Faculté de Lettres, Faculté de Sciences, Rectorat).

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Appendice

Plates. Tables. Index. Summary.

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