

# The Opéra by Charles Garnier

- Presentation
- Objectives
- Circuit
- Before and after the visit
- Chronological landmarks
- The visit: list of artworks
- Bibliography

## Presentation

In 1860, Napoléon III decided on the construction of a new Opera House as the old premises, situated on the rue Le Peletier which had been built as a temporary facility in 1820, were too small. The Opera building, designed by Charles Garnier to stage both lyrical and choreographic performances, was emblematic of the second Empire. In order to design a building of exceptional acoustics, the architect had travelled throughout Europe studying the proportions of concert halls. Built to accommodate the elegant upper classes, the Opéra doubled as a high-society "salon". The Emperor wanted a luxurious setting, equal in prestige to the regime and its celebrations. With this in mind, Garnier's project gave prominence to public spaces - a new approach which confirmed the fact that the performance did not solely take place on stage. Before it was even completed, Théophile Gautier described this building as the future "fashionable cathedral of civilisation".

## 1. Eclecticism and architectural rigour

Charles Garnier, at just thirty-five, was young and as yet unknown when he was chosen to design the new Opera house following a competition in 1861. His achievement was even more remarkable considering that there were 171 candidates, among them the already renowned Viollet-le-Duc, whose project was favoured by the Empress. The building proposed by Garnier drew inspiration from several historical styles that he had reinterpreted and fused together. This mixing of genres, eclecticism coupled with flamboyant ornamentation are typical of the art of the second Empire. The exuberance of this new style, despite having been minutely thought out by Garnier, could be confusing and prompted a verbal exchange which is still remembered today: the Empress, displeased that her protégé Viollet-le-Duc had not been chosen, said of the plans: "What style is that?... That's not a style!... That's neither Greek, nor Louis XVI, nor even Louis XV...!", Charles Garnier answered: "No, those styles have passed out... This is Napoleon III! And you are complaining?".

Garnier's architectural scheme is based on a symmetrical plan, developed either side of a longitudinal axis. He wanted the succession of spaces, each corresponding to a precise function, to be clear to the passer-by. He achieved this through the articulation of mass, the outside volumes of which reflect the interior spaces. This correspondence is particularly visible at roof level where the domes or gables vary according to whether they cover the theatre, the stage, or the rotundas of the Emperor or the season ticket holders, etc...

## 2. Architecture and decor

Charles Garnier not only designed the architecture, but also supervised the entire iconographic programme for the interior and exterior decoration: painting, sculpture, mosaics, stucco..., and in so doing revived the tradition that considered architecture to be the mother of all arts. He favoured subject matter drawn from mythology - for instance the group on the top of the building; *Apollo crowning "Dance" and "Music"* - or from contemporary sources such as the people in his entourage or the artisans working on the building... The iconography on the façade pays homage to great musicians - Mozart, Beethoven, Halévy, Rossini, Meyerbeer - and to two librettists - Scribe and Quinault. Garnier commissioned many works from former fellow students from the Beaux-Arts and from a friend from the "Petite Ecole" named Carpeaux: the paintings in the Grand Foyer went to Baudry, the ceiling of the auditorium to Lenepveu, and the façade sculptures to various artists. The four sculpted groups for the façade were entrusted to Carpeaux (*The Dance*), Guillaume (*Instrumental*

*Music*), Perraud (*Lyrical Drama*) and Jouffroy (*Harmony*). For these Garnier had planned a rigorous layout based on symmetry: each sculptural group was to include three figures, including a spirit at the centre. Carpeaux ignored these guidelines considering them to be too constraining, and Garnier let him have his way, unwilling "to deprive France of a masterpiece". And indeed, Carpeaux's *Dance*, which caused a scandal in 1869 as much for its vivid composition as for its daring subject - a ring of nude women; bacchantes, drunken with pleasure, whirling around the spirit of dance - remains to this day the most eye-catching and best known.

## 3. Architecture and urbanism

One of the main problems facing Charles Garnier was how to insert the new public edifice into the midst of geometrically-shaped Haussmannian blocks. Urban structural uniformity has its origins in the rules established by the Baron Haussmann who codified the height and alignment of buildings, the proportions of façades, the number of storeys, the segmentation and dimension of windows, balconies, etc. Garnier's solution was to use the building's imposing volume and the exuberance of its overcharged decor to vividly contrast with its uniform surroundings, highlighting the Opera's prestigious singularity. The construction of the new Opera House was not only an original architectural creation but was also part of the general urbanisation plan of Paris as defined by Napoleon III and implemented by Haussmann. The latter intended to create a new pole in the capital, favouring the development of a business area close to the centre and to the railway stations. To this end, he decided to cut an avenue connecting the Opéra with the Louvre (the Avenue de l'Opéra), which was to be a considerable project that required extensive demolition. This project was included in the campaign to carve many new arteries that were to restructure Paris: the north-south axis formed by the boulevards Sébastopol and Saint-Michel, the east-west axis of the rue de Rivoli, and the numerous avenues starting from the Arc de Triomphe, Place de l'Étoile...

Besides this, Napoleon III was still recovering from the shock of Orsini's attempted assassination on him which had taken place as he was on his way to the old Opera House, on the rue Le Peletier, in 1858. It was the first bomb attack in France and it had very nearly been successful, aided in particular by the network of narrow streets which surrounded the building. This event was all the more striking since the rue Le Peletier Opéra was already a replacement for the former building on the rue de Louvois, which had been closed in 1820 having hosted the successful assassination of the Duc de Berry. The Avenue de l'Opéra was designed to give royalty direct access to the Opéra from their residence in the Palais des Tuileries; it was to be vast enough to eliminate the risk of traffic jams which might facilitate new

assassination attempts. Besides this, a secured entrance was devised whereby a double access way led the Emperor's coach directly to the entrance of the rotunda which opened on to his box at the front of the house. But as work on the Avenue de l'Opéra only began after the construction of the Opera House and was not completed until 1879, the Emperor was never to use it.

The construction of the Opéra lasted fifteen years, from 1860 to 1875; the setbacks encountered by this, the symbol of the pomp of the second Empire, were closely related to the political events of the time. Although the façade was inaugurated during the World Fair in 1867 and Carpeaux's group, *The Dance*, was unveiled in 1869, the building was still unfinished in 1870 when the Empire collapsed. The costly construction, testament to a detested era, was brought to a halt and it was even considered worth abandoning. The Opéra was to suffer long from its association with the imperial regime and its eventual completion, in 1875, was only in direct consequence of the fire that had ruined the theatre on the rue Le Peletier two years previously, making the inauguration of the new building urgent and necessary.

#### 4. The dancers by Degas

Edgar Degas' work is especially good at evoking the poetry of ballet and the assiduous work of the dancers. A great lover of music and dance, Degas regularly attended the Opéra, in particular the one on the rue Le Peletier which is to be seen in many paintings and pastels. He liked going backstage and attending rehearsals either on stage or in the "Foyer de la danse" (large semi-public rehearsal studio); subjects he found more interesting than actual performances. He was greatly interested in the "taming" of the body and tirelessly studied the dancers' often exhausting, preparatory exercises of as well as their different postures and attitudes when resting.

The Opéra was to provide a source of inspiration for numerous artists; dancers on the stage and in the wings, the orchestra pit and even the audience itself were to serve as a vehicle for staging innovative compositions or new ways of expressing light.

## Objectives

This visit, based on the theme of the Opéra, links up three major artistic disciplines: architecture, sculpture and painting, whilst examining the work of three major artists of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Garnier, Carpeaux and Degas.

### 1. The Opéra: the architecture and its incorporation into its surroundings

- to observe an architectural plan
- to study Charles Garnier's architectural principles
- to name the different parts of the building
- to explain the architectural terms designating the elements of a façade and its decor
- to understand the incorporation of the Opera House into its surroundings, with reference to Baron Haussmann
- to describe the transformation of Paris under the Second Empire

### 2. The Opéra: its sculpted and painted decor

- to explain the notion of sculpture subordinate to architecture
- to define the terms sculpture in the round, high relief, bas-relief
- to comprehend the dynamism of the sculpted group *The Dance* by Carpeaux
- to compare the sophistication of the movement in Carpeaux's work with the static quality of academic sculpture
- to make a rough catalogue of the mythological, allegorical, historical or contemporary sources which inspired the sculpted and painted works
- to identify different sculptural materials and understand the corresponding techniques
- to promote pupils' awareness of the problems posed by the transportation and conservation of artworks, and the destructive effects of pollution

### 3. The Opéra: its life and workings

- to describe all the kinds of performances given at the Opera House
- to define the make up of the high-society Opéra audiences
- to remind pupils of the social ritual presiding over the entrance and seating of the public in the Opéra: stalls, boxes, lower circle, gallery (the gods)...
- to relate the functions of different parts of the building and the professions to be found there

These objectives may easily be related to the history programmes in French curricula for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year students: "Discovery of an aspect of social, cultural and artistic life (in particular of the bourgeoisie) under the Second Empire and the beginning of the Third Republic".

Besides this, one might consider the option of studying "the Opéra in literature" or "the relationships between literature and the other modes of expression in the 19<sup>th</sup> century" in 6<sup>th</sup> form French.

## The Circuit

Because of the disposition of artworks in the museum, it is best to start the circuit on the ground floor with the sculpture *The Dance* by Carpeaux, a monumental décor made for the façade of the Opéra, before moving on to look at the two models of the building: the first being its longitudinal section, from the entrance to the administrative offices, and the second, the Opéra in its surroundings (a model under glass flooring), in which the avenue leading to the Opéra and the constructions surrounding it, buildings, department stores, etc. are clearly visible. Then, continue to the upper level, where the world of ballet is evoked in the painting, sculpture and pastels of Edgar Degas, before concluding on the middle level with Pierre Bonnard's painting *La Loge (The Box)*.

### 1. Sculpture

During this visit, sculpture may be considered both as an art in its own right, and also as an art form, "subservient to architecture"; dependent on the building from which it cannot be dissociated. Architectural sculpture, takes the form of monumental high relief; standing against, yet clearly distinct from, the façade: see *The Dance* by Carpeaux. Sculptural décor, takes the form of bas-relief – such as the small-sized medallions representing musicians – or the compositions inscribed in semi-circular pediments; the third identifiable category are sculptures in the round; autonomous sculptures one can walk around, some of which can be seen topping different parts of the building.

## 2. The architecture and set-designs for operas

Studying this building introduces one to the wide variety of disciplines covered by the Museum collections in which architecture has its own specific place. This complex art form is not easy to exhibit, the architect's work having to be presented through plans, projects and drawings. To make the discipline easier to understand, Richard Peduzzi has been commissioned to construct models of the Opéra and its surroundings. These, he has staged as a permanent feature choosing the background of a starry night, which evokes a dream world whilst at the same time, paying homage to opera stage sets. One can also see three-dimensional models of set-designs, displayed behind specially designed glass windows. These are the original models, created by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Opéra set-designers, models after which the painted canvases of the sets were made: at the time, this was the sole method employed in the design and building of sets. In this part of the Museum devoted to the theme of opera, changing exhibits of drawings, posters, projects for costumes or set designs, as well as small exhibitions, complete and diversify the display.

### 3. Painting

A visit on the theme of dance provides a good opportunity to study Degas' work, whose passion for the subject shines through his paintings, pastels, and also his sculptures. In parallel to Degas' representations of rehearsals, bar exercises, dancers at rest, etc., it is interesting to see how other painters drew inspiration rather from the attitudes of the Opéra's public. Two paintings by different artists show members of the audience in their boxes, one painted by Eva Gonzalès in 1874, and the other by Pierre Bonnard, painted in 1908.

## Before and after the visit

### 1. Outside visits

Theatre buildings:

- the Opéra-Garnier
- the Théâtre du Châtelet
- the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées
- the Salle Favart
- the Opéra Bastille

Sculptures by Carpeaux in Paris:

- high-reliefs on the Louvre's Pavillon de Flore
- the fountain of the Observatoire

The Musée de la Musique:

- models of theatres and opera houses, in particular that of the rue Le Peletier

### 2. Literature and Opera

Honoré de Balzac:

- *La Peau de Chagrin (The Wild Ass's Skin)*, 1851
- *Le Père Goriot (Father Goriot)*, 1855
- *Illusions perdues (Lost Illusions)*, 1856, 1859, 1845

Gustave Flaubert: *Madame Bovary* (1856)

Guy de Maupassant: *Fort comme la mort (As Strong As Death)*, 1889

Gaston Leroux: *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra (The Phantom of the Opera)*, 1910

Marcel Proust: *Le Côté de Guermantes (The Guermantes Way)*, 1920-1921

Paul Valéry: *Monsieur Teste* (1929)

## Chronological landmarks

### 1. Construction of the Opéra

1860: competition for the new opera house  
1861: 171 candidates hand in their plans, Garnier is chosen unanimously  
1862: draining of the underground water and laying of the first stone  
1863: commission of the sculpted group *The Dance* from Carpeaux  
1867: completion of the façade of the opera house for the opening of the World Fair  
1869: unveiling of *The Dance*, the ink stain scandal  
1870: declaration of war, building work halted  
1873: fire in the rue Le Peletier opera house necessitating completion of new building  
1875: completion of the building and inauguration by Mac-Mahon, in the presence of the Lord Mayor of London.

### 2. Changes undergone by the building

1962: a new ceiling for the Opéra commissioned from Chagall in which provisions were made to keep the masking of Lenepveu's earlier ceiling from being irreversible.  
1964: Paul Belmondo's copy of *The Dance* is installed on the building's façade whilst the original sculpted group is transferred, firstly to the Louvre and then in 1986, to the Musée d'Orsay.

### 3. Theatres staging operas in Paris

1793-1820: Salle Louvois, rue de Richelieu  
1820-1875 the rue Le Peletier opera house  
1875-1989: Opéra-Garnier (specialising in dance performances since 1989, exclusively since 1996, subject to exceptions)  
Since 1989: Opéra-Bastille

## The visit : list of artworks

### Sculptures by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux

Major pieces:

- *La danse (The Dance)*, stone, 1865-1869 ; half-size plaster cast, 1868 ; sketches, 1865-1868

Other works:

- sculpted portraits, numerous busts of contemporaries including *Charles Garnier*, *Eugénie Fiocre* (a famous Opéra dancer)...
- half-size plaster casts of two high-reliefs designed to decorate the façade of the Louvre: *Flore, La France impériale protégeant l'agriculture et la science (Imperial France Protecting Agriculture and Sciences)*
- numerous plaster, clay and terracotta sketches (in glass cases)

### Architecture: the Opera and Haussmann's Paris

Models:

- longitudinal section of the Opéra
- birds-eye view of the Opéra's surroundings
- structure of the stage and machinery of the Opéra
- sculptures of decorative elements in the building
- posters, drawings, watercolours...
- three-dimensional models of opera set-designs
- models of Haussmannian buildings

Paintings:

- Victor Navlet : *L'escalier de l'Opéra (The Staircase at the Opéra)*, 1880; *Vue générale de Paris, prise de l'Observatoire, en ballon (General View of Paris, from a balloon over the Observatory)*, 1855

### Paintings, pastels and sculptures: The dancers by Edgar Degas

Paintings:

- *L'orchestre de l'Opéra (The Opéra Orchestra)*, 1869
- *Le foyer de la danse à l'Opéra de la rue Le Peletier (The "Foyer de la danse" at the Opéra on the rue Le Peletier)*, 1872
- *La classe de danse (The Dancing Class)*, 1875-1876
- *Répétition d'un ballet sur scène (Rehearsal of a Ballet on Stage)*, 1874
- *Danseuses montant un escalier (Dancers Climbing Stairs)*, circa 1886-1890
- *Danseuses bleues (Blue Dancers)*, circa 1895

Pastels:

- *L'Étoile (The Star)*, 1876-1877
- *Danseuse au bouquet, saluant (Dancer with a Bouquet, Bowing)*, 1877
- *Danseuses (Dancers)*, circa 1884-1885
- *Deux danseuses au repos (Two Dancers Resting)*, circa 1910

Sculptures:

- *Danseuse, grande arabesque (Dancer, Great Arabesque)*
- *Danseuse, position de quatrième devant sur la jambe gauche (Dancer, Fourth Position Left Leg Leading)*
- *Danseuse mettant son bas (Dancer Putting on her Stocking)*
- *Danseuse regardant la plante de son pied droit (Dancer Looking at the Sole of her Right Foot)*
- *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans (Little Dancer)*
- *Étude de nu pour la petite danseuse de quatorze ans (Nude Study for the Little Dancer)*

### Paintings: the audience

- Eva Gonzalès: *Une loge aux Italiens (A Box at the Italiens)*, 1874
- Pierre Bonnard: *La Loge (The Box)*, 1908

## Bibliography

- Thierry Beauvert and Michel Parouty, *Les Temples de l'Opéra*, Gallimard, collection "Découvertes", Paris 1990
- Bruno Foucart (introduction) and Martine Kahane (notices), *L'Opéra de Paris*, CNC, collection "Photo Poche", Paris, 1985
- Claude Jeancolas, *Carpeaux*, Edita, Paris, 1987
- Martine Kahane and Thierry Beauvert, *L'Opéra de Paris-Palais Garnier*, Adam Biro, Paris, 1987 (photographs by Jacques Moatti)
- Henri Loyrette, *Degas*, RMN/Gallimard, collection "Découvertes", Paris, 1989
- Laure de Margerie, *Carpeaux*, RMN/Gallimard, collection "Découvertes", Paris, 1989
- Pierre Pougnaud, *Théâtre, quatre siècles d'architecture et d'histoire*, Le Moniteur, Paris, 1980
- Roland Schaer, *La Danse*, Carnet Parcours du Musée d'Orsay, RMN, Paris, 1986

Exhibition catalogues

- Jean Sutherland Boggs, Henri Loyrette, Michael Pantazzi, Gary Tinterow, *Degas*, Paris, 1988
- Martine Kahane, *L'ouverture du Nouvel Opéra*, Dossiers du Musée d'Orsay, RMN, Paris, 1986
- Martine Kahane, *Le foyer de la danse*, Dossiers du Musée d'Orsay, RMN, Paris, 1988
- Laure de Margerie, *La Danse de Carpeaux*, Dossiers du Musée d'Orsay, RMN, Paris, 1989

# The Opéra by Charles Garnier

## • The visit: the artworks

### *The Dance* by Carpeaux and the façade of the Opéra

The contrast between the three versions discussed below: the original stone sculpture, the plaster cast and the miniature reproduction which is visible on the model of the Opéra, enables one to follow the different stages of the sculptor's work, in comparing their dimensions, the materials used and their respective functions. One should keep in mind the difficulties implied in working onsite on an artwork of this dimension; Carpeaux had a hut built for him against the façade of the Opéra.

1. Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: *La danse (The Dance)*, 1865-1869, Echaillon stone  
Location: ground floor, central aisle, to the left

In 1865, Charles Garnier (1825-1898) commissioned four sculptural groups to decorate the façade of the Opéra. Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (1827-1875) was entrusted with the task of illustrating the theme of the Dance whilst the three other sculptors were to represent Music, Harmony and Drama. Garnier stipulated that each group be of three figures including a spirit at the centre, as is the case of the group on top of the building, *Apollo Crowning Dance and Music*. Instead of respecting this set of rules, Carpeaux, from 1865 to 1866, multiplied the figures in his sketches and models; his main preoccupation was the expression of movement. He composed his sculpture around a circular dance, a recurring theme in his work. At the centre, the spirit of dance, whose silhouette and face are androgynous, dominates the group of fulsome women around it. The dynamism animating the whole group is effected by a double movement: the vertical – the leaping spirit, arms outstretched holding a tambourine – and the circular – the dancers' farandole. The latter are off balance on tiptoe; the oblique lines of their thighs and their legs contribute to the sensation of movement. Knocked over in the rush, a cupid is shaking a sceptre topped by a jester's head in a hood with bells (the symbolic attribute of madness) whereas to the right-hand side of the background is a half-hidden, grimacing satyr. Garnier was "amazed by such a lively composition" whereas the public was scandalised at its unveiling in 1869. *The Dance* was called "a shameful saturnalia" evoking "the shop sign of a house of sin". The violent criticism was provoked by the realism of the modelling of the flesh and the presence of nude women dancing freely, as opposed to idealised dancers represented by unreal and ephemeral figures. The outcry was such that a bottle of ink was thrown on the hip of the left-hand figure and the removal of the sculpture was called for. Another sculptor was commissioned to make an alternative sculpture, but the 1870 war caused the postponement of the project, which was abandoned entirely five years later. In 1964, as the pollution was damaging the stone of the original group, it was replaced by a copy, sculpted by Paul Belmondo whilst

Carpeaux's work was transferred to the Louvre and later, in 1986, to the Musée d'Orsay.

2. Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: *La danse (The Dance)*, 1868, half-size plaster cast  
Location: ground floor, Opéra gallery, on the right

This smaller sculpted group is similar to the former but in a different material. After making numerous drawings, sketches and models in which he sometimes included many more figures before restricting himself to nine, Carpeaux designed his final work in this plaster cast. The monumental group is of monumental dimensions suited to the proportions of the building; the plaster cast, closer to human scale is more touching, both by its size, half that of the stone group, and by the brittle material in which the hand of the sculptor may be felt. Among the numerous techniques used to make a sculpture, Carpeaux, chose to model his group in clay, gradually building up the form on a wire armature that served as the sculptures' skeleton. Once finished, the half-size model was cast in plaster. The next stage, the stone group, was executed by assistants who used a pointing system on the model to calculate the final dimensions which, carving under Carpeaux's supervision, they would then translate directly on to the stone. This group is a high relief, a sculpture of volume with a flat back which is meant to be set against the façade. It is worth noting the way the composition has been used to connect the characters as well as being the vehicle used to render movement and express joy, and also the way the dancers vary one from another in the expression of the faces: eyes, smiles, inclination of the heads, and the bodies: the off-balance postures on tiptoe, the movement of the bust, etc..

Also on view:  
Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: *La danse (The Dance)*, plaster sketches  
Location: ground floor, Opéra gallery, glass case on the right

3. *La danse (The Dance)* on the model of the longitudinal section of the Paris Opéra  
Location: ground floor, Opéra gallery

Carpeaux's sculpted group can be recognised on the right of the façade, only half of which is visible on the model. The changes of scale as one studies in succession the original stone sculpture, the half-size plaster cast and this miniature copy affect ones perception. This is no longer a monumental group dominating and overwhelming the viewer, but a small element integrated into a whole. The entire façade is ornamented with sculptures that are "subordinate to architecture". Garnier envisaged two kinds of sculptural decoration for his Opéra: architectural sculpture which plays a role in the edifice, such as the four groups that stand out from the façade and the high-reliefs situated on both sides of the arcades; and sculptural decor that covers and animates the



1. Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: *La danse (The Dance)*, 1865-1869, Echaillon stone
2. Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: *La danse (The Dance)*, 1868, half-size plaster cast
3. *La danse (The Dance)* on the model of the longitudinal section of the Paris Opéra

surface of the building in the form of medallions, semi-circular pediments, etc. It is worth looking at the postures of figures in the semi-circular pediments and how they have been fit into the half-moon shape, for example: women sitting with their legs stretched out. Other figures top the roof, these being sculptures in the round; autonomous structures one can walk around. This profusion of decor confuses one's senses and accentuates the orthogonal structures of the building.

## The Correspondence between the exterior volumes and the interior spaces

4 and 4bis. Longitudinal section of the Paris Opéra, model

Location: ground floor, Opéra gallery

Garnier imagined the construction of the building as a musician writes an opera, with particular care for the opening. From the very moment one enters the building, one passes through spaces designed to put one in the right mood for a performance. This orchestration of space also prepares the audience for their entrance into the auditorium as if they too were about to perform. On the outside, the glittering of gold and coloured marble reveals the taste of the time for colouration. Inside, one finds the abundance and diversity of a luxurious decor.

The different parts of the building correspond to precise functions: the arrival of the public, the performance, areas reserved for staff, etc. The entrance hall, with its relatively low ceiling leads onto the grand staircase which, by contrast, seems all the more high and vast. Decorated on several levels with balconies, this staircase really is Garnier's piece de resistance. Situated right above the entrance, the grand foyer with its painted ceilings is abundantly garnished with framed mirrors and fluted columns. This is where the audience convene during the interval; an ideal time to parade around, greeting acquaintances and showing off their costumes. The grand foyer opens onto a double-colonnaded loggia, another space for strolling which opens out onto the square and avenue de l'Opéra.

The auditorium, a sumptuous nest of red and gold, is organised like a theatre of the Italian style. Its acoustics are exceptional thanks to Garnier's travels throughout Europe studying the acoustics of the best auditoriums. Above and under the stage floor, which slopes to enhance the effects of perspective, were the complex machines, designed to operate the set changes.

The Foyer de la danse, sumptuously decorated, is a place for the dancers to rehearse and rest. The inclination of the floor is the same as that of the stage, but reversed, enabling them to work under the same conditions as during performances. It is also a meeting place for the elite society of season ticket holders, who are the only people allowed in. The administrative offices are discreetly

accommodated at the back of the building. The architecture there is simpler, even severe. The lyre, the attribute of Apollo and the symbol of music and poetry, can be found all over the edifice.

5. Bird's eye view of the opera quarter: model under glass flooring  
Location: ground floor, Opéra gallery

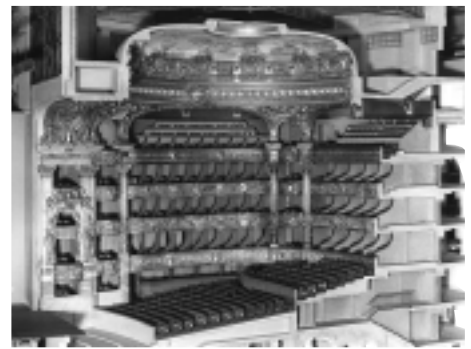
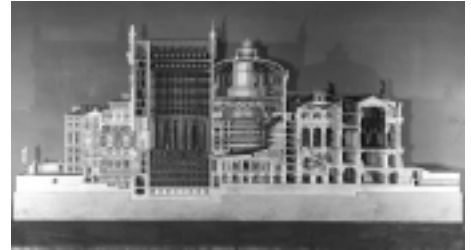
This model demonstrates how the Opéra, whose architecture favours curves and sculpted ornaments, stands out from the straight lines of its surroundings. It portrays the area in 1914 at the scale of 1/100<sup>th</sup>. It helps the visitor to understand the difficulties Garnier faced in integrating this building into rows of austere buildings with identical façades, in an area which included banks and department stores. The wide straight cut of the avenue de l'Opéra leading to the Louvre can easily be made out.

By comparing the longitudinal section with this bird's eye view of the building, one can see how each space within the opera has a distinct roofing. The configuration of spaces is visible from the outside as Garnier wished it to be: terrace roofing for the entrance vestibules and the foyer, large dome above the auditorium, gabled roof covering the stage, and low roofs for the administrative offices. All the architectural elements are organised symmetrically around a longitudinal axis. On both sides of the central dome are two smaller domes covering the rotundas: the Emperor's rotunda, preceded by a double slope designed for a horse-drawn coach and that reserved for season ticket holders, giving access to the foyer de danse. On top of the building, one can see Apollo holding his lyre in both hands.

6. Victor Navlet: *L'escalier de l'Opéra (The Opéra Staircase)*, 1880, oil on canvas

Location: ground floor, Opéra gallery, on the left

Painted in a realistic and academic manner, this cold-toned oil painting is a faithful rendering of the grand staircase with its rhythm of balconies, and portrays the movement of the ascending audience. The architecture of the interior is described with accuracy but emphasized: the spaces of vast proportions and the overcharged decor which become a shrine for music-lovers as soon as they set foot in it. This is how Garnier imagined it would be: "At each level, members of the audience, leaning on balconies will garnish the walls making them alive, so to speak, while others moving up and down the stairs will add still more life". Victor Navlet (1819-1886) is best known as a painter of panoramas, such as the General View of Paris, from a balloon over the Observatory, 1855



4. Longitudinal section of the Paris Opéra, model by Richard Peduzzi, 1986

4<sup>bis</sup>. Longitudinal section of the Paris Opéra, model by Richard Peduzzi, 1986

5. Bird's eye view of the opera quarter: model under glass flooring

6. Victor Navlet: *L'escalier de l'Opéra (The Opéra Staircase)*, 1880, oil on canvas

7. Eva Gonzalès: *Une loge aux Italiens (A Box at the Italians)*, circa 1874, oil on canvas  
Location: ground floor, Opéra gallery, on the left

The theme of the auditorium, and particularly the box, a setting for the goings-on of high society, was frequently adopted by the impressionists who were interested in subjects relevant to their times. A pupil of Edouard Manet, Eva Gonzalès (1849-1885) used the same contrasting effects, violently opposing dark and light, as can be seen in the famous *Olympia*, a detail from which is to be found repeated here: the stunning bouquet on the left, on the railing of the box, against the piece of soft furnishing restraining the curtain. The couple stands out clearly against the dark background of the box. The young lady, seen from the front, occupies the central ground. She is wearing an elegant costume, a rose similar to that on her dress highlights her hair. In her left hand, resting on the red velvet railing of the box, one can see a pair of opera glasses. On the right, seen from three quarters and wearing evening dress, is her companion. His face, in profile, is turned towards her but does not seem to see her. Both seem to be absent, indifferent to one another and even to the performance which they are nevertheless attending together.

## The ballet at the Opéra

8. Edgar Degas: *L'orchestre de l'Opéra (The Orchestra de l'Opéra)*, 1869, oil on canvas  
Location: upper level, gallery 30

This painting was at first intended to be a portrait of the bassoon player in the foreground, Désiré Dihau, a friend of Edgar Degas (1834-1917), who had introduced him to the opera, but it later became a group portrait of part of the orchestra. However, the usual places of the musicians have been rearranged, which has the effect of emphasising Dihau. This is one of the first examples of Degas' interest in the world of the opera. The contrast between light and shadow and the boldness of the composition, highlight the musicians' faces, who are represented according to their personalities and by specific gestures which correspond to their instruments. Here, dancers make their first appearance in Degas' work but in the background, as mere stains of colour in the fierce light of the stage, lit from below by the lime light, and contrasting with the half light of the orchestra pit. The ballet dancers, contrary to the musicians whose faces are realised in detail, are anonymous, only identifiable by their brightly coloured tutus. The scroll of the cello seems to be oddly intruding onto the stage among the dancers.

9. Edgar Degas: *Le foyer de la danse à l'opéra de la rue Le Peletier (The Foyer de la danse in the Opéra on the rue Le Peletier)*, 1872, oil on canvas  
Location: upper level, gallery 31

During his lifetime, Degas was already nicknamed "the painter of dancers" and so he has remained for posterity. As early as the 1870's, dancers were the inspiration for innumerable drawings, paintings and pastels, and were to continue to be so until the end of his life. He was more interested in their postures during classes and rehearsals than in onstage performances. The lesson is here solemnised by the imposing decor of the studio in the rue Le Peletier with its large mirror set in a niche framed with marble pillars. The ballerina seen in profile is attentive to the gesture of the ballet master, Louis Mérante, but it is difficult to know whether she is about to start her exercise or whether she has just finished it. Her silhouette stands out against the wall in front of a partly open door, lending the scene a sensation of depth. This effect is accentuated by the daylight filtering through the window glimpsed through the open door. On the left, three dancers do their exercises at the bar, whilst on the right, a small group is gathered tightly around the ballet master. The sitting dancer is in repose, her body relaxing. Tones of ochre and gold dominate the painting, punctuated by white and grey patches and enhanced by a few touches of vermillion: the fan on the chair in the foreground, the wide ribbon in the back of the right hand dancer, the line of the bar along the wall and the painter's signature in the bottom left.

10. Edgar Degas: *La classe de danse (The Dancing Class)*, 1875-1876, oil on canvas  
Location: upper level, gallery 30

This is the first painting of its size which Degas devoted to a group of dancers; it took him two years to complete. Many clues indicate this we are witnessing the end of the lesson. The pupils are exhausted, they are stretching, contorting themselves to scratch their backs, set their costumes or hair back in place, paying little attention to the teacher who remains unperturbed. The rehearsal studio is realised in an accelerating perspective, an effect obtained through a creating a size distortion between the dancers in the foreground and those in the background. The vanishing lines of the cornice, walls and floor accentuate the effect of depth. According to Paul Valéry, "Degas is one of the few painters who allowed the ground to have its proper place. He's got admirable floors." The door opens onto the next room which, illuminated by daylight, eases the sense of confinement. The empty space on the right emphasizes the profile of the old ballet master: Jules Perrot. The circle of white gauze tutus standing out against the greenish wall underlined by the marbling of the pillars is enhanced by the vividly coloured knots of belts and the bright pink of satin ballet shoes.



7



8



9



10

7. Eva Gonzalès: *Une loge aux Italiens (A Box at the Italians)*, circa 1874, oil on canvas

8. Edgar Degas: *L'orchestre de l'Opéra (The Orchestra de l'Opéra)*, 1869, oil on canvas

9. Edgar Degas: *Le foyer de la danse à l'opéra de la rue Le Peletier (The Foyer de la danse in the Opera on the rue Le Peletier)*, 1872, oil on canvas

10. Edgar Degas: *La classe de danse (The Dancing Class)*, 1875-1876, oil on canvas

11. Edgar Degas: *Danseuses bleues (Blue Dancers)*, circa 1895, oil on canvas  
Location: upper level, gallery 51

In this painting, made twenty years later, the artist no longer portrays the precise movements of bar exercises nor dancers resting after practice. In the vaporous and diffuse backstage atmosphere, four dancers, in tutus of intense turquoise – a tone radiating throughout the whole painting – seem like a single dancer in four different postures, each preoccupied only with herself. As they are close to one another, their costumes, being all of the same colour, accentuate the effect of mingled bodies and faces. Beyond the backstage, in the background, one can glimpse two dancers on the stage, like yellow spots at the centre of the painting. The painter's preoccupations have turned towards abstraction as he takes particular care over the effects of light, colour and matter. On the right, a part of the stage decor seen from behind evokes the composition of a photograph, an art Degas had become especially fond of.

Through the windows of the museum, one may see the Opéra with its variously shaped roofs, dominated by the sculptural group by Aimé Millet *Apollo Crowning Dance and Music*. One may also recognise the high reliefs by Carpeaux on the façade of the Louvre's pavillon de Flore.

12. Edgar Degas: *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans (The Little Dancer)*, 1881, bronze  
Location: upper level, gallery 51, glass case

Chin up and eyes half-shut, the little Dancer, tense with effort, stands with her arms shot backwards, hands crossed behind her back. The original artwork made of wax by Degas is the only one of his sculptures to be exhibited during his lifetime – in 1881, at the 6<sup>th</sup> impressionist exhibition. It was, violently criticised for its realism, which was judged to be excessive, and for the expression of “bestial boldness” of the ballet girl who was said more to resemble a “girl-monkey” than a sylph. Her body, toughened by exercises is covered with a cloth bodice and tutu. She wears satin shoes and her hair is a plaited wig, with a ribbon also of satin. This juxtaposition of genuine elements with the wax model contributed to make the little Dancer terribly real. The bronze presented here was made around 1950, it was patinated in order to suggest the original colours. The writer and art critic Joris-Karl Huysmans, conquered by this piece, while being conscious that it could make one feel ill at ease, wrote “Mr Degas has debunked the traditions of sculpture just as he has long shaken the conventions of painting”. Degas started to practise sculpture as early as 1860. He considered the figures he modelled in wax as exercises to help him gain more life-like accuracy in his paintings. In his other sculptures one can see evidence of one of his major preoccupations: the analysis of movement.

13. Edgar Degas: *L'Étoile (The Star)*, 1876-1877, pastel  
Location: upper level, gallery 57

This is no doubt Degas' best known pastel. As early as 1897 *The Star* was described by the painter's friend and essayist Daniel Halévy, as “grace and poetry itself”. Degas frequently used compositions and viewpoints which de-centred the main characters, finding inspiration in Japanese art which had begun to become known in the Western world. Here the audacious empty space in the foreground strengthens the sensation of movement. Striking a balance on her right leg, the Dancer is finishing her arabesque and moving towards the public, arms gracefully held up to accompany her gesture. Her head is thrown backwards, leaving her face in the shadow. Only her neck, in the continuity of the luminous line of her body, is violently illuminated by the lime light. The bright, pearly tutu is enhanced by vividly coloured flowers, a bouquet that counterpoints the one that crowns her hair. The scene is painted from a high angle, as if viewed from the boxes situated on the proscenium which are occupied by particular season ticket holders. At the back, between the stage sets painted in a simplified, almost abstract way, there is a glimpse of the tutus and ballet shoes of the dancers who are waiting for their turn to come on stage, as well as a male figure, bizarre and unexpected, in black, perhaps that of the main dancer's protector. This painting elegantly combines the rigour of the dancer's work and the magic of her presence on stage.



11



12

## A distanced outlook

14. Pierre Bonnard: *La Loge (The Box)*, 1908, oil on canvas  
Location: middle level, gallery 72

Composed on a base of red tones, dramatising the scene, this commissioned painting represents the Bernheim brothers, Bonnard's dealers, with their spouses in their box at the Opéra. The remarkable freedom of the composition and the bold framing that cuts through a man standing in the centre at eye level, which, it was said, caused his patrons displeasure, is witness to the distance Bonnard took from his patrons, even when it was a matter of a high-society portrait. The two men, unlike the two women, are represented as shadows, one being truncated, the other relegated to the background. The dark red half light of the foreground is contrasted with the orangey acid tones of the background, which gives the space a depth while emphasising the sensation of seclusion, of a universe muffled by velvet curtains. The stiff attitude of the characters, revealing a scarcely disguised “well-groomed ennui”, shows the ironic regard in which the painter held high society and its conventional and stuffy rituals.



15



14