

The Jesuit College

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The Jesuit College forms part of the Musée Fabre that can be seen from the Esplanade. This seventeenth century building houses modern and contemporary collections.

Following the reoccupation of Protestant territories by the king, the Jesuit members of the Company of Jesus, founded by Ignatius de Loyola, established themselves in Montpellier around 1630 and founded a school for boys. They occupied land granted by the bishop, and successive enlargements over time allowed new constructions to be undertaken. Dating from 1682, the project included a main four-storied building (the east Rectors' wing which faces the Esplanade) and two perpendicular buildings behind it in a U-shaped arrangement that recalls the form of a cloister. The main building is topped with a central classical pavilion, which is adorned with a pediment containing sculptures. The entrance is situated in a courtyard leading into the city (fig.1). The

methods of construction used in seventeenth century Montpellier are perfectly represented in this building. The walls are covered in the Montpellier style

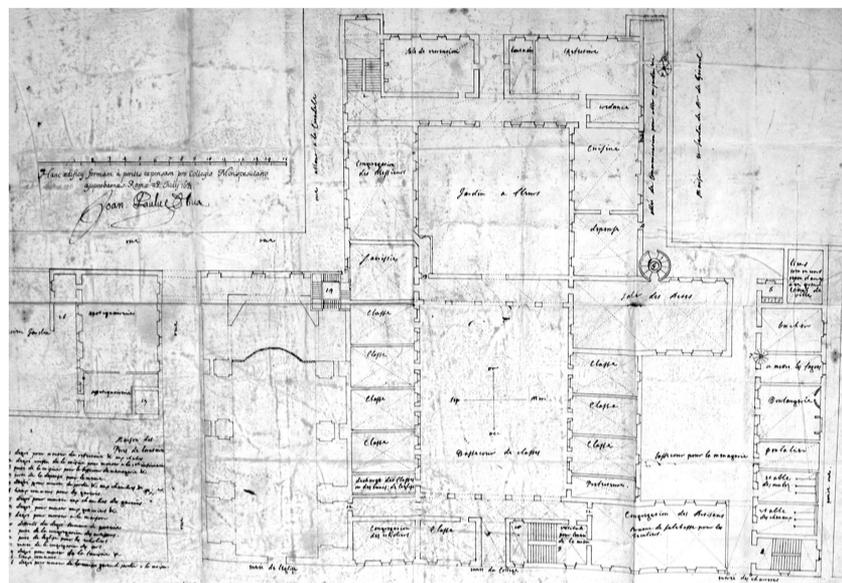


fig.1- Plan of the Jesuit College, second half of the eighteenth century

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of quarried stone “standardised” by being placed either vertically or horizontally. Some rooms are vaulted with plastered ceilings and painted with a lime wash. The upper stories are covered in “French flooring”, painted in grey and blue, as is characteristic in this region. The main building housed the brothers and the lateral wings were reserved for classrooms and dormitories for the students.

The interior decoration is very sober and limited to the cornices, window and door frames. Only the entrance to the Jesuit library (Room 46) is decorated with two Ionic pilasters on either side of the door which are topped with cherubs. In the interior courtyard one can note the gargoyles carved in the style of grotesque masks that decorate the cornice. The Giral staircase, which is original, is a staircase of four newels with the flights resting on the walls and arcades giving an impression of lightness and refinement.

What is today the entrance courtyard of the museum was occupied by a garden. After the pacification of the Languedoc region, the open area (the Champ de Mars) that had been maintained between the fortress and the city for defensive purposes was no longer needed. The local property owners had the opportunity to buy land in this area, on the condition that they construct a ten-foot stone wall with a balustrade on top. In around 1692 the Jesuits commissioned an Orangery to be built with a rooftop terrace. This structure no longer exists but was similar to the private terrace gardens seen on the boulevard Sarraill to the north of the museum.

Several building campaigns followed – the creation of a second courtyard that is known today as the Cour Bourdon, the elevated first floor corridor that connects the two wings of the building and the church, Notre-Dame-des-Tables, which was constructed between 1707 and 1747. The church was designed by Jean Giral, son of Antoine Giral, who was also the architect of the Place du Peyrou and the Saint-Charles chapel. Around 1700 the Jesuit College was the most important building complex in Montpellier. However, the Jesuits were expelled from France in 1763 and the college became a royal and then a national property. The Fine Arts Society occupies part of the building.

Finally in 1804 the college was transformed into the Lycée Impérial. In 1962 this school was relocated to the other side of the Esplanade and the library, the civil records office and the marriage chambers took over the vacated space. Around 1980, the museum integrated the southern wing of the college to expand its gallery space. After the relocation of the library in 2000, it was decided that the museum should expand into this exceptional complex of buildings, which remains a major architectural monument of the historic centre of Montpellier.

Historic Tour

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English translation by Susan Schneider