

The Hotel Massilian

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When the painter and local citizen François-Xavier Fabre made his donation in 1825, it was accompanied by the condition that his collection of paintings, drawings, books, prints and objets d'art be accommodated in a single location that was well lit, spacious and in the centre of the city.

The hotel Massilian, which was purchased by the municipality for 140,000 francs, had existed since the fifteenth century. It was built within the medieval city walls which were put in place by the Guilhems and the kings of Aragon. On this site the Cour de la Rectorie de la Part Antique had been built replacing the old Jewish quarter that existed at least up to 1271. The rector's house, adjacent to the north side of the Petit Scel Courtyard (the north part of the museum and site of the future Jesuit College), opened to the east onto the fortifications and the ditch surrounding the city (the current site of the Esplanade) (fig.1).

A well-known hôtel particulier or townhouse, it was host to the Prince of Conti and his entourage during the assembly of the Languedoc states in the winter of 1654-55. Molière, who had travelled in the Languedoc region since 1647, gave a performance during this assembly.

Jean de Massilian bought the hotel in 1746 in a town that was growing in population and spreading beyond its medieval walls. He undertook vast renovations in 1775 to bring the building in line with modern tastes. It was also at this time that the nobility had country manors or "follies" built, like the chateau of Bonnier de la Mosson (1723-1741).

The entrance on rue Montpelliéret, (known as rue Henri IV at the time), consisted of a covered archway leading to an open courtyard with stables, carriage houses and storage buildings. This space is today the Germaine Richier courtyard, which is the entrance to the pre-nineteenth-century collections.

The four buildings are arranged in an ensemble around this courtyard. On the east side the main portion of the building separated the entrance courtyard from the garden. Built in quarried stone and thirty-eight metres long, this four-storied building has eleven cruciform windows that open onto the garden. It is the hotel Massilian's only remaining eighteenth-century façade and one can see from the discreet mouldings and lintels, horizontal lines and flat façade that classical references dominate the architectural theme. It is one of the rare examples of Louis XVI period architecture in Montpellier.

The garden created by the Massilian family was an essential element in the heart of the building. Fed by the water of the Peyrou, it had a water basin in the centre and a rocaille waterfall which was probably located on the wall of the Orangery. This building which closed off the garden "on the royal route along the esplanade was composed of seven rooms each with their own entrance". Fabre had the Orangery set up as a classroom for the free drawing schools, but this space was demolished when the Gallery of Columns was connected with the library in 1878.

The hotel Massilian is the heart of the original Musée Fabre from which later constructions would be added to create the large museum we see today.

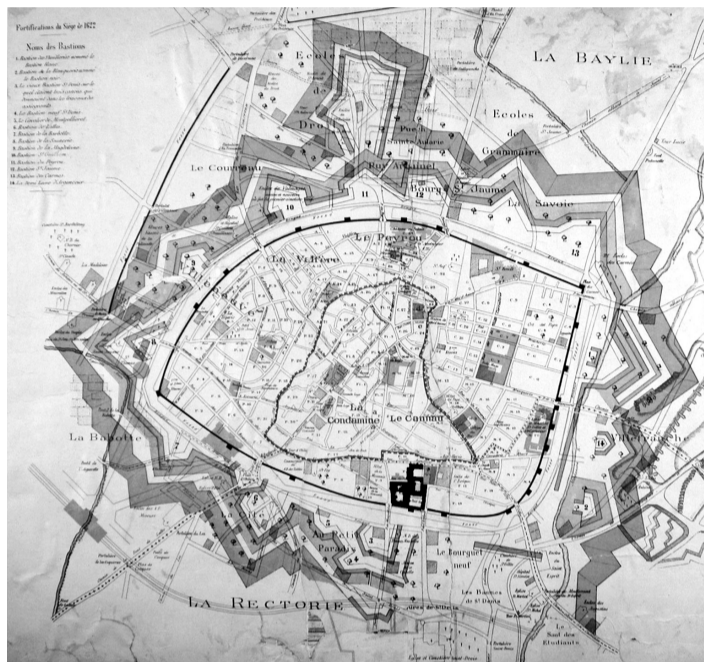


fig.1- « The city of Montpellier, its walls and suburbs in the Middle Ages »
Plan of the city dating from the seventeenth century
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