

# The Jeu de Paume Gallery and the First Musée Fabre



After the donation of François-Xavier Fabre and the foundation of the museum in 1825, the Jeu de Paume Gallery was the first gallery to welcome visitors. The exhibition rooms were installed on the first floor of the hotel Massilian, a private residence dating from the fifteenth century.

Even though this arrangement corresponded with the donor's wishes, a reorganisation of the space was necessary to exhibit works and receive visitors.

The façade of the hotel on rue Montpelliéret was completely demolished and was reconstructed from stone quarried in the region (Vendargues stone for the lower portion of the building and Saint-Geniès stone for the elevation).

In the upper portion of the building a balustrade connects the two pavilions framing the building. In one of the plans for the project this balustrade was topped with sculptures which were never put in place due to Fabre's judgement that there would not be enough distance from which to view them properly (fig.1). The entrance is framed by two pilasters\* of the Ionic order\* which support an entablature\* composed of a cornice, a frieze and an architrave.

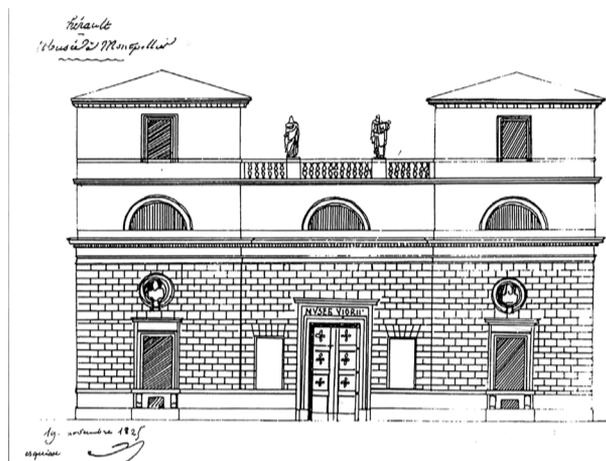


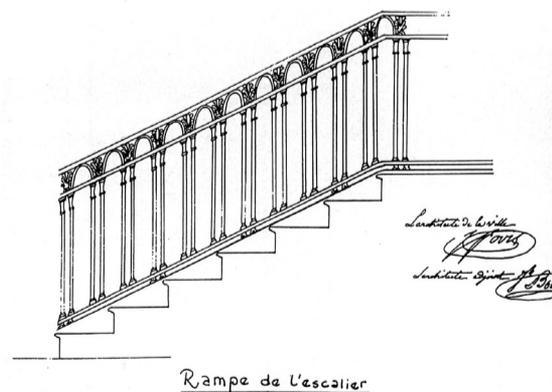
fig.1- Plan of the museum as seen from rue Montpelliéret, 1825. This elevation decorated with statues and busts was never built  
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Above the door the helmeted head of Minerva (known as Athena in Greece), the civilising goddess and protector of the arts and wisdom, welcomes visitors. This architecture was inspired by Fabre's long stay in Italy. It was constructed after the designs of the city architects Fovis and Boué and is based upon Florentine-Pompeian styles with sober lines, symmetrical pavilions framing the façade, balustrades and semicircular openings.

Access to the museum is through a ground-floor vestibule (Room 6), which is decorated in the same Italianate spirit as the façade. The space is marked by the rhythm of the simple and sober Tuscan order\* pilasters and columns. To the left was the entrance to the art school and to the right the library containing the volumes of Fabre and his friends the Countess of Albany and the poet Vittorio Alfieri.

Beyond this vestibule, the staircase of the former hotel leads to the museum. While it had at first been conserved in its original state, it was remodelled in 1836-37 following Fabre's own design (fig.2). The curve of the staircase, which originally led to the left, now accentuates the theatrical procession leading towards the works of art.

The original Musée Fabre consisted of five galleries. What is today Room 9 was the "Statue Gallery" containing paintings and plaster casts. It is today known as the Jeu de Paume Gallery, a name probably inherited from a royal sport that was played up until the seventeenth century. This sport, which was a precursor of today's racket sports, was played with either bare hands or with a leather glove. Next is Room 10 where the sculptures in marble are displayed, notably Winter and Summer by Houdon, which were donated by Creuzé de Lesser. Room 11, the Griffin Gallery, is dedicated to Fabre's painting collection while Room 17, which was at the time divided into two sections, is reserved for drawings and engravings.



English translation by Susan Schneider  
fig.2- Unrealized project of the staircase banister. This designer was apparently pioneered by Fabre  
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Historic Tour



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**\* Pilaster**

A vertical support, rectangular in form, that protrudes slightly from the surrounding wall and has either a base or a capital. It is not load bearing but decorative.

**\* Order**

The orders determine the proportions and the ornamentation of architecture, referring particularly to columns. The Ionic order created by the Greeks can be identified by its scrolled capitals. The Tuscan order is a Roman imitation of the Greek Doric order characterised by its simplicity and absence of ornament.

**\* Entablature**

The upper part of the classical order, composed of an architrave (the horizontal beam resting on columns), a decorative frieze and a cornice (an unbroken moulded projection).