

The Old Library Reading Room

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This gallery, which is dedicated to French eighteenth-century Neoclassical painting, corresponds to the old reading room of the municipal library before it was moved to the new Antigone area in 2000.

With the Fabre and Valedau donations considerably enriching the museum's collections, the need for more space was felt as early as 1838. Thanks to the sum of thirty thousand francs left by Fabre on his death, the municipality decided to construct a library "which is the most precious part of Fabre's donation". This expansion also allowed exhibition space to be opened up on the ground floor of the hotel Massilian.

Built between 1839 and 1841 by the city architects Fovis and Boué, the library is located on the north side of the museum garden (the Cour Vien). The central building is flanked by two pavilions set slightly behind it. A rhythmic alternation of windows and pilasters marks the façade facing the interior garden (fig.1).

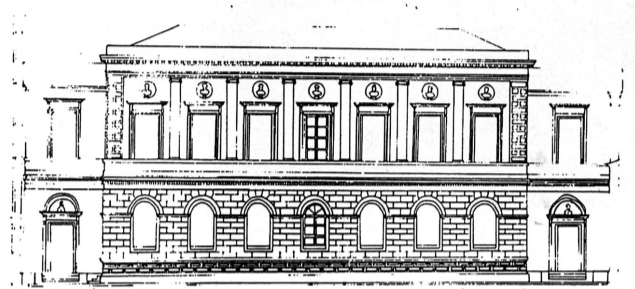


fig.1- The library and the faculty of letters
Elevation of the façade as seen from the courtyard,
built between 1839 and 1841
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A three hundred-seat lecture hall, with a staff room and cloakrooms on the ground floor, was built for Montpellier's newly created faculty of letters. The existing auditorium was built on the site of this lecture hall.

On the first floor was the library, which had been considerably enriched by the Fabre donation of nine thousand volumes, including Vittorio Alfieri's own library, the Italian poet he knew in Florence. The reading room opened onto a medals room installed in the east pavilion. The walls of this room were almost completely covered with cases displaying the small precious objects that belonged to Fabre (some of these works are displayed in the cases dedicated to the museum's donors in Room 12). In the public room, spiral staircases in the corners led to a wooden gallery where the precious and rare books were housed. This wooden structure existed throughout the twentieth century up to the interventions of Georges Rouse and Claudio Parmiggiani during the 2002 renovation (fig.2).



fig.2- Shadow Sculptures
Created by Claudio Parmiggiani in 2002 before the restoration of the library and its incorporation in the Musée Fabre
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As early as 1867-68 the first expansion was necessary to accommodate an exceptional group of medieval Arabic manuscripts bequeathed by the philosophy professor, Abbot Flottes (Room 21). In 1877 it was decided to connect the library with the Gallery of Columns. This room was given the name of the Fages Archives after the Montpellier doctor who donated ten thousand volumes on the natural sciences, ethnology and archaeology (Room 19).

Today the Cour Vien, a courtyard inserted between the library, the Gallery of Columns (1875-78) and the Esplanade building, is decorated with busts honouring great painters such as Poussin, Rubens, Titian and Bourdon as well as Greek and Roman philosophers such as Socrates and Seneca.

In the Cour Soulages, on the windowless wall of the library, stands the Béziers artist Antonin Injalbert's portico. This work was commissioned in 1894 for a gallery of shops on Montpellier's Place de la Comédie. However the work was considered indecent and quickly removed from view. This monumental sculpture, which welcomes the visitor with a depiction of "the Poetry of love in passion and melancholy", was placed in its current position in the 1960s after the city secondary school, which is now known as the Lycée Joffre, was moved to the other side of the Esplanade.

Historic Tour

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English translation by Susan Schneider