

The Gallery of Columns

...

This gallery, which is emblematic of the Musée Fabre, was constructed following the enlargement of the collection by successive donations during the nineteenth century. These included the sculptures of Summer and Winter by Jean-Antoine Houdon donated to the museum by Creuzé de Lesser in 1828, some one hundred Dutch and Flemish paintings of the Valedau collection bequeathed in 1836 and two donations by Bruyas, one in 1868 which was originally exhibited on the ground floor where the drawing school had previously been located (Room 8) and an additional several hundred works from the Bruyas collection in 1876.

In order to exhibit these collections in appropriate surroundings, the city architect, M. Cassan proposed several expansions. The idea was to create a gallery on rue Montpelliéret to match the library that had been built on the other side of the Cour Vien in 1839. Eventually these two buildings would be connected by a new building on the Esplanade to create a refined and harmonious ensemble in the city centre.

The expansion project was launched in 1876 on rue Montpelliéret. The ground floor was reserved for a drawing school and is today equipped to accommodate cultural and educational events. The first floor of the building was long known as the “Bruyas Gallery” since it housed the collection of nineteenth-century paintings donated by a Montpellier citizen of that name. Later both modern and pre-nineteenth century paintings would be hung side by side in this gallery (fig.1).



fig.1- View of the Gallery of the Columns, early twentieth century
© Musée Fabre / Montpellier Agglomération

This thirty-eight metre-long gallery is entered by a staircase set within four columns, which are mirrored at the other end of the gallery. Following the standard museum hang of the period, the walls were completely covered with paintings tightly packed together from floor to ceiling. In a decision that speaks of the modernity of the museum design, Cassan chose to place skylights in the ceiling rather than windows in the walls, thus achieving a maximum of exhibition space and a flattering light for the paintings. This choice also permitted the rue Montpelliéret façade to be decorated with a series of sculptural figures that honour the Montpellier painters Sébastien Bourdon (1616-1671), Joseph-Marie Vien (1716-1809) and Jean Raoux (1677-1734) (fig.2).

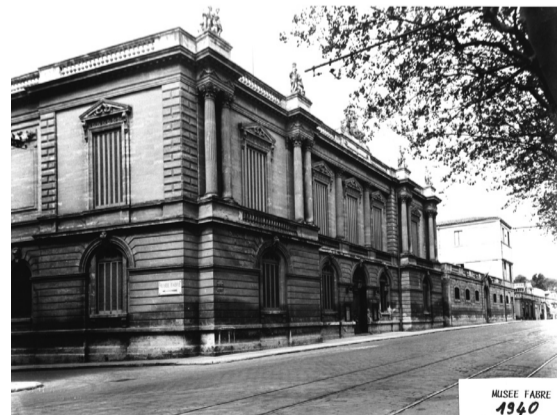


fig.2- View of the museum from the Esplanade c.1940
© Musée Fabre / Montpellier Agglomération

At this time the tramway passed in front of the museum. The Soulages courtyard was separated from the boulevard by the wall of the Orangery that was demolished before 1962, when the secondary school was relocated to the other side of the Esplanade.

The interior decoration is primarily concerned with the mosaic floor, which was commissioned from a local artist Francesco Mora. At the far end of the gallery, the goddess Minerva/Athena crowns the bust of a celebrated man with laurels in front of a painting that depicts a woman. This image might represent a painter of antiquity, possibly Zeuxis or Apelles.

The originality of this space rests on the placement of the columns, which add grandeur and give the gallery an appearance of an ancient temple, a worthy setting for the works of art.