

Discours Pascale Cossart sous la Coupoles

Journée Mondiale des Sciences

Mardi 27 septembre 2016

Distinguished guests, Messieurs mesdames les ambassadeurs, dear Colleagues, dear friends, Mesdames et Messieurs,

It is a real pleasure to welcome you under the Famous Coupoles, the famous dome of the Institut de France, here in the Quai Conti, in one of the most beautiful palaces of the city of Paris. Other famous and beautiful Palaces include for example the Palais de l'Elysée, the Palais du Luxembourg, the Palais Royal and of course the Palais du Louvre where we spent the whole morning and which is located just on the other side of the river Seine, on the right bank.

As you were already told, the crossing of the river that we just did, symbolized what has occurred in 1805 to the The Institut National des Sciences et des Arts, -the National Institute of Sciences and Arts- which moved from the Palais du Louvre to the **pre-existing** building where we are now thanks to Napoléon Bonaparte who was at the time in addition to being the French Emperor, a member of the Institute, in the so called « class of Physical sciences and mathematics ».

This coupole, this dome is the emblematic part of the building. All French people have heard of it, know it because this is the place where new members, elected in one of the five Academies, are officially inducted during a very official ceremony.

As some of you have already realized this coupole is very special. It is not circular, it is oval, egg-shaped but only in the interior. In contrast, the exterior part of the coupole, of the dome, is circular and is reminiscent of the many domes which have appeared since the first century in Rome and have repeatedly been used as magnificent decoration attributes in many churches. We all know the famous dome of the Sainte Sophie Basilic built in Constantinople



in the sixth century and which has a diameter of 31 meters. As we will see, this Coupole was also the top of a church, the church of a school, the so called « College des Quatre Nations ».

This college has an interesting history which I would like tell you first in details. I will then come back to the arrival of the Academies here.

This college was constructed in the second part of the seventeenth century according the testament of Mazarin.

Who was Mazarin? In brief Mazarin was an Italian. Giulio Mazzarini. He was born in 1602 with two teeth, a predictory sign of brightness, as he was proud to often say.

Mazarin received an excellent education at a Jesuit school: he was a very bright student, prepared a doctorate in science and then spent some time in Spain to finish his studies of Law at the university of Alcala de Hanares. When he came back in Italy, he started to work, as many young people of his generation in Rome, for the pope services which led him to move to Milano...There he very rapidly acquired the solid reputation of being a strong politician and got to meet Richelieu, the famous minister of Louis the XIII who finally hired him at the end of his life in 1640 to be his successor.

Mazarin, just after the death of Richelieu in 1642, becomes the main state minister of Louis the XIII and the god father of the future king, Louis the XIV who was only 4 years of age.

One year later in 1643, Louis the XIII die, and Mazarin becomes prime minister and is really governing France. In addition to being a great politician he is highly interested in arts, paintings, sculptures, and books that he collects for himself. He rapidly decides to build a palace rue Richelieu where he puts his numerous collections. When he dies in 1661 in the Royal Palace of Vincennes at the east of Paris, he still is the prime minister. More importantly, he is immensely rich. Strikingly, three days before his death, he had written his testament in which he was giving a large sum of money (two millions pounds) to the king, his god son to specifically build a school for the children (boys and girls) of the influent families of four nations recently acquired by France namely,

1. in the north Artois Flanders Hainaut and Luxembourg
2. in the east Alsace
3. in the south west Roussillon Conflent and Cerdagne, and
4. in the south east Pignerol (a small nation near Turin).

The goal was to turn the Sixty scholarship-holders into good French speaking catholic citizens. Hence the name which was then given to the school « le Collège des Quatre Nations ».

The instructions left by Mazarin did not indicate the place for the future school nor the architect. It is Colbert who had worked personally for Mazarin's private finances for ten years who was in charge of the execution of the testament. He chose the architect Louis Le Vau who already had realized the Louvre façade and Le Vau then carefully chose the location for the college just in front of le Louvre.

Be aware that at the time 1661 the Pont des Arts did not exist; it will only be open to the public in 1804.

Le Vau was very careful when he designed the college so that from the Louvre one could see the college and from the college one could see le louvre. The construction started in 1663 and took 25 years and the college was open in 1688. The Mazarine library was open to the scholars one year later. But the church had opened much earlier in 1674.

The design of the building is very special as it appears quite classical from the front, with the college church in the middle of the building and located in the axis of a semicircular Place and with two aisles a left and a right one which is called aisle Le Vau. In fact the building is very disequilibrated and nearly forms a triangle when one looks at a map from the top. This is due to the shape of the land available for the construction.

We are here in the chapel, in the church of the school.

Let's look at this Coupole. You have 12 different medallions which represent the 12 apostles. At a lower level the two letters SL correspond to the initials of Saint Louis a beloved French King who was claimed as the protector of the College.

You then have a latin sentence

« Sedebit sub umbraculo ejus in medio nationum »

It is a sentence from Ezechiel in the Old Testament in the Bible

« He will be seated under his shadow among the nations »

I have heard different interpretations/ translations of this sentence. Who will be seated ?

Mazarin ? it could well be that Mazarin will be seated under God's shadow and among the nations....

In fact Mazarin had asked to be buried in the middle of the church. But this will has not been respected because it would have cut the perspective between the entrance and the altar which was more or less in my back.

In addition, Mazarin died as I said, in Vincennes – the church of course was not built- and his body stayed temporarily in Vincennes until he was buried here in the crypt. But at the revolution his bones were thrown in the river Seine and disappeared. We are left now with an empty monument, a cenotaph dedicated to Mazarin which is located behind me on the left and has been realized by several sculptors: Coysevox for the statue, le Hongre and Tuby for the angel and the allegories placed at the bottom of the cenotaph.

The College des Quatre Nations enjoyed an excellent reputation throughout the eighteenth century. It was the only college at the time where maths were taught. In fact the college had a number of illustrious students such as d'Alembert but like all religious institutions it was closed during the revolution. It then served variously as a prison and a warehouse.

Then the first consul Bonaparte had the art schools that occupied the Louvre, transferred here as a result of which the building was then called the « Palais des beaux arts ». Bonaparte also ordered at that time the building of the « Pont des arts », this iron foot-bridge connecting the Palace to the right bank and which appeared as an eloquent emblem of modernity in the heart of the city. Interestingly It was built by Dillon who was a competitor to Bonaparte for his election as a member of the Institute !

Which Institute ?



The Institut National des sciences et des arts created on October 25 1795 by the convention and which will « cross » the river in 1805 !

What is the origin of the Institut National des sciences et des arts ? in a nutshell, it resulted from the recreation in 1795 of the previous academies which were suppressed by the French revolution in 1793 essentially because they were royal academies. These academies were relatively recent.

In 1635 Richelieu had created the Académie Française

Between 1648 and 1671, the Académies royales of painting and sculpture and also of music and architecture, were created.

In 1663, the Academie royal of inscriptions and medals was created by Colbert.

And as you know in 1666 the Academie royale des sciences was created by Colbert.

As I just said, in 1793 all the royal academies were suppressed.

But the Convention created the Institut National des Sciences et des arts in 1795. It had at the time three classes:

1. Physical sciences and mathematics which was the only one to correspond *stricto sensu* to a previous academy
2. Moral and Political sciences
3. Literature and fine arts.

In 1803, Napoleon who was elected in 1797 as a member of the Institute decides to come back to the previous academies albeit with another name. The Institute has then four classes and it is only in 1816 that Louis XVIII reestablish the name academies which are in a hierarchical order according to their date of creation

Academie française

Academie des inscriptions et belles lettres

Academie des sciences

And Academie des beaux-arts

In 1832 King Louis Philippe adds the fifth academy: Academie des sciences morales et politiques.



One word on the famous costume. This was also the idea of Napoleon in 1801. It is black with broderies of green olive tree's branches. It is worn by all academies but it is only worn for the big ceremonies under la Coupole.

Have the buildings not been renovated. Of course Yes !

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Palais appears not optimal for the work which is done. This room for example appears perfect for celebrations, ceremonies but not convenient for working sessions.

A new wing is thus built in the Palais in the front of the aisle Le Vau and called aisle Le Bas; its upper floor has two rooms for ordinary meetings, a smaller one for the deliberations of the Académie française, overlooked by a large portrait of Richelieu

and a larger one called Grande salle des séances decorated with portraits of masters of philosophy, the arts and sciences. It is in this room that Louis Pasteur for example came to tell his famous successful vaccination experiments.

So in this Palais, there are five academies which share most of the facilities with, each academy having its own day. We meet on Tuesdays hence this celebration on a Tuesday.

The two rooms that I just mentioned are in fact not the most convenient rooms for modern meetings and workshops and we are happy that a 400 seats auditorium now under construction will be opened at the end of 2017.

This is probably where we will celebrate the 400 years anniversary of the Academie des Sciences.