

Charles Percier

Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions

Extended Through February 12, 2017



Bard
Graduate
Center
Gallery

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Charles Percier: Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions—on view at Bard Graduate Center Gallery in New York City through February 12, 2017—will be the first large-scale exhibition to survey the magnificent range of projects undertaken by the French architect and designer from the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Jean-Philippe Garric, professor of the history of architecture at the University of Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, is the curator.

Although largely remembered for his close collaboration with Pierre François Léonard Fontaine (1762–1853)—together they defined the Empire style and created the decorative program of Napoleon’s reign—Charles Percier’s (1764–1838) artistic style was unique, complex, and ever-evolving. From the last years of the ancien régime, when Percier was a promising student—first at the Académie royale d’architecture in Paris and then at the French Academy in Rome, where he concentrated on graphic work—his commissions for public and private clients significantly influenced decorative arts and architecture during an extremely turbulent and rapidly changing period in French history.

Charles Percier: Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions breaks with the tradition of considering Percier and Fontaine together. This choice, shaped by

the discovery of new documents relating to the production of the two partners, allows a better understanding of Percier’s multifaceted artistic practice. The exhibition will feature more than 130 art works from principal museums and cultural institutions in France and the United States, as well as key objects from private collections, including his designs for furniture, porcelain, metalwork, and the renovation of the rue de Rivoli—the construction of which transformed the center of Paris. Rare drawings and spectacular examples of early nineteenth-century cabinets, candelabras, and tureens will also be displayed. By focusing on his most famous and seminal works, such as sketches for the arc du Carrousel, the interior designs for Josephine Bonaparte’s rooms in the Tuileries Palace, and the magnificent books dedicated to Roman palaces and interior decoration, the exhibition will demonstrate the diverse and extraordinary creations of an artist whose work brilliantly bridged ancien régime court culture and the industrial production of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Organized by Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York, in association with the château de Fontainebleau and the Réunion des musées nationaux-Grand Palais, Paris.

Following its presentation at Bard Graduate Center Gallery, *Charles Percier: Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions* will be on view at château de Fontainebleau from March 18, 2017 to June 19, 2017.

Background

With thousands of drawings in public and private collections, several architectural and urban interventions of prime importance in the heart of Paris, numerous furniture and interior designs commissioned by prestigious patrons, publications that left their mark on several generations of architects and decorators, and, among his students, sixteen Prix de Rome winners and seven members of the Institut de France, the genius of Charles Percier was evident to his contemporaries. While his importance has been acknowledged by most historians of art, architecture, and decorative arts, no exhibition or book has yet attempted an overview of his production as a whole. This is not merely an injustice to him given his central role in the arts at a time of transition between the ancien régime and the modern period and his proximity to those in power under Napoleon, it has compromised our understanding of the architecture



Andiron with Psyche. Made by Pierre Phillippe Thomire after design by Charles Percier, 1809. Chased and gilt bronze, château de Fontainebleau, inv. F 943 C

and decorative arts produced during this time, not just in France but throughout Europe.

While there are many surviving graphic documents and other works by Percier, there is no Percier archive. The principal sources—Fontaine’s journal and memoirs, the former written for posterity and the latter for his grandchildren—purport to be accurate, but often overlook entire aspects of his career. Fontaine failed to mention all of the projects undertaken by Percier alone. As a result, this exhibition, by concentrating on Percier, offers a biographical synthesis of his career that focuses on specific projects, whether realized, published, or drawn.

Themes

Percier and His Circles

Charles Percier owed a great deal to the academic world, and he gave a great deal back to it. After studying drawing at an exemplary philanthropic institution of the last years of the ancien régime, the *École gratuite de dessin* (Free Drawing School), he was a model student at the *Académie royale d’architecture* (Royal Academy of Architecture) and then, after winning the prestigious *Prix de Rome* in 1786, an enthusiastic pensioner (fellow) at the *Académie royale d’architecture*. He began teaching students of his own in 1791—almost immediately after returning to Paris from Italy—and gradually became one of the most important French architecture professors of the first third of the nineteenth century, entering the *Institut de France* in 1811. Percier lived alone but often worked with others—Pierre Fontaine, the most important of these, was by no means the only one—and befriended many of his fellow Rome pensioners as he would later do with several of his students, many of whom collaborated with him. His circle included fellow *École gratuite de dessin* pupils such as Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson (1767–1824); his teacher Antoine François Peyre (1739–1823); fellow Rome pensioners, most notably Jean German Drouais (1763–1788); architects and painters including François Gérard (1770–1837); and several generations of students who engaged in common projects and socialized, both casually and within more structured frameworks such as the dinners of the society of artists known as the *Duodi*.

This theme presents Percier’s various academic projects, including his Grand Prix winning architectural design, sketches he made in Rome, his graphic reconstruction of Trajan’s Column, as well as portraits of and work by his students.

Between Italy and France

Percier’s Italian sojourn (1786–91) had a profound effect on him. Like many fellowship students at the French Academy in Rome, his stay there was characterized by enthusiasm and wonder, but, more than any other, he made this experience a key moment in his



Charles Percier. *Italian villa at the seaside*, 1797. Pencil, pen, black and brown ink, black chalk, watercolor on paper. Musée du Louvre, Paris, RF3994.

emotional, artistic, and intellectual life. A relentless campaign of measuring and drawing made it possible for him to gather material for two volumes of engravings that were to have considerable influence on his contemporaries and later designers. For the rest of his life, he remained a fervent admirer of Italian antiquity and Renaissance art and architecture, and planned a second trip to Italy that never happened.

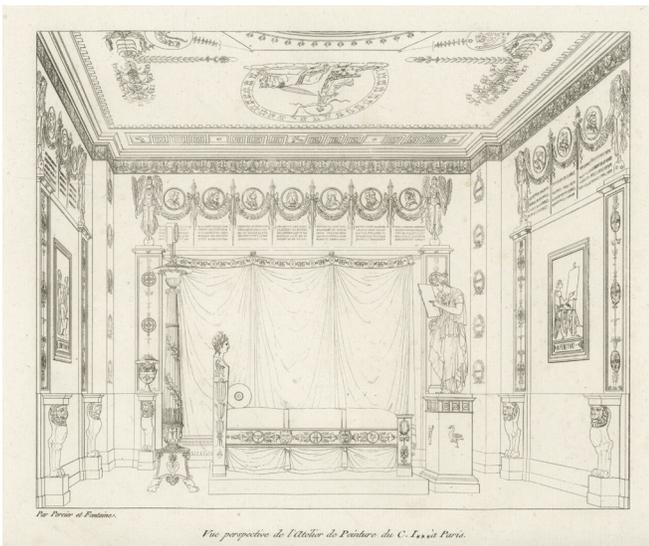
Despite his ardent Italophilia, Charles Percier was not indifferent to French architecture, especially that of the French Renaissance, and he admired the decorative and sculptural production of Jean Goujon (active 1540–65) and Pierre Lescot (ca. 1515–1578). Consistent with his admiration of Italian architecture, he carefully studied the *château de Fontainebleau* through hundreds of drawings. He also collaborated with art historian Alexandre Lenoir (1761–1839) on the installation and

graphic reproduction of works in the Musée des monuments français, a museum dedicated to French architectural heritage, which Lenoir opened in 1795.

This theme evokes the artistic context of Percier's Italian sojourn through drawings from his stay at the French Academy in Rome, a volume on Roman palaces and villas, and sketches. It also examines his involvement with the Musée des monuments français.

A Graphic Artist

Apart from a few letters, Percier left behind almost no writings. From the several thousand carefully organized drawings he bequeathed, it is apparent, even during his



Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine. Plate 1 of *Recueil de décorations intérieures* (Paris: Authors and Pierre Didot l'aîné, 1801–12).

early training at the École gratuite de dessin, that his skill as a draftsman enabled him to stand out, consolidate his position, and prevail over his contemporaries. His line is fine and precise, and he was less interested in the art of perspective than in delineation and linear agility. His mastery of outline and contour coupled with his passion for abundant ornament were the very heart of his creative work. This ability, cemented by his prolonged study of the bas-reliefs of Trajan's Column, enabled him to stand out as the illustrator, graphic designer, and decorator of his own publications and other prestigious editions, as well as of luxury objects.

Percier's most remarkable achievements, given that he's an architect, are his drawings for the editions of Horace and the Fables of La Fontaine published by Didot.

-Alexandre Lenoir, 1805

This theme emphasizes Percier's graphic work, considered both as an independent artistic domain and as the unifying thread between Percier's other creative projects. Exquisite drawings from the Louvre, luxury books, including a commemorative book for Napoleon's coronation, prints, and even a fan for Josephine will be on view.

Publicizing the style Percier

The Recueil de décorations intérieures

Percier's production in the realm of interior decoration and furniture design was considerable. Not only was he called upon to design a great many interiors, furnishings, and objects—from his first commissions for the National Convention in 1793 to the carriage for the coronation of Charles X—his major works were much publicized by the *Recueil de décorations intérieures* (1801–1812). This collection of 72 plates of furniture and interior designs was one of the most important and influential ornament books in France and indeed in Europe of the time. It established an international neoclassical taste and became a model for commercial catalogues of ornaments, unwittingly inaugurating an era of industrial arts production. The *Recueil* was a major source of inspiration for generations of decorators and designers. It ensured Percier's legacy while simultaneously linking it inextricably to that of Fontaine.

Percier, whose temperament and taste, indeed his gifts, were ill-suited to the trouble and demands of business, left all practical matters to me. I handled the correspondence as well as the accounts, and he focused almost exclusively on study drawings and graphic compositions.

-Pierre Fontaine, 1804



Jacob-Desmaller, after Charles Percier. Gondola chair from the Salon d'Argent of the Elysée Palace, 1805. Carved and silver gilt wood. Palais de l'Elysée, Paris, Mobilier national, GME 18590



Charles Percier. Clock. Made by Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, 1813. Bisque porcelain, gold highlights. Sèvres, Cité de la céramique, MNC 13022.

As Fontaine acknowledged himself, the *Recueil* was Percier's masterwork. Percier drew and engraved the plates largely on his own, despite including both of their signatures. "Percier and Fontaine" is thus perhaps more akin to a luxury brand than an indication of shared artistic paternity. Separating Percier from Fontaine, this exhibition restores Percier's role and singular contribution to the decorative arts as an expert draftsman and designer.

But the contributions Charles Percier made to the realms of furniture and interior decoration do not all fall within the chronological parameters of the *Recueil de décorations intérieures*, nor are they limited to the ensembles and objects represented there. His work for artisanal firms like Jacob frères and that of Martin Guillaume Biennais and his designs for manufactories like Sèvres were the point of departure for national and international diffusion of the *style Percier*. This diffusion ran parallel to the gradual industrialization of the arts, as well as a certain democratization of access to luxury objects.

This theme first focuses on the *Recueil de décorations intérieures*, juxtaposing rare hand-colored prints from the publication with corresponding drawings, furniture, and objects. It will include extraordinary pieces made

for Napoleon, Josephine, and members of the imperial circle from the collections of Versailles, Fontainebleau, and the Elysée Palace. It also demonstrates the dissemination of Percier's style and its vulgarization, as well as Percier's continued artistic development after 1815.

The Louvre, the Tuileries and the rue de Rivoli

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Napoleon engaged Percier and Fontaine to execute one of the most ambitious projects of his reign and of their careers—linking the Louvre and Tuileries palaces.



Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine. Arc du Carrousel, south side view, 1806-15. Watercolor and pen. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, RESERVE FOL-VE-53 (C).

This large-scale enterprise had three principal ambitions. The first and oldest one was to connect the Louvre with the Tuileries, thereby creating a palace of unmatched magnitude. As heir to the Revolution, Napoleon could not reside at Versailles, and he wanted to complete a project that a century of royal rule had been unable to bring to fruition. The Tuileries became the principal imperial residence, with all its practical and symbolic consequences. The second ambition was to transform the surrounding city. Given their dimensions and location, connecting the Louvre with the Tuileries meant recasting the center of Paris. From this perspective, the operation constitutes a link between the great urban embellishment projects of the eighteenth century and the transformations of the Second Empire.

Finally, the third ambition, doubtless the most contemporary, was cultural in nature: to complete and restore buildings considered jewels of French architectural patrimony as well as to create, within the Louvre, the world's largest museum.

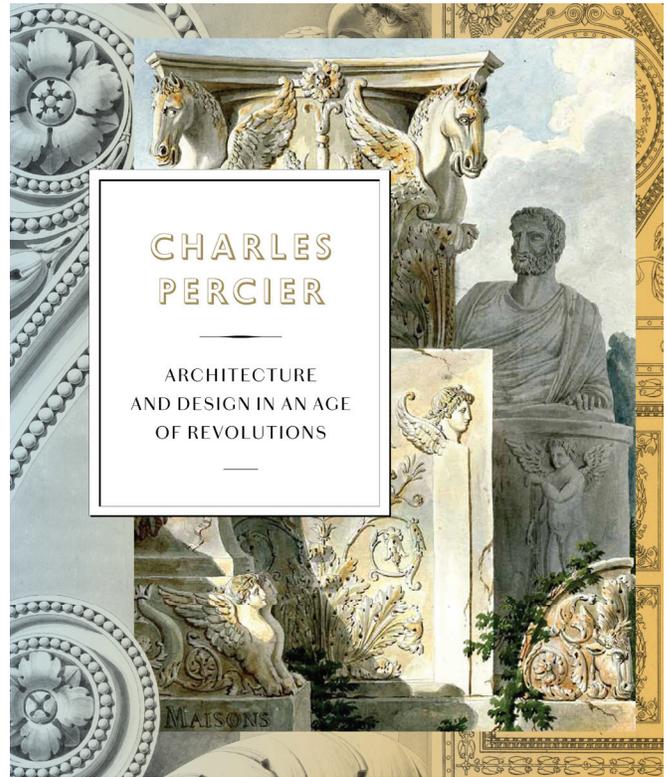
This theme presents Percier and Fontaine's designs for the Louvre and the Tuileries, from an urban scale to the arrangement of interiors and decoration. It will also include their designs for the renovation of the arcades on the nearby rue de Rivoli.

Paper Architecture

Much of the architecture Charles Percier designed with Pierre Fontaine was never built. Paper architecture, or plans for unrealized structures, was the reality for architects during this era of political turmoil. In fact, paper architecture became a practice in itself at the Académie royale d'architecture when Percier was a student there during the late eighteenth century. Economic crises in the 1780s resulted in a lack of architectural commissions and architects like Percier began defining themselves as artists who produced beautiful drawings of hypothetical structures, rather than builders.

When Percier left Paris for Rome, he was still training to be a court architect. By the time he returned in the midst of the French Revolution, the world he knew was shattered. Percier's talent for drawing enabled him to be flexible and versatile in seeking other forms of work. Besides book illustration, in the 1790s, Percier and Fontaine served as co-directors of set design at the Paris Opera, where they created spectacular yet ephemeral scenery for the stage.

Despite being swept into Napoleon's extravagant ambitions, including his plans for a Palace of the King of Rome, Percier and Fontaine managed to build only a small number of important structures. Their contributions to the staging of Napoleonic power, notably the emperor's coronation and his marriage to Marie-Louise, represent a significant portion of their realized work. The fact that they produced more ephemeral projects and—especially—designs for buildings that were never constructed resulted in a corpus of works on paper that reveal the richness and diversity of their imaginations. This final theme presents architectural drawings, watercolors, commemorative volumes, and objects, related to Napoleonic ceremonies and commissions, as well as opera sets designed by both Percier and Fontaine.



Publication

Charles Percier: Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions will be accompanied by a lavishly illustrated English-language catalogue published by Yale University Press in collaboration with Bard Graduate Center Gallery and the Réunion des musées nationaux–Grand Palais, Paris. Edited by and with contributions from Jean-Philippe Garric, it will include essays by leading scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architecture, design, and decorative arts, among them Jean-François Bédard, Jean-François Belhoste, Christophe Beyeler, Vincent Cochet, Anne Dion-Tenenbaum, Vincent Droguet, Iris Moon, Thierry Sarmant, and Letizia Tedeschi. The catalogue will be available in the Gallery and online at store.bgc.bard.edu.

Bard Graduate Center Gallery

Bard Graduate Center Gallery organizes pioneering exhibitions on decorative arts, design history, and material culture, with leading scholars, curators, and institutions worldwide. We provide opportunities for faculty and students to gain experience in exhibition making. Our projects and publications break down traditional barriers between academic and curatorial forms of inquiry.

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Gallery Programs

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212.501.3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.

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Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday and Friday through Sunday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Wednesday and Thursday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Suggested admission is \$7 general, \$5 seniors and students.

For information about Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit bgc.bard.edu/gallery.

For press information and images, please e-mail hollis.barnhart@bgc.bard.edu or call 212-501-3074.

Support

Bard Graduate Center gratefully acknowledges the generous support for *Charles Percier: Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions* from Lisa and Bernard Selz.

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Front Page: Robert Lefèvre. *Charles Percier, architect*, 1807. Oil on canvas. Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France. Photo: Gerard Blot, © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.