REPORT FROM PARIS

Revitalizing the Louvre

A decade of renovation and expansion, culminating last fall with the opening of the new Richelieu Wing, has catapulted France's grandest museum into the 21st century.

BY ANNE ROCHETTE AND WADE SAUNDERS

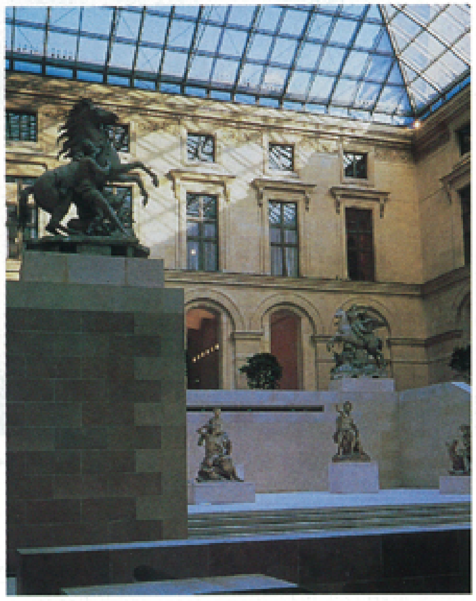
The opening of the new Richelieu Wing of the Louvre last Nov. 18, the museum's bicentennial, was the major media event of the year in France. The inauguration marked the second of three steps in the completion of the Grand Louvre, an appellation which is the most recent embodiment of the French infatuation with the "grand," as in the Train à Grande Vitesse (TGV), the Très Grande Bibliothèque and the Grande Arche de la Défense. The museum deserves the adjective: in a decade, and at a cost of around $1.1 billion, it has been transformed from a largely 19th-century institution—occupying buildings for which there were neither existing architectural plans nor plumbing nor wiring diagrams—to a 21st-century one.

I.M. Pei was chosen as the chief architect for the project in 1983, without the open competition usual for major public buildings in France. The first installment of the construction, finished in 1989, saw the excavation of the Cour Napoléon and the erection there of the glass pyramid as the Louvre's principal entrance. The second section of work has dramatically increased the overall exhibition space of the museum as well as its support areas and public amenities. The facades have been cleaned, the roofs redone and the exterior statues restored or replaced with copies.

Since 1983, the total area devoted to display has grown from 336,000 square feet to the present 556,000 square feet and will reach 653,000 square feet in 1997, at which time the Louvre will boast more gallery space than the Metropolitan Museum and stake its claim to being the largest of the world's great art museums, exhibiting over 30,000 works. The increase is even more pronounced in the support areas (offices, conservation labs, storage, etc.), which have been enlarged from 260,000 to 830,000 square feet.

Excepting the gut renovation of the Richelieu Wing, virtually all the expanse added to the Louvre complex is subterranean: over 1,300,000 square feet have been created under the Cour Napoléon and the Carrousel, about a third of which is for nonmuseological use. These new spaces include a number of multipurpose auditoriums, an upscale shopping mall where the rental price can exceed $100 per square foot per year, and an 80-bus and 800-car parking garage—one that is already often swamped.

One obvious and profound consequence of the changes is apparent in the upward-spiraling attendance, which grew from 2.7 million visitors in 1988 to 4.9 million in 1992. Attendance is expected to exceed 8 million by 1997, or an average of 25,000 people per day. On the weekend of Nov. 20-21 last year, the "people of Paris" were invited to inaugurate their refurbished crown jewel and more than 100,000 answered the call. This undeniable popularity has created misgivings among longtime lovers of the museum, who were used to a rather sedate and idiosyncratic art temple, but one generally conducive to contemplation.



Detail of the new Cour Marly, a covered courtyard devoted to French sculpture originally assembled by Louis XIV and Louis XV for the now-destroyed Château de Marly. © RMN.

The ever increasing attendance seems to have been imperfectly anticipated. Regarded esthetically, most of Pei's decisions appear inspired, not least the pyramid. But the beautiful is not always fully practical. On any given morning, as many as 5,000 people can be trying to enter the museum each hour. The majority come through the pyramid, which is linked to the underground reception area by nothing more than a wide spiral staircase, two rather narrow, two-stage escalators and a high-tech elevator for the disabled. There can be a long wait to enter and some jostling to exit, drawbacks that might have been lessened had the design provided a more generous system of access. Despite having 1,500 employees, the Louvre rarely has enough ticket windows open, and leaving a coat or a bag at the undersized checkrooms can be difficult or impossible at certain hours. These problems will worsen as the attendance grows.

Although François Mitterrand was strongly committed to the Grand Louvre from its beginnings in 1981, as was the Socialist Party, the project was several times in jeopardy. It was crucial to the overall plan that the Louvre reclaim the 19th-century Richelieu Wing, which since 1871 had been home to the Ministry of Finance, whose previous offices had been burned down by the communards. Early in 1986, the Socialist finance minister, Pierre Beregovoy, shifted his offices from the Richelieu Wing into temporary quarters while the monstrous new ministry building in Bercy was being finished. But later that year, when the right regained legislative power, Edouard Balladur, the new finance minister, insisted that his offices be moved back into the Richelieu Wing, where he remained ensconced until the Socialists came back to power in 1988. Balladur's fit of vanity added more than $15 million to the project's final cost.

The French architect Michel Macary has functioned as Pei's man on the spot throughout the project; the interior designer Jean-Michel Wilmotte became part of the design team in 1988. Pei was responsible for the overall conception of the museum, the Cour Napoléon, the Richelieu Wing and the galleries of painting, Middle Eastern antiquities and Islamic art housed therein. Wilmotte designed the vitrines—both freestanding and inset in the wall—and the furniture used throughout the new wing; he also installed the objets d'art.

All the 200 or so vitrines look to have been sized and set up for the specific works they display, and all have been constructed using the same angle-iron-like metal extrusion to define their edges and support the glass. The metal is variously finished a pale olive green, a light gray and a darker gray. Most of the vitrines have a complete lighting system housed within their 4-inch-thick ceiling—usually a long row of tiny spotlights coupled with one or more parallel strips providing pinpoints of light so numerous that the overall illumination becomes even. Wilmotte's furniture is less obtrusive than his vitrines and quite comfortable.

Macary planned the spaces devoted to sculpture in the Richelieu. He also was in charge of the parking lots, the auditoriums and other multiuse facilities, and the shopping mall under the Carrousel. His work there so seamlessly continues Pei's under the Cour Napoléon that one is uncertain where the museum stops and commerce begins. Among the commercial outlets, the Body Shop has been singled out for brashly ignoring the mall's visual guidelines; in fact the shop is a useful reminder of the risks which have come with the Louvre's new avidity for marketing.

Pei gutted the Richelieu Wing of everything but two grand and one lesser staircase and the so-called Apartments of Napoléon III. Where there had been six low-ceilinged stories there are now three high-ceilinged ones; the wing comprises 165 rooms, almost all of which are accessible to the handicapped, though the routing can be circuitous. Pei roofed the three pre-existing courtyards, now renamed Khorsabad, Puget and Marly, and made them the visual foci of the reconstructed building; the courtyards help visitors keep their bearings as they move through the succession of galleries. He partially excavated the much larger Puget and Marly courtyards—the latter nearly 23,000 square feet—so that each rises up as a series of terraces.

Their lowest terraces, some 20 feet below street level, are linked underneath the pedestrian corridor which now connects the rue de Rivoli and the Palais Royal to the pyramid. From this passageway, anyone can peer through two large windows down into the Marly courtyard on one side and the Puget courtyard on the other. The effect is quite theatrical, with the visitors inside the museum becoming so many extras animating a world of stone. But the spectacle is double-edged: while offering plenty of visual pleasure, it also comes perilously close to suggesting a Cecil B. De Mille set.

Pei chose Peter Rice (1935-1992), probably the greatest structural engineer of his generation, to design the glass roofs over the courtyards. The roofs had to be fairly flat so as to remain invisible from outside the museum and be constructed with metal elements fine enough not to cast shadows down into the courtyards. The final design of slightly convex planes arching up from each side is astonishingly light visually; no metal element measures more than 6 inches in diameter, though one of the roofs weighs some 170 tons. Rice managed to place all the tensile elements well up within the vaults, so the roofs feel airborne.

Pei housed the six escalators carrying visitors to the various floors of the Richelieu in a striking 80-foot-high volume along one side of the Puget courtyard. The escalators, some spanning 60 feet, have been engineered to a surprising spareness. They are sandwiched between two stone walls each pierced by two giant oculi, which are an unabashed quotation of Louis Kahn. Here, as with the pyramid or Rice's roofs, formal elegance and high-tech wizardry lessen the unavoidable clash of the contemporary with the existing Neo-Classical architecture.

The collections in the Richelieu Wing have been thoughtfully deployed to take advantage of the building's architecture. The Islamic collection, which was previously hidden away in cramped and remote rooms, has been installed below ground, where it is protected from daylight in galleries whose vaulted ceilings and intimate dimensions provide a hushed atmosphere not otherwise met with in the wing. French sculpture and Middle Eastern antiquities are placed on the ground floor and in the courtyards, where weight is not a problem. European objets d'art—dating from the 6th to the 19th centuries and including ivory carvings, metal and glasswork, ceramics and tapestries—are organized chronologically on the second floor alongside the Apartments of Napoléon III. A few beautiful old vitrines are still in use on this level. French paintings and those of the Northern schools are on the third floor, where they benefit from the natural light coming through the numerous glass roofs, a light supplemented, as needed, by computer-controlled electric illumination. One wishes that certain of the ceiling structures used to hide the light fixtures and even out the daylight were less overbearing.

Each floor of the Richelieu has a different visual feel. For instance, a number of the large windows on the ground floor giving onto the Puget and Marly courtyards have been left unglazed, so that there is a pleasant play in the sculpture galleries of near and far, of inside and seeming outside, a play reinforced by the decision to use stone for the floors in these rooms, as in the courtyards. The Apartments of Napoléon III, with their debauch of gilt, red velvet, crystal chandeliers and stucco ornament, set the tone for the second floor. Daniel Buren and Jean-Pierre Raynaud, who seem to have become France's de facto official artists, adorned the second floor café, which is more elegant than its Cour Napoléon counterparts. Their respective stripe and tile decorations are as stimulating as many of the objets d'art on this floor.

It is the sculpture collection that appears to be the great winner in the Richelieu. The sculptures installed in the Marly courtyard hold up beautifully to the monumental scale of their new setting. The works, originally assembled by Louis XIV and Louis XV for the gardens at the now-destroyed Chateau de Marly, are suffused with lyrical energy and emblematic of the best French classical sculpture.

By contrast, the Puget courtyard suffers from the heterogeneity of the works exhibited, which range in date from 17th to mid-19th century and include small bronze medallions from the Place des Victoires, monumental carvings by Puget, rather decorative marble busts by Pajou, stucco reliefs by Clodion and the realist bronze *Lion au Serpent* by Barye. Although the works are organized roughly chronologically level by level, the overall effect is jumbled and discordant. And the potted trees plopped in both the Marly and Puget courtyards are better suited to commercial malls.

A few other reservations bear mention. Some works have been encased that in fact suffer from the isolation, among them a striking 12th-century wood carving of Christ detached from the Cross, often referred to as the Christ de Courajod after its 19th-century donor. It has been set into the wall behind glass and now floats forlornly on an off-green ground, transformed into a pale image of itself. And at times the curators appear intent on exhibiting as many works as possible, overcrowding the 11 galleries devoted to 18th-century French sculpture with academic bravura pieces, at the expense of memorable works by Houdon, Clodion, Bouchardon and Giraud. Giraud's slightly over-life-size reclining figure made of wax over wood and plaster would stand out anywhere.

Unfortunately it was decided, apparently by the museum administration, to paint the walls in some of the galleries in a range of hues significantly more intense than is usual in museums of this century. While the change of color within the enfilade of galleries is generally used to set apart geographic schools or historic periods, the chromatic decisions feel arbitrary. Especially infelicitous is the dark plum gray that gives a gloomy cast to the whole section devoted to Dutch painting. And the finicky efforts to coordinate the vitrine backgrounds with the room colors sometimes distracts from the art.

Too often the paintings here look to have been hung by date or size, without regard for their quality or significance, as though all works become equivalent once they enter the Louvre. It is easy to miss the little, low, deep-emerald-green room tucked off to one side of a large, lighter green gallery hung salon-style with 15th-century German paintings of varying distinction. The little room is packed with great paintings, including a superb Dürer, several Cranachs (the Elder) and Holbeins (the Younger); it's a shame that there's not enough space to step back and view these works from a distance. And it is likewise hard to understand why the bulk of the stunning collection of Rembrandts fills a relatively smallish room where they are difficult to see when the museum is crowded, while the bigger adjacent spaces are hung with lesser pictures.

One obvious and profound consequence of the museum's renovation is its upward-spiraling attendance, which seems to have been imperfectly anticipated by the architect in his design.

Pei appears to have enjoyed playing with scale and architectural ornament in certain of the painting galleries. One darkened room—whose floor measures a scant 12 by 21 feet—has vitrines for walls; a padded, waist-high railing limits our approach, but encourages us to lean forward and closely regard the 31 small, 16th-century French paintings—by Jean Clouet and his son François among others—hung on a deep purple ground. At the other architectural extreme is the mammoth Rubens gallery, which seems to span the width of the building. The 24 paintings, commissioned by Marie de Médicis in 1622, are hung 12 to a side; each canvas is modestly framed in black, but then grandly reframed in the architecture by beveled pilasters which lead up to a gridded vault set under the peaked glass roof.

Poussin, that most architectural of painters, is an artist after Pei's heart. Pei has installed Poussin's "Four Seasons" series in a simple octagonal room, which functions as the crossroads between the Richelieu and Sully wings. Each painting is hung on its own wall; between them fall three doorways and a window giving onto the Cour Napoléon. The architecture subtly extends the artist's already many-layered meditation on change and renewal.

For many here, the Grand Louvre reaffirms France's cultural superiority at a time when it is threatened by every manner of foreign vulgarity. It is manifestly the most successful of the four major building projects—including also the Opera at Bastille, the Ministry of Finance at Bercy and the new National Library—undertaken during the Mitterrand years (1981-95). Tourism has become one of the city's chief revenue sources, and the refashioned Louvre, 64 percent of whose visitors are foreigners, seems certain to help keep Paris on every traveler's itinerary. It is ironic that it was the Socialists who restored the old royal palace to its role as the heart of the heart of the city and sad that, the job completed, the Socialists have become nearly as inconspicuous as was the Louvre's former entrance. □

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