Multimedia and Websites

Versailles décor sculpté extérieur
www.sculpturesversailles.fr
Created by Béatrix Saule et al., coproduction
Réunion des musées nationaux and
Etablissement public du musée et du
domaine national de Versailles

Nicolas Milovanovic
Les Grands Appartements de Versailles sous Louis XIV.
Catalogue des décors peints
Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées

The catalogs by Béatrix Saule and Nicolas Milovanovic comprise what
Thomas Grenon, administrateur général
de la Réunion des musées nationaux,
understands as an important part of its
public mission. In December 2004 it
electronically published Chef-d’œuvre de
la collection Granddier de céramiques
chinoises (www.museeguimet.fr/grandidier)
and thus took an important step towards
making its collections available online.
Saule’s Décor sculpté extérieur catalog is
the equivalent of five printed volumes
of 500 pages each. There are 1,315 cata-
log entries, 3000 illustrations (many
zoomable), thirty chapters, and several
informational sections (chronology, infor-
mation on artists and patronage, etcetera),
including a 100-page resume of
supporting documents. Searchable by
ground plans and elevation drawings, it
is an easily navigable database.

Milovanovic’s oversized volume of
215 pages, luxuriously illustrated with
169 images mostly in color, allows for a
comparison of a traditional book publi-
cation with an online digital resource.
Both he and Saule are curators at
Versailles, and their works dealing with
the use of traditional art forms—paint-
ing or sculpture—as a part of decorative
ensembles in an architectural context
each appeared in 2005.

The architectural sculpture of
Versailles was the subject of pioneer
studies some years ago by François
Souchal and Françoise de la Moureyre in
a 1972 article in the Gazette des Beaux
Arts and their more extended study of
the subject in French Sculptors, the Reign
of Louis XIV (1977–93).1 Saule updates,
refines, and expands these works, as
Souchal and de la Moureyre did not treat
capitals, pilasters, and other such archi-
tectural elements. Originally conceived
as a complement to an earlier catalog of
the sculpture made for the château and
the park at Versailles, the architectural-
sculpture catalog eventually took on a life
of its own. As Saule, a head curator at
Versailles, remarks in her introduction, a
new approach to this material was
inevitable. “The chief originality of this
work is in its topological and architec-
tural approach because this decorative
sculpture is completely subject to the
architecture: the creation of the work, its
form, its material, and even including the
choice of its theme.” She divided the cata-
log material into thirty chapters that
treat either a facade, a building, or a
space. These chapters are followed by a
summary and a group of illustrated cata-
log entries, usually a page in length.

A very extensive body of illustra-
tions was required to depict such unique
works, many of which were very difficult
to photograph. Numerous sculptures
also required multiple angle views, and
additional images were desirable for a
number of entries, especially works in
storage that had been replaced by copies
on the buildings due to weathering.
Early views and surviving studies for the
works appear when available.

Saule became acquainted with some
of the possibilities offered by electronic
publication before her catalog project.
She had worked with technicians to pro-
tduce two successful video displays:
Versailles le complet (1997) and Versailles le
Testament (2001), both available in many
languages. The first reconstructed a visit
to the state apartments as they appeared
in 1687. During the visit, it was even pos-
sible to examine pictures on the walls
from the royal collections in place at that
date. This exercise may have suggested
to her the potential of using electronic
publication to illuminate the architec-
tural decor. In addition to developing
materials for visitors to Versailles, includ-
ing DVDs and souvenir guides of excep-
tional quality, Saule heads the recently
launched Centre de recherche du
château de Versailles, now situated in its
own building on the grounds of the Petit
Trianon (a building without décor sculpté).

Saule’s catalog covers parts of the
château from various periods (with several
of the rarely accessible interior courts
presented in good photos). These include
the Grande and Petite Ecurie (the queen’s
stable in town is omitted as it does not now
belong to the domaine), and three other
dependencies in the town: the Grand
Commun, the Hôtel des Réserveurs, and
the Pavillon des Fontaines. The
Ménagerie, the park gates, the Grand
and Petit Trianons, the Pavillon Français, the
Queen’s Theater, the Belvidere, and the
Temple of Love are also included.

While the website texts are only in
French, the clear presentation of the
material should make it accessible to many viewers. The greeting page presents a number of options: “Sommaire” leads to the chapters of the text that relate to the locations of works. Each chapter contains one or more views of the area or walls discussed, sometimes in photos, and/or in drawings by the restoration architect Didier. (With these images it is possible to make a virtual tour of the exterior of the château and its dependencies.) “Accès par plans” features maps of the château, the town, and the park, and allows viewers to proceed from them to the appropriate chapters. “Index” appears in several parts, listing works by artist, iconography, and material. A table identifies which works are in their original locations, in storage, or destroyed. Finally, “Outils” includes a chronology of the buildings and their decoration from 1650 to 2003, a register of officials and patrons, a list of some six thousand documents sited in the catalog, and a bibliography (partial, but extensive and favoring documentary discoveries). Through the catalog entries, the precise location of the sculpture or ornament on the building can be identified by elevation drawings or photos. Another remarkable feature of the site is the possibility for users to create their own personal files from its materials.

In the chapters, catalog entries, and chronology section, the inclusion of summary histories of the buildings and related works up to 2003 is an important contribution to our knowledge of Versailles. In addition to the story of the château’s creation, these present the complex history of repairs and restorations over several centuries. In few other publications are the degradations, changes, and even (to some minds) the improvements of buildings over time so fully portrayed. The juxtaposition of architecture and details—both originals and copies—is facilitated by the unprecedented visibility of detail enabled by the zoom feature. Furthermore, the scholarship of the Versailles team and their careful study of documents and original works permitted them to select the best-preserved examples for the illustrations.

Saule in her introduction notes the high quality of some of the replacements and restorations of these works. “As to the replacements [of sculptures] often entrusted to excellent sculptors and realized after the original, these should not be despised: this we can see in looking at the figures of Mars and Hercules . . . copies of the 19th century by the chisel of Henri Chapu, who mentions the difficulty of reproducing Girardon’s work.”

It is possible to take exception to the author’s decision to omit all mention of style in her chapters and catalog entries. While her disclaimer—that the condition of sculptures weathered for centuries presents serious, perhaps insurmountable, problems for the identification of particular artists—has merit, broader issues relating to the evolution of the sculpture of the French court deserve mention, for example the Poussinesque and neoclassical sculptures and reliefs on the garden facade of the château (and their relation to the art of their designer, Charles Le Brun), and the Bernin-esque statues on the Chapelle Royale.

In spite of its great length, the Décor sculpté extérieur is very much a summary catalog. The comprehensive programs (allegorical, mythological, and functional) that determined much of the imagery are not discussed. One would have welcomed descriptions that went beyond identifying the subjects and works to include something about their present condition, although it might be argued that the enlarged images suffice for the later purpose. There is no mention of the substantial interpretive literature about Versailles, such as that concerning the meaning of iconographical programs and other intentions of artists and patrons. Foreign language material in German and English that users of the online catalog might find useful is almost entirely absent.

The Décor sculpté extérieur aims only at the presentation of the facts as they are known from documents and archaeology—the who, when, and where, as far as these may be established. This is a sufficient achievement. Versailles may be the most completely documented domain of the early modern period in Europe, and many scholars have overlooked documents buried in the mass of surviving material. A publication such as this puts us that much closer to getting things right.

The origins of Milovanovic’s Les Grands Appartements de Versailles sous Louis XIV are substantially different from those of the Décor sculpté extérieur since they relate to a new art historical publication by the author, Du Louvre à Versailles. Lecture des grands décors monar- chiques (2005). Christine Gouz, in a recent review of the Grande décors monar- chiques, wrote, “The author aims to chal- lenge the absolutist interpretation of the decor of Versailles and to redefine the idea, often vague and crude, of art offi- cial.” Milovanovic speaks of this chal- lenge to recent scholarship in an introduction of seventy-six pages (while the catalog section is only ninety-six pages in length). His text offers the sort of interpretive study deliberately ignored by Saule. Milovanovic’s excellent intro- duction, though somewhat tailored to the format of the catalog, reflects the approach to the Versailles interior decor of his earlier book. Yet, he intends his catalog to stand as a contribution on its own terms: the Grand Apartment “is one of the rare great decors of the seven- teenth century that survives largely in its original state. It has never had the bene- fit of any monographic study. A number of reasons may be advanced for this: a lack of interest in France for grand decors including easel paintings; a com- plex iconography of a sort that has only very recently been found interesting; finally, poor restorations that have some- what perverted the appearance of the paintings” (9). After appropriate intro- ductive remarks (“The Workshop of the Painters”; “A Refined Iconography”; “Paintings, Sculptures, and Silver Furniture”; “Use and Later History”), he sets out basic facts and, in a modest way, makes his argument. His knowledge of the historical publications of seven- teenth-century France (and of the schol- ars and writers who served the king) enhances our understanding of the decor.

The approach is notably different...
from that of many twentieth-century writers who have sought to explain the political motivations and the intended messages of the art of Versailles. Keenly aware that none of the original written programs including planetary, mythological, historical, and allegorical imagery have survived, Milovanovic cautiously discusses a series of situations and personalities whose influence may be perceived in part to explain what we see or would have seen. The Académie de peinture, the Petite académie, Charles Le Brun, Colbert, and the king are all given their due, but are used to explain details rather than to create a comprehensive program. This thoughtful approach may put an end to, or at least limit, the appeal of more speculative work so common in the second half of the last century. We seem to have a new and superior scholarly model here.

The condition of surviving works is important to Milovanovic, and he devotes part of his final chapter to the issue. He explains, “because of the great complexity of a structure joining a shell of plaster with a wooden latticework and mounted canvases, the decorations of the ceilings of the Grand Apartments are very fragile” (84). Already during the ancien régime things had seriously deteriorated. By 1821, the curators wrote: “the state of the roofs has allowed moisture to infiltrate the ceilings decomposing the glues and other sizing, and has destroyed a large part of the paintings, causing the colors to flake and rotting the cloth on which they are painted” (85). Milovanovic recounts other horror stories, including the fall of the central painting of the Salle des Gardes de la Reine in 1942. He notes that the post-World War II work by the notorious Pierre Paulet—who did not hesitate to repaint areas completely, even where substantial original paint remained—was not unprecedented. A telling photo of the widely reproduced image of Apollo on his chariot from the Salon d’Apollon taken before a restoration of 1974 shows about 50 percent of the surface gone, including most of his body (see 136 fig. 62a). This sad story points to perhaps the greatest weakness of the book and, one might add, to the printed presentation of these works of art. The splendor of the color illustrations often hides the real condition of the paintings, for their digital printing enabled retouching. An opportunity was missed by not collaborating with a conservator.

Milovanovic’s catalog entries are ordered by room, following the route tourists usually take through the apartments. His primary goals in the catalog section seem to be dating the works and identifying the subject matter, where he makes his major contribution. From the time of the earliest writers, the identification of some subjects of the paintings has been controversial. Milovanovic manages to sort out many of these problems, often by using his impressive command of stories in sources available to the Petit académie, which developed the program. Each entry also refers to studies for the works (drawings and oil sketches) and contains a bibliography and brief remarks about condition. However, it is often necessary to return to the chapter on the restorations for important information. While Milovanovic’s catalog contains entries for a few plaster sculptures included in the ceilings, architectural historians may be disappointed in the very sketchy treatment of the overall ceiling designs and plaster ornament into which the canvases have been placed. Apparently Milovanovic does not share Saule’s enthusiasm for ornamental work.

Les Grands Appartements concludes appropriately with five early descriptions of the apartments: André Félibien (1674), Combes (1681), the Mercure Gallant (1682), Nicodemus Tessin the Younger (1687), and Jean-François Félibien (1703). Merit Laine and Börje Magnusson published a more authoritative version of Tessin’s text in Nicodemus Tessin the Younger, sources works, collections, Travel Notes 1673–77 and 1687–1688 (2002).

Taken together, the works by Milovanovic and Saule confirm that scholarship today at Versailles is proceeding at a very high level. Milovanovic’s principal interests are the various texts and writings that might explain the program and the humanistic and artistic language by which it is expressed, even if he argues that, in the present state of affairs, we can only partly understand the intentions of the patrons and artists. In her website, Saule has presented material that is little known and mostly inaccessible. Her central concern is to show us the works and to clarify what remains while reminding us that we face important works by worthy artists. Her text focuses on the illustrations and on the documents, particularly those related to the commissioning and preservation of the works. For Milovanovic, the major documents are the early descriptions; for Saule, they are the payment records of both the creation and the restoration of works. Saule touches on the descriptions only in her catalog bibliographies. With its novel format, enormous size, and astonishingly high level of scholarly rigor, Saule’s publication could well turn out to be one of the most influential catalogs of this decade.

The free access to Saule’s site on the Internet is a remarkable gift to her readers. The question arises as to how readers will find their way to it. Is there at present any site to search for such materials? Inquiries at some New York libraries indicate that the current attitude is somewhat haphazard; the exchange of such information seems to rely on the publication of reviews, such as this, or by word of mouth. A better system is needed.

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Notes