Figure 1 Henri Labrouste, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, place du Panthéon, Paris, 1838–50 (photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen)
The Search for the Néo-Grec in Second Empire Paris

For several years French art has been suffering from archaeological diseases,” laments “J. L.” in the magazine Le Courrier Artistique of 26 July 1863. “The best-known of these pedantic affectations is the one that made its debut in architecture under the name of the néo-grec style.” Although néo-grec is now widely used to identify the most innovative French architecture of the mid-nineteenth century, J. L. describes its characteristics with a sneer, attributing its popularity to a pretentious respect for anything dating from antiquity, and he predicts its imminent disappearance (Figure 1).

This article displays “a witty eloquence,” hails a like-minded colleague at the Gazette des Architectes et du Bâtiment. “He enters forthrightly into an explanation of the thing and puts his finger on its ridiculousness,” proving that “he knows the subject well.” And so he reprints the paragraphs about the néo-grec’s distinguishing traits, as well as J. L.’s prediction that, like all styles, it will last no longer than “the length of a fad.”

In the November–December 1863 issue of the Moniteur des Architectes, Lucien Mangin vehemently objected to such negative criticism. “Everyone knows that the néo-grec is the king of the day,” he asserts. He chides its detractors for calling it “mean,” and he complains that they have jumped hastily and unfairly to the conclusion that the néo-grec, like so many previous architectural styles, is doomed to extinction. His one ray of hope, and a consolation to those artists involved, is that “only the small minority has spoken.”

A Flat Greek Character

This spirited exchange of opinions about the néo-grec proves that in 1863 the term designated an identifiable visible phenomenon in the Parisian landscape. Such clarity had not been apparent at its introduction into and early usage in architectural dialogue. Translated from the German into French in 1830, it figured during the next two decades as a synonym for byzantin, used to describe an amalgam of late classical and early medieval Greek forms, extending as late as the Romanesque. But it also held resonances of past and contemporary enthusiasms: le goût grec of the Comte de Caylus, his Recueil d’antiquités (1752–67), and his antique-inspired interior decoration; the engraved illustrations of ancient sites by Stuart and Revett (1762), Le Roy (1758), and Piranesi (1778); Greece’s successful struggle for independence in the thirties and its new availability as a scholarly destination; and in the forties, the development of a new school of painting, led by Charles Gleyre, which took as its subject matter daily life in the classical world.

The architectural landscape to which the term néo-grec was applied changed dramatically in the middle of the nineteenth century. The pressure of the rapidly expanding...
population of Paris—500,000 in 1800, slightly more than 936,000 by 1841, and five years later over 1,053,000—forced municipal authorities to undertake the first timid steps in urban development, while encouraging builders to profit. Urbanization reached its peak during the Second Empire under Napoleon III and his Préfet de la Seine, Georges-Eugène Haussmann. Thanks to the emperor, “who was a great friend to architecture,” Paris had become “the first city in the world,” T. L. Donaldson reported to the Institute of British Architects in February 1855. The capital was distinguished by “the magnificence of its monuments, the ample and commodious lines of its thoroughfares and public streets, the improvements of its salubrity, and a center of attraction to the people of every other country.”

The presence of the néo-grec in Second Empire Paris is recorded in C. F. Hayward’s “Nineteenth-Century Architecture: Paris Seen with London Eyes,” which The Builder published in December 1855. “The chief characteristics of the Paris school seem to be delicacy of detail everywhere,” says its author; “free but sparing application of columnar and trabeative classic art, combined with a frequent and happy system of arcuation; mouldings of a flat Greek character, often applied with the spirit of Gothic freedom; and constant use of ornamental carving.” Although unimpressed with the public buildings, he much admires the private housing: “on the whole, what with the play of fancy in the details of windows and doors, shopfronts, balconies, and often much surface decoration, there is great interest in the rue de Rivoli, many new parts of the boulevards, houses in the rue Faubourg Poissonnière, and elsewhere in Paris where architects are at work.”

In June and July 1861 The Atlantic Monthly printed a two-part paean entitled “Greek Lines” by the distinguished American architect Henry Van Brunt. Erudite but accessible, his essay traces the history of interest in Greek art in Europe, emphasizing the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and particularly the contributions of Karl Friedrich Schinkel in Berlin and Leo von Klenze in Munich, who “mingled that peculiar refinement of line which was revived from Greece.” But he reserves his highest esteem for Henri Labrouste, whose return from Rome in 1830 signaled “a new Renaissance” (see Figure 1). Labrouste’s controversial renderings of the Greek temples at Paestum in 1828 proved that “the pure Hellenic spirit” had “entered his heart”; at this moment “Greek lines began to exercise an influence far more thorough and healthy than had hitherto been experienced in the whole history of Art.” The buildings on the new boulevards, around the tour de Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie, and “wherever else the activity of the Emperor has made itself felt in the improvements of the French capital,” he informs his readers, “are by masters or pupils of the Romantique persuasion.”

It is noteworthy that nowhere in “Greek Lines” does Van Brunt use the term néo-grec. Subsequent architectural critics and historians are less reticent. In A travers les arts, a collection of cultural and artistic observations published in 1869, Charles Garnier situates the style somewhat vaguely after the reign of Louis-Philippe. In his opinion, “the so-called néo-grec style, but which had nothing Greek about it but the name” was produced not by those who first studied seriously the principles practiced by the Greeks, but by their followers and pupils who necessarily exaggerated and misapplied what they did not fully understand. He describes what he considers to be its chief visual characteristics, and he reports with satisfaction that the situation has changed decidedly for the better. True artists, who understand these matters, have put an end to research and transition, and, “of the supposed néo-grec there is nothing but a memory.”

In 1873 Robert Kerr edited James Fergusson’s 1862 History of the Modern Styles of Architecture for John Murray in London, and added a sixth chapter, “Recent Architecture in France.” “The Neo-Grec is not Greek, but French,” he declares, and Parisians have been persuaded—pace Garnier—that the style’s essence is “fineness,” and that it is “all-sufficient for use” and “permanent.” Without describing its characteristics, he identifies Gignain’s newly constructed Faculté de Médecine as “Neo-Grec at its best” and Charles Garnier’s Opéra as “in the most voluptuous elegance of Rococo Neo-Grec.” “It may be too ladylike for some of us,” he concludes, “but is it not beautifully dressed?”

Writing in the September 1876 Penn Monthly, Henry Augustus Sims, himself an architect, also finds little Greek in the style except the “Greek feeling and severity” which inspire the architects who practice it. They mold and adapt antiquity’s ideas “to modern requirements, modern cities, modern purposes,” he explains, and unlike the artists of antiquity, they give primary consideration to the interiors rather than the exteriors of buildings. He credits them as well with “medieval common sense” and, he says, “the result is the style which we now know as the Neo-Grec.”

The architect Alexandre Souard contributed the article “Neo-Grec” to A Dictionary of Architecture and Building, Biographical, Historical, and Descriptive, edited by Russell Sturgis for MacMillan in 1901–2. Like Van Brunt, he makes a passing reference to French interest in Greece in the early nineteenth century, but then offers more specific detail: “The neo-Grec movement is generally credited to [Joseph-Louis] Duc, L. T. J. Visconti, J. F. Duban, A. L. T. Vaudoyer, Constant-Dufeux, Alexis Paccard, and especially Henri Labrouste, and began in the reign of Louis Philippe.” He also lays out the principles that guided them: “a most careful studying of design based on the materials of the structure;
and a “rational” decoration that the forms themselves call for. The “Greek feeling” in fact existed “chiefly in mouldings and other details.”21 He briefly describes Labrouste’s Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève as “the best type of neo-Grec” while it paradoxically lacks any Greekness “in its structure or its system of design.”22

Dismayed by the decadence of monumental architecture in England and admiring the architectural accomplishments across the channel, A. E. Richardson published “The Style Néo-grec” in the July 1911 issue of The Architectural Review. He elaborates on ideas mentioned by others: “1830 witnessed the birth of the neo-Grec, a style which aimed at the introduction into modern design of the finesses of Greek art, its elasticity, its tractability, and its delicacy, but not its absolute forms.” To the list of buildings that embody it, he adds a few new names: the west façade of the Palais de Justice and the Colonne de Juillet, both by Joseph-Louis Duc; the library of the École des Beaux-Arts by Félix Duban. He maintains, however, that it is visible in edifices created up to 1900—Garnier’s Opéra, Labrouste’s interior of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Nénot’s New Sorbonne—after which “a heavier and more ponderous expression” replaced it.25

In the architectural section of Volume II of L’architecture et la sculpture en France de la Révolution à nos jours, issued in the early 1920s, Georges Gromort claims that it was the tyranny of fashion that forced nineteenth-century architects to reproduce a multitude of styles, “Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Gothic—and finally neo-Greek as a kind of reaction.”26 Inheriting a taste for pasteiche from literary romanticism, they all reproduced details rather than mass; the neo-Greeks covered the façades of apartment buildings “with moldings and more or less Greek ornaments,” and “this not particularly attractive architecture” was baptized “the néo-grec.”27 He imputes the ugly things of this artistic style not to the study of Greek elements but to bad architectural composition; he regrets from any sweeping judgment, however, believing it may be too soon to identify the real styles of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Modern scholarship is inaugurated in 1977 by The Architecture of the École des Beaux-Arts, edited by Arthur Drexler, to which Neil Levine contributes a seminal article, “The Romantic Idea of Architectural Legibility: Henri Labrouste and the Néo-Grec.” Like Van Brunt, whom he cites, Levine emphasizes 1830, the year Labrouste returned from Rome and established his own atelier, as the beginning of a new attitude, a romantic refusal of the academic classicism that permeated the teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts. “The Néo-Grec was viewed as a revival of the Greek spirit of rationally developed, emotionally charged expression rather than simply a reaplication of Greek forms.”28 This emphasis on the expressive function of architecture had important consequences. “Néo-Grec architects were the first to make the radical distinction between structural principle and decorative form,” Levine proposes; they perceived “the process of design as the decoration of construction,” in which the decoration was the expressive element, and thus “the Néo-Grec offered a new literary syntax of expression.”29 Levine sees as the style’s first construction Labrouste’s Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, and he names César Daly, the editor of the Revue Générale de l’Architecture et des Travaux Publics, as “the spokesman for the Néo-Grec movement.”30

Despite some disagreement about timing and the architects concerned, for more than a century critics and historians have accepted the term néo-grec as adequate identification of a distinct style. This general consensus is also reflected in the commentary on the new architecture of Haussmann’s Paris penned by the journalists of Le Courrier Artistique, the Gazette des Architectes, and the Moniteur des Architectes—and by other observers, including Charles Garnier. The néo-grec was a visible phenomenon in the capital of the Second Empire: these accounts both offer the means to situate the style more firmly in a physical and chronological context and show that the architecture to which it was attached was subtly transformed as it became the language of speculative builders.

**Antediluvian Imprints**

Much of the contemporary discussion of the néo-grec centered on two traits: its flatness and its use of engraved decoration. Compiling his Lexique des termes d’art, published in the series Bibliothèque de l’Enseignement des Beaux-Arts in the early 1880s, Jules Adeline offers a succinct and neutral description of the “néo-grec”: “Used particularly, in architecture, for a style inspired by the Greek orders, but above all characterized by a chosen ornamentation involving unobtrusive sculpted motifs, incised foliage, large plain surfaces and moldings of an elongated profile in section.”31 Few viewed these features with such neutrality, however.

The flatness provoked the reporter for Le Courrier Artistique to most intemperate language in 1863. “Nothing [is] in fact more monotonous, drier, more vulgarly boring than these displeasing constructions,” he expostulates. “Flat moldings on top, flat friezes surrounding and connecting windows, flat headstone-like pediments over doorways, here and there flat rosettes accompanied by sparse wreaths.” He declares their “sepulchral character” more suitable to a cemetery than a residence.32 The engraved motifs also drew the ire of Charles Garnier. Expatiating in A travers les arts, he contributes what has become perhaps the best-known description of the “néo-grec”: “in

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order to be distinguished, they [its practitioners] did things meanly; in order to be pure, they were dry and stiff; in order not to be heavy, they etched the ornaments, thus giving to the stones the appearance of antediluvian imprints. 

There is a certain degree of irony in the fact that these two characteristics, which later, ill-disposed critics found so objectionable, are strikingly apparent on the façade of Henri Labrouste’s Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (1838–52), which Henry Van Brunt in 1861 called “the most important work with pure Greek lines, and perhaps the most exquisite, while it is one of the most serious, of modern buildings” (see Figure 1). At the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève these features were dictated in part by the narrowness of the rectangular site opposite the Panthéon that the architect had been given, and in part by the content and function of the building as its designer conceived them. Apart from its windows and the garlands under the cornice, the ground floor is almost completely flat; the upper floor, with its windows united into a long arcade, is slightly less so. Beneath the windows, panels bear the engraved names of the 810 authors whose works are contained within. “This monumental catalog is the chief decoration of the façade,” Labrouste wrote to the Revue Générale de l’Architecture et des Travaux Public in 1852, “as the books themselves are the most beautiful ornament of the interior.”

Other ornamental elements of Labrouste’s library are best understood by turning to César Day’s “Introduction” to the Revue Générale in 1856, for without pronouncing the term, he gives advice on designing the “néo-grec.” His intention is to define “modern society,” which he finds both “industrial” and “democratic.” “As a democratic society,” he explains, “modern society declares that the past is dead, quite dead, and the architecture of our era, rather than reproducing the forms of this past, should on the contrary plunge completely into this modern fountain of youth that is nourished by science, industry, and the spirit of the 19th century; for only by these means will it find a new youthfulness.” He offers the following recommendations to the artists who would create the ornamental language for this new fusion: “let decoration draw its motifs from the national flora; eliminate erudition and cornice underpins detached, recognizable, humble flowers; similar blossoms encircle the metal patera that bolt the masonry façade to the iron frame inside.” There are also symbols from antiquity on the façade: garlands, which the ancients hung on buildings to mark religious and civil celebrations; and medallions, here inscribed “SG” and serving as the points from which the garlands are suspended.

By the 1860s, these distinctive traits had been absorbed into French architectural practice, but the néo-grec had begun to lose some of its hermeticism and exaggerated flatness. This was reflected in 1866 in the three-part Spécimens de la décoration et de l’ornementation au XIXe siècle par Liénard, issued by the Liège publisher Charles Claesen. Michel Joseph Napoléon Liénard was a sculptor of ornaments who worked on the churches of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul and Sainte-Clotilde and the fountains of the place Saint-Michel and the square des Arts-et-Métiers. All but two of the thirty-four designs in Part C are labeled “genre néo-grec.” Some objects are destined for the interior (furniture, fabric, ceilings, picture frames), but there are also architectural ornaments: cappings and crownings for doors, windows, roofs, and gutters; balconies; consoles; and capitals.

Claesen’s preface condemns the current obsession with recopying architecture from the past and publishing only albums of drawings by dead masters, insisting that “our era possesses a distinctly individual character; it has its tendencies, its attempts, its own art that it eloquently affirms by original creations.” And he claims that he has found in Liénard the perfect artist to express this, “an artist whose talent is acknowledged by all” and whose original designs show “still less the print of the artist’s personal talent than the mark of the current century.” Indeed, Liénard is not entirely free of his contemporaries’ eclecticism, as proved by a bit of Renaissance here and a bit of Gothic there. But the Spécimens is not mired in historicism, and it presents a valuable library of images one practitioner considered néo-grec.

The frontispiece to Claesen’s Part C depicts some, if not all, of the visual characteristics of Liénard’s néo-grec. These include abundant flourishes and arabesques, familiar vegetal (five-pointed leaves, detached flowers), the head of a woman, and palmettes. While flatness and quasi-incision are visible in the Spécimens, Liénard’s designs also prove that the néo-grec is capable of lively ornamental profusion. Scattered through the plates are reoccurring elements, like the garland (C.18a), the palmette as antefix (C.3), and a new but very Greek ornament, the lion’s head, as spouts of a gutter (C.22) or on a console (C.5, C.6). The most complete néo-grec ensemble, a window with an ornamental lintel and cornice
Néo-Grec on the New Boulevards

This livelier manifestation of the néo-grec is inextricably linked with the urban transformation envisioned by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte and executed by Haussmann. Haussmann's strategy of driving wide new streets through crowded districts with unsanitary habitations and narrow passages was radically different from his predecessors' emphasis on realigning existing façades. It furnished significant opportunities for construction, a substantial and speculative portion of which was devoted to domestic architecture housing the continually increasing numbers of citizens. Three projects deserve special examination: the boulevard de Strasbourg/boulevard de Sébastopol axis between the Gare de l'Est and the Seine; the rue des Ecoles in the fifth arrondissement; and the rue Saint-Placide in the sixth. They differed in constituencies and scale, but they were realized at approximately the same time—the 1850s, when Greek elements began to enter journalistic discussion.

Louis Lazare, founder and editor of the *Revue Municipale, Journal Administratif, Historique et Littéraire* (1848–62), is a useful, knowledgeable guide to the creation of these new thoroughfares and buildings. In 1850 he reports to his readers that residents and property owners of the (then) fifth arrondissement had banded together and urged the municipal authorities to open a new street in front of the Embarcadère (Gare) de l'Est to relieve the perpetually crowded rue Saint-Denis. Early the next year, the architect Lefebvre Norville wrote to Lazare to solicit his support for the project and to advocate another even more ambitious plan: the extension of the proposed street all the way to the Seine between the rues Saint-Denis and Saint-Martine. The first project, which produced the boulevard de Strasbourg, moved ahead steadily. Amédée Berger, who preceded Haussmann as préfet, signed a contract for demolition and reconstruction with the bankers Ardoin on 31 July 1852; expropriations began in January 1853. The formal inauguration of the new boulevard took place on 10 December 1853, when a triumphal arch proclaimed the arrondissement's gratitude to Napoléon III, poles carried floating banners, shields bore the imperial initials, and the appropriate dignitaries assembled for a ceremony that the emperor was regrettably unable to attend. Eighteen months after its opening, however, according to the *Revue Générale*, only the buildings near the station had been erected.

In 1857 César Daly reported that construction was under way, writing that he was pleased to see that “the domestic architecture of Paris demonstrates noteworthy progress: current private housing seems to have to share, in a way, the qualities of a public building.” As proof he offers two plates illustrating the building at 60 boulevard de Strasbourg, “an interesting work of our colleague M. [Jules] Amoudru” who “has directed the construction of ten or twelve houses in this new boulevard” (Figure 3). Daly’s imprimatur justifies taking this building as a model néo-grec façade. Over the entry two lush garlands flank a prominent medallion. Above the door, two narrow windows are framed by a trio of simplified pilasters; at the foot of each pilaster is a vigorously carved lion’s head, and each is topped, herm-like, by a finely-sculpted head of a woman coiffed in antique style. The face of the pilasters is incised with a fleur-de-lis–like motif with a long stem. The front of the cornice bears a row of shallowly carved palmettes, and the cornice is topped by closely spaced antefixes. Numerous detached flowers also find their place in the décor.
Whether Jules Amoudru designed other buildings on the new boulevard remains a mystery, but several resemble no. 60. A three-dimensional woman’s head of vaguely antique aspect ornaments the lintels of doors and windows at 64, 33, 58, 50—the portal to the Passage du Désir—and 20 (Figure 4). Garlands are prominent on 20 and 26. Numerous arabesques with detached flowers in shallow relief appear (20, 26, 58), and there are also flat incised motifs at 64, 56, 26, 50, 29, and particularly 33 (Figure 5). Lions’ heads appear on 29 and 20. In short, the boulevard de Strasbourg is a rich locus of the variety of forms and motifs that have been discussed as néo-grec.

The process of extending the boulevard de Strasbourg to create the boulevard de Sébastopol was more laborious. The author of the idea, Cadet de Chambine, had passed it on to two members of the Conseil général de la Seine in November 1850; they were not persuasive, and the Conseil voted it down. Chambine took it directly to the emperor in November 1852, and he, seeing its wisdom, gave it his support and dictated that the street be thirty meters wide. Lazare writes copiously about this project. He champions its economic advantages against those who would enlarge either the rue Saint-Denis or the rue Saint-Martin; he points out how, “for the city of Paris, from the various points of view of strategy, of art, and of hygiene,” it dovetails perfectly with the extension of the rue de Rivoli; he praises it as the essential north-south thoroughfare that will join the rue de la Harpe on the Rive Gauche and go as far as the Barrière d’Enfer (Denfert-Rochereau). The project at last passed the hurdles of the Conseil Municipal and the Ministère de l’Intérieur, and the emperor signed the declaration of “public utility” in September 1854. Variously known as the rue Neuve-de-Strasbourg and the boulevard du Centre, it was christened Sébastopol by Haussmann in 1855 to honor the emperor’s...
victory in the Crimea. Construction proceeded in five stages, from the Seine up to the boulevard Saint-Denis. Lazare predicts in November 1857 that this major artery “will remind future centuries of the glory and the productivity of the reign of Napoleon III.” It opened officially on 29 March 1858, and the enthusiastic editor reports in November that “one already sees rich and sumptuous residences.”

Details characteristic of the néo-grec are scattered over the façades of the buildings lining the boulevard de Sébastopol. The usual detached flowers and graceful foliage mark the modest entryways at 70 and 108, and a profusion of garlands makes the entrances at 91, 47, and 73 more dramatic. Sculpted figures, nearly three-dimensional, add an antique air: at 82, on either side of the number plaque are seated two Attic-looking youths, surrounded by a lightly incised décor of classically inspired motifs (Figure 6). At 65 the pediment is laden with flowers, garlands, a lion’s head, and two mermaids on either side. The numerous néo-grec lions in the boulevard de Sébastopol are curious beasts, perhaps more appealing to the popular imagination than the stately sculptures of aristocratic residences. Whereas a realistic rendering of a lion may be seen (82, 100), more often the brow is flat and palmette-topped, the ears are pronounced and spread wide (106, 73, 65) or elongated (92), and the expression is fierce. On many façades, however, eclectic elements dilute the effect of the néo-grec; at 92, signed “A. Aldrophe Arch 1862,” for example, the lion, garlands, and flowers conform to type, but the woman’s head above the window of the first floor comes from a different era.

The rue des Ecoles owes its existence and name to an earnest petition sent on 12 December 1848 to the Préfet de la Seine on behalf of the Ministre de l’Instruction publique, the deans of all the university faculties, and the 300,000 inhabitants of the very miserable medieval quarter at the foot of the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève. It appealed to him to open a new street between the Ecole de Médecine and the Jardin des Plantes for a variety of pressing reasons: in the recent cholera epidemic, 372 of those inhabitants died in a single day; the Rive Gauche was in genuine need of a “strategic thoroughfare”; it would provide workers with jobs of construction as well as
demolition; it would be, in effect, the equivalent of the Rive Droite’s rue Rambuteau. Louis Lazare immediately promised the support of the Revue Municipale, for “the opening of the rue des Ecoles is more than a useful work, it is the reparation of a neglect which has already been too prolonged.”

During a meeting in October 1850 the prince-président and his ministers recognized the “high degree of utility” of such a project, and he personally made modifications “in the plan of the projected street.” The Commission municipale voted unanimously for it in February 1852 and the following year it acquired a valuable ally in Haussmann, who, as a student, knew the depressed area well. Demolition took place, but construction was agonizingly slow. Lazare quotes an April 1855 petition from the concerned: “this sewer dams traffic; there is no business or industry possible in the side streets of this artery, which one doesn’t dare take because of the horrible state it’s in.” A first segment opened in that year between what is now the boulevard Saint-Michel and the rue Jean-de-Beauvais. Work continued to creep along on the next portion extending to the neighborhood of Saint-Victor and the church of Saint-Nicholas-de-Chardonnet. The Revue Municipale registered complaints as late as April 1861 about the lack of progress.

Perhaps construction of the rue des Ecoles proceeded slowly because the clientele for the properties being developed was so different from the moneyed bourgeoisie attracted to the rue de Rivoli and the boulevard de Sébastopol. César Daly, in 1857, is not impressed by the quality of the buildings: “The houses built up to this time are not very notable either for their character or for the richness of their decoration.” However, he very much approves of the fact that they are composed of small apartments that are within the means of the people who have been displaced by the demolition and reconstruction—a consideration “too much ignored by the speculation in the construction of residences” on the Rive Droite. The Revue Municipale notes in 1858 that the second phase of the rue des Ecoles “is going to produce a great number of modest constructions, suitable to the inhabitants of the neighborhood of Saint-Victor.”

The sparse, journeyman decoration of the buildings in the rue des Ecoles, erected several years later than those in the boulevards de Strasbourg and Sébastopol, is by no means uniformly néo-grec, but the usual elements make their appearance: a woman’s head (15, 16, 52); detached flowers (35, 16); the heads of lions, displaying all the exaggerations of those in the boulevard de Sébastopol (3, 15, 16, 23bis, 25, 35, 52). A further indication that money was not lavished on these exteriors is the nearly exact duplication of the entrances—comprising foreshortened pilasters with leonine ornaments on either side—at 52 and 35 (and its twin 25; Figure 7); 23bis (and its twin 33) has a somewhat similar arrangement. The building at 3, dated 1869, has more coherence, but also the flatness decried by critics of the néo-grec: the vegetal details and a woman’s profile barely rise above the surface of the stone, and two columns are more incised than carved (Figure 8). The rue des...
Ecoles proves that the néo-grec was not a phenomenon limited to the residences of the wealthy.

Compared to the task of imposing major thoroughfares on dense, populous neighborhoods, extending the rue Saint-Placide to the rue de Rennes was simplicity itself. As the Revue Municipale observed in March 1852, “This opening is exempt from difficulties.” The land belonged to hospices which themselves had proposed to build the street; only two unimportant buildings required expropriation; and owners of existing structures were offering to the city the terrain necessary for realignment and a width of thirteen (later sixteen) meters. Its utility lay in the linkage it supplied between the rue du Bac and the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, and therefore to the Luxembourg gardens and palace. The architect A. Chatillon reports in the Revue Municipale of July 1857 that the plans are available for viewing and that “It is a very good operation whose prompt execution is highly desirable”—and was accomplished in the next two years.

Here a major architectural journal steps forward to identify and to praise the néo-grec. In January 1862 the Moniteur des Architectes publishes the first of a series of plates of houses designed by Gabriel Davioud at 40 and 42 (originally 36 and 38) rue Saint-Placide (Figure 9). It declares that “this young and prominent architect” has attracted a rich and numerous clientele and that “All the houses he has designed are distinguished by a special character, a certain originality of good taste which place them in the first rank.” In March a second plate appears, the entry to no. 40.
The September 1862 issue of the review contains even more extensive and informative commentary about Davioud’s creations. “The houses in the rue Sainte-Placide,” says the journalist, “have a place among the most beautiful recently built in Paris.” The plates showing his buildings are intended to let the reader “judge the kind of ornamentation and the contour of their profiles which belong to what is commonly called the néo-grec style.” The critic’s enthusiasm continues: “This style, which is one of those that best suit houses, is currently one of the most widely employed, and there is every reason to believe that its use will not only spread but that it will endure and will not be the result of a momentary preference.”

Davioud’s houses possess a richness of sculptural detail that distinguishes them from the austere, decoratively Biblio- sements. No. 33 also bears Pierre-Modeste Gence’s name and the date 1861; its key- stone is a typically fantastical lion (Figure 12). On 49, the isolated woman’s face of the elaborately etched doorway echoes the venerable masculine heads which appear as cons- conses and on top of pillars (Figure 13). Fat garlands, lion- consoles, three-dimensional female heads, and circles containing feminine profiles ornament 34. The most extravagant façade belongs to 48, signed “J. Lobrot archte 1869”; its ornamentation, vigorously rendered, is both incised and bulbous, at times geometric (over the entrance), at

![Figure 10 Davioud, 40 rue Saint-Placide, Paris, 1862 (author’s photo)](image1)

![Figure 11 Davioud, 42 rue Saint-Placide, Paris, 1862 (author’s photo)](image2)
times floral (over and beside windows); at the level of the fourth floor, three medallions labeled “Prudhon,” “Soufflot,” and “Fr. Rude,” bear the sculpted images of the artists and rest on branches of laurel (Figure 14).63

The buildings of the rue Saint-Placide were constructed at the moment when the néo-grec style had been recognized by the public. Notably, in this more popular and publicly acknowledged manifestation, the faults alleged by its detractors have been reduced. While some façades sport incised and barely raised motifs that inevitably recall Charles Garnier’s diatribe against “the appearance of antediluvian imprints,” Davioud’s two houses, specifically identified by the admiring Monteuse des Architectes as ideal specimens of the néo-grec, are exempt from those defects. Furthermore, they share the streetscape with the many animated, three-dimensional representations of flowers, foliage, faces, and forms that are visible on neighboring façades. Garnier’s judgment that the néo-grec is “dry and stiff” and done “meanly” is called into question by the quiet exuberance of the houses in the rue Saint-Placide.

Particularly associated with the vogue for this richer version of the néo-grec in Second Empire Paris are the caryatids and caryatid-like figures that proliferate on the façades of residences.64 Théodore Labourieu, editor of the monthly review L’Art du dix-neuvième siècle, observed in October 1856 that “already in the rue de Rivoli ornamentation is taking a most interesting place on our houses.” He singles out for praise the two female forms signed by the sculptor “F. F. Roubaud” at no. 49, “whose graceful lines harmonize in aerial prestige with the contours of the lower window which these figures frame” (Figure 15).65 Also stunning is the three-story winged woman wearing a pleated antique robe in half relief at 57 rue de Turbigo (Figure 16).66 More orthodox caryatids, columnar in nature and function, make their appearance in various neighborhoods under construction. At 65 rue de Rivoli a pair of amply clad women flank an elaborately carved entry (Figure 17). The sculptor Aimé Millet posts a young woman as Industry and a youth as Trade on either side of the entrance to the 1863 passage Bourg-l’Abbé just off the...
boulevard de Sébastopol. 20 boulevard Saint-Michel boasts two female figures, arms crossed, on either side of the window of the mezzanine. In 1868 J. Lobrot signs 19 rue des Halles, whose caryatids by Charles Gauthier lift their hands to support the balcony of the second story (Figure 18). On these façades, such relatively authentic Greek architectural elements coexist harmoniously with the stylized decorative vocabulary of the néo-grec, and this richer eclectic décor would persist in architecture during the rest of the century, after dry, two-dimensional ornamentation had lost its charm.

The néo-grec was a product of its times and suffers from being largely disowned—or at least unacknowledged—by its contemporaries. None of its practitioners wrote to describe or defend it; none of the illustrious names that historians and critics have associated with it published any manifesto or tract. It is not mentioned by name before 1872 in the pages of César Daly’s Revue Générale de l’Architecture et des Travaux Publics. The surest indications of its presence are the hostile remarks in Le Courrier Artistique and Charles Garnier’s A travers les arts. Only the Moniteur des Architectes applied the term favorably—but vaguely and briefly—to buildings recently constructed. But these testimonies suffice to link the néo-grec to the domestic architecture of Second Empire Paris.
The physical evidence of the new streets of the capital dispels some of the chronological and physical haze that has surrounded the phenomenon. It is clear that the way was cleared for building in the 1850s and that building proceeded enthusiastically in the 1860s. The boulevard de Strasbourg opened in December 1853; the boulevard de Sébastopol was completed in March 1858; the first segment of the rue des Écoles was done in 1855 and the second in the following decade; the rue Saint-Placide took form in the late 1850s, and its façades are dated 1860, 1861, and 1869. From neighborhood to neighborhood, new residences displayed the distinctive decorative vocabulary of the néo-grec: detached flowers, feminine heads, fat ribbon-crossed garlands, fantastic lions, and shallow running geometric friezes.

The adjective “grec” gave great latitude to decors that were more fancifully antique than authentic. But the term brought a measure of respect and respectability to domestic architecture that had for a long time been overshadowed in importance by public architecture. That the néo-grec evolved from a dry austerity—which was displeasing to critics—to a more supple integration of elements is visible on Second Empire façades. Despite this subtle adaptation, it eventually succumbed to eclecticism when entrepreneurs, anxious about attracting clients, shifted their trust to the appeal of motifs borrowed from prestigious eras of French architecture and gave up the néo-grec architectural innovations of their own period.

Notes

2. Gazette des Architectes et du Bâtiment 6 (1863), 79.
3. Ibid., 80.
11. Ibid., 605.
13. When Van Brunt gathered these articles into Greek Lines and other Architectural Essays (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), he did in fact update his vocabulary, qualifying as “néo-grec” funeral monuments by Constant-Dufieux and Duban (85, 86).


15. Ibid., 86.


17. Ibid., 310.

18. Ibid., 307.

19. Ibid., 314.


21. Ibid., 704.

22. Ibid., 705.


24. Ibid., 1026.


27. Ibid., 20.


29. Ibid., 332.

30. Ibid., 346.


32. Le Coursier Artiste 6 (26 July 1863), 21. The first paragraph of this article suggests strongly that pique (or perhaps worse) against César Daly inspired it. Faced with the silence of well-known critics on the subject, says the author, it is the duty of the humble to signal and deplore this artistic ill, but modestly “as it suits people who have neither an important Review nor a place in the official column” (“comme il convient à gens qui n’ont ni pignon sur Revue, ni terre au soleil officiel”), 21. Others disagreed of this characteristic as well. H. Espéraudieu, writing in the Revue Générale de l’Architecture et des Travaux Publics 29 (1872), advises his readers, “Keep still further away from the sharp profiles that are called, I believe, néo-grec” (109), which he judges neither new nor Greek. Even Henry Augustus Simms, more favorable than not to the phenomenon, observes that its chief fault “is its want of chiaro oscuro” (707).

33. Garnier, A travers les arts, 85–86. Paul Planat published “Causerie, architecture et sculpture” in the 18 Sept. 1899 issue of his weekly magazine Construction Moderne, and although he does not use the term, the details he supplies identify his target. “In this ill-fated period”—presumably the 1860s—“appeared shallowly-engraved ornaments, which is a pure contradiction in architecture; stone treated like carpentry, little allegorical intentions and this archaism which allied, I don’t know how, a Greek sentimentality with commercial necessities.” But he is ultimately indulgent, since this artistic current introduced “the taste for research, precise, close and studied correctness; it was not a mediocre service and it is why one must pardon it for many errors committed in favor of a restoration of taste to which it truly contributed” (590).


37. Studying a door of the Erehtheum on the Acropolis, Jules Gaillabaud fixxes on “les rosaces,” the flowers above and on both sides of the frame and notes that they “seem to be borrowed from the Greek plant kingdom and recall, in every detail, species belonging to the flora of this country”: see L’art dans ses diverses branches ou l’architecture, la sculpture, la peinture, la fonte, la ferronnerie, etc. chez tous les peuples et à toutes les époques jusqu’en 1789 (Paris: Bureau de la Publication, 1863), 8.

38. In his analysis of “an original style of decor and of ornament” (293), Jacques de Caso emphasizes the presence of motifs that are incised or shallow, accentuated, detached, featuring ornamental flora and geometric patterns; he uses the term “néo-grec” only twice, however, once when quoting Garnier, once when discussing Casin, the designer of theaters. See “Le décor en ‘motif détaché’ dans l’ornementation des maisons et des édifices décoratifs en France, 1840–1870” in Évolution générale et développements régionaux en histoire de l’art, Actes du XXIIe Congrès International d’Histoire de l’Art, Budapest, 1969 (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1973), 2: 291–301. I have adopted his adjective “detached” as the best means of describing the kinds of flowers that abound on néo-grec façades of houses.

39. See Quatremère de Quincy’s Dictionnaire historique de l’architecture (Paris: Adrien Le Clerc, 1812) and his entries “guirlandes” (699) and “médaillon” (109).

40. Spécimens de la décoration et de l’ornementation au XIXe siècle par Liénard. Approuvé par le conseil de perfectionnement de l’enseignement des arts du dessin en Belgique et inscrit sur la liste officielle des modèles susceptibles d’être recommandés aux académies et écoles de dessin (Liège and Leipzig: Charles Claeesen, 1866). E. Bénézit, Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs (1911–1923; rpt. Paris: Gründ, 1999), so identifies a Michel Joseph Napoléon Liénard (8: 653). His name occasionally surfaces in contemporary periodicals. L’Illustration (9 Jan. 1847) reproduces and praises a wood-framed mirror of his creation. Gazette des Beaux-Arts 8 (1 Oct. 1860), 55, confirms him as one of the three ornamental sculptors of the Fontaine Saint-Michel under the direction of Gabriel Davioud, his designer. Reporting on the parks and gardens that newly beautify the capital, César Daly remarks that the only one of traditional design is the Square des Arts et Métiers (now Emile Chautemps), also conceived by Davioud, in which “All the ornamental sculpture is the work of M. Liénard: the talent of this artist was put to work there on his true ground,” an allusion to the cast-iron objets d’art commissioned from him by the Hauts-Foursaux et Fonderies du Val d’Oise: Revue Générale 21 (1863), cols. 175–76. The preface to Claeesen’s posthumous volume, Portefeuille de Liénard, motif inscrits applicables aux arts industriels et comptptures choisis et mis en ordre par MM. P. Liénard et A. Dousayns, sculpteur. Onravage dédié aux artistes (Paris: Claeesen, n.d.), says that continual labor and a long and fatal illness prevented the artist from making his work better known to the public; it identifies P. Liénard as his son and Dousayns as his son-in-law and pupil.

41. Claeesen, Spécimens de la décoration, 2.

42. Ibid., 3, 4.

43. The lion thoroughly fulfilled Daly’s advice to include symbolic elements in the composition of декорs: it was a familiar figure from Egyptian, Greek, and Roman architecture and a decorative cliché as sign of the zodiac, guardian


45. Louis Lazare, born in 1811, began working in the Paris Archives in 1835 and eventually in the bureau of alignments where his brother Félix was second in command. They had access to precious documents, chief of which was the compilation of records of municipal properties, including those purchased when they were nationalized during the Revolution. From these they prepared the *Dictionnaire administratif et historique des rues et monuments de Paris*, published in 1844; it had a second edition in 1855. The Revolution of 1848 cost Louis his job, and in June of that year, he began the *Revue municipale*, in whose title he incorporated the term “littéraire” to ensure his freedom to express his personal opinions. The *Revue* was not without its peculiarities: Louis freely printed quite apocryphal writings he attributed to historical personages like Henri IV and the Prévôt des Marchands François Miron—a practice denounced by *Le Moniteur* in 1858. He was twice condemned, in 1851 and 1856, for impertinence in publishing articles on social economics in a “literary” magazine and saved only when Napoleon III himself pardoned him. But a third transgression brought the *Revue* to a halt in 1862, and Louis died, in debt, in 1880. See Michel Fleury, “Les frères Lazare et le *Revue municipale*, in the introduction to the 1994 reprint of the 1855 edition of the *Dictionnaire*, ix–xix.

46. *Revue Générale* 15 (1857), col. 277. In *Building Paris* David Van Zanten refers to “the mysterious Amoudru who in 1852–1858 executed all the blocks along the new boulevard de Strasbourg for the entrepreneur Jules Arldoin in the ‘Néo-Grec’ style” (182) and eventually retired to a villa he had designed near Pigalle.


49. Ibid., 248 (20 Nov. 1857), 146.

50. Ibid., 282 (1 Nov. 1858), 471.

51. According to the *Inventaire*, Alfred-Philibert Aldrophe (1834–1895) was a pupil of Bellanger and worked for the city of Paris; for Gustave and Adolphe, the Barons de Rothschild; and for the Jewish community, designing a synagogue and the Séminaire israélite (1: 125).


53. Ibid., 61 (1 Nov. 1850), 499.

54. Ibid., 168 (1 April 1855), 1434–35.


56. *Revue Municipale* 269 (20 June 1858), 335.

57. Ibid., 94 (16 March 1852), 770.

58. Ibid., 234 (1 July 1857), 30.

59. *Moniteur des Architectes* 31 (Jan. 1862), col. 528. In *Le Dictionnaire général des artistes de l’École française depuis l’origine des arts du dessin jusqu’à nos jours* (Paris: Rénouard, 1882, rpt. 1997), Émile Bellier de la Chavignerie identifies Davioud (1824–1881) as the architect-in-chief of the service of parks and gardens; enumerates his artistic contributions (grilles, pavilions, fountains) to the bois de Boulogne, the bois de Vincennes, and the new squares and green spaces; and indicates that “he has also executed . . . in Paris a certain number of houses and residences” (1: 362). The *Inventaire* notes that he was a student of Jay and Vaudoyer but does not mention the (unsigned) houses in the rue Saint-Placide.

60. *Moniteur des Architectes* 35 (Sept. 1862), col. 597.

61. It is only just to say that the *Moniteur des Architectes* had published in November 1861 a plate of the building at 37 avenue des Champs-Elysées, designed by Jules Lobrot. “The good taste and the handsome impression of its sculpted ornaments as well as the wise distribution of the carefully studied contour of its moldings,” declares the journalist, “do the greatest honor to this architect” (30 [Nov. 1861], col. 515). In November 1862 another drawing of the building appears, with this label: “Although of considerable originality, the moldings and the sculptures in the néo-grec style which decorate its façade do not go beyond the limits of reason and good taste” (36 [Nov. 1862], col. 613). That there is no entry for Lobrot in Bellier de la Chavignerie’s dictionary suggests the professional indifference to architects who worked neither for the state nor for wealthy and titled clients. And establishing information on them, beyond signed and dated façades as Isabelle Parizet has done in the *Inventaire*, is complicated by the loss of construction permits and documents in the fire that destroyed the Hôtel de Ville in May 1871.

62. The *Inventaire* identifies Pierre-Moïse Gence (b. 1816) as the architect of apartment buildings in the rue de Rennes and the rue de l’abbé Grégoire, while it does not mention 33 rue Saint-Placide, clearly signed, it does ascribe to him 34 (1860), and 49 (1869).

63. This façade is so different from the discreetly decorated 37 avenue des Champs-Elysées that it seems unlikely that “J. Lobrot” is Jules Lobrot, identified by the *Moniteur des Architectes*. Indeed, the *Inventaire* credits it, with a question mark, to Jean Lobrot (1835–last date in Sageret’s *Almanach* 1876), a student of Gilbert, and also responsible for 19 rue des Halles (see further on).  

64. Jaqueline Nebout briskly traces caryatids from ancient Greece to mid-nineteenth-century Paris “and their multiplication, from 1860 on” in *Les caryatides de Paris sous le Second Empire et la Troisième République* attributes their popular-  

65. *L’Architecture privée au XIXe siècle* (1856), a student of Jay and Vaudoyer but does not mention the (unsigned) houses in the rue Saint-Placide, clearly signed, it does ascribe to him 34 (1860), and 49 (1869).

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