Books

Sara Galletti
Le palais du Luxembourg de Marie de Médicis 1611–1631

The Luxembourg Palace is one of those rare early modern buildings that remains central to the day-to-day life of a capital city. This national landmark today houses the Sénat, the upper chamber of the French parliament, while from the garden, it is familiar to countless Parisians and tourists. Its origins as a royal palace, however, lie in a radically different context. The palace was begun in 1615 for Maria de’Medici, widow of Henri IV and regent to the young Louis XIII. Despite substantial changes in both appearance and function, the palace still reflects something of the queen’s political position at that time, particularly as a foreigner and a female regent. This exemplary monograph by Sara Galletti reconstructs the early history of the building, offering new details and arguments to several historiographical problems in which the palace plays a leading role. Among the book’s many contributions, two stand out. The first is a new proposal for the sequence of rooms in the royal apartment. The question has received considerable attention from historians, due to the fame of Peter Paul Rubens’s large-scale series, the Life of Maria de’Medici, conceived expressly for the Luxembourg. Drawn up as part of the story, focusing on the fifteen-year period from 1615 to 1631, during which the palace and its dependencies were largely completed. The subsections follow the principal actors involved in the work at different stages. Here, too, several previously unpublished sources serve to drive the discussion. A building survey undertaken in 1623 (Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal 5995) provides a detailed description of the building reports. Here, Galletti traces the alterations made to the building as the property changed hands, from Maria’s death in 1642 through the mid-eighteenth century. As few of the original plans survive, historians have often relied on later drawings and depictions, made for different purposes. Some of these, as Galletti shows, are more reliable than others. Casual readers may find this chapter hard going. The discussion is largely descriptive and, to the extent that it leaves behind the figure of Maria, detaches itself somewhat from the argument of the book as a whole. It is, however, admirably comprehensive. Researchers interested in the later occupants of the palace will find this chapter a crucial resource.

Chapter 3 returns to take up the thread of the story, focusing on the fifteen-year period from 1615 to 1631, during which the palace and its dependencies were largely completed. The subsections follow the principal actors involved in the work at different stages. Here, too, several previously unpublished sources serve to drive the discussion. A building survey undertaken in 1623 (Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal 5995) provides a detailed description of the state of construction after eight years of building work. Drawn up as part of Cardinal Richelieu’s litigation against de Brosse, it relates to the architect’s early and still-unexplained departure from the project. As Galletti shows, the ostensible reason for the cardinal’s antipathy—de Brosse’s alleged mismanagement or misdealing—is complicated by the fact that the architect left the site only to receive a commission for Richelieu’s château at Limours. Whatever the explanation, Marin de la Vallée would take over as principal mason and contractor from 1624, entrusted
to complete the palace according to de Brosse’s original designs. The chapter also accounts for the palace’s interior decoration, as well as its dependencies. A long section on Marie’s agents Claude Maugis and Claude-Nicolas Fabri de Piersac illustrates their responsibility for liaising with artists, Rubens in particular. There are new details about the famous garden—Galletti redates Tommaso Francini’s project to 1625—and about the orangery, the aviary, and kitchens, which bordered the lower courts on either side of the palace. The picture that emerges from this chapter is that of a competent team of intermediaries who were able to bring this complicated project to fruition, despite frequent political and financial setbacks. One paradoxical effect of their activity, however, is to shield our view of the queen herself. Indeed, Maria’s absence from the discussion is conspicuous. Galletti gives her credit for a sophisticated taste and an advanced policy of art patronage, but her level of input in particular design or budgetary choices remains obscure.

The heart of the book is concerned with the layout of the royal apartment, and here Maria figures prominently. Like the Tuileries palace and the château at Charsleval, the Luxembourg was intended to house twin apartments: the king’s in the eastern wing and the queen’s in the western. From the beginning, however, Henri’s apartment was intended to remain empty, both as a monument to the man and a constant reminder of Maria’s claim to rule. Galletti’s overarching argument is that, as a political statement, the palace actually reveals the queen’s relative weakness. Maria was, after all, the head of a mistrusted foreign contingent at court, queen in a country ruled by Salic law, and regent who would one day have to hand over power to her son. As a patron, her response to this predicament was to stock the palace with reminders of her connection with Henri. The building’s rigorous left-right symmetry, which puts both members of the royal couple on equal footing, is only the most obvious of such references. Galletti also highlights the elements of Rubens’s cycle that served the same purpose. As she points out, the Life of Maria de’ Medici was intended to parallel a second, never-completed series celebrating the life of Henri IV, the galleries containing each linked by the terrace that runs across the entry pavilion.

The other distinguishing features of the Luxembourg were the large, salient pavilions that originally flanked the corps de logis, two on each of its extremities. The resultant layout is anomalous and for historians of interior planning creates a problem of interpretation, for the paired pavilions seem to provide routes to two separate apartments, each branching off from a common antechamber at the end of the corps de logis. Was one apartment ceremonial and the other private? Were they differentiated as winter and summer apartments? Scholars have offered several alternative explanations for this state of affairs, and Galletti usefully reviews each, before putting forward her own hypothesis. The precedent lies in Maria’s alterations in 1613 to her new apartment on the ground floor of the Louvre, which created two independent spatial sequences within the same wing, both following the antechamber. One led, per tradition, to the bedchamber, whereas the other bypassed the bedchamber to offer a more intimate access to the queen via a grand and petit cabinet. Rather than multiplying rooms in the same sequence, Maria appears to have distinguished the two sets of rooms for different uses, allowing courtiers left behind in the antechamber to feel that they remained close to the royal person. At the Luxembourg, this courtly practice is no longer cramped within the confines of a single wing but rather given monumental expression in the form of the two great pavilions on either side of the main block. Galletti supports the picture painted here with anecdotes drawn from contemporary mémoires and Florentine diplomatic correspondence. The sheer assiduousness of the research is impressive when we consider that it required a pursuit, often incidental to the reported events, for those isolated and curt references to the rooms in which they occurred.

In two autograph letters of 1611, Maria had singled out the Pitti Palace in Florence as the model for the building she wanted. She even sent one of the king’s architects to measure and draw it in detail. Scholars of the Luxembourg have made much of this affiliation, and the final chapter attempts to redress the resulting imbalance in the literature on the palace. Galletti redirects our attention instead to French precedents of the sixteenth century, particularly to the architecture of Jacques Androuet du Cerceau. In the hierarchical composition of volumes, the central pavilion housing a grand staircase, and the articulation of the entry pavilion, the Luxembourg draws on several models presented in Du Cerceau’s Les plus excellents bastiments de France (1576–79), a source that relates more closely to de Brosse’s background (Du Cerceau was his grandfather) and to royal traditions of architectural representation. Where the Luxembourg does clearly refer to the Pitti Palace are the elevations, namely, the expressive use of the Tuscan order and its associated rustication. Both of these elements might be understood as emblems of the Florentine grand dukes, but Galletti is careful to point out the personal way that de Brosse has treated them. The articulation is subtler and the masonry more smoothly dressed. The use of pilasters as opposed to half-columns further deemphasizes the tectonic expression of order in favor of a continuous ornamental skin. At the same time, the façades are littered with knowing references to royal palaces and châteaux, most notably Pierre Lescot’s wing at the Louvre: the coupled orders, a frontispiece crowned with a segmental arch, the narrow windows set within an arcade. The Luxembourg, Galletti argues, adapts the architecture of the Pitti to a new French context. In this reading, the palace is less a statement about Maria’s origins as a Medici princess than of what she had become: a queen of France.

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Notes
2. On the planning of royal palaces, see Monique Chatenet, *La cour de France au XVIe siècle: Vie sociale et architecture* (Paris: Picard, 2002). The research network *Palatinum: Court Residences at Places of Exchange in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe 1400–1700* (www.courteresidences.eu) and the Centre de Recherche du Château de Versailles have also been active in this field (www.chemtay.sessvilles-recherche.fr).

Ethan Matt Kavaler

*Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540*

New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012, 344 pp., 80 color and 210 b/w illus. $75, ISBN 9780300167924

Ethan Matt Kavaler’s beautifully produced new book makes an extraordinary contribution to the growing discourse on “Late Gothic” artistic production in the last decades of the fifteenth and first decades of the sixteenth century. The very title chosen by the author—a “provocative oxymoron” (22)—complicates old notions of Gothic as a style that “develops” continuously over three centuries, entering into a period of “decline” before being swept aside by the Renaissance.

The unruly and provocative material Kavaler deals with in this book is hard to cram into a traditional structure of chapter headings, and it has to be said that the introduction is disturbingly multifarious. Yet the author’s argument is, for the most part, well served by the thematic organization into five chapters—“Ornament and Aesthetics,” “Flamboyant Forms,” “Microarchitecture,” “Natural Forms,” and, finally, “Deconstruction and Hybridity”—a sequence that conveniently allows the author to reserve his most original thinking for the later parts of the book.

The introduction provides an overview of problems of taste and historiography: older historians of Gothic often professed a real dislike for this mode, which they considered to be “overcharged” with ornament of a kind that had broken loose from its old role of expressing architectural behavior. A few carefully chosen juxtapositions make the point: the “rational” forms of Saint-Maclou of Rouen (ca. 1440), in which slender filleted piers run smoothly into arches and ribs, is contrasted with the “jungle of overlapping shafts” (11) in the church at Brou, built some seventy-five years later for Margaret of Austria. Similarly juxtaposed, we see an austere geometric window (ca. 1300) from the nave of the minster at Freiburg im Breisgau with a window from the sixteenth-century choir where “designs have become fully emancipated from the mundane task of supporting the glass” (12). The coexistence of elements of Gothic and Italianate architectural idiom creates a new dispensation in which neither could claim exclusive right to express a unified worldview. The notion of “Renaissance Gothic” is invoked as a means of representing the Gothic of these decades (ca. 1470–ca. 1540) as qualitatively different from “High Gothic” and “Rayonnant.” Almost fifty years ago Jan Bialostocki opened the possibility of looking at the phenomenon as an independent entity and not a “late” manifestation, with all the associated negative connotations. The problem is compounded because of the tendency to look at architecture in synecdochic relationship with society and to see the fifteenth century as an “autumnal” age, as Johan Huizinga characterized it in 1919. Kavaler then proceeds to look at the capacity of Renaissance Gothic to express essential qualities of Englishness or Germaness; finally, despite his own aversion to “developmental” stories, he explores the prototypes to be found in English Decorated and French Rayonnant architecture.

At this point Kavaler comes to the heart of his material: the astonishing spatial unity conveyed by the German hall church with three vessels of the same height divided by slender supports that lead the eye upward to the vault canopy, an area to which master masons devoted an enormous amount of creative activity. We are introduced to the dynamic patterning of the vaults at St. Annen, Annaberg (1495–1525), and to the extraordinary work of Benedikt Ried in the Vladislav Hall in Prague (1493–1503).

In chapter 1, “Ornament and Aesthetics,” Kavaler introduces the difficulty many commentators have experienced with “ornament,” which a Stoic or puritan mentality might see as extraneous to the essential properties of the architectural frame and a sign of decadence and decline. Vasari’s critique of Gothic is much in this spirit. Kavaler, on the other hand, argues that “geometrical ornament might function as a kind of metalanguage … considered an approximation of divine thought” (50). Kavaler says further, in the spirit of Roland Barthes’s *Le plaisir du texte*, that “it could provide an erotically tinged response that provided a motor for continued viewing. Indeed, these structures offered a jouissance, a pleasure of reading surfaces” (51). Medieval witnesses were aware of the extraordinary virtuosity of many of the decorative forms of the period, but not necessarily in a positive sense. The 1439 contract for the vault of the Oxford Divinity Schools specified (in vain) that the proposed job should be “free of all curiosities … [such as] tabernacles, carved figures, casements, and fillets and … all other curious frivolities that have nothing to do with the work but occasion expenses of luxuries” (52).

Kavaler begins his analysis of Late Gothic ornament with the well-founded premise that behind the mind-boggling complexity of double-curved patterns may lie a simple geometric matrix, able to convey a subliminal sense of organization and purpose to forms that seem randomly composed. We are offered what Kavaler labels “pictures of geometry” and their transformative power. Interestingly, the patterns of some German Late Gothic vaults, which may seem random or impossible to grasp when seen obliquely, may resolve themselves into the simplest geometry when seen from directly underneath or in ground plan. As Kavaler writes, “Amazement and wonder were amongst the goals of this aesthetic” (80).

Ornamental vocabularies were simultaneously wide ranging, linking, for example, the Brabant and Spain, and Islam and the North, while at the same time capable of expressing regional or personal identities. Ornamental articulation encourages a narrative reading that may impose a sense of order while the similarities between the complexities of Late Gothic architectural ornament and the look of goldwork may induce thoughts of celestial architecture.

Chapter 2, “Flamboyant Forms,” allows the author to show us some of the building