

PETIT REOPENING

The landmark Petit Palais reopens after four years of renovation

December 10, 2005, was a proud day for Paris. After a four-year, \$85 million renovation, the Petit Palais (situated between the eastern end of the Champs-Élysées and the Seine) reopened to the public one day before the 103rd anniversary of its original dedication. On this day, thousands of curious Parisians waited in line to see their much improved “little palace”—little only in name, however, since the City hopes to make it a big cultural attraction.

Newly renovated like its sister, the Grand Palais (see PN Dec 05/Jan 06) across the street, the Petit Palais (formally called the Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris) was built for the 1900 World’s Fair. Charles Girault was the head architect for both buildings, which were, along with the nearby Pont Alexandre III, part of a harmonious design scheme.

The Petit Palais, whose function from the beginning was to house the City’s art collection, forms a trapezoid (a quadrilateral with only two parallel sides), with an interior garden in the shape of a semicircle. It is a classic Beaux-Arts building built with white stone, marble, brick and concrete. Girault showed restraint with typical Beaux-Arts decoration and achieved a remarkable simplicity, with just the right touch of architectural frill and poetry.

In Girault’s day, however, the only means of lighting the museum was with natural light. He proved a master at harnessing and maximizing it, which is evident from the moment you walk under the vaulted entrance. Inspired by the intense luminosity within, you are filled with an almost religious awe. Girault used many architectural tricks to capture this light, including arcades, rows of tall and luminous bay windows, large portholes cut into the central dome, clerestories and a peristyle around the garden (this quaint and peaceful garden captivated Parisians in the early 1900s, but the light required to nourish it proved harmful to the museum’s collection).

In addition to the building’s luminous interior, many of its decorative elements are worth noting. There are impressive mosaic floors in the galleries and the entrance vestibule, laid by the Italian mosaicist Giandomenico Facchina (he was known for the mosaic decoration he created in the Opéra Garnier, and for other mosaic terraces, such as the one in the Galerie Vivienne, 2nd). He also designed the enamel and gold mosaics lining the garden pool. Gold-plated zinc statues, made using a special molding technique, stud the garden; and frescoes done by various artists between 1903 and 1925, including the painter Paul Albert Baudouin, depict scenes of Paris.

The architectural firm charged with the Petit Palais’ renovation, Chaix and Morel, was responsible for touching up these decorative elements and for addressing the structural integrity of the Petit Palais. At the same time, they had to find a way to increase the museum’s exposition space. An additional sixty-five percent of exhibition space was created for the museum’s permanent collection, all without disturbing the original floor plans. This was achieved by excavating beneath the courtyard garden and moving administrative offices underground. Space was also dug out for an auditorium and teaching studios.

The garden has also been restored to its turn-of-the-century style. Symmetrical flowerbeds have been re-laid in the spirit of Jules



Vacherot, the head gardener during the 1900 World’s Fair. Inviting wooden benches line the now pedestrian-only Avenue Charles-Girault, along the north side of the building.

The new aim of the Petit Palais is to broaden accessibility to Paris’ rich heritage of art (which is in keeping with a global plan by the City to enhance its cultural reputation). Adults can now enjoy lectures in the new auditorium; children can participate in story telling, and in the studios they can attend arts and crafts workshops related to the exhibits; and there are even new guided tours for the hard of hearing as well as tactile visits for the visually impaired.

The Petit Palais boasts a collection of 45,000 works of art. Previously, it could display only about 850 works at a time. The renovation and reorganization of various galleries (which shed new light on the collection) now allow 1,300 works to be on permanent display.

These works showcase the best of the museum’s collection. Originally the collection was made up of primarily 19th-century French art that the City acquired after 1870. Donations and bequests from private collectors quickly

increased its size. Significant bequests include medieval sculpture from the Dutuit brothers in 1902; 18th-century decorative arts such as enamel timepieces and porcelain boudoir items from Edouard and Julia Tuck in 1921; and Greek and Russian icons from the 15th through 18th centuries from Roger Cabal in 1998, which make the Petit Palais home to France’s largest collection of icons. Recently 4,200 designs of Charles Jacquau, famed jeweler for Cartier, were donated to the museum. In the 1950s, Matisse made a contribution from his own fauvist collection, including a work by Cézanne. The artistic smorgasbord offered to visitors represents a wide range of art from antiquity to the early 20th century.

In the Petit Palais, the city of Paris hopes to provide the public with unique, ongoing temporary exhibition experiences. An example of this mission is this month’s special exhibit, curated by the acclaimed British illustrator Quentin Blake (through February 12). His black and white sketches have been blown up larger-than-life and affixed to the walls of the exhibit.

Museum-goers familiar with the work of Roald Dahl will recognize his drawings. Blake chose the theme of women for the show, called “Quentin Blake et les Demoiselles des Bords de Seine,” and selected fifty-eight pastels, paintings and prints from among the museum’s collection to go along with his sketches. The works of artists like Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec portray females in the 19th century. With Blake’s whimsical storybook drawings on the walls, the exhibit proves family-friendly—a sign that the City intends to democratize its art collection as a means of increasing attendance.

Mayor Bertrand Delanoë wrote in a press release that renovating the Petit Palais—the largest City-owned museum in Paris—is part of a conscious effort to re-energize the Parisian museum experience in order “to render culture accessible to all and to urge Parisians to embrace their heritage.” To that end, the permanent collection of the Petit Palais (like that of all City-owned museums) is free to the public (special exhibitions like this year’s upcoming exhibitions on Peru and Rembrandt will have an entrance fee). Gilles Chazal, the head curator and director of the Petit Palais, affirmed just how successful the Petit Palais’ renovation has been: “This result is beyond our expectations. This palace is even more beautiful than we could have imagined.”

Still an international capital for the arts, the City of Paris is making a considerable effort to strengthen its cultural reputation. Evidence of this is clear in the now-finished renovation of the Petit Palais, which not only brought the building up to modern safety standards and expanded its exhibition space, but also went to great lengths to create a modern and world-class museum experience.

No “petit” achievement.

—By Maisie Wilhelm