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Théodore Olivier (1821-1899) and Jules-Germain Olivier (1869-1940): Architectural Projects and Competition Drawings for the *École des Beaux-Arts*

Théodore Olivier and his son Jules-Germain were both French architects trained in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts at a time when Paris was the undisputed cultural center of Europe and the École the most powerful architectural institution in the world. Upon completion of their studies, they established their professional careers in the provincial cities of Toulouse and Montauban.

Théodore, born in Paris in 1821, entered the École in 1842 where his professors were Martin-Pierre Gauthier and Louis-Hippolyte Lebas, both former students of Napoleon's architect Charles Percier and two of the last proponents of the Neoclassical style. Lebas, one of the most important teachers of his day (Charle Garnier, architect of the Paris Opera, was among his students), had been named Professor of Architectural History at the academy in 1840, a platform from which he defended the supremacy of the classical tradition. Theodore no doubt absorbed these principles from his master but, after leaving the École, he joined the *Commission des Monuments Historiques* where he worked alongside Viollet-le-Duc on the repair of buildings damaged during the French Revolution.[1] Viollet-le-Duc, who had turned his back on the École to establish himself as a scholar-restorer, was a champion of French medieval culture. From this master, Théodore also successfully absorbed the principles of medieval and renaissance architecture. In 1853, the architect Léon Vaudoyer, after accompanying Théodore on an inspection tour of various buildings, wrote to a friend that "Monsieur Olivier shows a great deal of promise."

In 1850 Théodore Olivier was named chief architect of the *département* of Tarn-et-Garonne, a region in southwestern France that includes the city of Toulouse; he maintained this position until 1874. It was in the neighboring town of Montauban where Théodore eventually established his practice and where he made the watercolor drawing depicting three views (plan, section and elevation) of a stable and farm complex marked with the inscription "*A Montauban, le 22 juillet 1853, l'architecte du département, Th. Olivier.*" Olivier's son Jules-Germain was born in Montauban in 1869. It is not clear whether the senior architect encouraged his son to follow in his footsteps, but Jules-Germain did move to Paris and enrolled in the École in 1890, at precisely the same age as did his father (twenty-one). Jules-Germain began as a

[1] The architect and theorist Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, an admirer of Gothic architecture and early proponent of structural rationalism, is primarily known today for his restoration of numerous French cathedrals, among them Nôtre Dame in Paris.

student of Pierre-Joseph Esquié, who was from Olivier's region of Tarn-et-Garonne but who had also won the Grand Prix de Rome—the highest honor awarded an École student—and had authored a celebrated translation of Vignola. Esquié's father, Jacques-Jean, had been a well-respected architect in Toulouse. Therefore, it is possible that the family aided Jules-Germain's entry into the *école* system. Soon after he arrived, however, Jules-Germain chose to train at the famous *atelier* (studio) of Gustave-Laurent Raulin, who had won several medals for building designs for the Paris Universal Expositions of 1878, 1889, and 1900. Upon attaining his diploma from the *école* in 1903, Jules-Germain returned to Montauban and took up his father's old post as official architect of the region.

What was it like to be a young, inexperienced student from the provinces at the prestigious *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris in the late nineteenth century? For one thing, it was to feel the weight of history on one's shoulders. The *École* was the pedagogical wing of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, originally founded in 1671 under royal imprimatur by Louis XIV's building minister Colbert. Its teaching methods had been firmly established by the middle of the eighteenth century and, in spite of numerous name changes and institutional restructurings—including the Academy's brief suppression during the Revolution in 1793—its methods had changed little in one hundred years. The rigorous and lengthy training process entailed, first, meeting the age requirement, between fifteen and thirty years of age. After passing a series of written and oral entrance exams in subjects that included mathematics, history, and descriptive geometry, the former *aspirant* entered the *école* as a student of the *seconde classe*, and attained credits or *valeurs* for possible promotion by participating in a series of competitions known as the *concours d'émulation*. These monthly competitions took the form of either relatively rapid *esquisses*, in which the student was allowed twelve hours to complete the rough sketch of an assigned building; or more intensive *projets rendus*, in which the student was given two months to complete a large-scale project, often comprising three finished drawings of a building in plan, section, and elevation. Many of the drawings by Jules-Germain Olivier in this exhibition are labeled '*concours d'émulation*,' including two *lavis* (wash) studies of the *Porte de Senat* and a Corinthian capital. Although their subject matter suggests the persistence of classical and Renaissance styles as important components of the young architect's education, their careful attention to detail and sense of color and movement indicate that achieving subtle affects with watercolor and wash was also a vital part of one's training, a skill that could later be used to seduce prospective clients.

To remain a student of the Ecole, one had to enter continually these monthly competitions. After earning enough credits from the École professors, who comprised the jury for the *concours*, the student was finally promoted to first class, a feat that took both Théodore Olivier and his son around five years to

accomplish. Among the drawings, which may have impressed the jury are two studies by Théodore from around 1840 of a pair of columns and a temple façade. These sheets display not only a proficient awareness of classical symmetry and proportion, but also a talent for modeling these forms and conveying their plasticity through subtle gradations of light and shadow in two dimensions (a talent that his son would later share). Théodore's temple façade recalls a wider, less vertically-oriented version of his teacher Lebas's celebrated parish church, Notre Dame de Lorette, which had been completed on the Right Bank in Paris just a few years earlier. The comparison suggests the close correspondence, as well as the degree of influence, that teachers could exert on their students, who referred to their masters, familiarly, as *patron* ("boss").

This student-teacher relationship was a product of a studio system that was connected but somewhat outside of the École itself, in that the studios were often run by former Grand Prix winners who, after completing a major state commission, would establish a studio to help younger architects in their quest to achieve similar goals. These *patrons* would often take over studios that had already been established by noted architects, as Théodore's teacher Lebas took over the studio of the Academician A.-L.-T. Vaudoyer and Jules-Germain's teacher Raulin acquired his studio from Emile Vaudremer, who had trained, among others, the American architect Louis Sullivan. The architect's *atelier* was where the drafting tables were kept and, as such, was the place where the students actually learned to draw. Here, they were also subject to frequent critiques by their *patrons*, a practice that has evolved into the primary component of architectural education in the twenty-first century. It was also where the young *aspirant* would prepare for the École's entrance exams and where he (and it was always "he," at least until the very end of the nineteenth century when women were admitted) would prepare his drawings for the *concours*, receiving advice from his teacher and fellow students while remaining faithful to his all-important *'première pensée'* or first idea.

Even after the aspirant became an official student of the École, meaning regular participation in the *concours* (the school's lectures on subjects such as construction, theory and history were always free and open to the public), he still referred to himself as a student or *elève* of his *patron*, a fact confirmed by inscriptions on several of the Olivier drawings. Hippolyte Lebas's name appears on Théodore Olivier's study for an assembly building—given its complicated program and highly finished state, probably a *projet rendu*—shown on the same page in elevation, plan, and section, or in other words, respectively, a straight-ahead, aerial, and cut-away view. The view in the center of the sheet depicts a symmetrical grouping of classically arcaded and domed spaces that serves to demonstrate the core teaching of the Paris École des Beaux-Arts: training in layout or, as it came to be known, *composition*. In Academic architectural circles, the term did not just signify "composition" as we think of it (i.e., a term roughly equivalent to "drawing"), but

rather implied an almost religious sense of creating a balanced synthesis of individual parts that would ultimately result in a unified, rational, legible building. It is as much a technique as a style. The École dictated that a sense of *composition* should be attained both in a building's two-dimensional manifestation and its three-dimensional product. The yardstick by which the former was measured was that, from the two-dimensional drawing, the viewer should be able to project him- or herself into the actual building. We can appreciate this idea of successful two-dimensional *composition* in Jules-Germain's rigorously geometric, coherent plan of a fortification or military complex, which features a wide central access presumably intended to facilitate communication among the various parts of the building.

The degree to which both Oliviers understood this central tenet of the École can be seen in their respective designs for an amphitheatre or opera complex. In Théodore's sumptuously rendered, oversized drawing from around 1845, we observe the theatre slowly unfurling itself, from the strictly classical portico of its façade at left, through its entrance vestibule, main stage, all the way to the waiting room for the actors at the rear. Half a century later, Jules-Germain would take up the same program, but would produce designs for a theatre less inspired by the classical tradition than by recent achievements of the Second Empire: in fact, the son's design would seem to be an exact copy of Garnier's Paris Opera, were it not for the omission of two bays on the central façade and a slightly more symmetrical layout of the building's interior. Jules-Germain's elevation view of the opera in particular indicates that, by the end of the nineteenth century, young architects, while maintaining an interest in the École's principles of composition, had become captivated by the exciting, dramatic possibilities of this new, scenographic style.

The end result of so many years of training were, for the very few, either winning the annual Grand Prix or, several years later, being elected to the architectural Academy, which featured only eight members appointed for life. Since the Grand Prix drawings were judged by these same Academicians, some of whom were in their sixties or even older by the time they were elected, the results tended to be rather conservative, so as to appeal to the retardaire tastes of its jury. Many students withdrew from the grueling, four month-long process altogether (or stopped competing after a few tries), preferring simply to leave the École when they felt ready, when they reached the age of thirty, or when they attained employment. The diploma system was not enforced until the late 1880s, and although Jules-Germain did eventually receive one, the Olivier father and son's first-class, prize-winning status (each had won competition medals at various stages in the process), coupled with the fact that they both came from famous *ateliers* would have been more than enough for them to find work in Paris. That both Oliviers chose to return and practice in Montauban, where the mere fact that one had been registered at the École would have guaranteed a plumb

position, suggests that father and son were probably regarded with great respect by their departmental colleagues.

Not that either had much time to bask in glory: there was much work to be done in the fast-growing region of Tarn-et-Garonne, and each Olivier left the École at a heady moment in architectural history. For Théodore, this period was just at the beginning of the Second Empire (1852-70), a regime remembered as much for its unprecedented urban transformations directed by Baron Haussman as for its promotion of bombastic architects like Charles Garnier. Théodore's work at Montauban demonstrates both an interest in maintaining established traditions and at the same time a keen grasp of the signs and symbols of modernity. This combination can be seen in his project for a sleek railway complex which incorporates classical columns, innovative iron and glass construction, and regionally-inspired pointed wooden terminals, intended to serve as way- stations newly linking his fellow Montauban citizens with the glamour and excitement of Paris. Jules-Germain, on the other hand, began his career just at the dawn of the twentieth century, a time when the architectural preoccupations of the previous era—an obsession with modernity, speed, utility, and public works—had not only come to a head, but had been combined with a fascination for history and a perceived need to anchor the new with the old (a central characteristic of what came to be known as the "Beaux Arts" style). The younger Olivier's student projects and professional works evince a temperament deeply steeped in these notions. For example, one can observe a gorgeous watercolor rendering of a bathing complex, which combines classical calm and symmetry with the late-nineteenth century obsession with hygiene, as well as a project for a wine merchant's complex and the design of a racetrack where the sense of speed and movement suggested by the building's function is conveyed in its shape, its syncopated portico (which nevertheless still pays homage to classicism), and even in its hastily sketched-in trees, which appear to hover nervously around the building.

Taken as a whole, the Olivier drawings, which cannily combine tradition and innovation, new and old, serve to illustrate a sentence that Charles Baudelaire would write about "The Painter of Modern Life" in 1863:

"By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable."

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(Much of the information in this text comes from three main sources: the Museum of Modern Art's 1977 publication in conjunction with an exhibition on *The Architecture of the École des Beaux Arts*, edited by Arthur Drexler; Jean-Michel Leniaud's *Répertoire des architectes diocésains du XIXe siècle*, published by the École nationale des chartres in 2003, and Edmund Delaire's *Les Architectes Élèves de l'école des Beaux-Arts (1819-1893),* which was reissued in 2004 with an introduction by Annie Jacques).