

# Opera Garnier

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Paris Art Studies &ndash; September-October 2011

The History of Paris  
with Chris Boïcos - Architecture, Urbanism, Society - Part 8:

Paris under the Second Empire II (1860-1870), the Commune and the beginning of the Third Republic (1871-1880)

Opéra Garnier 1861-1875 by Charles Garnier (1825-1898)

1794 &ndash;  
During the French Revolution the Opera moves into the theater of the Palais Royal (on the current site of the Comédie Française).

1820 &ndash; Assassination of the Bourbon heir, the Duc de Berry exiting the Opera. His uncle King Louis XVIII orders the dismantling of the theater. A new theater is built re-using many of the same materials by François Debret on rue Le Pelletier (near the hotel Drouot).

1821 &ndash; Inauguration of the new Opera of rue Le Pelletier later associated to the birth of grand opera in the Romantic era.

1858 &ndash; Three bombs are thrown by Italian anarchists, in an assassination attempt organized by Felice Orsini, at the carriage of Napoleon III and Eugénie as they arrive at the Opera. The imperial couple is miraculously spared, there are 8 dead and 150 wounded among the bystanders. Napoleon III decides to build a new, more secure Opera theater.

1860 &ndash; An official competition is held (a first in the 19th century) for the plans of the new theater. 171 plans are presented to the jury and against all expectations the winning design is that of an unknown young architect, Charles Garnier; The former official architect of the Imperial Opera, Rohault de Fleury, disgusted, resigns.

1862 &ndash; Official pose of first stone of new Opera by count Walewski president of the legislative assembly. Garnier's budget of 29 million francs is reduced by the government to 18 million and then again to 15 million.

1864 &ndash; Garnier revises his budget to 21 million, constant wrangling with ministerial bureaucracy.

1867 &ndash; The scaffolding is brought down to show off the building during the Paris World's Fair.

1870-71

&ndash; The unfinished building is used as warehouse during the Franco-Prussian war and the siege of Paris. After the war under the new third Republic work resumes but only intermittently.

1873 &ndash;

A fire destroys the rue Le Pelletier opera. It now become urgent to finish the new theater. Garnier is given 18 months and 7 million francs to finish it.

1874 &ndash;

On 30 December, after intensive labor, Garnier delivers the new building, still unfinished in parts. Le Glacier (refreshment area) will be finished later and the smoking room (fumoir) never built.

1875 &ndash;

Official inauguration of the Opera by President Mac-Mahon with a gala reception for 2000 guests on 6 January. Garnier who was not invited had to pay for his own box. For the first time in history the ladies, lead by the Queen of Spain, leave their boxes during the intermission to admire the new foyers, establishing their right to move freely in the public spaces of the theater from then on. Garnier is applauded by the crowd on exiting the Opera. The building is considered a triumph.

Main decorations:

Sculptures of Main front, left to right:

Ground floor arcade:

Jouffroy-Harmony,  
Guillaume-Instrumental Music, Aizelin-Idyll, Chapu-Cantata, Dubois and Vatinelle-Song, Falguière-Drama, Carpeaux-Dance, Perault-Lyrical Drama

Medallions,  
Composers:

Gumery-Bach,  
Gumery-Pergolèse, Gumery-Haydn, Gumery-Cimarosa

Terrace

oculi, busts of composers:

Evrard-Rossini,

Chabaud-Auber, Chabaud-Beethoven, Chabaud-Mozart, Chabaud-Spontini,  
Chabaud-Meyerbeer, Evrard-Halévy.

Roof

line groups: Gumery-Harmony, Klagman-theater masks, Gumery-Poetry

Staircase:

Bronze

caryatids wielding candelabra by Carrier-Belleuse

Marble

caryatids framing door by Thomas

Ceiling

paintings by Isidore Pils (finished by Clairin): Triumph of Apollo (north),  
Charm of Music (south), Minerva fighting Brutal force (East), The city of Paris  
receiving the plan for the Opera (west)

Avant foyer:

mosaics by Salviati, designs by Curzon

Medallions:

Diana and Endymion, Orpheus and Eurydice, Aurora and Cephalus, Mercury and  
Psyche

Grand foyer:

ceiling paintings by Paul Baudry except west and east vaults by Barrias: The Civilizing Poets and Parnassus  
(respectively)

Center

of ceiling: Comedy, Music, Tragedy

North

side-vaults (left to right): Orpheus and Eurydice, Melpomene, Orpheus and the  
Maenads, Erato, Judgment of Paris, Clio, Jupiter and the Corymbantes, Urania,  
Marsyas and Apollo

South

side-vaults (left to right): Salome, Thalia, the Assault, Terpsichore, the

Shepherds, Calliope, the dream of St Cecilia, Euterpe, Saul and David

Theater ceiling  
by Marc Chagall 1964:

Blue  
area: Mussorgsky, Boris Godunov,

White  
area: Mozart, the Magic Flute

Green  
area: Wagner, Tristan and Isolde and Berlioz, Romeo and Juliet

2nd  
White area: Rameau

Small  
yellow area: Debussy, Pelleas and Melisande

Red  
area: Ravel, Daphnis and Chloe and Stravinsky, Firebird

Large yellow area:  
Tchaikovsky, Swann Lake, and Adam, Giselle