

Val de Grace

Paris Art Studies - Val de Grâce 1645 - 1667

1615 – Anne of Austria Infanta of Spain marries Louis XIII King of France at the age of 13. Disappointed and unhappy in her marriage, unable to bear children, she dreams of retiring to a convent (at 19). She befriends Marguerite de Veny d'Arbouse prioress of the Benedictine nunnery of Val Profond de Bièvre-le-Chatel (Seine et Oise) and raises the priory to the status of an abbey.

1621 – Anne buys the hotel du Petit Bourbon off the rue St Jacques on the Left Bank of Paris so as to install the nuns nearer to court.

1624 – First stone of the new abbey is laid. Building will proceed slowly until 1643. The first buildings are old-fashioned and austere. Anne's disgrace at court and the antipathy of the King means she is unable to raise substantial funds for the abbey. The Queen visits the nuns in their new quarters at least twice a week and most often on Fridays when she dines with them in the refectory. From her apartment at the Val de Grâce she secretly corresponds with the Spanish and English courts and the court of Lorraine.

1637 – Chancellor Séguier searches her apartment for incriminating correspondence but finds nothing. Anne has to sign a humiliating procès verbal of the interrogation. The King forbids her to retire to the Val de Grâce, but all is forgiven when the Queen at last becomes pregnant.

1638 – 5 September, birth (at last) of her first child, Louis-Dieudonné, the future Louis XIV.

1642 – Death of the Queen's great enemy the Prime Minister, Cardinal Richelieu.

1643 – Death on 14 May of Louis XIII. Anne is now regent of the kingdom and free, at last, to wield power in the name of her 5-year old son, Louis XIV. The new prime minister and ally of the Queen is Cardinal Mazarin. She decides to build a new chapel at the convent of Val de Grâce as fulfillment of a vow made before the birth of Louis.

1645 – The cornerstone is laid by the 7-year old Louis XIV. The first architect is the talented but temperamental and spendthrift François Mansart (1598-1666), who will be replaced by the more diplomatic Jacques Lemercier (1585-1666),

architect of the Sorbonne chapel (1635). Pierre le Muet and Gabriel Leduc will also be employed in the later stages of the building.

1666 –
Anne retires to the Val de Grâce to die (of cancer of the breast) but is finally taken back to the Louvre.

1667 – The church of the Val de Grâce is at last finished.

1793 – During the Revolution the abbey is transformed into a military hospital and is spared the demolition of the neighboring convents of the Ursulines and Feuillantines.

The Abbey:

The plan is inspired by the Escorial in Spain, a royal complex combining convent, palace and church. The cloister is severe in the Benedictine tradition. The Gothic buttresses of the old hotel du Petit Bourbon were incorporated into the new convent.

The nuns's cells were on the upper level. The vast gardens were used for growing vegetables and vines.

The Queen's apartment features an Ionic peristyle with ringed columns and is topped by urns with flames (pots au feu), symbols of faith, and pelicans feeding their young with their own blood, a symbol of maternal love.

The Church:

The church is preceded by a vast courtyard with a great iron gate and fence.

The north wing of the courtyard was used for housing important visitors (Mazarin's nieces, Henrietta of France, Queen Christine of Sweden, Maria Gonzaga, Queen of Poland …) and the priests affected to the abbey. On the south was the entrance to the abbey.

The projecting temple portico on the ground floor of the church front is of the Corinthian order and is tall and dynamic, a typical Mansart design.

The Latin inscription on the frieze: Iesu Nascenti Virginique Matri is dedicated to the Nativity of Christ and to the Virgin Mother, alluding also to the miraculous birth of Louis XIV.

The exterior sculptures are of St Benedict and his sister St Scholastica.

The upper floor, which also features a portico of the Composite order and two volutes, is a more timid and ornamental design by Jacques Lemercier.

The baroque dome, inspired by Palladio's Redentore in Venice, was finished by Leduc. On the inside the dome painting, featuring The Glory of the Blessed 1663, is by Pierre Mignard. Anne introduced by St Louis presents a model of her church to God.

The altar baldaquin with six serpentine columns was designed by Leduc and inspired by Bernini's baldaquin for St Peter's in Rome.

To the right of the altar is the chapel of St Louis which was reserved for the nuns. An interior passage connects it to chapel of the Holy Sacrament which is directly behind the altar. There the nuns could commune without being seen by the faithful in the nave.

To the left is the chapel of St Anne, from whose gallery the Queen could discreetly attend mass. After her death Anne's heart was placed here in an urn of the altar. The hearts of later Bourbons and Orléans, including those of Henrietta of England and Maria Theresa wife of Louis XIV were placed in a tomb beneath the altar. The 45 royal hearts were thrown out during the Revolution.

The interior sculpture (1662-67) was overseen by Michel Anguier (who in Rome worked as assistant to Bernini). The altar Nativity is a 19th century copy of the original by Anguier, now in the church of St Roch. The organ dates from 1852 and replaces the original organ destroyed during the Revolution.