A ROOM FROM THE HÔTEL DE TESSÉ

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At the western corner of the quai Voltaire and the rue des Saints-Pères in Paris stands a distinguished eighteenth-century house, which, from the name of its original owners, has been known for 175 years as the Hôtel de Tessé. Many of us in walking along the quai have stopped to look in the windows of the intriguing antique and book shops that now occupy its ground floor but, thus distracted, have perhaps failed to notice the dignified façade above. From this hôtel at 1 quai Voltaire comes the beautiful room recently presented to the Museum by Mrs. Herbert N. Straus.

Fortunately, except for the intrusion of the shops, the exterior of the Hôtel de Tessé has undergone little change through the years. In one of the principal rooms of the house, that known as the salon de compagnie, is a series of four painted over-door panels representing Music, Sculpture, Painting, and Architecture. In the panel symbolic of Architecture (ill. p. 191) the lower part of the corner of the hôtel appears in the background with a sign reading “Quai des Théâtins, 20.” (The present quai Voltaire has been variously known in the past, for a time in the eighteenth century being called the quai des Théâtins.) In the foreground are strewn great blocks of stone, on one of which a mason is at work. Two figures, possibly intended to represent contractors, are holding a drawing of the front of the hôtel, to which a third, perhaps the owner or the architect, is pointing. A comparison of this drawing with the present façade of the building shows no deviation worthy of notice, and we see the Hôtel de Tessé as it was originally, without its shops.

The history of the property on which the Hôtel de Tessé now stands is given in considerable detail by J. Vacquier in Les Vieux Hôtels de Paris (Le Faubourg Saint-Germain, vol. iv, pp. 11 f., pls. 32-40). In 1700 a M. Bouleau, secretary to the king, was the owner of a house on the site, of which no drawing has survived. This gentleman left many creditors, among them Claude Le Rebours, councilor of parliament, who, in 1707, was awarded the property in settlement of money owed him. Seven years later, in 1714, the property, including a large garden fronting on what is now the rue de Lille, was sold by Le Rebours to Jean François de Boisvin, Marquis de Bacqueville. While building himself a new house in the garden, Bacqueville lived temporarily in the house on the quai. He appears to have been an experimental temperament, if not something of an eccentric, for one day he announced that, by means of an enormous pair of wings that he had had constructed, he would fly across the Seine and alight in the garden of the Tuileries. Bacqueville did not reach his destination, but he did not do so badly, for he is reputed to have crossed the quai and landed on a laundry boat in the river, suffering only a broken thigh. Thus came to an end an early attempt at aviation.
In 1760 the house on the quai was almost wholly destroyed by fire, and it had not been repaired when in 1764 Bacqueville's son sold the property to Joseph, Comte de Hallwyl, and his wife. This transaction was not completed until September 1765, and less than a month later the property again changed hands, the Hallwyls transferring their interests to Marie Charlotte de Bethune-Charost, widow of René de Froullai, Comte de Tessé. The agreement gave the comtesse a life interest in the property, which was afterwards to go to her son, and stipulated, among other things, that she should erect a new hôtel to replace the ruined one. According to Vacquier, who had access to the records, this was done between the years 1765 and 1768. The contractor's bill of 219,000 livres was finally paid in 1772 to Letellier, "entrepreneur des bâtiments du roi." The present Hôtel de Tessé dates from this time.

The architect of the new hôtel appears to have been one Pierre Noël Rousset, architect to the king and member of the Royal Academy of Architecture. Modern writers on the subject accredit him with the design for the Hôtel de Tessé, and as long ago as 1787 M. Thiéry, in his Guide des amateurs et des étrangers voyageurs à Paris (vol. 2, p. 535), said: "Descendant la rue des Saints Pères du côté de la Rivière, on rencontre quelques Hôtels. . . . Arrivé sur le quai des Théatins, qui prend ce nom à l'angle de cette rue, formé à gauche par l'Hôtel de Tessé, dont l'entrée principale est sur le quai. Cet Hôtel, dans une magnifique situation, a été construit sur les dessins de M. Rousset, Architecte du Roi." In the introduction to this fascinating old guidebook the author comments: "MM. les Architectes ont été consultés sur les monuments publics & particuliers dont cette Capitale est redevable à leurs talens." This would indicate that Thiéry had gone to considerable trouble to assure accuracy in his
numerous statements concerning architecture.

Little is known about Rousset’s life and career. He is said to have been born in 1715 and to have died in 1763, but the original source of these dates is not available and there is good reason to believe that he died much later. He was elected a member of the Royal Academy of Architecture in 1758. The records of the academy from its foundation by Colbert in 1671 to its suppression by decree of the National Convention in August 1793 are available in published form (Procès-verbaux de l’Académie Royale d’Architecture, edited by Henry Lemonnier). There is no indication in them that any architect by the name of Rousset other than Pierre Noël was ever a member of the academy. The attendance records of the meetings show that from the time of his election until the academy went out of existence Rousset rarely missed a meeting. It is to be wondered indeed whether he may not have died in 1793 and whether the previously accepted death date of 1763 may not have originated in a typographical inversion repeated by later writers. In 1793 Rousset would have been an old man of seventy-eight. It is possible that the hardships imposed by the Revolution, combined with the suppression of his beloved academy, proved too much for him to bear.

For facts concerning Rousset’s professional activities other than his connection with the academy we are dependent, for the time being at any rate, on what can be culled from the books at hand. The material is pretty limited. He took part in a competition initiated in 1748 to provide an appropriate setting in the form of a square in some part of Paris for Bouchardon’s equestrian statue of Louis XV. The location which he chose was in the old quartier de la Grève adjoining the hôtel de ville. He submitted two schemes: one of a simple character, in which part of the existing hôtel de ville was retained, the other much more elaborate and involving drastic changes in the hôtel de ville itself. A brief description of Rousset’s schemes as well as a plan indicating their proposed location may be seen in an interesting book by Pierre Patte, published in
1765, entitled *Monuments érigés en France à la gloire de Louis XV*. Unfortunately no elevations are illustrated. The results of this competition were never put to use, however, for the king, having examined all the various schemes, decided that they would necessitate the destruction of too much private property. He therefore presented to the City of Paris the site of the present place de la Concorde, and as a result of this a new competition was held. None of these schemes being completely satisfactory, the more desirable elements of several were incorporated, at the king’s request, in a new design by Jacques Ange Gabriel, which was finally approved in 1753.

Rousset is known to have been responsible for the designs of renovations (1752 or 1756) in the woodwork of the organ in the Sainte-Chapelle. Thiéry (op. cit., vol. 2, p. 26) mentions this, and Pignoli de la Force, in his valuable *Description historique de la Ville de Paris* (vol. 2, p. 11), published in 1765, says of this project: “Le sieur Rousset habile Architecte en a donné le dessein qui est d’un très-bon goût & fort ingénieux. Il a été exécuté parfaitement par le sieur Lavergne.” Pignoli likewise accredits Rousset with designing a house on the Île Saint-Denis, near Paris, built by one M. Larcher, a rich merchant, in 1753—“ce bâtiment a été construit en 1753, d’après les desseins & sous la conduite de M. Rousset de l’Académie Royale d’Architecture.” He then proceeds to describe the plan of the house. Next in the chronology of Rousset’s dated work comes the Hôtel de Tessé, which, as we have already seen, is said to have been carried out between 1765 and 1768. Later, in 1775, he appears in correspondence between Jean Baptiste Pigalle, the sculptor, and M. d’Angiviller, directeur des bâtiments, in connection with the execution of the tomb of the Maréchal de Saxe in the church of Saint Thomas in Strasbourg. He apparently designed the architectural elements of the tomb, for Pigalle says in one letter, dated April 29, 1775: “Je rejoins à l’instant M. Rousset qui va se mettre après pour faire les plans et faces du tombeau de M. le maréchal de Saxe qui a bien voulu me rendre le service de s’en charger. . . .” Six days later Pigalle writes that since he has no knowledge of masonry he is relieved that Rousset has finished the plans.

Rousset also did certain decorative work for the Duchesse de Bourbon in the rue neuve des Petits-Champs, but we do not know when. Thiéry (op. cit., vol. 1, p. 168) refers to it, saying: “Arrivé dans la rue neuve des Petits-Champs vous trouverez l’hôtel de Madame la Duchesse de Bourbon. Tout l’intérieur a été décoré par M. Rousset, Architecte du Roi: cet hôtel est enrichi de morceaux des plus grand Maîtres dans tous les genres.” He is further accredited with work at the châteaux of Livry and Raincy, and he must also have carried out other projects in his long career.

So much for the architect. To return to the Hôtel de Tessé, we have already seen that the widowed comtesse took possession of the site in 1765 on condition that she erect a new building to replace the one ruined by fire. We have also seen that Vacquier, who had access to old documents relating to the hôtel, says that the new hotel was built between 1765 and 1768 and that the contractor’s bill was settled in 1772. It is logical to assume that, in normal circumstances, the old comtesse, having taken possession of the property, would not have delayed long in having plans drawn and construction started. But it does seem a little curious that the contractor was not paid until four years after the building was completed. It is possible, however, that though the fabric was finished by 1768 the decoration of the interior continued for several years after that. In fact, the decorative style of the principal rooms would tend to bear out this hypothesis.

A description of the hôtel dating from 1801 gives a good idea of its original extent. In translation it reads: “The house consists of a large entrance and a principal series of rooms fronting on the quai, composed, on the ground floor, of a porter’s room, kitchen, scullery, larder, pantry, cupboards, coach house and stable, and fine cellars underneath. There is a mezzanine (i.e., between the ground and first floors) and above it three floors, including a large and beautiful complete apartment and, on the third floor, the servants’ rooms. Front-
Door and part of the paneling of the “grand salon” from the Hôtel de Tessé.
This illustration and those on pages 190 and 191 are reproduced from
ing on the rue des Saints-Pères are other groups of rooms consisting of stables and a mezzanine, with two floors and an attic above. The house is served by one principal and two small staircases."

From the "large and beautiful complete apartment" on the first floor of the hôtel overlooking the quai comes the superb room given to the Museum by Mrs. Straus. It was known as the grand salon and, together with an antechamber, a sitting room, a dining room, and a bedroom, comprised the owner's suite. Tall French windows opened on a long corbeled balcony with a wrought-iron railing. Across the Seine rose the massive pile of the Louvre softened by the intervening foliage. The decoration of the grand salon is a model of restraint and elegance. Four great double doors, one of which may be seen on page 193, lead out of it into the adjoining rooms and provide important architectural features. Over the doors are beautifully sculptured plaster reliefs representing spirited putti holding wreathed and beribboned medallions in which dancing maidens masquerade as the seasons. The doors themselves are finely proportioned, their panels framed with delicately carved and gilded classical moldings and further enriched by crossed branches of laurel. The cornices which crown them are boldly carved with acanthus and rest on consoles from which hang chutes of leaves. Balancing each other at the two ends of the room are great arched mirrors providing, in the best French tradition, an infinity of pleasant reflections. The surrounding frames are ingeniously designed to suggest coffered arches in perspective. Richly carved wreaths flanked by sprays of laurel accent the centers of the arches, while down the posts trail little bunches of exquisitely carved flowers held together by long, tasseled ribbons. Under one mirror is a finely carved mantelpiece of bleu turquin marble; under the other, place was left for a console table or commode. An ornate cornice and a simply paneled dado complete the decoration of this distinguished room. We
do not show a general view of it as none of the available ones does it justice.

When, after the war, the room is installed in the Museum, two handsome matching console tables (see ill. opp. page), also presented by Mrs. Straus, will form part of its furnishings. These two tables were recently shown for the first time in New York when they were lent by the Museum to the extraordinarily fine exhibition organized by Mme Balsan for the benefit of the American Women’s Voluntary Services. Their vigorously carved classical decoration, with its beautiful old gilding, is reminiscent of the published designs of Delafosse. A further note of richness is added by the exceptional beauty of the variegated marble tops.

Just when the Comtesse de Tessé died is as yet unknown to us, but it would appear to have been in the late 1770’s or early 1780’s. The Abbé Bory, councilor of parliament, was living in the hôtel at the time of his death in 1785. Some years before, he had acquired a life interest in the property, very likely after the death of the old comtesse. After Bory’s death the hôtel reverted to the comtesse’s son, René Mans de Foullai, and his wife, Adrienne Catherine de Noailles. The new owners probably never lived there, for they already had a house of their own at 78 rue de Varenne. Moreover, in less than a year they sold the hôtel on the quai to François Gaspard Philippe Petit de Petitval. Comte René de Tessé had followed a military career with sufficient distinction to be made a maréchal de camp and a knight of the Order of the Saint-Esprit. Though he holds little interest for us, his wife crosses the American scene as an aunt of Lafayette and an intimate friend and correspondent of Thomas Jefferson. Many of Jefferson’s letters to Mme de Tessé may be found in a delightful book by Gilbert Chinard entitled Trois Amitiés françaises de Jefferson. Architecture and gardening are frequent subjects of their correspondence. During Jefferson’s sojourn in Paris (1784-1789) he saw much of Mme de Tessé, and it was to her that he wrote from Nîmes of his great admiration for the famous Maison Carrée which inspired his design for the Virginia State Capitol at Richmond.

In 1802 the Hôtel de Tessé was acquired from the Petitval heirs by a Monsieur Vigier, to whose descendant, the Comte de Vigier, it belonged in 1920 when Vacquier published it. The later history of the hôtel reveals little of more than passing interest. Maréchal Bugeaud de la Piconnerie lived there for a time and died in 1849 in a room adjoining our grand salon, which was filled with high officials while, outside, the populace crowded the quai as they awaited the news of his death. Bugeaud’s spectacular career as a soldier had begun under Napoleon and continued through the reigns of Louis XVIII, Charles X, and Louis Philippe and into the presidency of Louis Napoleon. His excellent soldierly qualities were apparently equaled by his ability to ally himself promptly to a new regime. But his greatest achievement was the splendid work he did in North Africa between 1836 and 1847 in connection with the consolidation and administration of the French conquests there. Thus he was in the way of being a precursor to Maréchal Lyautey. In view of the present African campaign, Bugeaud’s career takes on an additional interest.

Another personality, of considerable fame in his period, ended his days in the Hôtel de Tessé. This was the sculptor James Pradier (1792-1854). Between the years 1857 and 1872 the hôtel was occupied by the École du Génie maritime. Finally, after many vicissitudes, the principal suite of rooms was rented to a firm of antiquaries who used it as a background for the display of their wares.

This is what we know about the history of the Hôtel de Tessé. What has happened since the Germans entered Paris or who its present occupants may be, we do not know. But we may recall that it emerged unscarred from another invasion and the disorders which followed; for it was a little less than seventy-five years ago that the Germans were also entering Paris and the mob was firing the Tuileries across the way. Let us hope that the Hôtel de Tessé will survive these evil days as successfully as it did those.