



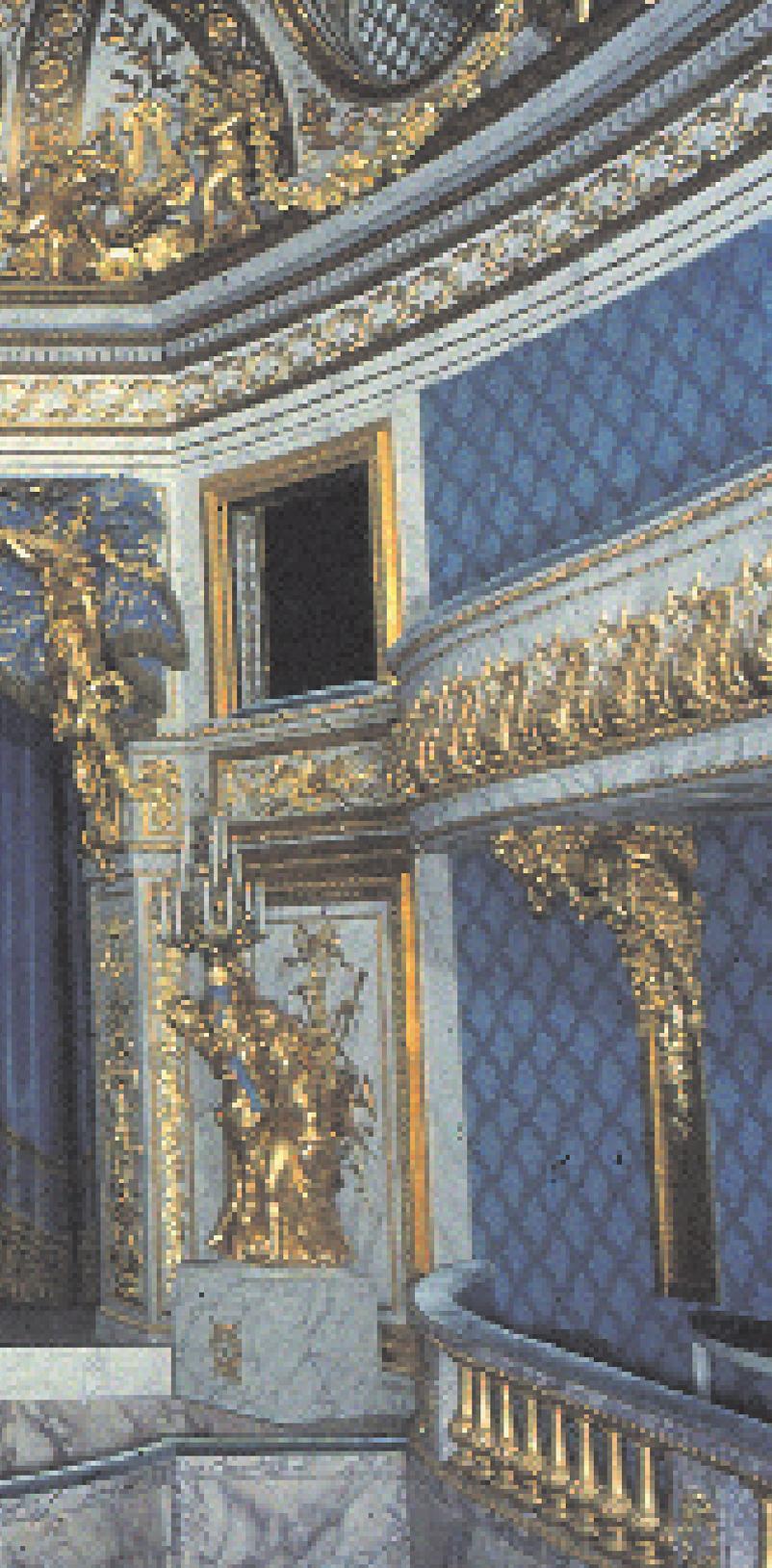
Triumph at Trianon

THE CURTAIN RISES ON MARIE-ANTOINETTE'S THEATER
AT VERSAILLES AFTER A MAJOR RESTORATION

Considered one of the most beautiful historic theaters in Europe, le Théâtre de la Reine at Versailles was built between 1778 and 1779 by the architect Richard Mique at the request of Marie-Antoinette. A pupil of Christoph Willibald von Gluck in Vienna, Marie-Antoinette was fond of music, opera, and the theater, commissioning works from the poet Michel-Jean Sedaine and comic-opera composer André Grétry. In addition to the many command performances held in her private theater, plays were put on in which the queen herself took part.

Appointed in rich, Louis XVI style, the diminutive theater is part of the

Petit Trianon Estate, which is dominated by a small mansion built between 1762 and 1768 by Ange-Jacques Gabriel for Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour. Given to Marie-Antoinette by Louis XVI, le Petit Trianon soon became the queen's favorite residence. She expanded the estate, adding the Anglo-Chinese Gardens and Le Hameau (the Hamlet), a model farm, mill, and dairy, where she and her fellow court companions could pretend they were peasants. In time the suite of buildings would become inextricably linked with the events of the French Revolution. The queen was at Trianon in October 1789, when she was informed that an angry crowd from Paris was approaching the palace gates.



JEAN-MARC MANNI (3)



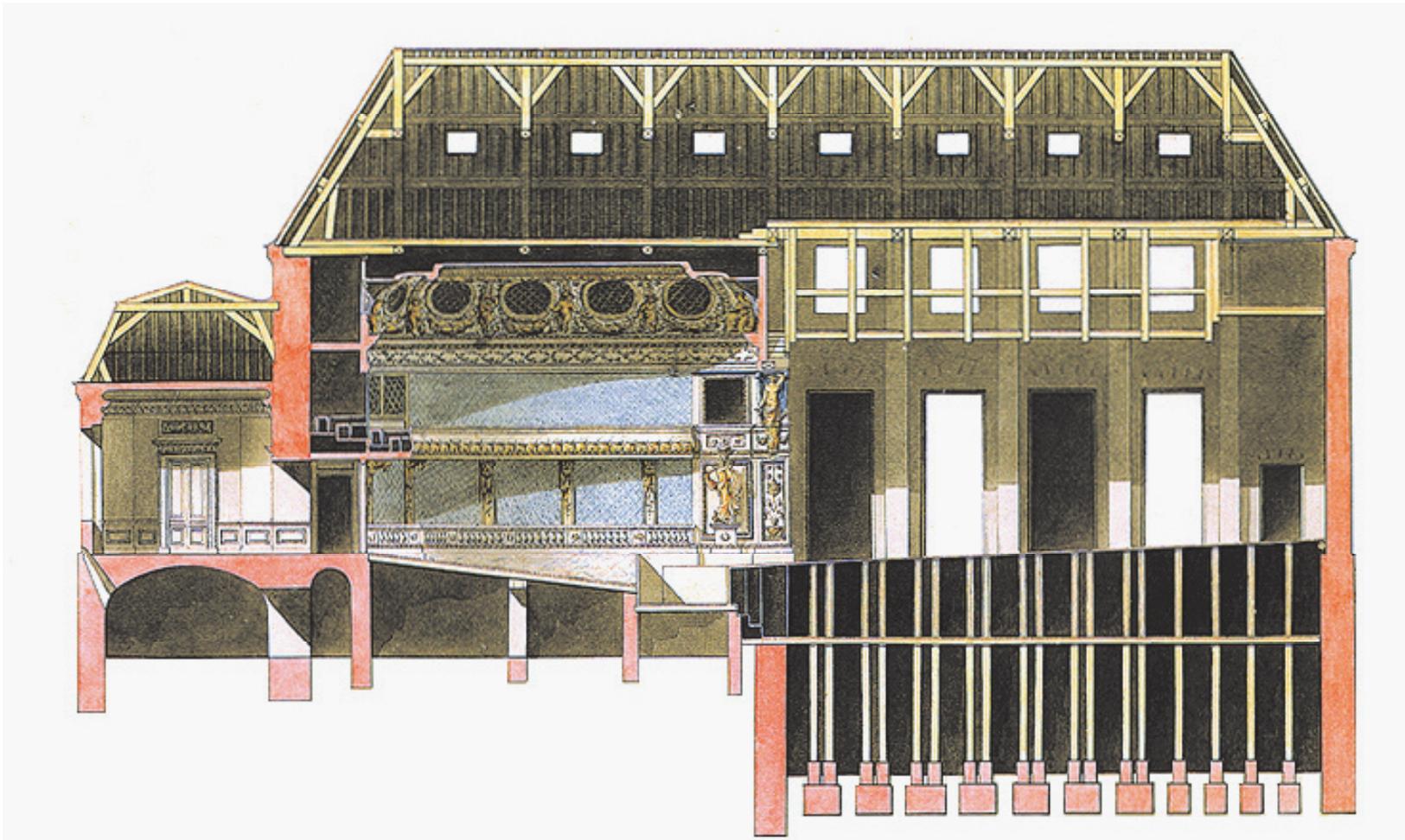
RESTORED TO ITS EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SPLENDOR, MARIE-ANTOINETTE'S THEATER HAD BEEN GILDED IN VARIOUS SHADES OF GREEN AND YELLOW. THE PAINTED OVAL, WHICH GRACES THE THEATER'S CEILING, IS THE WORK OF THE BAROQUE MASTER LOUIS JACQUES DURAMEAU.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, private theaters were a common feature in palaces and chateaus. Madame de Pompadour had commissioned Gabriel to build a theater for her private retreat of Choisy, while Louis XV ordered the same architect to undertake the magnificent Court Theater at Versailles.

In contrast to the latter, Marie-Antoinette's theater at Trianon was intended to welcome a small, intimate crowd. The "parterre"—the central seating area—is surrounded by the "baignoires," the lower box seats, separated by a grand balustrade. There is only one balcony and a single royal box. With the exception of a few furnishings dispersed in 1794, the major-



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A RENDERING DETAILING THE THEATER'S CONSTRUCTION, ABOVE, WAS INCLUDED IN A BOOK OF WATERCOLORS BY THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ARTIST CLAUDE-LOUIS CHÂTELET, NOW IN THE COLLECTION OF A LIBRARY IN MODENA, ITALY. THE THEATER WAS BUILT PRIMARILY OF WOOD—EVIDENT DURING RESTORATION—WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO ITS EXTRAORDINARY ACOUSTICS.

ity of the the decorative elements within the theater had survived intact, gently decaying with the passage of time.

The magnificent interior was constructed primarily of wood for acoustic reasons and decorated with “carton pate,” similar to papier-mâché, which had been gilded with gold leaf in several shades of green and yellow, and painted in places to look like marble. In addition to the decorative elements, the stage machinery, considered state-of-the-art by eighteenth-century standards, had survived along with a number of original sets, among them a 1754 set commissioned by Madame de Pompadour for Fontainebleau. Designed by the Slotz Brothers, it may be one of the oldest sets in the world.

During the 1930s, the theater underwent a major restoration, funded in large part by a Rockefeller grant to Versailles. Although this work saved the theater from total collapse, a number of inappropriate repairs had been undertaken, including the application of faux “gilding,” which over the past seven decades had turned a dark brown, and the replacement of original fabric panels with wallpaper. By the late 1990s, the theater’s ceiling had once again begun to collapse. The balcony was closed, being too fragile to support visitors.

In 1997, WMF France entered into an agreement with Hubert Astier, president of the Versailles Museum, to raise the \$700,000 necessary to properly restore the theater and supervise the work through its completion.

A French team, working under the direction of Pierre-André Lablaude, architect-en-chef of Versailles, under-



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took a magnificent job following in the footsteps of their eighteenth-century predecessors. Guided by archival documents detailing the construction of the theater and the composition of its original finishes, the team was able to stabilize structural elements and properly restore the theater's interior.

Reconstruction of the theater's ceiling was among the most demanding aspects of the restoration. Its beams had shifted out of place, destabilizing the structure and damaging a magnificent painting by the Baroque master Louis Jacques Durameau, which graces an oval at its center. The balcony suffered from similar structural destabilization. The royal box, which had been entirely destroyed, had to be rebuilt. Mique's original design, however, had been recorded by the painter Claude-Louis Châtelet in a book of watercolors that Marie-Antoinette had given to her brother, the Archduke of Modena-Este, and which is currently in the holdings of a library in Modena, Italy.

The original color scheme, including the many shades of gilt and royal blue, was replicated. Although the abundance of gold might seem overwhelming, by candlelight, it is a magical atmosphere, light dancing off the many glistening surfaces.

The well-known, Lyons-based Prelle company, which has been in business since the eighteenth century, was able to re-create the original fabric used in the theater, a blue fleuret damask woven of linen and silk. The only modern additions were the installation of proper electrical and security systems.

Following its restoration, the theater will be used only for intimate gatherings. To have opened it up to the public on a regular basis would have required the installation of numerous "safety features," including emergency exits and lighting, which would have destroyed the integrity of its interior.

The work, which took several years to plan and just over a year to complete, was made possible through the generosity of WMF France and its many donors, including Constantin Goulandris, The Florence Gould Foundation, and the Conny Maeva Foundation. Non-U.S. donations were matched by funds provided through WMF's Robert W. Wilson Challenge Program.

In October 2001, Marie-Antoinette's theater was unveiled to the public, restored to its late-eighteenth-century grandeur. For the first time in nearly two centuries, the music of Mozart and Gluck echoed within its walls. WMF France has made the restoration of eighteenth-century monuments a priority in its mission, the inauguration of the Queen's Theatre a magnificent way to launch this campaign.

—Bertrand du Vignaud



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LABLAUDE



JEAN-MARC MANA

MANY OF THE THEATER'S BALCONY SUPPORTS, SUCH AS THE ONE PICTURED ABOVE LEFT, HAD DECAYED OVER TIME. A CAST OF AN INTACT SUPPORT, ABOVE RIGHT, WAS TAKEN SO THAT REPLACEMENTS COULD BE MADE. FOLLOWING THEIR INSTALLATION, THE SUPPORTS WERE GILDED TO THEIR ORIGINAL SPECIFICATIONS.