



**After more than a year of work, the Grand Foyer of the Opéra Comique, a remarkable testimony to French art at the end of the nineteenth century, recovers its original radiance and beauty.**

**The project, conducted under the direction of National Heritage Sites of France, benefited from the patronage of World Monuments Fund.**

**January 14, 2013.** Three years ago, World Monuments Fund Europe approached Jérôme Deschamps, Director of the Opéra Comique, and listed the restoration of the Grand Foyer among its priority projects. WMF has raised two-thirds of the necessary funds, with the remainder supplied by the French government, owner of the site. The restoration, conducted under the direction of National Heritage Sites of France, was entrusted to the best artisans, selected for this prestigious project.

### **History and Description**

Designed by architect Louis Bernier (1845–1919) for the Opéra Comique, the current Salle Favart, the third with this name, was inaugurated in 1898. While it retains its original proportions and its historic location from 1783, at the dawn of the twentieth century it became the first European theater fully equipped with electricity, and the most modern safety standards were implemented.

Its interior was carefully designed in this age of World's Fairs and a triumphant Republic: it evokes "everything that embodies comic opera in different countries and during different eras," according to Bernier. The apex of the public space, the Grand Foyer is decorated with paintings, paneling, stucco, and carved marble whose eclecticism is tempered by the economy of its decorative themes. The best artists were chosen to create, in a variety of materials, motifs relating to the identity of the institution: the intersecting letters O and C, the lyre and the mask (as the comic opera genre combines music and theater), and the vegetation element (symbolizing nature and vitality, characteristics of the repertoire). Economy and abundance, modernity and tradition come together in the Grand Foyer, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful places in Paris from the nineteenth century, within a building itself listed as a National Heritage Site in 1977.

The painted decoration of the ceiling and walls was done by official artists of the Third Republic, working in the studio on large linen canvases that were installed in 1898 through the method of marouflage.

Henri Gervex (1852–1929) was the creator of the decorations that adorn the walls at both ends: *Le Ballet comique de la Reine* evokes the birth of opera in the court of Henry III, while *La Foire Saint-Laurent* represents the birth of comic opera in Paris in the early eighteenth century.

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The paintings by Albert Maignan (1845–1908) illustrate some scenes from famous comic operas of 1898, identifiable by their refrains: between the windows, *Le Chalet* (1834) by Adolphe Adam to the left, and *La Dame blanche* (1825) by François-Adrien Boieldieu on the right; to the side of the doors of the avant-foyer, *Les Noces de Jeannette* (1853) by Victor Massé on the left, and *Zampa* (1831) by Ferdinand Herold on the right. They are crowned by the allegories of the *Andante*, the *Adagio* and the *Allegro*, and by two women representing *Chant lyrique* and *Romance*. The ceiling, one of Maignan's masterpieces, is a virtuoso illustration of *Les Notes et les Rythmes*.

A set of marble busts completes the décor and represents important composers in the history of the institution: André-Modeste Grétry, Etienne-Nicolas Méhul, Fromental Halévy, Ambroise Thomas, Edouard Lalo, and Claude Debussy. The twelve stucco medallions surrounding Maignan's painting constitute a more structured pantheon, crediting the prosperity of the Opéra Comique to composers (above) as well as also librettists (left) and singers (right).

Above the doors leading to the side rotundas, gilt bronze allegories representing *La Musique* and *Le Chant* are the creation of Paul Gasq (1860–1944) and were produced by the studio of Christofle and Co., as were the ornaments on the five marble doors.

Christofle also created the two exceptional gilt bronze chandeliers with their rich, neo-Pompeian decoration, adorned with masks of satyrs and nymphs, and which hold 116 bulbs each, a highly visible testimony to the pride of the use of electric lighting for the first time in a Parisian theater.

### **Restoration**

The Grand Foyer experienced four rounds of restoration in the twentieth century, and was in excellent condition in terms of stability. The interior decoration, however, had suffered damage and tarnishing from its continued use, the effects of time, and from cigarette smoke.

Pierre-Antoine Gatier, Chief Architect of National Heritage Sites, directed the construction. For each element of the decoration, the materials, techniques, and tarnish have been analyzed and tested in order to establish a protocol for restoration that would be as respectful as possible. Following a call for bids, the work was carried out under the authority of the Chief Architect of National Heritage Sites in close liaison with the management of the Opéra Comique, and with the highest level of cooperation between all stakeholders.

Painted decorations have regained their original luster thanks to a thorough yet delicate cleaning that respected the pictorial layer and the original varnish.

Sculptural decorations, an important presence in the overall composition, received very special treatment. This revealed that they, like the cornices, were treated with three colors of gold: red, yellow, and green.

The frames of the four doors, made of Sarrancolin marble, were cleaned and their sumptuous decorations of gilt bronze, acanthus, and laurel leaves, were taken down, allowing the recovery of the quality of their carving and the richness of the gold treatment, alternating matte and glossy.

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The wainscoting, which runs completely around the room, has been cleaned and then restored with wax; its delicate decoration of gilded thistles was treated with the utmost care to restore its radiance and clarity. The mahogany dados, adorned with a gilded frieze, were the most difficult part to clean.

The two chandeliers were dismantled and transported outside the city to a specialized restorer who recovered their original gilding and restored their electrification, while respecting their original design.

The sumptuous draperies of the three windows will be recreated based on historical documents found in the archives. A natural silk damask, specially woven in Lyon, embellished with several golds, will be complemented by rich passementerie.

Finally, the oak floor, with its Hungarian point pattern, will be restored in 2013.

### **Patronage**

WORLD MONUMENTS FUND (WMF), the leading private international organization dedicated to the conservation of historic monuments and sites around the world, has made the restoration of the Grand Foyer of the Opéra Comique one of its priorities in Europe.

*“The exceptional quality of the decoration dating from the very end of the nineteenth century—which had lost much of its luster and its coherence over the years—and its function as a place to meet and exchange ideas, for spectators at one of the most prestigious opera houses in France, speak for themselves,”* says Bertrand du Vignaud, President of WMF Europe. *“Our American and European patrons, whom I thank most particularly, have once again responded to our call. I am certain that they share my enthusiasm for this magnificent achievement, owing to the talent of restorers who work in the secular tradition of French craftsmanship.”*

The primary sponsor was **The Danny Kaye and Sylvia Fine Kaye Foundation**, joined by **The Eveillard Family Charitable Trust, The Orangerie Foundation for Individual Philanthropy, The Sidney J. Weinberg, Jr. Foundation/Sydney Houghton Weinberg** and an anonymous donor.

The Danny Kaye and Sylvia Fine Kaye Foundation, named for the great American comedian—this year marks the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth—supports cultural and humanitarian projects in New York, Colorado, and the rest of the world. This foundation decided to support the restoration of the Grand Foyer, through WMF, recognizing the Opéra Comique as an institution known for its dynamism, openness to the wider public, and its educational concerns. In addition, the music, comedy, dance, and spirit that prevail in this building are very similar to that which propelled the career of Danny Kaye. The wish of the foundation, and that of WMF and its other partners, is that this restoration, the result of magnificent work accomplished by its restorers, will bring new brilliance to this magnificent Parisian monument. At the same time, it is carefully maintained by the French government, which provided a third of the funding for this project through the Ministry of Culture and Communication/General Directorate of Artistic Creation.

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WMF, which will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 2015, is delighted by the achievement of this project for the Opéra Comique, which will celebrate its own three-hundredth anniversary that same year.

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*“The willingness of World Monuments Fund to restore to the Grand Foyer its brilliance, its contours, and its true nature, will accompany us in the beauty of our artistic reconstruction, as we prepare for the tricentennial of the Opéra Comique in 2015. Thus, World Monuments Fund and the Opéra Comique together affirm that there is no constructive renewal for the future without an enlightened link to our history. I am delighted that this exceptional patronage, combined with government support, has allowed for this magnificent achievement. I thank the patrons who made it possible, I congratulate the craftsmen who made it a reality, and I hope it will be followed by the restoration of other remarkable decorative ensembles that are housed in the Opéra Comique.”*

Jérôme Deschamps

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