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Carnet de France: L'Hôtel Lambert

By Martine P. Dulles

Ah, si les murs pouvaient parler!
If the walls could talk!

We already know a lot about the history, and about some of the events that took place and some of the names of the illustrious persons who visited or lived in the Hôtel Lambert, but so much has happened there since the 17th century.

L'Hôtel Lambert, an *hôtel particulier* (private mansion) was commissioned by Jean-Baptiste Lambert (1607-1644), a financier and advisor to King Louis XIV. It is located at the eastern end of the *Île Saint-Louis*, one of the two islands in the Seine River in Paris; the other island, the *Île de la Cité*, is to the west and it is where Notre-Dame is located.

To design his mansion in 1639, Jean-Baptiste Lambert engaged no one else than Louis Le Vau (1612-1670), the architect who designed the apartments of the King and the Queen in the *Château de Versailles*, the *Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte* and others. The project was completed early in 1644, but the sad story is that Mr. Lambert only lived there a few months as he died in December 1644. His brother, Nicolas, inherited the property. Nicolas, a man of apparently no lesser great taste, enhanced the property. He hired a young artist, Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), to paint the ceiling of the *Galerie d'Hercule* (22 meters long) with mythological scenes. Later, Charles Le Brun painted the ceilings of the vaulted Hall of Mirrors in the *Château de Versailles*!

The Hôtel remained in the Lambert family until 1732, but from then on and until the 19th century, it changed hands many times, and the property went through the turmoil of the French revolution (1789) and other major events in France.

The Polish Prince Czartoryski purchased the mansion in 1843, and it remained in his family for a century. It became the center for the Polish society in France, but also for the cultural society of the time: Eugène Delacroix, Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, Frédéric Chopin, George Sand, Honoré de Balzac, Alphonse de Lamartine and the famous architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, just to name a few, were regular guests.

In 1862, the mansion became a "*monument historique*" (historical monument), a designation by the French government to exceptional buildings and monuments. However, the upkeep of the premises being so expensive, the space was divided into apartments.

You may remember the famous French actress, Michèle Morgan — she lived there for 20 years in the mid-1950s. Another well-known tenant was Alex von Rosenberg-Redé, also known as Alexis, Baron de Redé. He was born in Zurich in a wealthy family of Austro-Hungarian origin who lost their wealth during World War II. After living in the United States for a few years, he chose to move to Paris. As soon as he stepped foot into the premises of the *Hôtel Lambert*, he decided to live there and nowhere else. As a decorator and surrounded by wealthy friends, he enhanced his apartment and entertained lavishly. In 1957 and in 1969, he organized two balls: *Le Bal des Têtes* and *Le Bal Oriental*. At the first ball, guests had to wear headdresses, many of which were made by a young assistant to Christian Dior, namely Yves Saint Laurent. The second ball was attended by 400 costumed guests,



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L'Hôtel Lambert.

welcomed by two huge papier-mâché elephants. Those events became nationally known, especially among the French high society. Liza Minelli, Salvador Dali, Brigitte Bardot and many more well-known persons were in attendance, including Diana Vreeland, editor of the American *Vogue*, who decided to cover the event in the magazine.

In 1975, *L'Hôtel Lambert* was bought by Guy and Marie-Thérèse de Rothschild. "Elegance" did not stop — on the contrary, Marie-Thérèse de Rothschild, like her friend Baron de Redé, redecorated the mansion with great taste and organized many exquisite parties.

In 2007, Guy de Rothschild, having lost his wife (in 1996) and his friend Baron de Redé (in 2004), decided to sell the mansion.

Another chapter started when His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Abdullah Al Thani and members of his Qatari royal family purchased *L'Hôtel*. Huge renovations were undertaken that lasted many years. As a "*monument historique*," the French Ministry of Culture had to be involved in the decision-making process. The apartments were abandoned, and the space was put back to a one-family mansion. From the ceilings to the floors, every detail was addressed. Unfortunately, in 2013 a huge fire created major damage to some upper floors and the roof and lengthened the work schedule.

Once the *Hôtel Lambert's* renovations were completed in 2018, the decoration took place. French antiques of high quality were purchased. Their provenance was from a long list of dignitaries, all major collectors: among the Royals, Louis XIV, Marie-Antoinette, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor; among the designers, Hubert de Givenchy, Christian Dior, Yves Saint-Laurent and Pierre Bergé, just to name a few.

But this chapter ended at the beginning of this year when newspapers revealed that the *Hôtel Lambert* had a new owner: Xavier Niel. He is a very wealthy French entrepreneur, son-in-law of Bernard Arnault, co-founder and chairman of LVMH

(Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy), the world's largest luxury goods company.

So last month, the contents of the *Hôtel Lambert* were sold at Sotheby's in Paris. Sotheby's produced a set of six beautiful catalogues for the sale (from which I retrieved lots of information). In the first volume, Mario Tavella, chairman of Sotheby's Europe, who had visited the Hôtel when Baron de Redé was still a tenant, wrote: "Upon my return and presented with this superbly restored French monument charged with the honors of history, I realized that this is undoubtedly the most beautiful French *Hôtel particulier* in private hands, as well as one of the most astonishing residences in the world."

The sale took place from October 11 to October 14, 2022, where 1,442 objects were auctioned, and the results were far beyond the estimations. The proceeds from the sale went to support the Al Thani Collection Foundation.

At the *Hôtel de la Marine*, on the *Place de la Concorde* (see the *Charleston Mercury*, August 2021), is a wing devoted to the Al Thani collection. It is currently closed but will reopen on December 1, 2022.

Side note

The French Heritage Society is currently celebrating its 40th anniversary. An exceptional program was organized in October for American and French members of this organization. It was my great pleasure to see that the French media mentioned the Foundation and gratefully acknowledged its enormous donations to French heritage.

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