Course 5: French classicism in architecture (17th–18th Century)

Introduction:

During the reign of Louis XIV, art in France was placed in the service of royal power, expressing the grandeur and majesty of the monarchy, as encouraged by Colbert.

Architects such as Louis Le Vau and François Mansart contributed to the rise of a classical style, inspired by Antiquity and the Renaissance and founded on the pursuit of unity, harmony and measure, which became the artistic language of the reign.

I. Definitions and general overview of classicism:

I.1- According to the Larousse dictionary:

Classicism represents a stage in the history of the arts and letters and belongs to different periods depending on the discipline and cultural tradition: the age of Louis XIV in architecture and painting, the late 17th century in literature, and most of the 18th century in music.

I.2- In architecture, classicism is a style that developed chiefly in the 17th century in Europe, notably in **France**, **Italy** and **England**, drawing on the forms and principles of Greco-Roman architecture. It is characterized by a pursuit of order, harmony and proportion, according to precise rules inherited from antiquity.

I.3- The adjective "**classical**" began to be used during **the Renaissance**; it was then employed in opposition to gothic art.

I.4- Classical architecture refers to **the architecture of antiquity** as well as **the styles** derived **from it**. It is distinguished by fundamental principles such as regularity, symmetry, harmony, proportion and the use of modules. Emblematic decorative elements include columns and pediments, often executed in noble materials such as marble and granite.

I.5- In France, classicism covers the period from **1640 to 1715**, corresponding to the reign and style of **Louis XIV**. It is characterized by a pursuit of harmony, order and the beauty of Greco-Roman architectural models. The architect **François Mansart** is regarded as the principal forerunner of classical architecture. His approach rests on meticulous composition, aimed at achieving a more sophisticated and theatrical effect.

II. Historical Context of classicism:

-During the reign of King Louis XIII (1610–1643): a transition towards classicism, the **Louis XIII style**.

-In the 17th century, the rise of the urban bourgeoisie led to the construction of private townhouses (*hôtels particuliers*). **Between 1615 and 1645**, the first Parisian example of an hôtel based on strict regularity was built: the Luxembourg Palace, the work of Salomon de Brosse.

- From 1640, the architect François Mansart: birth of classicism, Chateau de Maisons-Laffitte (1641), Chateau de Blois (Gaston d'Orléans Wing, 1636).

-1640–1660, the era of Anne of Austria: attempts to integrate Baroque forms into classical architecture (Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte, 1656) and the college of the four nations (1662).

-Louis XIV style, the Sun King (1660–1715): regularity and monumentality

-**In 1667**, the construction of the Louvre Colonnade marked the end of this baroque influence.

- In 1671: the Royal Academy of Architecture was founded by Jean-Baptiste Colbert[1].

III. The Periods of Classicism:

Classicism reached its apogee during the reign of Louis XIV (**the great century**). The king was the master who directed projects, imposing his own taste.

The finance minister, **Colbert**, encouraged the creation of numerous academies, thereby helping to shape classical doctrine. Charles Le Brun[2], for his part, gathered the greatest artists of the age under his direction, thereby creating a unity of decoration characteristic of the Louis XIV style.

III.1- Pre-classicism, or towards classicism (1580–1640):

This period is regarded as a transitional phase "towards classicism", marked by a fusion of Mannerism and classical architecture. In France, the influence of the Italian Renaissance manifested itself in a search for simpler, less decorative forms. Indeed, ancient architecture was adopted there with great rigor and strict fidelity. A notable example is the Luxembourg Palace in Paris, built between 1615 and 1645 by the architect Salomon de Brosse.

2. The Apogee of classicism (1640–1715):

This period embodies the apogee of classicism, known in France as the "**great century**" under the reign of Louis XIV. It is characterized by the strict application of rules aimed at achieving harmony, clarity and universality. This is due above all to the establishment of the **Royal Academy of Architecture**. From 1640, the architect François Mansart began to produce buildings that respected the classical tradition:

- Roofs and façades are unified, and volumes are hierarchically organized by **pavilion.**

-Verticality is maintained, in keeping with the tradition of the period.

- The classical orders are used on façades and brick is abandoned (the end of the Louis XIII style).

Classical architecture is distinguished by the creation of large royal squares and by chateaux such as the Chateau de Maisons-Laffitte (1641), the Chateau de Blois (Gaston d'Orléans Wing, 1636) and the Chateau de Versailles and its gardens (from 1661).

3. Late Classicism (1715–1750):

Towards the 18th century, classicism began to decline, particularly with the emergence of the Rococo style, followed by a revival of classicism known as Neoclassicism. Nevertheless, the classical style persisted mainly in public and theatrical architecture. The most notable example of this persistence is the Hotel of Marine in Paris (Jacques Gabriel).

III. Urban planning:

III.1- Regular urban planning of classical cities: the plan of classical cities is inherited from antiquity[3] and the Renaissance; it is characterized by a rigid geometric conception and a rational organization, founded on the principles of regularity, symmetry, centrality and axiality.

This urban planning aimed to glorify royal power, particularly in France under Louis XIV, and to facilitate the control and management of public space. It also displays the following characteristics:

[1] Jean-Baptiste Colbert was a French statesman who served as Controller General of Finances from 1665 to 1683 and as Secretary of State for the Navy from 1668 to 1683 under Louis XIV.

[2] Charles Le Brun: First Painter to King Louis XIV

[3] Regular plan of the ancient Greek and Roman cities

-Grid organization: plans are regular, with an orthogonal layout (generally laid out in advance).

-Simple geometry: cities are organized according to simple geometric forms, which allows land areas to be measured and allocated easily. Streets are also straight, facilitating circulation and showcasing the landscapes of the city's focal points.

-Symmetry and centrality: plans are organized according to the principle of symmetry, with a centrality often marked by a square or a monument.

- Perspectives and monumental axes: the city is structured around a major axis. These axes offer impressive vistas, frequently terminating at emblematic monuments or squares.

-Hierarchy of functions: public and religious buildings are placed in strategic, highly visible and easily accessible locations.

Champs-Élysées avenue was laid out in **1667** during the reign of Louis XIV. It was designed by **André Le Nôtre**, the celebrated royal gardener, as part of the extension of the tuileries garden. Originally, it was called "Grande Allée du Roule" and formed part of the central axis of the garden, as a broad tree-lined promenade. It was only in the 18th century that it took the name "Champs-Élysées", in reference to the Elysian Fields of Greek mythology, symbolizing a place of happiness and peace.

The avenue gradually gained in importance and prestige, becoming one of the principal axes of Paris. Over the centuries, it has been modernized and widened to become the emblematic avenue we know today, linking the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe.

III.2- Royal Squares (Places Royales):

King Henri IV launched the construction in Paris of the first two royal squares, true archetypes of modern urban planning. These squares stage urban space, in the manner of the baroque, but with a French approach that favors clarity and rationality, based on the following principles: geometric regularity (square, circular and polygonal), symmetry, and organization around a royal statue at the center. Among the most famous squares are:

- Under King "**Henri IV"** : Place Dauphine, Place Vosges.

- Under King "**Louis XIV"** : Place Vendôme, Place des Victoires, place Vauban's strongholds.

- Under King "**Louis XV":** municipal urban planning (place of Concorde, place of Bellecour, Peyrou Park in Montpellier).

III.1- Place Vosges (Paris), 1605–1612: It is one of the most famous royal squares in Paris, located in the Marais district. It was built during the reign of Henri IV between 1605 and 1612. Its layout is based on simple geometric forms and central symmetry[4]. It is surrounded by a harmonious architectural ensemble of buildings in red brick, ashlar (cut stone) and slate, with arcades at ground-floor level. It served as the prototype for other squares, such as the place Dauphine and the place Vendôme.

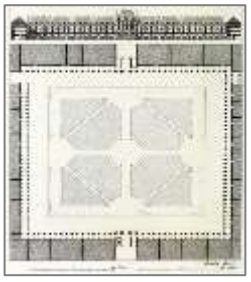


Fig. 1: Plan of the place Vosges

III.2- Place Vendôme: located in Paris, the square was designed by the architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart from 1698, during the reign of Louis XIV. It is based on the same principles as the place Vosges: regularity, harmony and symmetry. Octagonal in

[4] The square is almost square in form, 140 m

form, it is surrounded by uniform buildings with slate roofs and homogeneous façades, articulated by arcades and Corinthian pilasters. At its center stands a central monument (the Vendôme Column) that structures the space.

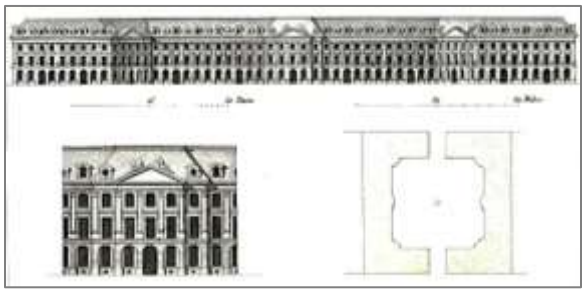


Fig. 2: Plan of the place Vendôme and elevations of the surrounding buildings

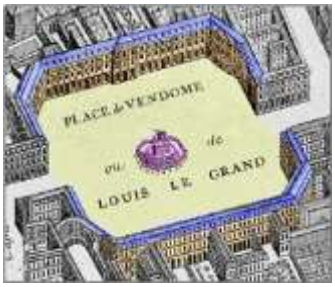


Fig. 3: 3D view of the place Vendôme

IV. Civil architecture in France:

Classicism in France is marked by two great royal buildings: the Chateau de Versailles and the Louvre Museum (Richelieu Wing).

IV.2- The Chateau of Versailles[5]:

It is a masterwork of classicism, commissioned by Louis XIV to glorify the French monarchy. Originally, the palace was built in 1624, under Louis XIII, as a hunting lodge. It was enlarged by the architects **Louis Le Vau** and **Jules Hardouin-Mansart,** during the reign of his son (Louis XIV); the chateau's gardens were designed by Le Nôtre[6].

The architecture of the **chateau** is unique and triumphant, marked by grandeur, vast gardens and sumptuous interior decoration. It is organized around a central axis crossed by a series of transverse axes, which frame the layout of the palace and gardens.

The palace takes the form of **a vast central block** flanked by **two wings** enclosing an imposing main courtyard. Mansart[7] subsequently added two further wings extending the façade. The chateau is essentially characterized by: horizontal façades, a rusticated ground floor, flat roofs, and arched windows.

Its most remarkable classical features:

-The Hall of Mirrors : a monumental hall[8] adorned with mirrors, gilding, chandeliers and ceiling paintings, a symbol of the king's grandeur and glory. This gallery connects the King's wing to the Queen's.

-The Gardens of Versailles: designed by André Le Nôtre on the model of the French garden. They are characterized by regularity, symmetry and the module. Their compositions vary among the grand canal, basins, fountains, flowerbeds, groves and sculptures.

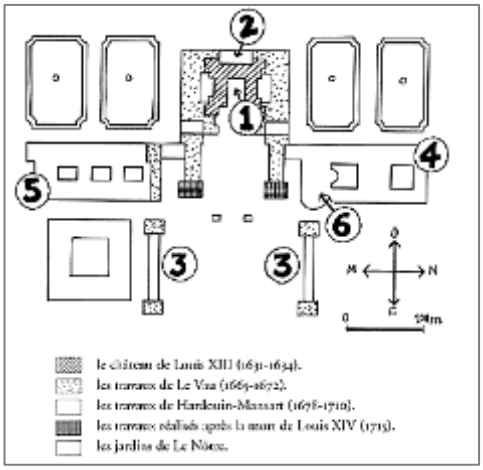


Fig. 4: Plan of the Chateau of Versailles and its construction phases

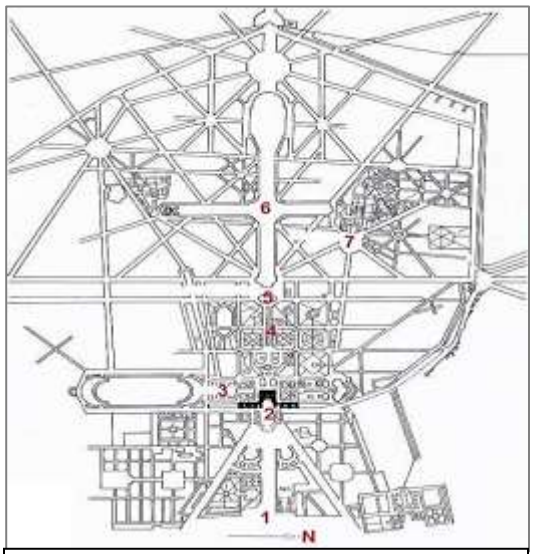
[5] The chateau is now a museum and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

[6] André Le Nôtre (1613–1700) was a French landscape architect who, from 1645, was notably the designer of the parks and gardens of King Louis XIV.

[7] Jules Hardouin-Mansart, the architect of Versailles under the reign of King Louis XIV, known as the Sun King (Roi-Soleil)

[8] Its dimensions: 73 m long, 10.5 m wide and 12.3 m high.

-The Grand Trianon: It was built under Louis XIV, beginning in 1687. This palace stands within the gardens of Versailles and served as a place of leisure and retreat. With its ordered façades, colonnades and geometric gardens, Versailles is a perfect example of this aesthetic.



1- Town, 2- Palace, 3- Orangery, 4- Gardens, 5- Basin of Apollo, 6- Grand Canal, 7- Grand

Fig. 5: plan of the Chateau of Versailles with its outdoor landscaping

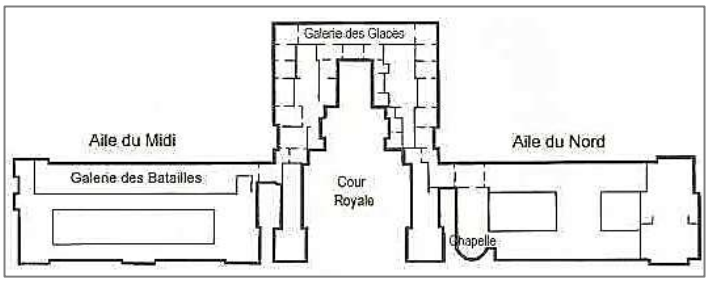


Fig. 6: plan of the palace

IV.2- The Louvre Colonnade (Paris, 1667) – Le Vau, Le Brun, Perrault:

A masterpiece designed by the architect **Claude Perrault**, located at the western end of the **Louvre palace** in Paris. Its construction began in **1667** and was completed in **1670**.

The colonnade is a series of **28 columns** of the corinthian order, supporting a richly decorated entablature. It is distinguished by its symmetry, order and harmony. It also offers a spectacular view over the square courtyard, creating a majestic and solemn atmosphere. Perrault contributed to the construction of the Louvre Colonnade in Paris, where he applied principles of rationality and harmony based on precise calculations.



Fig. 7: Exterior view: the Louvre Colonnade, Claude Perrault, Paris, 1666–1670

V. French Formal Gardens :

The French garden is an ordered and ornamented garden symbolizing royal power. True works of art, these gardens glorify sovereigns. The most famous example is that of the **Chateau de Versailles**, designed by

André Le Nôtre[9] for **Louis XIV**. One may also mention the gardens of the **Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte** and of the **Chateau de Chantilly**. They follow strict layout rules, such as:

-Simple geometric layouts, orthogonal axes and alignments of trees.

- Symmetrical compositions.

-Careful positioning of the elements of the layout, such as the chateau at the center of the composition (creating perspectives).

-The integration of green spaces and blue surfaces (flowerbeds[10], grass carpets, canals and water features, topiary[11]).

-Embroidery parterres (parterres de broderie): decorative patterns cut into boxwood hedges or flower plantings.

-Basins and fountains: water plays a central role in French gardens, symbolizing both life and power. The basins are arranged so as to reflect the sky and the surrounding sculptures. Fountains, such as those at Versailles (notably the famous Latona basin and the Apollo Basin), add a dynamic dimension to the gardens. Water displays are often synchronized with court events or spectacles.

-Avenues and groves [12]: the broad avenues lined with trees and clipped shrubs create perspectives that draw the eye towards focal points such as sculptures or fountains, as in the grand canal of Versailles.

-Symbolic use: French gardens are often imbued with mythological or allegorical symbolism. At Versailles, the sculptures and fountains refer to ancient deities, illustrating the power of Louis XIV, who was often compared to Apollo, which explains the particular importance of the Basin of Apollo.



Fig. 8: General view of the gardens of the Chateau de Versailles

-Mastery of nature: trees, hedges and flowers are carefully clipped, and every element of the garden is meticulously arranged, thus symbolizing royal sovereignty over nature and the kingdom.

VI. Characteristics of classicism:

-**A rational**, **functional and balanced** architecture.

-It draws on classical works to establish aesthetic and moral norms.

-Urban planning is particularly concerned with the design of **royal squares**.

-Theatricalization of space, but through techniques different from those of the baroque.

-**Homogeneity and unification** of space are achieved through a set of principles such as repetition, the module, balance, symmetry and proportion (balance and harmony between volumes).

-**Regularity** of **plans** and **façades** through orthogonal straight lines (façades with rectilinear lines but endowed with elegant decoration).

-Reuse of classical columns and orders (doric, ionic, corinthian, tuscan and composite).

[9] André Le Nôtre (1613–1700): King of gardeners and gardener to the king: he had been the king's gardener since 1635. He designed the great gardens of France, such as the Parc de Sceaux and the Château de Versailles.

[10] Flowerbeds.: a part of a garden, generally level, planted with flowers or turf, or laid out as reflecting pools

[11] Plants clipped or sculpted into decorative shapes.

[12] Private gardens for strolling or attending open-air performances.

-Pediments and friezes: triangular pediments surmounting porticoes or windows are frequently found, as well as ornamented friezes.

-The use of noble materials, such as stone and marble. They are commonly used to give a building an appearance that is at once imposing and durable.

-Sober decoration: unlike the highly ornate baroque, classicism is more austere, with a refined decorative scheme that emphasizes the rigor of forms.

-Perspective and ordonnance: in classical gardens such as those of Versailles, architecture is integrated into a strict geometric organization of the surrounding space, with a regular use of perspectives.

-The construction techniques employed are the same as those of the Renaissance.

-The widespread use of dressed masonry construction (brick with stone quoins).

-Religious buildings **built** in the Gothic manner (flying buttresses, ribbed vaults, buttresses) but with barrel vaults.

-Mansard roofs and flat terrace.



Fig. 9: Central part of the façade of the colonnade of the Louvre: regularity of the façade

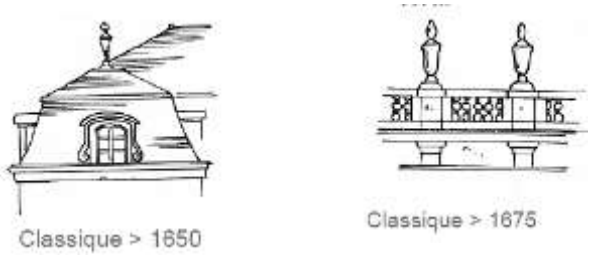


Fig. 10: Left : Mansard roof,
right: flat roof: attic storey adorned with flame-urns