

## Plasters for Versailles, the decorations of Jean-Baptiste Plantar for the Historical Galleries (1833-1848)

Justine Gain

**Abstract:** From 1833, Louis-Philippe transformed the former royal residence of Versailles into a new museum: the Historical Galleries. He gathered collections illustrating national history, from Middle Ages to his reign. To offer a proper setting, the architect Frederic Nepveu chose plaster as the main material of the decoration. And to do so, he hired the official sculptor of the time: Jean-Baptiste Plantar (1790-1879). As any sculptor, he used plaster as a sketch, but above all, he applied it largely in the mural decoration, even in key locations as the Great Battles Gallery and the 1830s Room. Plaster was also employed as a museographical tool to present collections, merged in an ensemble evoking their past eras. More than created an ornamental coherence in the galleries, Plantar's works demonstrate the flourishing implementation of plaster in official architecture, and the means processed to show it.

**Keywords:** sculpture, ornament, historic galleries, Versailles, Monarchy of July

### Yesos para Versalles, las decoraciones de Jean-Baptiste Plantar para las Galerías Históricas de Versalles (1833-1848)

**Resumen:** A partir de 1833, Luis Felipe transformó la antigua residencia real de Versalles en un nuevo museo: las Galerías Históricas. Reunió colecciones que ilustraban la historia nacional, desde la Edad Media hasta su reinado. Para ofrecer un marco adecuado, el arquitecto Frédéric Nepveu eligió el yeso como material principal de la decoración. Y para ello contrató al escultor oficial de la época: Jean-Baptiste Plantar (1790-1879). Como todo escultor, utilizó el yeso como esbozo, pero sobre todo lo empleó en gran medida en la decoración mural, incluso en lugares clave como la Galería de las Grandes Batallas y la Sala de 1830. El yeso también se empleó como herramienta museográfica para presentar las colecciones, fusionadas en un conjunto que evocaba sus épocas pasadas. Más que crear una coherencia ornamental en el museo, las obras de Plantar demuestran el floreciente uso del yeso en la arquitectura oficial, y los medios implementados para mostrarlo.

**Palabras clave:** escultura, ornamento, galerías históricas, Versalles, Monarquía de Julio

### Gessos para Versalhes, as decorações de Jean-Baptiste Plantar para as Galerias Históricas de Versalhes (1833-1848)

**Resumo:** A partir de 1833, Louis-Philippe transformou a antiga residência real de Versalhes num novo museu: as Galerias Históricas. Reuniu coleções que ilustram a história nacional, desde a Idade Média até ao seu reinado. Para oferecer um ambiente adequado, o arquiteto Frederic Nepveu escolheu o gesso como material principal da decoração. Para o efeito, contratou o escultor oficial da época: Jean-Baptiste Plantar (1790-1879). Como qualquer escultor, utilizou o gesso como esboço, mas sobretudo empregou-o em grande parte na decoração mural, mesmo em locais-chave como a Galeria das Grandes Batalhas e a Sala 1830. O gesso foi também utilizado como instrumento museográfico para apresentar as coleções, fundidas num conjunto que evoca as suas épocas passadas. Mais do que criar uma coerência ornamental no museu, as obras de Plantar demonstram o uso florescente do estuque na arquitetura oficial e os meios implementados para o mostrar.

**Palavras-chave:** escultura, ornamento, galerias históricas, Versalhes, Monarquia de Julho

## Introduction

Despite a few tries of making decors with plaster from the High Middle Ages (Inizan, 2017 ; Barthe, 2019)<sup>[1]</sup>, this material started to stand its modern shape during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and progressively took his place as a material able to adorn architecture (D'Aviler 1691), while plasterers and specialised sculptors perfected themselves, through different academies<sup>[2]</sup>. Its expansion had further benefited from its regular addition to stucco, instead of lime, largely used in interiors. Then, the rocaille aesthetic also needed plaster's support to invade interiors as Germain Boffrand reported it in his *Architecture Book* (Boffrand 1745), moreover, looking back to the ornaments he made at the Hôtel de Soubise, around 1740. The architect Jacques-François Blondel, seeing the craze of the time, also included plaster in his writings (Blondel 1772) without blaming it, and in addition to practical considerations about its making. The improvement of the knowledge around plaster (Puisais 1994), as well as the development of industry supported its use throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Ferroussat de Castelbon 1776).

Nevertheless, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while Antiquity became back the major reference, a superior prestige still surrounded the stone, which still decorated august buildings, largely outside, or showed up in essential performance spaces (Guini-Skliar 2009). Even more, some remarkable architectures left an important place to the bare wall, to the beauty of the stone without ornament, as it is, for instance, in the main staircase of the Theater of Bordeaux by Victor Louis, in 1780.

This vision partly remained popular among the architects during the following century (Gourlier, 1855). In 1832, in his *Historic Dictionary of Architecture* (Quatremère de Quincy, 1832), Antoine Quatremère de Quincy recalled the little use that previous centuries made of this material, rejected after him by Vitruve, and regarded good enough to build ordinary houses. If these lines were not based, contrary to recent papers (Lafarge and Le Dantec, 2017), on a scientific method, it at least reminds the classic consideration on materials. The 19<sup>th</sup> century pursued all the more the use of plaster, creating thus a tension, a paradox between the classical perspective of using noble materials and the burst toward modernity, a revival aesthetic in versatile materials.

Then, the flourishing use of plaster in official architecture (Inizan, 2017) came with the increasing of industrial materials as the *carton-pierre* and others (Nègre 2006). This allowed the process of casting, so common at the time, but also denied by some architects as "emptying the spirit of artists" (Normand 1826). Jean-Baptiste Plantar's works, especially his making in Versailles, exemplified perfectly how plaster took its part in the very official architecture, during the first 19<sup>th</sup> century. The archives still preserved in the museum, keep, records of this employment in decors throughout the castle. Finally, this paper intends to analyse the implementations of use of plaster in the Historical

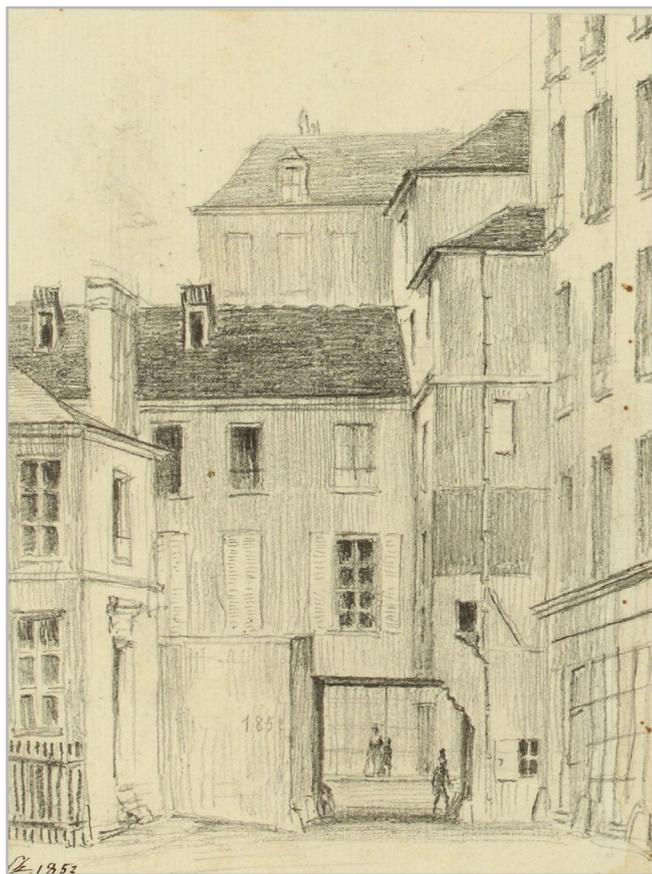
Galleries of Versailles, as an architectural statement, but also how these ornaments serve the political purpose of the museum, through *revivals*.

"Humble as its components are, common and cheap as it seems beside marble, and paltry when compared with the metals that have to a considerable degree taken its place for reproductive uses, it still preserves the plastic art, and enables youth to contemplate antiquity in its noblest achievements. To-day plaster is revolutionizing industrial art; for us, and in all probability, for those who are to come after us, plaster, lowly and cheap, but docile and durable, is the connecting agent with this greatest of men's indorsements in the past. " (*Official Report of the Second annual convention of the National Association of Builders of the United States of America*, 1888)

## Jean-Baptiste Plantar (1790-1879), formation and craft

Jean-Baptiste Plantar was born in Paris, in 1790, nearby the *faubourg Saint-Antoine*, in a district known at that time to host artisans, particularly those specialised in woodcraft. Plantar's family was not an exception since his father and his grand-father were talented sculptors from the *Académie de Saint-Luc*, a crafts corporation gathering painters and sculptors, positioned as an alternative, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century's artistic Parisian life, to the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*. Therefore, Plantar received a strong education in drawing but also in sculpture from his father who worked notably for the *Musee des Monuments Français* and for the Palace of Versailles. Owing to his training and then his successful career, Plantar embodied a permanence of the *Académie de Saint-Luc* legacy, after the withdrawal of corporations during the French Revolution (Kaplan 2001). As a young man, Jean-Baptiste Plantar received further training at the *Ecole des Beaux-arts* but did not contend to the *Prix de Rome* due to his precarious financial situation, starting to work as early as he could. His career started alongside Jean-François Mourette, a relatively anonymous sculptor nowadays, but the author of several important decorations for the Louvre and its surroundings – the Caryatids Room's ceiling or the eagles on the Lena Bridge, for instance. After this apprenticeship, Plantar swiftly made a name for himself as an accomplished sculptor, and more precisely as a talented ornamentalist, and started working for the main architect figures of his time – Pierre Fontaine, Frederic Nepveu, or Etienne-Hippolyte Godde – and hence, in most of the finest places as well as the Tuileries, the Louvre, the Palais-Royal, Versailles or Fontainebleau, to name only a few. These many works were explained by the official functions he occupied: from the year 1829, Plantar became a sculptor of the Buildings of the King until the end of the monarchy, in 1848.

Early on, Plantar moved to the *passage Sainte-Marie* [Figure 1], a little street stuck between the rue du Bac and the *boulevard Saint-Germain* yet to be built at the time, in today's 7<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*. Related to his implication in



**Figure 1.-** Léon Leymonnerye, *View of the passage Sainte-Marie toward the rue du Bac, D.8021(1130), Musee Carnavalet – Histoire de Paris, Paris.*

plaster works, it is interesting to underline that in 1819, he married Marie Pauline Micheli, daughter of an Italian moulder, Pellegrino Micheli who had arrived in Paris with his brother Etienne around 1780 (Carminati 2018) and had been living near the *faubourg Saint-Antoine*, as Plantar's family also did. Likewise, the Michelis family moved near the *faubourg Saint-Germain* during the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Testifying how involved this family was in the plaster field, Marie Pauline Micheli's cousin was, years later, the official moulders of the Louvre Museum's workshop during the Second Empire, *circa* 1855 (Rionnet 1996). In a social class where endogamic weddings were usual, it seems that Plantar acquired, through his family-in-law, a better knowledge of plaster's manipulation (Gain 2023 ; Derrot 2014). On the edges of craft and art, Plantar highly participated to the democratisation of plaster in official architectures, especially in Versailles, reflected a new perspective on mural decoration, and both prompted by his formation, and his personal choices.

### Made or Remade the Past: Revival Aesthetics

In 1833, Louis-Phillippe, the lately crowned King of the French, had been thinking about establishing a new museum in Versailles<sup>[3]</sup>. This former royal residence had been left unused for a long time. With the French

Revolution, the palace had already been turned into a short-lived museum: the *Musee special de l'École française* (Blanc 2017), which had then disappeared by 1816. In the early 1830s, once again, works began to transform the place into a museum, this time dedicated to the national history. Frederic Nepveu (Bireau 2009) was named the architect of the brand-new Historical Galleries. He supervised the entire modification of Versailles, to convert old and unexploited accommodations into actual museum rooms and had proper museographical settings installed, such as the zenithal lighting in the Great Battles Gallery. To take care of the entire carved decoration, in stone, wood and plaster, he hired Jean-Baptiste Plantar (Gain 2017). The sculptor, under the direction of the architect, cleverly alternated the use of these different materials, sculpting nonetheless mainly with plaster, in the new spaces arranged for the museum.

In three-dimensional sculpture, plaster was commonly employed as a sketch, to figure out the future sizes and the potential adjustments, through a plaster primary model. In Versailles, the *Porte de Rhodes* perfectly illustrated this application. This historic door from the 16<sup>th</sup> century was gifted to Louis-Philippe by the sultan Mahmoud II, as a diplomatic token of friendships between their nations. This piece was initially installed in the Order of the Knights of Saint-Jean-de-Jerusalem's Hospital, in Rhodes, before its arrival in Versailles. Nepveu was asked to create, on the ground floor of the north ward, five rooms themed around the medieval crusades [Figure 7]. In 1837, Plantar started to restore the *Porte de Rhodes*, which were in a poor condition. To conduct his operation efficiently, he resorted to plaster. Before repairing directly on the proper wood of the door, especially for figures, Plantar printed them in plaster to try his modifications on a draught before applying them to the original figures<sup>[4]</sup>. Specifically, he used this process on the figure of Saint John, above the central pillar. He either stamped the two knights in the round, repairing them alike on plaster prints before completely remaking them in another piece of wood, and replacing them back on the door. In this case, plaster was practiced to fix the composition, prevent possible mistakes, before restoring or remaking pieces of the 16th century door. This operation underlines the specific activity of restoration by Plantar in Versailles. Despite his numerous creations, he was also charged to fix some historic decors as the *Porte de Rhodes*, or as the pediment of the Marble Court, using another casting material, the *ciment de Molesnes*<sup>[5]</sup>. This exemplifies this association, feature of the time, between revivals of past and authentic historic pieces from these periods.

Besides, other operations were conducted on the door. Plantar copied elements on the top to create – later on – new overdoors for the entrances of each five Crusade's rooms [Figure 2]. After this stamp, he created, in 1842, a model in plaster for each overdoor with the final dimensions. For instance, the first Crusades Room model, as the others, was orchestrated around an ogive with two spandrels ornamented by trefoils and lily flowers and separated by a pinnacle while backgrounds were full of vegetal scrolls.

In two recesses, a pair of angels held what was to become crusaders coats of arms – which were not sculpted at that point, but to be realised later, directly on the actual piece, as they would be illustrating different Crusades characters for each room. The model completed, he proceeded to a hollow casting to obtain several prints, and, in this case, he made two prints for the two overdoors of the first room. These different steps, including different types of moulding, are entirely detailed in Historical Galleries archives, from the stamps of the *Porte de Rhodes* to the final installation of the overdoors<sup>[6]</sup>. This underlines the complexity of the process in conjunction with its cost, implying its administrative recognition in the bill. In the Crusades Rooms, plaster was used both to repair historical pieces, as well as to create similar gothic overdoors. In that regard, the material serves the revival aesthetic clearly displayed in Versailles, especially in this section, to make a gothic atmosphere made with authentic and imitated elements.



**Figure 2.-** Overdoor, Crusades Room n°1, North Ward, Castle of Versailles, Versailles © Justine Gain.

### Monumental sculpture: malleability of plaster

In the Crusades Rooms, the overdoors just mentioned above did not look like plaster, but wood. As a matter of fact, the painter Nicolas-Pantaléon Renaud did so in those spaces in 1839<sup>[7]</sup>. After several white coats of spray paints, made with oil, Renaud “painted in oak wood” the decors made by Plantar – the overdoors but also a part of the ceiling – with a specific process not detailed in the record, and then, vanished all of them. The *entrepreneur* Renaud also worked in the *Salle des Maréchaux* (Lacaille 2015) as well as the *Antichambre du Grand Couvert* at the *Grand Trianon* (Deplanche 2019), where he also painted the ceiling in fake white-veined marble. In the same way (Cochet 1846), the painter Jean-Baptiste Joseph Jorand<sup>[8]</sup> (Chave 2016) gilded the *voussures* made by the sculptor with gothic ogives, pinnacles, and cabbage leaves<sup>[9]</sup>. The plasticity of plaster was highly used in Versailles: Plantar made the *decors*, then, other artisans painted them to replicate other materials, nobler. The defects of the plaster – the lack of elegance, its inexpensive appearance – are thus filled by the following operations on Plantar’s ornaments.

The great malleability of plaster is likewise illustrated in the most prestigious spaces of the edifice. The Historical Galleries were basically a readaptation of the castle’s spaces to their new museal functions (Gaehtgens 1984). It was also a unique chance for Louis-Philippe to stamp Versailles’s architecture with his own imprint, as his ancestors did. The north and the south wards received the most extensive arrangements, after the complete destruction of 17<sup>th</sup> century accommodations. In the south one, the *Aile du Midi*, Frederic Nepveu designed two main museum rooms: the Great Battles Gallery and the 1830s Room (“Salle de 1830”, literally). As central spaces of the new museum, they were to be made a political instrument to illustrate national history, as the restored monarchy thought it should be told. Paintings, sculptures, supported by the ceiling decorations, show the most prestigious battles in the eponymous gallery, topographically followed by the 1830’s Room which directly promote the power. It demonstrates how history had led to the fair and moderate rule of the *Monarchie de Juillet*, solely aimed at ensuring the unity of the French people.

In the Great Battles Gallery, the iconographic program was ambitious: representing France’s military victories through large paintings – *The Entry of Henry IV into Paris, the 22 March 1594* by François Gerard<sup>[10]</sup> among the famous ones – and busts representing military heroes. In 1836, Jean-Baptiste Plantar was charged with decorating the prestigious gallery. Due to the room’s importance, Nepveu kept a close look on the decoration program: he chose which patterns were to be used and how Plantar was supposed to arrange them, throughout a series of drawings preserved in Versailles<sup>[11]</sup>. Hence, the ornaments were the result of a strong dialogue between the architect and the sculptor. The first decided the global arrangement while the latter brought his expertise to enhance the ornamental motifs. The entire setting was created in plaster, thus going hand in hand with the partitioning of the ceiling surfaces, which featured interior decoration from the 1820s and facilitated by this material (Inizan 2017).

The Great Battles Gallery *decorum* is dense [Figure 3], but mainly structured by the two-barrel vaults framing the huge zenithal lighting set. Above an acanthus leaves frieze and another one with water leaves, Plantar displayed an extra frieze of beads and whirls and a fruit torus cadenced by bay leaves just around the zenithal window. On the sides, he animated the two parts of a rich coffered ceiling by placing different types of *rosettes* within each coffer. Above the walls, bull’s-eye windows rows framed the ceiling, each window being decorated by Plantar – once again – in a different way [Figure 4]. He alternated four kinds of ornamental compositions, each corresponding to a different historical theme. The first, for instance, evokes the medieval period with its quiver and its gauntlet surrounded by different weapons<sup>[12]</sup>, and by the King’s figures (LP) with bay leaves. Obviously, a direct connection had to be established between artworks of the gallery – the sculpted busts and the military paintings –, and the

ornaments on the ceiling, both supporting the same iconographic program related to war, represented through different eras.



**Figure 3.-** Great Battles Gallery, Castle of Versailles, Versailles © Justine Gain.

This gallery, due to its impressive dimensions, epitomizes one of the main advantages of using plaster in the palace: the ease of operating. For the larger part of the setting, Plantar carved his linear ornaments directly – mouldings, vegetal torus, ova, scrolls, etc. – in plaster prepared upstream. In other cases, he realised, probably in his workshop in Paris, some elements as the *rosettes*, obtained by means of a model cast in several exemplars, described above, or the military trophies made for the bull's-eye window. Besides the different techniques of moulding induced, using plaster also generated a specific logistic between a local production *in situ* and brought pieces needing a longer production process, in the studio. For these, Plantar used four different models – Greek, Roman and Medieval – from which Plantar obtained 44 exemplars for each side of the vault. He did the same for the King's figures and the bay leaves. Using plaster to adorn a more than 120 meters gallery was strategic, in that sense, it permitted to use casting and production in series from several models only in order to adorn efficiently.



**Figure 4.-** Bull's-eye window, Great Battle Gallery, South Ward, Castle of Versailles © Justine Gain.

Following the iconographic program, the layout of the first-floor commands to the 1830's Room [Figure 5] [13]. Once again, the scenery achieved by Plantar is mainly made in plaster. One of the most remarkable patterns of the ceiling referred to the constitutional charter's date "1830", written in gold letters on a blue background. It celebrates the commencement of Louis-Philippe's rule, based on this charter. A sketch by Plantar, preserved at the National Institute of Art History [Figure 6], shows the primary project displaying the initial date set at the time: 27 July 1830, corresponding to the beginning of the *Trois Glorieuses*, three riots days that led Louis-Philippe on the throne. The idea was apparently withdrawn, perhaps due to political implications deemed too assertive. Plantar made another panel representing the charter itself positioned on a shield and topped by a royal crown. Below, two cornucopias, a laurel wreath completes the setting. One more, the plaster allowed Plantar to create his model in plaster, then print it, by hollow casting, in eight elements placed twice on each side of the 1830's Room, which was particularly appropriate for this ceiling composed by symmetrical ornamented compartments.



**Figure 5.-** Ceiling, 1830s Room, South Ward, Castle of Versailles © Justine Gain.



**Figure 6.-** Sketch for 1830s Room of Versailles, MS 823, National Institute of Art History, Paris © Justine Gain.

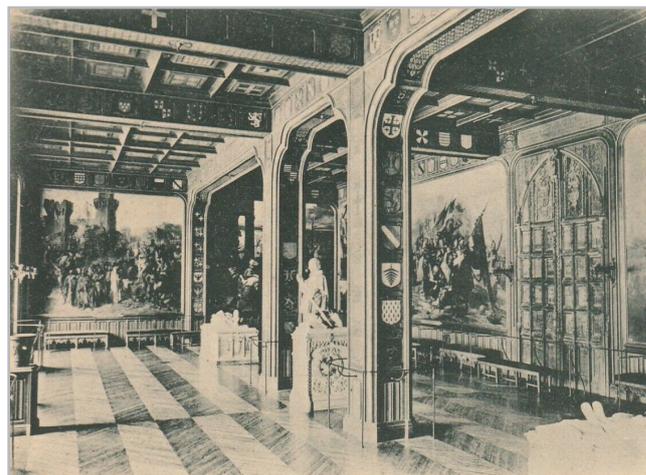
As it was for Crusades Rooms, the ornamentations described for the Great Battles Gallery and the 1830's Room received additional operations by painters, probably Charles Moench [14], specialised in gold painting, helping the plaster to look like other materials as stucco, stone or wood. This aspect underlines the high versatility of plaster able to imitate a large panel of materials. Despite that, its use in Versailles was not systematic. In fact, it seems to have been restricted to new spaces, where the *decorum* was entirely redesigned. In the so-called *stone galleries*, for instance, which structure the north and south wards, Plantar carved the decor exclusively in stone to match the initial material of the space, as the pediments above the entrance of the Crusades Rooms and the African ones show [15]. Therefore, plaster, in that regard, was strategically displayed in the castle, limited to spaces where its look did not jar with the general setting, and almost always rearranged to look like more luxurious materials – stone or wood. This situation reveals the new perspective of the time on the materials authenticity: the form prevails on the nature. Appearance, the surface where ornament flourishes, which was to become denser over the course of the century, absolutely takes precedence, a phenomenon supported by the development of industry, constantly inclined to offer new materials, always easier to use (Benoît 2013).

### Plaster as a Museographical Tool

Another significant application was devoted to plaster in Versailles, linked to both the needs of the new institution, and also, to the historical discourse proposed. Plantar employed the material as museographical tools, to create a proper setting to visit the museum and to contextualise the thematic of each section.

In the Great Crusades Room, still related to the *Porte de Rhodes* and the neo-gothic spirit associated with these spaces, Nepveu planned to install several funeral sculptures. To fully merge them in the ensemble, Plantar produced pedestals in plaster, in the very same neo-gothic spirit. The first pedestal was elevated in 1843 [16], to withstand the funeral sculpture of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam praying [17], dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and sculpted in alabaster. Plantar imagined an architectural base ornamented by four ogives on each side, structured by four twisted columns with pinnacles on the edges. The character coat of arms was also echoed as well as other military elements – a gauntlet or a helmet mixed up into lily scrolls [Figure 7 and 10].

In the same manner, a few years later, the artist designed two other pedestals for recumbent sculptures, Pierre d'Aubusson [18] and Hugues Parisot de la Valette, again in plaster, as they are themselves. Louis-Philippe, indeed, had ordered François-Henri Jacquet (Maridet 2020), the official moulder at the Louvre Museum workshop, to stamp various funeral figures, mainly coming from Saint-Denis Basilic but also from Malta, which was the case for

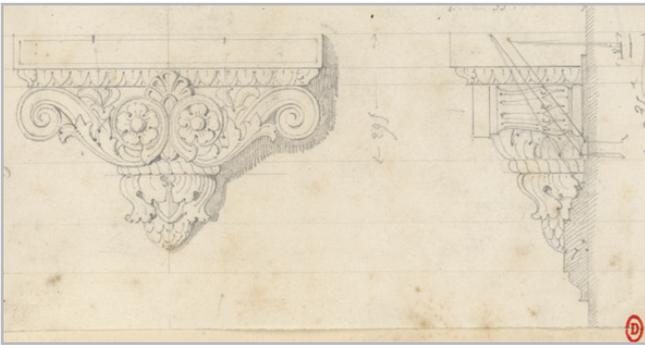


**Figure 7.-** The Great Crusades Room, Castle of Versailles, around 1900, postcard, private collection.

d'Aubusson and la Valette. Plantar created the pedestals in 1845 [19], using the same structure. This time, he did not cast, maybe due to the size of the pedestals – 2.08 by 1.19 meters – but he carved ornaments directly on the actual architectural basis. Still preserved in Versailles storage, these artworks present twelve very rich gothic panels surrounding a quadrangular base and structured by two scripted tables as well as each character's arms of coat. Museographical tools, as pedestals created for the Crusades Rooms, supported the same aesthetic displayed on the walls. Plaster was, then, extended the neo-Gothic decoration, offering a full Gothic atmosphere for the 19<sup>th</sup> century visitor.

Just above, on the first floor, the Stairs of the King (*l'Escalier du Roi*) were also fully adorned by Plantar, between 1838 and 1839, to introduce the Africa Rooms (Cottais, 2010). Several pediments in plaster came to garnish overdoors, along with some other pieces on the ceiling. Ten statues were sculpted to be shown on the walls, embodying several illustrious crusaders and French heroes. And no one imagined them presented without an ornamented reminder of the rest of the *decorum*. Thus, Plantar created ten supporting devices we refer to as lampstands, made with water leaves and two consoles placed back-to-back, and enhanced by acanthus leaves. A drawn sketch is preserved at the National Institute of Art History in Paris [Figure 8] and shows these details properly [20]. As the previous example, Plantar established an aesthetic unity through the decorative program he displayed on walls, overdoors and ceilings, and echoed them on his lampstands [21]. In doing so, he contributed to the iconographic smoothness between the different spaces of the museum, using the agility and seamlessness of plaster to reach that purpose. Indeed, when the visitor was at the foot of the same staircase, he could also admire a homogeneous whole: the two stone overdoors sculpted by Plantar to decorate the entrance of the Crusades Rooms [22], followed by, when he would climb up the stairs, by the ornaments of the Stairs of the King. This way, Plantar's works in general, including museographical tools, were no longer a basic decoration

to fill ornament gaps, but an indispensable way to unify the new spaces created for the Museum of French History, and enhance its discourse.



**Figure 8.-** Jean-Baptiste Plantar, *Album d'une centaine de dessins d'architecture*, MS 676, view 104, National Institute of Art History Library, Paris.



**Figure 9.-** Stairs of the King, North Ward, Castle of Versailles © Justine Gain.

### The reasons why...

Despite his official title, which explained his nomination as the sculptor of the Historical Galleries, Plantar also was one of the big ornamental sculptors of his time specialised in plaster. As a manual plaster noted, “the art of sculpture is so complicated” (Servajeau 1837), and mastering the art of sculpting on plaster is not easy, especially when it comes to such large-scale decorations. To hire Plantar, specialised in stone, wood, and plaster, is thus ensuring a perfect implementation of the decoration, supported by his atelier composed by different types of sculptors – Michel Lienard or Emile Knecht ( Derrot 2014) – and workers from different fields.

The use of plaster, in a such extensive way, can seem surprising in a castle like Versailles, known for its use of the best materials, as the marbles Louis XIV asked to adorn the *Grands Appartements* (Mouquin 2018). It exposes a different perspective of Louis-Philippe and his time. The King of French, who came to power after the French

Revolution, the First Empire, and the Restauration – with all the wars, riots and uprisings that characterised 19<sup>th</sup> century French History – tried to create a museum to reconcile all the politic tendencies that had come to be, as well as to look for legitimacy through the setting of the museum (Franconie 2021). “The monarchical monument was less converted into a national monument than it was reworked into a dynastic monument, capable of rooting the King of the French and his family in the long time of the history of France.” To do so, he had a strong iconographic program supported by sculptures, paintings and, as we demonstrate, decoration. The prestige of materials came in second, as a lower priority, regarding that primordial purpose. Other reasons justified this shift, as the chronological calendar. The Great Battles Gallery’s structure, for instance, was installed during the winter of 1835-1836. Historical Galleries were to be inaugurated in 1837, on June 10<sup>th</sup>, in the actual gallery. Plantar had only a year to sculpt his ornaments, and plaster appeared to be the most convenient means to meet such a strict deadline, with the ease of setting we mentioned.

Another reason, which is perhaps the most prominent, is the expense. If we go back to the bas-relief Plantar realised for the Stairs of the King, above the entrance of the Africa Rooms – two winged women crowning the King’s cypher surrounded by the symbols of Justice and fruits garlands, with a dimension of 1.82 by 3.01 meters –, it is interesting to see that it cost 1,600 francs <sup>[23]</sup>, whereas the two bas-reliefs of slightly greater dimensions – 5.58 by 2 meters – he did on the ground floor, above the Crusades Rooms’ entrance, cost 4 000 francs each <sup>[24]</sup>. Nearly three times the price, for only twice the dimension. And if we consider the volume of the surface to be decorated in the Historical Galleries, plaster becomes a logical choice.

For the pedestal made for Louis XIII’s bust by Jean Warin in 1843, in plaster, Plantar was paid 700 francs <sup>[25]</sup>, almost the same amount he received for the equivalent pedestal of Philippe de Villiers de l’Ilse-Adam, for which he earned 800 francs [Figure 10]. The rate quadrupled when Plantar had to make a stone pedestal for a group in round supposedly by Germain Pilon <sup>[26]</sup> in the stone gallery <sup>[27]</sup>, on the first floor of the north ward: almost 4,500 francs, even if the price also comprised the cost of the group’s restoration. This was even more significant when it came to marble pedestals. For the recumbent statue pedestals in the Great Crusades Rooms discussed above, Plantar was paid 1,080 francs for each work in plaster. Similarly, Plantar sculpted two marble pedestals to elevate King’s brothers’ recumbents, the *Duc de Montpensier* <sup>[28]</sup> and the *Comte du Beaujolais* <sup>[29]</sup>. In 1839, he sculpted sober pedestals, just enhanced by arms of coat characters on the bottom face and acanthus leaves on the angles, for 1,830 francs each, almost twice the price of the previous pedestals from the Crusades Room. Hence, it comes as no surprise that plaster was widely chosen to constitute the new museum’s decoration, with the notable exception of several strategic settings, or specific iconography.



**Figure 10.-** Jean-Baptiste Plantar *Album de dessins d'architecture et d'art décoratif*, MS 675, view 40, National Institute of Art History Library, Paris.

## Conclusion

Obviously, in the Historical Galleries, especially when it comes to Plantar's contribution, plaster was clearly preferred to produce sumptuous settings, still visible today. Through its uses in Versailles, plaster embodied main features of his time, the first being the *revival* aesthetic going on in the arts since the beginning of the century. The museum was an occasion to fix a French History discourse by creating a full historical decoration that imitates the past, as well as merges some authentic pieces in the *ensemble*. Moreover, plaster also demonstrates its malleability, able to constitute a proper foreground with all the advantages of a versatile appearance the outward show primes over the quality. Its ability to look like other materials goes hand in hand with its ease of set. The process of casting perfectly agrees the ornamentation of symmetrical ceilings, where ornate compositions repeat, from one side to the other. Versailles 19<sup>th</sup> century *decors* flatters the visible, backing the political and historical statements, so important in Louis-Philippe's *oeuvre*. Versailles as a museum also needed specific arrangements, to smooth the visit of its room. In that regard, plaster embodied the function of a museographical tool, as an increase of the decors, to support, even in the details, themes of each section. The revival aesthetic serving history invades all the devices of the museum, everything is adorned, everything looks somehow historical. Finally, another motive to use plaster was certainly the price, particularly attractive compared to marble or stone. The malleability of plaster, its plasticity, its reasonable cost, make this material convenient to handle and explain its craze in architecture, following the evolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Historical Galleries were not an exception in this century of ornament<sup>[30]</sup>, when plaster became prevalent in all the prestigious architectural *entreprises* as the Musée Charles X at the Louvre ca. 1825, or, a few years later, in the eclectic Opera Garnier.

## Notes

[1] In this first footnote, I would like to thank Grégoire Lubineau, contemporary art historian specialized in abstract painting, critic,

for his thorough re-reading of this paper and his comments on the text.

[2] *Plâtre architectural intérieur, histoire, pratiques professionnelles et restaurations récentes*, symposium, October 13<sup>th</sup> 2017, Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine, Charenton-le-Pont (France).

[3] A plan of the Historical Galleries of Versailles is available in : *Notice des peintures et des sculptures du palais de Versailles*. Paris : Crapelet, 1837, tome 3: 81

[4] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1838-7, memory n.° 12470.

[5] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1837-9, memory n.° 11194.

[6] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1842-5, memory n.° 20431.

[7] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1839-4, memory n.° 13887. Nicolas-Pantaléon Renaud (1798-?) was a local *entrepreneur* from Versailles, living *rue des Bons-Enfants*.

[8] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1839-4, memory n.° 13888.

In 1839, Jorand gilded the decors already made by carpenters, and Plantar. He might have done the rest of the gilding for the decorations made by Plantar after 1842. Jean-Baptiste Joseph Jorand (1788-1850) began his formation to become a *peintre d'histoire* in the *studio* of Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard and Antoine-Jean Gros. Despite a few exhibitions at the Salon, he worked as a gilder and decorative painter for the Historic Galleries of Versailles, especially in Crusades Rooms, working with the painter Charles Moench. Then, he moved to Eu where he drew the church Saint-Laurent, where Plantar also worked.

Paris, Louvre Museum, Jean-Baptiste Joseph Jorand, *Vue de l'église Saint Laurent à Eu*, 1845, INV 27242, Recto.

[9] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1842-5, memory n.° 20432.

[10] Versailles, National Museum of the Castles of Versailles and Trianon, François Gérard, *The Entry of Henry IV into Paris, the 22 March 1594*, MV 2715.

[11] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, Frédéric Nepveu architecture Agency, B26 C.

[12] Versailles, National Museum of the Castles of Versailles and Trianon, Jean-Baptiste Plantar, *Projet de décor des oculi de la Galerie des Batailles*, INV. DESS 1087.

[13] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1835-11, memory n.° 7395.

[14] Charles Moench (1784-1867) was a painter, formed in the studio of Anne-Louis Girodet. He painted historical paintings but also worked as a decorative painter in royal castles as Fontainebleau or Versailles.

[15] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1838-8, memory n.º 12756 and memory n.º 12754.

[16] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1843-6, memory n.º 21711.

[17] Versailles, National Museum of the Castles of Versailles and Trianon, *Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam praying*, 1535-1540, MV 467.

[18] Versailles, National Museum of the Castles of Versailles and Trianon, Pierre d'Aubusson, 1846, MV 464.

[19] Versailles, Archives service of the Palace of Versailles, 1845-8, memory n.º 1813.

[20] Paris, National Institute of Art History Library, Jean-Baptiste Plantar, *Album de dessins d'architecture et d'art décoratif*, MS 676, view 104.

[21] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1838-8, memory n.º 12755 ; 1839-6, memory n.º 14278.

[22] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1838-8, memory n.º 12756.

[23] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1839-6, memory n.º 14278.

[24] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1838-8, memory n.º 12756.

[25] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1843-6, memory n.º 21619.

Versailles, National Museum of the Castles of Versailles and Trianon, Jean-Baptiste Plantar, *Projet de piédestal destiné à supporter le buste de Louis XIII par Jean Varin*, ca. 1843, INV.DESS 1083.

[26] Paris, Louvre Museum, *Women in wood*, MR 3555, MR 3556, MR 3557, MR 3558, around 1600-1625.

[27] Versailles, Archives of the Castle of Versailles, 1837-12, memory n.º 10738.

[28] Versailles, National Museum of the Castles of Versailles and Trianon, Auguste Trouchaud, *Recumbent statue of Antoine-Philippe d'Orléans, duc de Montpensier*, 1837-1839, marble, MV 1912.

[29] Versailles, National Museum of the Castles of Versailles and Trianon, James Pradier, *Recumbent statue of Louis-Charles d'Orléans, comte de Beaujolais*, 1837-1839, marble, MV 1913.

[30] Jean-Michel Leniaud, *Le XIXe, un siècle d'ornements en architecture*, public lecture at the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine, Paris, January 20th, 2014.

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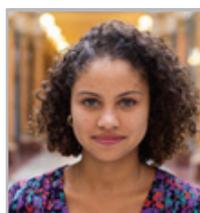
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