

Jacques-Ange Gabriel

Gabrielle Gaulin

I. Biography

Ange-Jacques Gabriel, born October 23, 1698, descended from a long line of architects in the Gabriel family. Many of the family were of some distinction in the royal court, including Ange-Jacques father and grandfather, both of whom were assigned royal projects, as well as non-blood relations in the Mansard and de Cotte families. Jacques Jules (V) Gabriel, Ange-Jacques' father, was the General Controller of Royal Buildings. Several years after Ange-Jacques' birth, his father entered the Ecole Architecture and began his studies. Several years after his entrance, Jacques V received a peerage from the King due to his family ties to Harduoin-Mansart. Jacques V continued to advance through titles as he grew in experience, becoming a knight, the director of the architecture school (after relative Robert de Cotte), first architect to the King (after Robert de Cotte), first engineer to the king, and inspector general of the royal buildings.

Ange-Jacques studied mainly under his father and his academy professors, with no other master noted. He attended the Royal Academy of Architecture like his father, and although he may have been a good student, we have no records of his time there. The academy only began the practice of awarding the Rome Prize's 1 gold and 2 silver medals for architecture students in 1723, by which time Ange-Jacques was 25 and already collaborating with his father. As a result, he never had the chance to travel to Italy and study ancient masterpieces first hand, which made him a unique architect in Parisian history. His development truly occurred in Paris and Versailles.

It's likely that by 1728, Ange-Jacques was already an appreciated collaborator with his father, evidenced by records of their trips together to royal projects outside of Paris such as Bordeaux, where Jacques Senior was working on the Place Royale. Due probably in large part to his influential relatives and father, Ange-Jacques was able to join the Royal Academy of Architecture at just 30 when the Academy director (his relative Robert de Cotte) created an additional 8 spaces in the ranks for architects of the second class. His career in collaboration with his father Jacques continued, but in 1735 we can note Ange-Jacques' first attributable independent work: a

staircase at the Palais de Dijon leading to the Salle des États. The staircase was warmly praised as a very elegant solution. In 1735 he was also named controller of Versailles Castle, allowing him to work additionally in interior decoration.

Ange-Jacques' collaborations with his father continued until Jacques Senior's death in 1742. At this point, the 44 year old Ange-Jacques succeeded his father as controller general of the King's buildings. He also was quickly passed his father's incomplete works as a first priority. These included the rebuilding of a cathedral at Orléans, overseeing the sculptures at the l'Hôtel des Fermes in Bordeaux and the Hôtel de Bourse on the other side of the Place Royale, apartments at Versailles, and even a special passageway for the king to visit his mistresses' apartments unseen. Compiègne was redesigned from its informal beginnings to a dignified castle, and Gabriel additionally worked on various menageries and apartments in Fontainebleau, Marly, and Choisy. All of this work occurred within the span of five-six years. During this period, Gabriel was also nominated as Director of the Royal Academy of Architecture in 1743.

As first architect, Gabriel's projects were heavily influenced by the taste of the King and his court. Gabriel's prime client and consultant for the royal buildings was Louis XV's official mistress, Mme de Pompadour. She had a great interest in classicism, and Gabriel and Pompadour worked out the details on many of the building schemes produced during her lifetime. In addition, Mme de Pompadour and King Louis XV's passion for escape from court life required Gabriel to create many small "ermitages" or living spaces at the royal estates; these included the Hôtel de Mme de Pompadour at Fontainebleau and a menagerie (a toy farm with cows and chickens) at Versailles which would later develop into the Petit Trianon. Besides architecture and planning, Gabriel was also occupied with satisfying the whims of the royals for modifications to existing rooms, laying out the gardens and parterres, interviewing workmen who proposed ideas to eliminate the castles of vermin and smoke, acting as head of police for the misdeeds of the servants, and managing the real estate, estimates, and bills.

In 1750, Gabriel was charged with the Ecole Militaire, a huge and cumbersome project. Inspired by

the efforts of Mme de Pompadour, it was meant to provide a public monument to the King and France's military strength, although its stated purpose was to act as a military academy. At around the same time, the first architect was also working on the restoration of the Large Pavilion in Fontainebleau, the restoration at Compiègne, and the Salon Frais on the future site of Petit Trianon. In 1753, Gabriel won the contest for the design of the Place Louis XV (now de la Concorde) as well as built a "ermitage" for Mme Pompadour at Compiègne.

1758 marks Gabriel's introduction to Greek classical architecture. Blondel presented a collection of drawings illustrated from visits to Greek ruins. Gabriel clearly took this lecture to heart and the purity of classical architecture began to be seen in his work, particularly the Petit Trianon (whose foundations were begun in 1762).

Gabriel was personally described as extremely thorough, always keeping multiple copies of every scheme and engrossing himself in every detail of the work. He made an effort to influence the selection of artists and craftsmen who were part of the works in order to ensure the highest quality of his design. Gabriel also had the help of a very capable atelier staff, including several Prix de Rome winners. He personally inspected all work while it was being carried out and insisted the workmen be paid properly to encourage good working habits among the builders. Unfortunately, Gabriel's projects were often not carried out to the fullest extent due to insufficient funds of the crown. His personal dislike for the extravagance of Rococo caused him to instead focus on elegant designs that were simpler than the decades preceding.

Despite his great personal merit, Gabriel was embroiled in several rivalries during his career as first architect. The General Director of Buildings, M. Tournehem and Gabriel, first architect, were often involved in disagreements typical between the artist and executer; Tournehem wished to share in the glory of the successes while simultaneously protecting himself when things inevitably went awry. As a result, Tourneheim regularly made attempts to micro manage Gabriel and his office and also required copious amounts of paperwork for every small movement, which Gabriel greatly resented.

Gabriel also disputed with Marigny, another member of the Academie. One of their arguments caused an uproar in the artistic community in 1767, leading to a momentary closure of Academie. This was all in reference to the fate of one architect, supported by Marigny and his camp, who was nominated to join the Academie as an architect of second class. Gabriel's supporters staunchly rejected him purely based on the fact that Marigny backed him. This bickering escalated to the point that the furious King declared that the potential member should be accepted immediately as a first rank architect, and when the Acadmie continued to put up an uproar, he suppressed the academy and stripped them all of titles for a period. Marigny additionally made accusations of plagiarism towards Gabriel and protested furiously when Gabriel's son was introduced as a candidate for membership of the Academie.

As Gabriel aged, the finances of the kingdom became increasingly worse, and his plans could rarely be carried out exactly as conceived. Often, workers were never fully paid, and even Gabriel himself was on occasion unremunerated. The financial troubles, as they always do, greatly slowed the building process. Gabriel resigned his post as first architect at 77, but his good health allowed him to continue on as director of the Academie until his last year of life. At that point, his health was impaired to the point that he could only sign his name. He died in 1782. Of his 4 children, only Ange Antoine became an architect; however, he left no legacy and was not widely supported.

II. Styles and Buildings in Brief

Gabriel's architecture was defined by four periods/styles: the first was a very practical, utilitarian building style; the second his Louis XV decorative phase; the third his most famous Louis XVI style; and the fourth his pre-Empire style late in his career.

His first phase was characterized by buildings such as the Bourse de Bordeaux. Designed in a regional style with French classical elements, such as rusticated pilasters, mansard roofs, lower floor arcade, and partially arched windows, as well as a classical pediment. The elevation was strictly symmetrical. This style, found in



Fig 1 - Bourse de Bordeaux facade

regional buildings, was very utilitarian and simple, while still preserving some of the approaches of classical French design. Although not as elegant as later designs, the projects still appear as rooted in the Academie's basic teachings. (See illustration Fig 1)

His second phase, evidenced in decoration for apartments for Louis XV at Versailles, featured highly elaborate floriated designs that are much more rhythmic and muscular than later designs. This type of heavy elaboration of forms can be found also in earlier work at the Petit Trianon, such as the octagonal pavilion in the midst of the gardens, in response to the fashionable taste of the time. In comparison to the Bourse de Bordeaux illustrated above, these creations were much more intricate, most likely reflecting their high stature as works of art for the nobility and the King of France. (See illustrations 2 & 3)



Fig 2- door in Louis XV's appartement at Versailles

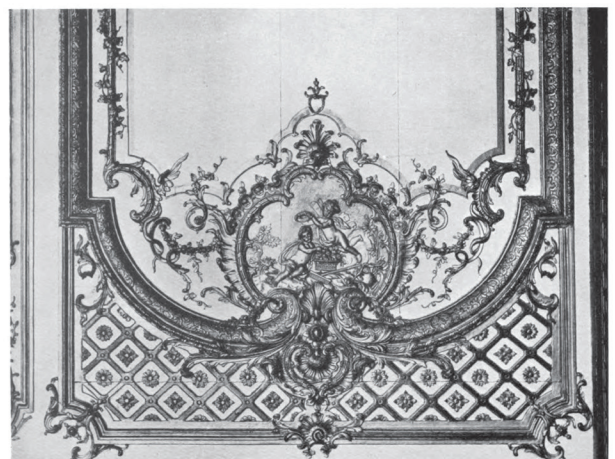


Fig 3 - Paneling detail at Louis XV's Versailles appartement

His commission for the Ecole Militaire also fell under this category of his work. Classical elements of symmetry, unity of façade, and arranging windows without consideration to interior arrangements are visible, but there is also a great deal of exaggeration in the facade decor. Since it was conceived of by Mme Pompadour as a charity to the city, a school for young noblemen without estate and a monument to French military might, the program called for a dramatic appearance. The giant orders that are over scaled and the muscular ornamentation feels a bit overwrought both inside and out.



Fig 4- facade of Ecole Militaire with rigorous ornament

His third style catches the majority of his famous works, including his ermitages, the Petit Trianon, and the Place Louis XV (de la Concorde). The Place was particularly well designed in response to the tricky request that the land, picked by king, was to be designed in a way to conserve and amplify the natural beauty of the area. It was difficult to avoid blocking views of the Champs Elysees beyond that were so valued at the time. Despite his plan originally being judged as incompatible, the King himself eventually selected Gabriel as the winner. The delicate proportions of the plan provided views as well as perspectives towards the Tuileries. In addition, the plan did an excellent to highlight the King's major reason for donating the land: a mounted equestrian statue of himself was erected right in the center, where it was prominently highlighted. Gabriel's use of water moats force the visitor to the square along certain paths that provide wonderful views, and his careful coordination of the two new facades constructed at the end of the Place with existing buildings ensured that the entire area worked as harmonic whole.

The last style was a very brief period at the end of Gabriel's career. A little more militaristic, a little less

delicate, some of the later interior arrangements of the Petit Trianon were designed presumably to appeal to a more masculine audience compared to previous iterations. Figures such as griffins featured in the carvings provided a very different look than the delicate fruit and florals from early work on the little chateau.

III. Significant Building – le Petit Trianon

The Petit Trianon is one of Gabriel's multiple "Ermitages", small private palaces for the King and a select few. The Petit Trianon is the most famous, but others exist at Fontainebleau and Compiègne. Built originally as an escape for Mme de Pompadour, the King's official mistress, and select women from the strictures of court, the building was never able to house original "inhabitant", as she died before its completion. It was built between 1762 and 1768, and was later given by Louis XV to the Comtesse du Barry (his following official mistress). Later, upon Louis XVI's marriage to Marie Antoinette, the house was given to the young queen after she begged for it. Marie Antoinette liberally altered the surroundings and the house itself to suit her taste.

The entire area was originally carried out as a menagerie with cow farm (vacherie), chicken coops and botanic gardens with pavilions. The French style garden had picturesque walks already established when Gabriel first began working in the area, constructing an octagonal pavilion in the center, as previously discussed. The pavilion, much more ornate and heavy than the later work at the Petit Trianon, reflected Louis XV taste for a residual mannerism. The next work to be carried out on the site was the Salon Frais, an entirely open air dining "room" constructed of trellis. The entire structure was then hung with greenery to provide privacy. The Petit Trianon palace was later built to provide the king isolation.

The Petit Chateau was first given thought in 1761. After construction began, the interior moldings and carvings were carried out from 1765 to 1768. In 1770, the kitchens were modified and aggrandized. Originally, the building was only used for dining, but the 9th of September of the same year Louis XV went to stay at the chateau for first time on an overnight.

The building is square in plan with elegant proportions. Each facade of the building was carried out

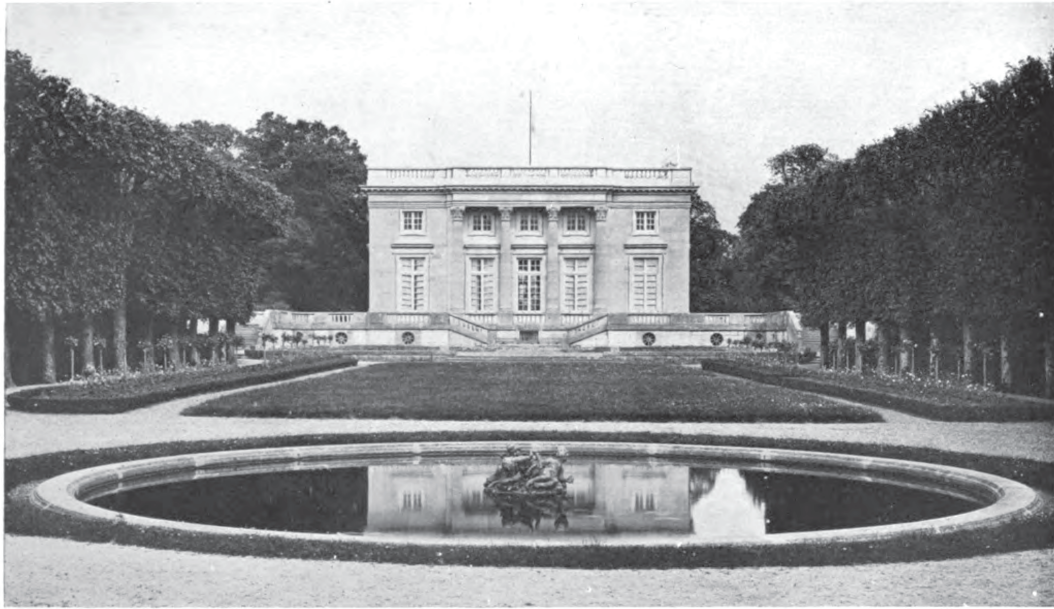


Fig 5- French garden facade of the Petit Trianon

differently in response to its surroundings in perspective. The interiors feature very delicate carving representing fruits and flowers, as well as other feminine themes.

Despite its small dimensions, the structure still exudes elegance and nobility. It served as a turning point for French architecture in its purity of line (from the classical Greek influence introduced to Gabriel via Blondel). As noted above, each facade was designed in relation to its landscape and to its respective level. These differences in level were prepared by Gabriel to allow for practical interior arrangements of offices and kitchens. As a result, servants were able to enter much more subtly. The richest façade with 4 Corinthian columns faces the French garden, providing an elaborate perspective; the second features pilasters, facing the more casual botanic garden. The facade facing the English garden, which was established during Marie Antoinette's time, has no orders. The entrance court façade, which has a sunken court with access to the building's utilitarian spaces, has pilasters ornamenting it as well. The most ornate facade faced the direction of the King's approach, and allowed for a stately walk up the steps into the house. Gabriel coordinated the gardens with the building façade as a piece; to highlight the natural beauty of the gardens; the restrained decoration and white stone is easily appreciated by all people and emphasizes the color and line of the yards.

Inside, the rooms are arranged to provide separation from the servants' areas and views out to the

surrounding gardens. The sunken level contained mostly service functions, as well as a billiards room. The other levels contain bed chambers and salons, as well as a large and minor dining room. The stairs which connected these functions allowed them full separation from the service areas, re-emphasizing the importance of privacy in the small castle.

The interior decoration was originally done in soft colors which emphasized the feminine qualities of the interiors and the fact that the Petit Trianon served as an escape from the heavier and ornate palace life. Soothing vistas also emphasized these qualities, and the fact that in comparison to the palace, these rooms were at a much more domestic scale. The King Louis XV had an office (since turned into a bedchamber for Marie Antoinette) and his own bedchamber at the attic level.

The entire structure and site of the Petit Trianon fulfilled their purpose admirably as a place of respite for the King, his mistresses, and their selected company. Gabriel's attentive design and use of classical lines emphasized repeatedly the importance of the program and to this day provide a beautiful vista to visitors. Thought-driven design and classical principles can thus be seen as timeless qualities to which we should all aspire.

Sources

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