



Percier(-Basant), Charles (1764-1838), and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine (1762-1853)

by Linda Rapp

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French architects and designers Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine were among the founders and principal exponents of the neoclassic Empire style. They incorporated elements of the art of antiquity into designs for their own time, always striving for harmony between a building and its setting, a room and its decorative features. They are known for the grace and elegance of their work and for their devotion to each other.

Both Fontaine and Percier were made officers of the French Légion d'honneur for their contributions to art.

Fontaine came from a line of architects and builders. He had his first experience of the profession when, at the age of sixteen, he went to Isle-Adam, north of Paris, with his father, who was working on fountains and hydraulic systems at the castle of the Prince de Conti.

The architect in charge of the project, André, recognized the young Fontaine's interest and aptitude for architecture and allowed him to copy designs and also to work on the construction site to gain practical knowledge. A young draftsman on the project, Jean-Thomas Thibault, also worked with Fontaine, teaching him the basics of the profession.

Realizing that Fontaine had the talent and dedication to be a successful architect, his father sent him to study with Antoine-François Peyre in Paris. Fontaine spent six years in Peyre's studio, and while there he met Charles Percier.

Percier was the son of a bridge-keeper at the Tuileries and a seamstress in the service of the queen. As a boy he attracted attention for his meticulous drawings of the uniforms of the officers that he saw at the palace, and he received lessons from a drawing-master who taught art to the ladies of the court.

Fontaine and Percier went on to study at the Académie des Beaux-Arts, where both excelled. In 1785 Fontaine took second place in the prestigious Prix de Rome competition for architecture students. Although he did not receive the scholarship that went with the first prize, he went to study in Rome, where Percier joined him the following year after himself winning the competition.

In Italy the two young men devoted themselves to the study of classical architecture. They shared a studio and often traveled to the countryside together. Their obsession with the arts of antiquity earned them the nickname "the two Etruscans" from their classmates.

While in Rome, Percier and Fontaine made "a pact of friendship founded on respect and confidence." Both



Three designs by Percier and Fontaine: The bedchamber of Empress Joséphine Bonaparte at her home named Malmaison (top), the grand salon at Malmaison, and a fateuil designed for Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (above). Northwestern University Library Special Collections.

pledged never to marry.

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 brought financial ruin to Fontaine's father, who called his son home to help support the family. Finding no opportunity in his native Pontoise, Fontaine moved to Paris.

Percier initially stayed in Rome, but, encountering public hostility toward the French, soon decided to give up the remainder of his scholarship. He made his way north to Paris and moved in with Fontaine.

In 1792 Percier was offered a post as the director of set design at the Paris Opera. He insisted that Fontaine be employed as well. The pair spent four years at the job, painting backdrops of classical scenes for the popular plays of the day.

The two also designed furniture and restored private houses. Their decorating work at the residence of a Monsieur Chauvelin caught the eye of his neighbor Joséphine Bonaparte, who engaged the pair to refurbish her house, Malmaison.

On the occasion of their interview for the job at Malmaison, Fontaine and Percier met Napoleon. As a result they were hired to decorate the Hôtel des Invalides, the first of their many public projects.

In 1801 Napoleon named Fontaine architect to the government, an appointment that Fontaine insisted on sharing with Percier.

Percier and Fontaine were responsible for refurbishing the palaces at Fontainebleau, Strasbourg, and Versailles. The Empire style that they created drew on the classical art and architecture that they so loved. Their aim was not to replicate the buildings of antiquity, but to translate classic designs into a modern idiom. They insisted that plans should suit the nature of the project and that architectural and decorative elements should complement each other harmoniously.

Among their projects in the capital was the design of the newly laid-out rue de Rivoli with its symmetrical buildings and arcades. They also contributed to the planning of new bridges across the Seine.

Another task was the completion and renovation of the Louvre Palace and the design for the space linking it with the Tuileries Palace. For this project Fontaine and Percier designed the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel (1806-1807), which stands in the courtyard of the Louvre. The elegant monument, inspired by the Arch of Septimus Severus in Rome, is considered one of their masterpieces.

Toward the end of 1804 Napoleon dismissed Percier from his service. The reserved Percier tended to work behind the scene and left dealing with the public to his more outgoing companion. Fontaine argued for the retention of Percier, stressing the importance of his contributions, but the emperor was not swayed. An incensed Fontaine recorded in his diary "It would appear that I am alone, but we will continue to work together and share the benefits, as in the past."

The two did continue to collaborate on various projects, including a vexed plan to build a palace for Napoleon's son. Fontaine and Percier submitted numerous designs over a four-year period, but abandoned the project in 1814 because Napoleon's military campaigns left him without sufficient funds for the construction.

Once Percier no longer had official state duties, he was able to devote time to teaching and to work in the decorative arts. His design work included furniture, clocks, and Sèvres vases.

Fontaine undertook many construction and restoration projects, including the completion of the Palais Royal (1814-1831), the restoration of the Théâtre-Français after a fire (1822), and restorations of the Élysée Palace (1816), the Château de Neuilly (1819-1831), and the Château d'Eu (1824-1833).

After Percier died on September 5, 1838, Fontaine wrote to a friend "I have lost half of myself; how many months or days can be left to me?"

In fact Fontaine continued to work well into his old age, finally resigning his post as architect of the Louvre and Tuileries Palaces in 1848 at the age of eighty-six. He died on October 10, 1853.

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