

THE MARK OF SOUFFLOT IN LYON

TOPIC

ROOM 15: THE CITY IN THE 18TH C.

Jacques-Germain Soufflot (1713-1780)

Architect of Lights

The oldest of a family of thirteen children from Burgundy, Jacques-Germain Soufflot turned down a legal career in order to teach himself architecture. He left for Italy and joined the Académie de France in Rome from 1733 to 1738, becoming interested more in baroque architecture rather than that of antiquity. On his return, he set himself up in his main home in Lyon for around ten years, where he was given large commissions that he frequently completed with local fellow architects. He mixed very well in society, becoming for example the friend of the abbot Antoine Lacroix, with whom he founded a free design school in 1751, as well as meeting Louis Nicolas de Neuville, Duke of Villeroy and Governor of Lyon. On returning to Paris he was appointed as controller of the King's buildings, a director of the Gobelins factory and a member of the Royal Academy of Architecture, chosen to construct the great building of Louis XV's reign: the new Génovéfains church in Paris (the current Panthéon)! He returned to Lyon, making his mark on the city: neoclassical architecture that mixes the principles of gothic lightness with the magnificence of antiquity.



Portrait of Jacques-Germain Soufflot, reproduction, extract from *Œuvres de Jacques-Germain Soufflot*, Bligny, 18th c.

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Major architectural works in Lyon

The extension of the Hôtel-Dieu

A hospital has existed on the current site of the Hôtel-Dieu since the 12th c.

However, it was in the 18th c. that it saw its most colossal transformation. It came from a desire by the Consulate to erect a palatial building on the banks of the Rhône that had just been redeveloped with the semi-oval shaped port designed by Ferdinand Delamonce in 1738. In 1741, the rectors of the Hôtel-Dieu – despite uncertain finances and an acute sense of economy – signed an eight-year agreement with the architect Soufflot: the plan consisted of a monumental two-storey façade looking out over the Rhône, almost 400 meters long and 51 spans! Arcades were also planned to house shops looking out over the promenade quay, the rents for which were used to finance the project. For more convenience, the plan also connected the façade with the existing buildings by means of four buildings placed sideways, providing interior courtyards and allowing areas to be separated off for convalescents, the injured, the mentally ill and terminally ill patients.

By the end of the architectural contract, the project had not been completed and work stopped. In 1754, thanks to an improvement in the economic situation, work was restarted under the direction of Toussaint Loyer and Melchior Munet, responsible in particular for the raising of a large dome serving as ventilation shafts so as to expel the miasma from the hospital wards. This was completed in 1761, and was the subject of great controversy fuelled by Soufflot, who accused the two architects of changing the profile of his building. It was finally destroyed by a fire during the liberation of Lyon in 1944, then rebuilt and raised in height in 1967. In 1766, work stopped again through lack of money, and it had to wait until the first half of the 19th c. before its wings were completed.

Despite these delays, the new hospital (**Inv. 63.15 - Façade and elevation of the Hôtel-Dieu**) was admired by visitors from both France and abroad, and...for the first time, the hospital was able to accommodate just one patient per bed!

Façade of the Hôtel-Dieu in Lyon, constructed from the designs and under the direction of, J.G. Soufflot, eastern façade, designed by F. N. Sellier, 18th c., Inv. 770.4



Façade de l'Hôtel Dieu de Lyon, Construite sur les Dessins et sous la conduite de J. G. Soufflot, C'est Ch. de St. Michel, Architecte du Roy. de son Academie Royale d'Architecture, Controleur Général des Bâtimens de Sa. Majesté, Et de ceux de la Ville de Lyon.



View of the Grand Théâtre, colour lithograph, Isidore-Laurent Deroy, 19th c., Inv. 37.59

The Grand Théâtre in Lyon!

It was in 1754 that the Consulate also awarded Soufflot the project for the Grand Théâtre that Lyon needed on the site of the garden located behind the Hôtel de Ville.

The architect was inspired by the theatres in Parma and Milan that he had visited during his Italian escapade. The three continuous balconies of the hall were provided with Italian-style loggias, their successive terracing making the top appear wider as a reminder of ancient theatres. The three levels of the low-key façade (**Inv. N 3511.15 - Façade**) were topped with a wide cornice and a balustrade, with blocks supporting pairs of small cupids sculpted by Antoine Michel Perrache. His plan was innovative: for the first time in France, a theatre that was completely detached, an oval auditorium in contrast to the normal elongated auditorium (**Inv. N 3504.30 - Auditorium**) and a stage that was slightly inclined towards the audience, fitted with an under floor level for machinery and very high flies! Considered as a fundamental stage in the architecture of theatres, it was the first building to reconcile the practical needs of the theatre with the desire of the audience of 2000...to be seen!

It was opened in August 1756, in the presence of Soufflot, who came from Paris for the occasion, and Melchior Munet, who directed the construction. However, Soufflot's Grand Théâtre was destroyed by a fire in 1826. It was replaced in 1831 on the same site by a theatre built by Antoine-Marie Chenavard and Jean-Marie Pollet, itself rebuilt by the architect Jean Nouvel in 1993 and became the Opéra de Lyon!

The Loge du Change

It was Soufflot who gave the Loge du Change its current appearance (**Inv. N 3917**), built between 1631 and 1653 to house the moneychangers for the Lyon fairs. For the market traders, the restoration meant that trading activity could continue on the right bank of the river Saône, at a time marked by the exodus of trade over to the left bank.

In 1750 the architect brought the number of arcades in the façade then open to five, completely rebuilt the rear buildings on a rectangular plan and increased the building's windows to seventeen. The building was accessed through two flights of steps in a circular arch opening out onto a chequered terrace. On the façade, the smooth pilasters and Doric entablature were retained in the ground floor.

On the second floor the ionic columns extended the height of the pilasters, the corners housing statues, whilst the balustrade was decorated with a calendar and a clock. At its centre was a table mounted with the royal arms as a reminder of the controlling power of the monarchy over trade in Lyon.



Loge des Changes in Lyon, built from the designs and under the direction of J.G. Soufflot, drawing, Jean-Baptiste Roche, 1749, Inv. N 3830

Private houses

Soufflot designed numerous private residences in the region. In Lyon he built several private houses, such as Lacroix-Laval – in which the Museum of Decorative Arts is currently located – as well as three large buildings around the Place Saint-Clair (currently the Place Louis Chazette) in the centre of the Saint Clair district, which he developed between 1746 and 1760 (**Inv. 99.9 – Model of the Quai Saint Clair**). He built three country houses in the surrounding area, in particular carrying out work on the Château d'Oullins, built in 1577 for Thomas de Gadagne and which became the summer residence for the archbishops of Lyon.



Façade of 3 Quai Lassagne, formerly the Quai Saint-Clair called "Soufflot", with Corinthian columns topped with bull's eyes, municipal archives.