

Palace Intrigue

Lavish balls, restoration dramas, simmering jealousy—Versailles is alive and well in the 21st century.

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Bertrand Vignaud has perched himself in the very spot where Marie Antoinette sat, in the royal box of her private theater. From this vantage point, it is easier to appreciate the magnificent restoration that has just been completed on this small gem tucked away in a remote corner of Versailles, on the grounds of the Petit Trianon.

Elaborate and lavish though it is, the interior retains a delicacy that makes it one of the great examples of Louis XVI style at its peak. It is difficult to fully appreciate in photographs, which invariably make the auditorium seem vast. As soon as one steps inside, what surprises and delights is the space's combination of intimacy and grandeur.

Abandoned and close to collapse for most of the past century, the theater, built in 1778, was rarely opened to visitors, owing to its fragile materials—giltwood, papier-mâché, faux marbles and silks. But like a knight in shining armor, in changed Vignaud, chairman of World Monuments Fund France. With the backing of the group's parent organization in New York and the help of Versailles' own experts, he orchestrated the restoration, which, considering the complications he encountered, was remarkably successful and speedy.

When work was completed in October, Vignaud organized an opening at which Marie Antoinette would have felt at home. While musicians performed selections by Mozart and Gluck, Europe's most illustrious names mingled, including Archduke Karl von Hapsburg, Baroness Liliane de Rothschild, U.S. Ambassador Howard Leach and the Aga Khan, who arrived by helicopter. It was a selective guest list—in keeping with the theater's original function, which is "not at all in tune with today's ideas," as Vignaud says.

As part of the Trianon, which was Marie Antoinette's private domain, the theater was visited only by favored aristocrats and servants. Along with the Queen, who was fond of acting, members of this *cercle de la Reine* often performed onstage, too. But just getting a seat in the parterre was nearly impossible even for France's highest born. "She only asked people she liked," Vignaud recounts. "A lot of people got cross."

As her political woes mounted, the Queen withdrew herself into the Trianon. Vignaud rises to her defense, calling the criticism she faced "completely wrong." The offspring of a noble Provençal family, Vignaud is sympathetic. He lowers his voice, as if to explain *entre nous*: "There was a lot of jealousy in France at the time."

Well, *plus ça change*... It seems envy and resentment didn't quite die with Louis XVI. Versailles is, after all, a living entity—1,700 acres populated by diverse constituencies, from ancien régime families to socialist bureaucrats and American millionaires, all of whom are vying for position. Anyone who undertakes to work at Versailles today must surmount myriad obstacles. "The problem is that so many people want to interfere, you see," says Vignaud. Among them are the almost 900 people who compose the



Ancien régime families and U.S. millionaires vie for position.

vast civil service that runs Versailles, the Etablissement Public du Musée et du Domaine National de Versailles. At the top of this organization, created in 1995, is an elite group of curators and architects, each of whom zealously guards his fiefdom, and presiding over all is the socialist version of the Sun King, Hubert Astier, the government-appointed president. Apart from this bureaucracy, there are various charitable groups—the most venerable being the Société des Amis de Versailles, established in 1907—that take on specific projects.

Vignaud, who is chairman of Christie's Monaco and whose work for the WMF is unpaid, grouches about the members of Versailles' rank and file. He says that they are perpetually "out to lunch" and resent the wealth of the donors who ultimately contributed \$800,000 for the restoration of the theater (which is open now by special tour). The press release prepared by Versailles about the building, for example, failed to credit the WMF. "And it was too late to correct, because they carefully hid it from me before it went out," Vignaud says. "I was appalled." He excuses Astier from blame, however, adding that the president was "very cross" when he learned of the incident. Astier himself speaks highly of Versailles' "very good collaboration" with the WMF, which he praises for its "savoir-faire in management."

Still, there were other bumps. Vignaud was also surprised at the behavior of the curator in charge of the Trianon, who was favored with one of the coveted invitations to the opening. The man failed to RSVP, or to show up. "Not to thank the donors for such an important thing!" Vignaud exclaims. "I try to behave as elegantly as possible, but that is shocking!"

Many members of Paris society were surprised themselves, however, by whom Vignaud did not invite: Vicomte Olivier de Rohan, the president of the Société des Amis and a member of one of France's most ancient families. According to Vignaud, Rohan "behaved very badly, criticizing the WMF at many dinners." According to many others, however, Rohan is entitled to be invited to any important event at Versailles, whatever he might have said. Liliane de Rothschild obviously felt so; learning of the slight, Paris' grande dame invited the Vicomte to be her escort.

I catch up with Rohan at a restaurant just outside the château, to which he commutes from Paris by motorcycle. Dressed in nicely worn



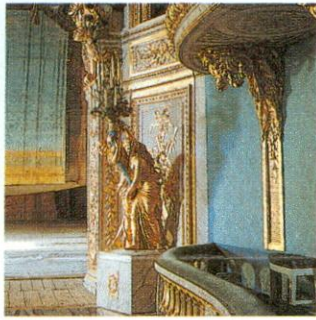
Top: Bertrand du Vignaud, left, and Archduke Karl von Hapsburg at the opening of Marie Antoinette's theater (center) restored by the World Monuments Fund. **Above:** Hubert Astier, Bernadette Chirac, Catharine Hamilton, Olivier de Rohan and Pierre Arizoli-Clementel.

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tweeds, he is the picture of a dashing aristocrat. Even as he explains his family's august lineage, he exudes charm. "It has been said in the family for the last 1,000 years that we originate from the kings of Britain," he says. "Whether it's true or not, we carry on saying it." Whatever their beginnings, the Rohans did own a huge chunk of France, including one-third of Brittany, up until the revolution. According to Rohan, the family became dukes "late"—not until Henri IV made them so in the 16th century. But the title wasn't seen as a step up by the family, among whom it "created a little scandal," says Rohan. As the first duke's mother huffed at the time, "If you're a Rohan, you're above that." A powerful feudal family, the Rohans ruled absolutely over their territory. By becoming dukes, they had to accept the sovereignty of the kings of France, who steadily centralized their power. Beginning with the reign of Louis XIV, noble families such as the Rohans were obliged to maintain apartments at the heart of power central, Versailles. "So we had to be there whether we liked it or not," sniffs Rohan. "We did not."

The Rohan name is forever linked with the so-called Affair of the Necklace. The handsome and dissolute Cardinal Louis de Rohan, Grand Almoner at the court of Louis XVI, was accused of forging Marie Antoinette's signature in an elaborate scheme to steal the most expensive diamond necklace in Europe. In fact, the Cardinal was a dupe in a plan set in motion by a cunning con woman, who hired a prostitute to impersonate the Queen at a nighttime rendezvous in the Grove of Venus, on the château grounds. The Cardinal was arrested and later acquitted, but only after a sensational trial in Paris that turned public opinion against the Queen and helped ferment the revolution.

Rohan winces at the mention of "the abominable scandal" as he refers to it. (He has no plans to see *The*



Above: An elaborate giltwood torchière takes feminine form. Below: The glittering crowd at the reopening of the theater, built in 1778.



TORCHIERE: GUILLAUME DE LAUBIER; REOPENING: LUC CASTEL

Affair of the Necklace, last year's movie based on the events.) While Americans might be surprised to learn that the embers of a 218-year-old scandal could still be smoldering, such reactions are not uncommon among the descendants of the ancien régime—as I find out firsthand when I take a drive just outside Paris to the Château de Breteuil, home since 1712 to the Breteuils, hereditary enemies of the Rohans. Baron Louis-Auguste de Breteuil, Minister of the Royal Household, carried out the King's order to arrest the Cardinal; according to a witness, he was “beaming with satisfaction” at the time.

Marquis Henri de Breteuil, a direct descendant of Louis-Auguste, owns the castle today. Times being what they are, he has opened the château to the public and installed on the second floor a series of life-size wax figures depicting glorious events in the family's history. In one tableau Baron de Breteuil leans over the shoulder of Louis XVI as he signs the arrest warrant for the Cardinal, who cowers nearby.

The Marquis, a jolly man, smiles as we pass the installation. He notes, however, that he telephoned Olivier de Rohan's older brother, the Duke, to obtain permission before erecting the scene. Breteuil even admits that it was “a big mistake to arrest the Cardinal.” Sounding as though the affair happened just last week, he offers his family's contrition: “We were wrong.”

Thus, Breteuil, too, has an intimate and lively relationship with Versailles. He is a vice president of WMF France and so was involved with the restoration of the theater. While acknowledging that certain frictions occurred during the project, he dismisses them. “Today at Versailles, everybody is very proud of their independence,” he says. “And all these different groups are very useful for Versailles. The problem is, sometimes they don't combine their efforts. But when there is a drama, everyone comes together.”

Arguably, Versailles' most effective advocate today is Rohan, who was drafted in 1987 to take over the Société des Amis. “They needed a name that meant something, and they needed somebody who knew the difference between a Louis XV and XVI commode,” Rohan says, somewhat modestly.

Working with his own connections and that of the Société's top-drawer board, Rohan has been successful at raising funds, much of which are used to repurchase Versailles' original furniture, which was dispersed during the revolution. The Vicomte gets in the trenches, too. He successfully took on the army, which planned to develop 200 acres adjacent to the château, making such a fuss that the town prefect called him “an anarchist.” Somewhat ironically, Rohan sees his role as making Versailles more democratic. “The state owns these museums, and they tend to make decisions about them without consulting anyone,” he says. “We are Mr. and Mrs. Everybody in front of the bureaucracy. We want open discussion.”

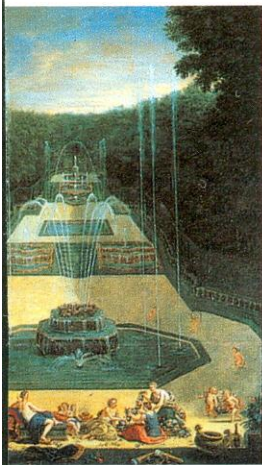
When asked about Vignaud and the WMF, he is gracious. “They were very nice to accept the restoration of the theater,” he says. But the Vicomte doesn't entirely take the high road. “Let's be honest,” he

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adds. "There are a lot of these organizations. They need publicity. They get better publicity when they get involved with Versailles than when they get involved with some cathedral nobody has ever heard of. We're fortunate that people prefer to go with us. But anyone who calls, we appreciate the help."

Over the past few years, Rohan has developed an extremely close alliance with a Chicago-based couple, Catharine and David Hamilton, for whom, in 1998, he helped found a sister organization to his Société des Amis, called the American Friends of Versailles, which is now the official representative for Versailles in the United States. What set tongues wagging was that Versailles already had an American affiliate, the Versailles Foundation, which was chartered in 1970 by Gerald Van der Kemp, chief curator since 1953. Long before the days of socialism, Van der Kemp and his energetic American wife, Florence, ruled Versailles almost as monarchs. Installed in a magnificent apartment in the Louis XIII wing, the couple lavishly entertained the world's wealthiest people. Major gifts of money and furniture, which brought Versailles back to life, followed.

The American Friends of Versailles hopes to restore the Bosquet des Trois Fontaines, as shown here in a 1688 painting.



After Van der Kemp left Versailles in 1980 to direct the Gardens of Giverny, the couple continued to maintain the Versailles Foundation. Van der Kemp died last year at 92, but his 88-year-old widow carries on, assisted by her daughter, Barbara de Portago. In April, they came to New York to give their annual fund-raising dinner at the Carlyle, the big draw of which was a 15-minute lecture by Prince Michael of Greece.

Meanwhile, the Hamiltons' American Friends group has organized a fund-raiser of its own this month: a six-day extravaganza of nonstop parties at locations all over Paris, including residences of Rothschilds, Ganays and other grandees. The main event is a spectacular ball at Versailles at which Laura Bush and Bernadette Chirac are honorees.

The elaborately printed invitation to these festivities is nearly the length of a book. Eight pages alone describe the various subscriptions available, beginning with the rock-bottom \$5,000 ticket (which gets you into the the ball and four events) and escalating to \$1 million, which gets you into all 14 events—plus your name on one of the three fountains in the Bosquet des Trois Fontaines. All proceeds will be used to restore this masterpiece of garden architect André Le Nôtre, which was designed in 1677 and had fallen into complete disrepair by 1830.

The French, not used to the concept of tax-deductible parties, are said to be astonished by the tariffs. But Mrs. Hamilton, an oil heiress born in Amarillo, Texas, and her Texan-born husband, who made a fortune through trucking, food

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services and other businesses, are counting on enough of them to write checks. The Hamiltons, who own an apartment in Paris and a nearby château, are well known in France. And planeloads of their friends from the U.S. are expected to show up, too.

Thus far, Mrs. Hamilton has raised 60 percent of the \$4 million needed to restore the Bosquet; the remainder will come this month. “Catharine works like hell,” says Rohan. He isn’t the only fan of Hamilton’s at Versailles. During a brief chat in Astier’s imposing office, the president speaks effusively of Mrs. Hamilton, while gingerly brushing aside the old guard Versailles Foundation. “It still exists, but it’s a little asleep right now—not very effective,” he says. Astier is eager to acknowledge the long history of American financial support of Versailles, beginning with John D. Rockefeller’s post-WWI donations of \$23 million, which literally saved the monument and, more recently, Bunny Mellon’s contribution to the restoration of the Potager, the royal vegetable garden, another project organized by the WMF. Then there’s the box office: Twenty-five percent of visitors today are American. Astier implies that such generosity is only justified. We owe the French, after all: “You remember that the birth of America was made right here,” he says, referring to the signing of the peace treaty between England and the U.S. in 1783.

Some of the cynical sorts who proliferate in Paris, however, are eager to see Catharine Hamilton as another in the long line of people who have tried to use Versailles’ luster to their own ends. Some of them would be amused to see her trip. “Those parquets are just as slippery now as they were 200 years ago,” warns one social arbiter.

But Mrs. Hamilton, an enthusiastic woman who still speaks with a bit of a Texas twang, is undeterred. Phoning from Chicago, she describes the event as more than a chance for some rich ladies to wear big gowns and heavy jewelry. “In light of the trauma we’ve all gone through, friendships are so important,” she says. “This is about turning on lights—seeing history.”

And there certainly does seem to be room for everybody to pitch in at Versailles—if they can take all the company. “It’s a bottomless pit,” says de Portago. “Mrs. Hamilton is a brave woman.” —JAMES REGINATO