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The ART & CULTURE Issue

When André Malraux established the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1959, he wrote that its role was “to make major works by humanity, and primarily from France, accessible to the greatest possible number of French people; to ensure the largest audience for our cultural heritage; and to support the creation of works of art and spirit that enrich it.”

But much has changed in half a century, and Malraux’s lofty goals are now beyond the government’s ability to meet them. It is simply impossible for the State to foot the bill for the entirety of French culture, past and present. Historic churches and châteaux need ongoing renovations in the face of constant assaults ranging from weather to visitors’ breath and vibrations from passing trucks. Museums require innovative programming and costly art acquisitions to remain world-class. There are digital archives to create, extensions to build, dance companies to support. France’s cultural institutions are doing their best to raise money with initiatives such as mounting blockbuster exhibitions, opening trendy boutiques and restaurants, and renting out space for special events. They are also increasingly relying on help from their friends.

Many receive support from a French network of nonprofit *associations d’amis*—there is a federation of 290 friends’ groups for museums alone. The biggest, the Société des Amis du Louvre, was created in 1897, counts more than 60,000 members, has an annual €3 million budget and has acquired masterpieces such as Ingres’s *Le Bain Turc*, which it donated to the museum in 1911.

The American model of giving has long served as inspiration for *Les amis*. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s, “The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes... Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.” This is still the case today; in the near absence of U.S. government support for culture, philanthropy is the number-one revenue

source for the arts. It is the opposite of the French model.

In recent decades, “American Friends” associations have sprung up alongside their French cousins. No one seems to know exactly how many there are or even when the first one appeared, but most sources think the concept probably goes back to the early 1970s. (For years, the U.S. Embassy in Paris has kept an informal listing of these groups but intends to track them more closely on its new Web site, American Center France.) One thing is certain, however: Friending France’s cultural organizations is more popular than ever. At

least half a dozen American Friends associations have been founded since 2001, and as this article goes to press, there are reports that a brand new one is forming for the Musée d’Orsay.

As Hal Witt, the director of the 25-year-old American Friends of the Paris Opera & Ballet, says, “It seems that every cultural organization in the world has noticed the effectiveness of American Friends groups and has created some sort of organization on this model, or would like to.” These friends offer a range of support, from acquiring works of art to planting gardens, refurbishing buildings, funding tours, translating databases, even sending American singers and artisans to perfect their skills in France.

AMERICAN FRIENDS ARE BUT THE LATEST chapter in a story that goes back at least as far as the summer of 1923. At the time, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was traveling through France and was struck by the sorry state of such architectural treasures as Versailles, the Reims Cathedral and Fontainebleau. France was still reeling from World War I, and Rockefeller knew the government

could not possibly raise enough money to rehabilitate these historic monuments. So during the next 13 years, he donated approximately \$3 million to the three sites (most went to Versailles) for structural repairs, new roofing and other direly needed improvements. Today, Versailles has not one but two groups of American donors helping to preserve and protect its old stones.

Over the years, American patronage has also been expressed through foundations (Florence Gould, Terra, Mona Bismarck) and associations (French Heritage Society, Friends of French Art). And while Americans have been instrumental in such prestigious renovations as Mont-Saint-Michel and the Arc de Triomphe, their generosity has not been limited to high-profile projects; they have also helped save countless small churches and obscure monuments in tiny villages as well as other beloved if modest historic structures.

The U.S. tax code encourages this generosity by granting a deduction for donors to nonprofit organizations under section 501(c)(3). This is undoubtedly the main reason that American Friends associations are based on U.S. soil. (The French law of 1901 governing associations also offers deductions to individual donors who pay their taxes in France, but it was not until 2003 that France started offering a comparable enticement to businesses. The impact has been impressive: Between 2002 and 2008, French corporate patronage for culture and other causes reportedly jumped from €350 million to €2.5 billion, with 39 percent going to culture.)

While Americans are historically the leading donors, French culture has friends in other places, too. The Centre Pompidou, for example, counts on help from North Americans, South Americans and Japanese. The Château de Chantilly, with its famous 18th-century stables and racecourse, recently received a €35 million grant from billionaire and racehorse owner Aga Khan, who lives nearby. And the Louvre's new Islamic art wing will be largely financed by Saudi Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Al Saud, who has contributed €17 million to the project—the largest donation ever received by the museum.

It seems that when Malraux wanted to ensure that people around the world could partake of France's cultural assets, he was on to something—you don't have to be French to feel a certain ownership of the country's magnificent patrimony. The most exquisitely French of monuments, Versailles, is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Catharine Hamilton, president of the American Friends of Versailles, explains, "France has given us so much in terms of beauty, an understanding of history and inspiration on so many levels. This commitment allows me—and those of my friends who feel the same way—an opportunity to give back."

It is a win-win situation. Châteaux in need of repairs and museums trying to acquire art in a competitive market are grateful for American help. In turn, Americans are happy to provide, out of a combination of generosity, a passion for culture or history, a love of France and a fancy for such rarefied perks as private international art tours. And let's be

BELOW: American Friends organizations offer donors a range of exclusive benefits, including extraordinary access to some of France's most spectacular historical sites and gala events such as this ball at Versailles.

honest: What Texas belle could resist putting on a fabulous ball gown and kicking up her heels in the same palace where French kings once partied?

Listings of French-American philanthropic organizations, including American Friends, will soon be available on American Center France (americancenterfrance.org), a Web site recently launched by the U.S. Embassy in Paris.



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For the Love of Louis

The American Friends
of Versailles



More Americans visit Versailles than any other nationality—approximately two million a year. Texas-born Catharine Hamilton first saw it as a 17-year-old, when her mother took her to Europe on a graduation tour. As she recalls, “I was overwhelmed by its beauty, its magnificence.” She never dreamed it would loom so large in her future. Three decades later, she was asked to join the board of Les Amis de Versailles, a French group founded in 1907 to help maintain and refurbish the château.

Six years after that, the French organization’s president, the Viscount Olivier de Rohan, took Hamilton and her husband on a walk through the gardens to see the Bosquet des Trois Fontaines. The grove had been designed by André Le Nôtre between 1677 and 1679 as a deceptively simple feature of water and greenery, consisting of three descending terraces with pools and fountains in different shapes. It was the only *bosquet* that Louis XIV helped design, and at the end of his reign, he often visited it in his wheelchair. When Hamilton first saw it, it was little more than a barren field, and Rohan expressed his wish that it could be rebuilt. She recalls, “I knew it was going to be a huge stretch to be able to re-create that, and I thought about it for a couple of days. I called Olivier back and said we’d try. And that’s the way it all started.”

When Hamilton returned to the States, she began reaching out to her well-placed acquaintances, and in 1998 the American Friends of Versailles (AFV) was established. The group’s goals are to support renovation projects, to enhance French-American friendship and to raise awareness that this historic monument needs to be maintained. “People think of Versailles as so magnificent and so opulent, but it’s very fragile,” says Hamilton. The undertaking is not just about celebrating kings and queens, she adds, but about preserving the stunning artistic heritage they left behind—the architecture, gardens, tapestries, furniture, clocks and so on.

AFV’s board is composed of French and Americans, but the organization does not have members in the traditional sense—anyone may send in a donation of any amount. In addition, the AFV hosts

Americans have long played an important role in preserving Versailles’s heritage. RIGHT, OPPOSITE: AFV galas such as the Bal Marie Antoinette are an important source of funding—not to mention a great chance to dress up and enjoy the splendor of the Salle d’Hercule. BELOW: The Bassin des Trois Fontaines, restored by the AFV.



AMERICA AND VERSAILLES SHARE A LONG history, one that goes back to Benjamin Franklin, who traveled there to enlist France’s help during the American Revolution. Another famous visitor was John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who between 1923 and 1926 donated millions to restore the château’s crumbling façades and put a new roof on the Hall of Mirrors. As in Rockefeller’s time, the needs of this vast, sumptuous château and gardens extend well beyond the capacities of the French government: Versailles’s annual €100 million budget is now financed by revenues generated by the château and private patronage as well as by State subsidies.

lavish fundraising events, with proceeds going toward the restoration project currently under way. Contributors over the years have included Buzz Aldrin, Nancy and Henry Kissinger, Patty Hearst, Susan Gutfreund, Frederick Smith (of FedEx), John H. Bryan (of Sara Lee), plus former ambassadors to France such as Craig Roberts Stapleton and Felix Rohatyn. The French board members have equally impressive friends—connections that have helped AFV offer packages that include such exclusive perks as private receptions at the Elysée Palace.

Since the group’s inception, it has donated more than \$5 million to Versailles. It inaugurated the refurbished Trois Fontaines in 2004, and is currently raising funds to restore the Pavillon Frais. Designed by Ange-Jacques Gabriel, widely considered the finest architect of the 18th century, the pavilion was built during the reign of Louis XV as a private dining room where the Queen and ladies of the court supped on spring and summer days. It was made of stone with intricate trelliswork, sculpted *boiseries* and arched galleries on either side adorned with spherical topiaries. Water basins in an enclosed garden were decorated with mosaic tiles. Demolished under Napoleon, it was slated for renovation in 1980, but due to a lack of funds, only the stone structure was rebuilt, and it has since fallen into disrepair.



threw a party by the same name—and came dressed as a sculpted yew bush (that evening, he met his future mistress, later known as Madame de Pompadour). Tickets, which cost from \$5,000 to \$25,000, allow access to some or all of 15 events planned over six days—a Chopin concert at the Polish Embassy, a cruise on the Seine, dinner at Paris City Hall, another dinner at the extraordinary Hôtel Lassay, a picnic on the grounds of Versailles and, of course, the Friday night ball.

It is a huge production, and Hamilton won’t sleep soundly until it’s over and the funds have come in. Then again, she knows her work is never really finished: “They renovated the Hall of Mirrors, and by the time they redo everything else, it will have to be done again.” americanfriendsofversailles.org

