



# HISTORY AND BUILDINGS

## HISTORY

### From Holy Apostles Basilica to University and Public Library

At the turn of the 6th century, Clovis I, King of the Franks, who had recently converted to Christianity, ordered the construction of a basilica dedicated to the saints Peter and Paul on the hill of Lutetia. He would be buried there, next to his wife Clotilde. In the year 512, they were joined by Saint Geneviève, who became the much-revered patron saint of Paris from the 9th century onward, giving her name both to the basilica and the Benedictine abbey that rapidly grew up around it. The abbey's 14th-century tower still stands today (it is called the "Clovis Tower", in reference to site's history) and now forms part of the outer wall of the current Lycée Henri-IV. This two-fold hagiographic and royal patronage would affect the history of the institution over the centuries.

Over the course of the 9th and 10th centuries, repeated pillages by the Normans caused significant damage and led to the abbey's decline. It was subsequently rebuilt and reformed in the 12th century when Suger, the Abbot of Saint-Denis and counsellor to first French King Louis VI and then Louis VII, imposed on the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine (henceforth installed in the abbey until the Revolution), the upkeep of a library and a school for scribes. The oldest contemporary manuscript with the abbey's ex-libris is today kept in Soissons (the current Sainte-Geneviève library possesses manuscripts dating back to the 9th century, albeit acquired at a later date); an inventory, which may be incomplete, lists 226 volumes in the 13th-century collection. In the 16th century, the Parish Church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont was built next to the

abbey basilica.



*Vue de l'Abbaye Sainte-Geneviève.* Engravind by E. Ollivier based on A. Saint Aulaire.

Cote : COLL GUEN ICONO TOPO 10 RES, N° 38.

The 16th century was one of turbulence, which, combined with the mismanagement of the abbey, led to chaos and confusion, with terrible consequences for the collections. At the beginning of the 17th century, King Louis XIII put the Cardinal François de La Rochefoucauld in charge of the abbey, asking him to restore order. The Cardinal carried out numerous reforms, including placing the

new Congregation of the Augustins of France, which oversaw all of the branches of the Order, under the authority of Sainte-Geneviève of Paris; he also initiated the resurrection of the abbey's library in 1624 by donating 600 volumes from his own collections. These became the nucleus of the current Sainte-Geneviève library, which soon grew again when the canon regular Claude du Molinet donated a Cabinet of Curiosities. In 1710, Charles-Maurice Le Tellier, Archbishop of Reims and the son of Louis XIV's minister, donated 16,000 volumes to the library, constituting the largest single donation received by the library under the Ancien Régime.

In the 18th century, King Louis XV, seeking to fulfil a vow he had made, commissioned the architect Soufflot to design a new church to replace the Sainte-Geneviève basilica. The first stone was laid in 1764. In 1791, the Revolution led to its transformation into the Pantheon we know today.

Thankfully, the revolutionaries spared the collections of the newly-nationalized library: Alexandre-Guy Pingré – librarian, canon regular, astronomer, traveller and writer – kept a meticulous catalogue, and his charisma sufficiently charmed the public commissioners to prevent them from scattering the collection. Only the Cabinet of Curiosities was sold off to provide funding for various institutions. The library remained in place under the rafters of the old abbey buildings, while the Collège du Panthéon (later renamed Lycée Napoléon, and then renamed again during the Restoration to become the Lycée Henri-IV) was installed on the lower floors.

The parallel expansion of the two institutions meant that cohabitation became increasingly problematic. The conflict was publicized and picked up by the press, the Ministry of Education became alarmed, and it was subsequently debated by the National Assembly. In 1838, the decision was finally made to build a separate building to accommodate readers. The architect Henri Labrousse was commissioned and the old Collège de Montaigu, destined for demolition, was designated as the site for the new building. In the interim, from October 1842 until the eventual completion of the new building, part of the old building was turned into a temporary library to provide the general public with on-going access to the most-popular collections. The rest of the building, which was where the new building would be constructed, was demolished.



*Vue de la Bibliothèque de l'Abbaye Sainte-Geneviève.* Engraving by P.C. de la Gardette, 1773. 37x48 cm, framed.

Cote : EST ENCADRE 17 RES.

This project, adopted by French Parliament in July 1842, was part of the huge urban planning scheme centred on the new Sainte-Geneviève church (now the Pantheon), that had been under discussion since Soufflot. The law of 5 July 1844 decreed the construction of a new street (rue Soufflot) and the construction of a new town hall, architecturally mirroring the law school. The new library was to form part of this complex. The

southern wall of the square was left for private initiatives.

Construction began on 1 August 1843, and the first foundation stone was laid in August 1844. The new Sainte-Geneviève library opened its doors on 4 February 1851. It was the first French public building to have been built specifically as a library and was listed in 1975 and then classified in 1992 as a Historical Monument. It can be seen as a manifesto in favour of modernity in architecture.

The Sainte-Geneviève Library is today a state institution with a dual inter-university and public status: the Universities of Paris 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 have access, as do all members of the public over the age of 18 who have passed the Baccalaureate. For administrative purposes, it is attached to the Sorbonne Nouvelle University – Paris 3. The two million documents in its collection span a huge variety of disciplines and are subdivided into three collections: the Reserve, which contains ancient, rare, or precious documents; the General Collection, which contains documents published after 1810; and the Nordic Library, which has the most extensive collections of Fennoscandian documents in Europe (outside Scandinavia).

## Varied Collections

### The General Collection

In addition to more than one million works, the General Collection is also comprised of 15,000 journals – of which 2,200 are current subscriptions –, 85,000 microform documents (theses, newspapers, books) and numerous electronic resources (scanned documents, databases, online journals, e-books). The wide range of resources currently available has been designed to meet the needs of a large and loyal readership, mainly comprised of researchers, teachers, higher education students (Bachelor through Doctorate), continuing education students, and students in post-secondary school (preparatory) classes, as well as all readers interested in university-level material. The encyclopaedic nature of the collection reflects the history of the library and particularly the introduction of the legal deposit. The General Collection aims to be as multidisciplinary and broad as possible. Although the collection remains stalwart in the pillars of literature, arts, and human and social sciences, it is also proud to provide students with in-depth resources in science, law, economics, and management.

### The Nordic Library

Its history is rooted in the abbey's library: of the 16,000 books bequeathed in 1710 by Charles-Maurice Le Tellier (Archbishop of Reims and brother of the Marquis de Louvois), around 500 were Scandinavian. In 1868, a bequest by Alexandre Dezos de La Roquette, French consul to Denmark and Norway, added more than 2,000 works to the collection and led to the establishment of a specialized institution. Numerous Scandinavian public figures have made bequests since then. In 1885, Henri Lavoix, the library's administrator, established contacts with publishers, libraries, and scholarly associations while on a professional assignment to Scandinavia; to celebrate his invaluable contribution, his

portrait now hangs on the wall of the staircase leading to the Nordic Library. The regular increase in the size of the collection led to it being officially named the “Scandinavian Collection”, and in 1903, it was consequently relocated to its own separate reading room and repository at 8, rue du Panthéon. The name “Nordic Library” was approved by an International Patronage Committee. In 1961, the reading room and the stacks were relocated to the new André Lecomte buildings (entrance at 6, rue Valette). The Nordic Library contains more than 180,000 documents, including a historical collection of around 7,500 works. As an exception to the general rule, the Nordic Library does loan a part of its collections. It is currently the most extensive collection of Scandinavian books outside of Scandinavia.

### The Reserve

Labrouste was the first to set aside a dedicated Manuscripts and Engravings area in the east wing of the ground floor. Previously, readers would enter the foyer, where a number of 17th- and 18th-century “curiosities” and artworks were exhibited; they would then walk through a corridor lined with wooden cabinets where the most precious books were kept and displayed, before reaching the separate reading room that spanned the entire width of the building. These rooms, which resembled 18th-century “contemplation libraries”, were later turned into offices and include a space that was designated for the Jacques Doucet literary library in 1929. Today, the Reserve contains all of the printed collections dating from the 15th century to 1810, as well as any publications from after that date that have come to be deemed precious (for their origin, binding, or such like). Collections of documents on bibliography, bibliophilia, the history of books and of writing and such, furnish these extensive patrimonial collections, which also include works of art and objects sourced mainly from the Sainte-Geneviève Abbey library and the Cabinet of Curiosities. The Reserve has in its care more than 6,600 pressmark manuscripts; 160,000 old, rare, or precious printed volumes, including 1,500 early printed books; more than 50,000 drawings, engravings, and photographs, and a significant collection of book covers. Amongst the oldest preserved manuscripts is a volume containing Cassiodorus’s commentary on the Psalms, copied in the 8th century (ms. 55). The collections are constantly growing in size, and are frequently requested for exhibitions, special assignments or research projects. They are the object of large digitization programmes, which are often run collaboratively with various partners.

## THE BUILDINGS AND THEIR DESIGN

### Innovative Construction for Its Time

At the dawn of the 19th century, the use of iron and cast iron was widespread in building construction. When Labrouste was commissioned to design the new Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, he was fully aware of the architectural feats that had been achieved in previous

decades. Nonetheless, his designs were innovative in many ways. He not only reconciled function and forms with aesthetics by leaving the building's structural features visible, but his unprecedented approach, uniquely his and free from the constraints of what had gone before, had the mark of a manifesto: his work introduced modernity to architecture. He reinvented what had been done in the past and came up with new solutions suitable for this project. His designs for the library were heavily infused with symbolic meaning. A striking example of this is the ever-present theme of the juxtaposition between night and day, darkness and light; this symbolism means that the library's evening opening times are reflected in the engravings in the stone of the building itself.

### The Facade

The facade, with its massive and relatively opaque ground floor level contrasts with the larger fenestration upstairs. This reflects the function of the building inside: a ground floor devoted to the conservation of precious, infrequently-consulted collections with a light and airy upper floor intended to provide comfort for readers. The windows, like the main entrance, seem to have been punched out of the wall, and their shapes provide the facade's main ornament. The main floor, which houses the reading room, has 42 windows under which is engraved a "monumental catalogue" of the 810 authors whose work is featured within the library, beginning with Moses and ending with Berzelius, the Swedish intellectual who passed away in 1848. The simple, plain nature of the facade, with its flowing, continuous garland across the top, demonstrates its modernity; the friezes, pilasters, and engravings bestow it with discreet elegance.



### The Entrance Hall



The Council had suggested two options for the design of the ceiling: it was to be either a vaulted or an iron structure. Labrouste opted for the latter, and the realisation of this design posed no major difficulties during its construction.

Labrouste would have liked to incorporate a garden along the principal facade of the building to "distance the library from the noise of the main street and to help visitors transition into the pensive atmosphere of the library." Such a project could not be realised, however, due to a lack of space. The garden appeared on the upper walls of the entrance hall instead, in the form of Alexandre Desgoffe's paintings of trees and

vegetation from around the world.

The half-light of this space is thought-provoking and evokes Dante or Auguste Comte's

positivism: the entrance hall is the dark forest of ignorance, from which the reader slowly rises as he climbs the stairs towards the temple of knowledge: the reading room. Over the course of his journey, the reader passes twenty busts of influential figures who illustrate the different disciplines that comprise the library's collections. These busts are the work of Carle Elshœcht, Louis-Parfait Merlieux, and Nicolas Mallet. Several were exhibited at the 1849 Paris Salon.

### The Ground Floor Rooms



The left side of the ground floor once contained theological collections and copies. Its role as a repository was given even greater prominence in 1931-1932, when metallic shelves, inspired by the famous shelving system for printed books that Labrouste created for the National Library, were installed. Even before the end of the 19th century, the initial construction plans had to be altered to create a space for offices, which had been overlooked.

The right side was always intended for rare and valuable collections. It was named the “Manuscripts and Engravings rooms”, and its role has remained much the same, despite now

being called the Reserve. It is also home to the administration, situated in the Curator's Office. Wood panelling and oak cabinets were mostly installed by Labrouste in two stages, first in 1850 and then in 1866. A major restructuring project was undertaken in 1933: the room originally intended to serve as a space for readers was divided into three to make room for the literary library donated by Jacques Doucet to the University of Paris, and to enable the creation of offices. From then on, the current reading room replaced the two entrance halls, which formerly exhibited various collections of artefacts. The Reserve now exhibits a selection of the furniture and artefacts inherited from the abbey library. Objects that are particularly worthy of mention are the busts of influential figures sculpted by the likes of Coysevox, Caffieri, Houdon, and such; and the gallery of pastel portraits of the Kings of France, from Louis IX to Louis XIV. These portraits were initially intended to feature in the Cabinet of Curiosities, and the programme wanted them to be “au naturel, like the most genuine of original paintings that one might find in Paris.”

This Cabinet aimed to illustrate the three kingdoms: animal, vegetal, and mineral, as well as depicting human activity. It was created for the appreciation of scholars and those with a curious mind, and was comprised of a collection of rare and unusual artefacts, which often originated from distant continents, and whose exact origin was frequently unknown: coins and medals, precious stones, stuffed animals, dried plants, statuettes, a mummy, paintings... In 1791, a large part of the collection was transferred to new institutions that had emerged during the French Revolution: the Natural History Museum, the Military Museum, the National Library, and so forth. The only artefacts that were left in the library were objects regarded as “primitive”. Recognised today as predominantly remarkable and

particularly rare, these ethnographic artefacts are now on display in the hall leading to the Reserve.

### The Staircase

This part of the building is characterized by both its vastness and its grandeur, which is entirely appropriate to its purpose as a passage towards intellectual enlightenment. On the landings, two busts – created respectively by Raymond Barthélemy (1878) and Eugène Guillaume (1881) – stand to recognise the importance of the role played by the Cardinal de La Rochefoucauld in the evolution of the library's collections during the 17th century, and by Labrouste, who two centuries later designed a space perfectly suited to the study of these collections. The decorative paintings are inspired by works of Italy, as are the reproductions by brothers Paul and Raymond Balze of works featured in the Raphael Rooms in the Vatican. The School of Athens (9.60 x 6m) is one such piece, which faces the landing leading to the Grand Reading room, incarnating the intellectual enrichment that awaits beyond the threshold.



### The Grand Reading Room



With no previous examples from which to draw inspiration, Labrouste needed a considerable amount of time to reflect upon how to realise this part of the project. We can nevertheless observe from the first sketches of his design, which have now been entrusted to the library, that Labrouste's key structural ideas remained much the same during the realisation of his project. The dimensions are largely inspired by observations he made during the short period in which he was responsible for maintaining the former abbey library. The layout of the two naves is reminiscent of the refectory of the former Parisian abbey Saint-Martin-des-Champs (whose buildings now house the National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts), which at that time was being developed into a library).

Labrouste first envisioned a ceiling supported by pillars. However – given the clear preference expressed by the Departmental Council of Civil Buildings – from 1840 onwards, Labrouste changed his design. A cast-iron structure on piers initially supported flat, pitched ceiling sections decorated with coffers, before the architect settled instead on a double-arched vault. Labrouste hoped that this design would enable him to emphasize the light that penetrated through the building's 42 windows, illuminating every corner of the room. The creation of the great cast iron arches, considered to be the room's principal

feature, required even more careful consideration. Labrouste worked on drawings and construction models with the help of Roussel, an ironsmith; and Calla, a foundry expert. The durability of several prototypes was tested before a final decision was made: the ironwork of the roof rafters would rest on each of the large arches; between them, a network of girders, and wire mesh would support the plasterwork.

The painted decor is discreet and serves simply to draw our attention to the books, the library's most important feature. The large oak bookcases serve a similar purpose; however, other bookcases in steel, once a feature of the room's central axis, have since been removed. The tables, also originally arranged along this same longitudinal axis, are now oriented perpendicularly to this direction, in order to increase the room's seating capacity. The library does, however, still have several hundred of the chairs that featured in the architect's original design, which are at once classical (made using turned wood) and modern (in their proportions). Two other items, which face one another, denote the entrance: the vestibule, set around the tapestry *L'Étude surprise par la Nuit* (completed by the Gobelins ateliers in 1853 from a design by the Balze brothers) which determined its proportions; and the main library desk, remarkable for its grand appearance and raised position. The power and mystery of this magnificent hall are such that any changes that have been made to it have not diminished the essence of its original spirit.

### **The Administration Building**

Labrouste had originally planned to place an annex to the west of the main building, to house administration and various related departments. The facade of the current Cujas Library was the only part of this project to be completed before it was abandoned. Labrouste instead oversaw the construction of a new building on the other side of the rue des Sept-Voies (today the rue Valette), to house all of the staff and services that had previously resided above the school. The relative harmony of the three buildings' facades is what gives this part of the square its particular character.

### **New Buildings**

The rate of growth of the collections quickly surpassed Labrouste's forecasts. It would nevertheless take more than a century before an annex building with more shelf space was finally created off of the main staircase in 1954 by the architect André Leconte. The period of economic prosperity meant that Leconte oversaw the completion of a second extension in 1961, which was connected to the first by a walkway. The two buildings have since then not only housed storage and offices, but also the Nordic Library, which can be accessed from the rue Valette.



*To go further :*

General catalogue: <http://bsg-catalogue.univ-paris3.fr/bsg/>

Manuscript catalogue: <http://www.calames.abes.fr/pub/bsg.aspx>

E-resource library: <https://archive.org/details/bibliothequesaintegenevieve>

Multimedia: Arte France, DVD 7 de la Collection Architectures

Recent publications:

- Peyré (Yves), La Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève à travers les siècles, Paris, Gallimard, 2011.
- Labrousse, 1801-1875, architecte : la structure mise en lumière : [exposition, Paris, Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine ; New York, MoMA],  
[Paris] : N. Chaudun : Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine : Bibliothèque nationale de France ; [New York] : Museum of Modern Art, 2012.

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