

A particular way to become a curator: the *École Nationale des Chartes*, Paris

by Anne Christophe¹

This brief introduction to the *École Nationale des Chartes* is not meant as an objective report, but as the personal insight of a third-year student in the *École*.

The *École Nationale des Chartes* was founded in 1821 and aims at preparing future curators to their professional life, whether in archives, in libraries or in museums. It is located in the older buildings of the Sorbonne, Paris, which in itself denotes some interest in heritage. The lectures and seminars still take place in a nineteenth-century room, with its old wooden benches and tables, and the entire building is literally packed with books, which conveys a very ‘chartiste’ atmosphere. The first thing new students learn is indeed to climb up the high ladders to dig up whatever books they need.

It is actually a small institution, with only twenty-five new students per year embarking on a four-year course. Applicants must pass the entrance examination after spending at least two years on a ‘Classe Préparatoire’ course² in Paris, Dijon, Strasbourg, Rennes or Toulouse, where they are specialised in French History. There are two distinct examinations called A and B. Traditionally, most students have entered the *École* via the A examination, which mainly consists of a Latin test and of a test in Medieval and Modern History, while the B examination, more recently created, is based on Modern Languages and on Modern and Contemporary History. Only eight candidates per year pass that B examination. In addition, at least one or two foreign students also gain admission each year. The French students have the status of civil servants, which means that they earn a salary and that they are committed to work for the French state for a minimum of ten years.

Given that the *École* aims primarily at training future library and archive curators, the course mainly deals with using documentary sources, especially ancient ones. As an old cliché goes, ‘chartistes’ are supposedly very fond of all kinds of dusty, decaying and unreadable documents. In their first year, they are all taught Palaeography, Romanic Philology, Latin and Medieval Latin, History of the Book, Archive Sciences, Art History and Archaeology. Afterwards they are free to choose their subjects according to both their career plans and their personal interests. In their last year at the *École*, they also take part in a seminar to reflect upon the notion of heritage. Though many students attend the art history classes, only a few of them will become museum curators, owing to the very small number of posts available. A minority of students finally turn to school teaching or to university lecturing, particularly in History, Art History, French or Classics.

While studying at the *École*, ‘chartistes’ write a PhD in History. This so-called ‘thèse d’*École des Chartes*’ is in fact very specific and does not really compare with either a British PhD or a French doctorate thesis. Students choose their own subjects, and their work ranges from a purely historical analysis to the edition of an ancient text. Companion courses to the thesis cover bibliography skills, computer sciences, statistics and cartography. Students are also free to use some hundred thousand volumes available to them from the School Library. The Library exists since the 1840s and specialises in Medieval History, bibliography, French History sources, and Latin and Romanic philology. Unfortunately, Contemporary History

¹ She is a student at the *École*.

² ‘Classe préparatoire’ refers to post-Baccalauréat courses preparing selected undergraduates to French *Grandes Écoles* entrance examinations. Those *Écoles* are highly competitive, interdisciplinary, State-funded institutions which work in partnership with French Universities and offer training for yet further qualifications, this time more specialized.

resources are thin on the ground. Yet this library still has a great advantage: being devoted to a very specific membership, it can afford to have most of the holdings in free access, available for browsing. Given also that you can take many books out, the library plays a key-role for the students. Of course, permit is required to consult some rarer documents, such as the ancient books and engravings which are used for the History of the Book seminars.

Students begin to work on their 'thèse d'École' during their second year and they must complete it within two years. They receive advice and guidance from two supervisors: one from the École and one from University. Another link between the two institutions is that students usually prepare a Master at University, as part of their 'thèse d'École'. Once finished with their 'thèse d'École', more and more students continue at University where they turn it into a proper Doctorate. Difficult to give you an idea of how long the 'thèse d'École' is, since it can be anything from four hundred pages (140.000 words) right up to a thousand pages (350.000 words) – for the bravest and the chattiest!

To me, the main advantage of this experience is that it allows people who will mainly work in archives and libraries to explore the other side of the mirror, in other words to be in the same position as the researchers they will have to help in their professional life. It helps seeing both points of view and reducing any lack of understanding which may exist between researchers and curators.

I also find it interesting that the same basic knowledge should be taught to future archivists and future librarians alike (not to mention future researchers, who get well prepared for juggling with historical sources). As for librarians, the 'chartistes' are obviously more able to manipulate ancient documents relevant to their fields, though at the end of the day, they may work in any type of library. Moreover, there is a point to a firmly interdisciplinary course, especially since historians, art historians, archaeologists, and museum-, archives- and library-curators tend to work in very partitioned worlds in France. Though I appreciate that each of those careers are highly specialised, more cooperation between them would be greatly beneficial.

Nevertheless, as you may have noticed, the École only provides a very theoretical background. That is why, after the École, the students have to take yet more entrance examinations. The two main ones are the *Institut National du Patrimoine* (INP) examination, which targets both archivists and museum curators, and the *École Nationale Supérieure des Sciences de l'Information et des Bibliothèques* (ENSSIB), which is meant for library curators. Those two schools deal with all practical, concrete aspects of the careers they pave the way for. So even though the École does deliver a diploma, it does not allow students to go straight into jobs at the end of their cursus (except for research jobs at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, the CNRS). The École is now trying to find solutions to the problem posed by its overwhelmingly theoretical course contents. Despite being notoriously backward-looking, the institution is now undergoing changes which are called for by the current context.

In the face of the problem, some pragmatic steps have long been set up in order to give students the opportunity to meet curators and to give them an idea of their future job. Visits of various institutions are organised, among which the public library of Versailles, the duc d'Aumale's library in Chantilly, and the departmental archives of the Manche, in Normandy. Other projects are the study of ancient books in famous Parisian bookshops (such as Bérés, which is now closing down), and the study of rare and ancient books in the reserve collections of important libraries (like the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal and the reserve of the National Library). In their third year, students also catalogue ancient books in cooperation with libraries. At the end of their first year, students undergo a training

course in small groups: they stay one week in a French town, where they spend their time in the archives, the library and the museum. Such steps provide positive effects, though their scope was found to remain too narrow.

As a consequence, more recent steps have been taken. Students are encouraged to follow parallel training courses at the end of their first year. They are advised to spend at least one month in an institution of their choice, in order to explore the concrete realities of the job. Then at the end of their second year, they have the opportunity to spend another month abroad in a European institution, for which they get grants. A partnership between the École and Russian libraries has been set up for two years, and Russian librarians come and spend a few months at the École. Those training courses represent a very positive progress, even if they will not completely solve the problem of being too theoretical. The very short timing, however, has to be taken into account: because of writing the 'thèse d'École', the students cannot afford to spend much longer in libraries or on training courses while at the École.

More positive changes have occurred. The European licence³-master-doctorate thesis means that students from University can be welcomed at the École. Most of them study History, Art History, French or Classics, and their courses at the École now count towards their university cursus. And in the future, thanks to a global national reform entailing a semester-based organization, 'chartistes' will be able to study abroad as part of the ERASMUS scheme. This will enable students to choose 'thèse d'École' subjects requiring archives located in a foreign country, which will be much more convenient and probably enlarge the scope of their projects.

Unfortunately, some problems remain unsolved to this day, and all changes have not brought positive effects to the École. The French state is currently trying to limit the number of civil servants curators for the sake of economy. Increasing pressure is put on those posts, leading to a major argument over the ease with which 'chartistes' take the entrance examinations to the INP and the ENSSIB. In fact, even if all 'chartistes' do not succeed in passing those examinations, they doubtless are more likely to pass than others: 'chartistes' who want to become librarians do not have to prepare for the written parts of the examination and only need to work for the oral test; moreover, a number of posts is booked for them. As for future archivists, they enjoy even more advantages: the École stands for the only direct route to the job of archives curator⁴, so that their monopoly gets more and more criticized. The controversy should be taken seriously, and might question the future of the École. In the short term, though, 'chartistes' are not an endangered species, and the museum specimens are still to be found behind the desk not the showcase!

As a conclusion, I hope that this brief, general survey contributes to give some idea of the École, which is not the only way to become a curator in France, though it certainly is the oldest and the most particular one.

Further information online:

-Website of the École: www.enc.sorbonne.fr

-Website of its library (the catalogue is available online) : <http://bibliothèque.enc.sorbonne.fr>

³ The French equivalent for 'degree'.

⁴ People who already work for long as archivists may also become curators thanks to a promotion at the end of their professional career.