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The Synthesis of Architecture and Decor

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CHAPTER 10

THE SYNTHESIS OF ARCHITECTURE AND DECOR

JEAN-FRANÇOIS BÉDARD

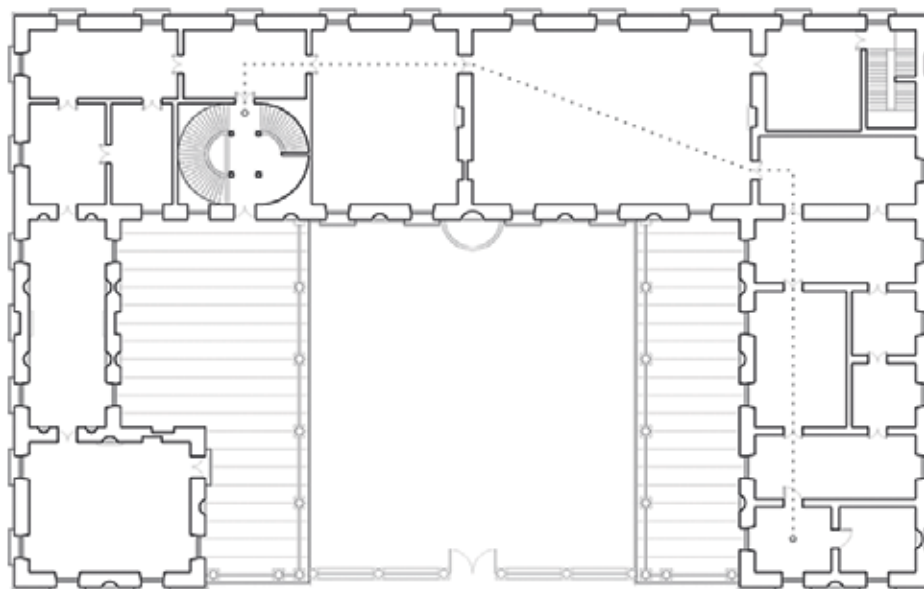
DESPITE CHARLES PERCIER'S STAUNCH SUPPORT OF THE REPUBLICAN cause—as a preeminent designer during the French Revolution, Percier served on the committee mandated to replace the royal insignia in 1793—his approach remained remarkably similar to that of royal architects. His teacher Antoine François Peyre and his mentor Pierre Adrien Pâris, both of whom were trained and employed by the monarchy, provided a model and shaped the young Percier's outlook.¹ Spanning a wide range of scales from diminutive ornamental designs to large urban planning schemes, his work combined Pâris's dexterity as an ornament designer with Peyre's skills in architectural composition. Percier's production, like theirs, fulfilled the multifarious demands placed on architects by a court culture that the Revolution failed to obliterate.

Courts had always relied on the arts to buttress their authority. The Regency of Philippe II d'Orléans, for instance, saw a conscious revival of seventeenth-century forms, appropriating the grandeur of the Sun King's reign to stress political continuity at a time of fragility for the monarchy.² Gilles Marie Oppenord was the

principal orchestrator of the Regency's visual culture. His career is strikingly similar to Percier's. Like Percier, he completed his architectural training at the French Academy in Rome. Like Percier, he produced an extensive array of designs: book illustrations, ornamentation for domestic objects and furniture, interior decoration, sets for festivities, architectural projects, and garden and urban schemes. Like Percier, he was a consummate draftsman and an inventive ornament designer. Like Percier, he used prints to disseminate his work and, thus, the image desired by the political elite who employed him. And like Percier, he made a lucrative commerce of his drawings. Despite the formal differences that set Percier's cool neoclassicism apart from Oppenord's rich baroque, the two artists share a remarkable coherence of purpose: Percier is far closer to his noble forerunner than to his contemporaries in the employ of bourgeois industrialists.

Trained in the tradition of courtly "artistic directors," Percier was ideally suited to serve Napoleon's reinstatement of a court in France after 1804.³ The Empire paid closer attention to architectural and decorative forms as heralds of political power than previous regimes had done. Percier's first project in a court context, however, was for a well-established monarchy. In 1800, King Carlos IV of Spain, ordered the decoration of a cabinet for the Casa Real del Labrador in Aranjuez, the so-called Platinum Room.⁴ To supervise the project, the king employed Michel Léonard Sitel, a French metalsmith who had recently settled in Madrid. Sitel, in turn, called upon Percier to design the room and its furnishings. He also delegated to the architect the selection of the artisans needed to carry out the work. One of the few projects conceived by Percier without the participation of his lifelong partner Pierre Fontaine, the Platinum Room is Percier's most accomplished decorative scheme.⁵

Located at the end of an enfilade in the east wing of the Casa Real, the Platinum Room is a richly decorated rectangular room covered by a barrel vault



► FIG 10.1. Plan of the second floor of the Real Casa del Labrador, Aranjuez, showing the location of the Platinum Room.

[FIG. 10.1]. A thin pilastered order, on pedestals and surmounted by gilded bronze capitals, subdivides the walls. On the north and south walls, these pilasters frame pairs of rectangular canvases by Anne Louis Girodet representing the seasons; below them are landscapes by Jean Joseph Xavier Bidault. Mirrors take the place of Girodet's paintings on the east and west walls, and views of famous urban sites by Jean Thomas Thibault that of Bidault's canvases. Mirrors also fill the lunettes over the east and west walls. This arrangement creates the illusion of an infinite vaulted gallery, an effect Percier emphasized in the perspective published in the second edition of Percier and Fontaine's *Recueil de décorations intérieures* [FIG. 10.2].⁶ Gilded bronze ornaments cast and chased by Pierre Auguste Forestier cover the entablature, pilaster shafts, pedestals, and wainscoting. Some are enhanced with platinum plate, giving the room its name. Painted grotesques, birds, flowers, emblems, and other figures decorate doors, overdoors, and the compartmented ceiling. The seats—two armchairs, two chairs, and two stools executed by the Parisian cabinetmaker Xavier Hindermeyer after designs by Percier—are richly appointed with gilded bronze ornaments in harmony with the room.

The perfection of the cabinet's unified decor is a tribute to Sitel's exacting supervision and Percier's inventiveness with ornament, furniture, and architecture.⁷ During the ancien régime, these domains were often the purview of specialists from different departments of the royal administration. Broadly speaking, the Bâtiments du Roi specialized in permanent buildings and supervised royal manufactures. The Administration de l'argenterie, menus plaisirs, et affaires de la chambre du roi (known as the Menus Plaisirs) took care of temporary decors for spectacles, fireworks, balls, and other special occasions.⁸

Percier's mentor, Pierre Adrien Pâris, was the preeminent designer at the Menus Plaisirs at the century's end. As Dessinateur de la Chambre et du Cabinet du Roi between 1778 and 1792, he conceived and supervised the decors of the monarchy's final years. With Pâris's support, Percier became the set designer at the Paris



▲ FIG 10.2. Unknown watercolorist and Charles Percier, designer and printmaker. Perspective of the Platinum Room, Real Casa del Labrador, Aranjuez, Spain (1800–1806). Watercolor over pl. 61. From Percier and Fontaine, *Recueil de décorations intérieures* (Paris: Authors and Pierre Didot l'aîné, 1801–12). Bibliothèque Paul-Marmottan, Ville de Boulogne-Billancourt, Académie des Beaux Arts, France, 70–424.

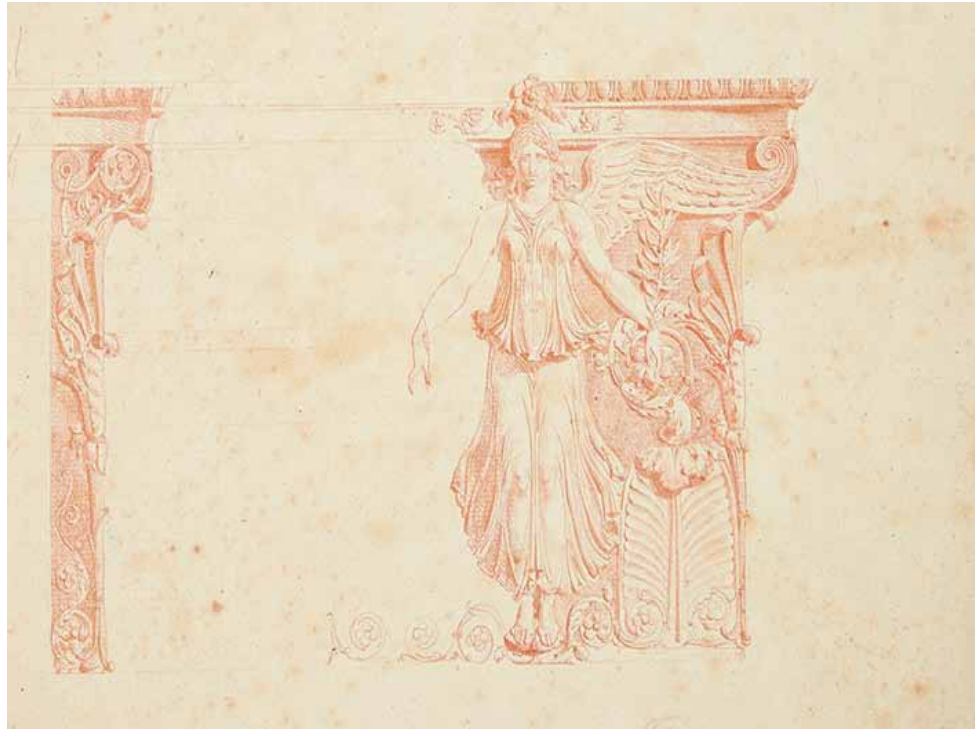
► FIG 10.3. Pierre Chenu, printmaker, after Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, architect and draftsman. "Cabinet of Count Bielinski, Grand Marshal of the Polish Crown, executed in 1734," from *Œuvre de Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier* (Paris, 1738–1751), pl. 87.

Opera during the Revolution. This experience left its mark on his Spanish project of 1800. At Aranjuez, the spatial dematerialization that results from the use of opposing mirrors, the shine of precious wood veneers, and the glittering ornaments—all no doubt heightened when illuminated by candlelight—conjure up the magic of a stage set. The theatricality of the Platinum Room echoes that of other decors realized by Percier and Fontaine around the same time, such as the *salle du Conseil* at Malmaison, which was designed as a military tent with martial attributes.

Theatrical influences pervaded the architectural work of artists at the *Menus Plaisirs*. Between 1734 and 1736, one of Pâris's predecessors, Juste Aurèle Meissonnier, Dessinateur de la chambre et du cabinet du Roi from 1726 to 1750, designed a room for the Polish count Franciszek Bielinski.⁹ As Percier would sixty-five years later for the Platinum Room, Meissonnier orchestrated mirrors, paintings, and furniture into a cohesive environment. He similarly disposed mirrors face to face and crafted lavish ornamentation that recalled the fantasy world of the theater [FIG. 10.3]. Even the manner of construction of both rooms suggests set design: they were prefabricated and exhibited in Paris before being shipped to their patrons in crates. Though far different in appearance, the Platinum and the Bielinski rooms nonetheless share the formal extravagance of spectacle in meeting the demands of a court elite that relished enchanting interiors.

As Dessinateurs of the *Menus Plaisirs*, Meissonnier and Pâris were accomplished inventors of ornament. Percier, too, placed ornament design at the center of his practice [FIG. 10.4].¹⁰ Unlike Meissonnier's plastic and curvilinear decor for Bielinski, however, Percier's decoration at the Platinum Room preserved the simple geometry of the space. He encrusted every surface with an overall field of planar ornaments. The engraved view of the room intensifies this visual saturation (see fig. 10.2). Percier's two-dimensional ornamentation points to the tradition of grotesque decoration. Pâris nurtured Percier's interest in that formal style, which had influenced architects and decorative artists since the rediscovery of ancient Roman models in the fifteenth century.¹¹ Following Pâris's lead, Percier learned from celebrated grotesque compositions such as Raphael's and Giovanni di Udine's Vatican loggia.¹² Inspired by the grotesque, Percier maintained an "epidermic" ornamental strategy throughout his career.





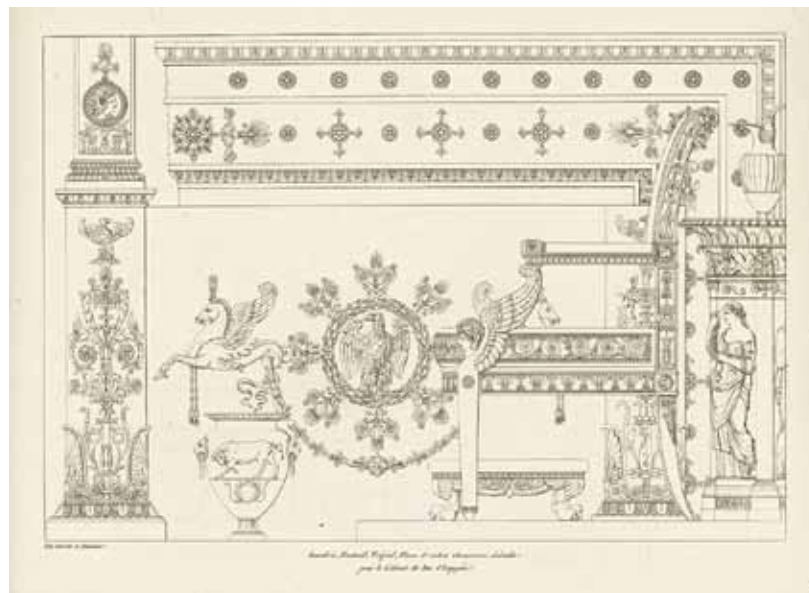
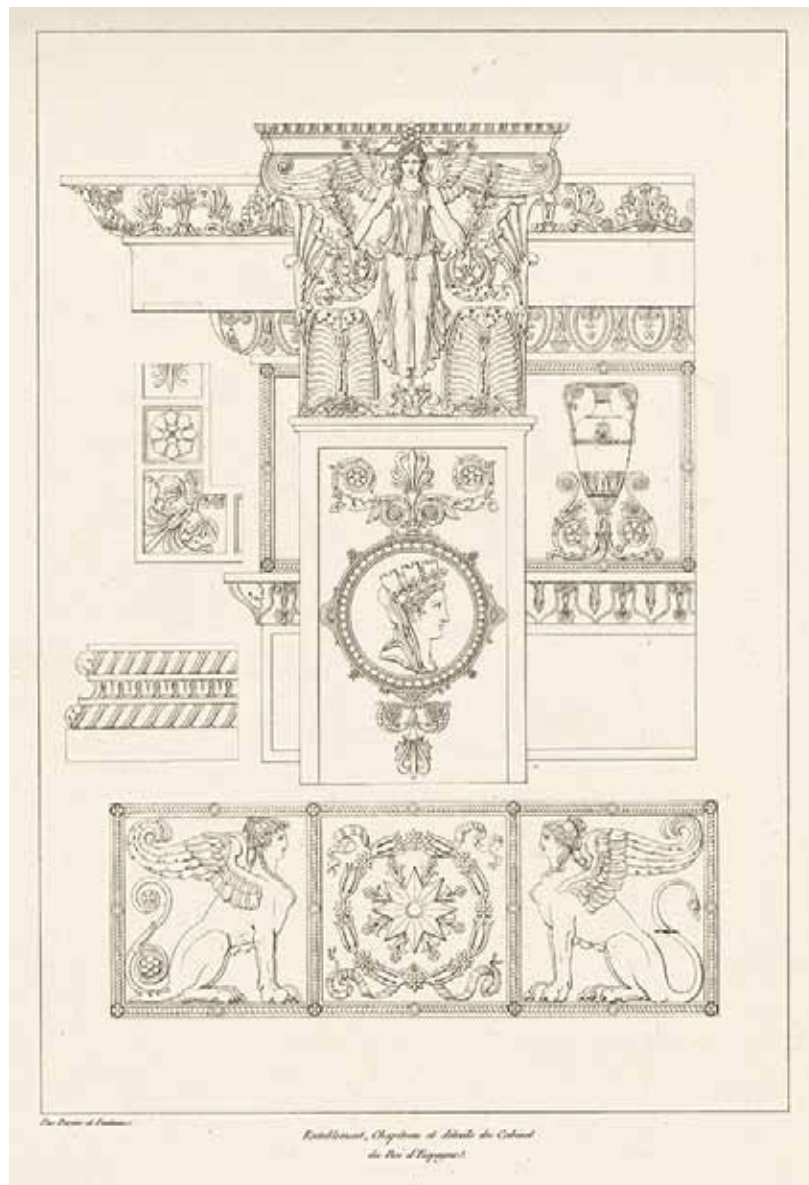
Percier's mastery of the grotesque also influenced his design method. The combinatory arrangement at different scales of geometric, plant, and animal components characteristic of this decorative style may be sensed in the illustrations of the Platinum Room in the *Recueil de décorations intérieures*.¹³ Plates 62 and 63, devoted respectively to the upper parts of the room's order and to the pedestals, wainscoting, and furniture set against an enlarged portion of the door panels' frames [FIGS. 10.5, 10.6], record the decor in abbreviated fragments, at different scales, superimposed on each other much as in a grotesque composition. The *Recueil's* engravings are meant not so much to document a final architectural design as to depict a stage in the compositional process that could be pursued by other designers.

Schooled in the tradition of ancien-régime architects and designers, Percier mastered the planning of the total environments that distinguished court architecture. Ornament held a central place in these settings. It reflected social hierarchies as it proclaimed political prestige—both crucial concerns for aristocratic regimes. Percier's dexterity in decorative invention helped him tackle the different scales at play in these theatrical settings. The Platinum Room at Aranjuez exemplifies his approach. There, he implemented a decorative

▼ FIG 10.4. Charles Percier. Study of a capital for the Platinum Room, Casa Real del Labrador, Aranjuez (detail), 1800. Graphite and red chalk on paper. Private collection, Paris. Cat. 61.

▼ FIG 10.5. Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine. Entablature, capital, and details from the Platinum Room, Real Casa del Labrador, Aranjuez. From the *Recueil de décorations intérieures*, pl. 62.

► FIG 10.6. Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine. Wainscoting, armchair, tripod, vases, and other accessories executed for the Platinum Room, Real Casa del Labrador, Aranjuez. From *Recueil de décorations intérieures* (Paris: Authors and Pierre Didot l'aîné, 1801–12), pl. 63.



method in the grotesque tradition. Not only the metallic ornaments disposed on the room's surfaces but also the painted decoration of the wood veneers and the barrel vault are in this formal mode. Even the way the room is illustrated in the *Recueil de décorations intérieures* heightens the fragmentation of geometric, figurative, and architectural elements as in grotesque designs. With the accession of Napoleon Bonaparte to the rank of Emperor of the French, Percier fully deployed his ornamental strategy in the service of the upstart imperial court and fulfilled his ambitions as court architect. ●

1 On Antoine François Peyre's importance as a teacher, see Jean-Philippe Garric, "L'Académie royale d'architecture aux origines de l'art de la composition (1779-1799)," in *L'atelier et l'amphithéâtre: les écoles de l'architecture, entre théorie et pratique*, ed. Guy Lambert and Estelle Thibault (Wavre: Mardaga, 2011), 23-50.

2 Jean-François Bédard, "Political Renewal and Architectural Revival during the French Regency: Oppenord's Palais-Royal," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 68, no. 1 (March 2009): 30-51.

3 Following Martin Warnke's expression. Martin Warnke, *The Court Artist: On the Ancestry of the Modern Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 176.

4 On the Platinum Room, see Chantal Gastinel-Coural, "Le cabinet de platine de la Casa del Labrador à Aranjuez: Documents inédits," *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français* (1994), 181-205; Javier Jordán de Urríes y de la Colina, "Les décors d'Aranjuez: Les Saisons du cabinet de platine de la Real Casa del Labrador à Aranjuez," in *Girodet, 1767-1824* (Paris: Galimard and Musée du Louvre Éditions, 2005), 261-65; Javier Jordán de Urríes y de la Colina, *La Real Casa del Labrador de Aranjuez* (Madrid: Patrimonio Nacional, 2009), esp. 176-84; Javier Jordán de Urríes y de la Colina and José Luis Sancho, "Sitel, Percier y el Gabinete de Platino," *Reales Sitios* 50, no. 195 (2013): 28-49.

5 Percier's sole authorship is noted by Jordán de Urríes and Sancho, "Sitel, Percier," 28.

6 Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine, *Recueil de décorations intérieures, comprenant tout ce qui a rapport à l'ameublement, comme vases, trépiéds, candélabres, cassolettes, lustres, girandoles, lampes, chandeliers, cheminées, feux, poêles, pendules, tables, secrétaires, lits, canapés, fauteuils, chaises, tabourets, miroirs, écrans, etc. etc. etc. composé par C. Percier et P. F. L. Fontaine, exécuté sur leurs dessins* (Paris: Authors and Pierre Didot l'aîné, 1812).

7 Jordán de Urríes argues for Sitel's important role in the design of the cabinet; Jordán de Urríes and Sancho,

"Sitel, Percier."

8 For a more nuanced account of the relationship between the Bâtiments and the Menus Plaisirs, see Jérôme de La Gorce, "Quand les Menus Plaisirs et les Bâtiments du roi s'associent pour servir la monarchie," *Les Menus Plaisirs du roi (XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles)*, ed. Pierre Jugie and Jérôme de La Gorce (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2013), 101-15. On the Menus Plaisirs, see also Jérôme de La Gorce and Pierre Jugie, *Dans l'atelier des Menus Plaisirs du roi: spectacles, fêtes et cérémonies aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Versailles: Éditions Artlys, 2010).

9 On the Bielinski cabinet, see Peter Fuhring, *Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier: un génie del rococo 1695-1750*, 2 vols. (Turin: Umberto Allemandi & C., 1999), 2:213-14. <which volume?>

10 Noted by Jean-Philippe Garric, "Présentation," in Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine, *Palais de Rome: Palais, maisons et autres édifices modernes dessinés à Rome*, ed. Jean-Philippe Garric (Wavre: Éditions Mardaga, Institut national d'histoire de l'art, 2008), 16.

11 On Pâris's study of grotesques, see Marc-Henri Jordan, "L'étude de l'ornement et l'art du décor," in *Le cabinet de Pierre-Adrien Pâris, architecte, dessinateur des Menus-Plaisirs* (Besançon: Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon, 2008), 40-57.

12 Eighteen engravings of Raphael's *loggia*, colored and in gilded frames, hung in Percier's Louvre apartment at the time of his death. His library also contained a volume documenting this decorative ensemble. See the probate inventory of Charles Percier, Archives nationales de France, Minutier central, étude XLVI, no. 905, September 11, 1838, respectively fol. 6r, no. 30, and fol. 7v, no. 54. Two original drawings for arabesques, most likely by the architect, are also mentioned on fol. 5v, no. 25.

13 Jean-Philippe Garric points to a similar combinatory strategy at play in Percier's decorative frontispieces; Garric, "Présentation," 25.