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Architecture as Portrait: Exotism and the Royal Character of the Louvre

The royal architecture of the Louvre, in Renaissance and classical France, shows a steady transformation in architectural form and a remarkable continuity in political intent—yet one can see that architectural form is at all times determined by the political iconography of the ruling king. In fact, these shifting architectural expressions, from Charles V's semi-residential fortress up to the desertion of the Louvre by Louis XIV in favor of Versailles, form a revealing succession of portraits of royal patronage that are sharply distinct from the general architectural tendencies of their times. In this case, the long-term perspective is particularly effective to uncover the continuing political intents underlying changing architectural motifs.

A common trait of royal patronage in France from the mid-15th to the mid-17th century is its xenophilia. Not only are foreign artists invited to the court, also native artists are encouraged to affect foreign stylisms. The political importance of this taste for the exotic, and the meanings that can be attributed to the resulting formal repertoires, have not, however, been subject to much scrutiny from the disciplinary standpoint of architectural history.

Thus, starting with Charles V's monumental staircase in the 15th century, what is to be witnessed at the Louvre is a continuum of image-driven interventions. Aside from their utilitarian functions, all transformations at the Louvre since that time have primarily sought to represent the King in his parisian residence. From Francis I's 1542 west wing at the Louvre, intended to impress his Spanish counterpart, up to Perrault's unbuilt wings to be decorated "in the manner of all the world's nations" (1670s)—not to mention the famous colonnade—, foreign influence was at the crux of these representations.

The aspect of these images is manifold and encountered several changes during the period in question. Whether they were regionalist or cosmopolitan, however, they all hinge on the concept of sumptuary distinction. Whatever the King built at the Louvre was thus meant to set him apart from the rest of the nobility. This could be achieved by either besting the aristocracy's achievements—as in Charles V's or Francis I's grander versions of

common castles—or by introducing radical differences from what the nobility could or would build—as in Henry II’s and Louis XIV’s Italianizing drives.

The Louvre Colonnade is perhaps the crowning point of this process. In spite of Bernini’s ultimate failure to bring about his design, the unmistakable combination of 16th- and 17th-century Roman compositions in the executed façade was not lost on older historians. This was, of course, very different from anything the French nobility would have dared to build in a time of rising nationalism—and quite intentionally so. The perception of the Louvre Colonnade as a “typical” example of French classicism is an image construed long after the fact, during the nationalist rampage of the 1920s (nineteenth-century historians had much preferred Francis I’s wing as an example of “typical” French architecture).

The key point in all these interventions, from Charles V to Louis XIV, is that they were in fact never meant to be typical. They could simply not have functioned as architectural portraits of the King, if they had been conceived merely as expressions of current French architecture.