
EXHIBITION THRONES IN MAJESTY

INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-JACQUES AILLAGON, PRESIDENT OF THE PALACE OF VERSAILLES

*This interview has been made for the special issue of *Beaux Arts Magazines* on *Thrones in Majesty* exhibition, March 2011.*

1-WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO ORGANISE AN EXHIBITION ABOUT THRONES IN VERSAILLES?

JEAN-JACQUES AILLAGON : The objective of this exhibition, which accompanies the publication of Jacques Charles-Gaffiot's essay, *Trônes en Majesté - l'autorité et son symbole* (co-published by Éditions du Cerf / Château de Versailles) is to underline the quasi-universality of a seated representation of authority, whether that authority be political, religious or intellectual. This question has a particular signification in a royal château, which for more than 100 years in France's history was the place where authority was exhibited on a daily basis. The château's throne room was the Salon d'Apollon, but on exceptional occasions the throne was installed in spectacular fashion in the Hall of Mirrors, in particular to welcome the most important ambassadorial delegations. At Versailles, the monarch's entire life was regulated according to a precise and demanding etiquette. A whole battery of symbols aimed to make tangible the king's role in a political system that had been organised around his person. The exhibition, Louis XIV, l'homme et le roi was successful in highlighting a duality in representations of the king: the king at war, in movement and the king of peace, master of himself, his people, his state and his actions. The portrayal of this peaceful king, the prince holding authority, the seated king, is a link to his ancestor St Louis who held his court of justice under an oak tree...

'Thrones in Majesty' is therefore an ideal subject for Versailles which you could compare to a 'locomotive' whose aim was to exalt power and authority. By placing the thrones in the Grand Apartments, we are reminding visitors that these staterooms had, contrary to the more private parts of the château, a scenographic function, that of being the stage where authority and majesty were embodied.

2-WHY DID THRONES SEEM TO LOSE IN IMPORTANCE AT THE END OF THE 16TH CENTURY IN EUROPE?

JEAN-JACQUES AILLAGON : Was that really the case? Until the end of the Ancien Régime, each time the king went to parliament to hold the 'lits de justice', he sat on a throne in a corner of the 'Grand Chambre'. In this way he underlined the power of his authority: he could annul parliamentary decisions and impose his own will. During the opening session of the Estates General at Versailles on May 5th 1789, did the king not sit on a throne in the Salle des Menus Plaisirs? When the Revolution put an end to the monarchy, 'Place du Trône' (Throne Square) became 'Place du Trône Renversé' (Square of the Overturned Throne). Not for a single moment was the foundation and force of this symbol forgotten. When Napoleon restored the monarchy, he was quick to recreate its decorum and its rituals, the coronation and all its regalia, the use of the throne and orders, although they had been abolished by the Revolution in the name of equality... We can also note that at Versailles, the symbolism of the throne had also been extended to other elements of furniture such as the king's bed, which had also become a symbol of his immutable authority. It was the habit to take off one's hat in front of the bed, even when the king was not in it.

3-WHY DID NAPOLEON BORROW DAGOBERT'S THRONE WHEN HE SET OFF FOR BOULOGNE TO INVAD ENGLAND?

JEAN-JACQUES AILLAGON : Napoleon was trying to tie his legitimacy to that of the oldest of French royal 'clans', the Merovingians, who had preceded the Carolingians and the Capets. In place of the Capetian fleur-de-lis, he put bees: a decision which it is said was inspired by the bees (which were in fact crickets) that had been found in Childeric's tomb at Tournai. By taking place on the so-called 'Throne of Dagobert', conserved during the Ancien Régime in the treasure of the royal basilica at Saint-Denis, Napoleon symbolically rooted his authority in the legitimacy of antiquity. Childeric had already used identical symbolic means. He was buried like a Germanic chief with his horses and his arms, dressed in a purple coat and was wearing a consular ring. In this way, he linked his legitimacy to Rome. In Napoleon's empire, thrones appeared everywhere the emperor was present, in the assemblies, in the departments of France and in the provinces of the Empire.

4-YOU ARE ALSO SHOWING A CERTAIN NUMBER OF PORTABLE THRONES IN THE EXHIBITION, WHAT DO THEY REPRESENT?

JEAN-JACQUES AILLAGON : Power moves, authority is seated. How was it possible to reconcile the movement of a person in authority and the permanence he or she symbolised? Quite simply in fact, by placing them on a portable seat! This seat can be carried by men like the Sedia Gestatoria or hoisted on an animal's back like the Thai Howdah. In this way, the serenity and unchanging nature of authority is affirmed. It goes forward and yet remains unmoving!

5-DURING THE REPUBLIC, THE THRONE'S HISTORY IS SOMEWHAT EQUIVOCAL ISN'T IT?

JEAN-JACQUES AILLAGON : That's true. The Republic has often asserted itself by overthrowing thrones. In 1792, in 1830 and in 1848, all symbols of the royalty and its authority were systematically targeted by the revolutionaries. At the same time, the Republic reconstituted a symbolism of power and authority, as bears witness the stereotype of the presidential photo. Modern republics rarely seat authority. It does however happen in certain circumstances such as in France on July 14th. When the president goes down the Champs Elysées, he is standing. He is the commander-in-chief of the army and as such is the incarnation of power. On Place de la Concorde, he becomes the chief magistrate of the Republic. He sits to attend the parade and power bows before authority.

During the Third and Fourth Republics, the election of the President of the Republic took place in the Salle des Congrès at Versailles. Once the result of the vote was known, the new president's election was proclaimed in the Salle de l'Investiture which is adjacent to the Salle de Marengo. An armchair was placed at his disposal: a sort of 'republican throne'.

Other than in France, all republics are attentive to the symbolical power of the seated representation of authority. In Abidjan, during his investiture in precarious conditions at a hotel, Alassane Ouattara was invited to take place on an armchair covered with red fabric which thus became, as it were, the 'throne of the Ivory Coast'. It is moreover well known how derisory monarchies based on personal power, such as that of Jean-Bedel Bokassa in the Central African Republic, were fond of the royal decorum of thrones.... In many of these countries, whether their situation be democratic or autocratic, we can note that the symbolism of the throne is deeply rooted in local political culture. Even if its modern representation finds inspiration in the canons of European history, its substance is not foreign to earlier indigenous cultural experiences.
