

The Griffin Gallery

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The museum that François-Xavier Fabre created following the donation of his art collection consisted of two principal rooms that formed an L-shape : the Jeu de Paume Gallery and the Griffin Gallery (Rooms 9 and 11). These galleries were created within the hotel Massilian between 1825 and 1828.

The Griffin Gallery, then called “the private gallery of the director” contains exclusively those paintings donated by the founder of the museum regardless of school. Fabre’s gift included 224 paintings, 26 drawings, 4 sculptures in marble, 6 sculptures in bronze, 72 engravings, 30 plaster casts and 11 objets d’art. Following the style of the era, the walls were covered with paintings tightly packed together on several levels.

The work of remodelling the gallery space began in 1827 and was completed under Fabre’s direction. The attic storey was removed, giving the room’s ceilings more than ten metres in height and providing maximum surface area for the display of the pictures. The semicircular windows above the cornices provide ideal lighting for viewing the paintings. The windows have a fan shape when seen from the exterior but were originally rectangular when seen from the interior.

For the space just beneath the wooden rafters, Fabre commissioned the Swiss-Italian painter and decorator Thomas Baroffi of Marseille to execute a frieze composed of griffins facing a central motif of Roman candelabra under garlands of plants and flowers (fig.1). The griffin is an ancient mythical animal that has the body of a lion and the wings and head of an eagle. It symbolically unites the qualities of courage and vigilance associated with these two animals. For the Greeks, griffins were associated with Apollo and guarded his treasures. Their origins probably go back to ancient India where their images guarded gold mines.



fig.1- Detail of the griffins after the 2005 restoration
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Though it cost four thousand francs, which was a considerable amount of money at the time, the frieze was not to everyone’s taste. Stendhal, who visited Montpellier in 1838, spoke of “large vacuous sphinxes, too brightly coloured...”. Nonetheless, the decorative treatment remains a remarkable example of the interior decoration of French museums in the early nineteenth century.

The north wall was adorned with a trompe l’oeil door facing a portico housing a cabinet of sculptures (Room 10), which led to Jeu de Paume Gallery where paintings and sculptures were exhibited. Around 1979, major renovation works were undertaken to enlarge and modernise the Musée Fabre. By removing a glazed arch, the Griffin Gallery was pierced to connect the hotel Massilian with the Jesuit College. Two mezzanines were also added causing the destruction of the north side of the griffin frieze (fig.2), which was recreated for the new museum in 2005.



fig.2- The Griffin Gallery in the 1980s with paintings hung close to the griffins
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