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Hilary Ballon, *Louis Le Vau: Mazarin's College, Colbert's Revenge*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999. ix + 236 pp. Architectural drawings, photos, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-691-04895-9.

Review by Douglas C. Baxter, Ohio University.

Few tourists today visit the Institut de France on the Quai Conti in Paris's Left Bank. The Institut, housing France's important academies, including the renowned *Académie française*, is better known to scholars, but even then only a few visit either the *Bibliothèque Mazarine*, whose rich collection has the honor of being France's oldest public library, or the Institut's own library. The complex, constructed 1662-1667, has had a long history, first as a college, library, and tomb memorial to Cardinal Jules Mazarin, then as a Revolutionary prison, and finally as home for the Institut since 1806.

Hilary Ballon, architectural historian at Columbia University and author of an earlier award-winning study of Paris under Henri I, [1] turns her attention to the Institut's earlier foundation as Mazarin's *Collège des Quatre Nations*, designed by the royal architect Louis Le Vau. While Le Vau is recognized as a gifted architect of important buildings in seventeenth century France, he is a comparatively unstudied figure. In addition to the College, he designed Nicolas Fouquet's Vaux-le-Vicomte, worked on the King and Queen's pavilions at Vincennes, and developed housing in the Ile Saint-Louis. He also worked on the Louvre's Colonnade, as well as the early design for Versailles. Yet Le Vau still awaits a comprehensive biography or major architectural overview, perhaps because, as Ballon suggests, scholars have a greater interest in the French classical tradition. [2]

Ballon uses her admittedly specialized study focusing on one project, the College, to address a number of broad issues. In particular, she contributes to our knowledge of Le Vau, whose ambition, talent, and creativity she admires. Le Vau is important, she argues, because he occupied a key place in the transition of French architectural style, from one shaped by the Renaissance and influenced by the Italianate baroque to that of the more severe classical style of the Louvre and Versailles. Ballon convincingly demonstrates that Le Vau had the talent to move back and forth between the two styles, adapting classical elements in the royal pavilions at Vincennes while employing elements of the baroque in the College. Le Vau's contribution to the new classical architectural style has been minimized by some, but Ballon sees him as a key transitional figure, standing between the future and the past.

Ballon also argues that the College project played a pivotal role in Colbert's architectural education. Le Vau suggested the importance of the College's site in a visual axis with the Louvre, embellishing Paris and enhancing the monarchical image of power and grandeur. Rejecting the older baroque architectural style, Colbert seized this vision and promoted the new classical style recalling the grandeur of imperial Rome, which would dominate future French architecture.

Ballon takes the adventurous step of writing for two audiences, art historians and traditional historians. [3] Her work develops a number of themes, some architectural, namely the interaction between the baroque and classical in France, the transition from older architectural traditions to that of the academy,

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Le Vau's intellectual development, and Colbert's architectural vision for the new Rome on the Seine. Yet she also discusses a number of more specific historical issues: Mazarin's wealth and cultural program, the artistic education of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, his active role as superintendent of public construction, and the interconnected worlds of contracting and industrial activity.

Ballon explores these larger themes in four chapters. The first, "Mazarin's Bequest," sets the scene for the construction of Mazarin's monument to himself. Mazarin's will set aside five percent of his estate for a combination educational institution for sixty students from the four "nations" acquired under his tenure as chief minister (Flanders-Artois, Alsace, Roussillon, and Pignerol), riding academy (never built), public library to preserve his magnificent collection of 38,000 books and manuscripts, and finally his tomb chapel. While these facts are well known, Ballon appraises Mazarin's approach to the arts. She rejects the notion that the cardinal was an avid supporter of the Italianate baroque style. While he had a partiality for baroque architecture and admired Bernini, he did not launch a "baroque offensive" as sometimes claimed, for Mazarin, the practical statesman, was a realist when it came to artistic matters. Ballon concludes that Mazarin never had passionate feelings about any one style and his wishes did not shape the style of his College.

The second chapter, "Architecture and Imagery: the New Rome," explores the actual design and construction of the complex. Mazarin had provided only the funding; his executors, presided over by his former man of affairs and new minister, Jean Baptiste Colbert, made the actual decisions. In fact, the project became less and less a memorial to Mazarin, as seen by a shift in decoration and the placement of his tomb, and more and more part of a royal project exalting state grandeur. Part of Le Vau's genius was to situate the building site in the heart of Paris in close proximity to the Louvre as a component of monarchical splendor, rather than on more inexpensive property on the periphery of the capital. At this point, Ballon, through the help of Le Vau's own architectural sketches, lucidly explores the evolution of Le Vau's elements. It is a tribute to her clarity that non-architects can clearly see the challenges Le Vau faced and his creative response.

The third chapter dramatically shifts emphasis, analyzing the inventory of Le Vau's library after his death in order to speculate on his education and training. Le Vau's books reflect a self-assured man of learning, self taught, caught between two worlds, the older one of mason contractors and the newly emerging academy. Le Vau never traveled to Italy; he learned elements of the classical tradition from his professional books, which Le Vau used not to absorb the canons of classical architecture but as a source of ideas.

The final chapter, "Charge of Embezzlement," examines an interesting digression, the lawsuit after Le Vau's death charging him with pocketing funds from the College project. Ballon adroitly explores this murky territory—hard evidence is lacking and mostly circumstantial—to probe the world of contractor-architects with their "sweetheart" deals on construction jobs. She exonerates Le Vau from the charge of cost overruns, arguing that the cost would have been on target if Colbert had not shifted site costs, including street modification and sewer construction, making Mazarin's bequest underwrite the cost of Parisian urbanization. She does admit, however, that Le Vau concealed his ties to the contractors and probably profited from his role as designer-manager of the project. She also concedes that he had an expensive lifestyle and borrowed recklessly, perhaps shifting money to his other project of founding a gun manufactory also subsidized by Colbert. The result is a fascinating picture of the architect as entrepreneur-industrialist that should be of particular interest to economic historians.

The conclusion traces Colbert's architectural education and suggests that he transformed himself from an accountant with little design knowledge into a sophisticated advocate of the classical style, who relied upon others, such as Le Vau, in this evolution. Less successful, in this reviewer's opinion, is the suggestion that the lawsuit against Le Vau's estate was Colbert's revenge for the architect's failure to satisfy the minister. It is true that Colbert was a cold, manipulative figure who could be vengeful, but

Ballon's evidence for Colbert's role in the lawsuit is that he was *ex-officio* head of the College trustees who brought the lawsuit and "must have approved the action" (p. 125). Yet she offers no real evidence of Colbert's actual role, perhaps because the College documents for 1669-1672 are missing. She also does not explore what it meant for Colbert to be *ex officio* head or offer hard evidence for Colbert's role in the College in the 1670s. She admits that the lawsuit is mysterious, for the College must have known that it would recover little money from Le Vau's debt-ridden estate, and presumes that the lawsuit must have been aimed at damaging his reputation. Perhaps, yet she offers little factual evidence of conflict between the minister and the architect, other than that Colbert openly invited criticism of Le Vau's designs for the Louvre *façade* and wrote a sharp letter about the failure of Le Vau's foundry. She also admits that Le Vau continued as royal architect after the College and was employed at the early construction of Versailles until his death in 1670. He appeared to continue to enjoy royal favor. Perhaps the posthumous lawsuit was petty revenge, but it seems, in this reviewer's opinion, that the charge is based more upon inference than hard evidence. Nonetheless, part of the reason for the success of Ballon's study is its creative use of sources. While others have turned away because of the lack of sufficient sources for a complete monograph, Ballon is able to tease new meaning from those disparate ones that do exist: the inventory of his library, his attempt to found a foundry, and the posthumous lawsuit.

Based in part on archival work in the Archives Nationales, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Institut itself, the study also has a solid command of the secondary literature. Extensive footnotes provide not only quotations from primary sources and discussion of issues but also suggest background reading on a number of related topics, such as Mazarin in the Fronde, his relationship to Anne, and even royal entries. The detailed footnotes also comment on such varied topics as riding academies, the casting of guns and how they were test fired, the placement of clocks in church *façades*, and the situation of Richelieu's tomb in the Sorbonne. Her text is also shaped by current research. For example, chapter three, dealing with Le Vau's library, incorporates recent scholarship about literacy during the period. She also mirrors recent scholarship on absolutism, noting that Louis XIV's government carefully consulted city fathers about river location and negotiated with the elites—see Ballon's comment "the king, rarely if ever, getting his way without some degree of compromise" (p. 48). The work is well illustrated with photographs, architectural drawings and engravings of the time, which clearly illustrate her themes, even to non-experts. A six-page bibliography includes both standard and recent work on the history of the period.

Ballon adds four appendices of interest to specialists. One identifies Mazarin's agent in Rome, Elipido Benedetti, as the author of early designs for the cardinal's tomb, while a second examines the artistic development of Le Vau's assistant, François d'Orbay, in his plans for the Spanish Steps in Rome. There is also a checklist of drawings for Mazarin's College based upon an inventory of Le Vau's property and finally a modern bibliographical documentation of the 308 works in Le Vau's personal library.

On the whole, this lucid, highly readable study goes far beyond narrow specialization and merits a wide audience, particularly among historians.

## NOTES

[1] Hilary Ballon, *The Paris of Henri IV: Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: The Architectural History Foundation; Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 1990). This earlier book won the Alice Davis Hitchcock Award for the Most Distinguished Scholarship in the History of Architecture. Her latest work shifts focus to American railway architecture, Hilary Ballon, *New York's Pennsylvania Stations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002).

[2] Cyril Bordier hopes to provide this major architectural study. See his *Louis Le Vau architecte. Tome I,*

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*Les immeubles et hôtels particuliers parisiens* (Paris: Éditions Léonce Laget, 1998). Volume 1 covers the architect's early career and commissions for private houses. A second volume on his work after 1661, including his work on the College, has not yet appeared. Although Ballon mentions Bordier in her bibliography, volume 1 came out about the same time and it appears she did not have the opportunity to use his work, particularly in her section on Le Vau's family and background.

[3] See, for contrast, the much more straightforward architectural history of Robert W. Berger, *The Palace of the Sun: The Louvre of Louis XIV* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), in which Colbert plays a merely formal role, without discussion of his artistic views.

Douglas C. Baxter  
Ohio University  
baxter@ohio.edu

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