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DIPLOMATIC ART HISTORY: THE THIRD REPUBLIC'S IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE FRENCH EMBASSY BUILDING IN HABSBURG VIENNA

ABSTRACT

When on April 18, 1901, the decision was made in Paris to construct the first purpose-built embassy in Vienna, the ministerial authorities hoped to put an end to the never-ending letters of complaint from the ambassadors about the inadequacies of the Palais Lobkowitz, which was rented until the completion of the new embassy. Yet controversies around the French embassy continued: A much more intense tug-of-war played out among architects, ministers, and diplomats over the representation of the Third French Republic in the architecture and furnishings of the planned building. I examine the years-long struggle of the state architect Georges Chedanne with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Fine Arts, and the changing ambassadors on-site in Vienna. In particular, I trace the different positions, demands, and needs of the actors involved not only through written sources but also in the architectural and artistic program of the building on Schwarzenbergplatz.

The primary tension at the heart of the planned embassy was that Chedanne envisioned a modern Gesamtkunstwerk somewhere between Art Nouveau and Eclecticism, whereas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs insisted on a self-confident representation of the Third Republic—both proposed styles conflicting with the diplomatic reality of the ambassador's life. I argue that Chedanne attempted to face this precarious situation artistically: Not the history of France but the far less problematic history of French *art* should await the visitors at the embassy. This, however, did not spare the building decades of scorn from both French ambassadors and the Viennese public.

KEYWORDS

Embassy; Architecture; Interior; Gesamtkunstwerk; Diplomacy; Republicanism; France; Vienna; Austria-Hungary; Chedanne Georges; Selmersheim Tony; Devambez André; 1900s; 20th century; Austria; Habsburg; Vienna 1900

On April 18, 1901, ministerial authorities in Paris decided to construct the first purpose-built French embassy building in Vienna, hoping to put an end to the ambassadors' never-ending letters of complaint about the inadequacies of the Palais Lobkowitz, which was rented until the completion of the new embassy.¹ Controversies continued, however, as a new and much more intense tug-of-war played out among architects, ministers, and diplomats over the representation of the Third French Republic (1870–1940) in the architecture and furnishings of the embassy. In this article, I examine this years-long struggle of the state architect Georges Chedanne with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts, and with the changing ambassadors on-site in Vienna, highlighting their different artistic and political positions, as well as their demands and needs. I then investigate the ways in which the built architecture endeavored to reconcile such tensions by artistic means. Chedanne, in my analysis, intended to face the representational crisis of the young French Republic in monarchical Vienna by domesticating the particularly sensitive political history of the Grande Nation as the history of French art in the building's decorative program. The architect as well as the constructed path of art history thus acted as diplomatic agents themselves. I demonstrate, in turn, that the institutional actors in this intricate situation actively shaped the project's architectural and artistic designs.

BUILDING A REPRESENTATION(AL) DILEMMA

The embassy building (Fig. 1), realized between 1901 and 1909, is located at the northwestern end of Schwarzenbergplatz in Vienna, standing out, with regard to the surrounding representative Historicist buildings, both in terms of topography and style. To this day, researchers commonly read its architecture as being “pure” French Art Nouveau exported to Vienna.² In fact, however, Art Nouveau elements are combined here with the Parisian mansard roof and Baroque volutes on the gables of the two prominent avant-corps with gilded bronze reliefs by the French sculptors Paul Gasq and François-Léon Sicard.³ At the rear, the tower (Fig. 2), which is faintly reminiscent of Loire château architecture and yet somewhat Romanesque, conceals a spiral staircase. The language of Art Nouveau, on the other hand, can be seen at the main entrance at the backside of the building and also in the wrought-iron latticework by Louis Majorelle. The figurative decoration features the two, previously mentioned, bronze reliefs on the facade, each depicting the allegorical friendship between Austria and Francia as well as the allegorical motto of the Third Republic “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité,” executed by Hippolyte Lefèvre (Fig. 3).

Even at first glance, the choice of themes reveals the outstanding diplomatic significance assigned to the embassy building. In the interest of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Fig. 1: Georges Chedanne, facade of the French Embassy building, built 1901–1909, Vienna (Photo: Shesmax/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0).

in Paris, the diplomats in Vienna, and, ultimately, France's international self-assurance, it was mandatory for the architecture to meet this diplomatic demand in a suitably representative fashion. Up to this point, the issue of a built self-image on foreign territory had not surfaced in France, since the French state had historically rented preexisting buildings and converted them into embassies. For a long time, the French legation in Vienna maintained a rather uncomfortable nomadic existence: They moved from palais to palais, until in 1869, they ended up in the Palais Lobkowitz, which was shared with a lawyer's office. As with the prior accommodations, the ambassadors considered the rented Baroque palais inadequate both to receive the local imperial family and to house its own diplomats.⁴ The palais was expensive, yet neither representative nor residential.

It was not until April 18, 1901, that the distant ministries in Paris finally approved the construction of the first French embassy built for the purpose. In the following month, the ambassador, the Marquis de Reverseaux, acquired three parcels of land from the city of Vienna on behalf of the ministry, which were to be inspected by the state architect Olivier Carré later that year.⁵ Yet the ministerial authorities strongly disapproved of Carré's submitted Historicist design for a richly decorated palais in the Empire style, since it was closely



Fig. 2: Georges Chedanne, back of the French Embassy building, 1901–1909, Vienna (Photo: Shesmax/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0).

associated with France's imperial regimes (specifically the First Empire, 1804–1814/1815, and the Second Empire, 1852–1870) and was thus considered unfit to represent the republic.⁶ Unlike the Parisian ministries, the French diplomats in Vienna would certainly have preferred such a Historicist palace, since it would have aligned with the common aristocratic taste in the Habsburg capital. The decision about the design was not up to the diplomats in Vienna, however, and Carré was dismissed by the state from the project. In his place, Georges Chedanne was appointed: a Parisian architect who had just caused quite a stir with the construction of the Eclectic Hôtel Élysée Palais on the Champs-Élysées and won the Grand Prix at the 1900 World's Fair.⁷ That same summer, Chedanne traveled to Vienna to meet with the ambassador in person and inspect the property.

By this time, if not before, Chedanne became fully aware of the project's actual challenge: to realize his vision of a modern Gesamtkunstwerk, somewhere between Art Nouveau and Historicist Eclecticism, while also fulfilling the mandate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which insisted on a self-confident representation of the Third Republic.⁸ In contrast to earlier French embassies, which were typically housed in rented, preexisting structures and were furnished only in a pragmatic and piecemeal fashion,



Fig. 3: Hippolyte Lefèbvre, *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, 1908, relief. Back of the French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: author).

this building, according to Chedanne's vision, would have a comprehensive and cohesive design. These earlier interiors were often assembled from heterogeneous objects drawn from existing stocks in Paris, intended merely to evoke a generalized association with French cultural production. By contrast, the Vienna project represented a deliberate departure: Chedanne aimed to orchestrate all aesthetic and functional elements with precision, thereby realizing an unprecedented and integrated diplomatic environment. Both views—of the architect and of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—conflicted with the diplomatic reality of the ambassador's work: On the political stage in Vienna, the marquis mingled mainly with representatives of the monarchies of Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, Russia, and Germany. It was therefore a delicate matter to openly display republicanism, since it would cast French representatives even further to the political fringes.

France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 had far-reaching consequences that became manifest especially through its diplomatic insecurity and reticence; this also affected visual culture in France.⁹ Only hesitantly and with great reservations did France still dare to

draw on its own history (except, of course, that of the First Republic, 1792–1804, during the French Revolution), given that the neighboring monarchies and empires stood in ideological contradiction to the fragile republicanism that was anything but undisputed in the country as well.¹⁰ The French were notably skeptical of pomp and splendor, since the political system had not been changed in a new revolution but rather under not so glorious circumstances after the lost war and the following bloody fiasco that was the short-lived republican Paris Commune in 1871. The collective national identity lay in ruins. Politically, socially, and ultimately artistically, France suffered a fundamental identity crisis in the last third of the nineteenth century. In Vienna, this predicament was further complicated by the fact that French diplomats acted in close proximity to and in constant exchange with representatives from various monarchical nations within the Habsburg monarchy. Their reactions could range from malice to rejection and exclusion, since French republicanism had been perceived as a threat to all European monarchists throughout the entire revolutionary era. Paris hence relied at first on sending aristocratic diplomats to Vienna who often actually thought little of their republican government and who, accordingly, often appeared unsuspicious to their international colleagues in the Habsburg capital.¹¹

The gradual gain in France's collective self-confidence toward the end of the nineteenth century was increasingly rivaled by a conflicting desire for international recognition in the Parisian ministries, which, again, confronted the diplomats abroad with ever-greater challenges. During the *fin de siècle*, the French identity crisis grew into a veritable representational dilemma, and Chedanne found himself in the awkward position of having to resolve this dilemma at Schwarzenbergplatz, in terms of architecture and art, and to respond to all valid institutional interests at hand. In a nutshell, Chedanne was expected to create a building that would present France as a self-confident modern republic, while many of the conservative emissaries preferred either a Baroque palais à l'ancien régime (i.e., in the style of prerevolutionary aristocratic France, before 1789) or a Neoclassical building in the Empire style.¹² The choice of the architect, however, lay with the authorities in Paris, who decided in favor of Chedanne because he was associated with a kind of eclectic Art Nouveau owing to his teacher, Julien Guadet. One of the most influential instructors at the École des Beaux-Arts and author of *Éléments et théorie de l'architecture* [*The Elements and Theory of Architecture*] (1901–1904)—arguably the most significant treatise on architectural composition of the period—Guadet sought to bridge the divide between the Romantic and Classical factions within the school.¹³ He advocated a liberal and contextually responsive use of historical architectural vocabularies.

Chedanne can be seen as extending his mentor's pedagogical principles: In merging formal elements of both Art Nouveau and Historicism, the architectural and artistic

conception of the French Embassy in Vienna constitutes a programmatic elaboration and contemporary reformulation of Guadet's theoretical framework. Neither a Hector Guimard nor a Jules Lavirotte, Chedanne was no radical Art Nouveau pioneer but an advocate of a more moderate Modernism—but Modernism nonetheless. The hopes of the authorities in Paris were quickly dashed, however; Chedanne's Modernist project could hardly be described as being "moderate." By 1904, the calculated costs had almost doubled, and Paris was also dissatisfied with Chedanne's first design, as can be gathered from a letter from Constant Moyaux, the inspector general of the Bâtiments civils [civil engineering section] of the Department of the Interior, to the French foreign minister, Théophile Delcassé.¹⁴ In this letter, Moyaux emphasizes that Chedanne had not only presented a design that was too expensive but also failed to provide an acceptable grand staircase, which was of utmost importance with regard to the Habsburg imperial family. As a result, access to the representative rooms on the bel étage was severely compromised. Moyaux wrote,

As for the facades, they lack character. The main facade, facing Schwarzenbergplatz, gives more the impression of a commercial or industrial building than that of an embassy representing a great nation where art has always been held in high esteem.¹⁵

A letter from the inspector general of the Bâtiments civils to the minister of foreign affairs, Maurice Rouvier, dated December 11, 1905, also fits with this striking conflation of art and patriotic national sentiment:

Mr. Chedanne must ensure that there are no further unforeseen issues. The decoration of the French Embassy in Vienna can do without excessive luxury; however, since it is a French undertaking, it is important that it be perfect in terms of art and good taste—something to which Mr. Chedanne will attach as much importance as we, as French people, naturally would ourselves.¹⁶

There were also reservations about the modern Art Nouveau facade on account of its insufficient reference to the history of French art. According to Moyaux's letter, however, Chedanne willingly took up the criticism and had already developed a new design.

What becomes evident at this point is how complex the web of authorities, demands, and personal taste—in which Chedanne had to operate—actually was. Evidently, it is not even possible to speak of "the Parisian authorities" in a generalized way. Moyaux's remark on his own intervention is telling insofar as it provides information about the

fact that the building, despite all of Chedanne's Gesamtkunstwerk ambitions, did not originate from the architect's head alone. Chedanne not only acknowledged the ministerial criticisms mentioned above but also incorporated them into new designs. It would nevertheless be naive to reduce the architect to a mere pawn in the ministries' game—the daring and highly individual architecture of the building and its furnishings do not speak in favor of such an interpretation. Certainly, the designs were all executed by Chedanne, but what is crucial here is not the final result but the genealogical process of getting to this result: Chedanne did not just draw ingeniously from himself; he also knowingly took into account the voices, positions, needs, and convictions of others. This is not a trivial conclusion: The embassy's design and construction process can only be described as a collaborative one; the public institutions issued the building order and actively participated in shaping the architecture. And herein lies my plea, which the history of the French embassy in Vienna embodies: that the currently developing architectural history of institutions—if it does not want to tackle merely questions of institutional representation—must focus more on the *processes* that lead to built architecture than on the built architecture itself. A focus on process, however, should in no way obscure the view of the architecture that is then actually built.

ART HISTORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

What, then, is the built result of this polyphonic building process, and in what ways were the conflicting interests to be met? I have briefly addressed the embassy's stylistic heterogeneity: the somewhat Romanesque tower, Baroque volutes, and lively Art Nouveau shapes. Assessments of the building's mix of architectural styles varied. The Austrian architect Adolf Loos, for instance, declared on the last of his ten guided city tours for his students and a private audience, as part of his Bauschule [Adolf Loos's School of Architecture], in 1914, that the French embassy was a “dreadful amalgamation of Gothic and Rococo,” even though he remained silent as to where exactly the building exhibits Gothic elements.¹⁷ Art historian Georges Vigne later attested that Chedanne displayed a certain sensitivity for the Rococo.¹⁸

Loos's denigration ranks among a large chorus of contemporary criticism directed at the stylistic features of the building. New appreciation for the embassy building began only in the 1960s, when the art of the turn of the last century as a whole was reevaluated. Interestingly, the building's first acting ambassador, Philippe Crozier, was quite satisfied with the result when he moved in in 1909, as he emphasized in a letter to Chedanne dated October 28, 1909:

As the work entrusted to you comes to an end, I wish to express my full satisfaction with the project you have conceived and overseen. Through its artistic character and well-considered design, the new building provides our diplomatic mission with a residence that is, in every respect, worthy of national representation and offers foreigners a magnificent example of modern French architecture.¹⁹

For Crozier, Chedanne's building should serve as a model for other French embassies, as he wrote in another letter just 13 days earlier.²⁰ And in a letter dated April 24, 1909, Durand-Lagranger, the material inspector of the Evaluation Office, also came to the same conclusion: "The magnificent new palace is in an exceptional location; I believe I can say that it does France credit."²¹ Crozier's successor, Chilhaud-Dumaine, on the other hand, had already given Chedanne's project a bad name.²²

In 1909, the year in which the embassy was occupied, the *Illustrirtes Wiener Extra-blatt* [Illustrated Viennese Daily Extra] noted the embassy's Baroque architecture, likely referring, for example, to the volutes on the two avant-corps.²³ The building's diversity of styles also runs through the interiors like a golden thread: On the first floor (Fig. 4), there

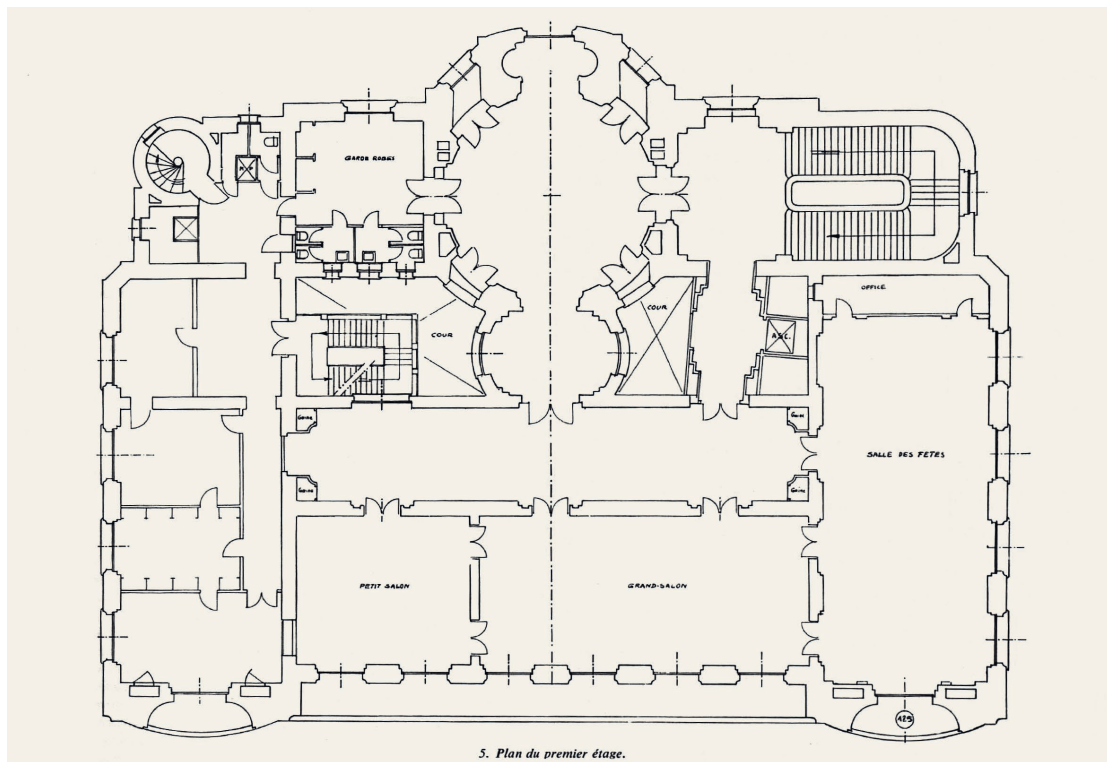


Fig. 4: Floor plan of the bel étage for the French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Pierre Moisy, "L'Ambassade de France à Vienne manifeste d'un Art Nouveau officiel," *Revue de l'art* 23 [1974]: 42–54, 45).



Fig. 5: Louis Majorelle, detail of the grand staircase, 1908. French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Thomas Ledl, CC BY-SA 4.0).

is the grand staircase leading to the *bel étage*, executed by Louis Majorelle and richly decorated with vegetal motifs whose somewhat golden triangular elements have been read as allusions to the Eiffel Tower (Fig. 5). The ceiling of the staircase is adorned with



Fig. 6: Albert Besnard, allegorical depiction of Austria and France, 1908–1910, ceiling painting. French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Thomas Ledl, CC BY-SA 4.0).

an emphatically Baroque allegory created by Albert Besnard, which once again shows the personifications of Austria and France (Fig. 6). The so-called Salon of the Archdukes (officially named Salon des Beaux-Arts) was intended to receive the imperial family;²⁴ the



Fig. 7: Salon des Beaux-Arts on the first floor, allegorical medallions by Paul Gasq (poetry, sculpture, architecture, and dramatic arts) and Ernest Henri Dubois (dance, painting, music, and lyrical arts), 1908–1910. Circular vestibule of the French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Johanna Fiegl, Wien Museum).

Baroque room is in delicate shades of gray and beige, featuring eight reliefs devoted to the fine arts, executed by Paul Gasq and Ernest Henri Dubois (Fig. 7). This floor also features grand connecting corridors, with pronounced references to the flamboyant Louis Quinze Rococo style (Fig. 8), but also the large dining room (Fig. 9), which is no longer there and was modeled on French hunting-lodge furnishings, as well as the ballroom (Salle des fêtes) (Fig. 10), which has also been removed. Here, one is confronted with an abundant late Baroque grotto architecture made of stucco and marble, once again translocating French château architecture to Vienna by artistic means.²⁵

On the second floor above the *bel étage* lie the rooms that are still today inhabited by the ambassadors and their families. The connecting rooms on this floor are similar in design to those on the *bel étage*, while the small dining room (Fig. 11) is much more private in character than the large one below: The Rococo architecture evokes an outdoor garden with oval reliefs aptly depicting women engaged in recreational activities



Fig. 8: Gallery on the first floor, decoration by Tony Selmersheim and Léon Binet, 1908–1910. French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Thomas Ledl, CC BY-SA 4.0).



Fig. 9: Large dining hall on the first floor (now destroyed), chairs by Tony Selmersheim, 1907–1908, photograph from 1910. French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Société des architectes diplômés par le gouvernement, *Recueil publié à l'occasion de la millième adhésion à la Société des Architectes diplômés par le gouvernement* [Paris: Librairie de L'Architecte, 1911]).



Fig. 10: Salle des fêtes (ballroom) on the first floor (now destroyed), photograph probably from 1952. French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Moisy 1974, 49 [see note 2]).



Fig. 11: Private dining room on the second floor, decoration by Léon Binet and medallions by Frédéric Vernon and Ernest Henri Dubois, furniture by Tony Selmersheim. French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Thomas Ledl, CC BY-SA 4.0).

such as ice skating. Art historian Pierre Moisy proposes here an architectural paraphrase of Germain Boffrand's salons of the Hôtel de Soubise in Paris, which are considered some of the finest examples of French Rococo architecture—an intriguing argument, though one that does not stand up to close analysis.²⁶ Beyond any doubt, however, is the observation that elements considered to be genuinely French were used time and again in thematically distinct rooms. This conclusion is significant since the individual stylistically homogeneous rooms contradict a generic or at least purely formalistic Eclecticism, which Chedanne has been accused of. Indeed, the embassy has “theme rooms” in its interior, which refer to historical styles and (usually courtly) representational spaces.

The works of André Devambez, with whom Chedanne shared a friendship from their student days in Rome, play a special role in the history of the building. The painter was commissioned to create a twelve-part cycle of paintings when he traveled to Vienna in 1910 to view the premises. It is unclear exactly which rooms were intended for his paintings, since they have only been on display in the embassy since the 1990s, in the former dining room on the first floor.²⁷ Moisy suggests they were intended for the Salon



Fig. 12: André Devambez, *Le Métro*, 1910, oil on canvas, 114 × 135 cm. Collection du Mobilier national, inv. no. GMTB 817; French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Collections du Mobilier national).

des Beaux-Arts, but given that the reliefs were already in place at the time, this seems questionable. There is evidence that the choice of subject matter was left to the artist himself, at least from the ministerial side, who opted for the theme of modern life and inventions (*La vie et les inventions modernes*).²⁸ However, Devambez's close friendship with Chedanne and the latter's influence on the decorations for the embassy suggest that he was not as free as the administrative certificate (*certificat administrative*) might imply.

In any case, Devambez immediately set to work and created a series of colorful paintings in modern brushwork, showing dressed-up women on the phone in the embassy, illuminated Métro staircases in Paris at night (Fig. 12), zeppelins over French fields, and speeding motorboats. A group of picnickers with a camera on a tripod presents itself as an explicit paraphrase of Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), which replaces the bather in the background with an automobile (Fig. 13). Spectacular perspectives from an airplane and representations of the latest high-tech products and leisure activities clearly



Fig. 13: André Devambez, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1910, oil on canvas, 135 × 48 cm. Collection du Mobilier national, inv. no. GMTB 431; French Embassy, Vienna (Photo: Collections du Mobilier national).

stage a forward-looking modernity, a French modernity that could be experienced, above all, in the capital and the surrounding area. The fact that Devambez was asked to paint a total of twelve pictures suggests that the paintings would have created a further thematic space depicting the radiant present of the French nation.

From the outside, the embassy was just as heterogeneous. Statements by contemporaries such as Loos but also from the Austrian and French daily press illustrate that it was difficult to classify the architecture stylistically. Romanesque, Gothic, Louis Quatorze, Louis Seize, Art Nouveau—the building’s stylistic pluralism led to strained and repeated efforts by critics and academics, both at the time and in subsequent art historical research, to artificially harmonize the architecture. Since the 1960s, four noteworthy contributions have been made to the reception history of the embassy: Pierre Moisy, in 1966, writes that the building features “a rare uniformity and purity of Art Nouveau,”²⁹ just as his French colleague Chantal Gastinel-Coural, decades later, in 1990, attests that the architecture displays a “perfect unity” (“parfait unité”).³⁰ Fittingly, Art Nouveau, as a renewal of the Rococo tradition, was already in 1900 being reinterpreted as a genuine French style (despite its Belgian roots). Before an influential publication by Debora Silverman in the late 1980s, however, little was known about the endeavors to establish Art Nouveau as a French national style.³¹ The historian Jakob Hort also perceives the embassy as a genuinely modern Art Nouveau work of architecture, with which Paris wanted to showcase France as a modern and progressive nation.³² According to him, an exhibition of the past was thus consciously avoided. At least for the facade, such an assumption may be plausible, but the overall diversity of styles, both inside and out, cannot be fully reconciled, despite repeated attempts at homogenization by researchers.

More recently, Olivier Dufour acknowledges the embassy’s lack of uniformity, discussing it as an awkward and disjointed pastiche.³³ I suggest that the indisputable juxtaposition of styles—in stark contrast to an amalgamation—should be read as programmatic. Whereas the building presents itself and France as modern on the outside and even so on the first floor, the almost encyclopedic juxtaposition of French styles from the past, beginning with the *bel étage*, conveys a keen sense of history. The sequence of rooms, which has so far been completely disregarded in research, appears to be the key to understanding Chedanne’s program in its entirety: The Habsburg family visitors were to enter the well-tempered modern vestibule from underneath the republican motto at the rear entrance, then turn left and, as they ascended the grand staircase, symbolically act as surrogates of the personifications painted above them. According to the official etiquette, the ambassador stood below the Francia, while the guests approached from Austria’s side. As one makes one way through the building via this route—and this seems to have been an

essential idea—all explicitly political motifs and symbols vanish almost completely, substituted by the juxtaposition of historical styles. Walking through the rooms, maybe even guided by the French ambassador himself, thus turns into a journey through the history of France—not, however, a political national history but a compendium of the Grande Nation’s historical styles leading up to Devambez’s own Postimpressionism. Rather than a display of France’s precarious history, a show of the far-less problematic history of French art and interior design awaited the anticipated monarchical guests. Once again, the underlying program can be grasped from the rooms’ sequence.

As explained earlier, it is known from the ambassadors’ correspondences that a major complaint about the Palais Lobkowitz centered on the fact that the imperial family could not be hosted there in an adequate manner, and it was precisely with this in mind that the embassy building on Schwarzenbergplatz was commissioned and designed.³⁴ For this reason, the *bel étage*’s first reception room was unofficially termed the “Salon of the Archdukes”—it was aimed precisely at them. So, before the Habsburg visitors had a chance to behold the various elaborations of French art, they were led to this room. The pictorial program of this room made crystal clear the register in which the other rooms of the embassy were to play—namely, that of art. The overall theme of the Salon des Beaux-Arts set the course, which could lead visitors on a tour of the French political past. The stylistic pluralism, critiqued since the completion of the building in 1909, thus reveals itself as no hesitant compromise; rather, as I argue, it is a programmatic domestication of national history in art and architecture.

EPILOGUE: ELEPHANT EMPIRE

I conclude by discussing a limitation of Chedanne’s national encyclopedia as expressed in the embassy’s art and architecture: The elephant in the room is the obvious omission of the tradition of Classicism. The fact that Chedanne and the Parisian authorities did not resort to Classicism may have been less due to the French Renaissance than to the still far-too troublesome contamination of Classicist forms with the failed empire (in fact, both French Empires from 1804–1814/1815 and from 1852–1870). As it happened, perhaps in an act of historical revisionism, this piece of the art historical puzzle of French styles was added immediately when the next ambassador, Alfred Chilhaud-Dumaine, took office in 1912: Offended by the inappropriate and parvenu-like furnishings of the embassy, his wife ordered all kinds of Empire-style objects to be brought into the embassy, which in 1912 was still not fully decorated. Dumaine is said to have been so offended by the interior that he always kept the ballroom (*Salle des fêtes*) closed to visitors and hid

other decorative elements behind partitions and tapestries from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁵ In 1914, he had a monumental tapestry based on a painting by the Classicist François-André Vincent purchased for the large salon on the second floor, which shows the Ancient Greek painter Zeuxis selecting the most beautiful young women to model for his Helena painting.³⁶ This anecdote illustrates how artistic ideals of beauty can arise from a combination of aesthetic elements. Chedanne's complex and varied approach to the embassy and its decorations was an intellectual gesture that contrasted with the rigid, uniform style of a Napoleonic office.

The embassy building continued to evolve in the subsequent decades. After World War II, the walls of some salons were covered, false ceilings were installed, the ballroom was completely removed, the original yellow color of the facade was whitewashed, and early modern tapestries and paintings in state possession were transferred to the city of Vienna, following the example of other French embassies with their holdings. The resulting art historical mess has substantially obscured Chedanne's original program, leading to a series of misunderstandings—the rumor that the seemingly odd and exotic furnishings were initially destined for the French embassy in Istanbul being just the most famous of them.³⁷

Chedanne himself became entangled in his own mess—a financial scandal—shortly after the building's completion, effectively ending his career; and lingering debates over the embassy were soon eclipsed by the outbreak of World War I. Politically and artistically, the embassy in Vienna faded into a welcome oblivion—only to reemerge in the latter half of the twentieth century as a curious and enigmatic architectural artifact.

NOTES

¹ For detailed information on the initial situation of the French legation in Vienna up to the new building project, see Pierre Moisy, “Das Palais Lobkowitz als Französische Botschaft und das neue Gebäude auf dem Schwarzenbergplatz,” *Alte und moderne Kunst* 7, nos. 62 and 63 (1962): 17–21, 17. In addition to the high maintenance and rental costs, there were also long walkways in the Palais Lobkowitz and a lack of bathrooms and electricity.

² Moisy 1962 (see note 1); Pierre Moisy, “L’Ambassade de France à Vienne manifeste d’un Art Nouveau officiel,” *Revue de l’art* 23 (1974): 42–54; Chantal Gastinel-Coural, “L’ambassade de France à Vienne: Décor intérieur et ameublement (1907–1914),” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de l’Art Français* (1990): 253–294; Jakob Hort, *Architektur der Diplomatie: Repräsentation in europäischen Botschaftsbauten (1800–1920): Konstantinopel–Rom–Wien–St. Petersburg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 461.

³ The juxtaposition between the Art Nouveau style and the Historicist forms has only recently been interpreted as an architectural motif of friendship between France (mansard) and Austria (Baroque volute). See Hort 2014 (see note 2).

⁴ Moisy 1962, 17 (see note 1).

⁵ On May 5, 1901, Marquis de Reverseaux paid 945,000 Francs for the property, which was considered difficult to build on because of its layout. Moisy 1974, 42 (see note 2).

⁶ Moisy 1962, 19 (see note 1).

⁷ Ministère du commerce, de l’industrie, des postes et des télégraphes, *Exposition Universelle de 1900 à Paris: Liste des récompenses* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1901), 274. In Paris, officials were displeased, since they would have preferred a design in the Louis Seize style. Referring to the embassy buildings of Germany, Russia, and England in Vienna, they requested a simpler and less pompous facade. In the summer of 1901, Carré was replaced by Chedanne, allegedly because Carré would be remaining in Beijing longer for another project but, in the end, probably primarily because his proposal had not been well received. Hort 2014, 452–457 (see note 2).

⁸ Numerous documents confirm that Chedanne wanted to design the embassy building as a holistic Gesamtkunstwerk. To realize his vision in as unhindered a way as possible, he called upon artists with whom he was already closely acquainted from Rome and Paris, such as François-Léon Sicard, Paul Gasq, Hippolyte Lefèbvre, and André Devambaz. In most cases, they even had to carry out Chedanne’s designs for the decoration, as can be seen in the case of the facade, the staircase of honor, the Salle des fêtes, and the dining room on the second floor. See Moisy 1974, 50 (see note 2); and Gastinel-Coural 1990, 256 (see note 2).

⁹ For the Third Republic’s identity crisis in visual culture, see Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989); and Richard Thomson, *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889–1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004). Hort has already explained in depth how political and artistic insecurity was reflected particularly in the diplomatic arena and in the case of embassy architecture. See Hort 2014, 427–483 (see note 2).

¹⁰ Thomson 2004 (see note 9).

11 As Hort (2014, 482–483 [see note 2]) summarizes, the French Republic adapted its behavior to gain acceptance at foreign courts as follows: “In its foreign representation, the republic wore the garments of the monarchy. At times, they did not fit well, and the ridicule of foreign court societies, which then rained down on the French diplomats, taught them to adopt aristocratic attitudes and to compulsively avoid anything that might appear nouveau riche or parvenu-like.” (“Die Republik trug bei ihrer auswärtigen Repräsentation die Kleider der Monarchie. Diese saßen ihr bisweilen nicht und der Spott der fremden Hofgesellschaften, der sich daraufhin über die französischen Diplomaten ergoss, erzog sie zu einer Übernahme der aristokratischen Attitüde und ließ sie alles zwanghaft meiden, was neu reich und parvenühafte wirken konnte.”) Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from primary and secondary sources are my own.

12 Hort 2014, 475–478 (see note 2).

13 For the work of Guadet, who was to become much more significant as a teacher than as an architect, see Guy Lambert, “Des ‘classiques’ pour former les architectes: Enseignement de la théorie et modèle éducatif des ‘humanités’ à la fin du XIXe siècle,” in *L’architecte et ses modèles: Intentions, connaissance et projets à la période contemporaine*, ed. Jean-Philippe Garric (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021): 59–74.

14 The construction costs were initially calculated at just under 900,000 Francs, but by 1904, Chedanne had already been promised 1.6 million Francs by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris. Moisy 1974, 42–43 (see note 2).

15 “Quant aux façades, elles manquent de caractère. La façade principale, sur la place Schwarzenberg, donne plutôt l’idée d’un édifice commercial ou industriel que d’une Ambassade pour une grande nation où l’art a toujours été en honneur.” Quoted in Hort 2014, 460 (see note 2).

16 “M. Chedanne devra tenir la main à ce qu’il n’y ait plus d’imprévus. La décoration de l’hôtel de l’Ambassade de France à Vienne peut se passer d’un luxe excessif quoique cependant, comme il s’agit d’une œuvre française, il importe qu’elle soit parfaite au point de vue de l’art et du bon goût, ce à quoi Mr Chedanne attachera autant d’importance que nous pouvons comme français en attacher nous-même.” Quoted in Gastinel-Coural 1990, 255–256 (see note 2).

17 The complete passage reads as follows: “The French embassy—a dreadful mishmash of Gothic and Rococo. Even from afar, one can tell that the building is plastered rather than made of stone, as it was surely intended in France. The ironwork! And yet, it is horrendously expensive.” (“Die französische Botschaft eine schauderhafte Verquickung von Gotik und Rokoko. Dabei sieht man schon von Weitem, dass das Haus verputzt ist, statt in Stein, wie es sicherlich in Frankreich geplant war. Das Gitterwerk! Dafür aber ist es horrend teuer.”) Quoted in the archival reconstruction of Adolf Loos’s city tour on March 21, 1914: “Adolf Loos und Wien, 3: In die Vorstadt!,” Wiener Geschichte Wiki, accessed July 30, 2025, https://www.geschichtewiki.wien.gv.at/Adolf_Loos_und_Wien,_3:_In_die_Vorstadt!

18 Georges Vigne, ed., *Le XVIIe arrondissement, mécène de l’Art Nouveau: 1895–1914*, exh. cat., Mairie du XVIIe arrondissement, Paris, February–March 1984; Musée départemental de l’Oise, Beauvais, April–May 1984; Musée Horta, Brussels, June–July 1984 (Paris: Délégation à l’action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1984), 47–49.

19 “Au moment où cessent les travaux qui vous étaient confiés, je tiens à vous signaler toute ma satisfaction pour l’entreprise que vous avez conçue et dirigée. Par son caractère artistique et ses heureuses dispositions, le nouvel hôtel assure à notre mission diplomatique une habitation digne à tous égards de la représentation nationale et constitue vis-à-vis des étrangers un magnifique spécimen de l’architecture française moderne.” Quoted in Moisy 1974, 46 (see note 2).

20 Quoted in Hort 2014, 458 (see note 2).

21 “Le nouveau palais magnifique est dans une situation exceptionnelle; je crois pouvoir dire qu’il fait honneur à la France.” Quoted in Moisy 1974, 45 (see note 2).

22 See Olivier Dufour, *Décors d’ambassades: Art et diplomatie française au XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions Norma, 2019), 29. For the long history of rejection and defamation of the embassy building, which was the main focus of research on it in the second half of the twentieth century, see Moisy 1962 (see note 1); Moisy 1974 (see note 2); and Gastinel-Coural 1990 (see note 2).

23 “Der Bau des Französischen Botschaftspalais: Differenzen mit den Wiener Lieferanten,” *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt*, September 30, 1909: 5–6.

24 Gastinel-Coural 1990, 263–264 (see note 2). In her article, Gastinel-Coural attempts to counter Moisy’s remark that it is almost impossible to say anything with certainty today about the building’s furnishings. She has combed through numerous archives in Paris, Fontainebleau, and Vienna in order to clarify the works commissioned and their whereabouts. Owing to the frequent rearrangements and renovations, it is still unclear today when and how many of the objects in the embassy ended up there.

25 Moisy argues that Chedanne’s program is condensed in this part of the building.

26 Moisy 1974, 48 (see note 2).

27 By the time Devambez received the paintings in Vienna at the turn of the year 1911/1912, a new and much more conservative ambassador, Dumonthier, held office, refusing to hang the Modernist paintings, while his wife had all kinds of furniture and paintings in the Empire style delivered to the embassy. Dumonthier argued that Devambez’s pictures were not appropriate for an embassy and sent them back to Paris, where they were transferred to the ministry’s depot and scattered across various state institutions. Devambez was well aware of his paintings’ fate; he turned to the Ministry of Fine Arts in dismay, asking to be allowed to exhibit the series, which he considered to be his major work, at least once. The reply was downright cynical: “This order, as you know, has already led to unfortunate incidents, and I believe it is preferable not to do anything that might rekindle their memory.” (“Cette commande, comme vous le savez a déjà donné lieu à des incidents fâcheux et j’estime préférable de ne rien faire qui puisse en raviver le souvenir.”) Quoted in Moisy 1974, 47 (see note 2). As if that were not enough, Devambez also found himself indirectly entangled in a financial scandal involving Chedanne and Frantz Hamon, the financial director at the Quai d’Orsay, which cost Chedanne his job as state architect and ultimately his career. Chedanne had—among other things—submitted an invoice for 30,000 Francs to the ministry for Devambez’s paintings, but he only paid Devambez 17,000. It was only with the late reevaluation of the embassy, thanks to Moisy’s contributions, that efforts were made to locate the dispersed paintings and reunite them at their intended destination in Vienna. For

more on Devambez's paintings, see Moisy 1974, 46–47 (see note 2); and for the financial scandal, see Hort 2014, 474 (see note 2).

28 Moisy 1974, 46–47 (see note 2).

29 The full quote reads as follows: "This resulted in a building in Vienna whose spacious design—both in the overall architectural concept and in the smallest details of its interior decoration—represents the Art Nouveau style in its French form with rare unity and purity." ("Damit entstand in Wien ein Bauwerk, dessen großzügige Anlage sowohl in der Gesamtheit des architektonischen Konzepts wie im kleinsten Detail der Innenausstattung mit seltener Einheitlich und Reinheit der Kunst des Jugendstils in seiner französischen Prägung repräsentiert.") See Moisy 1962, 20 (see note 1).

30 Gastinel-Coural 1990, 256 (see note 2).

31 Silverman 1989 (see note 9).

32 Following Hort, Chedanne's embassy building in Vienna is a "manifesto of the nation's contemporary art and culture" ("Manifest der Gegenwartskunst und -kultur der Nation") without strong references to the past. Hort 2014, 461 (see note 2).

33 Dufour 2019, 23–25 (see note 17).

34 Moisy 1962, 17 (see note 1).

35 Hort 2014, 477 (see note 2).

36 Gastinel-Coural 1990, 272 (see note 2).

37 André Levin, *Die französische Botschaft in Wien* (Cologne: Taschen, 1995).

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