

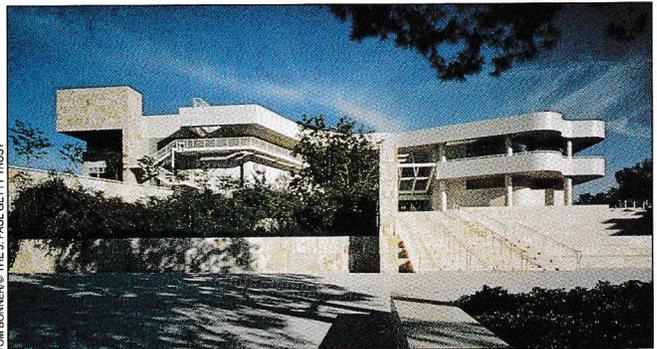
THE GETTY CENTER DECORATIVE ARTS GALLERIES

THIERRY W. DESPONT'S CLASSICAL SPACES IN LOS ANGELES' MODERNIST MUSEUM

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST DECEMBER 1997



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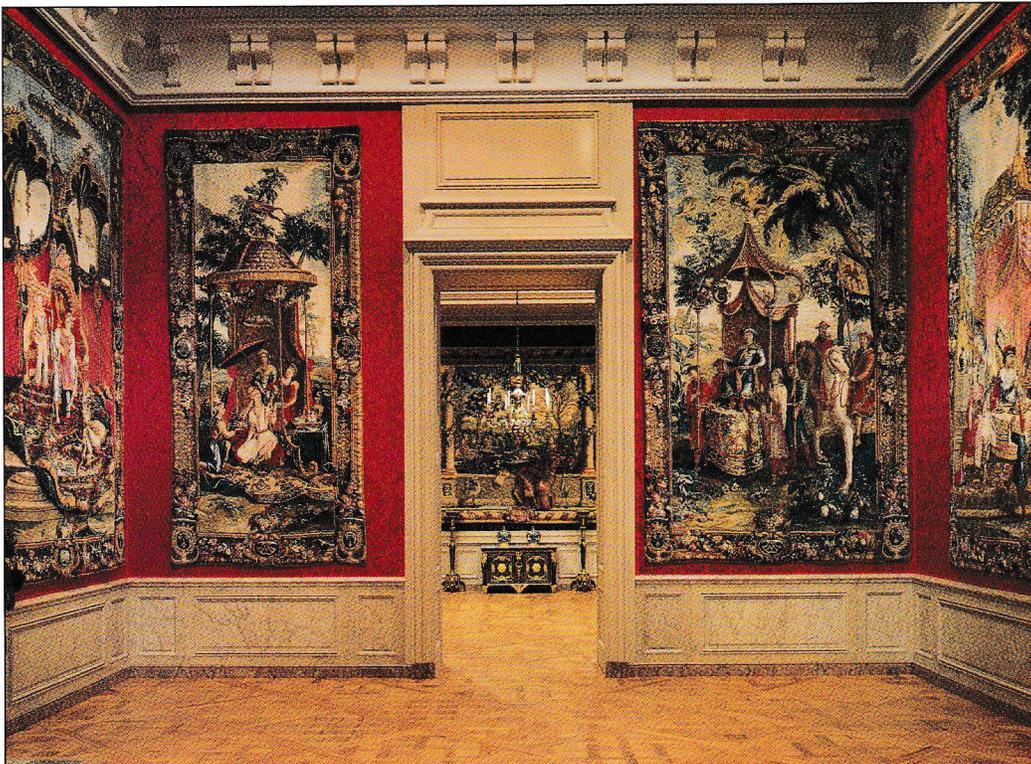


LEFT: At Los Angeles's Getty Center, Thierry W. Despont, left, "gave a complete context for our decorative arts," says museum director John Walsh, right. ABOVE: The new center was designed by Richard Meier.

TALLEYRAND SAID OF the mid-eighteenth century, "Whomever has not lived before the Revolution in France, does not know about *les douceurs de la vie.*" So says Thierry W. Despont, the French architect and designer who has brought his own sweetness of life to the decorative arts galleries of the new Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

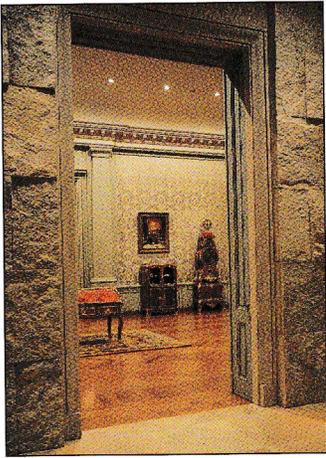
"I wanted very much to design galleries that would be in sympathy with the collections," says Despont, standing in the first gallery, which is lined with crimson silk brocatelle and *faux-marbre* wainscoting. With nineteen-foot ceilings, old parquetry floors and a massive fireplace, it provides a fitting backdrop for the half-dozen tapestries, called *L'Histoire de l'Empereur de la Chine*, woven in Beauvais between

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"The objects are the point," notes Walsh. "We wanted rooms that matched their scale." LEFT: The first of the decorative arts galleries has a series of Beauvais tapestries set on red brocatelle.

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ABOVE: "Outside the galleries is Richard Meier's enclosed hall," says Walsh. "You're reminded that you're in a modern building and that this isn't the 1700s and this isn't Versailles."

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1690 and 1705 for the château of the comte de Toulouse, a son of Louis XIV.

The decorative arts galleries are housed within two of the five museum pavilions that are arranged around a vast stone courtyard. They constitute the heart of the massive Getty Center, which opens in December, high in the hills above Brentwood. The strikingly modern structure, clad in beige travertine and off-white-enameled aluminum, was designed by architect Richard Meier. However, Getty Museum director John Walsh felt that the decorative arts should be displayed in the surroundings of their period.

"It's Meier's building, but we both discovered that we needed some help with the galleries," says Walsh. "We needed someone who knew fabrics and paints, who could give us a hand at refining details and choosing materials. Despont had shown himself



to be very adept at creating modern adaptations of various styles of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It's partly that Despont is a good designer, partly that he knows materials that are not used by the twentieth-century architect and, more than anything, that

he knows and respects Meier's work."

Though comfortable with the modern idiom, Despont is recognized for his classical approach to residential architecture on a grand scale. He studied architecture at Paris's Ecole des Beaux-Arts

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ABOVE: "The great hall has late-seventeenth-century palatial proportions—the furniture has a suitable interior in which it can live happily," says decorative arts curator Gillian Wilson.

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“It was as though I were designing a house but didn’t have to worry about kitchens and baths,” says Despont. A Régence paneled room was built in 1723 as a bedchamber. Louis XIV owned the Savonnerie rug.

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and brings his clients precise watercolor renderings of his proposals, a tradition that no doubt won points with the Getty’s directors. He was hired in 1988, fresh from working on the restoration of the Statue of Liberty and Clayton House, the Frick mansion in Pittsburgh (see *Architectural Digest*, December 1990).

Despont’s goal was, without losing sight of the museum’s exhibition program, to re-create the domesticity

of an aristocrat’s mansion. “The galleries were treated in a decorative sense similarly to the grand houses of the period,” he says. “At the same time, the intent was not to do any fake, historically accurate rooms.”

Despont worked closely with Walsh and with Gillian Wilson, the curator of decorative arts, who recalls more than seventy-five meetings, fifty-five of them at the Brentwood site. They carved fourteen galleries out of a 10,000-square-foot shell

within the museum building.

To develop a frame of reference, they visited the Wrightsman galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as the Louvre and the Victoria and Albert. “I didn’t want a copy of anything,” says Wilson. “The idea was to give a sense of the right scale, the right height and the right cornice to support pieces that date to the 1680s. You can’t put furniture like this in a plain white room with no moldings.”

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“It’s Meier’s building, but we needed someone who knew fabrics and paints, who could give us a hand at refining details.”

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ABOVE: Panels in a Régence room, whose furnishings date from 1670 to 1720, came from a mansion's library. "Everything—scale, fabrics—reflects the taste of the period," says Despont.

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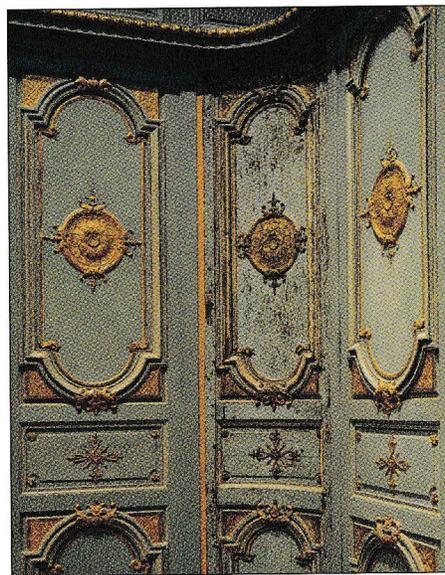
Wilson, who has been the decorative arts curator since 1971 and who worked with J. Paul Getty, personally selected most of the four hundred pieces of furniture, ceramics and tapestries, which were produced mainly in France from 1660 to 1790,

from the reign of the Sun King to the Revolution.

"What's wonderful about the decorative arts in the late seventeenth century is that Louis XIV had come of age; it's a time when France was establishing its own cultural identity," explains Despont. "You could call it *nouveau riche*—Versailles was not for the fainthearted in terms of decoration. So I wanted to have that boldness and strength of color."

Boldness certainly describes the second of the galleries, where a deep jade silk

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LEFT: "We kept one panel in its original condition to make it feel alive. All the others were restored," says Despont. "The gilding was of such good quality it only needed cleaning."

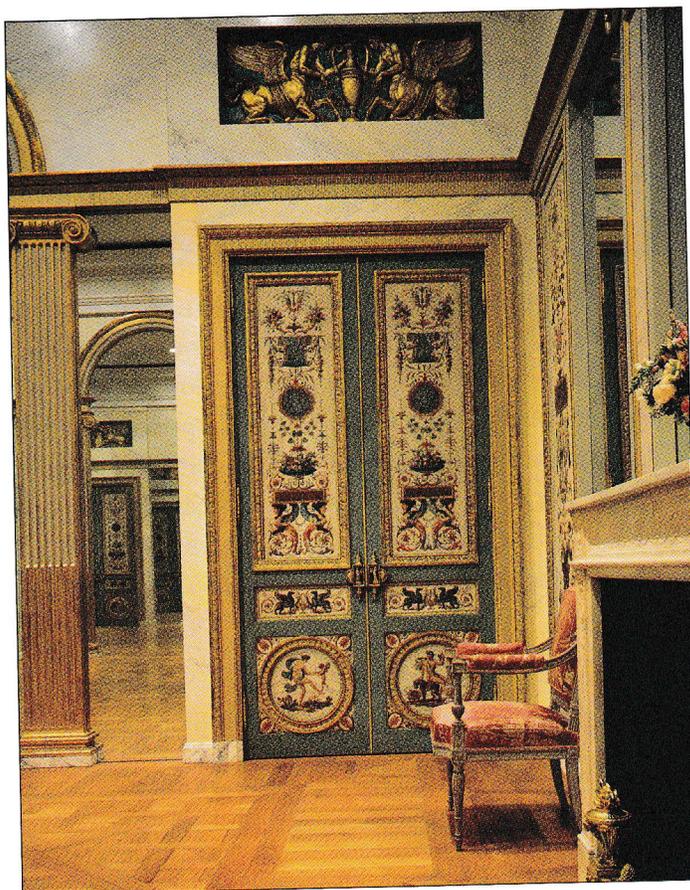
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 brocatelle offers a dramatic counterpoint to one of the largest gatherings of late-seventeenth-century furniture attributed to the *ébéniste* André-Charles Boulle. “We have lost an understanding of the strength of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century decoration because we have a vision of it as seen through the eyes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” says Despont. “The second half of the seventeenth century was an age of invention, full of life, with figures like Mansart and Le Nôtre.”

Although based in Man-

RIGHT: “I’m fascinated by the decorative arts cycle,” says Despont. “The panels were done at a time when Pompeii was being excavated and the influence of Roman design was strong.”



ABOVE: “I hope we captured Ledoux’s sense of fantasy,” says Despont of the Neo-classical paneled room. “One of his favorite tricks was to use mirrors in bays with no baseboards.”

hattan, Despont maintains an office in Paris and did extensive research on every color and fabric at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and established fabric houses like Prella in Lyons. “They have extraordinary documents. They can pull the jacquard cards out of a box and tell you when a fabric was first woven,” he says. At Despont’s insistence, the silk for the gallery that holds the Boulle pieces went through ten dye lots in order to achieve the ideal shade of green. “For me, one of the most exciting parts of this project was be-

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ing able to work with such craftsmen to re-create the fabrics and finishes of the original period.”

The jewel-like intensity of the first two galleries gives way to a ninety-foot-long great hall, an airy corridor of transition to the smaller galleries and paneled rooms. The ceilings were raised to a magisterial twenty-one feet, and the walls shimmer with celadon-and-silver brocatelle. “Here, because of the scale, we needed huge motifs that the rooms would have had at that time,” explains Despont, who says that he drew his inspiration from the stone vestibule at Vaux-le-Vicomte, the château of Louis XIV’s minister of finance Nicolas Fouquet.

The hall’s bracketed cornice and Doric columns provide flexible backgrounds where French and German furnishings from 1720 to 1760 can be displayed without compromise. “In all great houses there would be this kind of enfilade, a large hall and then rooms in sequence, so you’re drawn from one to another,” he says.

From the outset, Despont worked with Meier on the dimensions of the great hall, which he considered crucial to the successful flow of the galleries.

ry even the clients wanted something more refined,” says Despont. “Designers and architects paid more attention to the cleanness of the details.” Ceiling heights are lower, and wall colors, cornices and wainscoting are more restrained in response to the increasing refinement of the furniture. A gallery of delicate Neoclassical furniture fitted with small Sèvres plaques from 1770 to 1785 required only the slightest of moldings and a sky-blue wallcovering. A late-Rococo gallery (1750 to 1760) is lined with rose lampas to complement the original bedcoverings on a gilded *lit à la turque*.

“I think your eyes are stimulated by the variation,” says Despont. “You go from the bold colors of the seventeenth century to the more subdued ones in the late eighteenth century. We show how the use of color evolved over this one-hundred-and-thirty-year period.”

Less glamorous aspects of the design process dealt with the museum’s requirements for climate control, lighting and security. “Because there was such good coordination with Richard Meier, you’re not going to see any air-conditioning vents,” says Despont. “We were able to hide them behind specially de-

“I didn’t want a copy of anything. The idea was to give a sense of the right scale, the right height and the right cornice to support pieces that date to the 1680s.”

“The great hall is a bridge between the early eighteenth and later eighteenth century, while the smaller galleries concentrate on a particular period,” says Despont. “It’s almost like a family tree. The branches are not straight—some cut back and some go off in another direction. There were great changes in small increments. You’re bound to have some simplification and overlapping. But as you move through them, they give some idea of how it happened.”

From the far end of the great hall, the galleries progress chronologically and grow more intimate. “Toward the middle and end of the eighteenth centu-

signed cornices. Some of the fireplaces, which are obviously not real, can be used as air returns with ducts behind them. There’s a whole technology to the museum galleries, but it’s like going to the theater and seeing a fabulous play. You don’t want to know about the people running behind the sets and pulling ropes.”

Within the fourteen galleries are four paneled rooms, two of which have never been exhibited. A Régence paneled room at the far end of the great hall is composed of blue doors with gilt rosettes and moldings, and was com-

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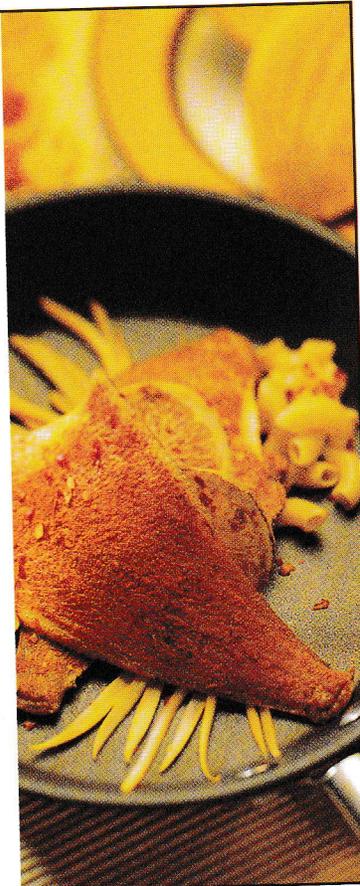
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pleted in 1719 for the library of Claude Le Bas de Montargis's *hôtel particulier*, at 7 place Vendôme. Getty conservator Brian Considine undertook the initial research into the restoration process to test the panels. The gilding was handled by the Gohard Atelier in Paris. Rubbing a finger over a softly gleaming rosette on the one panel left unfinished, Despont points out, "The gilding was of such good quality, we just cleaned it to reveal the original."

The room contains several examples of rare furniture, including a writing table veneered in ivory and blue-painted horn that was in the posthumous inventory of Louis XIV. It was probably used in the Trianon de Porcelaine, built for his mistress Mme de Montespan, at Versailles.

Although Despont tried to be impartial toward his architectural offspring, he couldn't resist the special charms of the Neoclassical paneled room built from 1790 to 1795 for Jean-Baptiste Hosten by architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. "I'm a great fan of Ledoux. Of all the rooms, this, for me, is the one that has the greatest sense of theater," he says. It is installed at the far end of the galleries as the savory after a rich meal. Panels delicately painted with mythological figures and grotesqueries alternate with arched twelve-foot mirrors framed by gilt pilasters.

Gazing at his infinite reflection, Despont says, "Ledoux was creating a pavilion for people to come and be amused. You have to imagine it at night with candlelight bouncing off the mirrors. It would be magic."

During his work in the decorative arts pavilions, Despont was asked to consult on the fabrics and finishes for the other galleries. His rooms for the display of everything from Renaissance sculpture to Dutch paintings incorporate dark-tinted plaster, richly textured wallcoverings and spare oak moldings. The effect is uncluttered but luxurious.

"It's always about light, the transition between vertical and horizontal planes and the sequences of space," says Despont. He sounds like the most modern of architects when he says, "It's about light and space, all of this." □