

ARCHIVE TREASURES n°8: THE OLD MONASTERY OF AUTEUIL

Introduction

In the Archives, a treasure trove of superb albums (photos, charcoals, watercolours) opens up for us the possibility of wandering through the former monastery of Auteuil, built in 1856, on the current site of the Square Rodin. We can take a virtual walk in the park, with its shady alleys, and push the door of the monastery, with its frescoes, iron structures and stone ogives. An experience that suspends time and gives us the opportunity to share the emotion of the first sisters who set foot in Auteuil. After reading this article, you will no doubt want to browse through the pages of the albums, decipher the blueprints and count the trees and the flower beds!

The purchase of the property

Since 1845, the Assumption was installed at Chaillot, near the Champs Elysées, in a monastery that was becoming too small due to the expansion of the Congregation. The sisters were therefore looking for a place where the life of the Assumption could unfold in all its dimensions: a silent monastery, in the countryside, a space for true formation, for a contemplative, austere and regular life; a boarding school, with spacious grounds, where the students could learn how to direct their flight; a home base for the gatherings of the Congregation, at a time when it was beginning to grow outside of Paris.

For obvious financial reasons, the Chaillot monastery had to be sold before considering the purchase of another property. In March 1855, the search became a reality: "*The Empress has just bought for her sister the Hotel [= the wealthy house] of Mme de Lauriston near us and all the land up to our street. If she bought our property for half the price she put into it, we could buy the 12 acres that we liked at the top of Chaillot and build the whole monastery there with the price.*" (MME to Father d'Alzon, March 7, 1855, n°2468). Then in April: "*...we are on the market for our property, not with the Empress, but with M. de Pontalba who would sell it to her and to others... Ask God and the Blessed Virgin in particular that this might be done and that we might have a property at the top of Chaillot which is not the one you saw, but which would suit us even better if it is not on quarries.*" (MME to Father d'Alzon, April 30, 1855, no. 2481) Initially, therefore, it is in another property in Chaillot that Marie Eugénie is planning to settle.

But business progressed less quickly than expected and finally she chose a new location: "*A magnificent property surrounded by woodland, orchards, villas hidden among the trees ... for a relatively modest price*" (Origins, Volume 3, Chapter XVII). The Auteuil project was born! On this property, in the middle of the forest, was the Château de la Thuilerie, so called because of the tile factory that was there in former times. In the 16th century, a hunting lodge had been built; and later on, a mansion that had belonged to prestigious families.

In the autumn of 1855, Marie Eugénie signed the final contract for the sale of Chaillot and the purchase of the Thuilerie (Cf. MME to Mother Marie Bernard, 14 October 1855, no. 5272). The construction work could begin. On this large property - bounded by Avenue Mozart, Rue de l'Assomption (formerly named, in the 19th century, Rue des Tombereaux, after the land carts that passed through there), Rue Lafontaine and Rue Ribéra - there was only one building: the small château with its tower. Difficult to install nuns there! So, the project was to set up the

boarding school in the castle and to have an adjacent monastery built for the community and the novitiate.

The move to Auteuil had a financial impact on the young Congregation, which had to save money for a long time. In October 1855, Marie Eugénie shared with Father d'Alzon that she was not sure that she would receive the money needed for the Thuilerie soon enough. She was always very careful with expenses: "*I am delighted that we are sorting out the yard, but I wish we could use the dumper truck at 10 Francs only for one day and take some unused gravel. It's the price of the dumper that bothers me...*" (MME to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, May 24, 1861, no. 510). And she was quite proud if it turned out that the management had been good: "We have given much more than I thought to the contractors and to the sellers of the Thuilerie and of the lots; we have given much more than we have received from M. de Morny, so that we are in a good position... I must confess that these calculations tempted me with pride...". (MME to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, May 16, 1857, n°462)

The construction of the monastery

Then began a phase of major works, with Marie Eugénie as the master builder! In March 1856, the foundations of the new monastery were dug; it was quite a discernment to choose the soundest position: "*Yesterday I went to the Thuilerie, the trees were falling under the axe, but the excavations had not yet begun. We have decided to build two sides of the cloister to host the children temporarily, we will do the hostel when we have new resources, because the château can only be arranged as a boarding school by destroying the chapel, and still it would never be very good.*" (MME to Father d'Alzon, February 20, 1856, n°2531); "*Yesterday, and the day before, I went to the Thuilerie where the foundations of the new building are being dug. It's a great deal to get it right. Today I am going to the Visitation to see their internal fixtures*". (MME to Father d'Alzon, March 6, 1856, Letter n°2535). Marie Eugénie multiplied the visits to decide on the interior design; she reviewed the architect's plans, proposed the design of the flower beds or the methods for draining the lawns. In fact, the Archives of the Mother House contain original blueprints, drawings of columns or cornices. One can almost examine these documents and imagine that Marie Eugénie is standing beside them, commenting on them with the architect Verdier, Father d'Alzon or Mother Thérèse Emmanuel who took over the supervision of the works when her Superior was away from Paris.

As for Father d'Alzon, as early as January 1856, Marie Eugénie insisted for him to come and rest at the Château of the Thuilerie: "*...Why would you not come here immediately? (...) When I go to the Thuilerie, I see a thousand things to be done there, which are precisely the only suitable occupations for you at the moment: flower beds to be created, lawns to be drained, to be cultivated, etc...*" (MME to Father d'Alzon, January 27, 1856, no. 2524). "*When are you now thinking of coming?... The Thuilerie being free only until June 1857, I hope that your projects will not be delayed for too long.*" (MME to Father d'Alzon, February 19, 1856, n°2530)

Father d'Alzon finally arrived in December 1856: "*Fr. d'Alzon was to arrive with such a flurry of wishes to settle down quickly at the Thuilerie that ... I was just trotting around, either here to look for things to organize a small temporary chapel, or at Auteuil to clear and prepare the place (...) For us, it is so delightful that he should go to the Thuilerie; he will have the big chapel organised, he will hurry up the work, he will supervise and initiate all the necessary arrangements, which I have no time to do, and which would be quite necessary.*" (MME to Sister Marie Augustine, November 26, 1856, n°1384). Father d'Alzon was promoted to supervisor of the works! Once he had settled in, on the days when Marie Eugénie did not come

or when she left Paris, he wrote to give news: "*I thought, like you, that it would be better to plough the lawn. Bülicher replied that this was impossible. Indeed, the soil is so hard that it would take at least four horses; and then... the horses will damage the flower beds by entering them*". (Emmanuel d'Alzon to MME, March 5, 1857, no. 804) He took good care of the garden, but when Marie Eugénie was away, he sometimes feared that his arrangements would not please the foundress!

Anyway, his long stay, from the end of December 1856 to April 1857, made him grow fond of the monastery and rave about its beauty: "*La Thuilerie is preparing every day to receive its future inhabitants. One day it will be very beautiful, almost too beautiful (...) What treasures of wisdom will be locked up in these cells, where nevertheless holy poverty will reign!*" ». (Emmanuel d'Alzon to Sister Marie de la Croix Aubert, January 9, 1857, n°781)

An ecological concern

Even if, to build the great monastery, some trees had to be felled, Marie Eugénie took care of them during all the works ... Father d'Alzon wrote to her one day: "*Before you leave, I would like to point out to you a fact that I noticed last night. Mr. Demion had the trees at the end of your forest cut down... the very trees that you wanted him to keep the night before last. See if you have to give some orders.*" (Emmanuel d'Alzon to MME, February 15, 1857, no. 790) A few days later: "*We are preparing the courtyard, we are keeping the trees that will shelter you on the side of the road, we haven't even touched the others yet; but we may have to decide on a few that might give damp, or may prevent the new building from drying out.*" (Emmanuel d'Alzon to MME, February 27, 1857, n°800). Felling a tree is never an insignificant decision and Marie Eugénie wants to avoid doing it as much as possible. Thus, during later arrangements, she will advise Thérèse Emmanuel to send a sister "*who cares about the trees, to check if it is really necessary to cut down those about which Sister Marie Marthe is talking... I want to spare all that we can and yet we must also cut down what is a hindrance.*" (MME to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, December 11, 1863, no. 557).

Between tradition and modernity

"*It is not a monastery in the technical sense of the word; it is not a convent, nor a congregation, nor a school, nor a boarding school, it is all of these things at once...*", we read in an architectural review of the end of the century about the monastery of Auteuil. In the château, converted into a boarding school, the large reception hall was changed into a chapel. The Consul's lounge, where Napoleon once liked to come, became a large parlour. Even if it turned out to be necessary to reduce Marie Eugénie's original plans, involving a cloister closed on four sides, to two wings only, the building was imposing: the cloisters kept "*the very pure lines of the Gothic style*" and they gave the long cell corridors, the refectory, the community room and the chapter room "*that religious aspect which made a deep impression on the soul.*" (Origins, volume 3, chapter XVII). Let us close our eyes and imagine ourselves contemplating the frescoes painted by Sister Anne-Marguerite on the walls of the cloister, of the refectory, frescoes of which the Archives keep photographs.

"*A large external porch with a double staircase rises up from the ground below the garden to the entrance hall, which overlooks the internal courtyard on the same level.*" Let's go through the door and put our hands on the modern heating system to warm them up: "*On the left and on the right, there are some easily accessible parlours, one smaller for the teachers, the other one larger for the students. Further on, the community or chapter room, the long and spacious*

refectory for the nuns...". All this is built with a clever mixture of old and modern, the architect having used beams and iron joists all visible in the middle of the pottery tiled floors according to the "Eiffel style", popular at the time.

The community moved in on August 10, 1857. More building works were undertaken afterwards (notably the present building, the "convent of the Immaculate Conception", inaugurated in 1866, on the other side of the park). A final chapter opened in 1925, after the expulsions, when property developers began to destroy the park with its century-old trees, the château and the big monastery. Fortunately, the memory of this place, the home base of the Congregation, dwells with us through its pictures.

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