

Reflecting Psyché: Mirrors and Meaning at the Salon de la Princesse, hôtel de Soubise

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Mirrors have long been invested with magical powers. In reflecting the world before them, they also capture and effect change upon it. Medieval Christians, for example, sometimes used small mirrors to catch the divine rays emanating from sacred relics; these might then be used as an aid in healing the sick. Centuries later, Lewis Carroll's Alice walked through a looking glass into an inverted version of the world she left behind. In our own century, psychologist Jacques Lacan posited the centrality of mirrors to self-definition.¹

Mirrors were a material well-suited to the formal and intellectual preoccupations of seventeenth and eighteenth century architects and their aristocratic clientele. European architects had been experimenting with mirrors since the fifteenth century, but not until the second half of the seventeenth century was mirror-production qualitatively and quantitatively adequate to allow large-scale architectural application. Versailles' 1678 *Galerie des Glaces*, by far the grandest mirrored interior of this era, provided a stunning demonstration of the mirror's architectural potential (and France's technological and manufacturing capabilities); it touched off a vogue in mirrored rooms that did not abate until well into the next century.²

An outstanding example of this trend, the *Salon de la Princesse*, at the Parisian hôtel de Soubise, was built and decorated between 1735 and 1739. Inside this room, architect Germain Boffrand and his collaborators created an intricate visual environment, with the salon's large mirrors and fixed artwork standing in metaphorical relation to one another, linked by the shifting values of the word *psyche*.³ Keeping in mind the idea that mirrors shape and transform what they reflect, the following describes one sort of transformation that the room's eighteenth-century visitors may have seen it effect.

A free-standing classical structure, the hôtel de Soubise was begun for General François de Rohan, Prince de Soubise, by architect Pierre-Alexis Delamair in 1705.³ Disappointed by Delamair's proposed interiors, the prince replaced him in 1707 with Germain Boffrand. In 1732, when the prince's son, Hercule-Mériadec, married Marie-Sophie de Courcillon—his second wife, more than forty years his junior and described by contemporaries as one of the most beautiful

women of the French court—he too called upon Boffrand, this time to remodel his and his new wife's apartments at the hôtel de Soubise.⁴

Like many other great houses of the era, the hôtel de Soubise included two complete sets of apartments. Those of the princess stood directly above her husband's. As the hub of his remodeling scheme, Boffrand built a two-story octagonal pavilion along the building's northern side. Inside were two grand oval salons decorated by François Boucher, Carle Vanloo, Charles-Joseph Natoire, Pierre-Charles Trémolières, Jacques Verberck, and other leading painters and sculptors of the day. Distinguished visitors were entertained in these salons, and in the event of large parties and other special occasions (eighteenth century visitors to the hôtel reported gatherings with as many as 300 guests), they served as focal points—the centerpieces of the building's public spaces.⁵

From the center of the *Salon de la Princesse* one observes eight floor-to-ceiling archways. One encloses a fireplace and its large sheet-mirror chimney piece. Framing the hearth are two other mirror-filled arches, each draped with gilt-stucco floral garlands. One arch accommodates a door, while the remaining four are taken up by windows overlooking the garden. In the spandrels, supported by pairs of cherubs, are eight gilt-framed oil paintings by Natoire, showing scenes from the Cupid and Psyche myth.⁶ Above the spandrels is an undulating, gilt entablature decorated with shells, floral forms, and paired white plaster infants bearing attributes of the hunt. The room is capped by a shallow saucer dome, painted opalescent sky-blue and traversed by gilt-stucco oak tree trunks—the heraldic symbol of the prince's family.⁷ All of this decor is multiplied by the three large sheet mirrors.

In the seventeenth century, the great illusionistic ceiling paintings of Pietro da Cortona and Giovanni Battista Gaulli had introduced a sense of flux and material insubstantiality into architecture, suggesting a breakdown of delimiting solid walls, and offering avenues of escape into an implied spatial continuum. Architects soon realized that mirrors too could be used toward these ends, but with even greater dramatic effect. Unlike a painting, a mirror can multiply light and forms actually in motion, transforming walls from inert matter into

a field of living images, a screen reflective of—even constitutive of—the activity occurring within a room. Boffrand recognized the architectural value of mirrors in his 1745 *Livre d'architecture*:

Les glaces dans les appartements y sont plus grand ornement lorsqu'elles sont bien placées, et principalement lorsqu'elles réfléchissent la lumibre de l'air et une vue agreable, lorsqu'elles sont bien proportionnées a la grandeur du lieu, lorsque leur hauteurest bien proportionnée hleurlargeur, lorsqu'elles sont placées les unes vis-h-visdes autres; cequi augmente les enfilades des appartements etréfléchiten différentes facons les lumibres...⁸

A room like the *Salon de la Princesse* was built to accommodate a sort of circular theater, one in which audience and actors were the same, a highly self-conscious, narcissistic troupe. Lit by dancing candlelight, in elaborate costumes of many colors, with mirrors repeating every gesture, they watched themselves perform. Historian Jean Rouvier once described eighteenth century French socialites as being "like jugglers or marionettes with visible articulations, capable of maintaining their balance in very difficult situations, considering the whole of life as a thing of ease and gaiety which obtains harmony by eliminating all forms of clumsiness."⁹ The impression of "ease and gaiety," however, was partly illusion, and not infrequently, a mask for a deadly serious subtext. At stake could be one's very place in society: the loss of favor from superiors and respect from inferiors. "Court life," the late seventeenth century moralist La Bruyère noted, "is a serious, sad game, requiring application; a man must arrange his pieces and his plans, have a design, pursue it, thwart his adversaries, now and then venture something, and play capriciously...the most skillful or the most fortunate player obtains the victory."¹⁰

A playwright and designer of actual theatrical sets, Boffrand was accustomed to thinking in terms of scenography and performance. Looking glasses — providing opportunities not only for looking at oneself, but for watching others as well— were one of his favorite architectural props. He addressed the mirror's importance in social situations when he wrote, "...ces lumières ne doivent être placées qu'environ à six pieds de hauteur, elles rendraient les yeux battus et enfoncés..." Light inappropriately reflected interfered with the exchange of glances: "...les dames," he noted, "...ne le pardonneraient pas.""

Boffrand's emphasis on "les dames" raises another of the mirror's associations. Seen as bearing particular resonance for women, mirrors, especially during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, came to line the places where they held court. In the west, mirrors have long been associated with female dieties. They have appeared as attributes of Venus (another of whose attributes, not coincidentally, is water, with all of its reflective properties) and of her Neo-Platonic equivalent, the Virgin Mary (the "*speculum sine macula*," or unblemished mirror). Furthermore, mirrors are

the *vanitas* symbol *par excellence*, evocative of the transience of corporeal existence and of women's purported self-absorption; Vanity was often represented in western painting as a woman looking or pointing to a mirror.¹²

At the *Salon de la Princesse* Boffrand used abundant gilding, brilliant colors, and multiple mirrors to construct what appears to have been intended and perceived at the time as a specifically feminine space. To the young Marie-Sophie the room offered the flattery of multiple reflections, the delight of painted tales of heavenly love overlapping with reflected images of her own earthly intrigues, perhaps even a hint of the ephemerality of her physical charms. The prince's salon below, by contrast, is a much more sober composition in gray and white, with allegorical sculptures of his interests and virtues: painting and poetry, music, justice, history and fame, politics and prudence, geometry, astronomy, and drama. Given the oft-noted blurring of gender roles in other mid-eighteenth century cultural arenas (the androgyny of contemporary *haute couture* was but one feature causing commentators like Montesquieu to claim that "there is only one sex left"), this gendering of architectural space is significant. Gender differentiation among aristocrats in this period was thought to have less to do with bodily form and attire than with moral and cultural differences. Diderot, for example, urged men to

remember that, owing to [their] lack of principles and power of reflection, nothing penetrates deeply into the comprehension of women: notions of justice, virtue, vice, goodness, or wickedness, float superficially above their soul[s]. Remember that women have clung with all the energy of nature to egotism and self-interest. More civilized than us externally, they have stayed simple savages within...¹³

Women, in Diderot's terms, were all surface, egotism, and self-interest, while men had moral depth, powers of reason and reflection, a sense of good and evil, and so on. Architecture, as in the two oval salons at the hôtel de Soubise, was one arena where the differences between women and men could be pointedly expressed. And what architectural material could be more appropriate for decorating the rooms where women held court than mirrors, especially as women lacked their own "power[s] of reflection?"

Finally, the mirrors at the *Salon de la Princesse* served to further the imagery and symbolism of Natoire's Cupid and Psyche paintings. It seems safe to say that the *Salon de la Princesse*, with so much of its wall space devoted to mirrored-glass, is an area charged with narcissistic allusions. In fact, the mirror's smooth, liquid-like surface recalls the pond beside which Narcissus died while gazing at his own mute reflection. Love, vanity, the conflation of truth and illusion, mirror images, and death are closely linked in the Narcissus myth. In a related vein, art historian Wolfgang Zucker noted:

...the relationship between death and a mirror reflection survives in the wide-spread European custom of covering all the mirrors in a house where somebody has died,

in order to prevent the soul of the deceased from seeing itself and remaining as a haunting ghost. The fact that in France large stand-mirrors are called *psyche* may have its origin in this connection.¹⁴

Zucker's allusion to *psyche* raises an intriguing trope, one in which mirrored glass, the human soul, the unconscious (the irrational, the uncontrollable, i.e. Diderot's woman as "simple savage"), and the female lead of Natoire's paintings share a name.

Natoire's imagery for the *Salon de la Princesse* was based on the Classical myth, as retold by La Fontaine in his 1669 book, *Les amours de Psyché et de Cupidon*. In La Fontaine's account, Psyche was a mortal princess so beautiful she angered the jealous Venus. Venus sent her son, Cupid, to punish Psyche, but in attempting to do so he wounded himself and fell in love with the young woman. Cupid thus carried her away to a magnificent palace with golden pillars and polished silver—or mirror-lined—walls.¹⁵ He showered her with gifts but would not reveal his name or face. He only came to her after dark and he implored her not to seek his identity. But when Psyche showed Cupid's gifts to her sisters, they persuaded her to betray him and discover his identity. So one night as Cupid slept, Psyche brought an oil lamp to illuminate his face; unwittingly, she dripped some of the hot oil onto him. Cupid awoke in a rage; Venus was likewise livid when she discovered what had happened. She locked up Cupid and forced Psyche to undertake a series of four all-but-impossible tasks, including a journey into the Underworld. Miraculously, Psyche completed her tasks but died upon returning from Hades. Cupid, however, escaped and revived her. Following this, Venus had a change of heart and Psyche was elevated to Olympus as an immortal goddess.

Historian Michel Gallet has called the Psyche myth an "allegory of the passions and torments of the soul," one that held a special appeal for mid-eighteenth century French aristocrats, who placed great stock in ideas of romantic love.¹⁶ *Psyche* as human soul, tortured but ultimately triumphant mythical lover, and mirror come together in the *Salon de la Princesse*. The mirrors dematerialize the physically limiting walls and establish the room as a theater dedicated to the entertainment, and mutual surveillance, of the princess and her guests. Reflecting Natoire's paintings and the room's inhabitants, they allow flirtation with love and death, Venus and Vanitas, Eros and Thanatos. They image Psyche, her love for Cupid (which occasioned her death), and her divine resurrection. As an attribute of Vision, the mirrors recall Psyche's fatal elevation of knowledge over faith (that is, her effort to see Cupid in spite of his request). And with its broad mirrored panels, the *Salon de la Princesse* itself became the earthly equivalent of Psyche's silver-walled palace.

Reflections of the paintings and of the princess and her guests would have mingled in the artificial space of the mirrors. These paintings, with their abundance of exposed flesh, evince a rhetoric of display and desire that is in perfect accordance with the operation of the mirrors.¹⁷ Marie-Sophie,

at the center of this elaborate construction, could witness herself—as her guests might also see her—as an integral and equally constructed part of it, as Psyche herself. In fact, it was not an uncommon practice for portrait painters in the mid-eighteenth century to cast their female sitters as characters from Classical mythology. Jean-Marc Nattier, for instance, who painted Marie-Sophie in 1741, became famous for his "mythological" portraits of aristocratic women in the guise of Venus, Diana, Flora, Hebe, or Aurora.¹⁸ With the *Salon de la Princesse*, Boffrand and Natoire placed Marie-Sophie within similarly fantastic composition.

Psyche had been transformed through love and death from a mortal woman into an immortal goddess. Likewise, within the operation of her room's ensemble, Marie-Sophie could temporarily become a fantasy, a goddess, Psyche. But unlike Nattier's painted goddesses, Marie-Sophie was alive here, playing her part before a society remarkably attuned to gesture and performance, ephemeral as her youth and her movements before the glass. Her guests looking on, reflected and seen looking on by Marie-Sophie, affirmed the role she played.

On a broader historical level, we might see in a room like the *Salon de la Princesse* the origins of a peculiarly modern way of seeing, knowing, and presenting the self. Previously, Europeans had, for the most part, been born into their social and historical roles; these were regarded as God-given, fixed, and not to be questioned or altered. But among the mirrored and painted surfaces of the *Salon de la Princesse* all present, especially the patron, were made to appear transient, creatively cultivated, fabricated as images directed toward the imaginations of others, dependent for effect upon their position in time and space. Within this room then we might be said to witness part of larger cultural shift, recognized much later by Einstein, Lacan and others, from an objectivist to a subjectivist paradigm. Here the self ceased being part of an ordered and objective reality and it began to function as the center of a composition, a construction—a representation, shifting in the light, of a reality lying always just out of reach.

NOTES

- ¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 1-7.
- ² At a time when a good cook earned 300 French *livres* per annum, and a particular painting by Raphael cost 3,000, Louis XIV's controller of finances, Colbert, paid 8,016 *livres* for a 46 by 26 inch a silver-framed mirror. Undoubtedly, such astronomical costs contributed to the mirror's exotic appeal. For the early history of European mirrors and their architectural applications see: Warren C. Scoville, *Capitalism and French Glassmaking, 1640-1789* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950); and Peter Thornton, *Seventeenth Century Interior Decoration in England, France, and Holland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).
- ³ The building now houses the French Archives Nationales. A good overview of French *hôtel* architecture is Michael Dennis' *Court and Garden: From the French Hotel to the City of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

- ⁴ Contemporary references to Marie-Sophie's beauty are recorded in Ch.-v. Langlois, *Les hdtels de Clisson, de Guise et de Rohan-Soubise* (Paris: Jean Schemit, 1922), p. 170.
- ⁵ Langlois, *Les hdtels*, pp. 189-190, 199-201.
- ⁶ Natoire's paintings are titled: 1) *Psyche' recueillie par Zéphyr*, 1739; 2) *Les nymphes offrant des fleurs à Psyche' sur le seuil du palais de l'Amour*, 1737; 3) *Psyche' montrant ses tre'sors à ses soeurs*, 1738; 4) *Psyche' contemple son époux endormi*, 1738; 5) *Les nymphes retirant de l'eau le corps inanime de Psyché*, 1738; 6) *Psyché chez les bergers*, undated; 7) *Psyché défaille de frayeur enpre'sencede Vénus*, 1738; 8) *Psyché enlevée dans Olympe par l'Amour*, undated.
- ⁷ The actual room's dimensions are 32' long by 24' wide by 20' high. Its original furnishings are described in Langlois, *Les hdtels*, pp. 241-45.
- ⁸ Boffrand, *Livre d'architecture*, (Paris: 1745), pp. 41 ff. This passage is reprinted in Michel Gallet, et al., *Germain Boffrand, 1667-1754, L'aventure d'un architecte independent* (Paris: Delegation a l'Action Artistique de la Ville de Paris, 1986), p. 142.
- ⁹ Jean Rouvier, et al., *The Age of Rococo* (Munich: Hermann Rinn, 1958), p. 29.
- ¹⁰ La Bruyere, *Characters*, trans. Henri van Laun, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 132-33. For a more recent account of court life see Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).
- ¹¹ Gallet, et al., *Germain Boffrand*, p. 142.
- ¹² For more on the mirror's history and symbolism in art and literature see: Jan Bialostocki, "Man and Mirror in Painting," in *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss*, eds. Irving Lavin and John Plummer (New York: New York University Press, 1977), pp. 61-72; and Heinrich Schwarz, "The Mirror of the Artist and the Mirror of the Devout," in *Studies in the History of Art Dedicated to William E. Suida on His Eightieth Birthday* (London: Phaidon Press, 1959), pp. 90-105.
- ¹³ Montesquieu and Diderot are quoted in Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. xxi, 199.
- ¹⁴ Wolfgang M. Zucker, "Reflections on Reflections," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Sept. 1962), pp. 247-248.
- ¹⁵ Describing the room where Psyche bathed, for instance, La Fontaine writes: "*Ce ne fut pas une petite joie pour Psyche' de se voir si brave, et de se regarder dans les miroirs dont le cabinet etait plein.*"; Jean de la Fontaine, *Les amours de Psyche' et de Cupidon* (Paris: La Cité des Livres, 1925), p. 27. In an ancient Roman version of the story, Apuleius described the walls of Psyche's palace as, "...covered in embossed silver....all the walls...shone with their own brilliance, so that the house furnished its own daylight, sun or no sun..."; see his *Cupid and Psyche*, ed. and trans. E.J. Kenney, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). p. 51.
- ¹⁶ Michel Gallet, *Stately Mansions: Eighteenth Century Paris Architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 109.
- ¹⁷ For more discussion along these lines see: Norman Bryson, "Transformations in Rococo Space," *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 89-121.
- ¹⁸ David Wakefield, *French Eighteenth-Century Painting* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1984), pp. 60-63. Nattier's portrait of Marie-Sophie shows her holding a book titled *Histoire Universele*, open to a page discussing Greek and Roman customs.