



Get Colleen's Tips Now!

Follow Colleen's Paris on Facebook for the latest Paris information.



Tons of Activities

[Colleen's Paris Blog](#)

[Calendar of Events](#)

[Entertainment & Sports](#)

[My Favourite Restaurants](#)

[Shopping :-\)](#)

[Visiting The City and Day Trips](#)

[Potpourri of Paris Tips](#)

[Paris Guidebooks](#)

[Move or Stay ?](#)

[Everything on All Transports](#)

[Hotels & Apartments](#)

[Specific Public](#)

[Children in Paris](#)

[Travelers with handicaps](#)

[AA Layover information](#)

[About This Site](#)

[Home](#)

[About Colleen's Paris](#)

[Search Colleen's Paris](#)

[Links](#)

[Colleen's Advice](#)

[I have a question...](#)



© colleensparis.com - 2010

Grand Palais History

[Click here for more Grand Palais history and activities](#)

Beautifully cradled by its colossal white stone columns and proudly displaying its glass ceiling under the sun and under the rain, the Grand Palais is one of the most familiar Parisian landmarks.

People even started to think it was immortal. The fall of a rivet from the glass ceiling in 1993, however, showed that this was not the case. This masterpiece erected during World's Fair of 1900 (l'Exposition Universelle de 1900) was falling apart. The great exhibition hall (*grand nef*) had to be closed to the public while emergency stairs were hastily built for the exhibition areas.

Just as Newton's apple produced the laws of gravity; the fateful rivet started a small revolution. Restoration was inevitable.

Aside from the decision process of the authorities (1993 to 2002) and given the huge sums involved, these decision makers should be excused for their slow response. There were some who wanted to demolish the Grand Palais.

Today, as the restoration work continues, the general public can once again lift their eyes safely towards the quadrigas – the harnessed furious horses clinging to the façade.



Les quadriges de Récipon (photo Fr3)

Georges Récipon, the sculptor, designed the two quadrigas. On the south side towards the River Seine is the sculpture representing harmony triumphing over disorder (*L'Harmonie triomphant de la discorde*); and on the north side immortality outliving time (*L'Immortalité devançant le temps*). What better symbol could you dream of to initiate the restoration of the monument under favorable conditions?

How did we get to the edge of this abyss? How did we get to the near destruction of the most beautiful exhibition palace in the world?

A criticized building

The building started to resemble one of those beached whales – pathetic, better to be sliced up than attempt to put it afloat. Its restoration had become a colossal financial burden for the government.

The Grand Palais, property of the Republic, was destined for sports, agricultural and cultural events; the Petit Palais was transformed into the museum of Beaux Arts de la Ville de Paris after the closure of l'Exposition Universelle of 1900. Even though its architecture had been criticized during its construction, the Grand Palais would be like the Petit Palais across the street – destined to endure in comparison to the temporary constructions on the esplanade of the Invalides and along the shore of the Seine. And well built they were.

Equestrian competitions and expositions

On the 22 April 1896, a law was passed announcing a competition for the construction of the Grand Palais in the Journal Officiel.

Consisting of exposition galleries with a surface of more 40,000 square meters, (430,556 sq. ft.), the Grand Palais would present two art exhibits during the Exposition of 1900 -- one, a retrospective, the "Centennale", and the other contemporary art. After that it would be dedicated to annual exhibits of the Beaux Arts, which were the pinnacle of the artistic life in Paris, and to other events such as equestrian, agricultural and flower events.



Concours hippique au Grand Palais, 1938-1939

(©LAPI/Roger-Viollet)

The building would house a range of amenities such as a bar, a buffet, various general administrative offices, a police station, and a concert hall, as well as saddle makers, stables and horse feed stores.

Forty nine different architecture projects were submitted. Under the guidance of Charles Garnier the jury indicated that all projects showed great talent but none of them were up to the task. It was therefore decided that the most talented architects would submit new proposals. The solid classical schooling of Louis Louvet, 1860-1936, a prize-winning architect, Henri Deglane 1855-1931, Albert Thomas 1847-1907 and Charles Girault 1851-1932, distinguished architects and Grand Prix de Rome laureates, guaranteed a certain level of quality.

Girault was chosen to build the Petit Palais and to supervise the construction of the Grand Palais. Three men were necessary to build it and a fourth one was needed to put all of their ideas and drawings together.

Then there was the slowness of the administration of the French Planning office of the exposition who reported directly to the minister of commerce and who nominated the assistants to the architects.

Fifty people worked with the architects, Deglane, Louvet and Thomas. The 23 assistants of Girault were also involved in the construction site. In addition, there were a number of engineers involved in the construction of the metallic structure.

Paradoxically, it was probably this heavy hierarchy and tedious decision making which saved the monument during a less-than popular period after the First World War. A more



Construction of

the metal frame ©BNF

The idea was to erect a real palace of the fine arts. A few years after the demolition of the Tuilleries Palace, the royal residence and then an Imperial residence (between Louis XVI to Napoléon III), the Republic wanted to show to the world that it was capable of building magnificent monuments.

Until then the World Fairs had never rendered any first rate monuments for posterity except for the Eiffel Tower, finished in 1889, and much criticized at the time. As to others, the French novelist, Huysmans, compared the Palace of the Trocadero, built in 1878, to the legs of a bloated woman because of its enormous paunch topped by two thin pinnacles.

The Palais de l'Industrie, built on the 1855 on the Champs-Élysées, had become unfashionable; its main draw back being to hide the Invalides. It was, therefore, destroyed.

In 1900 the objective was to do something much better. The future Grand Palais was part of an ambitious urban project. Construction included a new large avenue – Avenue Nicholas II which would become Avenue Winston Churchill, and a bridge, Alexandre III in the same axis as the prestigious Hôtel des Invalides.

This was to be a masterful piece, a perfect opus. But like all great projects, this one stirred up massive criticism. Famous writers, although radically opposed in their political views such as Anatole France and Maurice Barres, argued for Nancy (they were both from the Lorraine region) as the venue for the l'Exposition Universelle. Others were shocked that one of the most beautiful urban promenades in the world would be altered. And other people were militant for keeping the Palace de l'Industrie....

A petition of artists, among who were Rodin, Falguiere, Cavallie-Coll and Eugène Carriere expressed confidence in the future....

Opposition was strong in the Chamber of Deputies .The government project of introducing income taxes did not help the debate and at end of the day, partisans (supporters) of the Grand Palais won the battle.

extravagant and daring monument would probably not have survived the 1930s. The way it was built with a classical metallic structure and in a discreet Art Nouveau style, the Grand Palais survived two world wars and architectural style changes.

Saved from sinking

Nevertheless, this great vessel was gradually sinking into the ground. The great flooding of the Seine in 1910 was a cause of alarm in a similar way to Venice. The foundation of the Grand Palais was built on old oak pilings pounded into the ground. The gradual decrease in the ground water level caused the stakes to rot and the building to lean toward the south. The foundation of the building sank about 15 cm (5.9 in.).

Just as the tiny pea kept the Princess awake in the story of the Princess and the Pea, this miniscule settling had great consequences.

By leaning toward the Seine, the structure of this enormous vessel was weakened and could no longer be held together. In addition, the pinnacle on top of the dome had a leak rusting the metallic frame of the roof.

This was made worse by different structures put in place during exhibits such as the prestigious car show weakening the frame. Like the Titanic, the Grand Palais was slowly sinking while its metal frame was being twisted.



le salon de l'Automobile de 1908 (L.L./Roger-Viollet)

The final restoration and consolidation of the building began in 2002 under the supervision of France's public building and national palaces (*Bâtiments civils et Palais nationaux*). The first phase of the work, which was to consolidate the foundation of the building, was completed in 2004. New deeper foundations were built in order to secure the building to the limestone layer.

Two new levels of underground basement surface were created. The metal framework was stripped, repaired and repainted in their original color, pale Reseda green. The roof windows which had already been replaced in the 1960s were entirely replaced, primarily for security reasons. The glass used at the time was not strong enough to withhold a worker falling on it. A new method was found to reconstitute the initial support of the structure and maintain its rhythm. The result is astonishing.

There is once again a graphic harmony between the transparent glass and the support of the metallic structure. Now the glass ceiling panels seem to emit singing sounds generated by small changes in the outside temperature. As for the dome it was elevated about one-inch thanks to hydraulic jacks to allow the replacement of broken parts.

