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The tent-room: sedentism of an ephemeral architecture at the beginning of the nineteenth century (materiality, politics and travel culture)

INTRODUCTION

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the spread of the “tent-room” in Europe (Köhler 2008: 161–169). This term refers to a form of internal decoration that borrows from the shape of a tent and its different functions, which may be political or cultural. This form of interior is especially found in royal and upper-class circles, which links the tent motif with the exercise of power. However, the residences in which these interiors were found were not ceremonial buildings but small châteaux, villas even, where the monarch or a member of the upper-class would retire to from court in order to enjoy greater repose and privacy, a custom that dates back to the mid-eighteenth century.

It was in this context that the mobile, ephemeral object of the tent was transformed into a graphic object used for the decoration of an interior. The changing of the tent's function into that of a sign is similar to the concept of semiophore, (1987: 42–43) used by Krzysztof Pomian to describe the function of an object which, enclosed in a display case, loses all usefulness, to be legitimized instead by the meanings it bears. The tent, when transformed into decoration, sees its technical function replaced by the density of meaning it conveys. The hinges, poles and canvas used for these portable homes, which could be erected and dismantled at will, are nothing more than references from this point onwards. In order to understand the widespread use of the tent-room towards the end of the eighteenth century, we must first grasp the system of meanings it carries. To this end, we will initially examine the role of the tent in political symbolism, and its function in legitimizing power in an age marked by the affirmation of the Bonaparte dynasty. Towards the end of the Ancien Régime and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the cultural motif of travel was another phenomenon in which the tent-room assumed meaning, by rewriting the experience of mobility within the domestic space (Roche 2003).

The period of popularity enjoyed by the tent-room also showed the first signs of a process that foreshadowed the nineteenth-century appearance of the modern interior, understood as a place for projecting a new experience of individuality

and interiority, but also as a microcosm in which objects and decorations take on the function of evoking the exterior world (Sparke 2008; Rice 2007; Schlögel 2006: 322–328; Becker 1990).

TENT-ROOMS: VARIATIONS OF A DECORATIVE MOTIF

The tent-room is a decorative motif that mirrors three different representations of this ephemeral architecture: the war, the Oriental room and the theme of travel. While the examples discussed here date back to the period between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, it must be observed that the decoration of interiors with the drill fabric used to make tents was a custom already attested to in the sixteenth century, as confirmed by the inventory of goods belonging to Catherine de' Medici (1519–1589) in 1559, or that of Gabrielle d'Estrées (1570–1599) from 1599 (Havard 1894: 1365–1366). Furthermore, this decoration was not solely limited to aristocratic interiors; following the rise of the wallpaper industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it also became common in bourgeois households in the form of white-and-blue striped wallpaper (Jacqué 2010: 82).

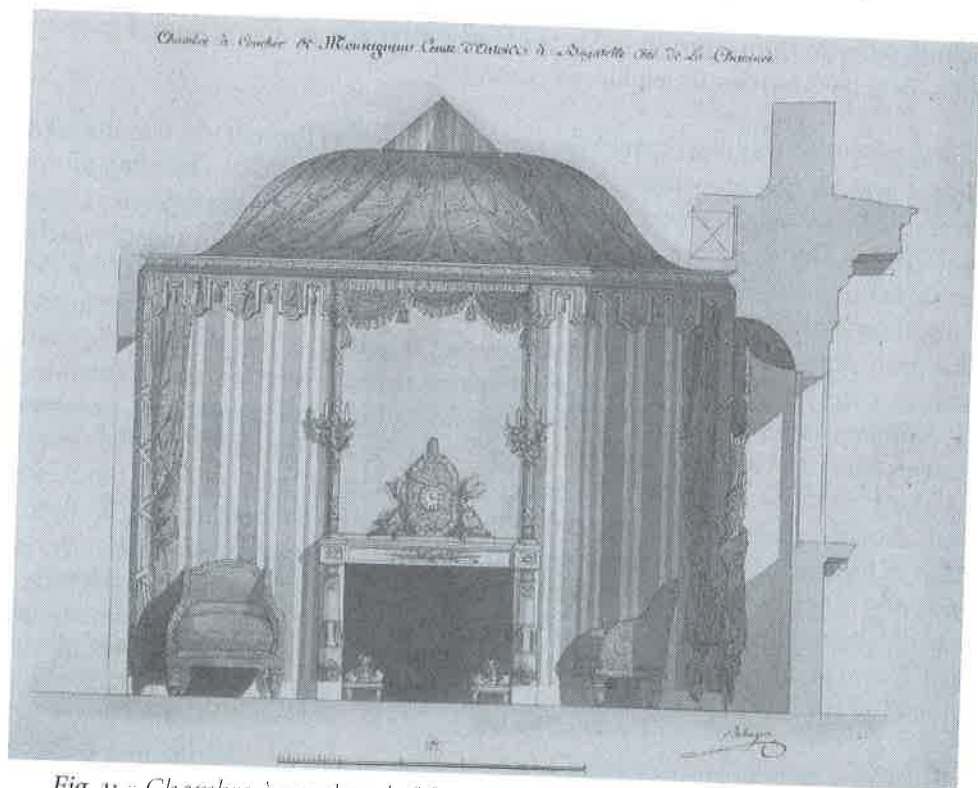


Fig. 1: « *Chambre à coucher de Monseigneur d'Artois à Bagatelle, côté de la cheminée* », drawing, 1770–1780

A military motif

One of the first testimonies to interior decoration in the form of a tent that used more than just drill fabric was the bedroom of the Comte d'Artois (1757–1824) at Château de Bagatelle. On the whim of the king's brother, this construction fitted into the category of a refuge, where the aristocracy would retire to free themselves from the yoke of court and etiquette (de Andia 1978: 9–10). Over the course of the late eighteenth century, these places, which were originally intended to be intimate and secret, instead became a source of competition among the aristocracy and evolved into *folies*, celebrations of the taste of their owners.

The Bagatelle *folie* was the work of young architect François-Joseph Bélanger (1744–1818) (Cast 1997: 125–127). His design was a villa with a rustic appearance, similar to the Petit Trianon by Ange-Jacques Gabriel (1698–1782) and the pavilion of Madame du Barry (1743–1793) at Louveciennes constructed by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736–1806) in 1770 and 1771. The Château de Bagatelle was built in 1777, while completion of the garden and interiors would require a further two years. The structure consisted of a cellar, a ground floor, a small attic floor and some attics

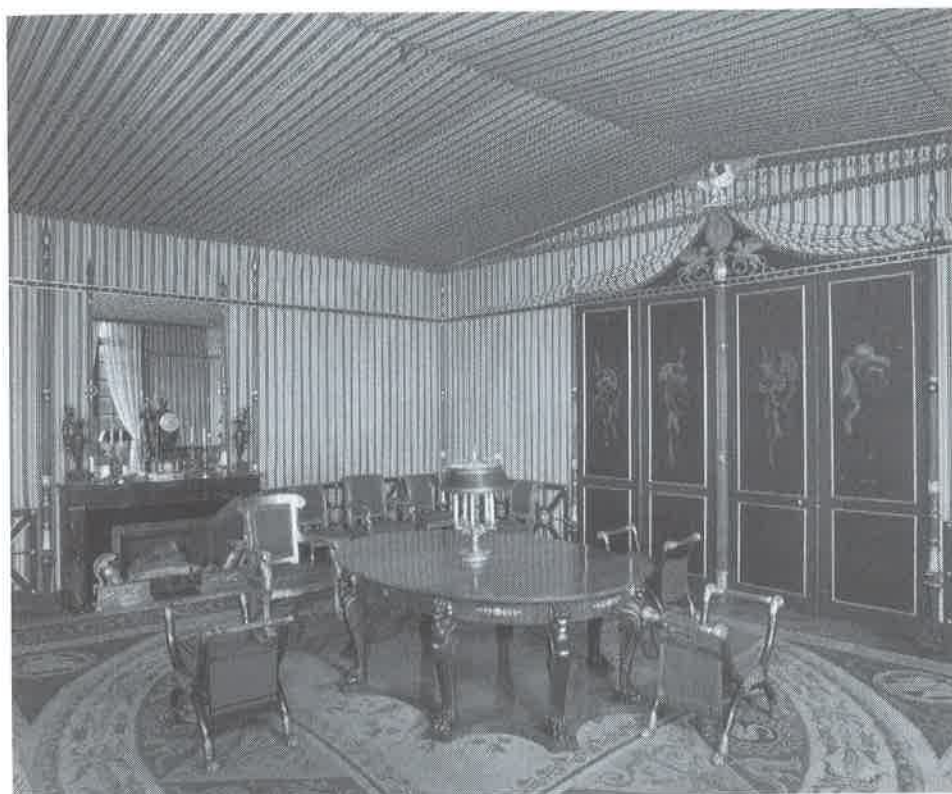


Fig. 2: Boardroom, Rueil-Malmaison, châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau

(Scherer 1985: 147). The prince's bedroom was in the west wing of the first floor. This room was constructed in the shape of a tent, alluding to the military rank of its owner. (Fig. 1) The military decoration consisted of pale blue wall coverings with white stripes, as well as striped Persian cloth folded at the ceiling, giving the impression of a tent. The alcove wall hangings were supported by bundles of lances. Even the fireplace was inspired by military themes, the chimney jambs being cannon shaped while the chimney breast was carved with the arms of the *Grand Maître d'artillerie* (Ibidem: 149). E. Scherer saw in this decoration the influence of Jean-Démsthène Dugourc (1749–1825), who had introduced Etruscan ornaments to France and who would become director of decoration and costumes at l'Opéra (Ibidem: 153). The austere military style of the blue-and-white striped tent seems to have been quickly replaced by blue and gold fabric, which, while maintaining the tent shape, rendered the space more intimate and welcoming (Constans 1997: 71).

Perhaps the best known example of a military style tent-room was the boardroom at the Château de la Malmaison, built by Charles Percier (1764–1838) and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine (1762–1853). The two architects were employed by Napoleon between 1799 and 1800 to renovate the château. The First Consul took charge of the project himself, ordering the construction of a boardroom in place of the ground-floor bedroom on 9 July 1800 (Fontaine 1987: 13). In the *Recueil des décorations intérieures* (1801), Percier and Fontaine made the following

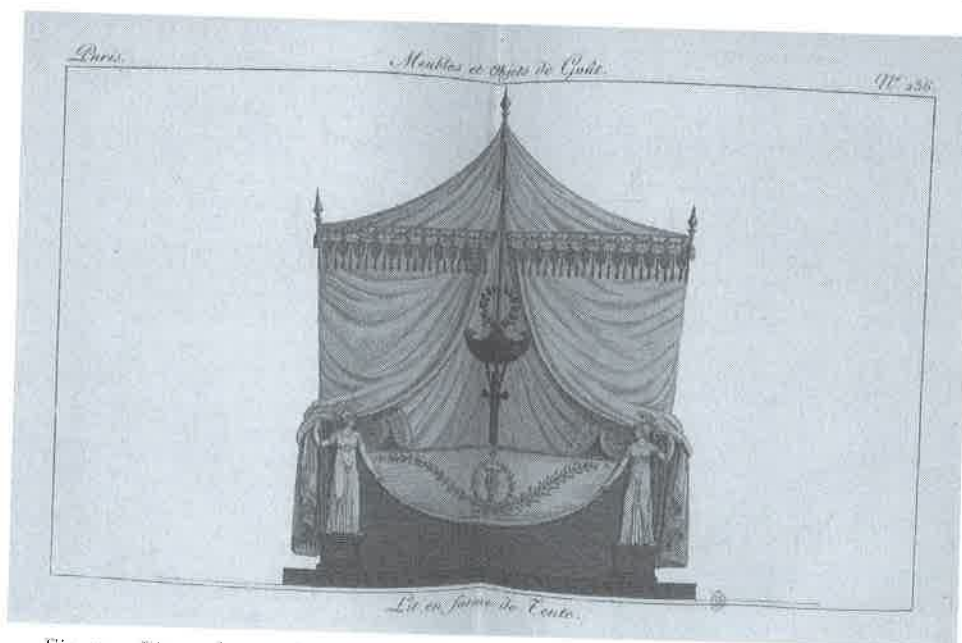


Fig. 3: « Lit en forme de tente » extrait de Pierre de La Mésangère, *Collection des meubles et objets de goût*, Paris, Bureau du Journal des Dames, 1805-1807, vol. V, n. 236

observation with regard to the boardroom and trophies that decorated it: “The First Consul had asked for a boardroom. The layout and decoration had to be completed in 10 days of work, because he did not wish to interrupt the frequent trips that he was accustomed to making. Consequently, it seemed fitting to adopt the tent shape for this room, supported by spikes, bundles and signage with groups of weapons to represent the most famous warrior people around the world hung between them” (1812: 55). (Fig. 2) The Malmaison had been conceived as a refuge for the First Consul, who was to go there to rest. However, as Fontaine remarked on 10 December 1800, “today he received homage, ministers came to report and the army generals have made it their courtyard, when it’s far too small to receive so many people” (Fontaine 1987: 15).

The military motif of the tent-room was also found in other châteaux, such as the residence of the Grand Duke in Würzburg, where, under Ferdinand III of Tuscany (1769–1824), a guardroom was arranged as a tent-room and decorated with military-style furniture (Helmberger, Mauss 2014: 18–19). This style was also found in the *Collection de Meubles et objets de goût* by Pierre de La Mésangère (1761–1831), which published in 1805 a tent-bed (Fig. 3) confirming the importance of this theme in early nineteenth-century.

The Oriental room

A second motif harks back to the Oriental room, a theme that had already emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as in the *Türckische Cammer* at the Sassonie court in Dresden (Schuckelt 2010) or the decoration of the Bellevue château, residence of Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764) (Stein 1994: 29–44), (or again in the Perse room in the Neuilly-sur-Seine residence of Claude Baudard de Vaudésir, baron of St. James (1738–1787)).¹ The Marmorpalais in Potsdam offered another example of this variation on the tent-room. This residence was built between 1787 and 1793 for Friederich Wilhelm II (1744–1797) by Carl von Gontard (1731–1791), and then by Carl Gotthard Langhans (1732–1808) from 1790. The Oriental cabinet was decorated in late 1790 and early 1791 and furnished with a divan, bearing witness to the mania for all things Turkish that was so rife among the European elite at the time (Gehlen 1999: 28–29).² (Fig. 4) At Malmaison, there was another room in the shape of a tent, the bedroom of Empress Josephine, whose construction in 1812 is attributed to Louis-Martin Berthault (1771–1823) (Chevalier 2006: 50–51). (Fig. 5)

¹ Archives de Paris, D5B6 650, Livre de compte de De la rue, tapissier, 1783–1785.

² This motif enjoyed a certain spread during the early 19th century, see Ernst Julius Walch, *Historische, statistische, geographische und topographische Beschreibung der königlich- und herzoglich- sächsischen Häuser und Lande überhaupt und des Sachsen-Coburg-Meiningischen Hauses und dessen Lande insonderheit*, Nürnberg, Schneider und Weigel, 1811, S. 105. The author mentions the Turkish tent-room of Elisabethenburg in Meiningen.



Fig. 4: Oriental cabinet, Marmorpalais, Neuer Garten



Fig. 5: Bedroom of Empress Josephine, decor 1812, Rueil-Malmaison, châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau

The travel theme

The Charlottenhof tent-room in Potsdam confirms the spread of this motif throughout Europe. Bought in 1825 by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia (1770–1840) as Christmas gift for the crown prince Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795–1861) and his wife Elisabeth Ludovika of Bavaria (1801–1873), the estate consisted of a park and a villa. The director of the gardens of Sanssouci, Peter Joseph Lenné (1789–1866), was put in charge of planning the park in 1826. That same year, the architects Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841) and Ludwig Persius (1803–1845) were responsible for the renovation of the residence, completed in 1833 (Hoffmann, Möller 1985: 3–15). The work of Schinkel and his pupil Persius on the external architecture bore witness to the neo-classical style, while the interiors reflected the bourgeois comfort and intimacy typical of the *Biedermeier* period. The tent-room was constructed in 1829 in a corner room next to the salon for the ladies in waiting. The walls of the room were covered with blue-and-white striped wallpaper (Fig. 6); fabric in the same pattern served as a canopy over two metal camp beds, and also covered the folding chairs and stools made by master carpenter Freudemann (Möller, Schönemann, Köhler 1981: 84).

In the Zeltzimmer at Potsdam, the travel theme was interpreted with originality. Camp furniture was used in addition to the tent decoration, consisting of portable beds, stools and folding chairs. The room was devoid of all military references and



Fig. 6: Tent-room, Schloss Charlottenhof, Park Sanssouci, Potsdam

recalled instead a scientific expedition. The illusion of travel through decoration in the form of a tent was reinforced by the sensorial experience of the body resting in a veritable travel bed. The use of wallpaper, instead of drill fabric, to reproduce the striped tent – chosen for reasons of economy (Jacqué 2002: 236) – enhanced the transition to the decorative motif. Indeed, the use of drill fabric to decorate tent-rooms preserved a continuity of material between the tent and the decorative motif, while the use of wallpaper established the transformation of the tent to a graphic device.

THE PAVILION: A “MILITARY MACHINE” AS A SYMBOL OF POWER

The tent was the place where medieval sovereignty was legitimized by the exercise of the military commander. The progressive sedentism of the monarchy and the birth of the modern State led to the assimilation of this motif into political symbolism, while the prestige of the sovereign remained bound to his role as the head of the army, which was reflected in the quality of the luggage and tents he travelled with.³ In his *Dissertation sur les tentes ou pavillons de guerre* (1735), Étienne-Claude Beneton de Morange de Peyrins (?–1752) traced the transformation of this technical item into a political symbol. The purpose of his *Dissertation* was to explore the history of the tent as a “military machine” and as an emblem of the exercise of power:

We saw [...] that it was in the camp & beneath the Praetorian Pavilion, that the Roman officers were rewarded, that it was similar to the way that our first kings received homage from those subjects who obtained fief in return. [...] [the homage] was accepted in the middle of the campaign, when the army was at battle, or in the general's tent, when the army was camped; the curtains of this tent would be lifted and the vassal would fall publicity to the feet of him to whom he had pledged an oath of loyalty (Beneton de Morange 1735: 86–87).

In keeping with Roman tradition, the medieval tent was the place where the sovereign exercised his feudal powers, according to a conception of power that was still deeply marked by military command. The open curtain walls were necessary to guarantee that the act of infeudation was public.

Beneton de Morange, displaying astonishing historical sensitivity, highlighted the transformation of the tent's function in political symbolism following the sedentism of the monarchy that marked the birth of the modern State:

3 Archives nationales Paris, 01 3243, Inventaire general des tentes, pavillons, maisons de bois, etc., du roi et leur ameublement, 1765. There is a second inventory from 1780, see Archives nationales Paris, O1 3244.

In this way the custom of keeping the pavilion curtains raised during acts of power was established, which the Sovereigns all did in their armies. From here it followed that when these acts had to be performed in their residential palace, they would put a pavilion, or perhaps just the height of the pavilion in the room where they performed these acts, in order to maintain the idea & the Right of the sovereign & the place where he had begun to exercise it, which was the army.

So this covered pavilion became a piece of furniture, changed in name and form, as in this case it was no longer necessary to act as a roof, to protect against rain: it was more typically made in the style of a canopy, that is to say, flat with curtains that were lifted in festoons all around (Ibidem: 88–94).

The exercising of sovereignty in the “residential palace” altered the function of the pavilion; this useful object became a means of evoking the ancient military legitimization of power. In fact, the pavilion “changed name and shape” and was transformed into a canopy-shaped dais that covered the throne. The role of the tent in the political symbolism of the monarchies of the Ancien Régime also appeared in the heraldic language of the coat of arms (Ibidem: 57; Duhoux d’Argicourt 1899).

The transformation of the pavilion into a throne dais recalled the transformation of a portable tool into a symbolic tool, observed in the case of the tent-room. The ancient legitimization of sovereignty through military power can be recognized in this interior decoration. By becoming an emblem of the monarchy, the tent was transformed into a symbol of its sovereignty. The hinges and cracks were absorbed by a graphic or plastic reference to evoke their mobility. It was no chance therefore that the tent-room, vehicle of this “political memory”, enjoyed a certain success at the beginning of the nineteenth century, since the affirmation of Napoleon’s power implied the mobilization of a symbolic set of tools to legitimize the new dynasty (Nouvel-Kammerer 2007; Jourdan 1998). In Napoleon’s case, the tent also reflected the importance of the military function in the affirmation of the Emperor’s power.

IMAGINARY TRAVEL

The tent did not have a purely decorative function in late eighteenth-century interiors, but radically transformed the space by creating an *interno nell’interno* (interior within an interior) (Forino 2001), unfettered by architectural space, which was somehow suspended. The lightness of the tent reduced the distinction between interior and exterior by reinforcing the evocative function of the room, making it a medium of the imagination. A particular journey experience is therefore made possible by the tent-room.

Economic mobility, the Grand Tour, scientific expeditions and military campaigns had a profound impact on the culture of the late Ancien Régime and the early

nineteenth century (Roche 2003; Black 2003a and b; Brill 1995). The importance of travel was accompanied by the unprecedented spread of travel literature. Travel books, diaries and guides had become one of the greatest publishing successes of the late eighteenth century (Roche 2003: 33). This passion for travel was also evident in the decorative arts, which made reference to exotic countries and the adventure of discovery (Gablowski 2006), to the extent that one might say that travel at the time was more a feat of the imagination than a real experience.

This cultural dimension of travel was also found in the motif of 'sedentary travel', which the book *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794) by Xavier de Maistre (1763–1852) made into a veritable literary genre, in which the interior represents a micro-landscape to explore but also a place where the elsewhere is present (Stiegler 2013). The tent-room is another example of this 'travelling in place', which transforms the domestic space into a large screen penetrated by the sensations and memories of travel.

Wallpaper is a good example of the devices that bore witness to this functional aspect of the interior. From the late eighteenth century onwards, it played an increasingly important role in interior decoration (Jacqué 2010; Velut 2005). Its success must be attributed to its accessible price, meaning it was affordable to the better-off middle class, and to the variation of patterns available, which allowed wallpaper to follow the rhythms of fashion and satisfy public taste. Exotic patterns can be found among the products of Joseph Dufour (1752–1827), manufacturer of wallpaper in Mâcon and then Paris, for example "the Savages of the Pacific sea" or the "Voyages of Captain Cook" (Clouzot, Follot 1935: 169). In a booklet of samples, Dufour explains the purpose of these exotic tableaux:

We thought he would be grateful to have gathered, so comfortably and visibly, this multitude of people that the immense seas held separate from us, so that, without leaving his apartment, and bearing the view around him, a studious man, by reading the general history of journeys or the tales of travellers who have fuelled the subject, he would believe in the presence of characters, compare the text to the painting, focus on the different forms, costumes, appreciate the skill of some, the taste of others, [...]

(Ibidem: 170–171).

CONCLUSION

Mario Praz, in his *Filosofia dell'arredamento*, stated that *Biedermeier* and Victorian interiors lost the purity of neo-classical decor for a mix of historicizing styles, inhabited by evocative objects (Praz 1993: 66). The tent-room encouraged this transformation, revealing the intermediary function of a tool that drew the gaze and stimulated the memory by evoking the travel experience. Anchored in frivolity

and luxury, but also in the political dimension of aristocratic decoration, the tent-room heralded the entirely bourgeois paradox, with which Walter Benjamin was already familiar, or rather, the exotic or military dream experienced from the comfort of one's armchair (Benjamin 1961: 411). The intimacy of the house invested by a scenographic interior like the tent-room or by a flow of objects charged with evocative power therefore becomes a vehicle of the memory, a "machine of the imagination".

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**EPHEMERAL ARCHITECTURE
IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE
IN THE 19TH
AND 20TH CENTURIES**

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