

CHÂTEAU DE VOLTAIRE

The philosopher's private sphere



Facade on courtyard

Introduction

When Voltaire acquired Ferney in 1758, he had no idea that the next twenty years spent there would be the most productive of his existence. Those of the *Treatise on Tolerance* and the *Philosophical Dictionary*, those of his struggle against the injustices of society and his defence of the victims of political and religious intolerance. Far from Versailles, Voltaire found freedom in this sanctuary. His intense intellectual activity and his clear influence in his active correspondence, drew the great minds of the Enlightenment and high society to Ferney.

Ferney became a “place of memory” on the philosopher’s death in 1778, a place where visitors from all horizons come to pay homage to the patriarch and seek inspiration.

The château and its estate

Set between the Jura and the Alps, Voltaire loved its gardens which, for him, formed the estate's most spectacular ornament. In the 18th century, the estate formed part of the village. The main courtyard housed a theatre in a former barn where Voltaire put on performances. Behind the château, in a private space, a French formal garden was installed including an ornamental pond, as well as a hornbeam arbour where the philosopher liked to read and rest. He had a vineyard planted, tended a carp pond and grew a vegetable garden and orchard.

In the 19th century, the David-Lambert family undertook major renovations: creation of the main entrance, a landscaped park to the west, enclosing the estate, etc.

The south terraces

On the death of Émile Lambert in 1897, his widow had the old presbytery near the church demolished and rearranged the gardens with the architect Edmond Fatio. He transformed the château's lower terrace and enclosed it with the orangery. Statues by Émile Lambert line the flowerbeds, such as Innocence, a bird posed on his hand, the recumbent statue in marble of Virginie with the quotation by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and the bust of fabulist Florian.



The French garden created in the 19th century with *La Vigne*, bronze by Emile Lambert (1882)

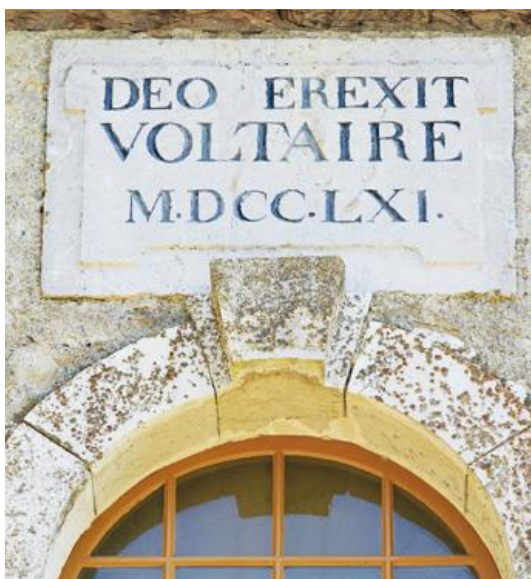
The courtyard façade

When Voltaire acquired the Ferney estate, he decided to build a new château. He himself oversaw the works as of October 1758. Shortly afterwards he extended his home to host guests and friends in comfort. In 1765, he called on the architect Léonard Racle to add two wings which gave the buildings its final appearance.

The classical façade can still be seen today on the courtyard side of the central building. It is laid out symmetrically around an entrance surrounded by Tuscan-style columns topped by twin pilasters on the upper floor, and a pediment bearing the coat of arms of Voltaire and Madame Denis.

The chapel

The chapel was originally the parish church of Ferney. To create a magnificent avenue leading to his château, Voltaire attempted to have it moved but, faced with opposition from the clergy, was forced to return to the original arrangement. Without conferring with the ecclesiastical authorities, he dedicated the new church directly "to God". He had a tombstone built in the shape of a pyramid against the south wall. However, after his death, in Paris, he was buried at Scellières Abbey in Champagne. Then, in 1791, his ashes were moved to the Panthéon in Paris, where they are conserved today.



Plaque on the church "built by Voltaire to God – 1761"

The Orangery

In 1901, Hortense Lambert-David had a new orangery built with an emblazoned pediment. This was connected by an arcade to a series of small buildings including a greenhouse and a palm house where various exotic plants were kept in winter (palm trees, banana trees, etc.).



Ground floor

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The vestibule

The vestibule is one of the rooms of the château that was rearranged in the 19th century. The two false ceramic stoves were commissioned by Voltaire in 1777, most likely produced by the Nyon manufactures in Switzerland. Two narrow corridors at either end of the vestibule provided the servants with access to the various ground floor rooms, with the exception of the wings added in 1765 by Léonard Racle. The last family to own the château, the David-Lamberts, had the statues of Voltaire and Rousseau, as precursors to the ideas of the Enlightenment, placed alongside one another in the 19th century, despite their known enmity. The grand staircase led to the upper floor, reserved for Voltaire's guests.



Voltaire on the left and Rousseau on the right face each other in the vestibule

The antechamber

In the 18th century, the antechamber served as a waiting room for people Voltaire wished to welcome into his private apartments, and for those he chose not to see... This floor was where Voltaire and Madame Denis' various reception rooms and private apartments were located. Representations of the Ferney estate and château in the 18th and 19th centuries are now displayed here. The bust of an elderly Voltaire by François-Marie Poncey was produced by the artist after his visit to Ferney in the winter of 1775-1776. The watch in the display case was manufactured in the watchmaking workshop supported by Voltaire in the village.



Fernaix watch, Pierre Dufour and Louis Céret, around 1770
Gold watch with stony dial and hands



“View of the Château de Voltaire”, burin engraving, 1786

The great hall

This great hall, extensively modified in the 19th century by the owner, Barthélemy Eugène Griolet, was originally divided into two separate rooms. At the heart of Voltaire's life in Ferney, divided between the art of hospitality and study, was the dining room and the philosopher's library/study. This space is now dedicated to the Ferney estate and Voltaire's works.

In the dining room, Europe's intellectual elite rubbed shoulders at Voltaire's permanently full table. Voltaire kept up his reputation by providing luxurious meals that were famed even in Paris. The adjoining library housed 7,000 volumes! The books covered an extremely wide variety of fields. Sold by Madame Denis to Catherine II, Empress of Russia, in 1778, Voltaire's library is now fully conserved in St. Petersburg at the Russian national library. 2,000 works are remarkably annotated by Voltaire himself.

The library was also Voltaire's study, a refuge to which he retired for some peace and quiet when he tired of his guests. "There are sometimes fifty people seated at

the table; I leave them with Madame Denis who does the honours and shut myself away." It was his inner sanctum, into which he only invited his closest friends.



Picture gallery

Grouped within a single room by Barthélémy Eugène Griolet, the picture gallery was in fact Voltaire's bedchamber and that of his valet in the 18th century. A selection of works on the theme of representations of the philosopher are now displayed here. Among them is his bust produced by Houdon in 1778, just weeks before his death. Conscious of his popularity, the philosopher groomed his image, disseminated by the numerous visitors he welcomed to Ferney.

Two paintings by Jean Huber, taken from the series of paintings *La Voltairiade*, illustrate scenes from the patriarch's daily life at Ferney. But one of the most surprising paintings in this collection is without doubt *Le Triomphe de Voltaire*. Branded a "mere daub" by Madame de Genlis, this highly symbolic work, commissioned by Voltaire in 1775, reveals his roguish and provocative character.



Le Triomphe de Voltaire, painted by Duplessis, 1775

The central drawing room

This drawing room, and the adjoining room, were fitted out after the death of Voltaire to preserve the memory of the patriarch of Ferney. They were opened to the many visitors that come to pay tribute to him after 1778. The philosopher's home became "a must-see" site, as demonstrated by the comments left by Chateaubriand, Flaubert, Gogol and Stendhal in the 19th century. Faithful to this staging, several paintings from Voltaire's painting collection are on display in addition to a set of armchairs attributed to the cabinetmaker Pierre Nogaret that belonged to the philosopher.

The richly decorated double stove in clay/marble was commissioned by Madame Denis for Voltaire. It made it possible to heat the drawing room and the adjoining room simultaneously. Opposite the stove is the cenotaph, the monument containing Voltaire's heart. Initially placed in the memorial chamber at the request of the Marquis de Villette, a friend of Voltaire who bought the château after his death, it was designed to house Voltaire's heart.



Clay-marble stove, detail of the bust of Voltaire



Cenotaph

The memorial chamber

The memorial chamber, dedicated to Voltaire, has been open since the 19th century. During his lifetime, the philosopher used it as his painting gallery and billiards room. The bed, now restored and returned to its place, is a key feature: Voltaire spent long hours working there and even received distinguished guests without leaving it. This bed became a true relic on the philosopher's death; many visitors even went as far as to cut off pieces of fabric to take away. Under the canopy, the painting of the Calas family, on behalf of whom Voltaire advocated, provided a means to express the values he held most dear: justice and tolerance. Grouped together by the successive owners, the portraits of Émilie du Châtelet, Voltaire by Maurice Quentin de La Tour, of the actor Lekain and of the young chimney sweep, all belonged to the philosopher.



Portrait of Voltaire, by Maurice Quentin De La Tour



Portrait of Madame du Châtelet, detail by Marie-Anne Loir



Portrait of a young boy called *Le Petit Savoyard ou le petit ramoneur*, second half of the 18th century, pastel by Marie-Elisabeth Dompierre de Fontaine or François-Hubert Drouais

Madame Denis' drawing room

The north wing opens onto Madame Denis' apartments, which have been entirely restored as part of the restoration of the château. These restoration works were notably made possible thanks to the château inventory drawn up on the death of Voltaire and to the detailed model produced by one of the servants at the request of Catherine II and conserved in the Russian national library in St. Petersburg.

Madame Denis played a vital role as lady of the house, and enjoyed receiving guests in this richly furnished drawing room where she played the harpsichord. The portraits of Catherine II of Russia and Frederick II of Prussia, gifted to Voltaire, that hang on the walls are a reminder that these two sovereigns, emblematic figures of enlightened despotism, acted as Voltaire's protectors.



Portrait of Catherine II de Russie, by Fjodor Rokotoff after Philippe de Lasalle



Portrait of Frédéric II de Prusse, by Anna Dorothea Liszewska-Therbusch



Harpsichord, Nicolas Gosset, 1770

Madame Denis' bedchamber

In the 18th century, the bedchamber became a private and personal space: guests were no longer received there, and beds became smaller and more comfortable. The bedchamber was also a place for pampering, as evidenced by the reconstitution of this dressing table characteristic of the mid-18th century. Manicure utensils, cosmetics pots containing make-up and sets of vials for perfumes... the number of accessories multiplied. The bedchamber comprised an alcove, a narrow wardrobe, and a water closet equipped with a rare wastewater disposal system.



Dressing table

The servants' chamber

This room was occupied by the chambermaids in the 18th century. According to the inventory conducted in July 1778 by Jean-Louis Wagnière, Voltaire's secretary, this small room nevertheless contained: "an overmantel mirror with a painted upper section with gilded rods without light fixtures, a wooden chest of drawers decorated with bronze, a large two-door walnut wardrobe, a small writing table that can be placed on the bed, a walnut tea table, three cane armchairs, two paintings over the doorway, 1 bed with a straw mattress, 2 mattresses, 1 feather bed, a wool bedcover and one floral perse, a bolster with flannel curtains in various colours".

Today, a film looks at the contemporary legacy of Voltaire.

Garden level

This level of the château used to house the service wings: kitchen, pantry, log room, wash house, and fruit reserve. The apartments of Voltaire's secretary, Wagnière, lay to the south. In the early 20th century, the garden housed the scientific workshops of the engineer Pierre Lambert, the château's owner at the time.

Today, part of this area is used for temporary exhibitions and educational workshops.



Voltaire, the figure of the committed intellectual

Voltaire put the principles of his philosophy into practice at Ferney. He spent a great deal of time, money and energy developing the village. He had the unsanitary marshes drained, the streets paved, financed the construction of houses, a public fountain, a theatre, etc. He encouraged and diversified craftsmanship with the creation of a ceramics manufacture, a tannery, a stocking factory and a watchmaking factory. He took a great interest in agriculture, introducing new crops and equipping the farmers with tools.

But his initiatives did not stop there. It was from Ferney that the philosopher waged his great battles against the “Infâme” (infamous), his expression to denote injustice, intolerance and religious fanaticism. It was a time of legal cases and the awakening of public opinion. The figure of Jean Calas is the most famous example.

Voltaire undertook a far-reaching campaign across Europe in defence of this Toulouse-born protestant accused of having murdered one of his sons to prevent

him converting to Catholicism, which led to his exoneration. But many others followed in his wake, with the Sirven affair, la Barre, the Jura Serfs and Lally Tollendal, for whom Voltaire advocated until his dying days.



Voltaire accueillant les paysans [Voltaire Conversing with the Peasants] (detail), by Jean Huber, taken from La Voltairiad



*La malheureuse famille Calas [The Unfortunate Calas Family],
after Carmontelle*