

At moat level: from equestrian art to equestrian sports

The size of the stable building and manege built circa 1656 by Mansart illustrated the prominent part played by horses in aristocratic society.

Spurred on by the Count of Artois

Maisons-Laffitte is one of France's most important equestrian centres. Its estate is full of bridle paths and the circular track known as the "Circle of Glory" is a rallying place for thoroughbreds on their way to training. This equestrian tradition dates back to 1777, when the Count of Artois bought Maisons. He had the superb stables designed by Mansart restored (no longer standing) and had a track laid out along the banks of the Seine on which his "English team" of about thirty horses trained.

The role of Jacques and Charles Laffitte

The banker Jacques Laffitte had the stables demolished after 1830, but, prompted by his nephew Charles, one of the founders of the *Société d'encouragement pour l'amélioration de la race chevaline* (a society promoting the improvement of equine breeds), they organised the first races on grassland along the banks of the Seine.

Joseph Oller, who invented the *pari-mutuel* (later to become the *PMU*, France's betting authority), bought the land and converted it into a race track inaugurated in 1878.

The permanent exhibition and film run through the history of Maisons-Laffitte, the horse centre.

Glossary

Barrel vault: a continuous surface of semicircular sections.

Doric column: has no base and a very simple plain capital, characteristic of Classical Greek architecture.

Ionic column: has a capital decorated with pairs of volutes on the sides.

Corinthian column: has a capital decorated with acanthus leaves.

François Mansart: (1598-1666) architect whose designs include the Château de Balleroy. His work inspired his great-nephew Jules Hardouin - who took the name of Mansart -, the architect behind Les Invalides and Versailles.

Parlement de Paris: the highest judicial court in the kingdom.

Pilaster: square pillar projecting from a wall.

Coffered ceiling: ceiling decorated with sunken panels.

Practical information

Visit takes on average: 1 hour.

Guided tours.

Special tours for disabled people.



The Centre des monuments nationaux publishes a collection of guidebooks about French monuments, translated into several languages. Éditions du patrimoine publications are on sale in the bookshop-giftshop.

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Château de Maisons

A paragon of French-style classicism

François Mansart's masterpiece

Around 1636, René de Longueil, president of the Parlement de Paris*, commissioned the architect François Mansart* to build a new château on land his family had owned in Maisons-sur-Seine since 1540. The château was inaugurated in 1651 with a sumptuous feast offered to Anne of Austria and her son, Louis XIV, then aged 12. The estate remained in the Longueil family until 1777, when it was bought by the Count of Artois, brother of Louis XVI and himself the future Charles X.



Famous guests

The Count of Artois left France at the time of the Revolution; the castle was sequestered and its furnishings dispersed. In 1804, it was bought and restored by Field-Marshal Lannes (1769-1809), one of Napoleon I's brothers-in-arms; the Emperor regularly visited the castle. Jacques Laffitte bought the whole of the estate in 1818. After 1830, the extensive grounds were developed for housing and the stables torn down. In 1905, the State bought the château, saving this model of classical architecture which had played host not only to kings and princes, but also to writers and thinkers like Voltaire, a friend of Jean-René de Longueil.

* Explanations overleaf.



Introduction to the visit

From the moment it was completed in 1651, the Château de Maisons was considered a model: “there isn't a single foreigner who hasn't been to see it,” wrote Charles Perrault, the author of the famous fairytales. The building is exemplary of classical French art, paving the way for Versailles with its symmetry, majesty and the orchestration of its spaces. It was designed as the key element in a geometric composition centred on an immense vista, but lost its estate and outbuildings in the 19th century.

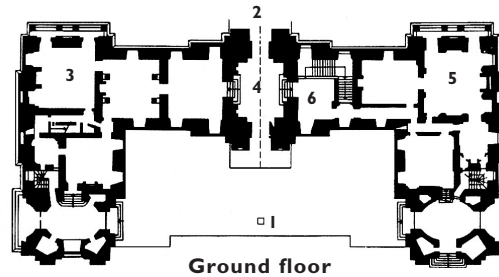
The facades

The purely classical facades are harmoniously proportioned. The balance in the composition also comes from the hierarchical arrangement of its pilasters*: Doric* in the lower parts, Ionic* on the second level and finally Corinthian* on each of the two frontispieces.

- 1 **The courtyard facade** has a central building with large slate-roofed wings on either side. These continue into two low terrace outbuildings.
- 2 **The garden facade** is characterised by its exquisite lateral porticos forming a perfectly symmetrical frame for the central front building.

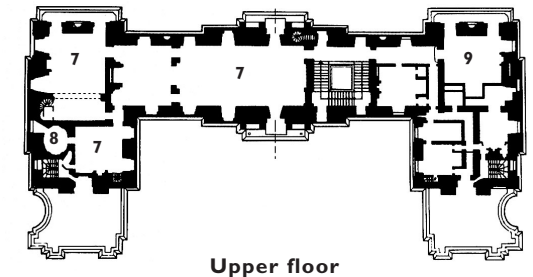
Ground floor

- 3 **The Captives room** owes its name to the fireplace carved by Gilles Guérin in honour of Louis XIII. The captives symbolize the provinces won for the country by the King. The room is decorated with 18th-century furniture and paintings.



Ground floor

- 4 **The vestibule** is the main entrance to the Château, pushing the staircase to one side. It has eight beautifully designed Doric* columns bearing the initials of René de Longueil and his wife Madeleine de Boulenc de Crèvecoeur. In the corners there are four eagles, which are actually a pun on the Longueil name; eagles have keen eyesight, or a “long eye” (long œil in French). Four bas-reliefs depict the four elements: on the back of the entrance, on the estate and orchard side, are Cybele (earth) and Juno (air), while opposite the entrance, towards the Seine, are Neptune (water) and Jupiter (fire).
- 5 **The Fame Apartment.** In 1777, the Count of Artois bought the Château de Maisons and refurbished this apartment, guided by his architect Bélanger, in a fine example of Neoclassical style. In the Summer dining room, the walls are decorated with niches whose features illustrate the seasons: flowers for Spring, wheat for Summer, and grapes for Autumn. The coffered ceiling* is the work of the architect Bélanger and Lhuillier, the sculptor.
- 6 **The Grand Stairway**, consisting of four “suspended” flights of stairs around a central opening, was a new type of staircase for Paris circa 1640. Set under a domed ceiling, it is decorated with Ionic* pilasters and groups of cherubs representing Music and Song, Science and the Arts, Peace and War, Love and Marriage.



Upper floor

Upper floor

- 7 **The Royal Apartment** is an “Italian-style” apartment, as instead of the beams and joists used in French-style ceilings, it has a barrel-vaulted* ceiling punctuated with domes. It includes a **ballroom**, with wood-panelled walls and 17th-century tapestries telling the story of Abraham, the **Hercules lounge**, which has a 17th-century fireplace, and the **King's Bedchamber**, which has a ceiling made of inset domes, its parquet flooring and a bed for lying in state set in an alcove with a large arcade opening.
- 8 **The Mirror Room** has parquet flooring inlaid with bone and tin flower designs. Fluted Ionic* pilasters* frame the mirrors. This exquisitely refined private room is set beneath a dome painted by Michel Corneille.
- 9 **Field-Marshal Lannes's Bedchamber** is in the Empire style. In the middle stands a Restoration period card table covered with elm burl marquetry, the skirt of which is decorated with the signs of the zodiac. Various paintings and objects illustrate the shining career of Jean Lannes, Duke of Montebello, who died as a result of injuries sustained in the Battle of Essling in 1809.

* Explanations overleaf.