

FULL MODERN COMFORT

Count Moïse de Camondo wanted his mansion to have all the amenities necessary for daily comfort and the efficient running of the household by its staff: electric lighting, central heating, sterilised hot and cold running water, lifts, a vacuum cleaning system, a modern kitchen and hygienic bathrooms. It was above all in the conception of these aspects of the house that the count showed his modern-mindedness. Except for the coal used for heating and cooking, all other sources of energy arrived by pipe or cable: water, gas and telephone supplied by the City of Paris or the State, and electricity for lighting and compressed air for the lifts by private companies. The energy required for the service bells and telephones was provided by Leclanché batteries housed in cupboards in the cellar. Successful companies directed by graduates of the Ecole centrale des Arts et Manufactures were awarded the infrastructure contracts: Mildé installed the electricity and the telephone and bell systems, Cubain installed the central heating and supplied the ranges, ovens and grills in the kitchen (fig. 4), and Kula installed the plumbing and sanitary equipment. These modern, functional spaces were painted with 'Ripolin' paint, and their floors, walls and even the kitchen ceiling were tiled.

INTERIOR DECORATION

Work on the interior began early in 1913, with René Sergent enlisting the services of the finest craftsmen. It was above all in this aspect of the project that Moïse de Camondo exercised his acute sense of detail. During the course of 1911 he acquired a quantity of period panelling with which to decorate his mansion's reception rooms. This panelling determined the height of each storey and sometimes even a room's form, although it was never installed as it formerly was. From the upholsterers and decorators Lemoine & Leclerc, the count bought the panelling of the Large Drawing Room. When certain original pieces could not be found on the market, he had copies made from period models, such as the reproduction of a cast-iron balustrade for the main staircase, made by the Baguès company.



Fig. 5 The Large Drawing Room, Musée Nissim de Camondo, 2013. Photo Jean Tholance, Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

Finally it was the turn of the prestigious Decour company, contracted for the interior decoration and upholstery. Founded in 1834, Decour had worked on several of the Rothschild residences, including Waddesdon Manor near London, and also on Henry Clay Frick's townhouse in New York. Its employees began work at rue de Monceau in January 1913, beginning by installing the framework on which to mount the period panelling, then fitting the ornamental cornices. The panelling, often cut to size, always complemented and sometimes stripped or gilded, was restored (fig. 5). Meanwhile, in the Decour workshops, the blinds, curtains and draperies from rue Hamelin, dismantled and cleaned, were unstitched, cut to size and remounted. Chairs were reupholstered and bed bases and mattresses were supplied or restored, while on site wall fabrics were hung, chandelier stems were covered with silk and cupboards and display cases were lined.

THE GARDEN

For the creation of the garden, Moïse de Camondo enlisted the services of the landscape gardener Achille Duchêne, reputed for his and his father's work for high-society clients since the late 19th century, who submitted plans and an estimate in June 1912. The black pencil drawing now in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs was probably one of his first proposals. It shows that the basic principles of the design had already been established: a French-style garden next to the mansion, and an English-style garden bordering the Parc Monceau (fig. 6). In the spring of 1913 an estimate was accepted for 'the creation of two coloured parterres on the terrace, the plantation of a box hedge at the foot of the terrace wall and an additional supply of trees'.

When war was declared in August 1914, advances and final payments for the work were still in progress. René Sergent supervised the mansion's upkeep and alterations until he died in 1927, after which he was succeeded by his associates L. Fagen and R. Bétourné. When he received the commemorative book on the architect² published in 1931, Moïse thanked him as follows: 'Monsieur Sergent was an artist, the worthy successor of the great architects of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the mansion he built to my entire satisfaction is his finest achievement.'

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Curatorial assistant, Musée Nissim de Camondo



Fig. 6 Achille Duchêne's design for the garden, pencil drawing, undated. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Duchêne collection, inv. CD 3027.39. Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

2. René Bétourné, *René Sergent architecte. 1865-1927* (Paris, Horizons de France, 1931).

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CENTENARY OF THE HÔTEL CAMONDO MASTERPIECE OF THE ARCHITECT RENÉ SERGENT

AN EXTRAORDINARY PROJECT, 1911-1914

> MUSÉE NISSIM DE CAMONDO

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Fig.1 Musée Nissim de Camondo, courtyard facade, 2012. Photo Luc Boegly, Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

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The demolition of the mansion of Count and Countess Nissim de Camondo at 63 rue de Monceau began on 5 December 1910. Their son Moïse had recently inherited the residence, built in 1864 by the public works contractor M. Violet and bought by his parents shortly after their arrival in France in 1870.

A refined and demanding collector and aesthete, Moïse de Camondo had developed a passion for 18th-century French art. Until then residing in rented properties, he was living at 19 rue Hamelin, in a vast mansion that he had decorated and arranged to his taste. It was probably in this setting, his collection's first home, that he developed his project to recreate an '18th-century artistic residence', the perfect and definitive showcase for his collection and also fulfilling all the demands of modern comfort.

To realise his dream, he chose the architect René Sergent (1865-1927), who had made a speciality of the 'neo-Louis XVI' style and excelled in the construction of comfortable mansions inspired by the creations of Ange-Jacques Gabriel. In the summer of 1910, he drew up plans for a classical mansion for Count Moïse de Camondo, with a courtyard at the front and a garden at the rear and freely inspired by the Petit Trianon. All he kept of the former Hôtel Violet was the cellars and the outhouses, which he redesigned. Once the project had been accepted, some forty building trades worked on the mansion for three years and more than two million gold francs¹ were spent on it. Count Moïse de Camondo, his children Nissim and Béatrice and some twenty servants, moved into the residence in the summer of 1913. When it was finished in the spring of 1914, several receptions were held to celebrate its completion.

THE FACADES

The classical, three-storey elevation of the sunlit courtyard façade, with a relief-faced ground floor, piano nobile and attic storey, is a direct tribute to its illustrious model (fig. 1). The ensemble is crowned by an entablature and a balustrade, and the three central bays are emphasized by Corinthian pilasters. The other

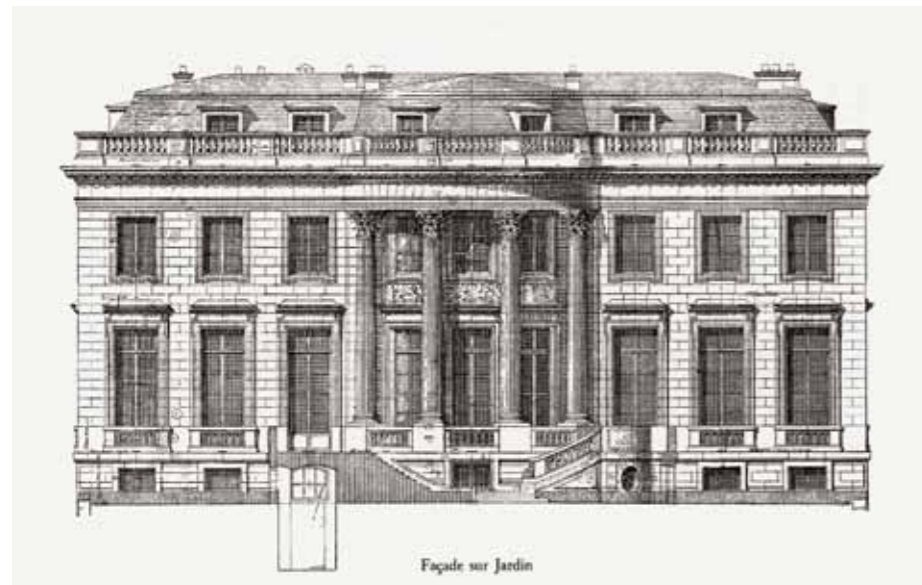


Fig. 2 Elevation of the garden facade by René Sergent, in René Bétourné, *René Sergent architecte. 1865-1927* (Paris, Horizons de France, 1931) p. 22. Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

decorative elements – the framing of the bays, balusters and entrelacs – are similar to those of the Petit Trianon. To soften the cubic space of the courtyard, Sergent brought either end of the façade round in a 90-degree curve, extending the composition to seven bays as opposed to the Trianon's five.

On the garden side, René Sergent deployed two perpendicular wings on either side of a central rotunda. As Moïse de Camondo wished, all nine bays have views of the Parc Monceau. The façade's elevation is similar to that of the Petit Trianon and has the same ornaments (fig. 2). The bas-relief frieze of children on the rotunda was executed on site by the sculptor Jules Visseaux. The mansion's east and west facades, never directly visible to the visitor, are entirely undecorated.

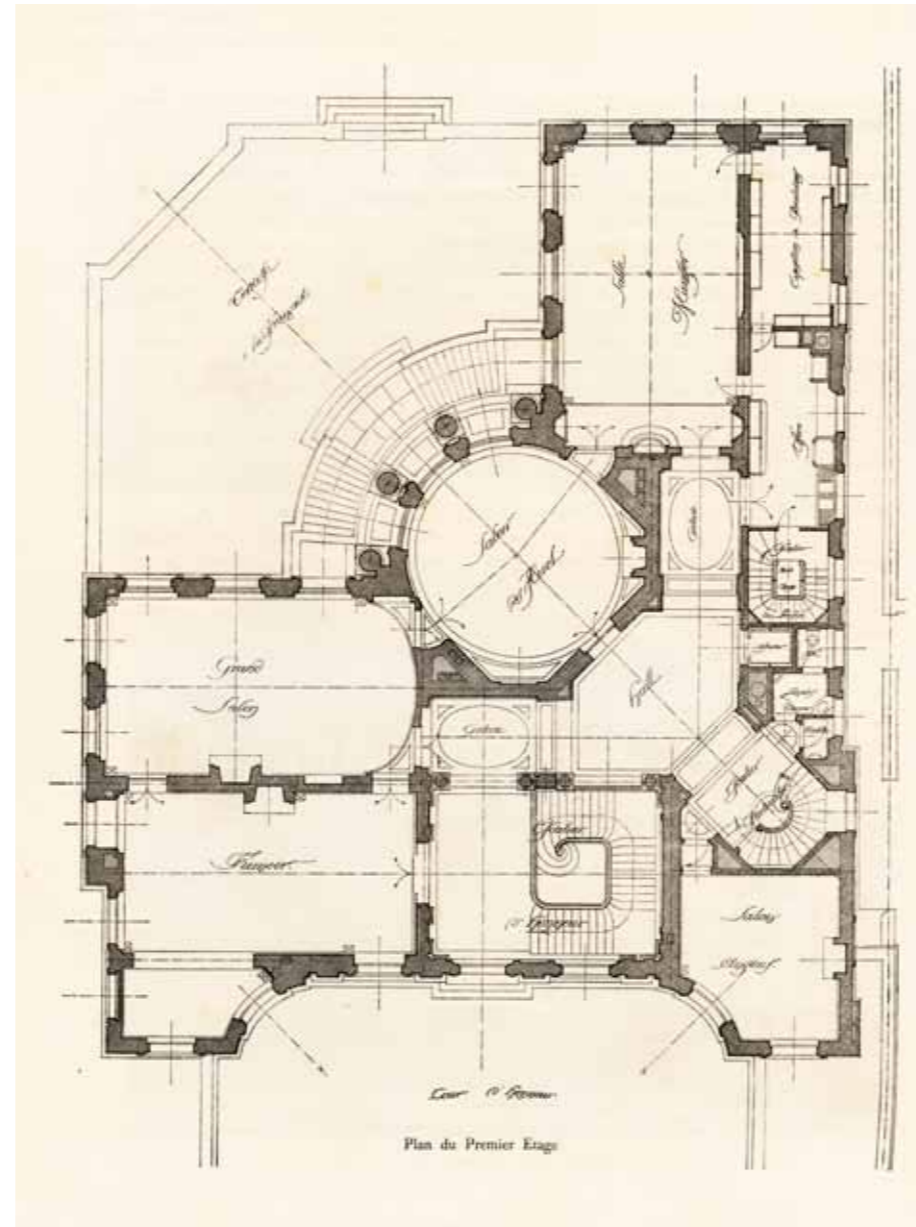


Fig. 3 Plan of the upper ground floor by René Sergent, in René Bétourné, *René Sergent architecte. 1865-1927* (Paris, Horizons de France, 1931) p. 20. Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

THE PLANS

As at the Petit Trianon, René Sergent created a difference of level between the courtyard and garden facades. This enabled him to devote most of the lower ground floor, half below ground level on the Parc Monceau side, to the service spaces: kitchen, laundry, 'salle des gens' (servant's dining room), cold room, larder and the chef's and butler's offices. The lower courtyard side is taken up by the hall where the master of the house welcomed visitors. In bad weather, guests could use the 'covered automobile entrance', entering through the wrought-iron doors of the porch beneath the monumental staircase. This staircase, faced with stone, leads up to the reception rooms on the upper ground floor (fig. 3), where a smaller, spiral staircase ascends to the private apartments on the first floor. The residence's parallel vertical and horizontal organisation enabled the servants to live, work and circulate in spaces separate from those of their employers.

CONSTRUCTION

After preliminary excavation work, building began as soon as planning permission was granted on 1 June 1911. Moïse de Camondo closely supervised every stage of construction on site. The 'Michau & Douane Public and Private Works Company' won the contract for the building work, which took more than a year, and in late September 1912 raised the flag marking the construction's completion. The roof structure, floorboards, zinc roof and exterior door frames were then added. One can assume that the building's shell was finished late in 1912. Time was short and Moïse de Camondo wrote to Sergent: 'Please issue instructions, which I would be obliged if you would write yourself, informing all your contractors that work should be very actively hastened. My new mansion absolutely must be completely finished by the date of 1 July 1913 so that I can take up residence.'



Fig. 4 The kitchen range delivered by Cubain in 1912. Photo Jean-Marie del Moral, Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

1. The equivalent of almost 6 million euros (François Loyer, 'Un Hôtel dans le goût du XVIII^e siècle', in Marie-Noël de Gary (dir.), *Musée Nissim de Camondo, La Demeure d'un collectionneur* (Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, 2007) p. 297, note 47.