

SALONS. [This entry includes articles on salons in France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands.]

France

During the Enlightenment, the salon in France was primarily, but not exclusively, the domain of women—mature, intelligent competent women—who clearly understood the importance of their rôle as salon hostesses. In small gatherings of men and women, the conversations at French salons were central in determining the course of the Enlightenment and in diffusing its effects throughout Europe.

The term *salon*, in the sense of a conversation salon, was first used in 1807 by Madame de Staël in her novel *Corinne*. The habitués of the salons preferred to use the term *bureau d'esprit*, derived from *bel esprit*, which designated a cultivated person who excelled in the art of conversation in a space open to and in the service of others. The *salon*, as we today understand the word, was begun in the early to mid-seventeenth century, in the Parisian townhouse of Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet—where she went to escape from the boisterous atmosphere of Louis XIII's royal court. In her own blue room, the famous *chambre bleue*, she received her guests, many of them writers. Together, during the 1630s, they developed conversation into an art—thus began the salon's golden age.

During the Enlightenment, the salon evolved through three stages that reflected the primary focus of the participants: the literary salon began in the 1730s; the philosophical salon in the 1760s; the political salon in the 1780s. In the literary discussions of the later salons, the first glimmerings of the Romantic tradition emerged, but political and philosophical problems dominated, in an atmosphere of unfettered critical inquiry. Although the composition and the subject of conversation varied continually, one element remained virtually constant: the gatherings were hosted by gifted, intelligent women, neither young nor particularly rich, whose faces we know from the oils and especially the pastel portraits by Jean-Baptiste Perroneau (1715–1783) and Maurice-Quentin de Latour (1704–1788). There were exceptions, such as the salons of M. de la Poplinière, Helvétius, and the baron d'Holbach, whose guests were male (with Mme. d'Holbach remaining discreetly in the background).

The Purpose of the Salon

Why were women the primary players, the ones who invited the guests and proposed the subjects to be discussed in their salons? Perhaps it was because these women were the models of good manners and might act as intermediaries between guests with opposing ideas; they also had tact and discretion and saw to bringing out the best in their circle, while encouraging others to shine, rather than attracting attention to themselves. They were arbiters of taste and frequently controlled the tone or the content of the conversation, demonstrating their disapproval when the language became coarse or the discussion heated. Surrounded by philosophes, the hostess's role was to encourage and mediate the discussion, to ensure that no one guest monopolized the conversation. She was also to ensure that in the search for truth, the language was clear, that no specialized jargon was used, so

that all present, whether artists, musicians, scientists, philosophers, novelists, or journalists, could follow the entire discussion without difficulty. To this end, any Latin used in scientific exposés was eliminated in favor of French, which eased communication between specialists in many fields. All subjects were discussed in common: private conversations rarely took place. The importance of the salon of the Enlightenment was therefore as a facilitator of intellectual exchanges that took place in an atmosphere of politeness and respect for others. The frequency of the encounters resulted in the diffusion of the ideas of the Enlightenment: the salon, along with the literary café, was the principal means by which opinion on current affairs was circulated. The salon also provided a means of escape from two alternatives: the rigidity of royal court protocol, and the ubiquitous gambling and card-playing fashions that swept through eighteenth-century society, causing bankruptcies on a vast scale.

Many of the philosophes who frequented the salons in the 1760s and 1770s were contributors to Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (28 vols., 1751–1775), the aim of which was to overcome ignorance and superstition, and to help advance humankind through education. The salons facilitated meetings and discussions between the *encyclopedistes*, and the ideas contained in the *Encyclopédie* were debated by those philosophes who attended salons two, three, even four evenings a week. The topics discussed ranged from science, philosophy, current affairs, and economics to literature, art, and music—and these discussions were directly linked to the written output of the Enlightenment. Underlying the *philosophes'* interest in these subjects was also a desire to make changes in society, to challenge the authority of both the church and the king, and to reform the government.

The salons were an intermediary space between the philosophes and the public, providing the opportunity for them to read their latest manuscripts and thus be noticed by publishers. Plays were performed in the private salon theaters far from the troublesome eye of the censor and before receptive audiences ready to offer constructive criticism. All aspects of the theater and its aesthetics—comedy, tragedy, even the type of delivery expected of the actors—were discussed. Musical and operatic recitals offered other forms of entertainment, as in the salon of the portraitist Mme. Vigée-Lebrun, where debates on the musical superiority of Christoph Willibald Gluck or Niccolò Piccinni, Jean-Baptiste Lully or Jean-Philippe Rameau, often took place. The salon of M. de La Poplinière contributed much to the awareness of music and opera, both Italian and German, and he generously supported composers. Artists were also welcomed to the salons. To her Monday salon, Mme. Geoffrin invited such painters as Carle Van Loo, François Boucher, Maurice-Quentin de Latour, and Hubert Robert; she did much to advance their careers, including buying their works.

The salons were cosmopolitan in nature, and Paris became known as the “café de l'Europe” because it was its intellectual center, attracting thinkers from all parts of the Continent and the British Isles. From England came writers such as Horace Walpole and Lord Chesterfield, from Scotland the philosopher David Hume, from Italy the witty economist Abbé Galiani, from Germany the philosopher Friedrich Melchior Grimm; and from America the irrepressible polymath Benjamin Franklin. The presence of these men in the salons, their correspondence, and their subsequent return to their countries promoted the spread of the Enlightenment throughout the

Western world. Grimm's newsletter *La Correspondance littéraire* was particularly useful in informing European nobility and royalty of the intellectual and cultural events discussed in the Parisian salons. Mme. Geoffrin corresponded with King Stanislas of Poland, the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, and Catherine the Great of Russia.

The French salon was not an exclusively Parisian phenomenon. Very active salons also existed in Bordeaux, Lyons, Autun, Toulouse, and Dijon, whose hostesses owned copies of the *Encyclopédie* and invited intellectuals such as Charles de Secondat Montesquieu and Voltaire. Yet the majority of the salons were in Paris, and eight main salons there were run by women. The older *salonnières* provided models for the younger ones: Mme. du Deffand learned from the duchesse du Maine; Julie de Lespinasse lived with Mme. du Deffand until opening her own salon; Mme. Geoffrin was inspired by Mme. de Tencin; and Mme. Necker modeled her salon on that of Mme. Geoffrin.

The Salon Hostesses

Mme. de Lambert was one of the senior salon hostesses. In 1710, at the age of sixty-three, she set up her salon in the Hôtel de Nevers, thus forming a transition between the seventeenth-century *style précieux* of Mme. de Rambouillet's salon and the philosophical style of the eighteenth century. Until her death in 1733, Mme. de Lambert received guests on two days a week: intellectuals, artists, and writers on Tuesdays; society people on Wednesdays. It was considered a haven from the excesses of the Regency. Although Mme. de Lambert's rules were strict and decorum was essential, she welcomed serious discussion of literature, science, and philosophy and included many women among her guests. Her influence was very strong, and she helped many, including the philosopher Montesquieu, to be elected to the Académie Française.

Mme. du Deffand belonged to the *noblesse d'épée*. Following the death of the duchesse du Maine, from whom she had learned the etiquette of the *salonnière*, Mme. du Deffand moved to the Ste. Joseph convent in Paris, where she founded her salon, famous for its witty intelligent conversation and for what Horace Walpole called the "prodigious quickness" of its hostess. Her social and intellectual superiority made her very exacting in her choice of guests. Although admitting that she was opposed to the philosophes' ideas, she nevertheless welcomed them to her salon, thereby contributing to the diffusion of the Enlightenment.

Julie de Lespinasse was the niece of Mme. du Deffand. She accompanied her aunt to Paris, where her intelligence and charm soon attracted a circle of admirers at the St. Joseph convent, in particular the philosopher and mathematician Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, who introduced to her the group of *encyclopédistes*. This brought about a disagreement with Mme. du Deffand, whose scepticism and acuity contrasted sharply with the warmth and sensitivity of her niece. Mme. de Lespinasse, who was neither rich nor beautiful, provided a comfortable and unpretentious salon where she shared her passion for music, especially that of Gluck, with the leading thinkers of the 1760s and 1770s. The freedom of discussion and the wide range of topics were welcome changes, and her tact and ability to reveal the brilliance of the minds of her guests were much admired by her loyal following.

Another salon that welcomed the *encyclopédistes* was that of Mme. Geoffrin on the rue Saint-Honoré. A bourgeoisie who had married a rich manufacturer, she had no intellectual pretensions, yet she became the hostess of the brightest intellectuals of the time. Known for her common sense, her discipline, and her strong will, she was nonetheless dearly loved and admired by her guests, among whom were many artists and men of letters, including Edward Gibbon and John Wilkes from England, and David Hume from Scotland. Her guests were selected with great care, and she compiled a list of subjects that would not be tolerated in her salon. Intellectually stimulated by her guests, she freely admitted that it was from the serious discussions in her salon that she received her entire education. Her celebrated generosity prompted her to give financial help not only to artists but also to the *encyclopédistes*. In several cases, financial aid from salon hostesses helped to establish young writers, though not always directly, since it was sometimes in the form of bequests. More frequently they gave moral support: Julie de Lespinasse in particular did much to encourage the *encyclopédistes*.

Mme. Necker, wife of Jacques Necker, who would become Louis XVI's finance minister, had received a good education in her native Switzerland and was respected for her knowledge of literature, classical languages, and science. As an immigrant, the wife of a financier, and a Protestant, she used her salon to break down social barriers, to help her husband's career, and to meet the leading writers and philosophers of the time. Her ambition was that her salon rival those of Mme. Geoffrin and d'Holbach. Each Friday, she brought together political and economic theorists, philosophers, and many foreigners. The philosophes' observations on religion occasionally shocked her, yet she welcomed them and listened to them: it was in her salon that Diderot and Grimm tried out some of their more audacious theories, while Abbé Galiani amused everyone with his witty repartee.

The salon in Enlightenment France was not a meeting place for people to exchange frivolous gossip. It was a serious working space, where new ideas were generated and profound changes in society were proposed by guests who believed in equality and whose intellectual abilities were unquestioned. It provided a framework for civilized deliberation in an atmosphere free from most constraints, where the subtleties of conversation could be explored, and where curiosity about the latest inventions—musical, scientific, or literary—was encouraged. These are the characteristics that explain the salon's extraordinary appeal to visitors from all over Europe.

[See also Clubs and Societies; Encyclopédie; Learned Societies; Men and Women of Letters; Music; Opera; Painting; and Paris.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clergue, Helen. *The Salon: A Study of French Society and Personalities in the Eighteenth Century*. New York, 1971. First published in 1907, and despite its age, this book is still useful. Following a general introduction on the salon and its evolution, there are studies of four of the most important salons: those of Mme. du Deffand, Mme. d'Épinay, Julie de Lespinasse, and Mme. Geoffrin.

- Glutz, Marguerite, and Madeleine Maire. *Salons du XVIIIème siècle*. Paris, 1949. An introduction to society life in the eighteenth century, followed by studies of eight groups of friends and salons, including those of Mme. du Deffand and Mme. Necker.
- Goodman, Dena. "Seriousness of Purpose: *Salonnières*, Philosophes, and the Shaping of the Eighteenth-Century Salon." *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 15 (1988), 111–118. Brief but important attempt to restore the idea that serious work was carried out in the salons, despite Rousseau's repudiation of this idea.
- Goodman, Dena. "Julie de Lespinasse: A Mirror for the Enlightenment." In *Eighteenth-Century Women and the Arts*, edited by F. Keener and S. Lorsch, pp. 3–10. New York, 1988.
- Goodman, Dena. *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*. Ithaca, N.Y., 1994. Chapter 2, "Philosophes and Salonnières," and Chapter 3, "Governing the Republic of Letters: Salonnières and the Rule(s) of Polite Conversation," are particularly noteworthy; interesting for detailed study of the salon.
- Kors, Alan Charles. *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris*. Princeton, N.J., 1976. A very thorough, well-researched book on the salon of Baron d'Holbach and its members.
- Landes, Joan B. *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*. Ithaca, N.Y., 1988. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the role and the importance in the literary world of the women who ran the salons.
- Rogers, Katharine M. "The View from England." In *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, edited by Samia Spencer, pp. 357–368. Bloomington, Ind., 1984. The French salons and their hostesses as viewed by English visitors; comparing France and England, most observers concluded that French society was superior.
- Tornius, Valerian. *The Salon: Its Rise and Fall. Pictures of Society through Five Centuries*. Translated by Agnes Platt. New York, 1971. First published in 1929, two chapters are of special interest in this rather fanciful book: "The Kingdom of the rue St. Honoré" (Mme. Geoffrin) and "The Muse of the Encyclopedia" (Julie de Lespinasse).

ROSENA DAVISON