

*«Le plus grand théâtre de la République,
la première réputation dans l'Europe».*
Ignazio Degotti (1758-1824)
behind the stage of the Paris Opéra

Abstract

This article explores the role, the vision, and the artistic expectations of the Italian stage designer Ignazio Degotti (1758-1824)¹. With a few career interruptions, Degotti was the principal stage designer of the Théâtre de l'Opéra² from 1795 to 1822. He approached his art as a fine and skilled connoisseur of architecture, perspective, decoration, and botany. Convinced that much of the effect of the opera resided in the visual, Degotti gave himself a special status of an artistic interlocutor among other opera creators. His persona, however, rarely fit the controlling requirements of theatre administration. Frustrating requests urged him to produce grandeur on stage, but under controlled timelines and budgets. Meanwhile, outside the Opéra, Degotti worked with Jacques-Louis David, organising the scenography of the *Coronation's* painting; his portrait stands right next to that of Napoleon's First Painter. It is when Degotti eluded the daily fights and controls of the Opéra and meshed his talents with art-academy relationships that he settled comfortably into his artistic role. Through unpublished archival material, this paper brings to the foreground the figure of Degotti, promoting his practice as an account very much integrated into the visual and cultural histories of his time.

Introduction

Degotti first approached the world of the arts as an engraving apprentice in Turin, his hometown. He then entered the orbit of the Galliari family, famous designers whose expertise in the reproduction of nature and botany was recognised³. Historical accounts relate that in his residence, Bernardino Galliari personally financed a botanical garden with exotic plants (pineapples, peppermint, and magnolias), some of which appeared for the first time in the area⁴. In 1777, Degotti became a member of the *Compagnia di San Luca*, later reformed into the Royal Academy of Painting by Vittorio Amedeo III. Here, the Galliari seniors Fabrizio and Bernardino taught perspective, while Degotti was a student along with Fabrizio's sons Giovanni and

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(1) Preliminary references on his life are in V. Natale, *De Gotti, Ignazio*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 36, Roma, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1988 (online edition). Information on Degotti has been extensively implemented in E. Cazzato, *An Italian Artist In Paris: The Career and Designs of Ignazio Degotti (1758-1824)*, PhD. Diss., The University of Sydney, 2017 (not published).

(2) Hereafter "the Opéra".

(3) From Andorno Micca in Piedmont, the first generation of the Galliari settled in Turin in the late 1740s. As designers, they were active for over a century. M. Viale Ferrero, *La scenografia del '700 e i fratelli Galliari*, Torino, Fratelli Pozzo, 1963, p. 20; R. Bossaglia, *I Fratelli Galliari pittori*, Milano, Ceschina, 1962.

(4) P. Sangiorgio, *Delle epoche più luminose della botanica ed agricoltura*, Milano, Pirotta e Maspero, 1807, pp. 36-39; S. Ceppo, *Nella inaugurazione di un monumento a Bernardino Galliari in Andorno sua Patria*, Biella, Tip. Amosso, p. 18.

Giuseppe⁵. Archival sources on Degotti's and Giuseppe's extra-curricular activities indicate that the two were close in 1778⁶. Due to his hybrid education, Degotti cannot be solely defined as an academic artist. Instead, he was drawn to art from the milieu of excellent workshop-trained decorators with extended competencies in architecture, painting, and decoration. This is an essential point to understand his vision and the way he conceptualised his role.

Degotti left Turin in 1783 and after some engagements in Rome (1784-1785) and Naples (1786-1789) he moved to Paris in 1790 to direct the painting atelier of the Théâtre de Monsieur (re-named Feydeau in 1792)⁷. At the Feydeau, he contributed to the success of Luigi Cherubini's operas *Lodoïska* (1791), *Eliza* (1794), and *Médée* (1797)⁸. In 1795 he worked with the dramatist Jean-François Ducis and the actor Talma on the décor of the highly successful oriental tragedy *Abu Far ou la famille arabe* staged for the Théâtre de la République⁹. Archival sources confirm that Ducis was very happy with this collaboration as Degotti was able to bring to life the imaginative visions of the plot¹⁰. In 1795, Degotti also received his first engagement as first painter (*peintre en chef*) of the Opéra, a permanent position for one principal decorator to undertake the duties of architect, inventor, and designer. Although marked by discontinuity, Degotti was part of the Opéra for over 20 years (1795-1800, 1803-1810, and 1815-1822)¹¹.

In the field of art history, Degotti has been evaluated as a noted figure in relation to his collaboration with Jacques-Louis David¹². Nevertheless, despite his long career, his complex artistic activity has been mostly underappreciated by scholars, mainly due to the difficulties in sourcing archival material; information on his own personal accounts is rare, fragmentary, and scattered worldwide. In 2011, from a selection of archival documents, Mathias Auclair reconstructed some vicissitudes of the Opéra atelier of painting in the years 1803-1822¹³. In his reading, Degotti only emerges as inadequate for his role due to his problematic management of time and resources. Yet, if Degotti's uneasy attitude is unquestionable, this paper emphasises that for over twenty years the Opéra found it difficult to replace him. As Degotti's letters and

(5) Turin, Archivio Accademia Albertina, Relazioni Adunanze Accademiche (1778-1796), p. 20.

(6) A notary deed dated 1778 reports Degotti's participation in a purchase of a plot of land in Andorno Micca (Galliaris' hometown) with Giuseppe and two other students. Turin, Archivio Nazionale, Sezioni Riunite, Notarili, 1778, book 3, p. 2039.

(7) A. Di Profio, *La Révolution des Bouffons: l'opéra italien au Théâtre de Monsieur, 1789-1792*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2003; E. Cazzato, *Chronicles of two Piedmontese in Paris: the stage designer Ignazio Degotti (1758-1824) and the composer Gian Battista Viotti (1755-1824)*, in *Cadernos de Queluz*, vol. 4: "Padron mio colendissimo..." *Letters about Music and the Stage in the 18th Century*, ed. I. Yordanova, C. Fernandes, Verlag, Hollitzer, 2021 pp. 655-704.

(8) E. Cazzato, *Ignazio Degotti Staging Luigi Cherubini: Making Visual Culture at the Théâtre Feydeau (1791-1797)*, in *Luigi Cherubini: il teatro musicale*, ed. M.-T. Arfini, F. Menchelli-Buttini, E. Pantini, Würzburg, Studio Verlag im Königshausen & Neumann, pp. 225-242.

(9) J.-F. Ducis, *Abufar ou La Famille Arabe*, eds. M. Poirson, F. Filippi, J. Razgonnikoff, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014.

(10) J.-F. Ducis, *Lettres de Jean-François Ducis édition nouvelle...*, par M.-P. Albert, Paris, G. Jousset, 1879, p. 125.

(11) N. Wild, *Décors et costumes du XIX^e siècle*, vol. I, *Opéra de Paris*, Paris, Éditions BnF, 1987; N. Wild, *Décors et costumes du XIX^e siècle*, vol. II, *Théâtre et décorateurs*, Paris, Éditions BnF, 2014. Degotti's career in this paper is reconstructed through an attentive reading of administrative documents kept in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra and in the Archives Nationales in Paris (AJ13 folder). Manuscripts' folios in this folder are often unnumbered.

(12) P. Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile*, 1st ed, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005; M. Ledbury, *Musical mutualism, David, Degotti and operatic painting*, in *Art, Theatre and Opera in Paris, 1750-1850. Exchanges and Tensions*, eds. S. Hibberd, R. Wrigley, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, pp. 53-76.

(13) Hereafter 'the atelier'. M. Auclair, *L'atelier des décors de l'Opéra (1803-1822)*, "Revue de la BNF" 37, 1, 2011, pp. 5-10.

manuscripts can confirm, he approached his work religiously. Convinced that his role was not simply that of a stagecraft provider, he believed his décor (and therefore his knowledge) could – and had to – provide and communicate an excellent level of visual spectacle-culture. The idea that stage designers should not be subordinate to the creative process of spectacle production was transmitted to his pupils Pierre-Luc Cicéri and Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre, whose aesthetics have been explored in academia more often than their master's¹⁴.

As Pierre Frantz points out: «L'étude purement formaliste du décor de théâtre aboutit à des résultats décevants, non seulement à cause du caractère lacunaire de la documentation, mais surtout parce que le décor de théâtre, d'opéra ou de ballet, s'intègre dans une pratique globale de la représentation»¹⁵. Following this statement, this paper avoids a formalist analysis of stage design. Instead, it refers to a methodology employed by cultural historians in the field of theatre studies¹⁶. Rather than relegating the purveyors of stage-design to their own “background” micro-history, this paper argues that Degotti's ethos, which permeated his creations, was fully integrated into visual and cultural histories of his time.

Inside the Opéra Atelier of Paintings: The power of a personality

Degotti's first project at the Opéra was to create a functional system of storage for décor and settings¹⁷. He shared this duty with the architect Auguste Cheval de Saint Hubert, an artist very close to David and actively engaged in overseeing the management of revolutionary festivals and national propaganda¹⁸. As detailed in the archival documents, the project proposal was efficient and ambitious, but the theatre administration decided not to proceed with its implementation. The decision to not proceed with a project which would, in Degotti's mind, free the imagination and creative genius of the designer, his painters, and the machinist may have been premonitory and Degotti's relationship with the board of directors began to sour. In 1799, the administration attempted to reform Degotti's contract as well as apply budget restrictions. In reply, Degotti wrote a remarkable letter to negotiate his position and status. This unpublished letter [Fig. 1-2], worth citing in detail, is a profession of faith in what he believed his role should be recognized for:

Persuadé que les intentions d'économie, et de réforme que vous manifestez dans vos règlements [...] je dois vous observer que l'article relatif au peintre dessinateur est d'une teneur qui exige explication et développement [...]. L'artiste qui doit occuper la place d'architecte,

(14) B. Daniels, *Cicéri and Daguerre: Set Designers for the Paris Opera, 1820-1822*, “Theatre Survey” 22, 1, 1981, pp. 69-90. For Cicéri and Daguerre working with Degotti see N. Wild, *Opéra de Paris* cit., pp. 283-284.

(15) P. Frantz, *Décor et action à l'époque des Bibiena*, in ed. D. Galligani, *I Bibiena: una famiglia in scena: da Bologna all'Europa*, Firenze, Alina, 2002, pp. 41-49, here: p. 41.

(16) Mark Darlow defines his approach as “concerned not just with the formal poetics and structure of the work of art but also its place within a specific field of signification and/or representation, and in a defined social and historical context” M. Darlow, *Staging the French Revolution: Cultural Politics and the Paris Opera, 1789-1794*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 5. I also refer to Gerardo Tocchini, to whom I am in debt for his insights and readings suggestions. I signal here G. Tocchini, *La politica della rappresentazione: comunicazione sociale e consumo culturale nella Francia di antico regime 1669-1752*, Torino, Libreria Stampatori, 2001.

(17) The project was proposed by Degotti and Hubert the 9th of September 1795. BnF-Opéra, AD/7, p. 315.

(18) On the organization of revolutionary festivals see J. Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival of the Supreme Being: The Search for a Republican Morality*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016.

peintre, inventeur et dessinateur des décorations du plus grand Théâtre de la République doit avoir acquis la première réputation sur les principaux théâtres de l'Europe, il doit avoir une parfaite et profonde connaissance soit de la construction, [que des] détails ornementaux de l'architecture de tous les temps et de tous les pays, de la géographie, comme de l'immense quantité, qualité, forme et nature des végétaux de toutes les contrées de la terre [1]. Il doit avoir une idée précise de tous les effets surprenants de la nature soit du feu, de l'eau, et des airs. Il doit avoir une idée poétique et pittoresque tant de l'histoire comme de la fable. Il doit avoir une imagination vaste et énergique pour pouvoir inventer des choses qui frappent les spectateurs, les transporte au lieu de la scène, il doit avoir une conception originale et juste jusque dans le moindre détail soit du dessin géométrique comme des effets de perspective linéaire et ancienne, enfin il est de la plus grande nécessité qu'il réunisse au génie créateur la capacité de l'exécution [2]. Il faut joindre à toutes ces qualités une précise théorie et une sûre pratique du mécanisme théâtral pour rendre les effets de l'histoire, de la fable, et des scènes vrais, piquants et merveilleux, leur donner les justes proportions au théâtre pour le garantir des dépenses inutiles et le rendre digne dans cette principale partie du titre qu'il porte. Sans les qualités ci énoncées qui sont le fruit d'immenses dépenses tant pour les voyages et recherches, que de longs, profondes et pénibles études [3], l'artiste ne peut faire que des choses incohérentes [...]¹⁹.

This remarkable and replete list of the ideal qualities of the perfect stage designer is a statement of what Degotti believed stage design was or could be, and what a qualified designer should be capable of. The designer was an intellectual, a conceptualizer, and a creator. As a *chef d'entreprise*, he was to be in touch with a wide range of discourses. While looked to for guidance, he was yet able to absorb new narratives, scientific knowledge, and ways of seeing via reading, experience, and first-hand knowledge of the world. The vehemence with which Degotti outlines the skills necessary for the stage designer – from a history painter's subtle understanding of history and fable to the naturalist's eye for minute detail, from deep knowledge of architecture to profound ethnographic and geographical understanding – signals his conception of stage designer as universal painter, vital to the stage in “making sense” [1]. He was convinced the stage required a strong, scientific knowledge of perspective, but also energy, freedom, and a vast imagination to blanket the audience in the context of the depiction [2]. Fully aware of his place within the Italian educational tradition of perspectival and theatrical expertise, Degotti was also convinced that any great stage designer needed to have knowledge of naturalism. One can detect self-aggrandisement for the education he had received, but also the struggle and sacrifice of someone who practiced what he preached [3]. This last point can be further confirmed through the analysis of an auction catalogue of items sold by his brother and inheritor Ilario Degotti²⁰. Degotti died in financial difficulties, but had always maintained a rich library of books (including publications on the natural sciences, botany, history, geography, and classics), personal drawings, sketches he had made for theatre productions, and paintings.

The Opéra administration rarely questioned Degotti's aesthetic talent and intellectual knowledge, but insisted that he was employed to paint theatre decorations and not paintings. Instead of solitary creation, they wanted quick and on-budget delivery of projects and plans for new settings, or the restoration and readjustment of existing scenarios when the circumstances allowed for re-use of old decorations. The

(19) Paris, Archives Nationales (AN hereafter), AJ13/54, ms. an XI, Lettre d'Ignace Degotti à l'Administration du Théâtre de l'Opéra. Paris, 2 avril 1799. Due to the material conditions of this document, the reading is not easy to follow. To facilitate the reader, the transcription is recorded to reflect the reading of its intended sense and a modernization of the spelling of the original text has been preferred.

(20) Paris, BnF-Mitterand, coll. 8-V36-2567.

first painter as atelier supervisor was to instruct the machinist and the staff painters at his service. Moreover, his role included routine tasks such as maintaining inventories, budgeting, and planning.

A letter addressed to the Minister of the Interior Ignace Frédéric Mirbeck in February 1801²¹ defines Degotti as a painter of undeniable talents, but one who also took advantage of his privileged position. Degotti subjected the administration to his will, generating a climate of rivalry among some of his colleagues²². He lacked method, planning, and organisation, and was incapable of managing the atelier. Above all, he refused to provide sufficient preparatory drawings for his plans.

Conversely, Degotti felt misunderstood by the people around him, whom he judged incapable of working on his ideas. In November 1802, Degotti was working on the staging of *Proserpine*, a project that had already been compromised due to a humidity problem in the atelier. The following section of a letter from the theatre director Étienne Morel de Chefdeville to the State Councillor Antoine-François Fourcroy gives a sense of how the *affaire* Degotti preoccupied a prominent member of the Napoleonic state-organisation²³:

Il veut entreprendre la totalité des six décorations qu'exige l'ouvrage de *Proserpine* et prétend qu'on ne peut distribuer cette besogne à d'autres peintres, que d'ailleurs c'est le vœu de M. Paisiello. Il n'entend pas être gêné dans l'exécution de ces décorations et pense qu'ayant fait preuve de talent il ne doit pas être assujéti à l'examen préliminaire de ses dessins et de l'estimation de ses ouvrages [...]. Le Citoyen Degotti prétend que les ouvrages d'art ne doivent pas se traiter comme un ouvrage grossier susceptible de lois et de prix fixes [...]²⁴.

In the quote by Morel there are at least two key points to consider. First, that the composer Giovanni Paisiello specifically wanted Degotti to be entirely and solely charged with the six decorations established for *Proserpine* («C'est le vœu de M. Paisiello»). Paisiello had met Degotti in Naples in the late 1780s and moved to Paris in 1802, when he was sixty-two. Despite having been implored by Napoleon to go to Paris, Paisiello never acclimated to French manners²⁵ and it is possible that he found in Degotti someone to trust and support. Secondly, Morel's report clearly sums up Degotti's views. He believed that the creative process behind his décor was more important than adapting to financial concerns. Conversely, the administrators blamed Degotti for being too intellectual and urged the first painter to simplify his décors to avoid budgetary consequences.

To hasten production, the desire of Paisiello was not respected. The administration felt forced to spread the task between three painters: Degotti, Jean-Constantin Protain, and Simon-Frédéric Moench (also called Munich). Strongly disagreeing, Degotti even attempted to convince the board of direction that this would lead to ter-

(21) AN, AJ13/51, ms. [unnumbered], Rapport présenté au Ministre de l'Intérieur sur le décorateur du Théâtre des Arts. Paris, 24 février 1801.

(22) AN, AJ13/89, ms. folder 437, Note de Boulet à Monsieur Cellier. Paris, 10 septembre 1801.

(23) Fourcroy established his career after the Revolution and in 1802 he directed the Département d'Instruction Publique, which oversaw censorship. See M. Darlow, *Staging the French Revolution* cit., p. 168; V. Granata, *La censura teatrale a Parigi in età Napoleonica*, "Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica" 1, 2002, pp. 63-96, here: p. 92 n.5. On the organisation of the Opéra under Napoleon see D. Chailou, *Napoléon et l'Opéra: La politique sur la scène (1810-1815)*, Paris, Fayard, 2004.

(24) AN, AJ13/89, ms. folder 439, Lettre de Etienne Morel de Chefdeville à Antoine-François Fourcroy, enregistré nr. 891, Paris 7 novembre 1802.

(25) P. Moliterni, *Musica Napoletana e Napoleone. Paisiello e D'Azzia emigranti*, in *Una storia della musica in Puglia. Tre secoli fra antico e moderno*, Bari, Adda editore, 2012, pp. 127-137. I thank Lorenzo Mattei for this insight.

rible results²⁶. As Degotti predicted, the final effect did not satisfy the administration, who recognised that the decorations were patchy and disconnected²⁷. This episode allows us to argue that despite his unworldly and almost obsessive attitude, Degotti was right to think that decorations deserved a different treatment than the one accorded by the Opéra.

Degotti had always demonstrated the ability to match the intentions of the creators he collaborated with, as it was for Cherubini's successes at the Feydeau and for Ducis' *Abufar*. This is evident in an unpublished letter the composer Jean-François Lesueur addressed to Degotti about the staging of *La Mort D'Adam* in 1809; Lesueur wrote that he was looking forward to seeing Degotti's décor and that he fully trusted his competencies and talents as an engineer and creative²⁸. This letter also shows the enthusiasm of an author who anticipated success with Degotti's touch. Reports state that once finished, the decorations were beautiful, and when the composer congratulated the painter on a scenario representing paradise, Degotti answered: «Yes, it certainly is the most beautiful paradise you ever saw in your life, or ever will see»²⁹.

Yet, the administration seemed to wish to discourage an uncontrolled complicity between Degotti and the musicians, making clear that any decision of Degotti's needed to be discussed with the board of directors³⁰. The emerging impression is that Degotti could easily convince musicians and librettists to adapt to his ideas. It was not their responsibility to deal with budgets, and they were all interested in staging spectacles that could be treated as grand, detailed works of art. With his perfectionist and perhaps extravagant attitude, Degotti was overturning the rules of an implicit but existing hierarchy inside the theatre organisation, in which the writer and the composer normally held a higher status than the decorator. Degotti insisted that much of the effect of the opera resided in the visual – rather than purely musical – qualities and thus considered himself an artistic collaborator and interlocutor who could portray the complex world of the composers in the most thorough way possible. Degotti's sense of himself as belonging to the world of the history painter as much as the decorator is particularly of interest in the light of his friendship and collaboration with the dominant painterly presence in France during the Revolution and Empire, Jacques-Louis David.

Outside the Atelier of Painting: Jacques-Louis David and the Coronation

Outside the Opéra, during the years of the Directory³¹, Degotti became intimate with a circle of artists close to David, including Jean-Baptiste Isabey and Claude Thiénon³². Through Isabey, Degotti was involved in private events and exclusive gatherings for

(26) AN, AJ13/53, Lettre de Degotti à Cellierier. Paris, 20 brumaire XI, enregistré nr. 926. Paris, 11 novembre 1802. In the same folder: Réponse à la lettre du enregistré 926. Le Conseiller d'État chargé de la direction et de la surveillance de l'Instruction Publique au Directeur de l'Opéra. Paris, 25 novembre 1802.

(27) AN, AJ13/89, ms. an XI, liasse 2, fol. [unnumbered], opéra de *Proserpine*, observations.

(28) Reims Archives, Collection Pierre Tarbé, CART. XXII, ms. 104. Lettre de Jean-François Lesueur à Ignazio Degotti. Paris, 6 mars 1808.

(29) G. Grove, *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (A.D. 1450-1880), London, Macmillan, 1879, 3 voll., here: voll. 2, p. 124.

(30) BnF-Opéra, AD/10 (meeting reports from 1808–1810), Rapport sur l'atelier de peinture, p. 137.

(31) P. Mansel, *The Eagle in Splendour: Inside the Court of Napoleon*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2015.

(32) E. Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David After the Terror*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999. On the proximity between Thiénon and David, see V. Bajou, *Painting and Politics under the Empire: David's Distribution of the Eagles in David after David: Essays on the Later Work*, ed. M. Ledbury, Williamstown, Clark Art Institute, 2007, pp. 55-71. I thank Prof. Mark Ledbury for his generous comments.

the new élite. For example, he worked on some décor Madame Campan had commissioned for a musical performance in 1802³³. In 1803, however, the Opéra discouraged its painters – and therefore Degotti – from taking engagements outside the theatre, so as to optimise time management³⁴. It is these circumstances under which Degotti came into proximity with David.

The increasing centralisation of political power under Napoleon Bonaparte reached its apogee on the 2nd of December 1804 with his coronation as Emperor of the French. That night, David sketched and registered the details for the monumental Louvre panel *The Coronation of Napoleon* (*Le Sacre de Napoleon*, 1805-1807, Paris, Louvre). On the main stage of this highly theatrical ceremony, Napoleon and Josephine were the protagonists. The rest of the actors were prominent members of the Bonaparte élite: men and women who were going to play a decisive role in the developing agenda³⁵. Behind them, as if watching the denouement of an opera performance in box theatres, were the spectators: *nouveaux riches* and patrons of the newly born Napoleonic society. The ceremony was the result of a collective enterprise between the best artists, musicians, and fashion designers available on the market³⁶. Isabey had designed Joséphine's dress³⁷ while the music was commissioned from Paisiello, a Te Deum and a Coronation Mass combined with a March from Lesueur³⁸. In painting what he thought future generations should glean from the imperial moment, David – the visual witness of revolutionary France – had chosen to insert his self-portrait in the composition. Quite prominent in a centred position, he is placed standing tall on the left, among the box spectators on the second level. Standing right behind David: Ignazio Degotti (Fig. 3)³⁹.

Degotti and David had probably met in Rome in 1784 when Degotti was the stage designer of the Teatro Argentina and David was there for his second sojourn (October 1784 – September 1785), accompanied by de Saint Hubert⁴⁰. Although the first written traces of their relationship are dated 1805, in 1795 Degotti had already worked at the Opéra with de Saint Hubert and he was painted attending the coronation ceremony in 1804⁴¹.

(33) Three manuscripts mention Degotti working with Thiénon and Isabey for Mme Campan. 1) BnF-Manuscripts, ms. 2773, fol. 86, Thiénon to Degotti, 6 pluviôse [missing year]. 2) Reims, Archives Nationales, Collection Pierre Tarbé, ms. XXI, fol. 260, Isabey to Degotti, 2 février 1802. 3) A letter sold by the Maison Charavay (not dated) that Campan wrote to Degotti about the settings for a performance where Hortense de Beauharnais was invited. See M. Dommanget, *Annales révolutionnaires*, vol. VIII, Besançon, Millot, 1916, p. 597.

(34) AN-A]13/63, [Carton AA] ms. 11, fol. 159, Notes pour les peintres.

(35) See *Le sacre de Napoléon, peint par David: Paris, Musée du Louvre, 21 octobre 2004-17 janvier 2005*, ed. S. Laveissière, Paris, Musée du Louvre; Milan, 5 Continents, 2004.

(36) T. Porterfield, S. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007, pp. 3-22.

(37) J. Chazin-Bennahum, *The Lure of Perfection: Fashion and Ballet, 1780-1830*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 121.

(38) P. Mansel, *The Court of France 1789-1830*, Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 147.

(39) Fig. 1, sketch of Ignazio Degotti by Jacques-Louis David as depicted in the *Coronation* painting. Sold by Christies, 10th of April 2008, lot 131, sale 5509. First cited in M. Ledbury, *Musical mutualism* cit., pp. 57-58.

(40) On David being accompanied to Rome by de Saint Hubert see Accademia di Francia, ed., *David e Roma*, Roma, De Luca, 1981, p. 221. Palazzo Mancini, which hosted the Académie de France in Rome in 1725 was walking distance away from the Teatro Argentina. See Giambattista Nolli map (1748) through the platform developed by the University of Oregon <http://nolli.uoregon.edu/>

(41) Scholars tend to consider a drawing of c1804 as the beginning of David's collaboration with Degotti. M. Ledbury, *Musical mutualism* cit., p. 62.

In 1805, David formally contacted Degotti seeking his expertise for the scenography setting of the *Coronation* and further manuscripts confirm their solid relationship between 1805 and 1809⁴². A letter⁴³ describes a request for Degotti to establish the price for the *Coronation* background. In a very gentle and polite tone, David persuades Degotti to be completely satisfied with his treatment and for the final price for this task to be determined without counting the effective number of hours Degotti worked on the tableau. David seemed familiar with Degotti's attitude towards budgets and deadlines, so he writes that he would appreciate a quick delivery of the work, but it was far from his intentions to push Degotti with timing. Further correspondence, this time dated the 25th March 1806, has David politely asking Degotti for an extra task and a personal favour to pose for two hours so he could finish the figure of the cross-holder for the same painting⁴⁴.

As Philippe Bordes has demonstrated, the *Coronation* was not the only painting of David's that Degotti was involved with⁴⁵. Mark Ledbury has further argued that David had not sought Degotti merely for help with perspective, nor ever treated him as a subordinate-level executor⁴⁶. In fact, the former painter of Napoleon's letters indicate genuine interest in Degotti's expertise. David sought advice pertaining to his theatrical skills and ability to recreate large-scale paintings, crowded by figures, objects, and details placed proportionally. A later letter from David to Degotti, dated the 25th of February 1809 confirms how David seemed deeply aware of Degotti's personality and concerned about the best way interact with him:

Mon Cher Monsieur Degoty [Degotti],

Ma petite chambre est faite, les figures sont placées et colorées. Cela veut bien dire, mon bon ami, que je n'attends plus qu'après vous: je sais que vous avez beaucoup d'affaires; vous voyez que je vous tourmente le moins possible, mais à présent je n'y tiens plus; il faut commencer [...]. La perspective du fond que vous avez peinte fait à merveille [...]. Adieu, mon bon ami, à lundi; nous verrons tout cela ensemble.

Votre dévoué ami, David [...]⁴⁷.

When he says «vous voyez que je vous tourmente le moins possible», David shows his understanding of Degotti's distaste for pressure. It might be interesting to question who was playing the part of the famous painter and to ponder the direction of artistic reliance. Ledbury's interpretation of this joint participation as a part

(42) Bordes locates Degotti and David's first contact in April 1805. P. Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David* cit., p. 46; see also eds. A. Schnapper, A. Sérullax, E. Agius-d'Yvoire, *Jacques-Louis David 1748-1825*, Paris, Musée du Louvre; Versailles, Musée national du Château, 1989-1990, p. 605. A *Coronation* sketch by Degotti is signalled to be in the Louvre dép. Arts graphiques, see S. Laveissière, *Le Sacre* cit., p. 94.

(43) New York, Morgan Library, *Dossier David*. Letter of David to Degotti, 18th of March 1805. The date of this letter (1805/1806) is difficult to interpret. The Morgan Library records the manuscript as written in 1805, but this same letter was reported as dated 1806 in A. Schnapper, A. Sérullax, E. Agius-d'Yvoire, *Jacques-Louis David* cit., p. 606. Reported with this same date (1806) and fully cited in M. Ledbury, *Musical mutualism* cit., p. 63, n.42. I thank Jennifer Tonkovich and Sal Robinson of The Morgan for providing me the scanned copy of the original.

(44) A. Schnapper, A. Sérullax, E. Agius-d'Yvoire, *Jacques-Louis David* cit., p. 606.

(45) Degotti was also involved in the making of *Sappho and Phaon* (*Sappho, Phaon et l'Amour*, 1809, St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum). P. Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David* cit., pp. 208-209.

(46) M. Ledbury, *Musical mutualism* cit., pp. 69-72.

(47) Schnapper locates this letter as part of a discussion about the subject *La Distribution des Aigles*. A. Schnapper, A. Sérullax, E. Agius-d'Yvoire, *Jacques-Louis David* cit., p. 614. See also: Société de l'Histoire de l'Art Français, *Nouvelles archives de l'art français (1874-1875)*, Paris, J. Baur, 1875, pp. 419-420.

of «an ongoing friendship and desire for experiment»⁴⁸ is certainly characterises this relationship appropriately.

In an echo of Degotti's words written in 1799, David seems to have understood the potential of this painter who could source visual effects from both history and everyday life. Degotti's experience in theatre allowed him to adjust and add a final touch to a wide range of scenes («pour rendre les effets de l'histoire, de la fable, et des scènes vrais, piquant et merveilleux, leur donner les justes proportions au théâtre»). Therefore, the role of Degotti cannot be seen as a mere technical resource for David. Instead, Degotti's staging expertise was perceived to be equal to that of the academy-trained David and a source of inspiration. Seen this way, the collaboration between David and Degotti fits the perspective that scholars such as Ledbury and Thomas Crow support: the network of artists that gravitated around David should not be seen as a "school" of artists with an established hierarchy subordinated to Napoleon's First Painter, but as a group of artists with equal standing, both inspiring and learning from one another⁴⁹. This affective network of artists, designers and musicians in the circle of both the Theatre Feydeau and David's studio during the Revolution and early 1800s stands in tension and contrast with the highly hierarchical and bureaucratic enterprise of the Opéra under the Empire.

Behind the staging of Fernand Cortez (1809)

The main Empire enterprise Degotti was engaged to under Napoleon was the staging of *Fernand Cortez*, which premiered the night of 28th November 1809. With music by Gaspard Spontini and a plot based on a libretto written by Etienne de Jouy and Joseph-Alphonse d'Esmenard, *Fernand Cortez* was conceived as an ambitious "Empire-performance" and a visual propaganda of the military conquests of Napoleon and the Great Army during the Peninsular War in Spain in 1808⁵⁰.

The plot was based on the story of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, and his invasion of the Aztecs in Mexico during the sixteenth century. For this staging, Degotti was entrusted with complex and ambitious designs for an opera whose theme was imperial conquest. Dramaturgically intriguing, even if not well-calculated politically, the plot focused on the image of the virtuous hero (Cortez, alias Napoleon and the French Army), conquering the weak Aztecs to free them from an oppressive religion (the Spanish and the Inquisition). The story is then embellished by an improbable cross-cultural love romance between Cortez and the Aztec princess Amazily, and climaxes with a reconciliation of the two cultures. Despite the premiere's success, the police suspended the staging after only 17 performances⁵¹. The reason was that the audience sympathised with Cortez as a Spanish hero, instead of perceiving Napoleon as a modern Fernand Cortez battling the Spanish Inquisition.

Furthermore, backstage events reveal the usual difficulties between Degotti and the administration. In April 1809, the administration asked the painter to suspend

(48) M. Ledbury, *Musical mutualism* cit., p. 70.

(49) See M. Ledbury, *Introduction*, in *David after David* cit., pp. vii – xvi; for an overview of David's students T. Crow, *Emulation: David, Drouais, and Girodet in the Art of Revolutionary France*, 2nd ed., New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2006.

(50) C.-J. Esdaile, *The Spanish Army in the Peninsular War*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988; A. Andries, *Modernizing Spectacle: The Opéra in Napoleon's Paris (1799-1815)*, Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 2018.

(51) D. Chaillou, *Napoléon et l'Opéra* cit., p. 69, 467.

any other work he was engaged in to completely dedicate his efforts on Spontini's opera. It is interesting to note that for this staging, the Opéra deliberately chose to re-assign Degotti to the role of first painter that in 1807 had been passed on to Protain. The latter was a man very close to the Napoleonic entourage, as he was one of the painters sent to Egypt to document the campaign⁵². Despite Protain's high-profile apprenticeship, the administration preferred to trust Degotti, further granting more flexibility in the expenses: «L'administration s'est cru obligée de retirer la confiance à M. Protain fils alors chargé de la direction des travaux de cet atelier pour la reposer sur M. Degotti dont plusieurs chefs d'œuvre proclameraient l'habilité et les connaissances des effets de décorations»⁵³.

Degotti could not have landed a grander platform to express his talents in concocting decorations inspired by the nature and structures of Mexico. The work asked for a magnificent spectacle which included the presence of real horses on stage and a rich reproduction of Mexican flora. For this opera, Mitoire, director of the Opéra storage places, reported that Degotti benefited from an unusual amount of freedom. Any material from the hangars of the Menus-Plaisirs, as well as every painter and assistant of the atelier were available for his needs, including his request for extra external painters⁵⁴. In April 1809, pressure began to build around the anticipated delivery date of the décor. Mitoire complained that nobody could understand Degotti's intentions. Degotti replied that he needed calm to accomplish his duties, and that decorations could be finished by the end of June, the original date for the premiere⁵⁵.

Degotti was focused on extensively studying everything related to Mexico and in acquiring accurate botanical knowledge of this location. In his library, he possessed several volumes where he could have sourced his information such as the *Histoire de la conquête du Mexique, ou la Nouvelle Espagne* by Antonio de Solís, which had illustrations of the greatest monuments of Mexico⁵⁶, and a book on the dealings of Humboldt and Bonpland that provided precious and detailed accounts about the natural history of South America⁵⁷. Most important, Degotti also urged the painters of the ateliers to study botanical gardens and any variety of flora related to Mexico, as he planned to cover the front of the stage with native plants⁵⁸. In this way, Degotti exemplified the botanic expertise he had acquired in his early career from his masters Galliaris. This time, the detail was brought onto the stage's ambitious settings – including real vegetation.

He also relied on his direct relationships with botanical suppliers. For example, a letter from the archives of Reims reveals that from 1803 onwards Degotti was in touch with Gabriel Thouin, the botanist and horticulturist of the Jardins des plantes, who sent him real samples of flora and prices of several articles⁵⁹. Nevertheless, the administration was again very sceptical of the painter's excessive zeal, and discouraged this attitude because he was delaying the delivery of the decorations by persisting in the completion of tiny details that would have lost their effect on stage: «il

(52) N. Charles, *An Account of the French Expedition to Egypt [...]*, London, S. Gosnell, 1800, p. 46.

(53) BnF-Opéra, AD/10, Rapport, p. 157.

(54) BnF-Opéra, AD/10, Rapport à l'atelier de peinture, pp. 136-137.

(55) BnF-Opéra, AD/10, Rapport de MM. Les administrateurs sur Degotti, p. 158.

(56) A. de Solís, *Histoire de la conquête du Mexique ou de la Nouvelle Espagne*, Paris, chez M. Villery, 1691.

(57) A. von Humboldt, *Relation historique du Voyage aux Régions équinoxiales du Nouveau [...]*, 3 voll., Paris, F. Schoell, 1814-1817.

(58) BnF-Opéra, AD/10, Rapport sur les travaux de Fernand Cortez, p. 128.

(59) Reims Archives, Collection Pierre Tarbé CART.XXI, ms. 299.

a trop de cet esprit de détail qui rend les décorations des véritables tableaux dont beaucoup d'effets sont perdus pour la scène»⁶⁰.

Moreover, administration reports stressed that as had often happened in the past, the tasks Degotti had distributed to his assistants and subordinates were too ambitious for them to realise. Degotti was incomparable when working on large panels for the background scenarios, owing to his superior talent for extended and detailed narrative sets: «le Citoyen Degotti peindra rideaux de fond, paysages et autres dans lesquels il a une supériorité reconnue»⁶¹. Again, the compliment that Degotti had the greatest knowledge of his art was here softened with their demand for him to work quicker with less resources⁶².

Most of the sketches related to *Fernand Cortez* were lost in the auction organised by Degotti's brother in 1825. One sketch attributed to Degotti by the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra⁶³ fits this description of act two (Fig. 4):

Un paysage montagneux [...] qu'on découvre dans le fond. Les Espagnols sont occupés à jeter un pont sur d'immenses rochers, d'où s'échappent des torrents qui se précipitent dans le lac. Le grand temple des sacrifices s'élève sur le côté opposé; presque vis-à-vis, une roche couverte d'arbres s'avance en saillie sur les eaux. Le jour est sur son déclin⁶⁴.

In the surviving sketch, the position of the sun suggests an approaching sunset as in the description of libretto. The scene opens with a small portion of natural landscape in the background before the action progressively moves towards the right for the combat. There, the setting is developed in two levels. The first has the Spanish soldiers fighting on a *practicable* (the bridge). The second portrays a hill in the background. Amidst the dynamism of the combat, there was the "silent" action of the plants, which must have been the real vegetation provided by Thouin.

During the performance, 16 horses appeared on stage mounted by their grooms in rich gold costumes⁶⁵. They were borrowed from the circus of the Italian Antonio Franconi, with whom Degotti had already worked at the Feydeau⁶⁶. Reports compiled during the rehearsals blamed Degotti for failing to make appropriate arrangements with the choreographer, resulting in too little space for the dancers to properly execute the choreographies, thus losing most of their charm⁶⁷. Degotti of course could not disagree more, but the persistent disorientation, and the protracted length of time it took to prepare the decorations for *Fernand Cortez* was too much for the administration. Degotti was accused of prioritising his own glory and trusting nothing else besides his own imagination, forgetting that his creations had to be functional for the whole setting. His unorthodox attitude caused the administration to determine that his ego was incompatible with the needs of the atelier's theatre. In a long report dated December 1809, the administration finally admitted that the atelier needed

(60) BnF-Opéra, AD/10, Rapport de MM. Les administrateurs sur Degotti, pp. 157-158.

(61) *Ibidem*.

(62) BnF-Opéra, AD/ 10, Rapport sur l'atelier de peinture, p. 139.

(63) Fig. 2, BnF-Opéra, inv. ESQUISSES ANCIENNES-5 (49)

(64) G. Spontini, *Fernand Cortez ou La conquête du Mexique: opéra en trois actes*, libretto by V.J. Etienne Jouy, and J.A. Esménard, Paris, chez Roulet, 1809, p. 30.

(65) J.-G. Prod'homme, T. Baker, *Two Hundred and Fifty Years of the Opéra (1669-1919)*, "The Musical Quarterly" 5, 4, 1919, pp. 513-537, here: p. 527. Castil-Blaze reports that a journalist proposed to write a note on the door of the theatre stating «here we play the opera on foot and on horseback». Castil-Blaze, *L'Académie Impériale de Musique*, Paris, Castil-Blaze, 1855, p. 126.

(66) About Degotti and Franconi at the Feydeau P. Smith (pseud. E. Monnais), *Esquisses de la vie d'artiste, quatrième partie*, Paris, 1844, pp. 356-357.

(67) BnF-Opéra, AD/10, p. 137, 159.

a less talented but more organised painter, less skilled but with a smaller “artistic ego” than Degotti had. In brief, they wanted a simple stage decorator rather than an individual artist⁶⁸.

They could not complain about his great talent but explained that the theatre was building a new “military” discipline that obliged both the directors and the subordinates of the Opéra to be rule-abiding⁶⁹. Degotti protested (once again) by saying that the majesty and the grandeur of his creations were incompatible with the strict and limiting deadlines imposed by the administrators. The administration attempted to save his place as decorator, negotiating some further and very strict conditions of collaboration. Full of self-pride, he rejected this offer and on the 3rd of February 1810 resigned his position (although he would return in 1815).

It is hard to determine whether Degotti was protesting too much or whether the administration could not fully understand the value of his work. From what emerges of the archival reconstruction of Degotti’s vicissitudes, one could argue that he had a fundamental misunderstanding of the contingency and “pragmatics” of opera décor. Yet, this is precisely what made him such an interesting figure, behaving like a famous painter, and managing the atelier as though it was his own private studio.

Conclusions

During the years of his engagement with the Opéra, praise for Degotti’s undisputable talent vied with bitter complaints about his bizarre and selfish attitude. Since the early stages of his career Degotti had made clear that his artistic role was intolerant of budgets and rules. He did not want to provide fixed sketches and he persistently refused to work on the readjustments of old décor. Anything with his signature had to be brand-new, depicting large and rich scenarios. Degotti was also convinced that great stage designers needed sound knowledge of naturalism, one of the key aspects of his cultivated and passionate education.

His expertise and artistic sensibility led him to fully integrate his stage design skills into academic art, but at the same time put him in contrast with the Opéra’s administrators, who did not know how to deal with his imaginative visions. His legacy, however, would have a strong impact on Romantic scenography through his pupils Cicéri and Daguerre who will convey his thinking. Degotti’s conception of the ‘stage designer’ contributed to opening the way to hybrid forms of stage spectacle that were fully understood in Modernity, from the Ballets Russes to Richard Wagner and the Bauhaus’ productions, where stage design was seen as not only a complex art but at the center of new kinds of visual, dramatic, and musical creation.

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(68) BnF-Opéra, AD/10, Rapport de Monsieur l’administrateur et l’inspecteur général sous M. Degotty, p. 159.

(69) BnF-Opéra, AD/10, Rapport de l’administrateur comptable sur Degotti, p. 161.

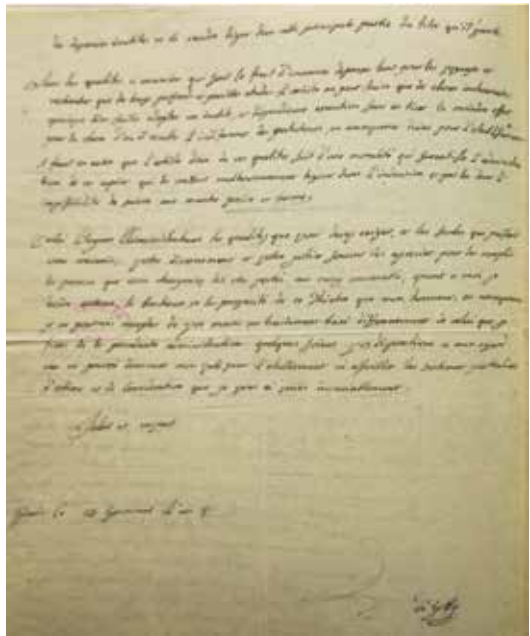
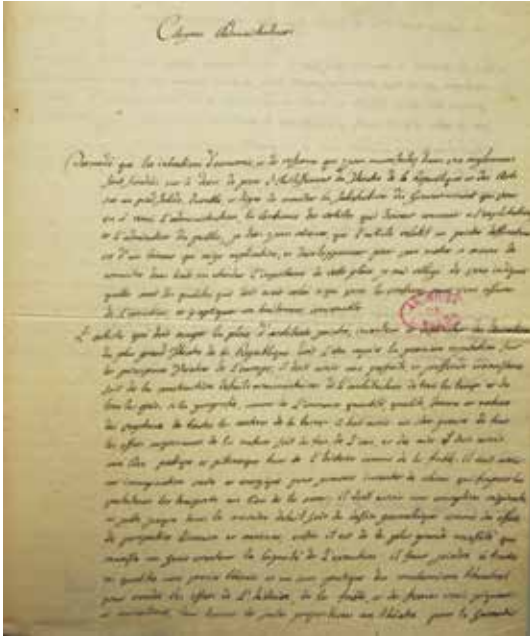


Fig. 1-2

Lettre aux citoyens administrateurs, signée par De Gotti [Ignazio Degotti].
 Dated Paris, le 13 germinal an 7.
 Archives Nationales de France, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, AJ13/54.
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Fig. 3
 Jacques-Louis David,
 Portrait of Ignazio Degotti (1804-1805?).
 Inscrit "le célèbre décorateur desgotti
 fait de Souvenir par David"
 Black chalk on light brown paper,
 177 x 129 mm.
 Sold by Christie's in 2008,
 lot 131, sale 5509.
 By Permission of Christie's
 through Bridgeman Images.
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Fig. 4

Ignazio Degotti, Sketch for Fernand Cortez (Act II),
Ink and Bistre Wash, 290 x 430 mm (image),
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra.
BMO ESQUISSES ANCIENNES-5 (49).

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