



ARTS

The Imperial court theatre at Fontainebleau

Livre relié

Auteur(s) : Cochet

Traducteur(s) : Kerman

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From the Valois to the “series” of the Second Empire, theatrical performances were – along with hunting – among the favourite entertainments offered during court visits to Fontainebleau. In 1725, the palace was the first of the princely residences to be provided with a special performance hall. Restored during the First Empire and again during the July monarchy, it welcomed the stars of the time, who were called to perform for the guests of the Emperor and the king of the French. When at last it was deemed outmoded and impractical, it was carefully dismantled so that its machinery might be used in the new theatre Napoleon III had Hector Lefuel construct in the southern wing of the cour d’honneur. Work on the imperial theatre began in 1854 and was entirely finished by the following year. With a large selection of stage scenery allowing the staging of a varied repertoire, the theatre was nevertheless only used for approximately ten performances, from its inauguration in 1857 to the last imperial visit to Fontainebleau in 1868. Neglected and forgotten, it briefly found a semblance of life during the German occupation in 1940 – 1945, then sank back into oblivion, the relic of a defunct empire. Today its restoration, begun in 2007, allows us to rediscover the history, authenticity, and cultural treasures of the last French court theatre.