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Columbia's Maison Française Completes Stunning Renovation in Advance of Centennial

NEW YORK, August 22, 2012 — Founded in 1913, the Maison Française of Columbia University was the first French academic and cultural center of its kind to be created on an American campus. The formation of the center was a pet project of Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler, a francophile and internationalist. In its long history, the Maison Française has been host to a long list of intellectuals, celebrities and dignitaries, including Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, André Malraux, Edith Piaf, Pierre Boulez, Claude Lanzmann and Nicolas Sarkozy.

Building on this history, the Maison Française recently completed an historic renovation process leading up to the Maison Française's Centennial celebration in 2013. The renovation was led by Shanny Peer, director of the Maison, who, upon arriving at Columbia in 2009, saw the hidden potential in the aging building.

“The Maison Française looked worn and cluttered, with peeling white paint, drab black vinyl floors and tired furnishings, but I could see that it was like a diamond in the rough, with the potential to become a beautiful, unique and welcoming space on campus,” says Peer. “I wanted to revive it and turn it into a French House worthy of its name in time for its 100 year anniversary.”

Much of the support for the renovation came from the Maison Française Advisory Board and its Chair, Paul LeClerc, President Emeritus of the New York Public Library and the new director of Columbia's [Europe Global Center in Paris](#). On campus, Peer found a great ally in Susan Mescher, Deputy Vice President for Strategic Planning in Arts and Sciences. Mescher shared Peer's enthusiasm to revive a unique space and important cultural center at Columbia. Buell Hall, which houses the Maison Française, is the oldest building on Columbia's Morningside campus, and it is the only one to survive from the years preceding Columbia when the land was home to the Morningside Insane Asylum.

Shanny Peer and Susan Mescher started the renovation process in 2010 with work on Buell Hall's second floor, which includes a library/conference room, large kitchen overlooking campus, reception room and office space. All rooms but the kitchen on the second floor were renovated in 2010, with custom-designed, handcrafted light oak panel floors and encaustic tiles, walls painted in an art nouveau palette and period antiques, including French art nouveau embossed leather chairs. The Florence Gould Foundation provided funding for the second floor renovation, with matching funds contributed by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at

Columbia. Never did Peer and Mescher imagine the help they would find for the next stage of the project. Renaud Dutreil, another member of the Maison Française Advisory board and former Minister of Artisans and Small and Medium Businesses in France, who recently stepped down as the Chairman of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton Inc., pledged \$100,000 from LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton Inc. as a gift for the Centennial renovation. The money was to go toward renovations of the public face of the Maison Française, Buell Hall's East Gallery, which is used for conferences, seminars, film screenings, small performances, and special events.

“We’re planning a series of events for the Centennial that will take place in the East Gallery,” says Peer, “including a conference marking the 100-year anniversary of Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*, lectures about President Butler’s francophilia and about philosopher Henri Bergson’s 1913 encounter with America as one of the very first French visiting professors at Columbia, and an exhibition about the history of the Maison Française and special relationship between Columbia and France over the past 100 years.”

Dutreil’s vision for the East Gallery, shared by Peer, was to invite French and American artisans to design and handcraft customized elements to create a space worthy of its history. Paul LeClerc and Elizabeth Rohtayn, an advocate of public education and founder of Teaching Matters, Inc., also made gifts to help fund the project, as well as the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Columbia.

To carry out this vision, New York-based French interior designer Caroline Beaupere was invited to guide the renovation design with her unique French aesthetic, with Brendan Kelly as architect. Beaupere worked with selected craftsmen to design the pieces they would craft for the Centennial renovation. Hand-planed oak wood flooring in a herringbone pattern was custom designed and made by Thomas Cordts for Contour Parquet. Urban Art House owner Noel Vega crafted a stage, podium and AV cabinet in his furniture workshop in Brooklyn. The famed French metal-working firm *Les Metalliers Champenois*, established in New Jersey after owner Jean Wiart came to the U.S. to recreate the torch and flame of the Statue of Liberty for its 1986 Centennial, forged the East Gallery’s new crown jewel: two ornamental wrought iron chandeliers. The fixtures incorporate hand-colored accents of historic glass donated by the Atelier Saint-Marq/Fort Royal, an exquisite glass art workshop in Reims, France since 1640. A whimsical touch is added by transparent polycarbonate “Ghost” chairs designed by Philippe Starck for Kartell—a modern take on 18th Century French style.

The completion of the renovation of the Maison Française coincides with the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation’s modernist renovation of the Arthur Ross Architectural Gallery and north and south lobbies in Buell Hall.

The Maison Française’s renovated East Gallery will be inaugurated in a private reception on September 13 and will be open for public viewing on September 17 from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.

About the Maison Française

Since its founding in 1913, the Columbia Maison Française has played a vital role in fostering intellectual and cultural exchange between France, the United States and the French-speaking world. The mission of the Maison Française is to promote interest in French and Francophone culture, society, politics, and history, to foster innovative scholarship, to enable exchange across disciplines and schools at Columbia and beyond, and to contribute to international and intercultural understanding.

About Columbia University

Among the world's leading research universities, [Columbia University](#) in the City of New York continually seeks to advance the frontiers of scholarship and foster a campus community deeply engaged in understanding and confronting the complex issues of our time through teaching, research, patient care and public service. The University is comprised of 16 undergraduate, graduate and professional schools, and four affiliated colleges and seminaries in Northern Manhattan, as well as a wide array of research institutes and global centers located in major cities around the world. More than 40,000 accomplished students, award-winning faculty and professional staff define the University's underlying values and commitment to pursuing new knowledge and educating informed, engaged citizens. Founded in 1754 as King's College, Columbia is the fifth oldest institution of higher learning in the United States.