

The collections of the Maison des Lumières Denis Diderot : history and current layout

In 1923, Jeanne Alice Moreau Du Breuil de Saint-Germain (1848–1927) bequeathed her home to the Société historique et archéologique de Langres, on the express condition that it be used “to preserve, house and exhibit the public collections of said society”. This gift allowed Langres to open a second museum in 1927, in the vicinity of the Musée Saint-Didier, within the walls of a mansion built at the end of the 16th century and extended in the 18th century. This rather ramshackle first museum closed its doors in 1995, just as the new Musée d’art et d’histoire was inaugurated. In 2009, the city of Langres came into possession of a building formerly owned by the SHAL, paving the way for the creation of a new museum.

The visit opens with a history of the museum site, an 18th-century hôtel particulier that became a large bourgeois house in the 19th century, then a museum. It is made clear that Diderot was not born there but in a rather more modest dwelling, which can be seen elsewhere in the city. Visitors are shown the building’s 18th-century architectural ornaments and portraits of the Du Breuil family. They are also provided with an account of the contents of the original museum.

The next section introduces various 18th-century historical, artistic and scientific landmarks, before focusing on Diderot's relationship with his home town – Langres was both the city where Diderot went to school and the site of 19th- and 20th-century debates between the materialist philosopher’s supporters and detractors. Visitors are welcomed by Jean-Antoine Houdon’s bronze bust of Diderot, the museum's masterpiece. This bust, which Diderot himself presented to the city in 1780, memorialises the relationship between the philosopher and his home town – a relationship which entered into a new phase with the creation of the museum. Visitors are then introduced to Diderot’s family and his father’s trade as a cutler. Other exhibits present the city’s historical evolution from ancient Roman to Catholic town, the Jesuit college that Diderot attended, and various sculpture projects and 19th- and 20th-century documents inspired by Houdon’s bust.

Above all, the 18th century was “curious about the world”. Like other philosophers, Diderot shared in this spirit of enquiry. An original edition of his 1772 *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* is presented alongside scientific instruments, maps, travel books and ethnographic artefacts, illustrating the discovery of new lands and cultures during that period. Philosophers used observations of these faraway places to criticise European social, moral and religious models. These exhibits also demonstrate the relationship between technical progress and the renewal of philosophical ideas: the invention of the sextant and the marine chronometer brought Europeans in contact with previously unknown populations, indirectly spurring new philosophical responses. The museum illustrates the scientific advances of the 18th century with displays – spread across several rooms – of scientific instruments, including a microscope, telescope, armillary sphere, planetary sphere and two graphometers.

After 1728, Diderot pursued his studies in Paris, where he established his main residence until his death in 1784. A section of the museum is devoted to Diderot's university education in Paris, his early work as a translator from English into French, and his philosophical works and novels. His social life is also illustrated, notably his love of theatre, cafés, promenades and salons. The clock that Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin gave Diderot to make his study more comfortable is displayed alongside a first edition of *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre*. In this introspective work, written in 1768 for "those with more taste than fortune", Diderot ponders his relationship to social recognition, wealth and posterity.

18th-century philosophers understood that the progress of ideas was a collective endeavour: European thinkers came together to forge a "Republic of Letters". The circulation of books, newspapers, letters, artefacts and people fostered the creation of a vast network of ideas. These exchanges, and the debates spurred by differences of opinion, led thinkers and scholars to realise that their knowledge was relative. This idea is explored in a room devoted to Diderot's only major voyage: his 1773 and 1774 visit to the Russian Empress Catherine the Great. Diderot's writings on politics and education are presented in this room, including his *Plan d'une université pour le gouvernement*, an educational programme "from the ABC to university" written at the behest of the Russian sovereign in 1775.

Jean-Simon Berthélemy's *Apollon and Sarpedon*, a painting presented at the Salon of 1871, welcomes visitors to the room devoted to Diderot's relationship with the arts. Diderot took part in the aesthetic debates of his time. He attended and discussed the Salons du Louvre from 1759 to 1781, wrote plays and distinguished himself as an art theorist and critic. His aesthetic visions permeate his writings: theatre lay behind his views on painting and sculpture, as well his musical theories, and he used musical terms to describe works of art. This room presents the great artists that Diderot knew and loved, including Joseph Vernet, Jean-Baptiste Deshayes, Pierre-Jacques Volaire, Gabriel-François Doyen, Hugues Taraval, Pierre-Alexandre Wille, Étienne Falconnet.

One of the highlights of the collection is its complete original edition of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (35 volumes including the *Supplément*). The museum seeks to provide a concrete introduction to this major undertaking, which is the "greatest work" of the 18th century in size as in scope, and Diderot's most famous achievement. The *Encyclopédie* is thus the focus of the permanent exhibition, with three rooms. The first room describes the scope of the "encyclopaedic project" and the battles it spurred between its supporters and detractors. The second room explores the "manufacturing of the *Encyclopédie*", i.e. its material production (typography, printing, drawing and engraving, folding and binding, distribution). The third room introduces its contents. The material presented in this last section of the permanent exhibition changes regularly, in order to illustrate the range of subjects covered by the *Encyclopédie*, from intellectual concepts to scientific disciplines and trades. The focus currently is on the 18th-century faience trade in Langres and the local area, as well as on natural history and mathematics.