

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Revisiting Louis Roelandt's Aula Academica: Interior Decoration and Visitor Experience in Early 19th-Century Belgian Architecture

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Since the inauguration of the Aula Academica in Ghent in 1826, its grand proportions and lavish decoration have impressed visitors. An exemplar of tasteful, neoclassical architecture, the university building soon joined the list of Belgium's canonical buildings. The Aula was the first commission of Louis Roelandt (1786–1864), a promising architect who had just returned from training in Paris at the *École spéciale d'architecture* under Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine. Through a detailed analysis of the design process, this article examines how Roelandt's design forms part of an international architectural culture that understood not just the principles of composition but how composition combines with the ways an interior is used. Drawing on the example of a national pantheon commemorating important people, Roelandt created an ensemble in which architectural composition, interior decoration and the visitor's path of movement contribute to the expression of architectural character.

**Keywords:** 19th century; neoclassicism; empire; Louis Roelandt; Belgium

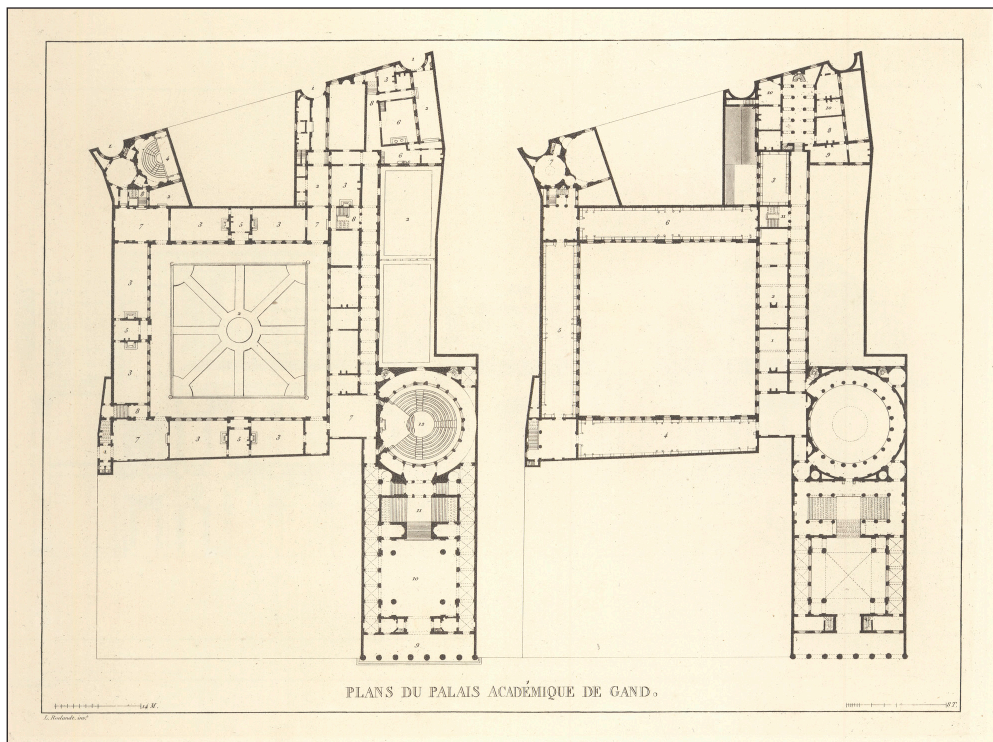
When the Aula Academica, by Louis Roelandt (1786–1864), opened in 1826 in Ghent, it was immediately lauded as an architectural tour de force. In the first visual overview of modern architecture in Belgium, the *Choix des monumens*, Pierre-Jacques Goetghebuer included no fewer than four plates of the recently completed university, whose official name was the Palais académique (1827: plates CXVII–CXX). Roelandt's plan, which Goetghebuer included, shows the irregular building plot provided by the city authorities into which the architect inserted a rational scheme of common geometric shapes along primary and secondary axes, stretching from one side of the city block to the other, set flush with neighbouring buildings (**Figure 1**). The larger section contains auditoriums and laboratories arranged around a square courtyard. The ceremonial space of the university, however, is the narrower elongated section, now known as the Aula Academica, or simply the Aula.

The Aula Academica marks the beginning of the professional career of one of Belgium's most prominent 19th-century architects. After attending the Ghent Academy of Fine Arts from 1802 until 1808, Roelandt studied at the *École spéciale d'architecture* in Paris and in the studio of Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine (Van de Vijver 2000). The young architect returned to

Ghent following the fall of the French empire in 1815. At that time, Ghent was part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a newly established constitutional monarchy led by King William I.

The construction of a national identity for this new kingdom was a particularly pressing issue because of the country's heterogeneous internal structure. The economy of the densely populated Catholic South, an area led by a French-speaking elite, was based on agriculture and industry. The less populated North was Dutch-speaking and religiously diverse, relying mostly on international trade. The primary goal of King William's policies was to forge a stable political, economic, cultural and social union from these diverse groups. Strategies to create a common national identity from multiple perspectives ranged from language politics to industrial sponsorship (De Haan et al. 2014; Aerts and Deneckere 2015). One of the key strategies to homogenize the country was the organization of higher education (Tamse and Witte 1992; Van de Perre and Judo 2015).

In September 1816, the king issued a Royal Decree to establish three universities in the South, providing the region with the same educational layout as the North. The Royal Decree stipulated that the host cities – Liège, Leuven and Ghent – would be responsible for the construction and maintenance of education. In Ghent, which had no existing infrastructure dedicated to this purpose, the city council decided to build an entirely new university complex, the Palais académique. The mayor, Philippe de Lens, a fierce advocate of the new regime, assigned the



**Figure 1:** Ground and first floor plans of the Roelandt's Ghent university buildings, as published by Pierre-Jacques Goetghebuer. The long narrow section of the complex is the Aula Academica (Goetghebuer 1827: plate CVIII).

commission to Roelandt (Dambryne et al. 1992). In 1818, persuaded by the architect's project, the Ghent municipality appointed Roelandt city architect, a position he occupied until 1853. This first university in Ghent was thus not only a turning point in Roelandt's professional career, but it is also a testament to King William's project of nation-building (Tollebeek and Te Velde 2009).

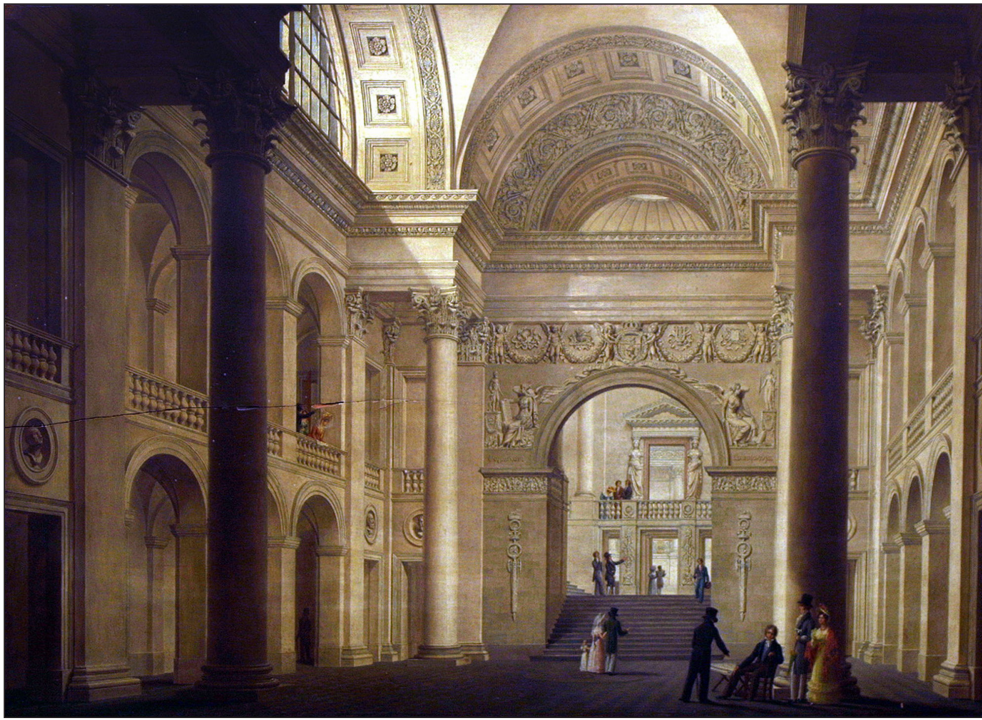
The predominant observation, made by many writers since the building's completion in 1826, is that the Aula, that portion of Roelandt's design that forms the ceremonial centre of the university, is an aesthetic composition in which the scale and decoration together produce an overwhelming effect on the visitor (de Bast 1826; Voisin 1826; Bekaert et al. 2006). The Aula's lavish interior, described by a contemporary, the French bibliophile and historian Auguste Voisin, as a collection of the most sumptuous architectural fragments inherited from antiquity, quickly became famous, both locally and internationally (1826: 153) (Figures 2 and 3). According to the rector of the university, entering the academic hall evoked a near spiritual sensation:

How overcome with wonder one seems to be, as if surrounded by purer air, when – wandering through this vast edifice, touched at every turn by the mark of genius – one casts a religious eye up at the cupola and believes one is drawing breath beneath the dome of heaven. (Author's translation, Raoul 1826: 9)<sup>1</sup>

Recent histories have gone further by recognizing this wing of the complex as one of the most important examples of an influential cultural phenomenon: the education of 'Belgian'-born architects and engineers in Paris during

the period of French control over Belgium (1794–1815). Dirk Van de Vijver, for example, has methodically studied Roelandt's training at the *École spéciale d'architecture* and his stay at the studio of Percier and Fontaine. From a cultural research perspective, Van de Vijver and others have found that designs produced by architects such as Roelandt during the period when the Dutch controlled Belgium (1815–1830) were an intersection of various influences: composition methods practised at the *École spéciale*, a visual idiom that combines both antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, an inclination towards utility, and models derived from contemporary French architecture (Van de Vijver 1998; Van de Vijver 2000; Van De Vijver and De Jonge 2003). The Aula is the product of these compositional strategies and thus perfectly fits the international context of early 19th-century architecture (Lucan 2009; Van Zanten 1977).

In the last five years, however, historians have demonstrated the significance of Percier and Fontaine's interior and decorative designs in the first decades of the 19th century. In addition to composition, *convenance* and distribution along axes, concepts such as visual effect, trajectory and symbolism have been shown to be crucial to understanding architectural design of the period. Iris Moon (2013) argues that Percier and Fontaine's interiors can be understood as the primary site of a post-Vitruvian architectural discourse, where the boundaries between the discipline of architecture and broader cultural practices are renegotiated. Jean-Philippe Garric (2014) points out the crucial role of ornament in both the literary oeuvre and the built interiors of Percier and Fontaine, and Odile Nouvel-Kammerer (2013) analyzes the role of iconography and symbolism in their decorative ensembles.



**Figure 2:** Ange de Baets, *Vue intérieur de l'université de Gand*, oil, 1827. The vestibule of the Aula Academica. Collectie Universiteitsarchief Gent, © UGent, photo Hilde Christiaens, G01\_ABa\_084b.



**Figure 3:** Ange de Baets, *Vue de l'université de Gand, l'émicycle*, oil, 1827. The academic hall of the Aula Academica. Collectie Universiteitsarchief Gent, © UGent, photo Hilde Christiaens, G01\_ABb\_003b.

I intend to reconsider Roelandt's design of the Aula Academica in light of this international architectural culture, in which principles of composition were combined with a sophisticated understanding of the interior. My analysis of Roelandt's design relies heavily on a close reading of the building itself and an examination of the design process through archival sources. These include original design sketches, construction drawings, building specifications and project descriptions, all found in the Ghent

city archives or Roelandt's personal archives, kept in the Ghent university library. Contemporary literature on the Aula exclusively consists of dense descriptions, typical of architectural writing at the beginning of the 19th century (in addition to Goetghebuer 1827, see de Bast 1826; Voisin 1826). Although these descriptions provide meticulous details on iconography, they give nothing away about the underlying symbolism nor about the original design process. The absence of explicit written sources, however, does

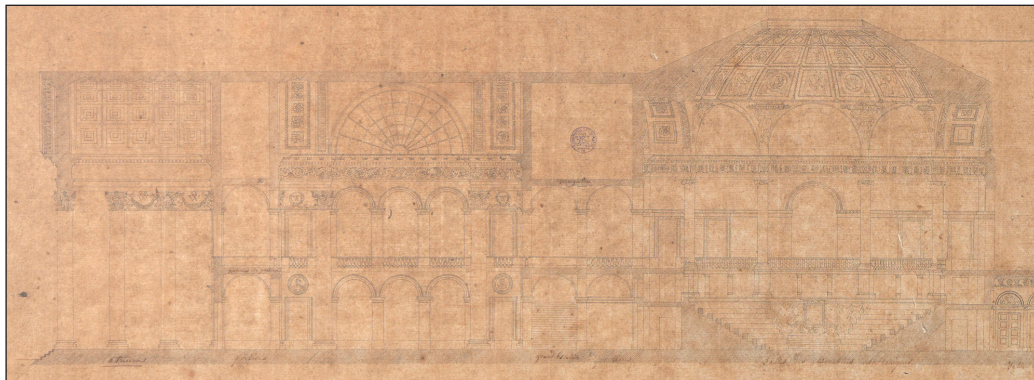
not necessarily indicate the lack of a conceptual design basis. As Nouvel-Kammerer has indicated in relation to Percier and Fontaine's *Recueil des décorations intérieures* (1801–12), the discourse about the symbolic features of interior decoration was often passed over in literature because decorative motifs were assumed to simply follow contemporary trends and thus required no discussion (2013: 42).

Drawing on the idea of a building that functions as a national pantheon, commemorating historical figures of significance to the area, Roelandt shaped the Aula as a symbolic ensemble in which he judiciously employed the techniques acquired during his training at the studio of Percier and Fontaine. The crucial interplay of architectural composition and interior decoration becomes particularly clear in the way the architect dealt with the programme of the university. Both nationalist-historic and academic references were carefully positioned along the visitor's path of movement, creating a dynamic visitor experience on a human scale. Recognizing the Aula interior as a meticulously crafted, symbolic composition allows us to understand the

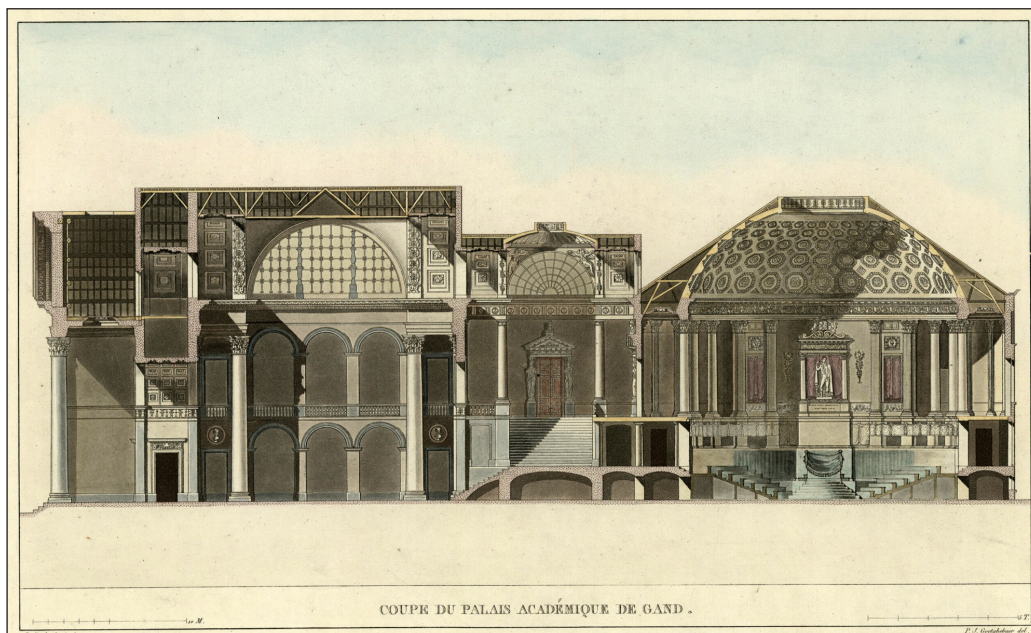
building as an academic institute as well as a catalyst for national identity in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands.

### The Aula: Architectural Composition and Interior Decoration

The Aula is characterized by a focus on decoration rather than the distribution of architectural features, which is evident through a comparison of the architect's proposal with the project as published. Roelandt presented his initial design for the Palais académique complex to the Dutch minister of education, Repelaer Van Driel, in April 1817, eight months after the king had issued the Royal Decree announcing the establishment of the Ghent university. The drawings for this initial design concept, dating to sometime between 1816 and early 1817, have been preserved in the archives at Ghent University (Figure 4). The decoration of the final project as published by Goetghebuer was, in fact, very different from Roelandt's preliminary design, although the architectural framework of the design remained almost identical to its original incarnation (Figure 5).



**Figure 4:** Longitudinal section of the Aula Academica by Louis Roelandt. This drawing was submitted to the national authorities in April 1817. Collection Ghent University, BIB.ARCH.005647.



**Figure 5:** Longitudinal section of the Aula Academica, as published by Pierre-Jaqués Goetghebuer (Goetghebuer 1827: plate CXIX).

The layout of the Aula follows the principles of composition taught at the *École spéciale d'architecture* at the beginning of the 19th century. The plan is derived from both French baroque planning – based on the sequence of *cour d'honneur* and *corps de logis* – and the bi-axially symmetrical Caserta model (see Van Zanten 1977), turned here into a sequence of large halls separated by modest spaces of transition (see the plan in **Figure 1**).

The composition, in both the plan Roelandt submitted and the final one, begins with a strong central axis that moves through a grand Corinthian portico composed of eight colossal columns and leads to the two-storey covered vestibule (**Figure 6**). Framed by four freestanding Corinthian columns bearing a groin vault and lit by two Diocletian windows, the vestibule is a combination of Roman bathhouse and Greek stoa, according to the architect (Roelandt 1817). From the vestibule, a broad staircase lined with arcades leads first to a landing that opens onto the circular academic hall, with the same two-storey height of the vestibule. The hall itself is a grandiose chamber surrounded by eight massive Ionic columns. By means of arches and pendentives, these columns support a coffered cupola with a central oculus. The general layout of the Aula project was thus defined by a orderly temple portico, followed by an impressive vestibule leading towards a grand academic hall.

Having the plan approved allowed the architect to focus his attention on the interior. The initial layout did not change after it was accepted by the minister of education, but the plans for decoration did. Roelandt designed the Aula's lavish interior and its complex decorative schemes

in accordance with the concept of *caractère* (character). One of the most dominant concepts in 18th-century architecture, *caractère* has been thoroughly studied both on a theoretical level (Madrazo 1995; Szambien 1986b) and in relation to architectural design (Egbert 1980; Etlin 1996). Though the concept appears in the writings of Blondel, Boffrand, Le Camus de Mezières and Boullée, Quatremère de Quincy made *caractère* the cornerstone of his theory of imitation (See Di Palma 2002; Lavin 1992). According to Quatremère, *caractère* reveals the relationship between essential meaning and visual appearance. By using material form, and taking into account the harmony of its constitutive parts, the architect was capable of rendering sensible the 'intellectual qualities and moral ideas' of building projects and expressing a building's nature – its use or purpose (De Quincy 1787: 502; Di Palma 2002: 52). Much of the Aula's nature was conveyed by architectural means: its scale expressed cultural value, the monumental orders matched its elite status as a public building and the galleries and colonnades emphasized its scientific purpose. However, when looking closely at Quatremère's theory of *caractère*, interior design also plays an essential role in expressing the meaning of a building. According to the French theorist, a judicious use of decoration was one of the most effective and sophisticated means of expressing *caractère* (De Quincy 1787: 515) – a strategy Roelandt enthusiastically applied in his work, though he never explicitly acknowledged it.

The decorative scheme of the Aula relied heavily on the 18th-century concept of the public pantheon – a series of great men of *exemplum virtutis* that inspired national pride



**Figure 6:** Vestibule of the Aula, 2018. Photo by Thibault Florin.

(Colton 1979: 4). Public pantheons took many forms – from burial places and mausoleums, such as the Panthéon in Paris or London's Westminster Abbey, to literary texts and sculptural ensembles – and played a prominent role in constructing national identity all across revolutionary Europe (see Wrigley and Craske 2004). At the beginning of the 18th century, the canon of exemplary men was composed mainly of military or political men but, over the course of the century, began to include intellectual heroes (Colton 1979: 1–12, 203–24). In the first decades of the 19th century, this cult of the intellectual hero began to fuse with emerging nationalism. Projects such as the busts of Italian artists and scientists inside the Roman Pantheon, by Antonia Canova (1808) and the Walhalla in Regensburg (1842), containing busts by many different German sculptors, commemorate a series of exemplary men from the cultural and scientific realms to create a national history (see Bouwers 2012).

In his preliminary design, Roelandt intentionally separated the two main themes of the pantheon programme – national legitimation and commemorating cultural or scientific merit – by expressing them in different parts of the design (**Figure 4**). An inscription on the frieze of the peristyle of the portico, referencing the one on the Pantheon in Rome, declares King William I as the royal patron of the building. The king's monogram features abundantly on the peristyle and the vestibule, and Roelandt proposed decorating these rooms with the heraldic symbols of the city and the kingdom. This nationalist characterization of the peristyle and vestibule disappears completely, however, in the concept for the academic hall, which was devoted entirely to the building's academic function. Drawing on classical mythology, in which the gods and goddesses of the Roman tradition represent academic disciplines, Roelandt added an

elaborate decorative programme to its cupola. Winged goddesses of fame appear on the pendentives, and the coffering of the dome features bas-reliefs of various Roman gods and their attributes, such as Minerva's owl, Apollo's lyre and Aesculapius' snake. This collection of Roman gods, which recalls the Pantheon in Rome, expresses the dignified, intellectual purpose of the building. Roelandt's initial decorative programme thus split the building in half, with the modest staircase as a neutral point of transition. However, the decorative programme had not yet been finalized and, in his discussion of the drawing, the architect emphasized the importance of the client's input in determining the final decoration (Roelandt 1817).

The subsequent alteration of the design shows that the authorities recognized the political significance of the Aula's interior and directly influenced its conceptual characterization. The final design retained several of the inscriptions, monograms, heraldic symbols and sculptures from preliminary drawings but integrated them into a coherent ensemble of nationalist-historic decoration. This decorative ensemble characterized the entire interior and culminated in the academic hall. In the vestibule, the series of busts in circular niches functioned as a small-scale national pantheon (**Figure 6**). Representing 'Belgian princes who have favoured literary and scientific culture, from the time of Charlemagne to the present' (de Bast 1826: 36–37), the busts together convey the legitimacy of William I as the successor to a long and celebrated tradition of royal patronage. The academic hall, meanwhile, was entirely stripped of its mythological decoration. Instead, the circular colonnade was interrupted by a royal podium surmounted by the coat of arms of the kingdom (**Figure 7**). Flanked by the heraldic symbols of the city and the university, the podium was intended to feature a (never executed) statue of King William I.



**Figure 7:** Academic hall of the Aula, 2018. Note the royal podium, the bas-reliefs and the balcony railings. Photo by Thibault Florin.

Flanking the royal podium were 12 bas-relief profiles of famous Dutch and 'Belgian' scientists, constituting a second gallery of great men. The collection of figures spanned the period from the Habsburg Netherlands to the French reign, from the 15th to the 18th century, evoking an image of a continuous intellectual culture shared by both the Northern and the Southern Netherlands regardless of the separation of 1581. This nationalist-historic claim was further supported by the only other decorative element in the room: a balcony railing depicting the coat of arms of the States General of the Seventeen Provinces. The Seventeen Provinces is the denomination of Habsburg Netherlands between 1543 and 1585, during which the Northern and the Southern Netherlands were unified. Reference to this golden age was of great significance to the historic conceptualization of the Ghent university. When the city nominated itself for the establishment of a university, they emphasized the city's historic ties with the House of Orange-Nassau, evidenced by the pacification of Ghent in 1576 and the existence of a Calvinistic university at the time (Mantels 2013).

The decorative ensemble thus clearly situates the university and its royal patron in a very specific historic era of national and intellectual harmony. The city's academicians who would attend the university, who would be literally embraced by the balcony railing, were thus understood to be successors to their historic counterparts on the bas-reliefs, and their assembly in the new academic hall of the Aula signalled the revival of the golden age of the Seventeen Provinces. Seen against the political background of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Aula's decoration must thus be understood as an instrument in the construction of national identity. By publicly demonstrating the 'common' intellectual culture of the Netherlands, the pursuit of knowledge in science and culture was employed to unite the 'divided kingdom'. At the same time, the decorative scheme legitimized the new political regime by depicting William I as a generous king granting his people the privilege of intellectual self-development. Instead of relying on classical mythology, the decoration employed to convey this nationalist, political message was entirely composed of historical references.

The nationalist-historic perspective was interwoven with other elements that helped characterize the building as an academic institution. This is especially apparent on the Aula's staircase. Instead of a neutral point of transition between two different realms, as it had been in the initial design, the staircase now fulfils a mediating function. In the initial design drawing, an arch separating the vestibule from the staircase features round bas-reliefs with symbols of the four faculties – literature, law, medicine and science – interspersed with putti holding garlands (Figure 2). Further allegorical representations of the faculties flank the arch, which was surmounted by the university's coat of arms and motto. Although not executed, this group of reliefs would have clearly elucidated the ambition of the building to any visitor entering its gate. As executed, however, the metopes of the Doric frieze on the walls of the stairwell were replaced by a sequence of circular medallions depicting a wide range of scholars along with the

symbols of their profession (see Figure 13). The exhaustive collection of 37 *grands hommes* consisted of both ancient figures (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero) as well as modern Dutch, French, British and German scientists (Copernicus, Huyghens, Bacon, Descartes, Leibnitz, Newton, and so on). Unlike the series of busts in the academic hall, the medallions on the frieze are not intended to sustain a nationalist ideology. Instead, the international and historically comprehensive pantheon of scholars simply expressed the many facets of the pursuit of knowledge and the ambition of the university to inscribe itself into international academia.

Published descriptions of the Aula indicate that a learned audience would have been expected to understand that the iconographic references throughout the Aula elucidated a nationalist-historic claim. In 1826, the year of the Aula's inauguration, a description of the building was published by the philologist Amandus de Bast, as part of a pamphlet eulogizing King William I. The author provides detailed information on the iconography and concludes that the Aula – referred to as one of the most beautiful academic buildings in Europe – was also 'royal', emphasising both the academic and nationalist themes discussed above (1826: 44). In his *Choix des monumens* the following year, Goetghebuer concluded that the building honoured both the king – referred to as 'Prince protector of the Arts' – and the Ghent municipality (Goetghebuer 1827: 81).

As this preliminary reading of the Aula's iconography shows, architectural decoration was a crucial tool to express character in a reciprocal relationship with architectural composition. A visitor strolling through the Aula passed three different galleries of great men. In each, these different compositions of busts, medallions and bas-reliefs conveyed the layered pantheon programme to the visitor. Unlike the nationalist-historic narrative which unfolds throughout the entire interior and culminates in the academic hall, the academic theme was only introduced on the staircase, and so the staircase fulfils a crucial role in the visitor's experience, mediating the nationalist-historic theme with the academic theme.

### The Decorative Scheme of the Aula's Staircase: Towards the Light of Knowledge

Apart from its own academic gallery of great men, the staircase also featured an abundance of architectural ornament such as Phemes, caryatides, busts of Roman gods, medallions, candelabra, lightning bolts, griffins and signs of the zodiac (Figure 8). Roelandt had even planned (but did not execute) a floor mosaic on the landing of the staircase depicting Medusa's head surrounded by snakes. This specific ensemble of mythological references did not unfold throughout the Aula's interior but was strictly confined to the staircase. Upon closer inspection, it appears that Roelandt's mythological decoration of the Aula's staircase was based on a specific corpus of decorative motifs borrowed from Percier and Fontaine's influential publication, the *Recueil des décorations intérieures* (1801–12). The Minerva bust over the entrance to the academic hall, mounted on an extraordinary



**Figure 8:** The ceiling of the Aula staircase, 2018. The paintings on the walls were realized later, between 1858 and 1881. Photo by Thibault Florin.

pediment, for example, recalls their design of a temple of Diana in a private bedroom. The signs of the zodiac on the vault of the Aula staircase also appear in their designs for Isabey's painting studio and on the ceiling of the Salle des Gardes of the Tuileries Palace. Candelabra are omnipresent throughout the *Recueil*, as is the motif of the sphinx, whereas fulmen appear on the ceiling decoration of the Musée Napoleon (Percier and Fontaine 1812: plates 3, 23, 25, 26, 32, 45, 67, 69). However, many recurrent motifs of the *Recueil* – such as swans, eagles, vases, hermae, winged horses, torches, draperies and tents, lutes, cornucopia, weaponry, chimera and Egyptian motifs – are completely absent from the Aula. Roelandt thus carefully selected mythological motifs from the *Recueil* and reconfigured them into a new arrangement, indicating a use of mythological decoration which was far from generic.

In contrast to the allegorical private interiors presented in the *Recueil*, Roelandt's Aula staircase does not express a new social order (Moon 2013) but instead evokes a process of initiation, symbolizing the academic function of the building. Antecedents to Roelandt's design strategy can certainly be found in the milieu of the *École spéciale* in Paris. The essential role attributed to the visitor's path of movement recalls Percier and Fontaine's entry for the *Concours de l'an II* of 1794. In their *Monument des défenseurs*, from the same year, visitors are forced to walk up several ramps and contemplate the entire inscribed surface of the pyramid before being granted access to the temple at the top (Moon 2013: 139; Szambien 1986a: 82–83). In a larger context, the fusion of movement and symbolic meaning also fit the academic architectural discourse. The Temples of Virtue and Honour in Rome, which Quatremère de Quincy considered the most formidable examples of allegories from antiquity, were built, like the Aula, in such a manner that a visitor was obliged to pass

through the Temple of Virtue to arrive at that of Honour (De Quincy 1787: 32; Also see Younés 1999: 61).

Based on a study of Percier and Fontaine's domestic interiors, Nouvel-Kammerer, a decorative arts historian, recently re-examined their use of architectural ornament, suggesting that the 'empire style' was a system of easily understood associations between the decoration and the surface or object it was applied to. Individual decorative elements functioned as signals which collectively formed a logical code, communicating the use or meaning of the object or building. Crucial to Percier and Fontaine's decorative code was the mythology of the Roman Olympian gods. Depictions of the gods, as well as their attributes and symbolic implications, were easily recognized and understood by the learned public. Throughout the *Recueil*, combative gods such as Jupiter, Mars and Minerva were linked to places associated with the official regime, whereas others, such as Apollo, Hebe and Venus, were found in private apartments and on (bedroom) furniture (Nouvel-Kammerer 2013: 39–41). Gods often appeared in pairs, expressing opposite abstract concepts: 'On the ceiling, to the side of the windows, Apollo, the symbol of day, can be seen and, at the side of the bed, Diana, the symbol of night' (Percier and Fontaine 1812: 21).<sup>2</sup>

The decorative scheme on the Aula's staircase follows the same logic of Percier and Fontaine's compositions, albeit on the scale of a public building (Figures 9 and 10). On the landing of the staircase, between the public entrance to the academic hall, large bas-reliefs of candelabras were executed, a motif that also appears on the ceiling, where Roelandt copied the frieze of the Temple of Antonius and Faustina, from the Roman forum, depicting candelabras flanked by griffons. Both the candelabra, used by the Romans to illuminate their temples, and the griffon, symbol of the god Apollo, refer explicitly to the





**Figure 9:** Decoration of the Aula staircase as executed. View of the entrance to the academic hall with the chandeliers and caryatides. Photo by Thibault Florin.

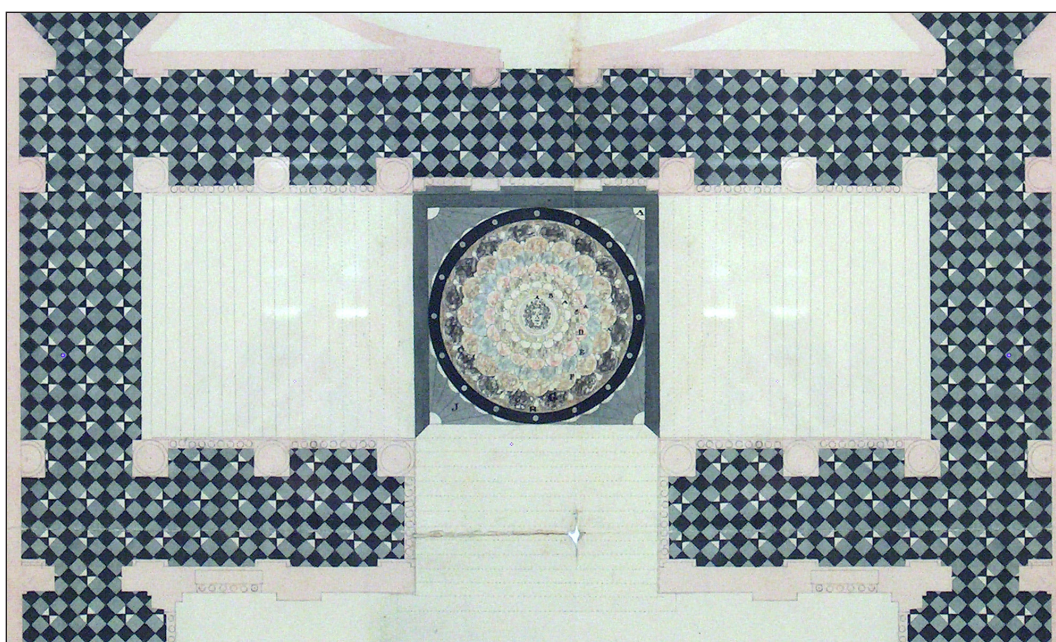
concept of light (De Quincy 1787: 450–53; De Quincy 1801–20: 491–92). The signs of the zodiac, on the inner ring of the staircase's cupola, also refer to the sky, as do the fulmen – representations of lightning bolts – on the horizontal geison of the Doric order. Within the context of a university building, these references to light on the Aula's staircase were understood as an allegory of wisdom. To the students of the university, the staircase symbolised their ongoing transformation from laymen to experts, a journey towards the light of knowledge.

In the midst of this decorative allegory in the staircase, another symbolic scene was staged. The main components of this composition are the bust of Minerva, surmounting the pediment of the entrance gate to the academic hall,

and the (unrealised) Medusa mosaic on the landing of the staircase (**Figure 11**). A visitor climbing the stairs would first tread on Medusa's head on the landing, before passing beneath Minerva upon entering the hall. In classical mythology, Minerva and Medusa were rivals, the former representing knowledge and the latter threatening it. Functioning just like Percier and Fontaine's divine couples, Minerva and Medusa express two opposing notions. Visitors to the academic hall would literally trample on Medusa, and therefore symbolically conquer the threat to wisdom, in order to be granted access to the hall by the goddess of knowledge. To the students, this mythological staging was reminiscent of the difficult obstacles on the path to wisdom. To emphasize the symbolism, the Minerva



**Figure 10:** Details of the Minerva bust and the frieze copied from the temple of Antonius and Faustina. Photo by Thibault Florin.



**Figure 11:** Detail of a design for an (unexecuted) floor mosaic for the landing of the staircase of the Aula Academica by Louis Roelandt. A mosaic depicting Medusa is at the centre of circular, decorative motifs. The staircase is located between the vestibule (bottom) and the academic hall (top). Ghent City Archives, F205. Photo by the author.

bust explicitly depicts the goddess as Medusa's conqueror, featuring the Gorgon's cut-off head on her armour.

The allegory on the Aula staircase cannot, therefore, be understood as a static arrangement of generic decoration. As opposed to traditional, allegorical paintings that often float high above a visitor's head, the staircase transforms allegory into a dynamic experience on the human scale. In so doing, Roelandt used features of Percier and Fontaine's design practice to characterize the academic function of the building. Unlike the nationalist-historic characterization, the academic characterization relies thus not only on its exclusive location in the interior, but also on a dramatic visitor experience. Comparable to the private interiors of the *Recueil*, the Aula's staircase triggers a process by which a visitor identifies with the Roman pantheon and the ideas they symbolize by first accepting the *mise en scène* and the physical closeness to the gods. Roelandt integrated these decorative strategies for his public architecture

along the visitor's path of movement. Movement is a crucial requirement for the allegory's interactivity. It is only by approaching and mounting the staircase that the *mise en scène* reveals its full potential. The emphasis on movement directly relates to the process of academic initiation – transforming those who enter through the portico knowing nothing into those who partake of the legacy of knowledge.

### The Orders: Archaeological Models and Free Style Compositions

The interplay between the architectural composition and the nationalist-historic and academic decoration constitute the iconographical structure of the Aula's interior. Following the logic of the symbolic allegory on the staircase, the vestibule becomes the world of the general public, the laymen, whereas the academic hall is the terrain of the initiated, the experts. This dichotomy, already apparent in the

earliest designs, was expressed by architectural elements. The vestibule, surmounted by the naked vault and colossal Corinthian columns, not only evoked a Roman bathhouse, it also functioned as one: a semi-public gathering space where sophisticated men could spend time, discussing and exchanging ideas. The academic hall, on the other hand, was treated as an almost sacred space, reserved for the few. Alluding to the mysticism of religious architecture, its focus is entirely on the natural light flowing in through the lantern. This twofold conceptual structure was complemented by the continuous trail of nationalist-historic decoration throughout the interior, climaxing in the academic hall.

The complex merging of themes was further framed by a specific décor of architectural orders. At the beginning of the 19th century, the orders were still essential tools to convey the desired character of a building, no longer as parts integrated with the whole, but by the manipulation of their individual parts (Pelletier 2006). To this extent, Le Camus de Mezières, for instance, emphasized the importance of the cornice (Le Camus de Mezières, and Middleton 1992: 90), whereas Quatremère de Quincy attributed a similar importance to the entablature (De Quincy 1801–20: 339). This design technique – a playfulness with the classical orders – was used to a great extent in the Aula.

Apart from the staircase, the Aula is composed entirely of Corinthian orders. Throughout the entire project, the capitals appear the same, while their entablature constantly deviates from the classic example of the dentil-supported cornice. The modest entablature running around the vestibule, for example, differs strikingly from the decorated one in the academic hall (Figure 12). Roelandt's personal interpretation of the Corinthian entablature clearly

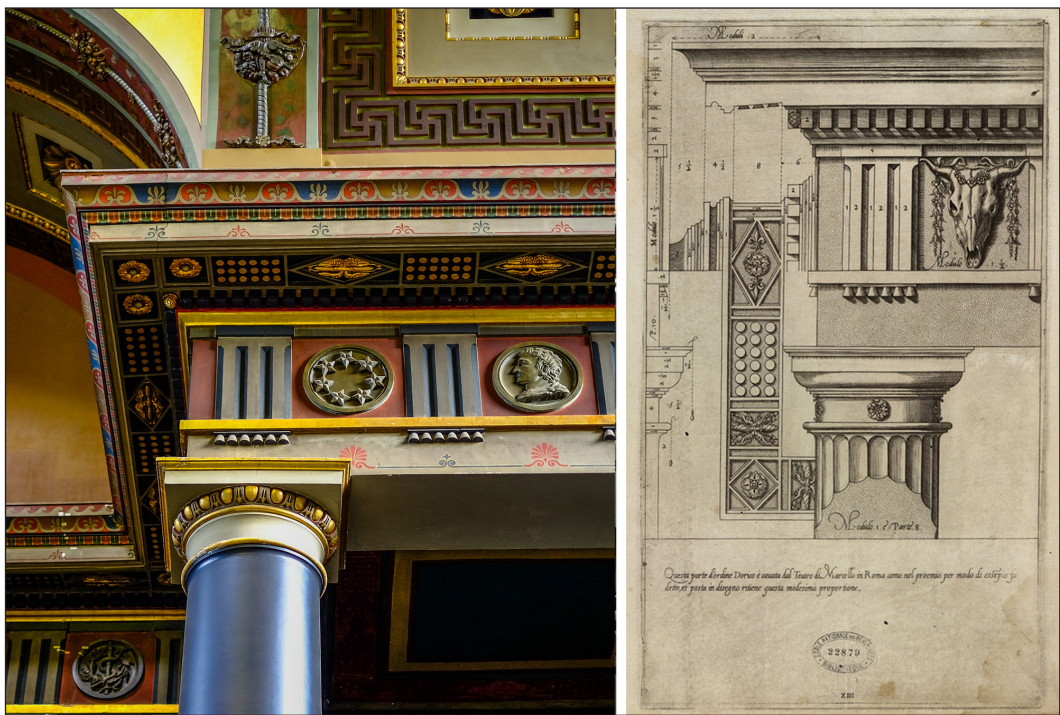
follows the post-Vitruvian aesthetic attitude of Percier and Fontaine, who propagated a design practice based on personal taste and free association (Garric 2014).

Contrary to the playful renditions of the Corinthian order in the vestibule and academic hall, the Doric order on the staircase displays all characteristics of the Theatre of Marcellus, a principle example of the Roman Doric order (Figure 13). A similar adaptation of esteemed classical examples occurs on the façade of the building. Although supported by the same columns as the vestibule, the façade's Corinthian order is entirely modelled after that of the Roman Pantheon (Figure 14). Auguste Voisin, who noted the resemblance to the Pantheon, also commented that the capitals of the columns were modelled after those of the temple of Antonius and Faustina (Voisin 1826: 149), a claim which is supported by the contour of the capital's middle volutes.

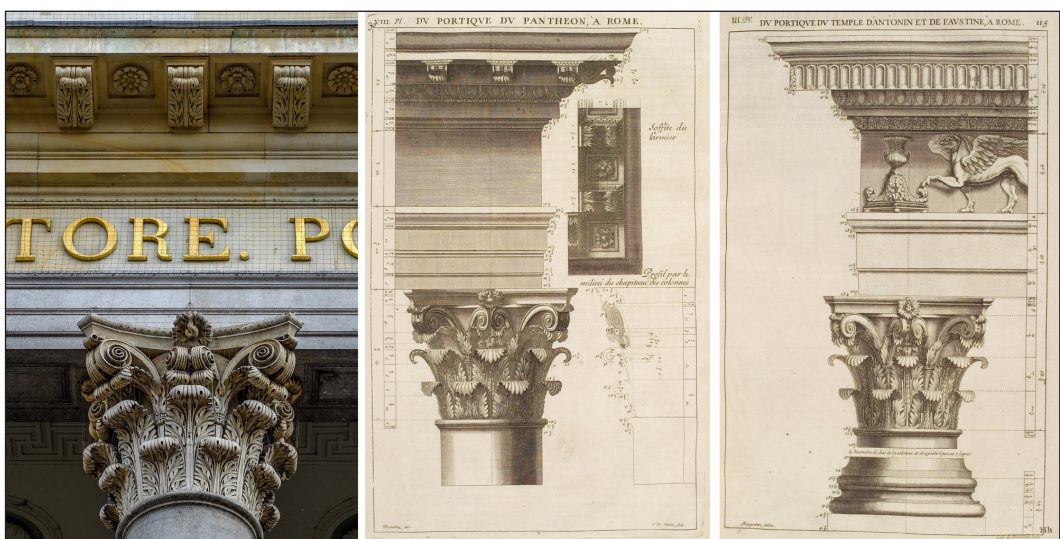
In essence, then, the parts of the Aula complex that are solely associated with the nationalist theme, such as the vestibule and academic hall, feature the architect's own interpretations of the Corinthian order, whereas the parts where the nationalist theme is fused with the academic, such as the façade and the staircase, feature architectural orders based on a Roman precedent. The visual character of the architectural orders thus sustains the semantic structure of the design. The richness of the eccentric Corinthian orders emphasized the grandeur of the project, providing the new kingdom with a dynamic and contemporary architectural style. The classical Corinthian on the façade and the Doric on the staircase, respectively based on the Pantheon and the theatre of Marcellus, on the other hand, gave expression to the academic theme.



**Figure 12:** Comparison of the Corinthian entablature of the vestibule with that of the academic hall. The entablature of the vestibule features an egg-and-dart moulding above an undecorated frieze and is not topped by dentils, but features glyphs interrupted by palmettes instead. Its upper edge is a continuous Vitruvian scroll (or poste), a popular Renaissance motif. The entablature in the academic hall features a frieze richly decorated with *rinceaux* and blocked dentils and is topped with a continuous scroll of foliage. Photo by Thibault Florin.



**Figure 13:** Comparison of the Doric entablature of the Aula staircase with Desgodetz's rendition of the order of the Theatre of Marcellus. Doric columns – with astragal, echinus and abacus – are surmounted by a plain architrave and a frieze composed of triglyphs, guttae and metopes. In the cornice, the geison, supported by a continuous row of denticules, is shaped as a repetitive sequence of 18 guttae and fulmen inside diamonds. The sequence is only interrupted at the corners, to display rosettes inside squares. Photo by Thibault Florin; sketch from Desgodetz (1682: XIII).



**Figure 14:** Comparison of the Aula façade and Desgodetz's rendition of the Corinthian orders of the Pantheon and the temple of Antonius and Faustina. The entablature of the Aula façade consists of a blind architrave and frieze surmounted by a cornice without dentils and features modillions shaped as acanthus leaves interspersed with rosettes. The soffit of the architrave is decorated with modest rectangular motifs and its base features a trifold sequence of diminishing toruses and scotia. Both motifs are taken from the Roman Pantheon. Photo by Thibault Florin; sketch from Desgodetz (1682: III, VIII).

The classical aesthetics of these orders, combined with the mythological decoration previously discussed, made a powerful statement about the academic ambitions of the Aula. The architectural orders were thus an extremely versatile tool to express the interior's complex set of characters. Indeed, Roelandt's use of the Corinthian order

throws light on the conceptual scheme of the entire project. Whereas the Corinthian archetype on the façade directly associates the building with the most acclaimed classical pantheon, the Corinthian variants on the inside reflect the assimilation of the pantheon concept to a contemporary institute.

This flexible interplay of decoration, character and orders is also the key to understanding the caryatides. Flanking the main entrance to the academic hall on the staircase and supporting the Minerva bust, the caryatides appear as one of the most iconic elements of the interior. Their tied dresses, fixed gaze and lack of arms make reference to Percier and Fontaine's caryatides at the Salle des maréchaux at the Tuileries Palace. However, Roelandt's use of the caryatides cannot be compared with the symbolically overdetermined French example. Percier and Fontaine deliberately modelled their caryatides after Jean Goujon's caryatides of the Louvre, as part of a nationalist strategy to associate Napoleon's reign with that of Henri II (Frommel 2014). In the Ghent Aula, they do not actually carry any such symbolic meaning.

Instead, the Aula caryatides must be understood as the columns of an extravagant architectural order. The design process actually shows that Roelandt had originally opted for Ionic columns rather than caryatides, the safe middle ground between Doric and Corinthian. As orders, the caryatides claim a dual position in the complex interplay of architectural character. By referring to the classical example of the Erechtheion and, at the same time, following Percier and Fontaine's aesthetics, the caryatides embody both the classical character of the staircase and the contemporary character of the vestibule and the academic hall. Because of its specific size, the order also mediates the monumental scale of the building and the visitor's human scale, enforcing the spatial experience of the staircase allegory. The Aula caryatides operate at the intersection of tectonics and representation. As such, they demonstrate how architectural form and decoration closely work together in the Aula.

### Spectators in Motion

From the moment of its inauguration in 1826, visitors to the Aula Academica commented on its mesmerizing effect. In the *Choix des monumens*, Goetsghebuer mentions a 'sensation' when admiring the rich interior of the building (1827: 81). In a speech given at the inauguration of the building, the resigning university rector, Jacob-Lodewijk Kesteloot, stated that all words fell short of describing such a grandiose place. One look at the interior, however, sufficed to 'awaken the divine in a visitor' and to 'arouse a feeling of the sublime' (Kesteloot 1826: 9–10). Over the years, the building did not lose its enchanting power. In a biographical essay on Roelandt written in 1868, Gustave De Man described the strong effect of the Aula staircase on visitors: 'The whole of this harmonious ensemble bears the hand of the master: it produces a startling effect, prompting a reverence worthy of the scientific sanctuary one is about to enter' (1868: 7).<sup>3</sup>

This intense visitor experience was partly the result of Roelandt's careful design process that combined architectural composition with decoration and iconography. However, it is only by considering the integration of these strategies along a central path of movement that the full potential of the decorative scheme is revealed. To a visitor moving through the interior, abstract notions were transformed into intense visitor experiences. Climbing the

staircase towards the academic hall symbolized the transformation of laymen into intellectual experts by means of a sensational reconfiguration of Empire ornament. Entering the academic hall was framed as the culmination of a nationalist-historic discourse legitimizing the new political regime. Such decorative ensembles were accentuated by a carefully crafted décor of architectural orders. In the fragile political climate of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, the interiors of public building projects were conceived as national pantheons. When designing public interiors, key architects such as Roelandt — and Suys after him — employed design techniques learned during their training in the studio of Percier and Fontaine. By combining sophisticated architectural composition and decoration with a keen understanding of spatial narrative, these architects shaped national pantheons as compelling visitor experiences.

The Ghent Aula's role as a pantheon of intellectual history upholding the nationalist aspirations of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was short-lived, however. Only four years after the solemn inauguration of the building, the Belgian revolution resulted in the separation of the southern provinces from the kingdom. Despite the political rupture, the building did retain its academic function and continued to serve as a symbolic place of unity. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the Aula was claimed by political or socio-cultural movements (see Tollebeek and Te Velde 2009: 35–43). As a site of the memory of a unified Dutch past, the building hosted a series of Orangist congresses and formed the backdrop for the debate on the Dutchification of Ghent University. At the same time, the building was inscribed with a new nationalist and patriotic discourse and was chosen as emblem of the university, emphasizing its scientific character. As a result of this complex interplay of interests, the Aula's iconography was continuously altered. The dedication to William I on the façade was deleted and reinstalled, historical and mythological statues were removed, replaced or added, murals were painted and memorial plaques for fallen soldiers installed. After two centuries, the Aula has become a palimpsest of successive interventions, but its iconography still revolves around the main themes of the pantheon programme whose intimate interplay was captured so intensely by Roelandt's design.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Comme d'étonnement on s'arrête frappé, comme d'un air plus pur on semble enveloppé, lorsque, portant ses pas sous cette vaste enceinte, où partout le génie a laissé son empreinte, levant, vers la coupole, un œil religieux, on croit y respirer sous le dôme des cieux'. Translations are mine when the original text appears in the notes.
- <sup>2</sup> 'On voit sur le plafond, du côté des fenêtres, Apollon, symbole du jour, et du côté du lit, Diane, symbole de la nuit'.
- <sup>3</sup> '... tout cet ensemble harmonieux est traité de main de maître; produit un effet saisissant et inspire un recueillement digne du sanctuaire de la science où l'on va pénétrer'.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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