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CHAPTER 3

**SCENOGRAPHY**



Fig. 1. The Swedish knight Branting in Gustaf Wasa. Watercolour pencil drawing by L. J. Desprez. NM.

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# LOUIS JEAN DESPREZ

## An introduction

*Barbro Stribolt*

The pre-romantic period, which to begin with is something of a gallant *plaisanterie*, a play on exotic names and historical accessories, a masquerade in suggestive costumes adorning the emotions, develops eventually into an intense experience of mood and colour in alien surroundings, no matter how playfully the architectural themes may seem to have been gathered from a variety of periods and countries. (G. M. Bergman)

IN SWEDEN THIS process of development achieved its supreme expression in the stage designs produced by Louis Jean Desprez for Gustaf III. For the king's patriotic dramas on themes from the exploits of his own subjects, Desprez created magnificent stage settings which in many ways also presaged the romantic historicism of the 19th century. The monarch—author and producer in one—and Desprez inspired and complemented one another in their artistic achievement. For example, the stage design for the opera *Gustaf Wasa*, their greatest joint success, was entirely the work of the king, while Desprez took charge of the decorations.

Gustaf III's utterance: "*Nous ne sommes en Suède que deux à avoir de la fantaisie: Desprez et moi*", shows that he regarded the Frenchman as his equal in terms of imagination and scenic creativity.

Gustaf III had come into contact with Desprez during his Italian journey in 1784 and had engaged him to take charge of the scenery workshops of the Swedish opera, initially for a period of two years. At



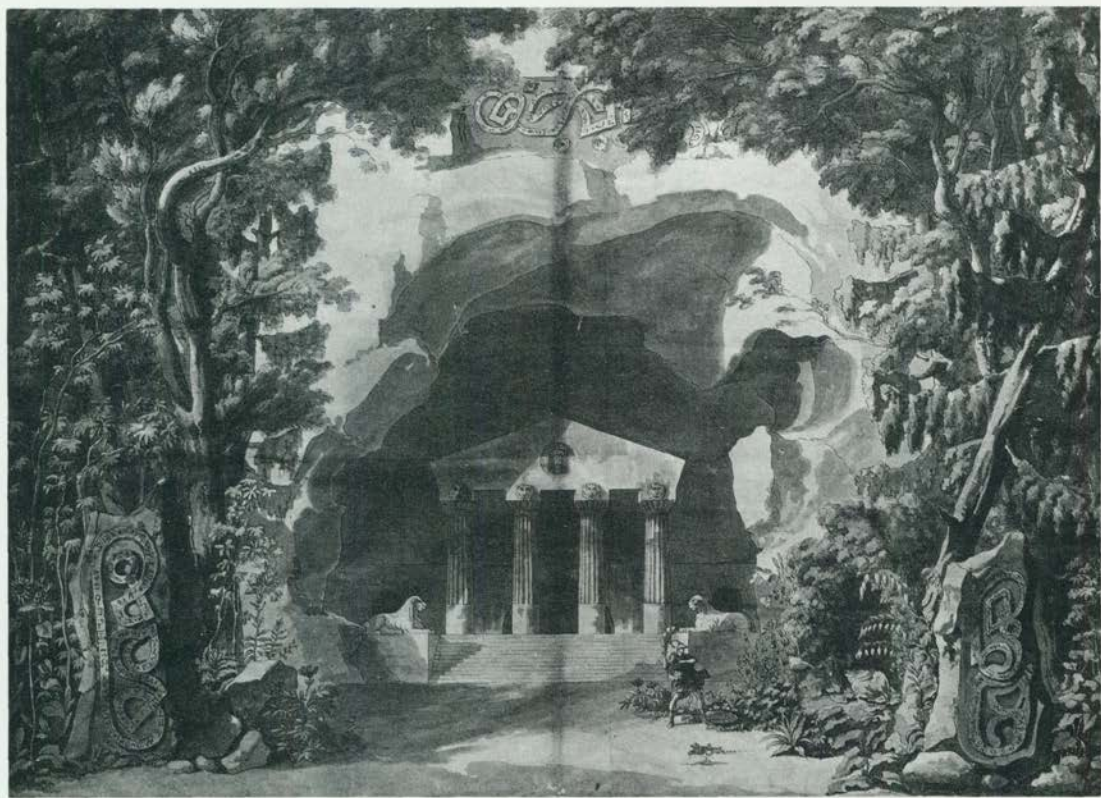


Fig. 2. Stage design for *Elektra*, tragic opera in three acts by J. C. F. Hæffner, libretto by N. F. Guillard. First performance at Drottningholm in 1787. Watercolour drawing by L. J. Desprez. DTM.

that time Desprez had been in Rome for several years. He was supposed to be continuing his architectural studies there, but he had neglected them for other occupations. In Italy he had been engaged as a draughtsman and graphic artist, and he had painted decorations for the masterly Teatro Aliberti in Rome.

Immediately on his arrival in Sweden there ensued a flurry of activity. The first production, at the Gripsholm Theatre in 1785, was *Drottning Christina* (see the colour supplement), an historical drama by Gustaf III set in 17th century Sweden. The triumphal success of *Gustaf Wasa* the preceding year encouraged the king to place new orders (Fig. 2), and when the two-year contract expired it was replaced with a new one lasting until 1798.

During the king's lifetime, Desprez could be confident of his future in Sweden, but things changed drastically after the death of Gustaf III in 1792. Desprez was obstructed and his favoured position under-



*Fig. 3. Scenery sketch for Frigga, lyrical drama in one act by O. Åhlström, libretto by C. G. af Leopold after a drame by Gustaf III. First performed at the Royal Opera in 1787. The sacred grove surrounding the temple of Frigga in old Uppsala. Watercolour drawing, composition by L. J. Desprez, possibly studio work. DTM.*

mined. When the contract finally expired, Desprez was not even in a position to return to France any more, and he died destitute in Stockholm in 1804.

During his productive period in the 1780s, and in addition to other activities—he was appointed “First Architect to the King” in 1788—Desprez made about ten new stage productions for the royal court theatres. He also produced standard decorations such as urban scenes, gardens and palace apartment.

Desprez’ work for the theatre is mainly known to posterity through surviving sketches, some of which are from his own hand while others are studio copies (Fig. 3) done by such pupils as Per Estenberg (1772–1848) and Carl Johan Hjelm (1771–1827). But, happily, stage decorations painted in distemper on canvas, in the form of backcloths





*Fig. 4. Detail from the surviving backcloth for Act I of Queen Christina, heroic verse drama in four acts, with singing and dances, to a plan by Gustaf III, libretto by J. H. Kellgren, music by C. F. Müller and P. J. Lambert. First performed at Gripsholm in 1785 by the royal court, in 1787 by the Royal Opera and the Royal Dramatic Theatre Company at Drottningholm. Distemper on fabric by L. J. Desprez. Gripsholm Theatre. Photo Beata Bergström.*

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and flats, have also survived, so that we too can study the bold virtuosity and the unhesitating fluency of line so typical of his decorative work (Fig. 4).

(Translation: Roger Tanner)

#### NOTE

*Desprez, Louis Jean, b. May 1743 at Auxerre, department of the Yonne, France, d. March 19, 1804 in Stockholm. Parents: Louis Mathieu Desprez, alderman of the wigmakers' guild, and Parette Bourbon. Pupil at L'Académie Royale d'Architecture, Paris, in the early 1760s; taught drawing at L'Ecole Militaire until 1776; received a royal grant to study in Italy, 1777-82; head of the scenery department of the Royal Opera in Stockholm, with a contract dated April 28, 1784, in the autumn of which year he arrived in Stockholm; member of the French Academy of Art 1785; was given a new contract on September 10, 1786, valid until 1798; on May 11, 1788 Gustaf III appointed him his chief architect; in 1791 he became the crown prince's drawing teacher; elected as professor in the Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in 1797 (after Louis Masreliez) but in 1798 resigned; on July 16, 1799 he was appointed Gustaf IV Adolf's chief architect; though appointed Swedish agent for the fine arts in Italy, Nov. 10, 1803, he never assumed the post.*

(From Svenskt biografiskt lexikon. Stockholm 1945)



*Fig. 1. Louis Jean Desprez (1743–1804), First Architect to the King. The inscription reads: "Desprez angry. Worried and without any money." Washed pencil drawing by J. T. Sergel. NM.*



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# DESPREZ' URBAN SCENES

*Barbro Stribolt*

IN GUSTAVIAN THEATRE THE 1780s are crucial. It is then the scenography, too, begins to undergo a most interesting development, the artist chiefly associated with it being of course Louis Jean Desprez (Fig. 1). Working, we can only assume, in very close collaboration with Gustaf himself, he introduces a series of novelties emanating in the first place from new dramatic ideas, which in turn give birth to a new and, in one respect, esoteric visual and symbolic language.

Here we shall content ourselves with two fields which tangibly separate out the 1780s from the foregoing period. For it is now the process begins which demands that each work shall have its own unique scenography—a natural consequence, to some extent, of each play being situated in a specific historical time and place. For this a suitable—not merely generalized—setting is needed. The second field of innovation has to do with the way the scenery is placed on stage. The two rows of receding, vertical and stiffly symmetrical flats are no longer felt to be adequate. Instead, major flats or set pieces begin to be painted. These can be both asymmetrical and project far out into the stage. Flats and ceilings are more and more replaced by a series of cutout backcloths.

Desprez arrived in Sweden in 1784, just when those new artistic developments were beginning which only the king's death would interrupt—an event which would mean the beginning of the end for Desprez himself.

During his relatively brief period working in Gustaf's theatres, however, Desprez would see a whole series of his own scenic sketches realized. It was also he, as far as we can judge, who painted them; or, when the brush was wielded by others, closely supervised their efforts.

From the list of works drawn up in 1798 in connection with Fredenheim's application to the new government that Desprez' contract be extended, it transpires that he had been responsible for in all 35 new stage sets: a total in which the sets for *Aeneas i Carthago* (also called *Dido och Aeneas*) are moreover not included, since it is hard to

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say exactly which of them were in fact based on Desprez' designs. By the time that ill-fated opera finally came to be staged, in 1799, Desprez was no longer in charge of the royal theatres' scenery, and he had to put up with other people's decisions. Whole scenes were cut, and the sets simplified. Over and above his 35 complete sets, however, distributed between four stages—the Opera, the Dramatic Theatre in Bollhuset, and the two court theatres at Drottningholm and Gripsholm—he also added new scenic elements to existing older sets, elements which transformed their content. This is presumably what is meant by the expression, used in the list of sets, "*composé sur la place*".

Of the wealth of scenery created by Desprez between 1785 and 1792 we today only possess a fragment. Yet in a Europe that has destroyed all trace of most of this kind of original material, even this is of great interest. Most of his sets were created for the Grand Opera in Stockholm. All have disappeared, with the exception of a pillared hall—"Dido's Hall of Audience" (see the colour supplement); but even that lacks both backdrop and ceilings. Here compared with Desprez' original design, the extant set created for *Dido och Æneas* has obviously been somewhat changed or simplified. It was "rediscovered" at Drottningholm, in the theatre to which it had been transferred from the Stockholm Opera, presumably already in the eighteenth century.

From the Gripsholm theatre we also possess one set, complete except for its ceilings: namely, the one Desprez created for the first act of *Drottning Christina*. This too was found at Drottningholm, whither it was taken from Gripsholm, probably in 1786. (It was brought back to Gripsholm in 1963.) Extant, too, is a backdrop from the first scene in Act I of Gustaf III's comedy *Frigga* (preserved since 1922 at Drottningholm).

Of Desprez' décor for the Bollhuset theatre (Théâtre Dramatique) one garden set, entitled "*Jardin orné de cascades*" has survived. It too was transferred to Drottningholm, presumably when the theatre in the Bollhuset was demolished in 1792.

Of Desprez' work for Drottningholm, only a few odd pieces of stage décor have survived, among them a couple of flats for Act I of *Electra*, and one or another sloping wing—a so-called "*Kabinett*". However, Drottningholm also possesses an architectural backdrop known as "the great peristyle", which may perhaps be a relic of an urban scene composed by him for Drottningholm. On the other hand this backdrop, unquestionably by Desprez, *may* have been made for another theatre.



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Although a demand was beginning to be heard for each play or opera to have its own "unique scenery", the standard sets nevertheless remained indispensable; and so would remain even throughout the nineteenth century. Recurring regularly in varying combinations in every genre, they comprised pillared halls, drawing rooms, formal gardens, forests, interiors of prisons and fortresses, etc. Hell/Hades and Heaven/Parnassus were standard sets, likewise the indispensable urban scene.

Here I shall try to identify Desprez' town scenes with the help of the 1798 list of works and of sketches extant either in the original or in eighteenth-century copies. What did these sets or pieces of scenery look like? Any light we can throw on this matter will be a contribution to the extensive work of documentation which has long been going on at the Drottningholm Theatre Museum, and which concerns the extant original scenery from the theatres of Drottningholm, Gripsholm and Rosersberg. The relics of these court theatres' stage sets amount to a collection comprising 382 flats, 270 set pieces, 36 backcloths and three curtains. Among these items are also one sloping wing which, according to an extant inventory, formed part of the "Ancient City", i.e., one of Desprez' urban scenes. For anyone who tries to map out the destinies of our eighteenth-century scenery and the uses it was put to this inventory, drawn up in 1809 and entitled *Inventarium öfver Kong. Teatrarnas Dekorationer* ("Inventory of the Royal Theatres' Stage Sets"), and subdivided into sections for the Dramatiska Teatern, Drottningholm, Gripsholm and Ulriksdal, is an invaluable document.

Desprez' list of works includes the creation of *four* town scenes. These are called either "*Place publique*" or "*Ville antique*". For the Stockholm Opera he produced a "*Ville antique*" for Act I of *Armide* and a "*Grande place publique dans la ville de Chartage*" for *Dido och Æneas*. Thereto—according to the list—he made one "*Place publique*" for the Drottningholm Theatre and one "*Ville antique*" for the Bollhus stage.

The Gothenburg Art Museum has a watercolour by one of Desprez' pupils which in all probability shows his master's urban scene for *Armide* (Fig. 2). It only shows the backdrop, and bears the superscription "*Armide första akten*" ("Act I *Armide*"). What it depicts is an amphitheatre-like complex of linked buildings, crowned by a circular temple surrounded by obelisks. These architectural motifs unquestionably derive from Desprez' formal repertoire and we have no reason whatever to doubt the accuracy of the superscription. And with



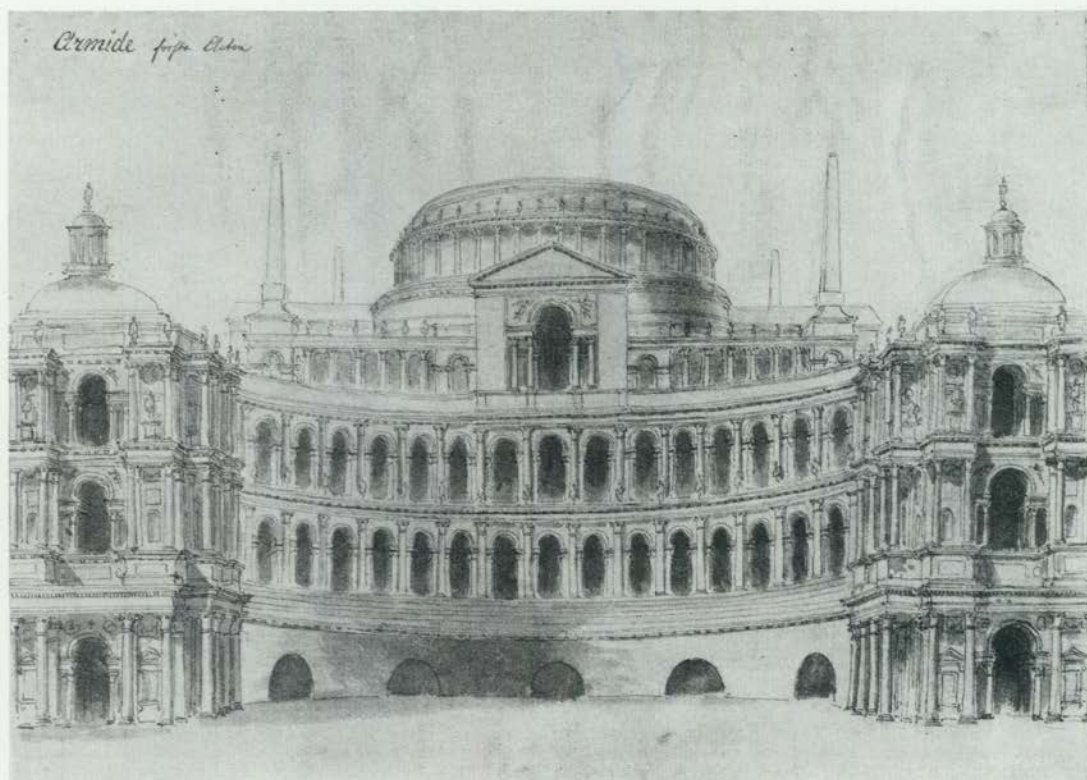


Fig. 2. The city of *Armide*, Act I of *Armide*, opera in five acts by Ch. W. Gluck, libretto by Quinault. Sketch by L. J. Desprez. Gothenburg Museum of Art.

the aid of the inventory of stage sets we can deduce that “The City of Armida”, as it is called there, was also used in other operas: on the one hand in Act I of *Electra*, where it was supplemented by a serviceable temple and is referred to as “*Temple au milieu d’une place publique, composé sur la place*” in Desprez’ list of works; on the other in Act II of *Thetis och Pelée*. In the latter opera “The City of Armida” served as the scene of the Olympic Games and was complemented with “10 sections, 5 pushed in from the right and 5 from the left side of the Theatre [when changing from Scene 1 to Scene 2], so that half the amphitheatre is on either side, it begins at the 1st flat and ends at the 5th”. Though we can only do our best to imagine this arrangement, there is no question but that it seems to fit in with the sketch of the *Armide* backdrop that shows part of an amphitheatre.

“The City of Armida” consisted of 16 flats “representing houses and temples”, seven roofs “painted to join up with the flats, thus



Fig. 3. "The elephant sketch." Pencil drawing by L. J. Desprez. NM.

partly representing houses, and the rest air", and, finally, a backdrop "representing the last part of the city of Armida". Is it this "last part" that is shown in the Gothenburg sketch? Why not? What we can see can also be interpreted as part of a city or its outskirts.

The National Museum in Stockholm owns a pen drawing (286/19), it too the work of some unknown pupil of Desprez, who in all probability has copied one of his originals (Fig. 3). In Wollin's view ("Katalog över Desprez' teaterdekorationer upprättad i samarbete med Agne Beijer", bilaga II, in *Desprez i Sverige*, Stockholm 1936.), this may refer to "*La grande place publique dans la ville de Char-tage*". It shows a city rising behind the diagonal line of a town wall. The town itself, with its picturesquely grouped buildings, is not shown frontally, but seen from one side; the actual stage/acting area is situated outside the urban area. Elephants—one in the triumphal procession of stands, another supporting an obelisque in the city





Fig. 4. *Temple gable*. Watercolour sketch after L. J. Desprez. DTM.

—lend the whole an African tinge and suggest that all this may represent Carthage.

When *Dido och Æneas* was finally staged in 1799, Desprez, as I've said, no longer had any say in the production of scenery and his suggestions were greatly simplified in the process of being translated into stage sets. The "*Grande place publique dans la ville de Chartage*" had been intended for was cut. Yet from the inventory of sets for *Dido och Æneas* we can see that it comprised some kind of a town set, in the scene which takes place in "the suburbs of Carthage". In the inventory it is described as showing "a sumptuous town scene" and in point of fact the "elephant sketch" can equally well be a sketch for the setting for "the suburbs of Carthage" as for the unknown and never executed "*Grande place publique*".





Fig. 5. "Town scene executed at the Bollhus Theatre, presently in service at Drottningholm." P. Estenberg after L. J. Desprez. *The Estenberg Family Archives*.

In the Drottningholm Theatre Museum is a watercolour sketch, made by some unknown scene painter in imitation of Desprez, in which the gable of a temple—probably a three-dimensional one—is the main motif (Fig. 4). This sketch is interesting in the present context inasmuch as the backdrop or cloth which is drawn in behind the temple and thus we assume already existed, agrees in certain of its details with the section which corresponds to the background of the "elephant sketch". These agreements must be more than a coincidence and suggest that whether or not the "elephant sketch" belongs to *Dido och Æneas*, its town scene once actually existed. And if this backdrop or cloth—as seems probable—really did exist, then there can no longer be any question of the "elephant sketch" being an original design for the "*Grande place publique*" ...

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In a bound volume in private ownership, afterwards known as *Estenberg's ritbok* ("Estenberg's drawing book"), the architect Per Estenberg, who was one of Desprez' pupils, made wash drawings of a score of Desprez' stage sketches. This book and its copies would seem to have been complete by 1798 at the latest. One of its wash drawings shows a town scene (Fig. 5. Here published for the first time), provided with the following note: "*Stadsdekoration verkställd på Bollhuset för det närvarande tjänar på Drottningholm*" ("Town scene executed at the Bollhus presently in service at Drottningholm"). Estenberg's copy shows a city which in its lively grouping, and not dominated by any central feature, heaps together a conglomerate of monumental buildings. If we take its superscription *au pied de la lettre*, this can only be the "*Ville antique*" of the list of works, made for the Théâtre dramatique/Bollhus but even then, i.e., prior to 1798, doing service at Drottningholm. It is possible it was taken there when the Bollhus was demolished in 1792, though of course this can equally well have happened earlier.

The inventory of Drottningholm sets includes a complete town scene, entitled "*Antik grekisk stad*" ("Antique Greek City"). It consisted of five pairs of wing flats, plus a backdrop. Whether this is the town scene that had been brought from the Bollhus and supplemented with a fifth pair of wing flats is something we may conjecture, but not confirm.

It remains, therefore, only to identify the town scenes in the list of works made for Drottningholm. An original watercolour sketch called "*Antik stad*" (Drottningholm Theatre Museum), for some baseless reason stated in scientific documentations to be the one made for the Bollhus, may be the original design for the Drottningholm urban scene (see colour supplement). Here we are on most uncertain ground, and the sketch in question may of course also be a design for some set that was never realized.

Its motifs place it in the group of Desprez' works which Bjurström has brought together (*Teaterdekorationer i Sverige*, Stockholm 1964, p. 4.) and which in his opinion are obviously related to Desprez' attempts to reconstruct the Temple of Fortune in classical Praeneste. In this group of his works the architecture in the backdrops is shown frontally and symmetrically—in the same fashion as in the abovementioned architectural backdrop known as "The Great Peristyle". This gives it a strikingly solemn and elevated character; a whole city rises upwards, ending in a circular building with towers or a dome. Thus this architecture is arranged in quite a different manner from what we



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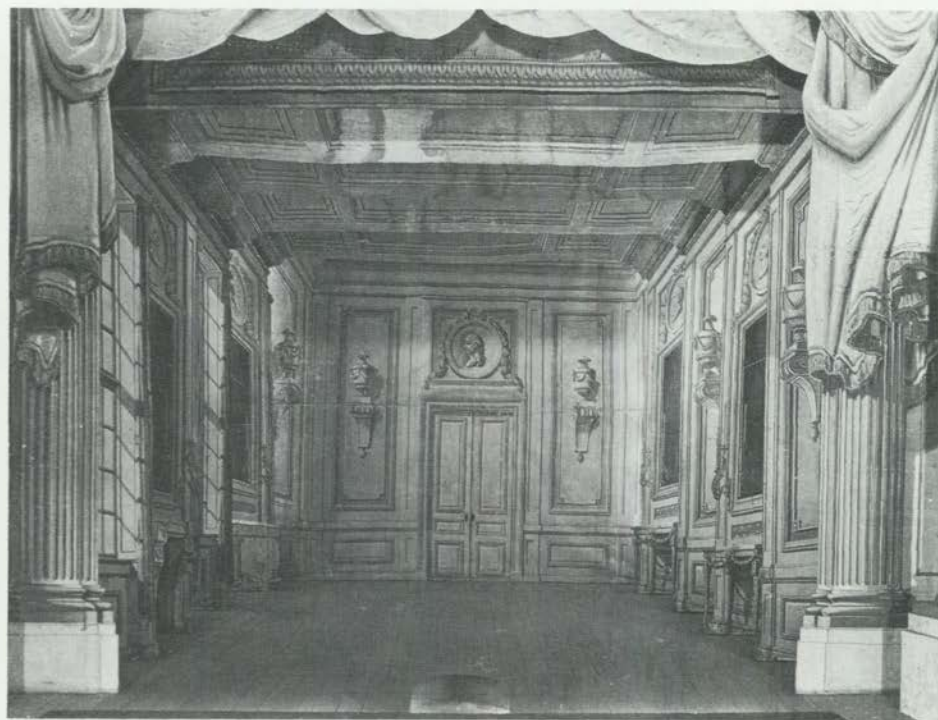
see both in Estenberg's Bollhus copy and in the "Elephant sketch". One could speak of town scenes belonging to two essentially different species.

Apart from the traditional so-called "*Komedigatan*" ("Street scene for comedies") executed before Desprez' arrival in Sweden and which is of no interest in the present context, the inventory also lists a complete town scene—the one mentioned above—entitled "Antique Greek City". It consisted of "A Backcloth showing rather sumptuous architecture," (to which has been added the note "Elektra/Despres"); also some flats: "Antique Greek city 5 flats high, the 6th the back-drop".

If this "Antique Greek city" is identical with the one transferred to Drottningholm, which cannot be proved, the transfer may have occurred as early as 1787 in connection with a production of *Electra* at Drottningholm. As would seem to be indicated by the note added to this backdrop.

However, the Drottningholm inventory also, over and above the "Great Peristyle" already mentioned, comprises one backdrop with architectural motifs. This is how this, our remaining backdrop, marked with the letter O and an arrow, is described: "depicts a kind of antique city, painting badly worn away, the cloth is lying folded in a cubbyhole to the right." Can this have been a surviving fragment of yet another town scene by Desprez, stored in the eighteenth century at Drottningholm?





*Fig. 1. Gustavian drawing-room interior. Original stage decoration at the Gripsholm theatre. Photo: Swedish National Art Museums.*

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# SCENOGRAPHY AT GRIPSHOLM

*Per Bjurström*

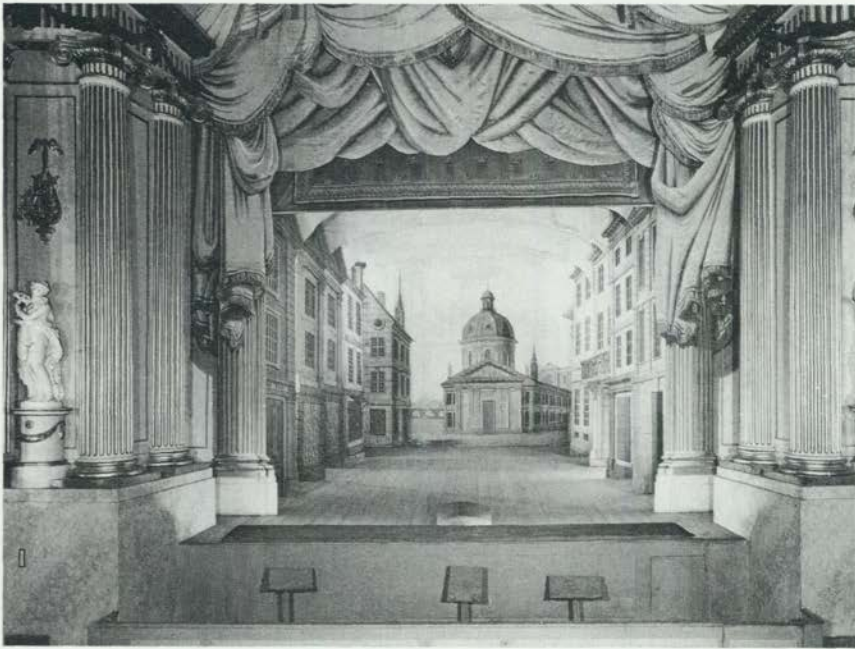
WHILST THE DROTTNINGHOLM THEATRE was equipped with a regular operatic stage and the very latest kind of stage machinery and pairs of flats permitting four different scene changes, the one at Gripsholm was a good deal less ambitious, both in size and equipment. This was because it was primarily intended for plays and *opéra-comique*.

The latter called for a small orchestra pit. This had been constructed with two largely unknown refinements. The first was Palmstedt's insertion of two wooden drums under the stage. The other, his experimental provision of a double-bottomed floor, shaped like a sounding board and in section roughly similar to a violin. Though the latter is no longer extant, we know it once existed.

Preserved, on the other hand, is much of the scenery. In all probability the white and gold palace set, with its Ionic columns linking up with the auditorium's architecture, mirrored upstage in a rotunda with a cassetted dome, was one of the original sets.

This scene, either drawn or suggested by Palmstedt himself, made a dignified background for the French classical repertoire of tragedies, usually presented as they were against a single unchanging set, in order to stress the unities of action, time and space. Despite its Gustavian formal idiom, this one merely repeats a scenic convention, already some one-hundred-and-fifty years old, representing a generalized courtly environment such as could serve either as an interior or an exterior, according to circumstance.

But the demands of the comic repertoire were more varied. The most important comedy set was a drawing room, the one at Gripsholm also being in the modern Gustavian style (Fig. 1). Another favourite setting, above all in various *opéras-comiques*, was a rustic



*Fig. 2. Urban scene. Original stage decoration at the Gripsholm theatre. Photo: Swedish National Art Museums.*

interior. At Gripsholm it was a miller's cottage, magnificent in extent, with its flats all painted over with the miller's various requisita.

Other sets comprised a generalized town view flanked by various kinds of houses, of older type to the left and other more modern ones to the right (Fig. 2). In his even less symmetrical backcloth the artist has created a collage of buildings with strong Parisian overtones: to the left, a bridge with an urban silhouette in the distance; in the centre, a simplified variant of Louis Le Vaux's Collège des Quatre Nations, more or less in side view. And to the right, above the long two-storey façade, rises a similarly simplified version of Perrault's Louvre colonnade.

Ever since the Renaissance such a generalized urban scene, flanked by private houses and more or less obviously forming part of a modern city, had been the conventional comic setting—the classic stage-set for comedies of errors, originally based on the architectural theorist Vitruvius' descriptions of them in antiquity. And indeed seventeenth and eighteenth-century comedies of error had much in common with those of Plautus and Terence, of whose themes they were in fact often no more than slightly updated versions.





*Fig. 3. Forest scene with a rock temple. Original stage decoration at the Gripsholm theatre. Photo: Swedish National Art Museum.*

Another requirement was a forest grove, with flats showing leafy trees and, in the background, a high cliff with a temple cut into it (Fig. 3). This set, too, is a variant of a type which had established itself in Florence in the last decades of the sixteenth century and, living on, had spread both to other Italian princely cities and above all to Paris and Vienna.

Another highly characteristic setting found in every well-equipped theatre was a prison. Introduced at the end of the seventeenth century, it had achieved its magnificent apogee in Ferdinando Galli-Bibiena's magnificent prison interiors. However, we know very little about how, in practice, these were built on stage. Typical of them was a lop-sided perspective, difficult to realize in a stage with flats and which in practice called for a minimum of depth. Thus it is characteristic that in the Gripsholm prison set this type of perspective only takes over in the backdrop.

Obviously we cannot say whether Gripsholm had any other complete sets, now lost. But by and large these six would have sufficed for a fairly varied repertoire.

But Gustaf III's ambition to create a national Swedish drama called

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for something else: namely, for a scenography directly related to the text. Here the traditional schematic type of set was no longer adequate. The interesting thing, however, is that Gustaf, in order to realize this ambition, turned to a Frenchman he had met during his Italian journey in 1783–84: Louis Jean Desprez (1743–1804). Not merely is Desprez' work one of the peaks of Swedish theatrical decor; it was of great importance even by international standards. Just as Gustaf III's plays and operas are forerunners of the historical melodrama—destined to culminate in Scribe's plays, half a century later—so Desprez' sets, so charged with furious romantic-dramatic atmosphere, are forerunners of a romanticism which would not reach a similar degree of opulent imagination until around 1810, in those of P. L. C. Ciceri (Fig. 4).

Desprez had learned his craft in Italy. In 1776, winning the Prix de Rome at what in those days was regarded as the late age of 33, he had been able to make an extended stay there. And it was when visiting Rome in 1784 that Gustaf III had come into contact with him, and engaged him as *dekorationsskötare* for the royal theatres.

According to the jury's statement, the drawings with which Desprez had won the Prix de Rome had given high hopes of a future in theatre, and in Rome he had worked, at least for a while, for the Teatro Aliberti. When staying briefly in Rome in 1779–80, Palmstedt had made a hasty sketch of a set for a Temple of Neptune. It gives us some idea of Desprez' scenic art at that time. But this was not all. When contributing to Saint-Non's extensive and comprehensive work "*Voyage Pittoresque de Naples et de Sicile*" (1781–86) Desprez had also acquired intimate experience of two fields which would prove to be of importance to his future work as a scenic artist in Sweden: namely, grandiose romantic landscape, and remains of antique monuments, in the Grecian form in which they are found in southern Italy.

Desprez' Swedish debut occurred at the Gripsholm. On Twelfth Night 1785, Kellgren's *Drottning Christina* ("Queen Christina"), based on a draft by Gustaf III, was performed. The king, we may assume, not only directed the production but also discussed its scenery with Desprez.

The setting for Act I, situated in "De la Gardie's Garden" (now Kungsträdgården) prepared for a solemn occasion", is astounding (see colour supplement). Dominated by a brilliant palace, a rotunda surrounded by colonnades in a style reminiscent both of Gothic and Moorish architecture, it is a festive "vauxhall", a scene about as remote from classicism as can be.





Fig. 4. Scene from the final act of Voltaire's *Sémiramis*, as conceived by L. J. Desprez. Watercolour and gouache, presumably by Desprez himself, 1780s. DTM. (Desprez here closely follows a concept by Paolo Antonio Brunetti for a performance of *Sémiramis* at the Comédie Française, 1759.)



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It is one of the best-known of all Desprez' stage works. To create a feeling of distance he has recourse to an original trick of perspective; by placing a staircase upstage that leads down to a—partly invisible—market place, the stage itself becomes a terrace. The many backdrop figures painted on both staircase and palace, on the other hand, agreed to some extent with prevailing conventions.

All theatrical décor is fraught with a double tendency: on the one hand, to break out of the spacial limits set by the theatre and create an illusion of reality; on the other, simultaneously to bring together the scenic conventions into a unity which nevertheless can only turn the stage into an unrealistic, purely imaginary milieu. Desprez exploits both in a new way. Though his De la Gardie palace has nothing whatever to do with Scandinavian realities, the scene, with its light mid-summer night mood, is no whit less Nordic for that. The illuminated architecture, with all its thousands of light sources is realistic in quite a different fashion than the self-illuminating festive palaces of Baroque opera. No question but that personal experiences of nocturnal Italian feasts were still fresh in his mind. Yet this does not prevent the effect from being more fantastic than read, nor this scene, which is and must be played in artificial lighting, from yielding a new, highly imaginatively stimulating effect. For Desprez himself the south Italian mediaeval castles, in their more often than not remote and desolate situations, colliding with this northern country's unfamiliar history, must have triggered off a singular and exotic feeling. What more symptomatic than that the tower of the mediaeval Three Crowns Castle, in Stockholm, should stand out against a background of Sicilian mountain slopes?

The details of his second set for *Drottning Christina*, intended to represent what the stage instructions modestly call "the porch of the Palace Chapel", derive their forms from north Italian equestrian statuary and south Italian church architecture—to be precise, from Palermo Cathedral. Whilst ogive vaultings lend local colour and a "Gothic" atmosphere, the heavy walls echo a trend both in Desprez' and his French contemporaries' stage architecture. Characteristic, is the heavy, serious ground-tone, but here with a special nuance due to the way in which the Gripsholm stage's shallowness forcibly concentrates everything within a few forms.

By and large the mood of the set as a whole is set by the second-storey "side tower" and its heavy roof. Only the background architecture—of quite different dimensions and whose lowermost parts alone are visible—stands for the splendour. This tendency to break off the

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effect of the flats' continuation as they march away into the distance and link up with the painted backdrop is characteristic of the classicizing stage designers. Common to them is that the upstage space widens out laterally, and that the orthogonals leading into the depths, by balancing the horizontals and verticals, create secure a strict overall sense of form in the stage milieu.

Thus while this Desprez set, in its structure, accords fully with the canons of contemporary classicism, his vivid sense for combining discrete elements has created, within this framework, something completely original: a fantasy world rife with novel qualities, wholly unlike the conventional and by this time wholly emasculate Baroque stage milieu. In his very first Swedish stageset Desprez had created something entirely new, such as lacked any counterparts abroad: a piece of classicizing romanticism, that in many ways heralded the scenic art of the next century.

Simultaneously with *Drottning Christina*, a production of the one-act opera *Frigga*, versified by Leopold on the basis of a drama by Gustaf III and set to music by O. Åhlström, was being planned. It is set in prehistoric Scandinavia. Its stage instructions read: "The theatre shows the Sacred Grove surrounding Frigga's Temple at Old Uppsala". The backdrop is seen to be almost wholly covered with trees." But Frigga's sanctuary has become a classical temple guarded by reindeer, seated there like well-trained watchdogs, and surrounded by runestones, in wild countryside, with a cave and sheer cliffs. Little though there may have been any current interest in Olof Rudbeck's (1630–1702) theories of Sweden as the original homeland of all the European peoples, this set, too, fuses romantic and classical values.

In the event, the opera *Frigga* was never staged at Gripsholm. Not until 1787 did it have its first night; and thereafter became part of the Drottningholm repertoire.

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