

# Palace of Dreams

**FACTEUR CHEVAL'S PALAIS IDÉAL IS A GIGANTIC WORK OF OUTSIDER ARCHITECTURE, A FRENCH NATIONAL TREASURE AND A MONUMENT TO AN IMAGINATION THAT ACCEPTED NO BOUNDS.** BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



IN 1879 A RURAL postman, or *facteur*, named Ferdinand Cheval paused on his route outside the town of Hauterives to pick up a small object in the middle of the road. It was an irregularly shaped stone of a type that abounds in this part of the Rhône-Alpes region of France, where extensive outcroppings of porous sedimentary rock called calcareous tufa dominate the landscape. Holding up his little discovery to the light, Facteur Cheval (as he is generally known) suddenly conceived an idea that would alter the course of his life and extravagantly enrich the history of art.

He placed the stone in his pocket, and every day thereafter, on his 10-kilometer

round trip between Hauterives and Tersanne, he gathered additional specimens, bringing first a satchel and then a wheelbarrow in which to carry the load home. Working each night in the garden behind his house—with only a kerosene lantern for light—he proceeded to dig foundations and build walls, using lime mortar and prodigious ingenuity to transform a heap of stones into one of the most extraordinary works of architectural improvisation ever conceived.

“I constructed in my dreams a faerie palace,” Facteur Cheval later recalled, “surpassing all imagination, everything the genius of a humble man could imagine (with

PALAIS IDEAL DU FACTEUR CHEVAL

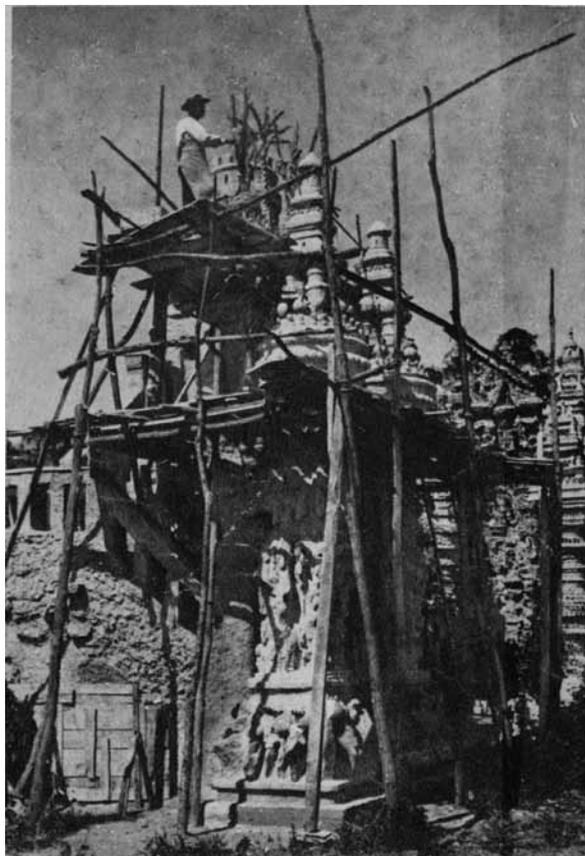
grottoes, gardens, towers, castles, museums and sculptures), trying to bring a new birth to all the ancient architectures of primitive times...but the distance from dream to reality is great; I had never touched a mason's trowel...and I was totally ignorant of the rules of architecture."

Already 43 years old when he began work on the Palais Idéal, Facteur Cheval may have been untutored in his new métier, but by trial and error he mastered the basic principles of construction and engineering. Studying the engraved illustrations in *Le Tour du Monde* and other popular architectural reviews, he compiled a treasure trove of visual references—Assyrian ruins, Aztec temples, the grotto fountains of the Villa Medici—that fed his imagination and inspired his labors. Over the course of the next 30 years, the project grew steadily more ambitious, expanding to meet the elaborate requirements of his designs.

He began with a series of grottoes modeled on the Medici type, arrayed along a serpentine north-facing passageway, marked by ornate columns and arches. The walls of each semi-circular grotto are formed by myriad pieces of tufa, whose gnarled, granular surfaces, rich in fossilized organic matter, attest to the metamorphic power of nature. Several of the grottoes are dedicated to religious themes—the Virgin Mary, the four gospel writers, the angels of Calvary—while others contain naïve models of exotic buildings, including a Hindu temple, a Swiss chalet and a medieval castle. Inscriptions on the upper façade bear the names of Archimedes, Caesar and Vercingetorix, alluding to the ancient Greeks, Romans and Gauls. Standing guard nearby are a host of fanciful animals—camels, roosters, elephants, boa constrictors—each painstakingly modeled in concrete around a supporting armature of metal wire.

To the east, a dramatic spiral staircase leads to a labyrinth on the second story, where novel creations lurk around every corner to surprise and delight: gargoyles, sculpted flora and fauna, stalactites and stalagmites made of tufa, curiously shaped apertures framing picturesque views of the leafy countryside. Scattered throughout





are poetic inscriptions, commenting eloquently on the labor of love that is the Palais Idéal. “For my idea’s sake, my body has confronted all: time, ridicule, the years,” announces one verse. “Life is a swift charger, but my thought will endure in this rock.”

The far end of the east façade features a series of columns in what Facteur Cheval termed the “barbaresque” style. Each takes the form of a totemic human figure, rendered in a dramatically simplified manner reminiscent of Etruscan statuary. The south façade treats tropical themes, replete with palm trees and Polynesian motifs, while the west façade, by contrast, is classically organized, featuring a peristyle of seven columns, each of which supports a rectangular cartouche containing a letter of the name Cheval. Inscribed alongside is the year of Cheval’s birth, 1836.

Dramatic towers and minarets—the construction of which required extensive scaffolding—surmount the central mass of the Palais Idéal, which Facteur Cheval hoped would eventually serve as a “Druid tomb” for himself and his wife. After discovering that the law did not permit burials on private land, he proceeded to devote an additional 10 years to the construction of a separate tomb of similar design—although of more modest dimensions—at the Hauterives cemetery, a short distance away. He was buried there upon his death, at the age of 88, in 1924.

Age-old traditions associating nature with magic—such as popular legends about faeries, hobbits and forest sprites—have long afforded a measure of whimsical license to garden architecture. Since at least the 16th century, fountains, follies and gazebos have often combined mythological allusions with high stagecraft to achieve spectacular flights of fancy, such as those featured on the grounds of many a Tuscan villa or Loire Valley château. The Palais Idéal falls within this same basic tradition, and its heterogeneous aesthetic also has much in common with a Mannerist penchant for public exhibitions of diverse wonders or *meraviglie*, as for instance in the Kunstkammer of Rudolph II at Prague.

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Bravant la chaleur, la froidure  
Et même l'outrage du temps  
Je forçais parfois la nature,  
Et triomphais des éléments.  
Par cela, j'apprends à tout âge  
Qu'en se montrant persévérant,  
Laborieux, rempli de courage  
On arrive à tout étonnement.

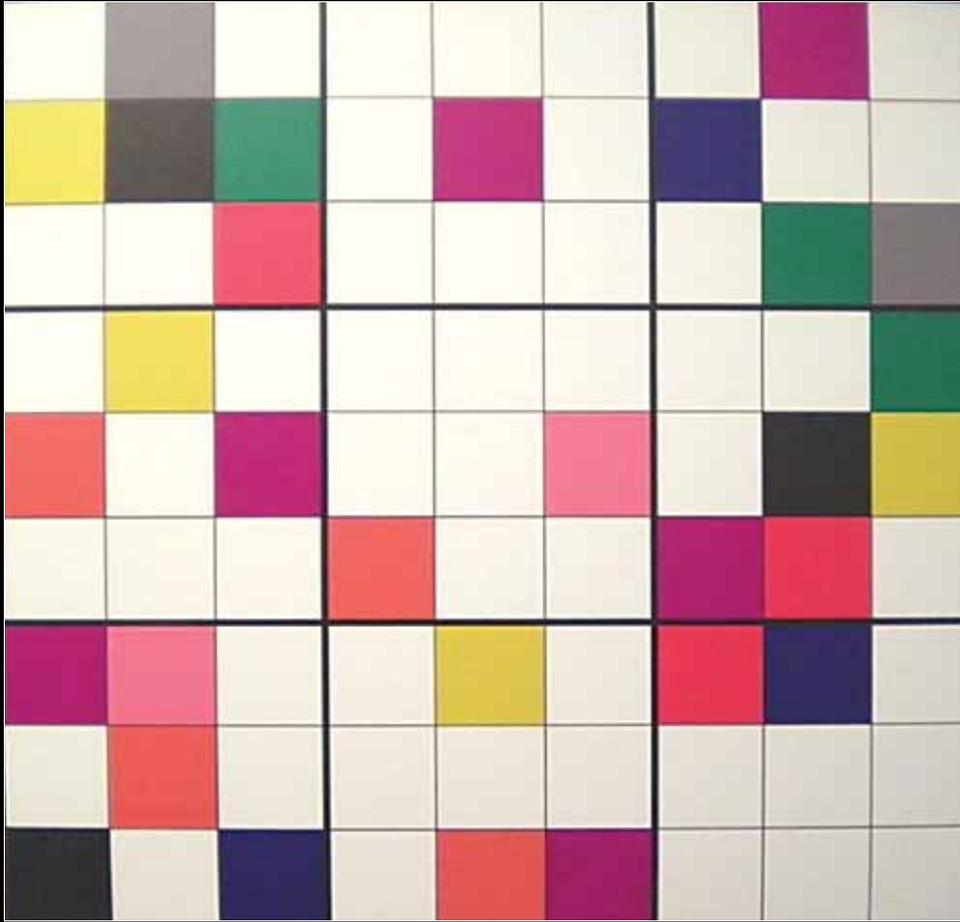
HAUTERIVES (Drôme) — Palais idéal  
(Vue de la Terrasse Nord)

Cheval, autour du Palais Idéal

But while much of the theoretical literature on Mannerist decoration and design stresses the themes of aristocratic insouciance and *sprezzatura*, the earnest devotion with which Facteur Cheval pursued his self-appointed task—and the stunning personal cost he paid in physical toil—would suggest that the Palais Idéal represents a very different achievement from the stylish display of a rich man's prized possessions. By his own account, Facteur Cheval spent 10,000 days (or 93,000 hours) working on his “faerie palace,” a monument to a life that knew no idle moments and to a creative spirit that transcended the limitations of an ordinary civil servant's milieu. The diminutive size of the Palais Idéal's basic building blocks—tufa pebbles—helps to reinforce a visitor's appreciation for the slow, steady

PALAIS IDEAL DU FACTEUR CHEVAL

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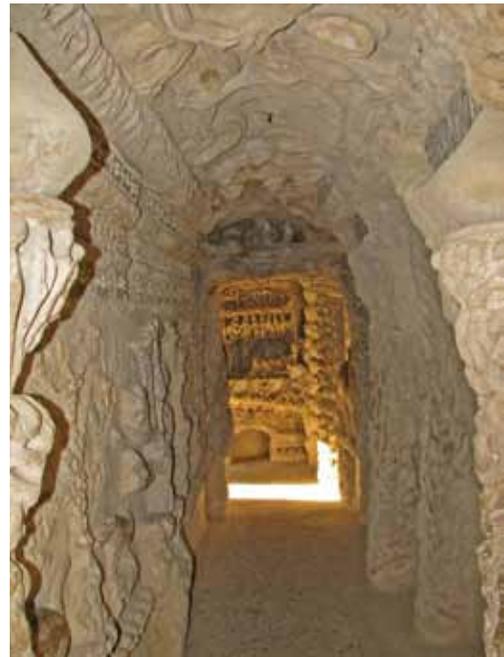
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effort that resulted in this massive edifice of gentle wonder.

In the early years of the 20th century, the area around Hauterives was used heavily by the French army for military training exercises, and the Palais Idéal became a popular attraction for visiting officers. Julie Richoud, a local woman employed by Fauteur Cheval in his declining years as a caretaker at the Palais Idéal, later recalled that the soldiers who stopped by were always shocked to discover that such a large and impressive project had been the work of a single person. They often remarked that it was an undertaking fit for a vast team of craftsmen—or perhaps elves.

As the Palais Idéal's fame spread, many artists of the Surrealist movement made the pilgrimage from Paris and found endless inspiration in Fauteur Cheval's dreamlike juxtapositions of

disparate styles and cultures. Soon after Fauteur Cheval's death, André Breton memorialized the postman in verse; Max Ernst captured the Palais Idéal in collage; and Pablo Picasso devoted an extensive series of drawings to the build-

ing's mysterious forms and atmosphere.

During the post-World War II years, Jean Dubuffet hailed Fauteur Cheval as the spiritual forbear of *art brut* or outsider art, a movement that championed works created beyond the boundaries of traditional culture. Yet for its part, the French establishment did not hesitate to give the Palais Idéal the imprimatur of official recognition. In 1969 culture minister André Malraux declared the site a national monument, releasing much-needed state funds to aid in upkeep and repairs. (Due to Fauteur Cheval's idiosyncratic building methods, conservation remains an ongoing challenge.)

In 1911 the population of Hauterives stood at 1747 souls; as of the 2008 census it was little changed at 1548. Aside from the fast-food concessions across the road, which introduce an unfortunate element of visual pollution to the environs of the Palais Idéal, the grounds and building remain much as they were in Fauteur Cheval's day. The site, which is still in family hands, is open to the public throughout the year, welcoming approximately 100,000 visitors annually—an astonishing influx of outsiders to this tiny village, whose favorite son is an outsider to the art world no more. ▲

## Le Palais Idéal du Fauteur Cheval

**Entry:** €5.80 for adults; €4.10 for children

*Opening hours vary seasonally*

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