

Entering Monte Carlo's Casino: Architecture and Tourism in Monaco

Jinseo Kim¹ & Rachel Wise[#]

¹Winsor School

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

The Casino de Monte Carlo, established in 1865, has been integral to Monaco's development as a luxury tourist destination. This paper explores the architectural significance of the casino's northern facade, analyzing its use of the Beaux-Arts style, a nineteenth-century design movement known for its opulence and eclecticism. While the southern Opéra de Monte-Carlo, designed by Charles Garnier, fully embodies Beaux-Arts grandeur, the casino's entrance employs a more understated iteration, blending French sophistication with Mediterranean exoticism. This strategic approach made the casino both inviting and exclusive, appealing to a broad range of tourists. Through an analysis of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travel accounts, this paper examines how visitors perceived the casino's architectural fusion of familiar French elements and foreign influences. These design choices not only enhanced the casino's allure but also played a role in shaping Monaco's hybrid cultural identity as a cosmopolitan hub for leisure and luxury. Ultimately, this study argues that the architectural elements of the Casino de Monte Carlo were key to its success, reinforcing Monaco's image as a space that balanced elegance, exoticism, and accessibility.

Introduction

Despite only being 514 acres (0.8 square miles), Monaco hosted around 340,000 tourists in 2023.¹ A country based on tourism, Monaco attracts more tourists than permanent residents. Tourists flock to one of the city's most prominent landmarks, Casino de Monte Carlo (1865) (Fig. 1), situated in the center of the busiest streets of Monaco's capital. Upon the casino's opening, the entrepreneur behind the casino, François Blanc "invited all the notables of the Principality and the elite of the population of Nice and the surrounding area" to attend.² His target audience was, initially, Monégasques and the wealthy from nearby French cities. While there have been a few studies on why and how Monaco bet on a casino to jumpstart their tourist industry, there has been little focus on the significance of its architecture.³ This paper examines the casino's architecture as a lens to understand and define the late nineteenth-century developing culture of tourism in Monaco. First, this paper examines the extent to which the Beaux-Arts style influenced the northern facade entrance of the Monte Carlo casino. The Beaux-Arts style emerged in the nineteenth century and employed an eclectic mixture of architectural designs. In comparing it to the slightly later addition of Charles Garnier's Opéra de Monte-Carlo on the southern facade of the casino complex (Fig. 2), it is clear that the casino's facade utilizes a toned-down iteration of the Beaux-Arts style but one that nonetheless emphasizes exoticism and defines a space for gambling.

¹ Cassandra Tanti, "Monaco's Tourism Sector 2023: Hotel Prices Hit New Record," *Monaco Life*, March 21 2024, <https://monacolife.net/monacos-tourism-sector-in-2023-hotel-prices-hit-new-record/>.

² Quoted in Robert Miller, "Constructing a Spatial Imaginary: The Formation and Re-presentation of Monte Carlo as a Vacation-Leisure Paradise, 1854–1950," PhD diss., (University of Kansas, 2016), 98; Bénédict Henry Révoil, *Monaco et Monte Carlo*, 2nd ed. (Paris: E. Dentu, 1878), 199–200.

³ Miller; Paul Franke, "'Nobody Came to Monte Carlo to be Bored': The Scripting of the Monte Carlo Pleasurescape 1880–1940," *Journal of Urban History* 48.6 (2022): 1247–1260.

In analyzing late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century primary accounts of Monte Carlo and the casino's architecture, this paper asserts that the Beaux-Arts style allowed the casino to cater to a French tourist population with a predilection for both familiar French architectural styles and nineteenth-century "exotic" ones.

History and Description of the Casino

By the mid-nineteenth century, the royal family of Monaco was strapped for cash with few financial remedies. Monaco's lack of natural resources, due to its rocky location as well as the royal family's failed taxation endeavors, had brought them to a financial impasse.⁴ In looking for ways to make profits again, they hesitantly resigned themselves to the tourist industry and, specifically, the creation of a casino. They left the Société des Bains de Mer (SBM), which was a public company created by the Monaco royal family, in charge of the casino. The first casino iteration was, however, not as successful as wanted, so with the help of the new architects and sculptors, the casino was rebuilt and rebranded as an inviting and alluring space for tourists.

Initially constructed in 1858 at Villa Bellevue, the Casino de Monte Carlo was originally designed by Parisian architect Gobineau de la Bretonnerie (1828-1887). Due to its lack of profit, the royal family of Monaco hired François Blanc, a French casino entrepreneur, along with several other sculptors and architects, to redesign the casino. Charles Garnier, a famous French architect known in particular for his Beaux-Arts style and design of the Palais Garnier in Paris, designed an Opera house within the casino complex. The grand entrance of the casino was designed and expanded under several hands.

When approaching the casino, tourists may note the two prominent towers that loom over the entrance. Each of these towers houses an allegorical statue in a niche, sculpted by Fabio Stecchi, an Italian-born, French naturalized sculptor (Fig. 3). The one on the left represents the Mediterranean Sea, and the right represents the Seine.⁵ Between the towers, a large staircase leads up to the grand entrance on the first floor, which is composed of three gilded doors. Above the entrance is an extravagant iron overhang. The entrance protrudes out, creating dimension and movement to the facade, adding to the grandeur of the casino. A clock centrally surmounts the second floor, a nod to the recent standardization of time and perhaps a projection of Monte Carlo's desire to be a modern city. There are 6 windows on each side of the front of the building (2 on the roof, 2 on the second floor, and 2 on the first) and 5 in the middle.

The Beaux-Arts style originated in Paris around the 1830s at the École des Beaux-Arts. It immediately grew to immense popularity and was adapted and used by architects from countries such as France, Belgium, and Germany. This style was most popular in urban and wealthy areas and communities. Beaux-Arts buildings were embodiments of opulence and easily became symbols of cities' identities across Europe and America. Beaux-Arts buildings are often decorative and extravagant, including elements from Baroque, Renaissance, and Neoclassical architecture. Some specific key features are layered facades, sculptural adornments, and iron structures.⁶

The Monte Carlo casino has been classified as a Beaux-Arts inspired building. As one of the most prominent parts of the building, the northern facade should be examined for Beaux-Arts elements. Some aspects of the casino that align with the Beaux-Arts style are its colorful decorative features, the polychrome roof, the statues in niches and flanking the clock, the two glazed friezes on the towers, the central clock, the iron overhang, and the particular attention to architectural details on the towers, including shields and animal heads.

While the casino entrance only has some Beaux-Arts elements, the southern facade of the complex, which faces the sea, has more elaborate and varied ones. The entrance to the Opéra de Monte-Carlo was designed by Charles Garnier, whose Beaux-Arts style work had brought him fame. Like the entrance to the casino, the opera house also employs decorative features on its facade, though with more detail and use of garlands and colorful mosaics. It also uses columns

⁴ Miller, 42-46.

⁵ Philippe Casimir, *Guides des Pays D'Azur: Monte Carlo et Les Environs* (Nice: Éditions de la Sté de Publicité Des Pays D'Azur, 1903), 192.

⁶ Margaret Fletcher, *Architectural Styles: A Visual Guide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 152.

as accents on the second-floor porch. Unlike the casino entrance, the opera house has first-story rustic stonework, a common feature of the Beaux-Arts style that references Renaissance architectural design to add character progression to the building's levels. On the other hand, the layout of the two facades is similar as they are both symmetrical, have the same number of windows, two decorated towers, and have projected entrances. Compared to the Opera House, which fully embodies the Beaux-Arts style with its opulence suited for a venue for high art, the casino's northern facade employs some elements of the style but feels less formal and more approachable. By making the building less ornate, the casino becomes less intimidating and more inviting to the Monte Carlo tourist population, encouraging them to ascend the stairs and gamble.

The purpose of the casino's architecture is additionally manifested in the sculptures on the two towers. Placed above eye level, they loom as idealized figures to visitors of the casino. This is further supported by the statues' idealized and classicized bodies in contrapposto poses. Each statue represents a different body of water: The figure on the left, holding a trident, represents the Mediterranean Sea, which Monaco borders, and on the right, the figure holding an oar represents the Seine River in Paris. By featuring these symbols, the casino's exterior makes an intentional connection between Monaco and France, appealing to the French Tourists that Blanc sought to attract. These figures look towards the casino entrance, urging spectators to enter and also indicating that the casino, in architecture and purpose—as well as Monaco in general—is the hybridization of French style and culture and the Mediterranean. The use of the Beaux-Arts style celebrates French culture while also marking Monaco's emerging identity as a new hub for luxury. The casino promotes the identity of Paris with its Beaux-Art style trappings but also asserts its Mediterranean identity.

The fact that the casino was intended to welcome the French may be another reason why he wanted to add aspects that were typically French—so that they could feel a sense of home and hospitality, inviting them into the casino and making them comfortable with the environment, which can lead to more spending. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that the tourists then or today are all French or all wealthy. Because the new design took inspiration from the Beaux-Arts style and highlighted Monégasques identity through sculpture, it takes the atmosphere of both France and Monaco. The casino was successful because it imitated the peacefulness and separation of Monte Carlo as well as the luxurious atmosphere of France. Monte Carlo offers a feeling of otherworldliness and can remind one that they are on vacation in a foreign country. Through the use of the Beaux-Arts style, with its extravagant details, one may feel that they are part of something exclusive due to the style's association with wealth. "Vacationing in the city served as social capital in a variety of forms."⁷ The casino combines these two aspects of each country's style which allows for a spot where tourists may come and feel welcomed and special at the same time.

Reception

But, did the visitors take note of the clever use of architectural styles? We will examine the accounts of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writers who visited Monte Carlo and wrote about the atmosphere and the impact of the casino's architecture. Thanks to Robert Miller's 2016 dissertation on Monaco's tourism, this paper can draw upon many primary sources about tourists' experiences at the casino. These accounts reveal how visitors were struck not only by the casino's architecture but also by its integration into the stunning Mediterranean landscape. William Hope Devereux, a critic of the time, captured this sentiment, stating, "I had seen Constantinople, Madeira, and many other parts of this fair earth of ours, but . . . [did] not remember anything that compares with this bit of Italian coast scenery, which I think is surely the loveliest in the world."⁸ His quote proves how memorable the city and its buildings were due to their ability to adapt to different foreign styles. He also emphasizes the "Italian coast scenery," underscoring Monaco's Mediterranean charm. For example, Stéphen Liégeard, a French writer and poet among other things, appreciated the casino and said, "This picturesque little corner of the Orient where man and the elements have struggled

⁷ Miller, 30.

⁸ Quoted in Miller, 211: William Hope Devereux, *Fair Italy, The Riviera, and Monte Carlo: Comprising a Tour Through North and South Italy and Sicily with a Short Account of Malta* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1884), 58.

against its miracle? Well! What! The palace of Aladdin with its chiseled bronze, its shimmering brass, multicolored mosaics, transparent agates, dark porphyry, its muses with outspread wings, ancient masks grinning with laughter or pain."⁹ By referencing Aladdin and aspects of architecture that are associated with Middle Eastern buildings, Liégaard acknowledges that visitors of the casino felt and noticed foreign influences even without deeply analyzing the building. This shows that the casino's use of the Beaux-Arts style was successful in making tourists feel like they were exploring a new country, differentiating themselves from the neighboring country of France. This idea of imitating a foreign country may also comfort customers to gamble as they are reminded that they are not home.

Another critic, Paulin Blanc stated that the casino has "the most magical gardens, walkways with views of the Alps, and temperate seasons, and splendid views of the horizon, it will appear to the eyes, that the palace of Eden has fallen out of the sky to the Earth; when you see it you will remember it for all your life."¹⁰ Blanc's comparison of the casino to the Garden of Eden issues the gambling house an ironic biblical sense of purity and innocence. Gambling in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was banned in many European countries because it was addictive and generally had bad moral associations. With its explicit Christian reference, Blanc's grand statement destigmatizes the casino and its values. His quote might reflect how many tourists responded to the architecture and justified their gambling activities. The fact that the casino offers a different space, not commonly seen in the country of the target audience (France), makes Monaco a space that seems more exotic and foreign. The use of the Beaux-Arts style adds to the exotic and foreign feel by blending European elegance with opulent, grand designs.

Filson Young, a prominent Irish journalist, who wrote an early 20th-century account of his experience at Monte Carlo, describes the environment of Monte Carlo in opposition to the casino:

The dust of the day has subsided; lamps glow amid the flowers; men and women, some of the most lovely of women and the most beautifully attired, walk on the spotless pavements as though they walked on a lighted stage. The murmur of music, melodies of passion and romance, steal from violins out of the cafés and among the trees. There is a rustle of feet, a whisper of dresses, a hum of voices. This is under the evening sky; but as you pass under the great portals of the Casino and enter the rooms the odour of the evening and the perfumes of flowering shrubs fade and vanish suddenly like an overture that is ended.¹¹

When describing the casino, however, he sarcastically uses terms like "overpowering," "gold-drugged atmosphere," "pretending," and "artificial." He notes the international range of visitors, which paints the casino as an elegant and sophisticated space, but one that facilitates garish behavior and extreme opulence. Another interesting part of this quote is its mention of the "great portals" emphasizing the effectiveness of the entryway in creating a transitory portal and a place that seems foreign and new. This aligns with the previously mentioned feeling of being reminded that tourists are no longer in their home country.

The Monte Carlo casino's architecture helps justify and elevate the function of the building: gambling. Scholars have labeled the entire casino complex as a Beaux-Arts building, but no one has examined how the Beaux-Arts style was implemented at the casino and how it was perceived and interpreted by tourists. By examining the casino's northern facade, this paper finds multiple references to the Beaux-Arts style with a particular emphasis on "exotic" architectural elements somewhat passed over in the Garnier opera facade. The casino statues help solidify Monaco as an intersection of French and Mediterranean culture. By looking at the primary accounts of how the building was received by tourists,

⁹ Quoted in Miller, 196: Stéphen Liégaard, *La Côte d'Azur* (Paris: Quantin, 1887), 260.

¹⁰ Quoted in Miller, 205: Paulin Blanc, *Les Joueurs et les cercles avec des notices sur Monte-Carlo, Aix-les-Bains, par Paul Blanc*, (Chalon-sur-Saône, FR: 1885), 129, Bibliothèque Nationale de France François-Mitterrand Rez-de-jardin, 8-V-20761, D3 L 3.33-A.

¹¹ Quoted in Miller, 301: Filson Young, "Monte Carlo," in *Memory Harbour: Essays Chiefly in Description*, (London: Grant Richards, 1909), 25-28, 32.

it is evident that the unassuming aspects of the architecture has a positive effect on visitors. Although the use of the Beaux-Arts style has not fully been explored in this building, the style with a little “foreign” twist is readily apparent. Its smart architectural choices are what make this building so alluring to tourists, in the past and likely into the far future.

Figures



Fig. 1: Casino de Monte Carlo, north facade, opened in 1865, Monte Carlo, Monaco



Fig. 2: Opéra de Monte-Carlo, south facade, opened in 1879, Monte Carlo, Monaco

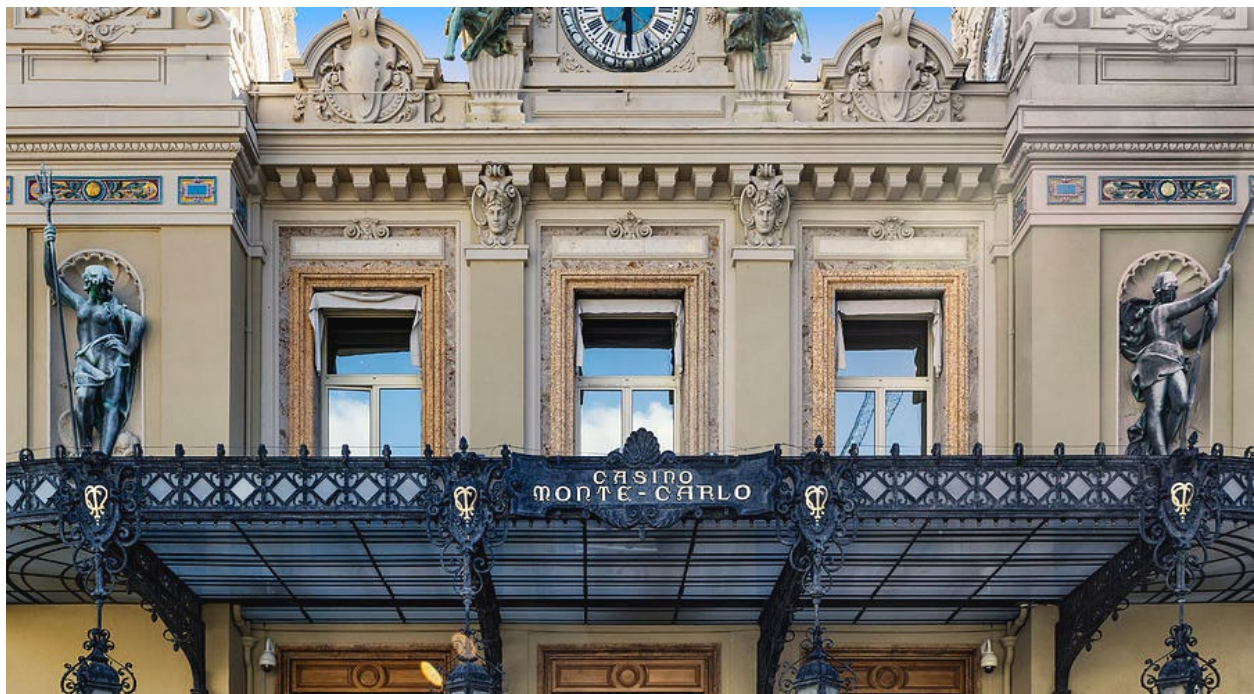


Fig. 3: Casino de Monte Carlo, north facade, opened in 1865, Monte Carlo, Monaco

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