

# The political world inspires French cartoonists

ANNIK BIANCHINI

POLITICAL cartoonists are on show at the Palais Bourbon, the seat of the French National Assembly. Six cartoonists invited by the President of the National Assembly sketched the actors of political life. As a result, 200 drawings and some 40 full size profiles were exhibited. Some of these sketches were very relevant as regards the frequently fierce behaviour of the political world but there is also a sense of humour and a certain amount of sensitivity behind the criticism. Just for once, the Palais Bourbon opened its doors to political cartoonists full of humour and inspiration: The Palais Bourbon, the seat of the National Assembly, was

built between 1722 and 1728 on a piece of land bought by the Duchess of Bourbon in the style of the Triannon Versailles.

The President of the National Assembly Jean Louis Debré invited six cartoonists, Boll, Cabu, Calvi, Pétillon, Plantu and Wiaz for the occasion. They strolled around the corridors of the Palais Bourbon for a few weeks in order to make a few hitherto unpublished drawings. Their scathing pencils did not put off the President of the Assembly. It was an informal way of using self-mockery and making the representatives of the Nation look more humane. As a result 200 drawings (most of them unpublished but also sketches that had already appeared in print) and about 40 full-size profiles were exhibited in the ave-

inspiring reception rooms of the Palais Bourbon with its stately chandeliers and wonderful painted ceilings. The cartoonists sketched the daily life in Parliament ranging from the ushers (civil servants who play a major role as a link between elected members and their colleagues) to extremely controversial topical issues such as the debate about the bill concerning secularism in schools or the bill relating to education as well as the disputes that regularly occur in the Palais Bourbon.

For a long time Parliament was the main source of inspiration for political cartoonists. Henri Daumier (1808-1879) who owed his fame to his political sketches was certainly one of their forerunners. He enjoyed casting a critical eye on

the eventful history of the nineteenth century through his lithographs and sculptures. His social and political involvement was admirable. In addition to their meaning Daumier's prints reveal his tremendous talent as a cartoonist by the vigour and accuracy of his style, the wide range of light and shade effects and his remarkable use of light.

The cartoonist Calvi suggested to the President of the National Assembly that an exhibition take place for the members of Parliament. Jean Louis Debré agreed on condition that it should be organised by several cartoonists and open to the public. It is a great novelty in the subdued atmosphere of the Palais Bourbon. "That is quite natural Calvi exclaimed, "Cartoonists have always promoted politicians for once it will be the other way round."

A French Member of Parliament wearing his red white and blue

ribbon (his badge of office), blames his wife for wanting to take up politics and shouts angrily. "She cannot even write false invoices!" Members of Parliament in summer clothes have turned the Assembly into a holiday beach while the Republic, an attractive young woman bearing a Phrygian cap strolls among them.

This is a veiled reference to the "35 hour week" (in order to create jobs the previous government chose to introduce a shorter 35-hour working week). Two friends burst out laughing in front of cartoons of the Prime Minister. Jean Louis Debré is not spared, standing with his chest puffed out between two rows of Republican guards (a ceremonial corps whose duty is to escort officials on state occasions). "It is good to make fun of the establishment within the establishment. It is an excellent exhibition showing that politicians have a good sense of humour," a student points out. Many a head of state have been

the target of Plantu's caustic drawings. Teachers and friends gave him this nickname at his school, the Lycée Henri IV in Paris, in the sixties as they found his real name, Jean Plantureux, rather dull. A quarter of a century later, practically every day President Chirac had to put up with his head represented in the shape of a triangle shedding a drop of sweat on the front page of "le Monde". "The chief editor tells me that he complains about this drop but I don't always add it. It refers to his irritable nature," Plantu confesses.

As for Cabu he laughs at everything. He laughs at himself, at illness and even people he loves.

With a childish smile and his head slightly tilted to the left, he takes a felt pen and a sketchbook and puts them on his lap. He draws

fast and with incredible skill. This is no doubt how he has examined and dissected the Fifth Republic, de Gaulle, Pompidou, Giscard d'Estaing, Mitterrand and Chirac for the last forty years. He has sketched them all, presidents and ministers.

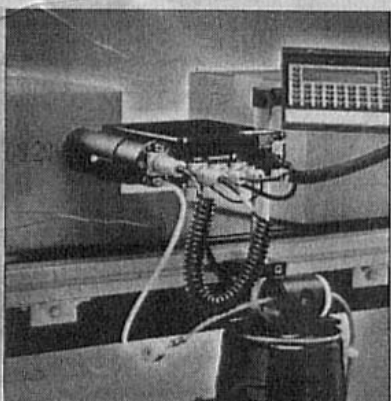
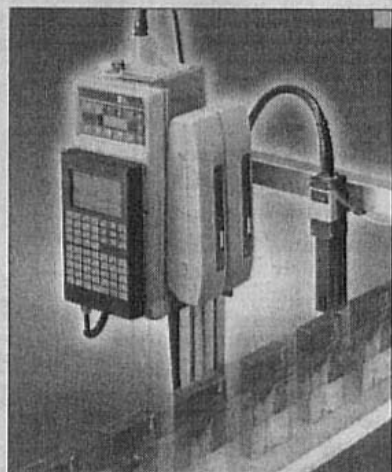
Since 1993 when he joined the satirical weekly "Le Canard Enchaîné" Pétillon's sense of humour has remained unchanged. He draws with such ease that he rouses laughter at unexpected moments. His press cartoons allow him to grasp the feel of current events. He shuts himself up for three days at newspaper's headquarters, from Sunday to Tuesday evening, closing day. He listens to the radio and reads all the newspapers. "Unlike a comic strip a press cartoon has

to be drawn immediately on the paper in order to be satisfactory," he adds.

Readers and spectators enjoyed the amusing and cruel story of political life. Besides, for many of them it was a passport allowing them to enter the inner sanctum of the Republic. Whereas we can congratulate our deputies for their humour, the cartoons that reveal them are often very relevant regarding some fierce aspects of political life but they also express a certain amount of sensitivity behind the criticism. A free press is one of the essential elements of a democratic society. In many cases a sense of humour and political awareness are one and the same.

Website: www.assemblee-nationale.fr

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## Fert, an NGO lends a helping hand to farmers

PASCALE BARLET

FERT started in 1981. It is a French organization specialised in giving help to farms in developing countries. The interesting point is that it deals with problems not only from a technical point of view but has also a human and cultural approach.

In developing countries, the economy mainly depends on agriculture. However, the farmers are not always aware of the type of technical and commercial tools that could help them to improve their farms. In 1981 a few French large farm managers who were anxious to help future trading partners decided to create an association called FERT (Association for the development and revival of the land) an international cooperation whose aim is to support groups of farmers for a period of time until they become technically and financially independent. Mr Michel Michel Mollard, the director, explains his approach "It concerns countries that are in debt but we are confident in the long-term possibilities and believe that we will be able to initiate relations such as acting as consultants".

Therefore, the field tests started in 1984. At the time, they realised that humanitarian aid during the preceding twenty-five years had been more technical than humane. "It is no use explaining to an African how to prune an apple tree if you have not tried to establish his real needs, his working conditions and his life style beforehand. We are more concerned by men than by their techniques, it is another timescale and you have to be very patient". Today more than fifteen countries throughout the world receive this aid. Among them are Albania, Brazil, Bulgaria, Romania and Egypt as well as Madagascar, one of the first countries where FERT was involved.

In Madagascar, 75% of the population is rural and 62% of the active population work on farms. Agriculture is the main economic sector it accounts for 27% of the GDP and is the main source of currency through the export of raw and converted agricultural goods. However the farming investments are very low, less than 1% of the annual production and less than 3% of the farmers are in contact with genuine financial advisers whereas specialists consider that one third of the families living on farms are in debt.

On this island, the first activities that FERT organised with the farmers were financing plans that proved to be essential in helping family farms to buy the necessary equipment, improve working conditions and increase the output. Within the FIFATA (Fikambanana Fampivoarana ny Tantsaha meaning Association for the advancement of farmers) established with the help of FERT, credit terms were made available through the setting up of village loans and savings banks providing local and accessible services for farmers thanks to decentralised management. This innovative experience aroused interest from the Malagasy Government and sponsors who backed FIFATA and FERT by creating and organising the CECAM network (a cooperative agricultural and financial institution).

(Abridged)

## Lille - European capital of culture

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concerning Picasso and Rembrandt, the circus as regards Chagall and the industrial world with Fernand Léger. Belfries are square towers built in order to protect cities against plunderers in the Middle Ages. Visitors who usually have no opportunity of going to museums will discover masterpieces from national and regional museums (paintings, sculpture and decorative art). The programme of artistic events for Lille 2004 is more classical but also very diverse, divided into three "seasons". The exhibitions in particular will be of great interest as there are so many big museums in the area. The highlight will be a retrospective Rubens exhibition at the Palais de Beaux Arts (Lille Fine Arts Museum). A twin exhibition will take place in Antwerp the birthplace of Rubens, a painter who was so deeply rooted in the history of Flanders. Major historical figures from the North such as Antoine Watteau will be evoked in Valenciennes and the Matisse Museum in Cateau Cambrésis will present the "Groupe Vouloir", an avant-garde movement that started in Lille in 1925 and finally an exhibition on "Matisse and textile colour".

Lille Opera house, closed for 5

years, celebrates its reopening after its renovation. It will present operas, ballets and concerts. The Lille National Orchestra and its conductor will perform in 11 towns. The programme is based on nine tableaux including the complete symphonies and concertos of Beethoven with in addition some recitals and chamber music.

On the stage Shakespeare will be in the limelight and many companies from other countries will perform. Bartabas has brought back from Tibet the idea for a new show performed by the Zingaro Equestrian Company. Not forgetting the circus and street arts such as the traditional giants, symbols of the North of France who have organised a "giant" meeting, gathering their "colleagues" from Belgium, China, Japan, the United Kingdom and even Mexico, rivaling with the popular Dunkirk Carnival.

The third season will be devoted to architecture and design. All during the year schoolchildren and teachers will think about what the Ideal City looks like.

Website: www.lille2004.com

## Architects highlight the French cultural heritage

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Following the same idea courses on historic buildings and areas were implemented in Syria in 2003 at the start of the new academic year, in Tunis a course concerning the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco) has been taking place since 1994 for Tunisian, Moroccan and Algerian architects. A partnership with the National Institute for Monuments and Culture in Sofia (Bulgaria) has been working since 2002 and other projects are in preparation.

Exchanges are a permanent feature in the history of culture and architecture.

Benjamin Mouton chief architect and inspector general of ancient monuments went to Romania in 1994 on an official mission for the Minister for Arts and Culture to work on an experimental project bringing together French and Romanian contractors on a seventeenth century tower of the church of Apostolache. "They worked out the

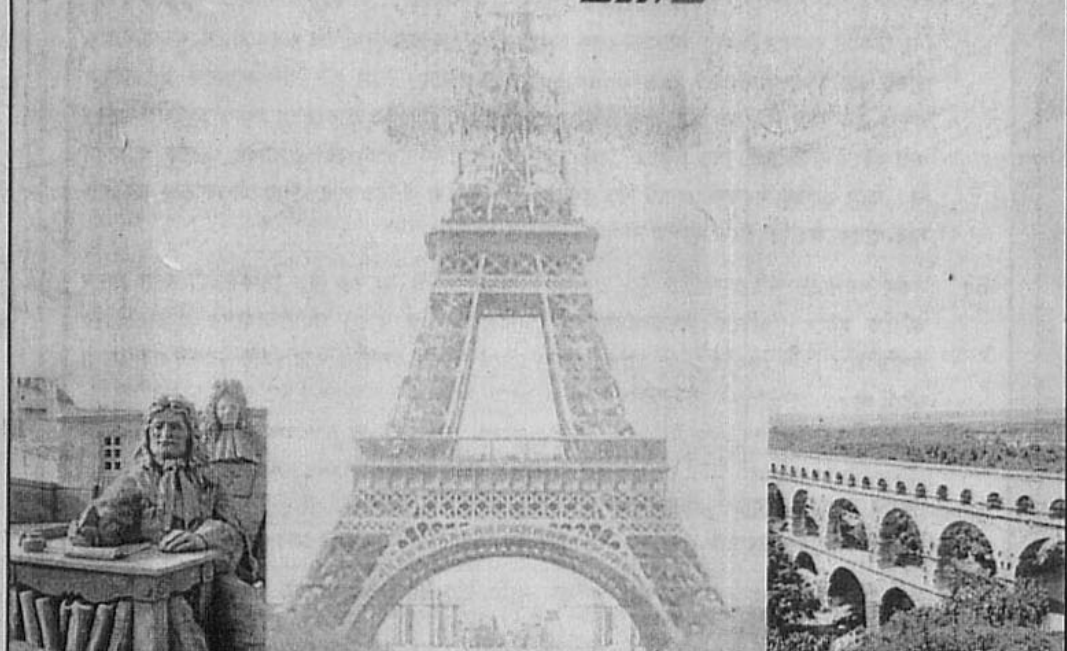
whole history of the restoration including archaeological research then they implemented both traditional techniques and the latest ones with earthquake-proof reinforcements thanks to a metal framework bored into the stonework". At present there are missions in Lithuania, India and Angkor where young Cambodian architects are trained and supervised for the preservation of the Khmer artistic heritage. "It consists in passing on expertise. The more experience the architects have the more efficient they are" Benjamin Mouton observes.

Nevertheless, their greatest quality is their passion for architecture and historic buildings. Considering the increasing interest for the preservation of ancient buildings, town areas and landscapes, building and rehabilitation inside a town will be one of the great issues of the twenty-first century.

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