Philippe II, Duke of Orleans

The duke, after whom the city of New Orleans is named, was a cultured intellectual and a gifted visual artist, actor and musician. He played the viola da gamba and wrote operas under the guidance of his composition teacher, Marc-Antoine Charpentier. As regent to the young Louis XV, he promoted public education, abolishing tuition fees at the Sorbonne. Philippe was a notorious womanizer who loved assignations in his private box at the Opéra.

The Opera

The private theatre in the east wing of the building became a public facility in 1661 when Molière took it over for his company of actors. Jean-Baptiste Lully remodelled the theatre for opera performances after Molière’s death. Architectural drawings portray a long narrow room holding about 1200 spectators – 600 seated in boxes and on benches, and 600 standing. There was space for an orchestra of 48 musicians. A very deep stage allowed for ten sets of scenic flats, producing an illusion of dramatic perspective.

The great French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau is thought to have started his career as a set painter at the opera.

The Orléans Collection

Most of the present-day building at the Palais-Royal dates from the 19th century. One of the features left from the time of Cardinal Richelieu is the Galerie des Proues with its matched series of sculptures of ships’ prows, in honour of Cardinal Richelieu’s position as Minister of the Navy.

The Colonnes de Buren, a series of striped columns created by the French conceptual artist Daniel Buren.

The mirror-ball fountain by the Belgian artist Pol Bury.

Today there are two famous installations of outdoor sculpture in the courtyards:

www.palais-royal.monuments-nationaux.fr