

Jules Cantini was the most important marble merchant in the South of France in the nineteenth century. The son of an Italian mason, he built up in Marseille a business that worked its own quarries, from Vitrolles to Carrara and as far as Algeria, and supplied marble to the city's major building sites. Having become a sculptor through his dealings with architects, and then a patron through the fortune he had made, he bequeathed to Marseille his town house and his collections — today the Musée Cantini.

Origins

Jules Cantini was born in Marseille on **2 February 1826**. His father, **Gaétan Cantini**, was a mason of Italian origin established in the city at the beginning of the century, responsible among other things for the demolition of the Porte d'Aix aqueduct in 1823, the necessary preliminary to the building of the triumphal arch. His mother was named Thérèse Farci.

Orphaned at the age of five, Jules entered the free drawing school of Marseille, the future school of fine arts, in **1837**, at the same time as his elder brother **Pierre**, who founded a decorative sculpture workshop on the rue des Beaux-Arts. It was in that workshop that Jules began.

The marble merchant

Cantini's career was first of all that of a marble industrialist. He worked **three marble quarries of Vitrolles**, then acquired quarries in Italy, at **Carrara**, and in **Algeria**. On the advice of Monsignor Robert, bishop of Marseille, he discovered and began working quarries of ivory-coloured marble.

On the death of his brother Pierre in **1851**, he took over the family business, moved it to the avenue du Prado and modernised it. He held **patent for a mechanical sawmill** and used steam power, which allowed him to cut marble on a scale beyond anything the traditional workshops could manage. He owned sawmills in the Rouet and Bonneveine districts. In 1856 he married Rose Louise Augustine Lemasle.

The firm became indispensable in Marseille and took part in the city's major public building sites, foremost among them the cathedral of **Sainte-Marie-Majeure**, known as La Major. Cantini would serve for ten years as president of the Marseille **builders' trade association**.

The sculptor

It was on the site of La Major that Jules Cantini met the architect **Léon Vaudoyer**. From that encounter came a second career, as a sculptor. He executed the **altars** of the cathedral and a series of statues, and several churches in Marseille hold his works.

His output belongs to an official art nourished by classical and Italian references. In **1903** he delivered a statue of *David* after Michelangelo, installed on the avenue du Prado, and he drew the plans for the **monumental fountain of the place Castellane**, executed in Carrara marble and presented by him to the city in 1911 — the "Cantini fountain", which remains one of the landmarks of central Marseille. He was made an **Officer of the Legion of Honour** in 1908 and served as director of the Académie de Marseille.

The patron

His fortune made, Cantini devoted a growing share of his means to patronage. In **1888** he acquired a town house at **19, rue Grignan**, built in 1694 for the Compagnie du Cap Nègre, which traded in coral from the Tunisian coast. There he brought together his collections of sculpture in wood and marble, and from 1912 he entrusted prints to the Musée du Vieux-Marseille.

By his will he left the city of Marseille the house on the rue Grignan and the whole of his collections, on the express condition that it should become a **museum of decorative arts**. He also bequeathed some thirty buildings to the city and its hospitals.

Jules Cantini died in Marseille on **12 December 1916**, at the age of ninety. He is buried in the Saint-Pierre cemetery.

Legacy

The house on the rue Grignan opened to the public in **1936** as the **Musée Cantini**. Since become one of the great French museums of modern and contemporary art, it holds a reference collection for the period 1900-1980. An avenue in Marseille also bears the marble merchant's name.

His career illustrates a type of entrepreneur characteristic of the nineteenth century: one who, starting from the trade in raw material, mastered the entire chain — quarry, sawing, carving, sculpture — before moving on to artistic commissions and then to patronage.

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