



PARISIAN CAFÉ: LE PROCOPE

Simon Férelloc and Bernard Michon

The arrival of coffee in France, a little before the mid-17th century, led to the emergence of new venues offering customers the opportunity to consume this exotic drink. One of the oldest and most famous of these is the Café Procope, located in the district of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris. Opened in 1686, Le Procope was frequented by many intellectuals up until its closure in 1890. It reopened a few years later and is today a traditional café-restaurant in Paris.

The origin and spread of coffee

More than likely originating in Ethiopia, primitive coffee plants were taken to Arabia, and domesticated and cultivated around the 12th century. Nevertheless, it wasn't until the 15th century that coffee was cultivated in the coastal region of Yemen, around the port of Moka (as proved by archaeological findings). It seems that the spread of the consumption of this infusion of roasted coffee beans was relatively rapid in the Muslim world, particularly within the Persian and Ottoman Empires, favoured by the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Regarding Europe, German, Italian, and Dutch botanists and travellers brought back information from the Middle East about this new plant and the beverage that could be made from it in the late 16th century, Venice being the specialist in this domain. The Dutch then played a major role in the transplantation of coffee to other places of production, first towards the East: in 1658, cultivation began in Ceylon, and at the end of the century, on the island of Java in Indonesia. They then brought it across the Atlantic Ocean to introduce it to Curaçao and Suriname in 1718. The introduction of coffee to the French colonies began circa 1715-1717 for Bourbon Island (current-day Réunion Island) and in the mid-1720s for the Lesser Antilles, thanks perhaps to Gabriel de Clieu, who is believed to have introduced a coffee plant to Martinique, before promoting its cultivation in Guadeloupe, where he was governor between 1737 and 1753.

This globalisation of coffee cultivation resulted in a spectacular increase in its production, particularly in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which alone accounted for over 60% of the volumes imported into Europe in the late 18th century. The increase in production allowed for the consumption of the "liquor that chases sleep away". It reflected the changing food tastes of populations in modern times and their ever-increasing appetite for exotic products. The other



consequence of course, was the massive recourse to the slave trade and colonial slavery to meet increasing demands and ensure sufficient production.

The emergence of “cafés” and Le Procope

The preparation of exotic drinks, primarily coffee, demanded a certain knowledge and know-how which initially required the use of “specialists” such as lemonade makers and then cafetiers. The career of Sicilian man Francesco Procopio dei Coltelli (1651-1716) is emblematic of the emergence of this new profession: he initially set up business at the Saint-Germain fair in Paris and in 1676, made a name for himself amongst the members of the community of “lemonade-makers-distillers” before settling in the rue de Tournon, before moving to the rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain and founding the café Le Procope, an institution whose success may be partly explained by the establishment a few months later of the nearby theatre of the Comédie-Française.

The number of coffee shops, inspired by the coffee houses that appeared in London in the mid-17th century, increased in the French capital: there were 380 in 1720 and over 600 at the end of the century, while at the same time, the population of the city grew from 510,000 to 660,000 inhabitants. According to Yves Jubinville, the café had a “dual cultural reference”: “[visiting] a café meant travelling between popular culture and elite culture, between the oral and the written word, in short, it was to live astride two worlds, two models of being and action”. In fact, the increasing numbers of such venues contributed to the growth of coffee consumption, even if this exotic drink was far from being the only one to be consumed there, and to the broadening of the social base of consumers, ranging from the elite to the working classes.

The clientèle of Le Procope

In the 18th century, Le Procope was a place frequented by Enlightenment philosophers and intellectuals. Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau were regulars there. Diderot and d’Alembert are said to have written several articles for their *Encyclopaedia* there, and the “founding father” of the United States, Benjamin Franklin, is said to have prepared part of the American Constitution within its walls. During the Revolution, deputies and journalists replaced the philosophers and Le Procope became a sounding board for revolutionary ideas. The café was initially taken over by the revolutionaries of the Club des Cordeliers: Danton, Marat, and Desmoulins, in particular. The members of the Club des Jacobins, the enemies of the Cordeliers, also became regulars. A portrait of Robespierre may still be seen still here. Throughout the following century, Le Procope remained a veritable Parisian institution, welcoming the great names of French poetry and literature: George Sand and Paul Verlaine, as well as Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo. However, the establishment’s reputation was not enough to prevent it from going bankrupt and it closed its doors in 1890. It



reopened after the war and subsequently became a restaurant whose format differed markedly from Le Procope known to thinkers and artists of the 18th and 19th centuries. The central role of cafés in intellectual life has left its mark in the French language with the expression “donner du grain à moudre” which translates literally as “having coffee beans to ground” or figuratively as “having food for thought”.



About the authors

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Illustrations



Studies of the lower classes or *Les Cris de Paris* (The Cries of Paris): *Caffé Caffé*, engraving, Anne Claude Philippe de Tubières, Comte de Caylus, 1746, public domain.



Interior of a London coffee house, 1690-1700, Creative commons.



“The café”, colour engraving, based on Janinet, 18th century.



“The establishment of new philosophy, our cradle was a café”, print, circa 1779, © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Portrait of Robespierre inside Le Procope, © Le Procope.



Current-day facade of the café-restaurant Le Procope, photo by Jean-Marie Hullot, Wikipedia Commons.