

THE DRAWING ROOM



I'm making a party of these 2 days holiday at Saché, I intend to fleece you of 1fr.50 at backgammon and 100 chips at wisth (sic).

Honoré de Balzac, Letter to Jean de Margonne, Passy, 9 June 1847.

Balzac's stays at Saché were not only motivated by his search for a peaceful place in which to work. From the 1830s, Balzac suffered from heart and lung problems : henceforth, Château de Saché was also a place of convalescence.

Balzac at leisure

According to Balzac, Doctor Nacquart *ordered* him to regularly *take the native air* in order to recover from his overly intense activities in Paris. Balzac's stays at Saché were thus sometimes dotted with long walks in the local *hundred year old woods*, visits to local stately home owners or whist¹ and backgammon² games with Jean Margonne. Furthermore, in line with his habits when in Paris³, it seems that Balzac sometimes led soirées himself at Saché : according to a descendant of Jean Margonne, the writer was in the habit of reading his novels to his hosts following a demonstration of his oratory talents during an evening at the house of neighbours in Artannes⁴.

ROMANTIC WALKS

In his correspondence with Madame Hanska, Balzac recounts several times his walks in the *beautiful woods* of Saché. In 1833, a hydraulic engineer sent a letter to Virgile Pertuis, Saché's estate manager. Not without irony, he evoked the *romantic* Balzac and his country house parties during which he sought inspiration :

[...] I thought I would redress an oversight and ask you for news of the romantic : does he often go to dream in the moonlight, at the foot of the oaks and beeches of the forest or at the bottom of those sinister-looking ravines ? If you have not already done so, do him the service of showing him Madelaine's grotto, at the bottom of the château's waterfall ; he would be very happy with that : he would go there to meditate on human misery whilst watching the leaves fall from the trees on a misty October day, whilst you more cheerful grape-pickers fill up your barrels with that liquid thanks to which you, as I, will feel little antipathy [...].

Honoré de Balzac's main stays at Château de Saché

1825

late Sept./early October:
one or two weeks.

1831

from early November
to mid-December.

1832

from 8 June to 16 July.

1834

from late Sept. to mid-
October.

1836

from 19 June to 4 July.

1837

from 15 to 26 August.

1848

from 3 June to 7 July.

1. Whist : card game of English origin, popular in Paris around 1830 (a predecessor of bridge).
2. Backgammon: dice game.
3. Contemporaries of Balzac, in particular Théophile Gautier and George Sand, reported that he would willingly narrate or read his work during soirées in Paris.
4. Amédée Salmon de Maison-Rouge, 'Souvenirs intimes de Balzac en Touraine', newsletter of the *Société Archéologique de Touraine*, vol. XII, 4th quarter of 1899.

