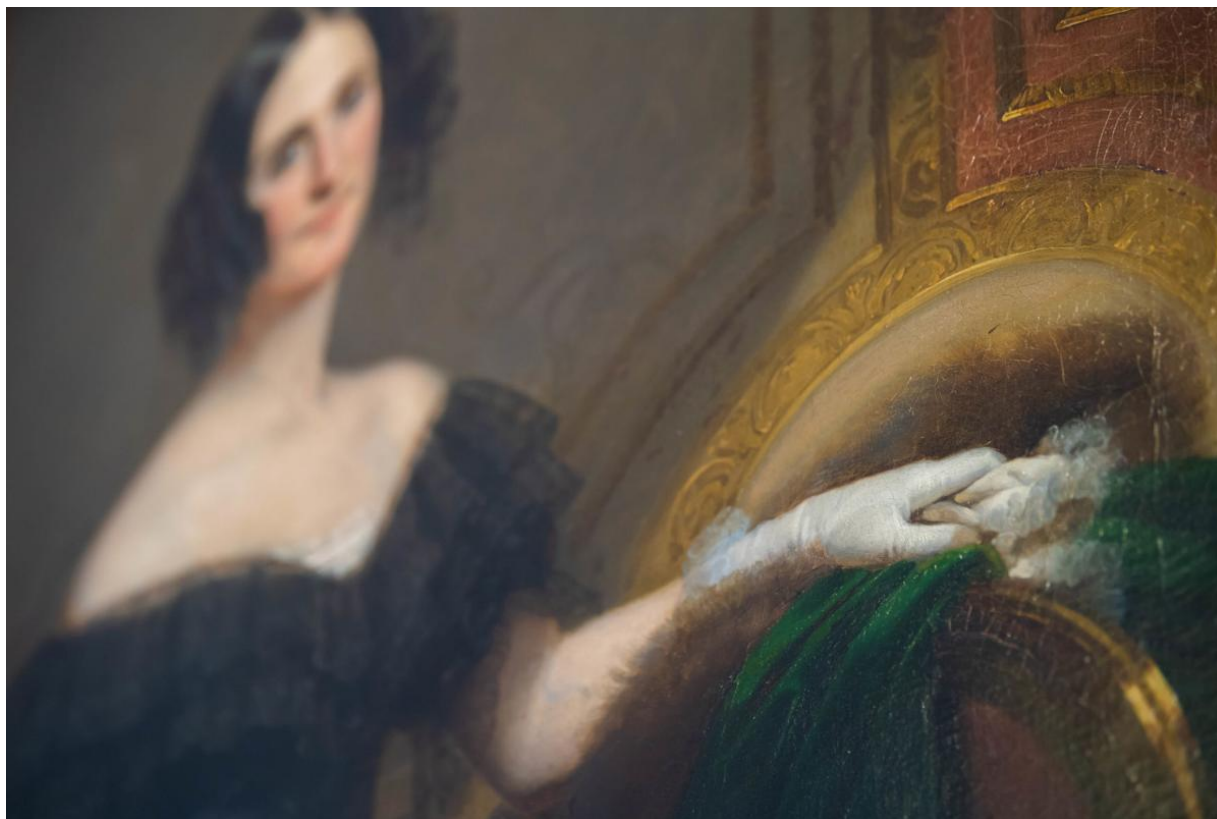


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# Exhibition on Baroness de Pontalba, among creators of Jackson Square, opens in French Quarter

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Detail of a painting of the Micaela, Baroness de Pontalba (1841) by Claude-Marie Debufe in the exhibition "The Baroness de Pontalba & The Rise of Jackson Square" at the Cabildo in the French Quarter of New Orleans on Friday, November 30, 2018.

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The glove on her hand is to hide the fingers that were shot off by her father-in-law while he was trying to murder her for her fortune.

ADVOCATE STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

When the exhibition "The Baroness de Pontalba & the Rise of Jackson Square" opens Sunday at the Louisiana State Museum's Cabildo in the

French Quarter, the Southern Gothic-like story of the family who essentially created Jackson Square will offer a little drama to go with the viewing of paintings, documents and decorative arts.

Born in 1795 in New Orleans, Micaela, Baroness de Pontalba, lived a life with plenty of twists and turns. In addition to helping shape the architectural landscape of the French Quarter, her story includes a move to France, a troubled marriage and an attempted assassination.

All play out in this exhibition featuring items pulled from the museum's own collection, the New Orleans Public Library, Tulane University, the Historic New Orleans Collection and the Pontalba family in France.

And while her family's affairs figure heavily in both the exhibition and the broader story of how today's Jackson Square and its surrounding buildings came to be, it is the baroness who dominates the exhibition's three sections.

The first part of the exhibition focuses on the baroness' early years and her father, Don Andres Almonester, who funded construction of

the Presbytere, St. Louis Cathedral and the Cabildo. After the fire of 1794, he funded the Cabildo again.

Part two is built around the troubled marriage of the baroness and Celestin de Pontalba, “her move to France and the tragic story of her life and attempted assassination by her father-in-law,” historian and guest curator Randolph Delehanty said.

The third part tells the story of “the transformation of Jackson Square,” from its humbler beginnings into what we see today.

The Upper and Lower Pontalba Buildings — now owned by the city of New Orleans and state of Louisiana, respectively — became prominent features of the iconic area. The exhibit also explains how the muddy parade grounds of the Place d’Armes were transformed into today's Jackson Square, complete with the statue of Andrew Jackson.

Delehanty said he believes the baroness was instrumental in the design of the Pontalba buildings, though the name of the architect remains a mystery.

The story of how the exhibition arrived at the local museum is itself a tale, not as dramatic as that of the baroness, but one that involves a road trip through France and a chance encounter that helped add to the exhibition's offerings.

Six years ago, museum supporter and real estate agent Peter Patout got lost with his cousin in northeast France. Somewhere outside Paris, they saw a sign for "Senlis," which they knew is where the chateau of the Pontalba family was located.

"We go to the tourist information office, ask about the chateau, then the woman calls the chateau, hands me the phone," Patout said. "The person who answered said that we can go there and tour the grounds."

The chateau was where the baroness lived after her marriage.

Upon arrival, they met Pierre Pontalba, who is now the family liaison for the exhibition. Pontalba provided a three-hour tour; the visitors were also allowed to see some of the inside of the chateau.

They kept in touch, and two years ago, Pontalba was invited to New Orleans to learn more about the city.

Patout called Louisiana State Museum Foundation Director Susan Maclay to help set up a tour of some of the flood-protection structures around New Orleans because she also was president of the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-West.

“I was blown away there were still Pontalbas in existence,” Maclay said. “And I had no clue they were still living in the family chateau.”

It was from this meeting that Maclay thought of creating a Founders Ball for the foundation on Saturday and connecting it to an exhibition opening the next day on the life of Baroness Pontalba.

Among those attending the ball: Pierre Pontalba and his parents, Charles-Edouard and Isabelle, Baron and Baroness de Pontalba.

The family has lent a number of important pieces to the exhibition that have never been seen in the U.S., including a watercolor of the

baroness' father-in-law and an 1841 painting of the baroness by Claude-Marie Dubufe.

“This exhibition so wonderfully illustrates authenticity by seeing actual artifacts,” said Steven Maklansky, the museum's interim director.

“And then we have this sense of legacy,” he added, “that sense that we are a part of this, the connection that we have when we walk the same steps the baroness did.”

The exhibition runs through Oct. 15.

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