

AN EXPLORATION OF GLOBAL DEAF CULTURE IN FRANCE

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INTRODUCTION

The RIT/NTID France Study Abroad program involved the completion of a Spring semester course, culminating in a two-week study abroad. The course covered a variety of content including French Deaf history, French Sign Language (LSF), and general French culture. While in France, we had the opportunity to apply our newly gained knowledge and experience the cultural aspects first-hand. As a group, we traveled through Paris, Rouen, and Caen. We visited prominent French landmarks, including those specific to global Deaf culture. We were often accompanied by Deaf French tour guides whose expertise served to complement our cross-cultural experience. Our interactions were diverse and involved navigating between ASL, LSF, English, and French.



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FRENCH DEAF CULTURE & HISTORY

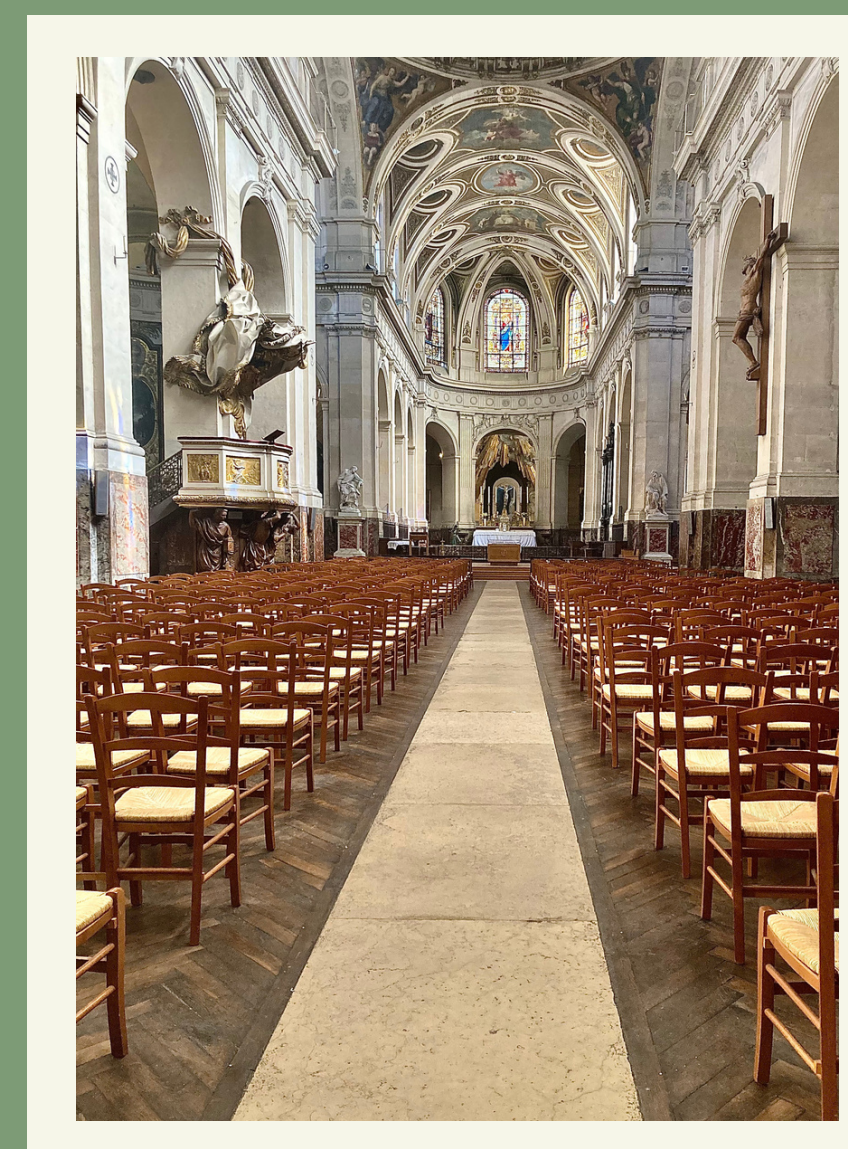


Figure 1

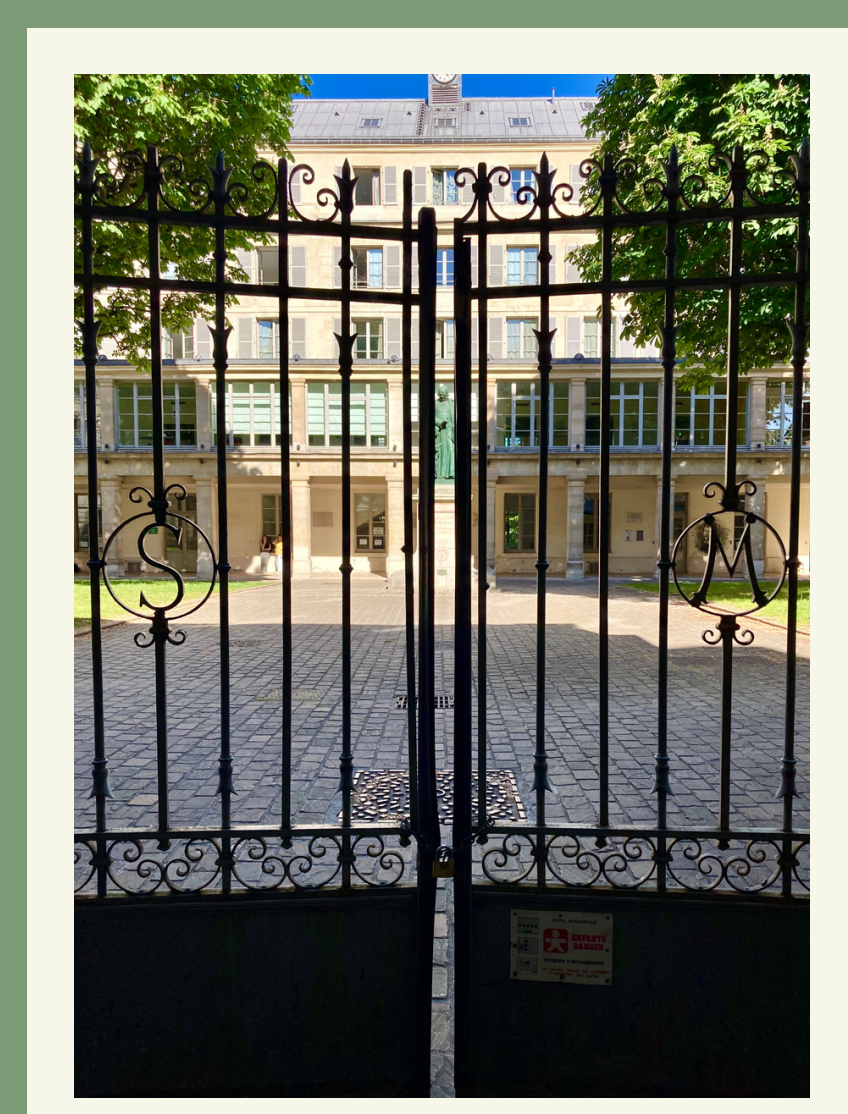


Figure 2

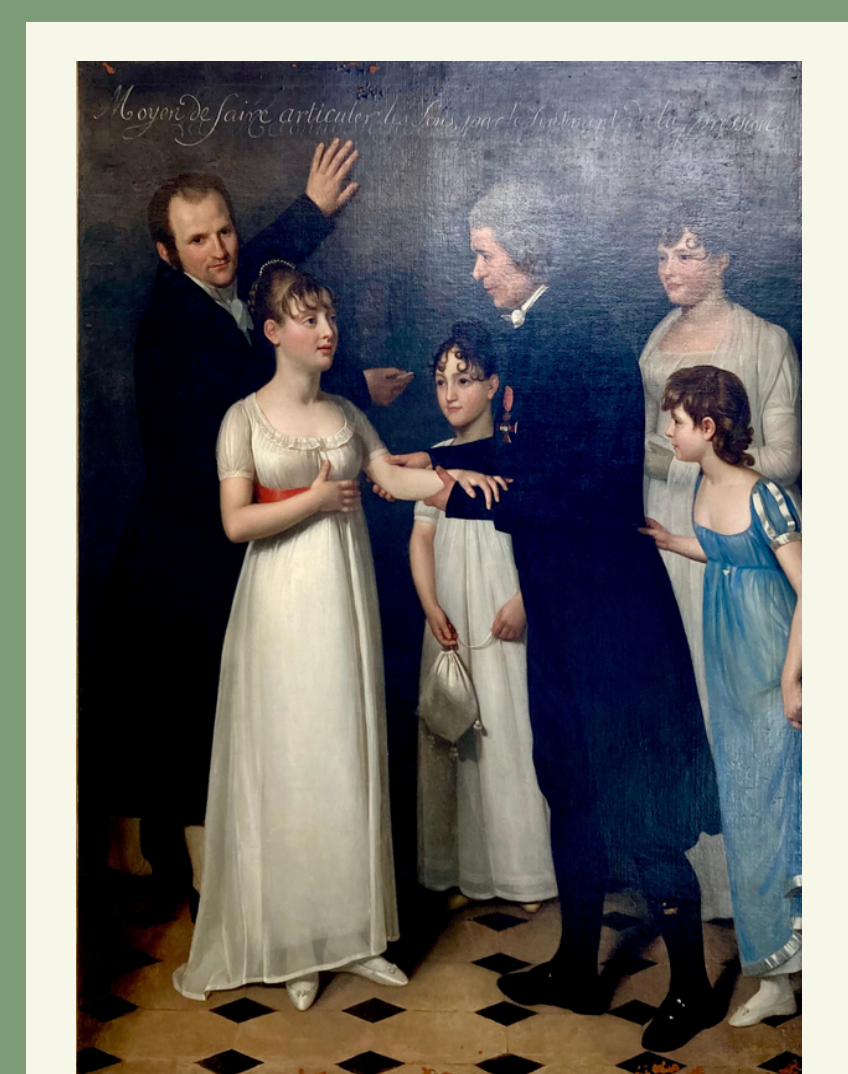


Figure 3



Figure 4

The "Father of the Deaf," Abbe de L'Epee, is an integral figure in French Deaf history. The image to the left (Figure 1) displays the church in which L'Epee's tomb now lies. In his life, L'Epee was an educator of the Deaf who founded the Institut National de Jeunes Sourds (National Institute for the Deaf) in Paris, 1760. To this day, L'Epee is often hailed as the "Father of Sign Language." In fact, in this regard, L'Epee was a student of the Deaf. The French Deaf community created their own sign language which they shared with L'Epee. This system of communication, which he dubbed "methodical signs," was a key component of his educational approach.

The National Institute for the Deaf remains open, carrying with it the legacy of its founder. At the center of the courtyard, visible through the gates in Figure 2, is a statue of Abbe de L'Epee. The school is open to both residential and non-residential students who receive education in their native sign language. Our group was fortunate to enjoy a tour of the campus during our stay in Paris. The tour itself was carried out in LSF, as our guide was unfamiliar with ASL.

Figure 3 is one painting displayed within the institution's walls. Though difficult to read, there are two lines of script written at the top. One of the lines is written boldly, the other nearly indiscernible. This peculiarity reflects the impact of the 1880 Milan Congress. The original script, which promoted the use of sign language in Deaf education, was overwritten to reflect oralist ideology. Here was a physical representation of oralist propaganda--the alteration of a single line, in a single work of art.

At the conclusion of our tour, we happened upon one of the institute's students in the courtyard. A snapshot of our interaction can be seen in Figure 4, wherein the student is pictured on the left wearing grey sweatpants and a long sleeve shirt. This interaction, though unplanned, demonstrated the strength of the global Deaf community more than any other that I experienced while abroad.