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Tunisian works (1927–1936) of Joseph Hiriart: completing the architectural career of an Art Deco master

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The Mediterranean Sea separates the French architectural works of Joseph Hiriart (1888–1946) from his Tunisian buildings in North Africa. Among the former are Villa Leihorra (1926) and other works of the late 1920s that were built on the French Basque coast. These were preceded by the La Maîtrise pavilion (1925), which was designed by Hiriart in collaboration with Georges Tribout and Georges Beau on the occasion of the ‘International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts’ that was held in Paris in 1925. These pieces of architecture form the most published and recognised part of the career of Hiriart, a master of Art Deco and a key architect in the interwar period. However, the same is not true of his Tunisian works that span from 1927 to 1936 because, despite the obvious and consistent interest in them as they provide additional features which complement his French works, their dissemination has been incomplete and limited to brief mentions. The paper sets out Hiriart’s biography and best-known works, and then focuses on his time in Tunisia, providing an overview of the architectural projects he carried out there and framing them in the colonial context with the aim to fill this historical void and restore the Tunisian part of his architectural work.

Introduction

Joseph Hiriart was a key architect in the interwar period and a forefather of a style that over time would become known as Art Deco. Even if his best-known works were built in France, these have been addressed in books and magazines beyond the French-speaking world. The reference to the La Maîtrise pavilion (1925) in Paris, a project undertaken by Hiriart with his colleagues, Georges Tribout and Georges Beau, for the ‘International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts’, is recurrent in the books on Art Deco architecture,¹ as well as in books about modern architecture.² Other works of Hiriart, such as Villa Leihorra (1926) in Ciboure, southwest France, have been covered in books on the history of architecture during the interwar period,³ and are

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part of several compilations published in France.⁴ Regarding monographs, it is noteworthy that Hiriart's life and works, which were carried out during a relatively short career (1924–1945), are told in detail in Valerie Lannes' *Joseph Hiriart, Architecte de la lumière* (2015).⁵

However, there is scant literature on the professional stage that Hiriart developed in Tunisia which generally appears as brief notes. For example, in the aforementioned monograph by Lannes, no more than a few pages with incomplete information are dedicated to Hiriart's Tunisian works, which offer only fragmentary explanations without a complete overview.⁶ The same is true of books that are dedicated to Tunisian modern architecture, for instance, *Tunis l'Orient de la Modernité* (2010) by Charles Bilas.⁷ This particular work is neither in-depth in the study of Hiriart's works nor does it establish a relationship between his overseas works and French works.

Contrary to what might be deduced from the scant attention given to these Tunisian works, they fully deserve to be brought to light because they are the fruits of half of Hiriart's professional architectural career and they complement his French works in profoundly relevant aspects. Firstly, they are buildings of a certain size, most of which were intended for collective housing, a purpose that the architect was facing for the first time. On the other hand, they brought a change regarding the relationship of the works with their environment. While his French works located in small coastal towns were in dialogue with their natural environment, his Tunisian works have a purely urban character since they were constructed in the main streets of the new European city of Tunis. Finally, beyond the practical aspects, the study of these works brings to light the involvement of Hiriart with the colonial system, as well as a new reading of the use he made of a style that in the interwar period would be used to proclaim Europe's *mission civilisatrice* in the colonies.⁸

In this article, a full perspective of Hiriart's architectural career is provided, which links his French and Tunisian works, relating the well-known characteristics of the former with the new features that come to light after the study of the latter, such as the use of Arab architectural elements. Following the first section that provides a biography of Hiriart and reviews his major French works, there are two sections on the urban colonial policies in the Maghreb countries and the new European city of Tunis. The article then provides a brief cameo of Hiriart's colleagues, leading to the section that expands on Hiriart's six works in Tunisia and a conclusion.

Studies and early works

Joseph Hiriart was born on 6 March 1888 in the Basque city of Bayonne, in southwest France, western Pyrenees. He entered the School of Fine Arts of Bordeaux in 1905 to study industrial and decorative arts. Thanks to a grant from the City of Bayonne, he was able to enrol at the École des beaux-arts in Paris in 1911 to study architecture. He was admitted to the workshop of Gustave Umdenstock, and according to the awards obtained he was a model student who won several medals and mentions in drawing, modelling, and perspec-

tive.⁹ The Beaux-Arts style prevailed, which was the result of one and a half centuries of instruction under the authority, firstly, of the Académie royale d'architecture and, secondly, of the architecture section of the Académie des Beaux-Arts after the French Revolution. It was a classic style, which was nourished by the great traditions, characterised by symmetry, the hierarchy of spaces, historicism, and a profuse repertoire of ornamental elements.¹⁰ However, from the last years of the nineteenth century, most graduates, including Hiriart, rejected the Beaux-Arts style, adopting a non-academic language such as Art Deco for their projects.¹¹

The career of Hiriart was interrupted after the outbreak of the First World War since France called him up to fight for his homeland; he enlisted in the French Air Force and became a sergeant of the Chauny Squadron. On 1 February 1916, while flying over German territory, his plane was hit and he was forced to land. From there, he was captured and then taken to a camp near Mannheim in southern Darmstadt, Germany. However, in the spring of 1917, he managed to escape and returned to France.¹² He resumed his studies in 1919 and married Joséphine Signoret whose parents, an Occitan father and a Basque mother, had met in Mexico, from where they returned enriched during the 1910s, after the father prospered in the business world.

The couple settled in Paris and Joseph obtained his degree as a government-certified architect in 1922.¹³ He immediately opened an architecture studio on Rue Marbeuf, near the Champs-Élysées Avenue. He was soon associated with Georges Tribout and Georges Beau. Three of them formed an ambitious team and went on to win the competition for an exhibition pavilion convened by the Galeries Lafayette stores on the occasion of the 'International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts' in 1925. The pavilion, called La Maîtrise, took the form of an octagon, and a column designed by Léon Leyritz and decorated with a sphinx was raised in each of the vertices (Fig. 1). On one side, at the

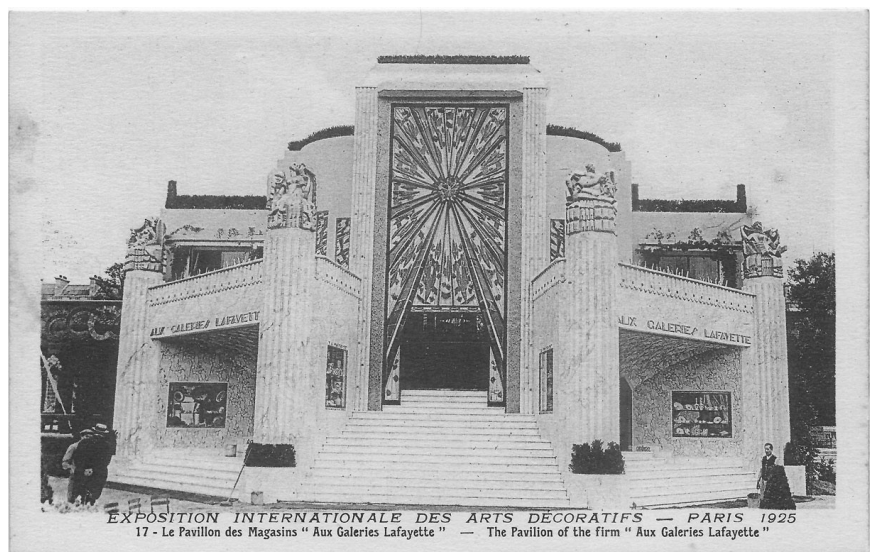


Figure 1.
La Maîtrise pavilion, 1925, by
Joseph Hiriart, Georges Tribout and
Georges Beau, developed by
Galeries Lafayette stores as part of
the 'International Exhibition of
Modern Decorative and Industrial
Arts', postcard, Wikimedia
Commons

top of a stone staircase, was an elegant open door designed by the stained-glass maker Jacques Gruber, with the image of a resplendent sun. Inside, there was a set of counters that were made by the best cabinetmakers, which were decorated with the most precious leather, glass, and metals. It was certainly one of the most famous pavilions of the Exhibition, whose photographs and chronicles were published in hundreds of newspapers, books, and magazines.

Thanks to the success with *La Maîtrise*, the team would become known throughout France, receiving commissions from all over the country and specially from the Basque coastal area. It was one of the places where the signs of the new era were most clearly presented, characterised by luxury and the desire to have fun; new architecture flourished on the Basque coast. Examples are the Andalusian house *Barbarena* (1926) in Biarritz by Henri Giraudel, the casino *La Pergola* (1929) in Saint-Jean-de-Luz in the modern style by Robert Mallet-Stevens, and the villa *Bagheera* (1926) in Anglet by Georges-Henri Pingusson, in which the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and that of southern Spain were combined.¹⁴

In 1925, Hiriart designed the *Lehen Tokia* house in Ciboure.¹⁵ Hiriart arranged the design by combining both Basque style and Art Deco elements, such as the stained-glass in the front door by Jacques Gruber, featuring a flock of ducks taking flight. In 1926, Hiriart's mother-in-law commissioned him to design and build, very near to *Lehen Tokia*, what was to be the 'most beautiful house on the Basque coast, with a courtyard inside, as in the houses we knew in Mexico'.¹⁶ Thus, Hiriart conceived *Villa Leihorra* (Fig. 2), an imposing Palladian-style house with a flat roof and interior patio, plus noteworthy contributions by some of the best artists of the time: mosaics by ceramist Édouard Cazaux, forged ironworks by Jean Schwartz, stained-glass windows by Jacques Gruber, and sculptures by Yvonne Serruys.



Figure 2.
Villa Leihorra, Ciboure, Basque
coast, 1926, by Joseph Hiriart at the
request of his mother-in-law,
photographed by the author, 2019



Figure 3.
Entrance of the Musée de la Mer in Biarritz, 1932, by Joseph Hiriart, François Lafaye, and René Laccourreye, showing the shield of the town of Biarritz by Alfred Biberstein at the top, and on the frontispiece, above the door, a bas-relief by Lucien Danglade, with the figure of an octopus and the name of the museum, photographed by the author, 2020

In 1928, Hiriart was required to rebuild the Chappelle du Sacré-Coeur in Hasparren. The frescoes painted by Georges Sauvage and the work of the Mauméjean brothers, who painted the Christ in the apse, are worthy of note.¹⁷ Further, Hiriart, François Lafaye, and René Laccourreye were the architects of the Musée de la Mer in Biarritz (1932), which is an imposing building in concrete at the foot of the cliffs, on whose façade stands an entrance body that resembles the bow of a ship, with marked cornices and green glass (Fig. 3).

Nevertheless, in the mid-1920s, after a period of recovery the French economy began to decline, and the commissions received in the studio of Hiriart, Beau, and Tribout dwindled to a trickle. Hence, faced with this reality, Hiriart decided to look for new markets in other countries. The French North Africa, within which the urbanism of a second wave of European colonisation was developing, was a good opportunity.¹⁸

Urban policies in the colonial cities of the Maghreb: a shifting context

As Patricia A. Morton explains,¹⁹ the French colonial policy would undergo a transformation in the first decades of the twentieth century, shifting from the assimilation of the colonies into the French nation to the association of the colonies with France.²⁰ As could be seen in the 'Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris' (1931), the Great France, made up of France and its colonies, required an architectural expression that was different from that of colonial sections of previous expositions, marked by a sort of exoticism and a lack of authenticity.

The colonial policy of assimilation in the mid-nineteenth century was derived from the republican ideology of equality and the supposition that the colonised peoples would only benefit by adopting French civilisation and rejecting their own. Under assimilation, France and its colonies were conceived as a united country, ruled under the same flag and with one language. This assimilationist policy may be seen in the first urban interventions in colonial Algiers, which the French government aimed at providing all the attributes of a French capital city.²¹ The first works were carried out in 1832 by opening its central Place des Armes inside the Casbah and widening streets to facilitate the movement of French troops. In the following decades the Empress Eugénie Boulevard, hotels, residential buildings with arcades, and official headquarters with reference to Haussmann's Paris would be built next to a new sea front, which was inaugurated by Napoleon III.²²

But at the turn of the century, under the inspiration of the French colonial advocates, a new policy of association emerged from the emulation of British native policies.²³ This policy was informed by racial theories of evolution, according to which 'the indigenous civilisation was inferior and segregation was advantageous for the natives'. This new approach brought about the strict segregation of natives by the French, and it would inspire the urban projects to be applied in the countries that were colonised later than Algeria. Following the distinction made by François Béguin, the 'Protector's Style' would be applied, rather than the 'Conqueror's Style'.²⁴

That is the case of Morocco, where in 1912, Marshal Lyautey, head of the French protectorate of Morocco, went to the city planner Henri Prost for the planning of the colonial cities. In Rabat, Prost arranged a separation space composed of recreational areas between the medina and the colonial city, whereas in Casablanca he aimed to structure the growth of the new city by opening two circular avenues and radial ways tangent to the medina.²⁵

The same policy was carried out in Tunisia. It was in the populated coastal towns where the dissociation between the Arab town and the colonial extension would manifest to a greater degree. In Bizerte, for example, the European town filled the area between the walled city and the Bizerte Canal and was designed as a grid cut by two diagonal avenues.²⁶ This is how the spatial structure of the colonial towns was developed to ensure the comfort of Europeans. Housing units in these districts were a lot larger, contained far more amenities, and boasted significantly larger surrounding spaces for gardens and other activities.²⁷

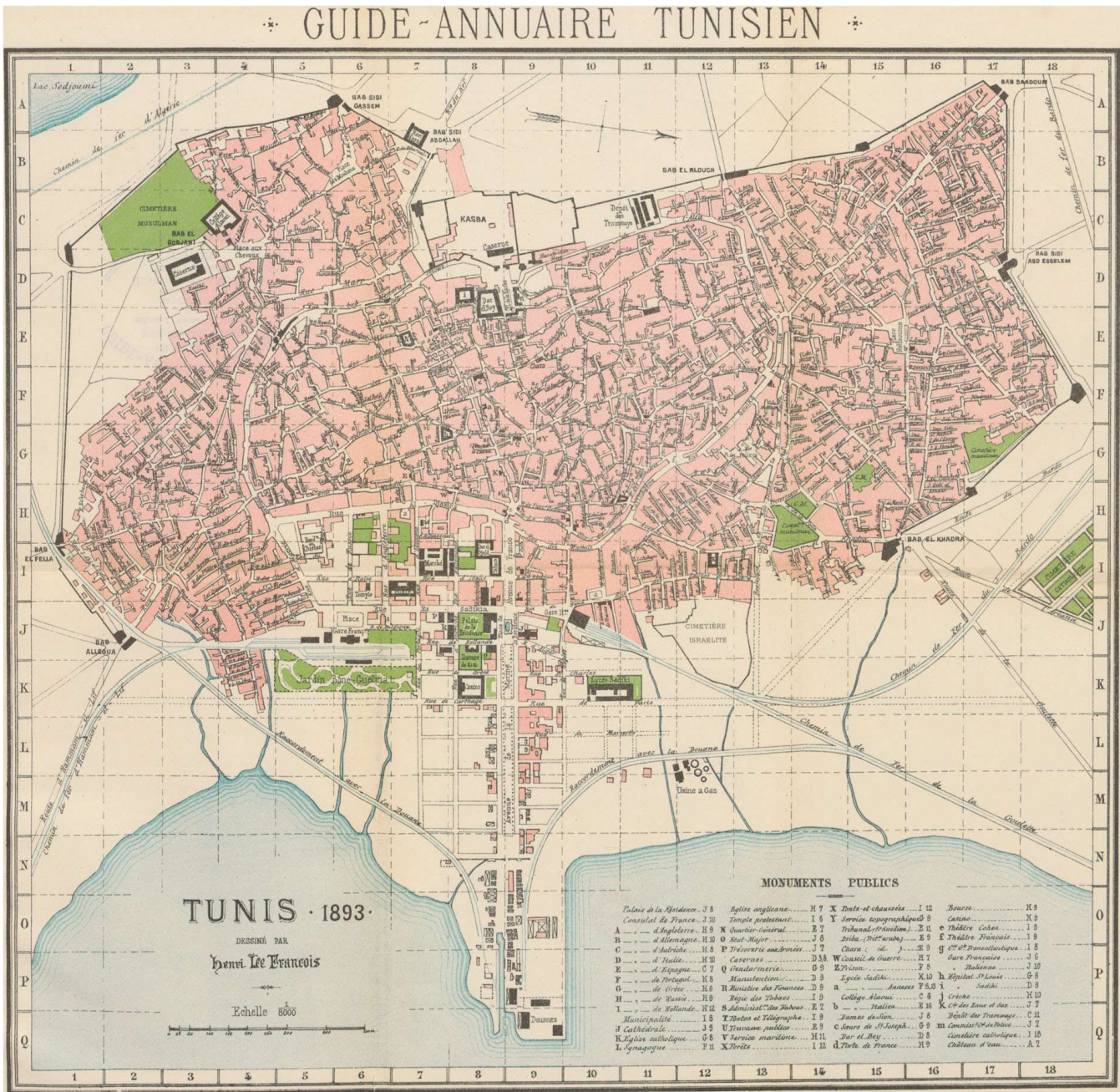
Looking for a new market in the European city of Tunis

No city in the Maghreb reflects the relationship between association policy and urban planning as clearly as Tunis. The city was undergoing expansion since the 1880s, after the invasion by French troops and the signing of the Bardo Treaty of 1881, by which the country became a French protectorate under Paul Cambon, the French resident Minister in Tunisia (1882–1885).

After the construction of the Post Office of France and the Consulate of France (1862), adjacent to the walls of the Arab medina, the extension of the European city began, with a population consisting of a few thousand people, most of whom were Italian.²⁸ From *Bab al-Bahr* [The Sea Gate], located at the foot of the wall of the Arab medina in its eastern part, an urban axis would be born in a west–east direction, to reach the Bahira swamp. The axis, which took the form of a boulevard, would take the name of Avenue de France in its first part up to the French consulate, and that of Avenue Jules Ferry in its longest and widest stretch.²⁹ Perpendicular to this axis were drawn the Avenue de Carthage and the Avenue de Paris, which, together with the Avenue Jules Ferry formed the main axes of the European city, a sort of *cardus* and *decumanus* of modern Tunis.³⁰ The layout of the new city was carried out by engineers and geometers; hence its orthogonal configuration, as shown in the plan drawn by Henri Lee François in 1893 (Fig. 4).³¹

The Consulate of France would be followed by the construction of the Catholic cathedral Saint Vincent de Paul by Louis Bonnet-Labranche, which was completed in 1897 in a mixture of styles, including Moorish revival and Neo-Byzantine architectural traditions. Near the consulate and the cathedral, next to a series of classicist-style houses, is the Municipal Theatre (1902) by Jean-Émile Resplandy in the Art Nouveau style.³²

At the end of the 1920s, the construction of the European city was an unstoppable fact. Almost all of the plots of the Avenue Jules Ferry were built



upon, and the Avenue de Carthage and the Avenue de Paris were in the process of being built. While next to the medina walls the oldest houses built in the last decades of the nineteenth century are in styles such as Neoclassicism, Liberty, and Art Nouveau (Fig. 5), the buildings to the east of the European city that were erected after the First World War are in modern styles such as Art Deco, Rationalist, or Arabesque.³³

The growth of the building activity in the city was generated by the need for housing to accommodate the growing number of settlers combined with the imported French phenomenon of urbanisation. As a result of the expansion of the European city (Fig. 6), a number of new neighbourhoods were being built, such as Montfleury, Mutuelle-ville, and Lafayette.³⁴ It was a process that was induced by the Industrial Revolution and favoured by the development of infrastructures, means of transport, new hygienist attitudes, and a legal arsenal whose main tools, as far as Tunis is concerned, consisted of the Land Law Act of 1885 and the Road Regulations Act of 1889.³⁵ The boost in the expansion of the City Council would be channelled through its powerful development departments, such as the General Directorate of Public Works, the City Works Directorate, and the Road Service. These departments carried out an integral remodelling of the space outside the walls.

Figure 4.
Map of Tunis, 1893, showing the Avenue de France, more or less formed, as well as the houses on the north side of the Avenue Jules Ferry, while Avenues of Carthage and Paris are simply traced, in Henri Lee François, *Souvenir de Tunis. Notice générale sur la Tunisie*, 1893, p. 61, Mechanical Curator Collection, British Library, reproduced with permission

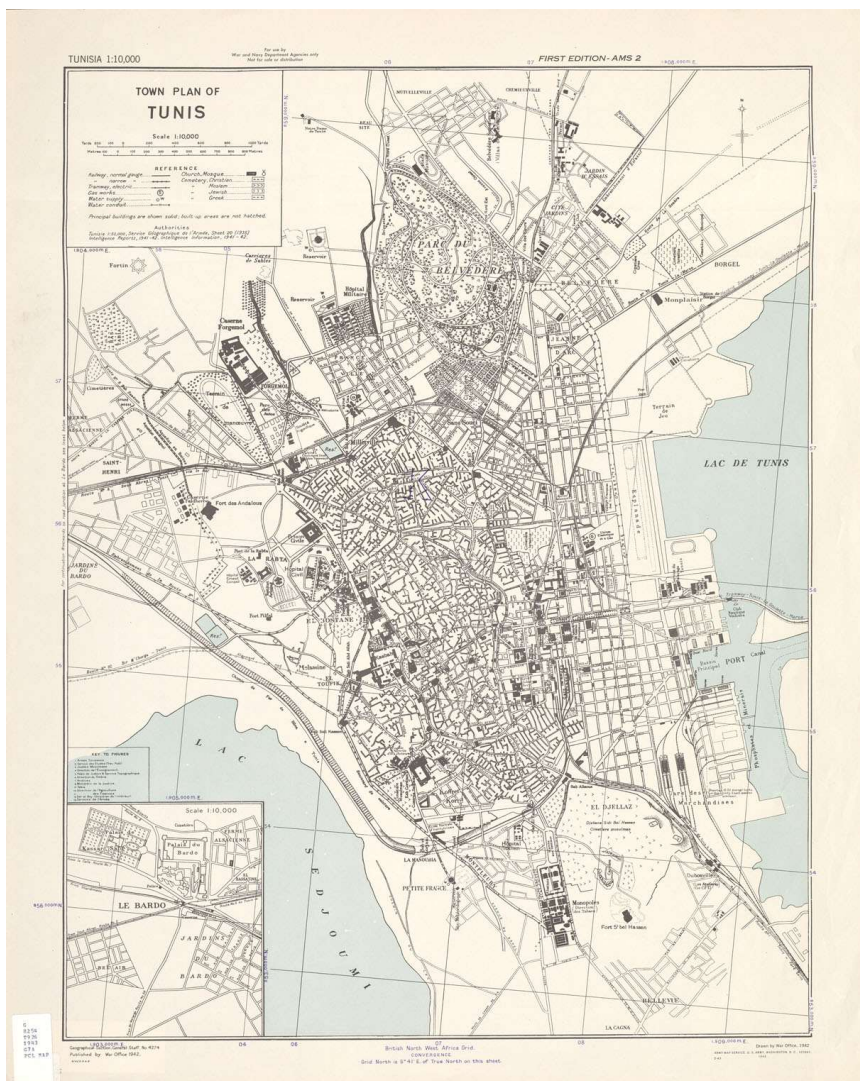


Figure 5.
Classical-style houses in the corner where Avenue de France (former Promenade de la Marine) meets Rue Charles de Gaulle (former Rue d'Italie), photographed by the author, 2019

Figure 6.
Town Plan of Tunis, 1942, by the U.S. Army Map Service, fifty years after the plan drawn by Henri Lee François in Fig. 4, showing the extension of the new European city of Tunis completed by then, Army Map Service, U.S. Army, Perry-Castañeda Map Collection, University of Texas Libraries, reproduced with permission

As in the other Maghreb countries, with the growth of the capital, together with the increasing need to adapt architectural models to the local context, it soon became necessary to set up architectural consulting firms on site. Architecture, as a profession, became a viable economic activity and was taken up by colonial practitioners operating in familiar territory.³⁶ The Protectorate pursued a policy aimed at attracting French companies and professionals. As Gwendolyn Wright has argued, the French colonies did provide an exceptional opportunity for transforming the concerns of architects into real policies, given the prevailing urban apathy of the metropolis after the completion of its renewal on the initiative of Napoleon III and the prefect Haussmann.³⁷

This is the context in which Hiriart would start his new professional stage in the late 1920s. Nevertheless, Tunisia was not just a market for Hiriart because it was also an opportunity to collaborate in the strengthening of the Protectorate. Indeed, as Daniel E. Coslett notes, it was a Dual Protectorate being both French and Catholic, which were Hiriart's two main distinguishing features.³⁸ First, Hiriart committed himself to the expansion of the French culture in Tunisia, where there was a competition between the French and the Italians in the social, demographic, and economic fields.³⁹ This struggle dated back to the mid-nineteenth century, when Father François Bourgade anticipated the secular organisation Alliance Française, which established one of its first overseas centres in Tunis, soon after the Protectorate expressly decided to promote the French language and thus combat 'the Italian menace'.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Hiriart felt that he himself was on a mission in that territory, and willingly collaborated with the implantation of Catholicism, which was strongly rooted in the country since the time of the Tunis Archbishop, Charles Lavigerie. Proof of his involvement is the letter sent by the Archbishop of Paris, Jean Verdier, to Hiriart in 1927, expressing the wish that Hiriart carry out the project for a new church in Tunis, notwithstanding the fact that the project did not succeed.⁴¹

Two new colleagues: Jean-Marcel Seignouret and Victor Valensi

It was not with his Parisian associates that Hiriart embarked on his professional career in Tunisia, but with a new partner: the architect Jean-Marcel Seignouret, who would be responsible for the monitoring of the works and with whom he opened a studio at 4 Rue Bretagne, Tunis, in 1927. Seignouret was born in Auch, southeast France. As a child, his family moved to Tunisia, where he was educated at the Lycée Carnot. Seignouret was mobilised in the First World War, after which he entered the School of Fine Arts in Paris to obtain his diploma in 1926.⁴² Among his first works are the monument dedicated to the fallen in the war in Fabrèzan, Aude, in 1927 together with the architect Henri Gibert and the sculptor Firmin Michelet, as well as the École primaire Supérieure de jeunes filles [Superior School for Young Girls] in Bizerte, Tunisia, in 1931. After the Second World War, Seignouret continued his career in Tunisia, which ended in 1961.

Moreover, Hiriart was sponsored by the influential Victor Valensi, a member of a reputable Jewish family of Italian origin, wherein many members worked in

the municipal administration or practiced the liberal professions. Valensi became an architect of the Tunisian government after graduating from the School of Fine Arts in Paris in 1913. In 1923, he published the book *L'habitation tunisienne* [*Tunisian Housing*], showing how Tunisian white-volume architecture could be combined with modern architecture, by purging the most picturesque of ornaments.⁴³ He designed the Tunisia pavilion for the 'International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts' (1925) in Paris, as well as various private houses in Sidi Bou Said and the Grande Synagogue on Paris Avenue, Tunis (1912).⁴⁴ He undertook the project of the Tunisian Pavilion for the Colonial Exposition (1931), and he was a professor at the School of Fine Arts of Tunis (1930).

In the next section, the six projects that were carried out by Hiriart in Tunisia will be presented, five of which were actually built. The methodology has been developed according to the following steps: consultation of documents in the National Archives of Tunisia and the Building Control Service of the City Council, literature reviews, scrutiny of the two main construction magazines of the time, *Chantiers* and *Journal*,⁴⁵ and finally, the visit by the author to Hiriart's Tunisian works.

First incursions (1929): the proposal for the railway station and the monument to Bourde

At the end of 1929, the General Directorate of Public Works of Tunisia called for a design competition for a new railway station, replacing the previous structure. The station would be located on the boundary of the Petite Sicile, a set of blocks south of Avenue Jules Ferry and east of Avenue Carthage. It would become the central location of a railway network that began to expand in the 1870s, by means of concessions to British, French, and Italian companies. This network would facilitate the movement of Tunisians through their country as well as the extraction of raw materials, which would be quickly shipped to the metropolis from the port of Bizerte. Hiriart and Seignouret, together with René Audineau, presented a proposal with an industrial appearance and constructivist influence, emphasised with a slender tower (Fig. 7), which drew inspiration from the station that Tony Garnier wanted in his Cité Industrielle.⁴⁶ The trio won the sixth prize, while the jury declared the first prize void. According to the magazine *Chantiers*, the project of Hiriart and his partners was the result of a thorough study of the organisation and internal operation.⁴⁷

Around the same time, Hiriart participated in designing the monument in homage to Paul Bourde, Director of Agriculture in 1891, who launched an aid programme to incorporate irrigation techniques used by the Romans in antiquity. Sculptures of prominent men of colonisation, such as the statues of Cardinal Lavigerie (1825) and Jules Ferry (1899), who played a determining role in the implementation of the Protectorate, were erected in Tunis.⁴⁸ In the same way, the French colonial government promoted the construction of a monument in the central square of the European quarter of Sfax, in recognition

Figure 7.
View of the proposal for the competition for a new railway station, 1929, by Joseph Hiriart, Jean-Marcel Seignouret, and René Audineau, in 'La nouvelle gare de Tunis', *Chantiers. Revue mensuelle illustrée de la construction en Afrique du Nord (Les chantiers nord-africains)* (April 1930), 325–34 (p. 329), Bibliothèque nationale de France, reproduced with permission

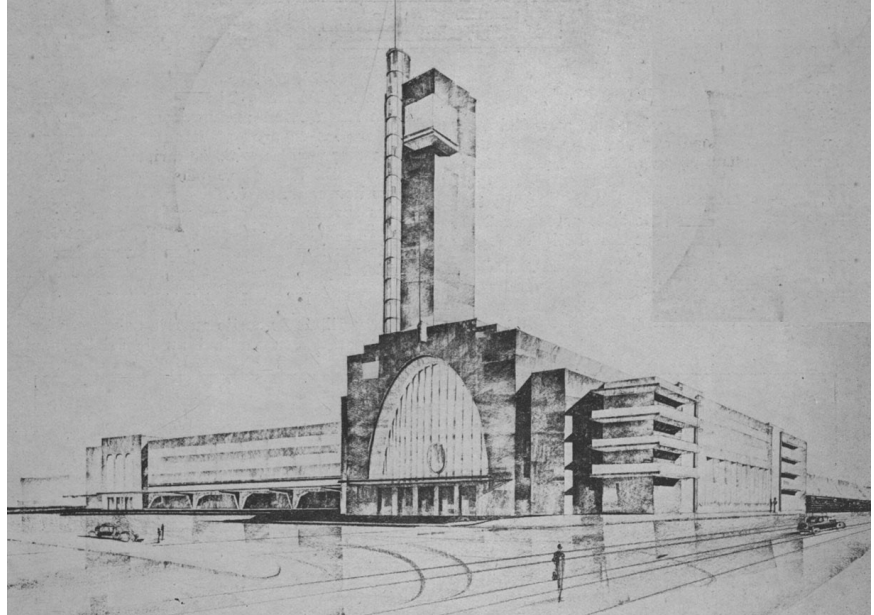


Figure 8.
The monument to Paul Bourde, 1929, in the central square of the European quarter of Sfax, which remained standing until 1957, postcard, Wikimedia Commons



of Bourde's work, which would be inaugurated on 13 April 1930. The monument, composed of a monolith and a bust, would be located in the centre of a garden, surrounded by an iron chain and egg-shaped ornaments (Fig. 8). Hiriart projected a mass of octagonal plan with geometric mouldings and a ribbed dome.⁴⁹ The bust, which would be attached to the eastern face of the mass, was made by the Flemish sculptress Yvonne Serruys, author of the sculpture of a stork that was placed a few years before in the garden of Villa Leihorra

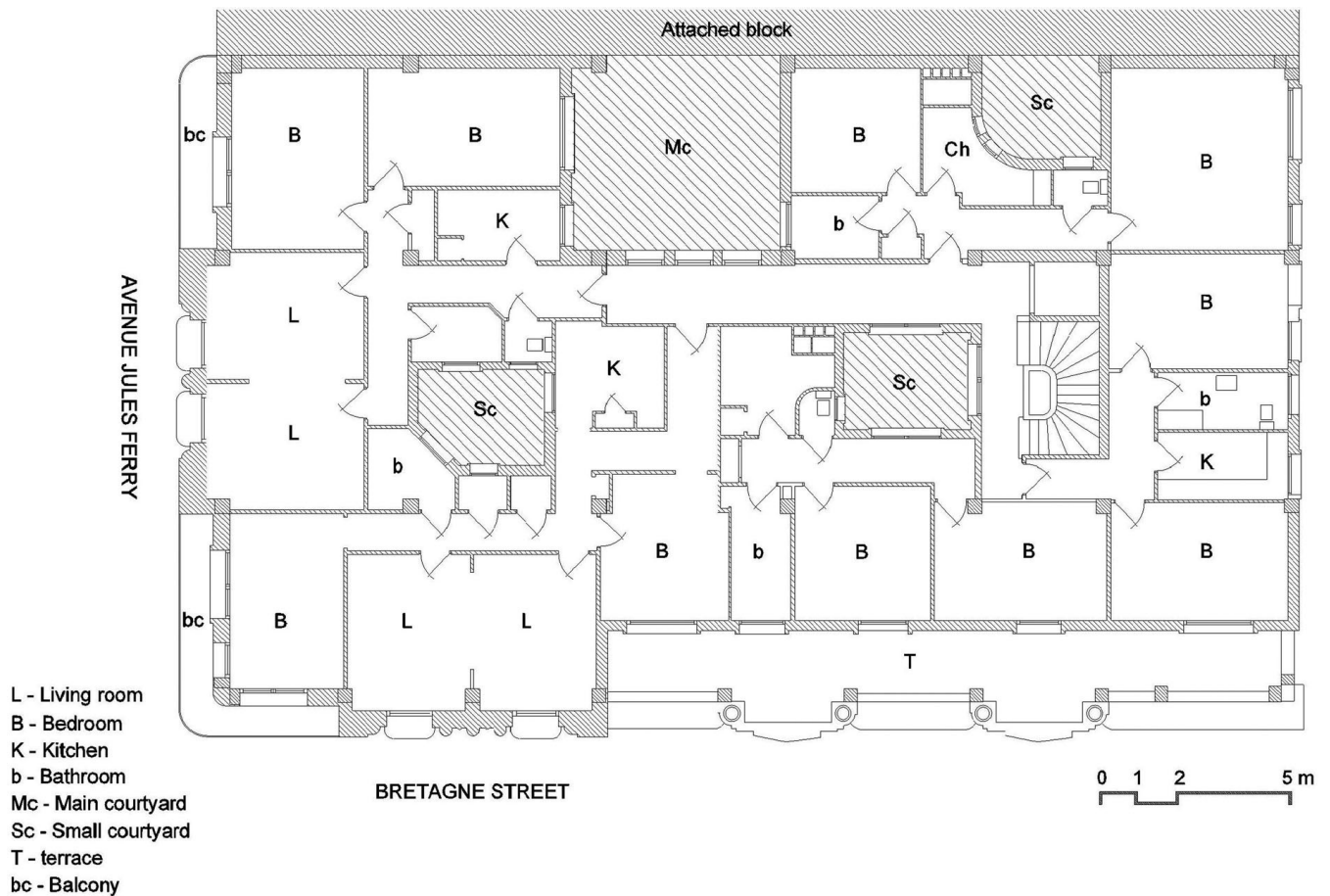
(1926). She was married to Pierre Mille, a member of the Conseil supérieur des colonies [Supreme Council of the Colonies], and was involved in the implementation of the Protectorate, as shown by the sculpture she made in homage to the French Resident Minister Paul Cambon (1928). Like the sculpture of Cambon, the monument to Bourde was meant to represent the empire in the colonial cities, transmitting the message of 'authority over the other' through the style, as revealed in studies by Edward Said and Swati Chattopadhyay.⁵⁰

Three residential blocks in the new European city of Tunis (1930–1936)

The building on Avenue Jules Ferry (1930)

It was on Avenue Jules Ferry that Hiriart and Seignouret built their first residential block. It was promoted by the Jewish developer Simon Zana, with the aim to accommodate rental apartments. The project was developed during 1930, and the reinforced concrete construction was carried out between 1930 and 1932 under the direction of the contractor Raphaël Bono.⁵¹ The ground floor was

Figure 9.
Fourth-floor plan of the building on Avenue Jules Ferry, 1930, by Joseph Hiriart and Jean-Marcel Seignouret, showing the complex distribution of courtyards since the house was attached to another block, courtesy of Building Control Service of the City Council of Tunis, Roadway Registry 12094, redrawn by the author based on the original plan, 2021



intended for commercial premises, while the upper floors would be occupied by apartments (Fig. 9).

The top floor differs on the side of Bretagne Street as a consequence of the municipal ordinances to not darken the street; consequently, the alignment had to be shifted, which created space for a terrace with pergola. Since the house is attached to another block on its east side, the architects opened a main courtyard of about 25 m² in area in order to ventilate and illuminate the rooms, in addition to three other small courtyards of 8 m² for the ventilation of the stairs, kitchens, and bathrooms. Hiriart and Seignouret carefully designed the details of the main façade, giving the building a modern and monumental character. Not in vain, the building, which was located on the



Figure 10.
The building on Avenue Jules Ferry,
1930, by Joseph Hiriart and Jean-
Marcel Seignouret, now occupied
by the Tunisian Ministry of the
Interior, photographed by the
author, 2019

main avenue of the city, would symbolise their coming out process in the capital of the Protectorate. Strategically, the façades present noticeable historical elements. The central part of the main façade, which protrudes and creates an overhang, is embellished by slender pilasters with Ionic capitals. Its upper part is topped by a frieze that accentuates its symmetrical character (Fig. 10). The balcony railings are made of thin iron plates with ornamental drawings. Finally, the elegance of the wrought-iron door produced by the Italian master Michele Farrugia should be noted.⁵² The composition of the south façade, the rationality of the plan, and the diversity of materials used suggest a rationalist character, but not without being nuanced by some Art Deco details.

The block of the Compagnie des Assurances Générales (1934)

In 1934 Hiriart and Seignouret won the first prize in the competition to build the apartment block of the Compagnie des Assurances Générales. The construction of the building was entrusted entirely to the entrepreneurs Angelo Casaluze and Ali Tapka. It was to house the company's headquarters on the main level and a number of apartments on its upper floors, with all the greatest amenities of the time, such as a phone line and central heating.

Unlike the building on Avenue Jules Ferry, the block was not attached to any other. As a result, symmetry of the floor plans became possible, which benefited the order and the structural economy. The rectangular-shaped plot covered an area of about 850 m² and was located between Rue Constantine, Rue Souk Ahras, and Rue Bône. The entrance to the building, from Rue Bône, gives access to a large inner courtyard of about 50 m² in area, from which the two main staircases start, being arranged on both sides of the courtyard. A secondary staircase rises only to the first floor, giving access to the company's offices, which are arranged along long corridors and illuminated by large windows facing the courtyard. The three residential floors are occupied by ten apartments (Fig. 11). The service rooms are arranged around the large central courtyard, while the living rooms and bedrooms are facing the street.⁵³ Despite the complexity of the programme, the conception of the building responds to an absolute rationality.

Given the narrowness of the streets that surround the block, the architects aimed at locating in the corners the most expressive element of the façade: a polygonal bay window that starts from the balcony of the first floor and gives way to a loggia on the third floor. On the side façades, there are rows of windows of straight lintels on the first and second floors, whereas on the third one the architects projected a row of horseshoe-arched windows framed in an *alfiz*, i.e. a Moorish architectonic ornamental panel that encloses the outward side of the arch (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13). They also used Arab elements in the entrance door to the house, such as the wrought iron door, adorned by a geometric-patterned fretwork that mimics an *alfiz*. All of these elements were welcome when composing the façades. Indeed, as Dell Upton notes, Art Deco was applied as a mode rather than as an immovable style.⁵⁴ While style refers to those standard forms that are common to a

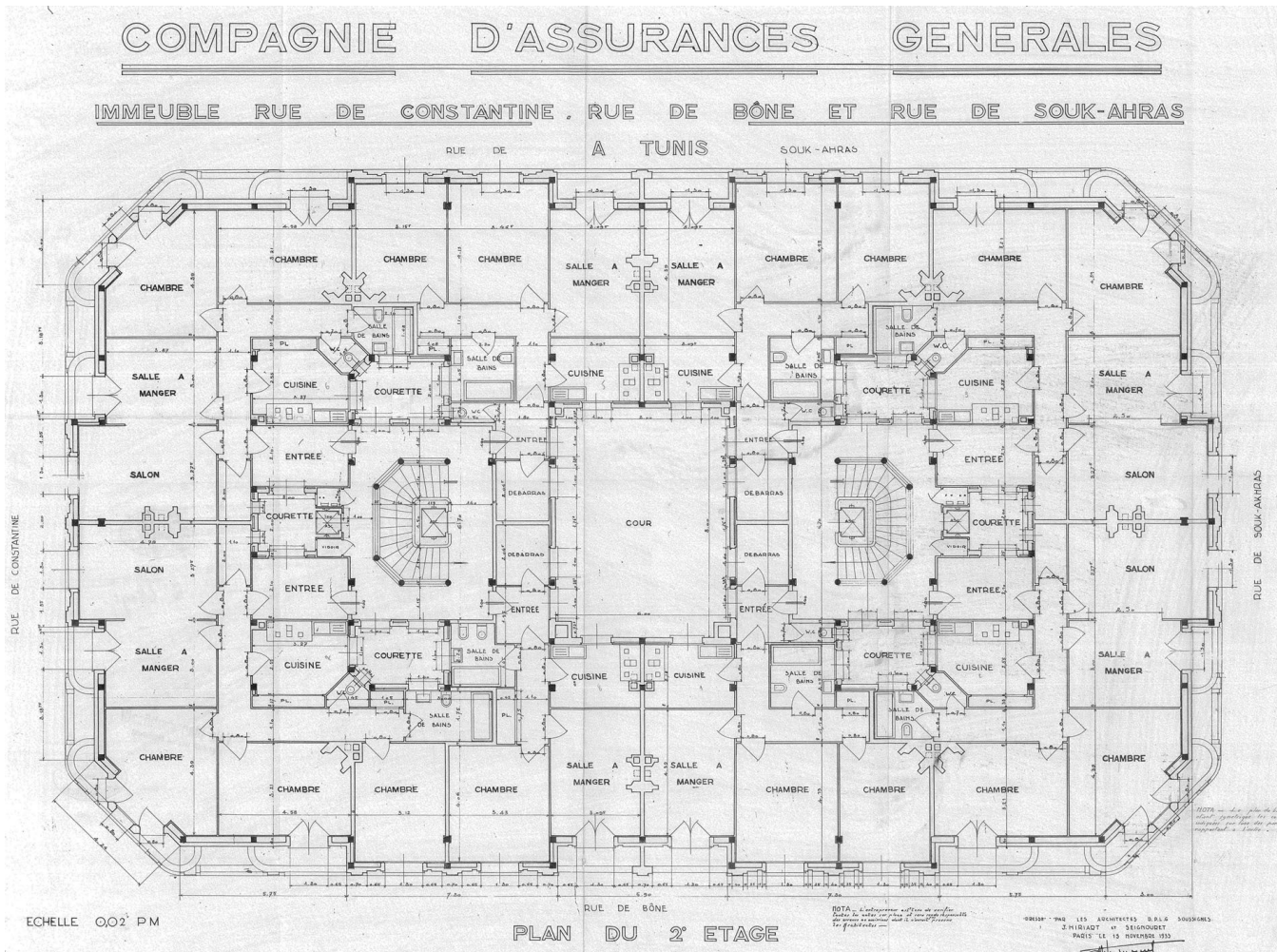
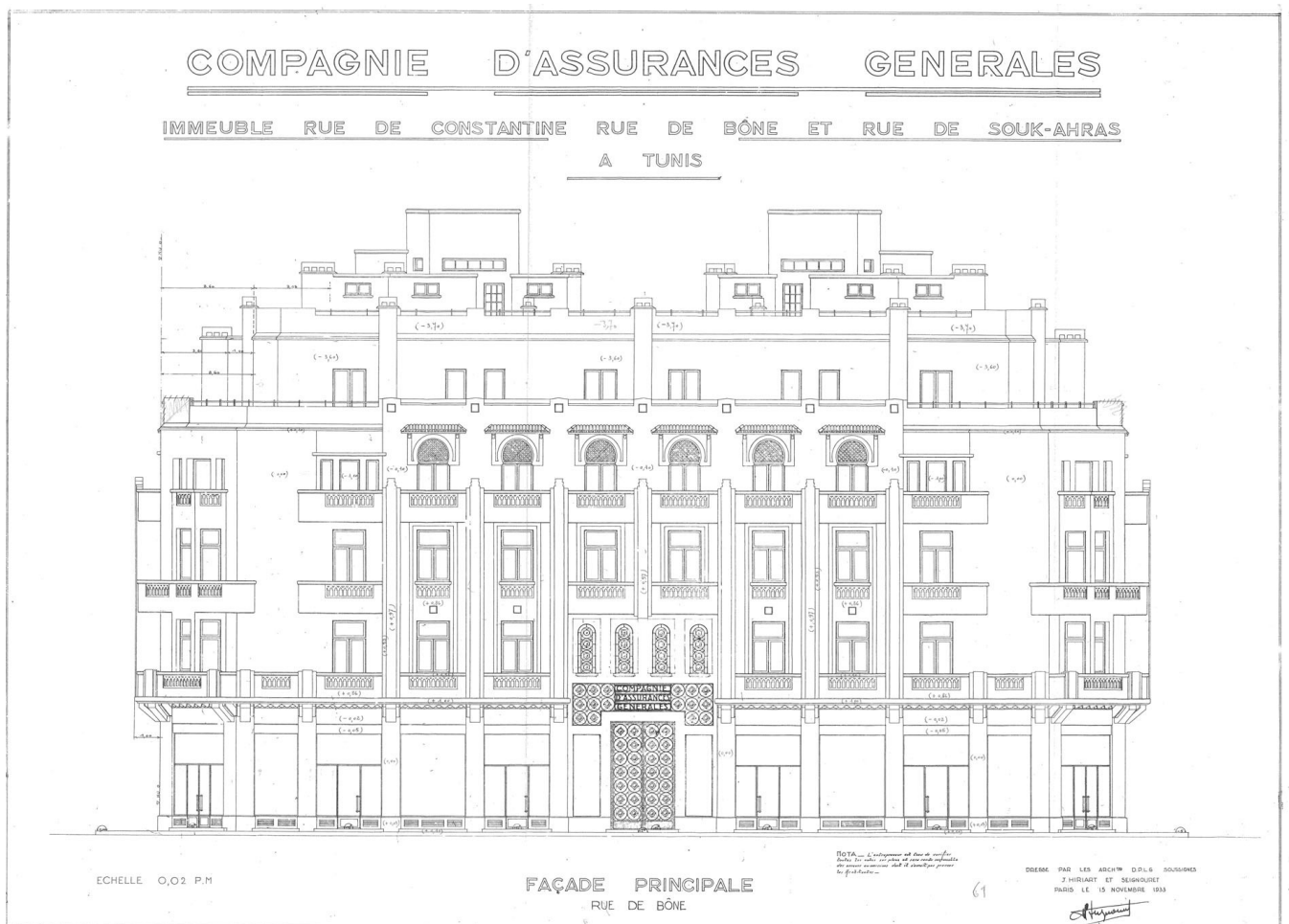


Figure 11. Second-floor plan of the apartment block of the Compagnie des Assurances générales, 1934, by Joseph Hiriart and Jean-Marcel Seignouret, showing symmetrical organisation, unlike the building on Avenue Jules Ferry, courtesy of Building Control Service of the City Council of Tunis, Roadway Registry H-8045

range of buildings and create a unifying background, mode refers to elements that are used against a background to create distinctions among buildings. This is what Hiriart seemed to be looking for when employing Arab elements that contrasted with the classicist buildings that were at the beginning of Jules Ferry Avenue.

From a technological perspective, this project was a breakthrough in the career of Hiriart. Indeed, the building was built with a structure that was made entirely of reinforced concrete including the façades. Being built by the Société Métropolitaine Fourrée et Rhodes of Toulouse (France), the structural design and calculation were carried out by the engineers Georges Demarre and Henri Novak of the well-known Hennebique Company.⁵⁵ The firm had a competitive network that was composed of engineers and merchants who were located all over the Maghreb region, with offices that were established in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.⁵⁶ Hiriart had already worked with Hennebique to resolve parts of his French buildings, such as the basement of the Chapelle du Sacré-Coeur in Hasparren (1928). However, he never did it in such a



comprehensive way, which would be reflected in all of the details. Examples are the floors, which were equipped with a novel acoustic insulation system, by means of the intercalation of independent layers of concrete and cork,⁵⁷ as well as the basement walls, which were constructed with double concrete walls and an interspersed waterproof sheet.⁵⁸

Figure 12.
Main façade of the apartment block of the Compagnie des Assurances générales, 1934, by Joseph Hiriart and Jean-Marcel Seignouret, courtesy of Building Control Service of the City Council of Tunis, Roadway Registry H-8045

The Schwich et Baizeau block on Carthage Avenue (1936)

Hiriart's last and largest residential block was commissioned by the Schwich et Baizeau company in 1936. The company was created in 1902 to market building materials, when the engineer Vincent Schwich and Lucien Baizeau decided to go into business together. They would guarantee the supply that agricultural colonisation required for its installation throughout the territory.⁵⁹ In the late 1920s, together with Société Lafarge, Schwich et Baizeau built a cement factory in Djebel El Jloud, south of Tunis, launching the country's first rotary kiln.⁶⁰



Figure 13.
 View of the apartment block of the Compagnie des Assurances Générales, 1934, by Joseph Hiriart and Jean-Marcel Seignouret, showing polygonal bay windows starting from the balcony of the first floor and becoming a loggia on the third floor, photographed by the author, 2019

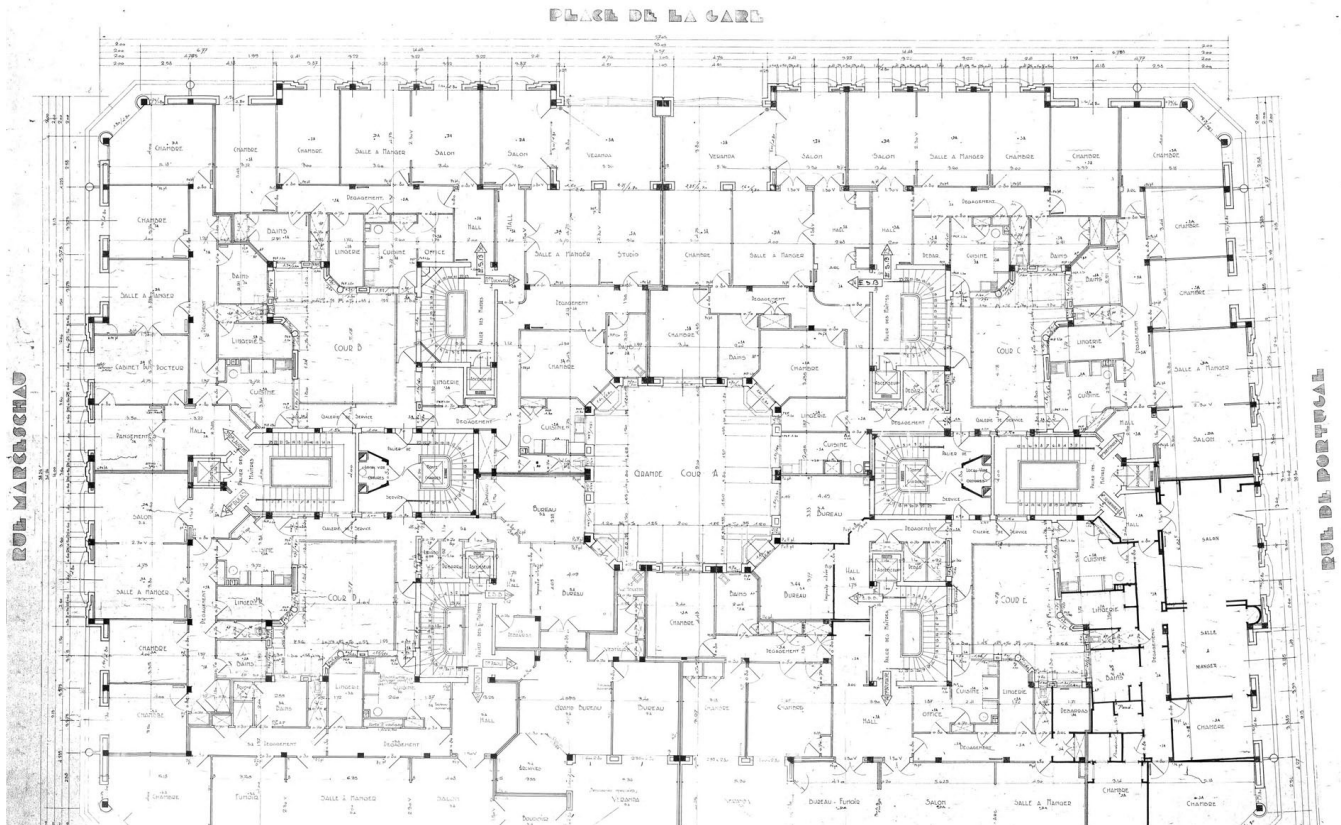
Baizeau appreciated modern architecture. A few years earlier in 1928, he entrusted to Le Corbusier the project for his Villa Baizeau in Carthage. Thus, seduced by the interest that was presented by the central Avenue of Carthage, where the warehouses of the company were located, and aware of the importance of architecture in the field of enterprise as a means of social representation, the associates had the idea of building there the new headquarters of their company. Following the demolition of the old warehouses that were located between the avenue and the railway station square, the company held an architectural competition in 1935, which was won by Hiriart and Seignouret.

The building was one of the largest real estate operations to be carried out in the inter-war period in the new European city of Tunis. It has seven floors and its floor plan has a width of 38 metres and a length of 57 metres. It is not easy to distribute a surface of such size and even less so if, instead of large spaces, it is for housing purposes, with rooms and auxiliary services, such as courtyards, stairs, and accesses. Notwithstanding, Hiriart and Seignouret successfully resolved the distribution of the space. Moreover, the coherence between the structural elements and the interior distribution is absolute.

The two entrance halls are located on the side façades. These are two doors of slender proportions made of wrought iron that evoke the doors of the first projects of Hiriart, such as the La Maîtrise pavilion and Villa Leihorra. Both give way to large staircases that the architects chose to paint in grey tones, avoiding the chromatic exaggeration that was typical of the architects of Italian origin. They inserted the main courtyard of about 80 m² in the centre of the building. In addition to this courtyard, they incorporated another four smaller courtyards (Fig. 14). The organisation of the floor type is absolutely symmetrical: on each side, there are three staircases with windows to the courtyards, each serving two apartments per landing, with two or three bedrooms, bathroom, toilet, kitchen, living room, and dining room. The services are grouped around the smaller patios.⁶¹

The architects carefully studied the circulation of the service staff and other services. In this regard, on each side of the building is incorporated a fourth independent staircase for the entrance and exit of the servants, purchases, and garbage. On the roof was arranged a terrace around the central courtyard and in it, next to the staircases and elevators, are the bathrooms and laundry for the employees of the offices. In terms of composition, at the height of the mezzanine a sturdy cantilever surrounds the building. The façade above it was painted in white and consists of three elements: a series of balconies with attached pilasters, windows with straight lintels, and loggias (Fig. 15).

Nevertheless, the size of the building, which was completed in 1937, was not a fortuitous event. In fact, it was the result of negotiations between Schwich et Baizeau and the City Works Directorate. The talks had begun in 1925, ten years before the call for competition, by signing an agreement, according to which the façade of the block would reach 22 metres. The postal exchange between the company and the city planners reveals a subtle negotiation



game.⁶² In 1935, shortly before calling the competition, the company obtained permission for the house to reach 27 metres in height on its four sides. The measure was absolute rather than relative, no matter how different were the heights of the adjacent buildings. The company was able to make the most of the strategic location of the house, taking advantage of the monumental size of the railway station square, and making the height of the building to finally tame this wide space.

The extension of the Lycée Carnot (1936)

The Lycée Sadiqi was the symbol of French education and the integration of the Tunisian elites before the establishment of the Protectorate.⁶³ In 1931, after being renamed Lycée Carnot, in view of the fact that the classrooms had become obsolete, Victor Valensi commissioned the project for a new school. He designed a whole new wing with a monumental façade towards Habib-Thameur Street, which is 120 metres in length, with a central doorway and two secondary doors on both sides.

However, shortly after, the school would require the construction of an auditorium.⁶⁴ It was Valensi who invited Hiriart to collaborate on the project in 1936. It was certainly a delicate order from an architectural perspective, as

Figure 14.
Second-floor plan of the Schwich et Baizeau block on Carthage Avenue, 1936, by Joseph Hiriart and Jean-Marcel Seignouret, with a floor area of 3300 m², intended for apartments and offices, with a large central courtyard and four secondary courtyards, two main staircases and six service staircases, courtesy of Building Control Service of the City Council of Tunis, Roadway Registry 13726



Figure 15.
View of the Schwich et Baizeau
block, 1936, by Joseph Hiriart and
Jean-Marcel Seignouret, from the
railway station square,
demonstrating the imposing
presence demanded by the two
associates in the construction of the
headquarters of the company,
photographed by the author, 2019

the new auditorium was to be attached to the strong building that was erected a few years earlier. Hiriart and Valensi designed a monumental access door to the auditorium, taking advantage of the flexibility of the Art Deco, which could be nourished equally by elements of African roots or rationalist character.

The ambition and the beauty of its resolution are such that the new door would end up overshadowing forever the great façade that had been built a few years earlier (Fig. 16 and Fig. 17). The architects composed a robust parallelepiped body in concrete, in the centre of which they opened a large door framed between two columns of colossal size and with a papyrus-shaped capital. At one third the height of the door, they arranged a curved balcony with a balustrade. Under it, there is the access door with a rich work of stained-glass and a wrought-iron latticework by Italian artisans.

Above the edge of the door, which was adorned with two rows of diamond tips, there is a striking bas-relief frieze with geometric drawings that belong to Masonic imagery: the pillars of King Solomon's temple at the ends, and in the centre the characteristic mason's tools such as the toothed saw, the right-angled triangles, and the knotted rope.⁶⁵ The bas-relief motif certainly



clashed with the religious beliefs of Hiriart and is rather attributed to Valensi, who should at least be familiar with such symbols because he belonged to a Jewish family of Italian descent, a collective in which the Tunisian Freemasons recruited their first followers.⁶⁶

Notwithstanding, the elegance of the door transfers onto the interior of the foyer in a sort of stylistic continuity: from the large foyer, a magnificent stone staircase rises to the right side, with a wrought-iron balustrade and a winding wooden handrail. Upstairs, at the height of the exterior balcony, a spectacular stained-glass window with geometric motifs floods the interior with light (Fig. 18). The extension of the Lycée Carnot presents some common elements to the Petit Séminaire Saint François Xavier that Hiriart projected in Ustaritz in southwest France (1924), such as the wrought-iron balustrade by Jean Schwarz and the stained-glass window of geometric motives that illuminates the staircases by the Mauméjean brothers (Fig. 19).

End of the Tunisian stage and latter years

It was undoubtedly the crisis of the 1930s that prompted Hiriart to leave Tunisia, when the situation began to worsen by the middle of the decade. After 1934, as a result of the fall in the price of wheat, oil, and wine, farmers were unable to pay their loans, hence, many farms went bankrupt. With hundreds of families in debt, the entire Protectorate entered into a deep economic crisis.⁶⁷

Figure 16.
Corner view of the access door to the auditorium of Lycée Carnot, 1935, by Joseph Hiriart and Victor Valensi, as an addition to the school building by Victor Valensi in Habib-Thameur Street, photographed by the author, 2019

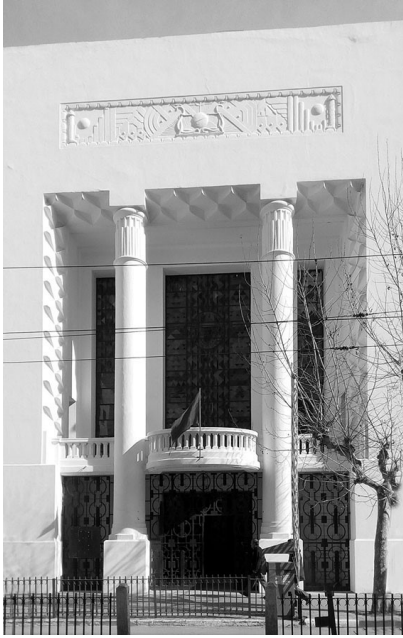


Figure 17.
Front View of the access door to
the auditorium of Lycée Carnot,
1935, by Joseph Hiriart and Victor
Valensi, photographed by the
author, 2019

Hiriart returned to the studio on Marbeuf Street, Paris, where he worked for a few years. In 1937 he participated in the 'Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie moderne' ['International Exhibition of Arts and Techniques in Modern Life'], where he collaborated with Tribout and Beau on the project of the Aluminium Pavilion. After the Second World War, Hiriart was commissioned to lead the reconstruction of the town of Sisteron, on the northern border of the Provence region of France, a task to which he could devote only one year, because he died on 17 November 1946.

Conclusion

Hiriart had the chance to take root in the community of European settlers, being involved in the promotion of the Protectorate, as evidenced by his participation in the monument to Paul Bourde. On the other hand, his association with Seignouret and his collaboration with Valensi also gave him the opportunity to meet the main developers of the country, whom he advised to obtain the best building use, as can be deduced by the administrative process of the Schwich et Baizeau block.

Furthermore, Hiriart's whole architectural contribution acquires new nuances in the light of these detached pieces, once they have been restored and reintegrated into his whole work. His contribution acquires, in the first instance, an urban nature, due to the willingness of Hiriart to participate in the formalisation of the streets of the new European city of Tunis. From a typological perspective, the challenge of designing large residential blocks was not only a structural challenge but also generated difficulty in organising the complex interior distribution of the blocks. In order to solve it, Hiriart turned to resources he did not use in his French works, such as collective communications nuclei and common courtyards, with which to ensure better ventilation and lighting. The complex system made of eight staircases and five courtyards around which the first floors of the Schwich et Baizeau block are organised (Fig. 14) is certainly noteworthy.

From an artistic point of view, Hiriart's contribution is a sign of the international vocation of a style, which was the fruit of France's latest attempt to export its own language and extend its colonial influence around the world.⁶⁸ Notwithstanding, for him, as well as for other French architects, such as Georges Piollenc and René Audineau, the new European city of Tunis became a testing ground.⁶⁹ Recognising the opportunity, he applied, with skill, a style that was born outside of the academy and that, therefore, unlike the Beaux Arts style, was free of pre-established codes. Thus, Hiriart felt free to integrate into his façade repertoire, elements hitherto alien to his work, whether they were Arabic, Masonic or African. The eloquence of these elements, which Charles Bilas associates with the concept of the 'Orient of Modernity', is evident in the façade of the block of the Compagnie des Assurances Générales, as well as in the access door to the auditorium of the Lycée Carnot.

Four buildings of Hiriart remain standing in the new European city of Tunis. They are the result of an artistic language that for decades was nothing more than a taste, remaining nameless until the holding of the large retrospective exhibition of 1966 at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris. It was then that this taste reached the status of style, taking as its name the abbreviation of that exhibition. This recognition would come a few years after the French colonies in Africa embarked on their processes of decolonisation and independence (Tunisia in 1956). Colonial architecture did not leave this process unscathed, as the impact on Hiriart's legacy demonstrates; the monument to Bourde in Sfax, after being knocked down and shattered on 4 January 1957 in the context of the proclamation of Independence, was recovered, shipped, and then erected in Bourde's birthplace in Voissant, France.⁷⁰

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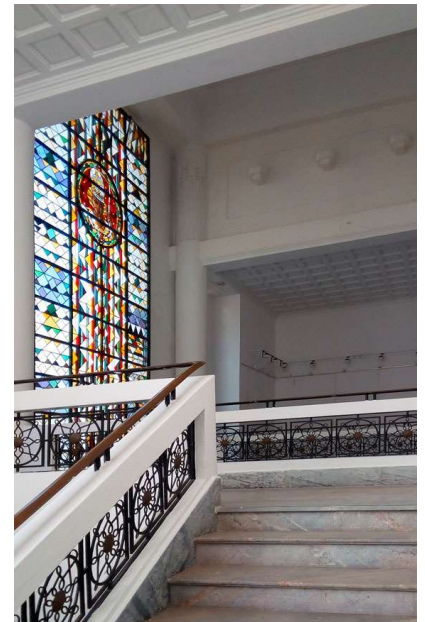


Figure 18. Inside view of the stone stairs and the stained-glass window of the auditorium of Lycée Carnot, 1935, by Joseph Hiriart and Victor Valensi, photographed by the author, 2019

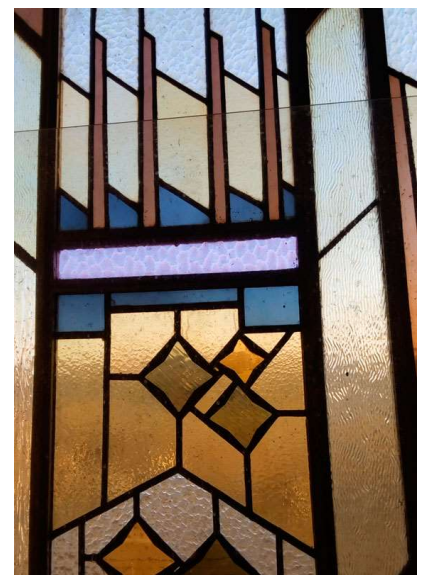


Figure 19. Detail of the stained-glass window of the Petit Séminaire Saint François Xavier in Ustaritz, 1924, photographed by the author, 2019

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 56. 'Liste des Agents et Entrepreneurs-Concessionnaires du Système Hennebique', *Le Béton Armé. Revue mensuelle technique et documentaire des Constructions en Béton Armé Système Hennebique* (September 1928), 6.
 57. 'L'immeuble des Assurances générales', *Journal des travaux publics et du bâtiment: organe du Syndicat des entrepreneurs de travaux publics de l'Algérie et de la Tunisie* (10 January 1935), 5 <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5682584p/f5.item>> [accessed 15 February 2022]
 58. 'Immeuble rue de Constantine, rue de Bone et Rue Souk-Ahras. Compagnie d'Assurances Générales. Architectes: Hiriart et Seignouret (1933)', Building Control Service of the City Council of Tunis, Roadway Registry H-8045.
 59. Hueber and Piaton, *Tunis*, pp. 152–3.
 60. P. Farge, 'Le marché du ciment et son évolution en Tunisie', *Méditerranée*, 19 (1974), 17–33.
 61. 'Immeuble à Tunis. Schwich et Baizeu. Architectes: Hiriart et Seignouret (1936–41)', Building Control Service of the City Council of Tunis, Roadway Registry 13726.
 62. Ben Moussa, 'Le règlement'.
 63. Hueber and Piaton, *Tunis*, p. 143.
 64. 'Plans, correspondances et notes concernant l'agrandissement de Lycée Carnot à Tunis. Architectes: Hiriart et Seignouret (1941–56)', National Archives of Tunisia, M3.0015-0396.

65. Innumerable writings can be found on Freemasonry symbols, in all of which are these three symbols explained. See, for example, Daniel Beresniak, *Symbols of Freemasonry* (New York: Assouline, 2000).
66. Claude Nataf, 'Judaism and Freemasonry in Colonial Tunisia', *Archives Juives*, 43 (2010), 90–103.
67. Jean Poncet, 'La Crise des années 30 et ses répercussions sur la colonisation française en Tunisie', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 232/233 (1976), 622–7.
68. Simon Texier, *Une histoire de l'architecture des XXe et XXIe siècles* (Issy-les-Moulineaux: Beaux Arts editions, 2015), pp. 99–101.
69. Emmanuel Bréon and Philippe Rivoirard, *1925: Quand l'Art déco séduit le monde* (Paris: Éditions Norma, 2013), pp. 45–55.
70. Robert Gauthier, 'Paul Bourde est expulsé de Sfax', *Le Monde*, 7 January 1957, p. 2.