

## The Villa Bartholoni



**Une institution  
Ville de Genève**

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VILLE DE  
GENÈVE



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*Cover: The Villa Bartholoni around 1860  
Lithograph, Fontanesi, Lemercier, Geneva  
History of science museum*

# Welcome to the Villa Bartholoni and to the History of science museum

Built in about 1830, the Villa has hosted the History of science museum since 1962. It is an architectural gem.

The Villa Bartholoni was commissioned by a Geneva businessman of the same name who lived in Paris. Of Italian inspiration in a neo-classical style it was designed by a famous French architect. It is an outstanding example of an early 19th century holiday house. As the many frescos decorating the rooms on the ground floor suggest, the house was designed to impress visitors, stage festivities and host sumptuous receptions.

This was a luxury villa on an exceptional site, nestled in a green haven overlooking lawns gently falling towards the lake. The Villa has a unique view on the Savoyard pre-Alps and the Mont-Blanc massif. The wife of Hans Wilsdorf, who was briefly owner in 1925, declared that: "This is truly the Pearl of the Lake", thus baptising the property 100 years after it had been constructed.



# The Sécheron countryside

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Until the middle of the 19th century, the land surrounding the current Villa Bartholoni was in the countryside outside the walls of Geneva. There were fields, meadows and orchards owned by the commune of Petit-Saconnex. An avenue bordered by chestnut and plane trees led from the Lausanne road to the side of the lake where there had been a house since the beginning of the 18th century. The land was bordered on the west by the Hôtel de Sécheron, managed by the Dejean brothers who received wealthy tourists.



## The Sécheron Hotel

Lithograph, Kellner, around 1840

CIG/Geneva Library

As the ramparts of Geneva were gradually demolished during the second half of the 19th century, Geneva grew. The Pâquis quarter densified and the embankment on the right bank, which ended at the Pâquis, was extended to the Plantamour estate next to the Perle du Lac park. Towards the end of the 19th century, the first companies were established on the industrial site at Sécheron, between the new railway linking Geneva with Versoix and the Lausanne road.



**View of Sécheron, on the banks of Lake Geneva**

Print, Kuster, Geneva, c.1830

CIG/Geneva Library

## Geneva in the 19th century

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After 14 years of French occupation, Geneva re-established its independence on the last day of 1813 by proclaiming the restoration of the Republic of Geneva and, by adopting an extremely conservative constitution, a return to the “ancien régime”.

Aware that the Republic could not survive in isolation amongst its powerful neighbours, Geneva requested admission into the Helvetic Confederation. This came into force after the treaties of Vienna and Turin in 1815 and 1816 which fixed its borders and guaranteed geographical continuity with Switzerland. Following redistribution of territory, France and Savoy ceded to Geneva half a dozen communes in the Pays de Gex and twenty or so Savoyard communes, collectively called the “communes réunies”. Following the exchanges, Geneva’s population increased by 32,000, mostly of Catholic faith, thus introducing a new religious heterogeneity.

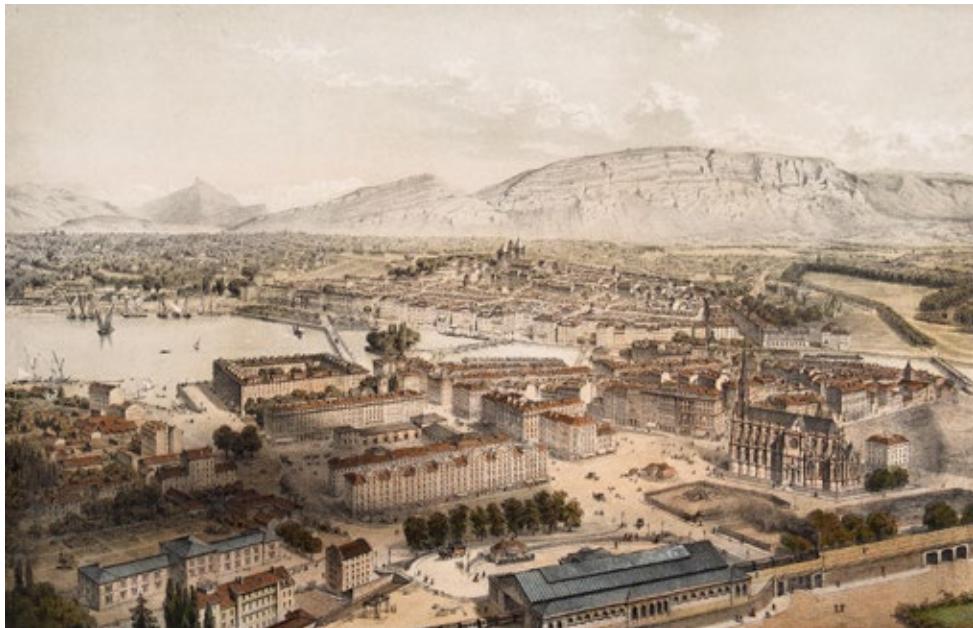


***Arrival of the Swiss at Geneva 1st June 1814***

Water coloured etching, Dubois, Geneva

CIG/Geneva Library

In 1847, Geneva experienced its radical revolution. Under the leadership of James Fazy, the reactionary government was overturned and a new constitution adopted. The Fazy revolution included the removal of the ramparts which had encircled the town and had hindered its demographic growth. In 1858, Geneva continued to open up and built the Cornavin railway station with financial support from the private Paris-Lyon-Marseille rail company. The first Geneva to Lyon railway lines were followed by a Geneva-Versoix-Lausanne connection. The transformation of Geneva into a modern town was followed by a steep population increase. A massive arrival of foreign and swiss workers meant that Geneva's population grew from 38,000 inhabitants to 70,000 between 1850 and 1870.



**Aerial view of Geneva, after 1862**

*In the foreground, Cornavin station constructed in 1858*

*Lithograph and watercolour, Guesdon, Geneva*

*CIG/Geneva Library*

In addition to the perennially prosperous watchmaking and banking industries, Geneva gradually became a renowned centre of mechanical and chemical industries with the creation of several well-known companies such as the *Société genevoise d'instruments de physique* (SIP), *Piccard, Pictet and Company* (forerunner of the *Ateliers des Charmilles*), the *Meuron and Cuenod* company (the future *Atelier de Sécheron*) or the *Chuit and Naef* chemical industries, the origins of *Firmenich* and *Givaudan*.



**The Société genevoise d'instruments de physique factory in Plainpalais, 1896**

Panoramic view of the national exhibition at Geneva

Print, Eggimann, Frey and Conrad, de Ziegler, Geneva, 1896

CIG, Geneva Library

## Jean-François Bartholoni, banker, businessman, patron

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Jean-François Bartholoni (1796-1881), the original owner of the villa that bears his name, was a banker, businessman, patron of the arts, and a pioneer of railway development in France and Spain.



**Jean-François Bartholoni (1796-1881)**  
*History of science museum*

Bartholoni was descended from a family of Tuscan emigrants who settled in Geneva at the beginning of the 17th century. He was born in 1796 then moved to Paris in 1814 which was in the throws of the Second Régime under the reign of Louis XVIII. Employed as an apprentice banker, he learned the trade quickly and eventually bought the bank which had trained him with his brother Constant (1794-1873). After several attempts, the Bartholoni brothers finally opened their own bank. Jean-François Bartholoni was well informed and visionary, he actively financed the development of railways in France, initially for goods then for passengers.

Bartholoni participated in the creation of the *Paris-Orléans* railway, inaugurated in 1832, which later became the *Compagnie de l'Ouest* of which he was the managing director. He was also involved in the creation of the great transatlantic shipping lines and of navigable waterways in France.

In spite of his activities in Paris, Jean-François Bartholoni did not forget the town of his birth. In 1825, he purchased a property of 4 hectares at Sécheron on the banks of the lake with an exceptional view of the Alps. He asked a famous Parisian architect to design an Italianate villa for the site and also the surrounding gardens. The Villa Bartholoni was opened in 1828 and became a gathering place for the Geneva upper bourgeoisie. During the summer, sumptuous receptions, concerts and firework displays were organised. Distinguished guests attended: Queen Hortense, Princess Mathilde, the Queen of Denmark, Princes Jérôme and Louis brothers of Napoléon 1st, and the French poet Lamartine. The latter left his name on a bench installed in front of the villa on the promontory overlooking the lake.

Bartholoni was also involved in creating the first railway line between Geneva and Lyon and the construction of Cornavin station, then owned by the private company *Paris-Lyon-Marseille*.

Music lover and patron of the arts, Bartholoni founded the Conservatory in 1835 whose aim was to open music education to the general public. He financed construction of a building in the Place Neuve wholly devoted to teaching music: the Conservatoire, built between 1856 and 1858 by Jean-Baptiste Lesueur (1794-1883), another famous French architect.



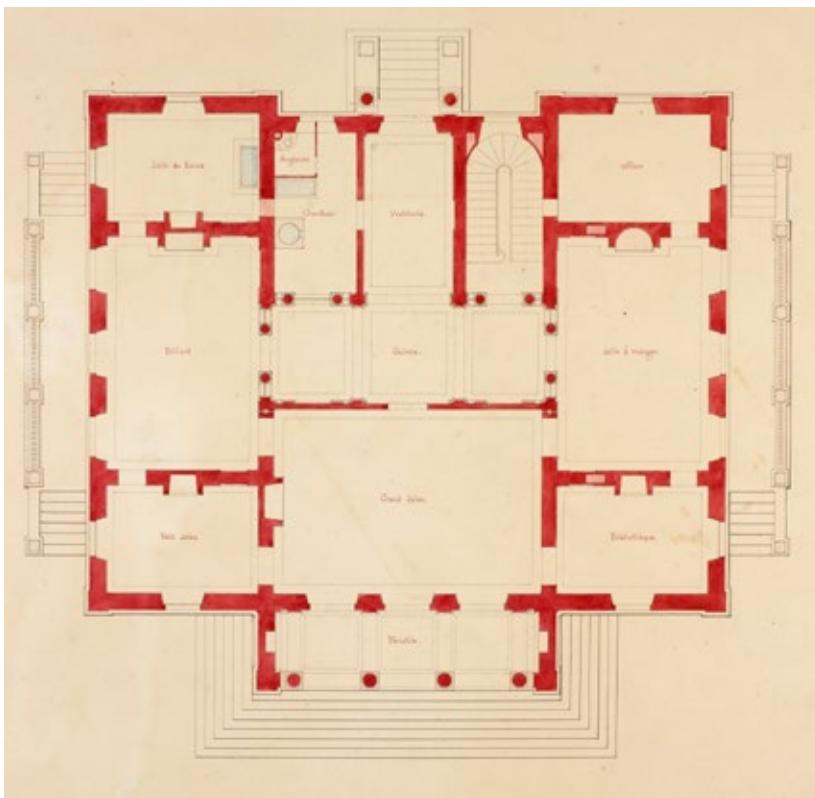
***The Conservatoire of Music in the Place Neuve***

Photograph, Auguste Louis Garcin, after 1858

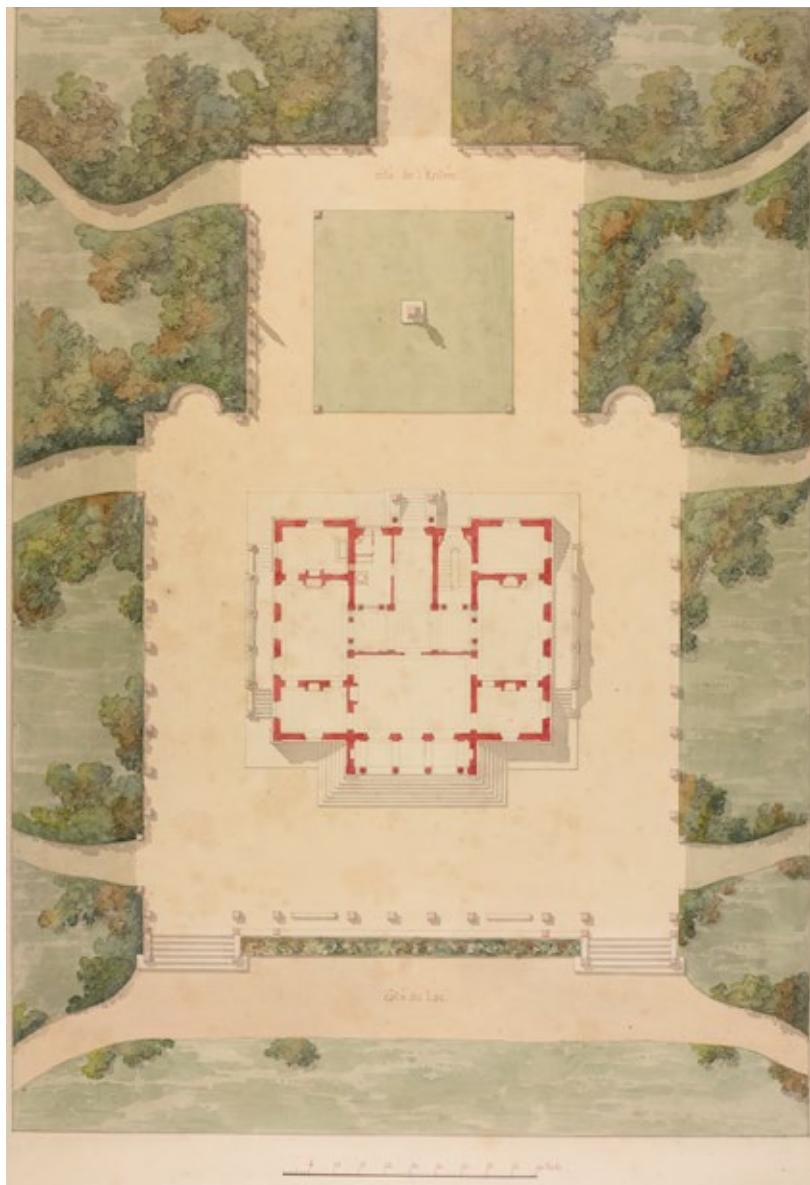
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# The Villa Bartholoni

Bartholoni commissioned the Parisian architect Félix-Emmanuel Callet (1791-1854) to design his future villa. Callet had won the Grand Prix de Rome and had stayed several times in Italy. Construction was directed by the Geneva architect Samuel Vaucher-Delisle who had built the Rath Museum.



**Villa Bartholoni, ground floor plan**  
Drawing and water colour, F.-E. Callet, around 1820  
CIG/Geneva Library



**Villa Bartholoni, general site plan**

Drawing and watercolour, F.-E. Callet, around 1820

CIG/Geneva Library

Heavily influenced by the villas of the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio, Callet designed the villa in the Italian style with two completely symmetrical flat roofed stories and five rows of windows on each façade. The southern facade, facing the lake, has an openwork front with columns consisting of a loggia on the ground floor and a balcony on the first floor. A monumental staircase links the loggia to the terrace. The entrance porch on the north side, surmounted by a triangular pediment supported by two columns, is placed at the centre of a slight recess. The lateral facades are each ornamented with steps and balustrades in front of the three central windows.

The entrance stairs give onto a vestibule followed by a transversal corridor paved in marble and adorned with Corinthian columns. This gives access to the three main rooms on the ground floor: the dining room and the billiard room at each end and, of course, the grand salon with parquet floors



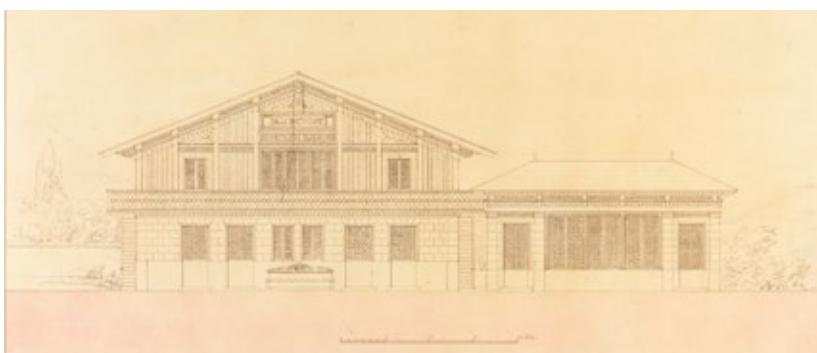
**The Villa Bartholoni**  
*Print, Armand Cuvillier, around 1870*  
CIG / Geneva Library

in a mixture of rare woods and ceilings decorated with Roman-inspired frescoes. Three French windows give access to the loggia, an outdoor space covered by first floor balcony. Four small rooms at the corners of the house – an office, the library, a small salon, a bathroom with a marble drinking fountain – lead off the three main rooms.

Originally, a single staircase (the wooden one on the Lausanne side), whose cage is lined with false marbles, led to the upper floors. The bedrooms were on the first, darker, floor and mirrored the symmetry of the ground floor. Above the landing, a vestibule lit by a window gave access to the master suites located at the sides of the building and the guest rooms. The attic floor, distributed around the opening of the vestibule on the floor beneath, included two other guest bedrooms, rooms for servants and storage space.

The villa also has a much more rustic basement including a laundry, kitchen, a well, a scullery, a wood store, a cellar and two outbuildings.

The building in the style of a Swiss chalet currently occupied by the Perle du Lac restaurant, also designed by Callet, was for the servants.



**Chalet forming outbuildings and an orangery**

Drawing and watercolour, F.-E. Callet, around 1820

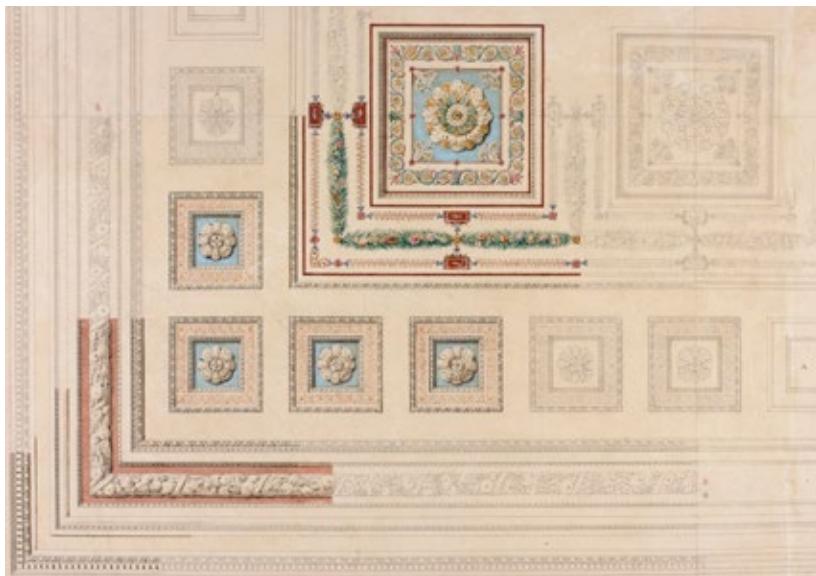
CIG/Geneva Library

## Sumptuous interior decoration

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For the interior decoration of the Villa, especially the ground floor, the architect called upon no less than twenty artists, decorators and other craftspeople mainly from Italy. The results reflect their talents: spectacular! Real precious materials combine with trompe-l'oeil decors. The walls are covered by a dozen different false marbles rendered in stucco. The floors are laid with coloured marbles. The parquet floor of the salon is composed of six varieties of wood. Nearly all the doors are in trompe-l'oeil false wood except those of the salon and dining room. The ceilings are decorated with coffers painted in trompe-l'oeil. Each room has at least one fireplace, nearly all in different marble.

The rooms on the ground floor are decorated with paintings and designs on a specific theme. Paved with multicoloured marble slabs, the dining



**Villa Bartholoni, detail of the dining room ceiling**

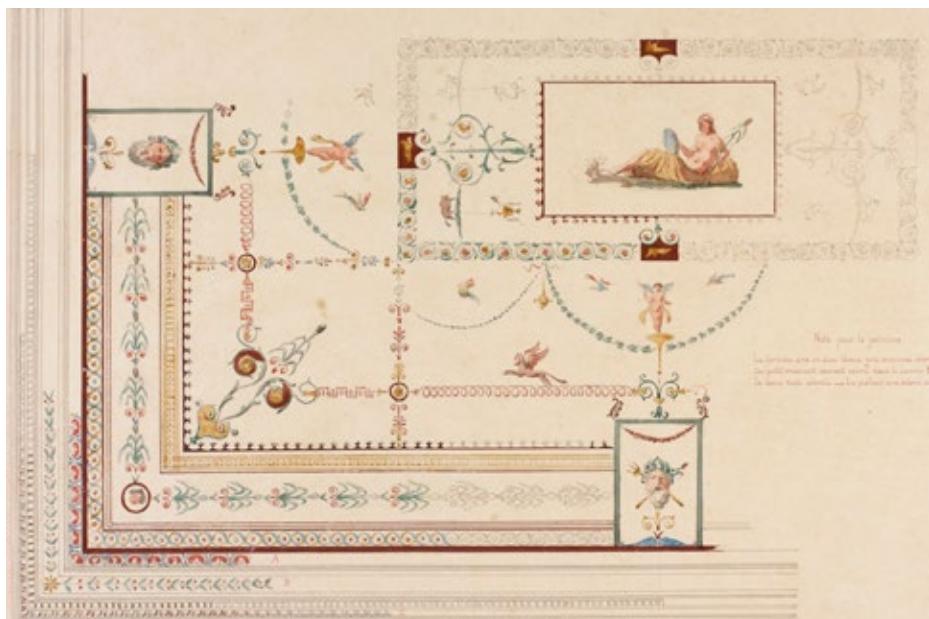
Drawing and watercolour, F.-E. Callet, around 1820

CIG/Geneva Library

room, the dominant colour of which is yellow, recalls festivities and abundance with garlands of still-life bouquets of fruit, while birds peck at the fruits and grapes.

Leading off the dining room is the blue-dominant library. Figures of ancient poets and philosophers in relief are aligned along a frieze. Opposite the dining room, the billiard room has blue walls with a frieze of flowers and vines.

The bathroom marks a design departure from the rest of the house. Instead of garlands, birds and other bucolic scenes, the walls are ornamented with scenes of the ocean. In the centre, is a birth of Venus surrounded by heads of Neptune, dolphins and shells. On the walls, winged spirits are shown astride a lion and a seahorse.



**Villa Bartholoni, detail from the ceiling of the bathroom**

Drawing and watercolour, F.-E. Callet, around 1820

CIG/Geneva Library

The decor of the salon is by far the most impressive. The pale blue walls are covered in several horizontal friezes scattered with eagles, garlands and lions' heads. On the ceiling, there are rows of stucco caissons which are painted with small winged children playing with their pets. The caissons are separated from each other by octagonal motifs decorated with profiles and geometrical designs. In spite of such extravagant decor, the grand salon nonetheless maintains a certain unity brought about, for example, by the floor whose design recalls the layout of the ceiling.



**Villa Bartholoni, detail from the ceiling of the grand salon**  
Drawing and watercolour, F.-E. Callet, around 1820  
CIG/Geneva Library

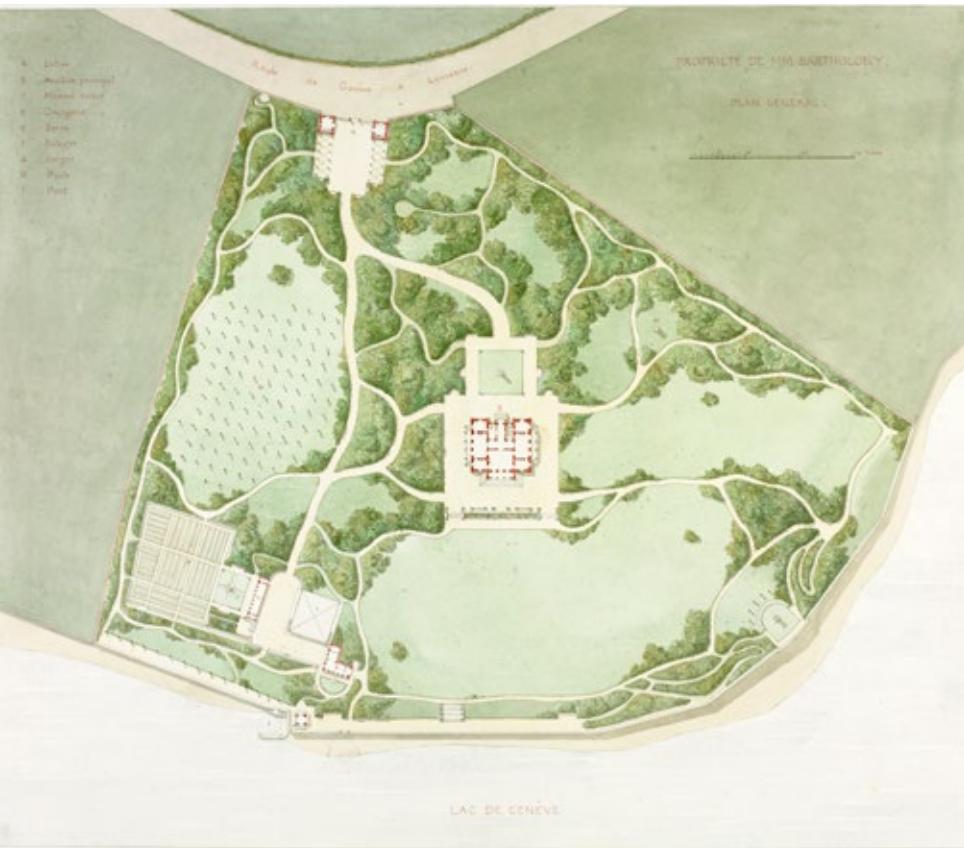


**Villa Bartholoni, detail from the grand salon**  
Drawing and watercolour, F.-E. Callet, around 1820  
CIG/Geneva Library

## A villa in a haven of nature

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Bartholoni's architect, the Frenchman Felix-Emmanuel Callet, did not stop at the design of the Villa, he also turned his attention to the surrounding park.



**Villa Bartholoni: general plan of the estate, the Villa and its outbuildings**

Drawing and watercolour, F.-E. Callet, around 1820

CIG/Geneva Library

Cultivated land and fields were transformed into a leisure park in the French style with a network of well-maintained paths winding between lawns and woods. Various sculptures of ancient subjects distributed around the park embellish the walks. A small port was built near to the servants house, an old farm transformed by Collet into a Swiss chalet, an orangery and a greenhouse (the latter no longer exists). At the entrance to the park along the rue de Lausanne, on both sides of the monumental gates, two square pavilions were built in molasse for the caretaker and the gardener.



***The glasshouse and vegetable garden***

*Photograph, around 1900 (?)*

*History of science museum*

Towards 1850, the park was endowed with a new, exotic building above the orchard to the west of the Villa: a Moorish pavilion housing a fountain. A windmill installed on the roof of the pavilion pumped water from a well to supply the fountain. The pavilion has disappeared but the monumental fountain, including a basin emptying into a square pool, is still there.



***The Moorish pavilion and its fountain***  
Lithograph, Fontanesi, Lemercier, Geneva, around 1860  
CIG/Geneva Library

## The Villa Bartholoni at the turn of the 20th century

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On the death of Jean-François Bartholoni in 1881, his younger son Fernand (1828-1904) inherited the property. Following in the footsteps of his father, Fernand was president of the Conservatory of Music of Geneva and also became vice-chairman of the Orleans Railway company. He was very active in the railway sector and was one of the creators of the gare d'Orsay in Paris. In 1891, he commissioned a new monumental staircase inside the Villa where the heating installation was previously, to the right of the entrance.

Fernand's son Jean (1880-1937) inherited the Villa on his father's death in 1904. He added nine panels by the French painter William Bouguereau in the grand salon and the billiard room. The panels were previously in the Bartholoni's Parisian mansion.

In 1924, the Bartholoni family sold part of the property to Hans Wilsdorf (1881-1960) the founder of Rolex watches. He did not enjoy his property for long. In 1926, the house and the adjacent Moynier land were sold to the League of Nations who wished to construct their headquarters there. The Villa was about to be demolished. It was saved in 1930 by an agreement signed between the city of Geneva and the League of Nations which stipulated that Geneva would offer rights to a property on the Ariana estate (where the UN is now) in exchange for rights to the Sécheron land.

The Villa Bartholoni was saved but it was in a pitiful state. It was renovated for the first time in 1938 and 1939 by the city of Geneva. The facades were rendered, the damaged molasse was replaced by limestone. Inside the Villa, the layout was modified: a kitchen was installed on the ground floor and bathrooms on the first floor. The interior decoration was restored by a group of students from the School of arts and crafts with their teacher who 'restored' the original work sometimes covering it with several layers of oil paint.

For thirty years the Villa had no specific function. In 1962, after the departure of the occupants, the International Telecommunication Union, the town council decided to install the brand new History of science museum

which opened its doors to the public in 1964. As the Villa continued to deteriorate, the city of Geneva undertook extensive renovations between 1985 and 1992, as well as modernisation of the museum itself. Outside, large-scale restoration of the framework, the roof and the facades was carried out. Inside, the badly damaged original staircase was rebuilt. The parquet floors and millwork were repaired. The servants' rooms in the attic were converted into offices. In the basement, the vaulted cellars were cleaned, re-plastered and a stone floor was installed. The new areas opened up became a photographic workshop and a conference room. With regard to the interior decoration, one of the main tasks was to undo the results of the 1938 restoration by removing the layers of paint which covered the marbled-stucco and to save, even recreate, the false marbles and false painted wood which had been sanded before being repainted in the 1930s.



**Construction of cultural objects store**

Photograph, around 1986

History of science museum



***Renovation of rooms on the first floor***

*Photograph, around 1986*

*History of science museum*

# History of science museum and the Villa Bartholoni

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The new History of science museum of the city of Geneva was inaugurated at the Villa Bartholoni in 1964. Creation of the museum was the idea of Raymond de Saussure, a descendant of Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, geologist and naturalist of Geneva in the second half of the 18th century, who became famous following his ascension of Mont-Blanc.

In order to pay tribute to the rich scientific history of the city, Raymond de Saussure founded the Museum society and the *Revue de l'histoire de sciences* (today *l'association du Musée et de la Revue de l'histoire des sciences*) with a group of Geneva scientists in 1953. In 1955, the Society mounted a temporary exhibition at the Rath museum to present historical scientific instruments, some of which had belonged to the de Saussure family.



***The grand salon of the History of science museum, around 1970***

*Photograph*

*History of science museum*

The aim was to raise awareness amongst the public and authorities about the importance of the scientific heritage and the necessity of founding a museum dedicated to it.

The authorities approved the new museum, directed at that time by the mathematician Marc Cramer, which was finally installed at the Villa Bartholoni in 1962. At its inauguration in 1964, the museum offered a relatively 'open' presentation of the instruments (they were freely accessible) which was partly a result of the first rather improvised exhibition rooms. The approach to the presentation of objects changed during the renovation of the museum in the 1990s.

In the 1990s, the architectural and museographical philosophy consisted of guiding the visitor through a maze of tall glass display cabinets whose layout was adapted to the design of the parquet floor. Each cabinet displayed one type of object from many angles. The instruments were presented from an evolutionary perspective. The museum addressed itself to



***The grand salon of the History of science museum, around 1995***

*Photograph*

*History of science museum*

specialists or to collectors; the prestigious character of the collections was underlined accordingly.

From 1999, responding to political interest and under the guidance of new management, the Museum changed its strategy. It opened up to the city and began a dialogue about science with the public. The first 'Night of science' created in 2000, is now biannual. Over a summer weekend, scientists and the public meet around stands and scientific demonstrations in the Perle du Lac park.



***The Villa Bartholoni during the 'Night of science'***  
Photograph, Geneva, 2022  
History of science museum

Within the museum, the museography has been entirely re-assessed. The glass showcases have been removed from the grand salon which has reverted to being the main room in the building and is now the setting for debates, conferences and various presentations.

The permanent collection rooms now tend to be devoted to the history of a discipline rather than of the instruments. The instruments are shown in metal showcases placed along the sides of the rooms so that the public can visit in comfort.

On the first floor, three rooms are given over to temporary exhibitions which are renewed every year. The basement has also been modified. An old service room has been transformed into a communications workshop and a meeting room equipped with retractable benches. It now stages demonstrations and experiments carried out with replicas of ancient instruments.



**Microscopes room**  
History of science museum

## The Villa Bartholoni: some key dates

- 1825: purchase of the land by Jean-François and Ami-Constant Bartholoni.
- 1828: drawings for the Villa by French architect Félix-Emmanuel Callet.
- 1829: start of building led by the Geneva architect Samuel-Vaucher-Delisle.
- 1830: building finished.
- 1891: installation of main staircase in place of the heating installation.
- 1925: purchase of the Villa by Hans Wilsdorf, director of Rolex.
- 1926: sale of the house and land to the League of Nations for their headquarters.
- 1928: exchange of land with the City of Geneva who ceded the Ariana estate for the Perle du Lac.
- 1930-1946: various occupants.
- 1937-1939: restoration of interior decoration.
- 1964: History of science museum opened.
- 1985-1992: works to restore both interior and exterior.
- 2000: first edition of the 'Night of Science' in the Perle du Lac park.

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## **History of science museum booklets**

The museum collections described in short thematic booklets

1. The skies of Mont Blanc: In the traces of Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (1740-1799), pioneer of Alpine meteorology.
2. Once upon a time, there was electricity: A history of electricity through the instruments at the History of science museum.
3. Sun time: Description and use of the main types of sundial exhibited at the History of science museum.
4. Seeing the infinitely small: Instruments at the History of science museum trace the history of microscopy.
5. Models of the universe: A brief history of celestial measurement through some of the astronomical instruments in the History of science museum.
6. Observing the sky: A brief introduction to astronomy and presentation of instruments from the first Geneva Observatory.
7. The Pictet Cabinet: The art of teaching science through experiment.
8. Jean-Daniel Colladon, Geneva scientist and industrialist.
9. From foot to metre, from marc to kilo: The history of weights and measures illustrated by emblematic objects in the History of Science Museum collection.
10. The beginnings of modern meteorology.
11. Tubes (and light bulbs) at the History of science museum.
12. The Villa Bartholoni.

Downloads available at: <http://institutions.ville-geneve.ch/fr/mhn/votre-visite/site-du-musee-dhistoire-des-sciences/parcours-permanent/>

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GENÈVE**

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