

BALZAC

IN HIS WORLD



His family

Honoré de Balzac was born in Tours in 1799, of the union of Bernard-François Balzac (1746-1829), a Freemason with revolutionary ideas, and Anne-Charlotte-Laure Sallambier (1778-1854), the descendant of a line of drapers and braid makers from Saint-Denis. His parents belonged to the circle of notables of Tours in the early 19th century. The director of military food supplies in Tours beginning in 1795, Bernard-François Balzac became the administrator of the Hospice Général of Tours and adjunct to the mayor starting in 1803.

Honoré de Balzac was the older brother to two sisters, Laure (1800-1871) and Laurence (1802-1825), and one brother, Henry (1807-1858). Marked by the premature death of her first born, his mother immediately placed him with a wet nurse in Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire. A day pupil at the boarding school Le Guay in Tours beginning in 1804, Honoré became a boarder at the secondary school in Vendôme from 1807 to 1813. Balzac would reproach his mother for having preferred Henry to her other children, him being in reality the putative son of Jean Margonne (1780-1858), Châtelain of Saché.

The Balzac family relocated to Paris in 1814, then to Villeparisis in 1819. After studying law, Honoré received permission to launch into literature. He moved to an attic room in the Bastille district, on Rue Lesdiguières.



Laure Surville (born Balzac)
By Louise MIDY
Pastel, ca. 1860

The favourite confidante of young Honoré in the 1820s, his sister Laure published a biography entitled *Balzac, sa vie et ses œuvres d'après sa correspondance* (*Balzac, His Life and His Work Based on His Correspondence*) (1858) after the novelist's death. Balzac was inspired by Laure's life when he created Célestine Rabourdin in *Les Employés* or *La Femme supérieure* (*Bureaucracy or A Civil Service Reformer*) (1838).

The Tout-Paris of arts and letters

Honoré de Balzac began to be a well-known author in 1829, despite the lack of commercial success of *Le Dernier Chouan* (*The Chouans*), the first novel that he published in his own name. He became a regular at literary salons, like those of Sophie Gay and Juliette Récamier. On 10 July 1829, during a reading of *Marion de Lorme* by the leader of the Romantic writers, he was amongst the prestigious gathering around Victor Hugo, along with Eugène Delacroix, Alfred de Musset, Alexandre Dumas, Alfred de Vigny, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Prosper Mérimée and Louis Boulanger.

Balzac also became a regular contributor to journals and reviews, which gave him the opportunity to strengthen his relationships in the world of letters: he collaborated with Émile de Girardin (*Le Voleur* and *La Mode*), Charles Philipon (*La Silhouette* and *La Caricature*), Charles Rabou (*Revue de Paris*) and François Buloz (*Revue des Deux Mondes*). Then, in December 1835, Balzac acquired *La Chronique de Paris*, which he ran for several months and for which he recruited a variety of contributors, namely Théophile Gautier, Gustave Planche and Alphonse Karr. In parallel, his collaboration on collective books like *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (*The French, Painted by Themselves*), *Le Diable à Paris* (*The Devil in Paris*) and *la Vie privée et publique des animaux* (*The Private and Public Lives of Animals*) linked him directly to fashionable contemporary authors.



Honoré de Balzac
By BRUGIOTTI
After David d'Angers
Plaster, 1929 [1844]

In 1835, David d'Angers offered to create a medallion in Balzac's image. After several refusals, the novelist finally agreed to pose for the famous sculptor. David d'Angers sketched a first drawing of his profile, and then produced two moulded medallions in 1842 and 1843, before sculpting the writer's bust in 1844.

Novelist for women

Definitively recognized as a fashionable writer beginning in 1831, Honoré de Balzac became the favourite amongst ladies: he looked after his female readers and even took the time to reply to their letters. Moreover, many of his contemporaries considered that the novelist's success was based on his sensitivity to women and the use of a literary genre that primarily appealed to a female readership. Inspired by his personal experience, he often modelled his female characters after real women. There was, of course, *La Dilecta*, **Laure de Berny**, his first love whom he met in 1822 and who served as mother, lover and literary advisor to him, but also all the other women who counted in his life: the **Duchess of Abrantès** who opened the doors of salons to him, **Olympe Pélissier** who introduced him to Eugène Sue and then Rossini (1831), the **Marquise of Castries** who converted him to legitimism (1832), **Maria du Fresnay** who gave him a daughter, **Princess Guidoboni-Visconti**, and his loyal and attentive friend **Zulma Carraud**. And then, in February 1832, after reading *La Peau de chagrin* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*) in her Castle of Wierzchownia in Ukraine, Countess **Éveline Hanska** (1801-1882) sent Balzac a letter that she signed *L'Étrangère* (*The Foreigner*). She critiqued him for having neglected the delicate feelings and the refined nuances of the characters of women that he had depicted in his earlier *Scènes de la vie privée* (*Scenes of Private Life*). Balzac then published a notice in *La Gazette de France* to obtain her address. This was the beginning of a long correspondence between Balzac and Mme Hanska, who would meet for the first time in Neufchâtel in September 1833 and who explored Europe together on many travels. Balzac eventually married the countess in 1850, five months before his death.

BALZAC AND THE ARTS

Honoré de Balzac was a real art lover: painting, sculpture and decorative arts, but also music, theatre and opera. His Parisian environment invited him to frequent fashionable artistic places.

The novelist discovered the artists of the Italian Renaissance – particularly Raphael and Michelangelo – through engravings, but also by visiting the Louvre and during his various voyages in Italy. Additionally, fascinated by Neoclassical painting, whose theatrical staging he transcribed into his work, he also appreciated the colourists. He admired Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* at the 1834 Salon, dreaming of offering the magnificent piece to Mme Hanska. And when he described the boudoir of Paquita Valdès in *La Fille aux yeux d'or* (*Girl with the Golden Eyes*), he recalled the colours that were so dear to Delacroix.

In terms of music, Balzac befriended Rossini who sometimes received him in his box at the opera, met Frédéric Chopin through George Sand, and admired the virtuosity of Franz Liszt. All these events fuelled *The Human Comedy*, as well as the artwork and furniture in his own interiors. His inventory of assets at his final residence, the house on Rue Fortunée in Paris (1847-1848), is a testimonial to the taste for antiques that had blossomed under the July Monarchy, with neo-Gothic style cohabitating alongside Empire and Restoration furniture. In March 1848, he received the owners of the Château d'Azay-le-Rideau, themselves likewise art lovers, at his home: "This morning, I am expecting [...] Mr. Margon[n]e, with the two Messrs. de Biencourt, father and son, lovers of paintings who want to see mine" (Balzac to Mme Hanska, 13 March 1848).



MUSÉE BALZAC
Château de Saché



Countess Anna Mniszech, daughter of Madame Hanska
By Jean GIGOUX

Oil on canvas, 1857 Salon
On loan from the Maison de Balzac (Paris)

Balzac's correspondence with Mme Hanska's daughter Anna (1828-1915), reveals the great affection they felt for one another.

The novelist admired the upbringing and the piano skills of the young woman who played "everything, open book, absolutely like the late Mozart would have done" and who had hands with "ironclad fingering, absolutely like Liszt" (letter from Balzac to his nieces Sophie and Valentine Surville, Wierzchownia, 29 November 1849).

Here, she poses in the ground floor drawing room of the house on Rue Fortunée, in front of a pair of vases that Balzac commissioned from Victor Paillard in 1849.



Grand piano
By ÉRARD
Fired mahogany, 1849

In 1847 and 1848, Honoré de Balzac planned to install a piano in his private manor on Rue Fortunée for Mme Hanska's arrival. But in fact, she was the one to bring in a small piano made by Pleyel three months after the novelist's death, because "Érards are unattainable for less than 3,000 francs", as she wrote to her daughter Anna (Paris, 22 October 1850). In the interiors of *La Comédie humaine* (*The Human Comedy*), the increasingly widespread presence of the piano underscored the democratization of luxury and the bourgeoisie's rise to power. For example, Madame Phellion had "an upright Érard piano, placed between the two windows and opposite to the fireplace, [which] showed the constant occupation of a proficient" (*Les Petits bourgeois / The Middle Classes*).