



REPORT

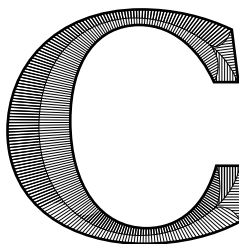
## French culture in the US



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## FULLY BOOKED

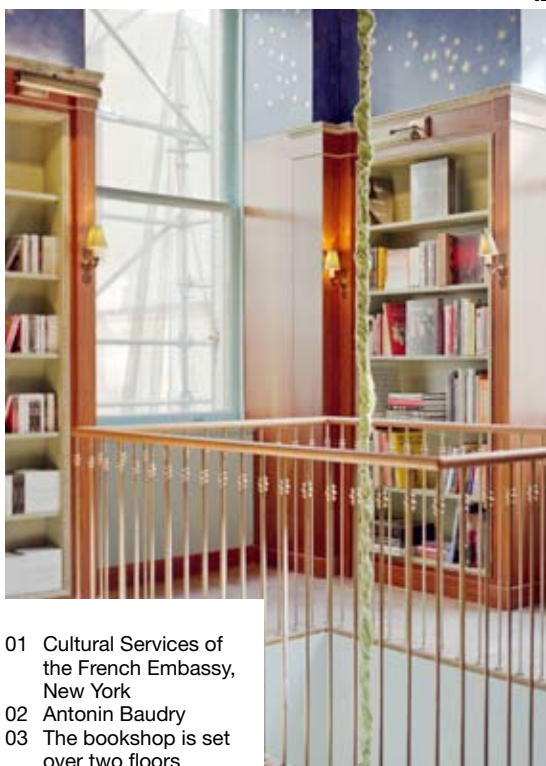
### —New York

**Preface**

France's artistic reach in the US is in the hands of charismatic cultural counsellor Antonin Baudry. As part of a busy calendar the diplomat and author is building a bookshop in France's New York embassy; we popped in to have a word.

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- 01 Cultural Services of the French Embassy, New York
- 02 Antonin Baudry
- 03 The bookshop is set over two floors

France's New York cultural embassy building feels like it has been airlifted from a Parisian avenue and deposited in the middle of Manhattan. Occupying a coveted nugget of the Upper East Side facing Central Park, the creeper-covered townhouse adorned with the Tricolore and EU flags was the final work of American architect Stanford White, murdered in 1906 by the jealous husband of a woman with whom he was having an affair.

"This building has been the home of the Cultural Services of the French Embassy for the past 60 years," says Antonin Baudry, France's cultural counsellor to the US, who works from a third-floor office. "It became a building hosting an administration that used to organise invitation-only events. But what we're doing now is a leap in the dark, giving the building new life."

That voyage into the unknown will see the heavy-set doors of the embassy annex left open to the public. It is an attempt to get beyond the stuffy, elitist image of the establishment and make the space available to everyone. As soft power goes, it's a bold statement of intent.

The key project supporting this very French notion of *égalité* is a new bookshop occupying two large rooms in the embassy. It contains some 14,000 French books both in their original language and English and the 19th-century-inspired



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This is the when we can make people discover French culture, which is complex, different and interesting

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décor is designed to encourage punters to make themselves comfortable while thumbing the Gallic tomes on offer. It's a cultural haven away from the frenetic pace of the outside world.

Baudry is the man marshalling the new open-door policy – and the bookshop – aimed at “physically engaging” people. Aged just 39, he is responsible for shaping France’s cultural policy in the world’s most powerful nation, including forging stronger relationships between academics and students from each country. He welcomes MONOCLE into the embassy building with a broad grin; his foppish hair is arranged in a middle parting and he is dressed in a slightly oversized grey suit. He looks a little boyish; a little bookish, too.

Baudry doesn't try to hide the fact that he is a bureaucrat who is employed by a western superpower. But he also suggests that prepackaged notions can be misleading. “I really don't think that clothes matter,” he says, telling an anecdote about how he recently went to a squat in Brooklyn and had a robust exchange of ideas with a group of anarchists while still dressed in his crisp formal attire. “The people I am interested in talking to are tolerant.”

Indeed, typecasting Baudry as just another “suit” would be missing the point. He is clearly passionate about literature and the stacks of books piled on his office coffee table are testament to that. He is a fanatical reader, he explains, with a score of books on the go at any one time. Among the current crop is *The History of Rock 'n' Roll in Ten Songs* by Greil Marcus and Emmanuel Carrère's



- 01 Party in the embassy building
- 02 Plaque announcing the cultural services
- 03 Finishing touches for the bookshop's fresco
- 04 Venetian room in the embassy building
- 05 Emily Katz
- 06 'Weapons of Mass Diplomacy' by Baudry
- 07 Baudry in his office
- 08 Portrait of Napoleon waiting to be rehung
- 09 French and US flags



latest novel *Le Royaume*. But he also draws inspiration from a range of other diverse influences. He did a masters in mathematics with a particular interest in algebraic geometry and still tries to keep up with his old peers by reading research papers. He's interested in philosophy and theology, has been dipping into Chinese literature recently and is also a passionate fan of heavy-metal band Metallica (“It's powerful, very well composed – almost mathematical – energetic and beautiful”). He also studied cinema and dabbles in screenwriting.

The Cultural Services of the French Embassy's role is to make people “fall in love” with French culture, says Baudry. When asked why Americans should be interested, he smirks – his boyish look returning for a second – before saying, “Because it's cool,” and listing what France has to offer the world through art, literature and cinema.

Baudry has been buzzing around the entrance hall near a neo-classical statue, giving instructions. There have been earnest discussions among his team members about where to place the plaques commemorating bookshop donors. The only non-French staff member among his group is Emily Katz, in charge of fundraising strategy. “From a US perspective, working here is very exciting,” she says. “You can never quite anticipate



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## Screen time

France has been pushing its cinema industry as a soft-power tool for decades and its film-funding programmes are well known. The cinema battle has been won and cultural councillor Antonin Baudry proudly mentions how nearly half the films programmed at the latest edition of the New York Film Festival were French or French-produced. Today, the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in New York is shifting its attention away from the big screen to the little one.

The embassy says that there has been a new push in TV quality within France in recent years – from better production to script writing – and the country is now eyeing the export market, keen for a slice of the cake being enjoyed by Scandinavia, the UK and the US when it comes to international drama. Taking place in Beverly Hills, the second edition of *Direct to Series* is held at the end of October, a two-day industry event aimed at developing opportunities for French TV creatives and producers within the lucrative US market.

what will happen and Baudry brings a crazy energy to work.”

Part of that energy is focused on targeting American students and that means getting out to campuses throughout the country. “I think that when you're young – when you're listening, studying and learning – your mind is really wide open,” says Baudry. “This is the moment when we can make people discover French culture, which is complex, different and interesting.” Eyes wide with anticipation, he speaks about wanting to engage the next Bill Gates and Steve Jobs – for Baudry culture crosses into the tech field – aware of entrepreneurs' opinion-influencing potential.

Baudry's ability to engage is partly due to his youthful effervescence. But he points to a book by Claude Lanzmann on his office coffee table, someone he refers to as “one of my best friends” and who he says completely outdoes him in the energy stakes. The film-maker and writer happens to be 89 yet it seems entirely right that Baudry would find common intellectual ground with an octogenarian. “It's important to have energy and a vision,” he says. “Age doesn't matter.”

The cultural councillor is a self-declared workaholic, often arriving at his desk by 08.00 or 08.30 (“Except in August”) and working through until late evening. The morning MONOCLE visits he has already had a meeting with a partner foundation first thing, met an American author he admires, talked with two French institutes about closer collaboration and had a team meeting. On top of all the get-togethers, Baudry maintains an active social calendar, often meaning he'll come back to the Upper East Side after a dinner or event to make sure he keeps on top of his crammed inbox.

“I receive around 300 emails a day,” he says, laughing, “which isn't good because I hate emails.” One gets the sense that Baudry is happiest away from the gizmos and fads of the 21st century. Not a fan of social media or e-books, he clearly values a good old-fashioned face-to-face conversation instead of anything virtual, whether entertaining at the New York embassy or on one of the many trips



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that his role entails, spanning LA, Miami, Boston and Chicago.

Diplomacy, of course, has a big part to play in the work of the cultural services and Baudry's hybrid career has stood him in good stead. Prior to taking up the role of cultural counsellor, first in Spain in 2006 and then in the US from 2010, Baudry moved in political circles. He worked as a speechwriter under prime minister Dominique de Villepin during the Iraq invasion of 2003, a key moment in international relations that saw France vehemently reject armed conflict. He subsequently worked in the French interior ministry, foreign ministry and finally the prime minister's office before departing for Madrid.

Baudry's time under De Villepin helped inspire his first book. A graphic novel, *Quai d'Orsay*, was penned under a nom de plume, Abel Lanzac, with artist Christophe Blain. Although fictional, the book clearly draws on the character of De Villepin and the events of 2003. An international success, it was recently adapted for the big screen.

"I love the fact that he wrote that book and managed to pull it off. He must be a true diplomat is all I can say," Mitzi Angel, publisher at Faber and Faber, is speaking at the New York offices of *The Paris Review*. The doors have been thrown open for a hipster-intellectual crowd celebrating the launch of its latest edition and Baudry – jacket and tie removed – is in attendance. He says that he counts the *Review*'s editor Lorin Stein among his closet circle in the US. The magazine editor laughs about how he once referred to Baudry as Inspector Clouseau, a joke that has since stuck.

"It's unusual for a foreigner to come to New York and immediately identify the needs that the French government can supply," Stein says. Yet for someone so French and so immersed in French culture, he adds, he's also completely transfixed by American contemporary literature – something that makes him genuinely want to forge links between the US and France.

"That's rare," says Stein taking a drag of his cigarette. "It's something I've never quite seen in his predecessors." — (M)



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## Cultural Services of the French Embassy

**Number of staff:** 35 in New York; 85 total in the US

**Number of events organised a year:** 150 to 180

**Cost of New York bookshop:** \$5.3m (€4.1m)

**Number of books in library:** 14,000 (70 per cent in French, 30 per cent in English)

**Number of DVDs in library:** 200

**Number of French films at New York**

**Film Festival, 2014:** 12 (out of a total of 31)

**Number of new programmes presented at Direct to Series, 2014:** 36

- 01 Lorin Stein, editor of 'The Paris Review'
- 02 Fireplace in the Venetian room of the embassy building
- 03 The Cultural Services of the French Embassy building's stairwell
- 04 Baudry inspects books
- 05 A corner of the bookshop in the embassy building