

Women and Their Professional Activities in Architecture, France 1918–1945

In France, the feminisation of the profession started at the beginning of the seventies, but women architects started to practice architecture at the very beginning of the twentieth century.

Those pioneers, and especially women who practiced before 1945, were neither numerous among registered architects (subscribers at the Ordre des Architectes) nor among architects who realised planning permissions and were a few in professional societies as the Société Centrale des Architectes (SCA) or the Société des Architectes Diplômés par le Gouvernement (SADG). So it seems that women were not practicing project management a lot. Nevertheless, the large number of women who studied in architectural schools in France since the end of the nineteenth century, indicates that women wished to fit into this architectural environment.

To understand this situation, it is necessary to extend the research scope: women architects were practicing architecture 'differently'. Their practices were not regulated by the Ordre: town planning, journalism, landscape design... It seems that women participated in the diversification of architectural practices.

This research is an opportunity to take a fresh look at the profession of architecture. It is an opportunity to discover the real scale of women's activities.

Keywords: women pioneer, diversification, France, practices, deed of architecture

Introduction¹

Who were the French women designers and architects in the first half of the twentieth century?

If we were to believe what is commonly known, we would be tempted to think that until very recently French women architects were indeed very few! In fact if the names of some contemporary French women architects are now known, such as those of Françoise-Hélène Jourda (who died quite recently in May, 2015), Odile Decq, Manuelle Gautrand, Anne Demians, Anne Lacaton, in partnership with Jean-Philippe Vassal, the situation is quite different for architects of previous generations: at best only the names of Charlotte Perriand or Adrienne Gorska appear.

Thus the common perception is that women architects were indeed very few, and that they never played a major role in architecture.

But beyond these preconceptions what was the substance of their lives? What is the history of French women architects? And who were these women in the shadows?

Their story remains to be written.

As a matter of fact there exists, at the moment, no specific and comprehensive paper on the history of French women architects. Only a few documents have been real steps forward in our knowledge of the subject.

The research work initiated by Lydie Mouchel in 2000² has enabled us to get to know better what positions were occupied by women in such important schools of architecture as the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts (Ensba) and the Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture (ESA) in Paris in the 19th century.³

1 I will herewith present the results of a research work which I started within the framework of a master *Recherche en histoire culturelle et sociale* at the University of Versailles in 2009, and regularly kept working at ever since. It is the basis of a thesis I am now starting at the University of Strasbourg (September 24, 2015).

2 Lydie Mouchel, "Femmes architectes 'une histoire à écrire'", (DEA Histoire socio-culturelle, Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Versailles/Université Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 2000).

3 Lydie Mouchel's research allows one to discover the presence of women at the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts (Ensba) between 1898–1945 and their presence at the Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture (ESA) between 1880–1961.



Fig. 1. Miss Bocsanyi, one of the seven women architects who graduated from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Paris (photographer: Paul Darby). Courtesy of CNAM/SIAF/Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d'architecture du XXe siècle.



Fig. 2. One of the seven women architects who had graduated from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Paris, probably Mrs Fratacci (photographer: Walery). Courtesy of CNAM/SIAF/Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d'architecture du XXe siècle.

The 2009/2010 number 15 issue of the EAV journal, brought out by the *Ecole nationale supérieure d'architecture de Versailles*, has published documents relating to the history of French women architects, such as a draft paper dated 1930, authored by a French architect, Emile Maigrot, about seven women architects who had graduated from the Ensba of Paris: Renée Bocsanyi, Agnès Chaussemiche, Yvonne Dupuy, Jeanne-Marie Fratacci, Jeanne Surugue, Marie Sapareva and Lucie Dumbrevano (Figs. 1 and 2).⁴ The issue also contains a paper by Meredith Clausen about the Ensba in which she explores the reasons behind our ignorance of the history of French women architects, and surveys the first women admitted at the Ensba.

In 2012, the French journal *Criticat* also dedicated its number 10 issue to women architects, underlining and documenting the work of contemporary architects such as Carin Smuts and Paola Vigano. It also devoted some pages to more historically oriented studies about French pioneer women⁵ such as the role played by Paulette Bernège, who worked towards the rationalisation of private spaces between the two World Wars.

⁴ Spelling of the name of this woman graduate is uncertain.

⁵ Stéphanie Mesnage, "Éloge de l'ombre," *Criticat* no.10 (2012), 40–53.



Fig. 3. Marion Tournon-Branly. Courtesy of Académie d'Architecture/Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d'architecture du XXe siècle.

Finally, the *Dictionnaire Universel des Créatrices*, released in 2013 by *Editions des Femmes*,⁶ is the most important contribution. Its aim is to try and 'identify creative women, whether known or unknown, who, individually or as a group, stood out in their time and opened new vistas in one of the manifold fields of human activity'.⁷ Notes concerning architecture, urban planning and landscaping (section supervised by Ms Anne-Marie Châtelet) document the 'better known' French women architects, among whom are (for the period under consideration, namely 1918–1945): Jeanne Besson-Surugue, Renée Gailhoustet, Adrienne Gorska, Marion Tournon-Branly (Fig. 3) and Juliette Tréant-Mathé. But this publication also highlights others, recorded as 'lesser figures' in history, such as Geneviève Sée, as well as foreign women architects who worked in France at one time or another:

Apart from Eileen Gray, the dictionary features more modest, lesser known players in the field of architecture in France, such as Monica Brügger, Katarzyna Kobro, Blanche Lemco van Ginkel, Beate Schnitter, Anastasia Tzakou, Ingrid Wallberg and Myra Warhaftig. Finally, a summary note attempts a short synthesis of what is known about pioneer French women architects.⁸

Thus this story is still mostly unrecognized today.

The Main Steps in the Feminisation of the Architectural Profession

In spite of the fragmentary nature of our knowledge, we can highlight some turning points.

At the end of the nineteenth century, women were among students who matriculated in architecture studios at the Ensba, then the preeminent centre of teaching for architecture in France, and in the

⁶ Béatrice Didier, Antoinette Fouque and Mireille Calle-Gruber (ed.), *Le dictionnaire universel des créatrices* (Paris: Edition Des femmes, 2013).

⁷ Didier, Fouque and Calle-Gruber (ed.), *Le dictionnaire universel des créatrices*.

⁸ Stéphanie Mesnage, "Architectes [France depuis le début du XXe siècle]: Les pionnières," in Béatrice Didier, Antoinette Fouque and Mireille Calle-Gruber (ed.), *Le dictionnaire universel des créatrices* (Paris: Edition Des femmes, 2013), 229–230.

classes of the ESA (Figs. 4 and 5). In 1898, Julia Morgan was the first woman to be admitted to Second Class,⁹ the first level of study at the Ensba to be accessible after a competitive examination, and a first period of training in so-called 'external' or 'free' studios. This pioneer was an American, as was Laura White, who in 1883 entered the ESA.¹⁰ The very first generation of pioneers (end of nineteenth century – 1918) was thus made up of a majority of foreigners, who, moreover, rapidly gained their diploma as qualified architects. Lydie Issacovitch who was born in Russia was the first woman to graduate in France in 1906 from the ESA.¹¹ But the first woman to graduate from the Ensba was French – Jeanne Besson-Surugue, in 1923.¹² With the passing of time the proportion of women in schools of architecture increased: about 50 women were admitted at ESA between 1918 and 1945, and 82 at the Ensba between 1918 and 1929.¹³ Over the same period, some 70 women graduated from the École Centrale des arts et manufactures de Paris (ECP),¹⁴ into which women had been welcomed since 1918 into its four sections, including the construction section. In the following period (1945–1961), admissions were much more numerous: 170 women got into ESA, a number which, however, must be put into perspective, considering the doubling of student enrolment in that school during the same period.

Sociologists who work on the issue of the feminisation of the architectural profession, such as Olivier Chadoin, Nathalie Lapeyre, and Nicolas Nogue, select the year 1968 for the identification of the true beginning of this process, or some thirty years after most other liberal professions.¹⁵ This date corresponds to that of the splitting up of the training system at the Ensba, which gave birth to the Unités Pédagogiques d'Architecture (UPA), namely the institutions which opened more widely with the end of the *numerus clausus* (Admission Limits). This reform would prove to be beneficial for women. Between 1975 and 1985, the proportion of women among graduates increased from 11 % to 29 %; between 1985 and 1995, it soared to 40 %.

Thus women entered schools of architecture rather early, and have continued to grow in numbers ever since.

9 Mouchel, "Femmes architectes," 23.

10 Mouchel, "Femmes architectes," 24.

11 Archives ESA (registers). In the original presentation, I said that Adrienne Lacourière was the first woman to graduate in France (at the ESA in 1896); in later recherche I discovered that was a mistake.

12 Mouchel, "Femmes architectes," 26.

13 Calculations based on Lydie Mouchel's surveys (see Mouchel, "Femmes architectes").

14 Stéphanie Mesnage, "Actrices de l'architecture: Les femmes dans l'exercice professionnel architectural entre 1890 et 1968" (Master 2, Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Versailles/Université Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 2009), 107.

15 Nathalie Lapeyre, *Les professions face aux enjeux de la féminisation* (Toulouse: Octarès publ., 2006), 89.

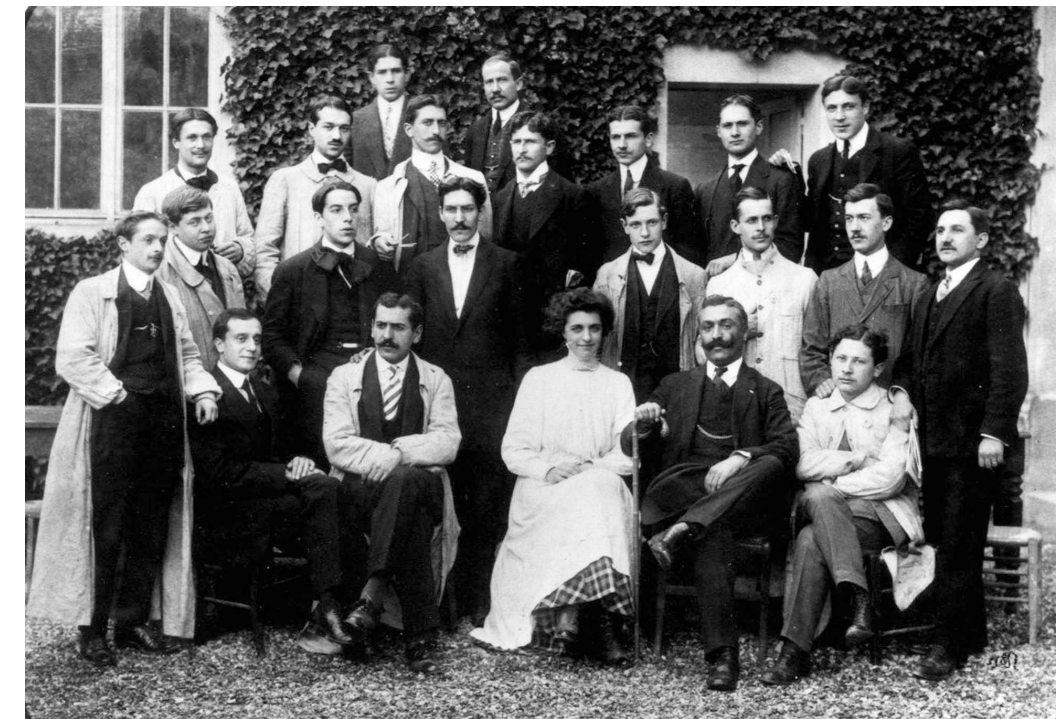


Fig. 4. ESA, 1908–09 (the woman is probably Verna Cook).
Courtesy of ESA/SADESA.



Fig. 5. ESA, 1902–03 (the woman is probably Lydia Issacovitch).
Courtesy of ESA/SADESA.

How to Approach the History of Women Architects

a) Women Architects, Project Managers

There remains a veritable mystery concerning these pioneers who ‘disappear’: Indeed, in spite of their important presence during their studies, very little is known about their careers and their achievements. And with good reason – there were few women project managers, and this being the most newsworthy practice, was also probably the only one to pave the way for public recognition.

Probing into the archives which document the history of project managers in Paris –such as directory names for architects as drawn up after building permissions (or construction licenses) in Paris, the official notice board (Paris District) of the General council of the Ordre des Architectes, professional directories like the Sageret, or architectural journals– one can already identify a little less than 10 women who seem to have been active as project managers (whether on their own or in partnership) in Paris between 1880 and 1945, whereas during the same period they had been at least about 160 students at Ensba, at the ESA and at the ECP!¹⁶

Who were they? We can mention a few figures who were already active in the 1930s: Adrienne Gorska, who worked for a long time with her husband, Pierre de Montaut, and Juliette Tréant-Mathé, who did the same with Gaston Tréant. Other lesser known names appear, such as Renée Bodecher (Bocsanyi), who from the early 1930s, and in partnership with other architects amongst whom her husband Henri Bodecher, designed many structures, including a group of buildings on the avenue Montaigne, on behalf of Lloyd France Vie (Figs. 6 and 7).¹⁷ She was still active in the 1970s, thus spanning several generations.

It must be noted that these three women worked in partnership with their husbands.

Later, in the 1950s, a more numerous second generation appeared. We may cite Georgette Becker, Gilberte Cazes or Solange d’Herbez de la Tour. Georgette Becker worked, alongside Albert Laprade, on the development of Le Mans old town, and on the first part of the administrative centre in Lille. Gilberte Cazes worked with Jean Lecouteur on various projects (offices, school groups or homes) and Solange d’Herbez de la Tour worked along Pierre-Edouard Lambert and was mainly active in the context of reconstruction.

How can we explain this phenomenon, and what became of all the others – that is to say, of all the women who studied architecture, and who, one may suppose, moved in architectural circles?

I propose that this lack of appreciation of women’s work has much to do with how one defines the architectural profession and its practices. I will stop for a moment to consider the historical background of this definition.

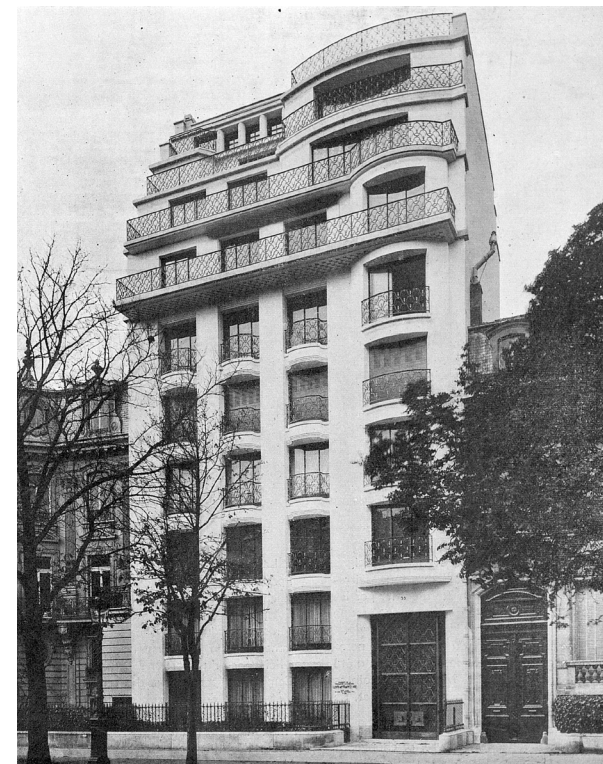


Fig 6. Henri and Renée Bodecher, Group of buildings, avenue Montaigne, Paris, on behalf of Lloyd France Vie (photographer: Chevojon). Published in *La Construction Moderne*, no. 27 (1936), 541.



Fig. 7. Henri and Renée Bodecher, Group of buildings, avenue Montaigne, Paris, on behalf of Lloyd France Vie (photographer: Chevojon). Published in *La Construction Moderne*, no. 27 (1936), 545.

The architectural profession is a very old one, but the modern notion dates back to the Renaissance. Until the nineteenth century, the architect was mainly an artist. With proximity to the *beaux-arts* (the liberal Arts) he also took on the identity of an intellectual, which differentiated him from manual workers who come under mechanical arts.¹⁸ One of the imperative definitions was given by the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*: ‘The architect is the artist who draws up buildings, determines their proportions, their layout, the decorations, has the plans carried into effect, assigns work to the staff and pays the bills’.¹⁹

In the nineteenth century, the advent of industrial society, the development of new techniques and the unprecedented growth of cities resulted in important changes in the architectural profession and its role: the architect was from then on less of an expert than an engineer, with his precise and

¹⁶ Personal calculations based on L. Mouchel’s research results (see Mouchel, “Femmes architectes”).

¹⁷ Mesnage, “Actrices de l’architecture,” 84.

¹⁸ Annie Jacques, *La Carrière de l’architecte au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1986), 4 ; R. Moulin et al., *Les architectes, métamorphose d’une profession libérale* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1973), 14.

¹⁹ *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* (7th edition, Paris: Institut de France, 1878), quoted by Annie Jacques, *La Carrière de l’architecte au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1986), 7.

thorough knowledge he henceforth worked on wider questions of town planning.²⁰

In this context many debates cropped up about the organisation of a profession to which access was free, without any need to produce one's diplomas or to prove one's ability.²¹

Indeed anybody could claim to be an 'architect' and have access to commissions without doing anything illegal. After 1880, in order to bear the professional title of architect, the only requirement was to pay a license, just as for commercial activities proper.²²

One of the principal aims of architectural societies, notably of the Société Centrale des Architectes (SCA) and the Société des Architectes Diplômés par le Gouvernement (SADG),²³ was precisely to allow their members to 'be distinguished from the many "swindlers", contractors, surveyor clerks or site supervisors who took the title of architect' and to 'offer their clients a guarantee for competence and good repute'.²⁴ The architect's diploma had been in existence since 1868–1869 but it was at first perceived as redundant and few students sought it. In any case, it was not a prerequisite for practicing the profession and, therefore, did not as such stand for competence in the manner architects wished for.

It was only with the advent of the Vichy government that the debates initiated by professional associations on the architectural profession came to fruition, with the creation of the Ordre des Architectes (1940). Since then, the title of architect has only been conferred after registration on the official list of the Ordre, which initially depended upon various criteria, among which the possession of an architect's diploma.²⁵

Thus, as recalled by this short historical review, architects never ceased to try and legitimate their activity in the face of neighboring professions. To that effect, they had long exercised control over the composition of their own professional corps. The aim of this control was notably to focus the profession upon its historic mission: architectural project management.

And this is one of the keys for the understanding of the history of women architects – it appears that women architects remained unknown because they were not project managers although they but practiced their profession in other ways.

20 Jacques, *La Carrière de l'architecte*, 8.

21 Catherine Jubelin-Boulmer, Françoise Hamon (ed.) and Dominique Hervier (ed.), *Hommes et métiers du bâtiment, 1860–1940* (Paris: Monum, éd. Du Patrimoine, 2001), 35.

22 Ibid.

23 *Société Centrale des Architectes* (SCA) established 1843, and *Société des Architectes Diplômés par le Gouvernement* (SADG) established 1877.

24 Marie-Jeanne Dumont, "La SADG. 1, 1877–1939: Histoire d'une société d'architectes," *Tribune d'histoire de l'architecture (France)* (1989), 6.

25 Gérard Ringon, *Histoire du métier d'architecte en France* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 97.

b) Women Architects Elsewhere

We must indeed widen the field of research and reflection in order to discover the trace of women architects in their careers and to begin to understand how they infiltrated the profession.

The exploration of various sources already reveals the presence of women in a plurality of architectural practices which exist beside project management such as town planning, landscaping, writing, history, journalism, teaching, the protection of architectural heritage, to cite but a few.

In the period now of interest to us, namely before 1945, the selection as applied by the Ordre was not yet effective, but the profession was already focused on project management, and this had the effect of making other practices less visible.

Thus the study of the history of women architects becomes an invitation to take a different look at the profession and to take into account all kinds of practices which constitute veritable deeds of architecture, without limiting oneself to the definitions as given by organisms or institutions. We must now ask ourselves how to define a deed of architecture? Here architecture is more a question of practice than of official status.

Whatever the reasons, women seem to have been important players in the diversification of the architectural professions, thus anachronically designated - the phrase was used much later, in the 1980s, to speak of the widening of the architect's field of competence.²⁶

The progress of this research does not yet allow us to yield a complete statistical analysis. But some practices and players have already been identified. In the field of town planning we can cite many women such as Jeanne Boulfroy, Denise Malette and Antoinette Prieur, who worked between the early 1940s and the late 1970s. Jeanne Boulfroy is the author of many urban developments, projects of urban planning and town plans in the French department of Charente Maritime. Denise Malette has designed various projects for urban development and reconstruction in the departments of the Ardennes or the Doubs. Finally, Antoinette Prieur has carried out similar assignments in the departments of Calvados and Loir-et-Cher.

In landscaping we see the name of Jeanne Besson-Surugue: Born in 1896 in Paris, she had studied at the Ensba in the Deglane/Maistrasse studio, and graduated as DPLG from the school in 1923. She was the first Ecole des Beaux-Arts woman graduate. She rapidly joined SADG (1924) and we know that her career was marked by two high points. First, she went to work in Cuba as a *fonctionnaire contractuel hors de France* (contract official for positions abroad), where she was in charge of plans for public parks, and she also had to supervise the works. It seems that she then worked

26 Robert Prost and Monique Minaca, *Prospective des métiers de l'architecture: Rapport final, Mission sur le bilan et la prospective des métiers de l'architecture* (Paris: Direction de l'Architecture et de l'Urbanisme, 1987) quoted by Rainier Hoddé, "Architectes hors l'architecture - Les métiers du 3e cercle," *Les cahiers de la recherche architecturale et urbaine* no. 2–3 (1999), 137.

alongside Jean-Claude-Nicolas Forestier, a famous French landscape architect. We know that she left Cuba in June 1933 for Indochina, where she joined the Public Works services, and became a Public Works architect in Phnom-Penh. The exact dates when she was nominated to these positions are not known, but something took her away from architecture. Contrary to other women architects, she was not surrounded by a triad of male architects; only her brother, Pierre-Hubert Surugue, was *Architecte DPLG*.²⁷

In the field of journalism and architectural criticism, Simone Gille-Delaforon wrote many articles in several journals: *Arts*, and also *Beaux-Arts*, from 1935 to 1950, as well as in *La Construction Moderne*, where she gave various accounts of architects' projects, exhibitions, and congresses.²⁸

In the fields of teaching and illustration, Juliette Billard (Fig. 8) is an interesting figure. born in 1890, accepted in Second Class at the Ensba in 1913, she began by working for other architects. She then worked as an illustrator, notably on the theme of architectural heritage for the City of Rouen. She also was a set decorator and model maker for the *Cinéromans* film studio. she finally taught drawing in a secondary school for girls in the city of Le Havre.²⁹

Some women even simultaneously explored several types of practice, e.g. Geneviève Dreyfus-Sée (Fig. 9), who was a journalist, educationalist, historian and illustrator.



Fig. 8. Juliette Biard (Billard).
Published on INA (Normandie Actualités/France 3 Haute Normandie/Diffusion 12/03/1965/Rouen: ORTF).



Fig. 9. Geneviève Dreyfus-Sée.
Published in *Hommes et Techniques*, no 115–116 (1954), 559 (photographer: Weber).

c) The Study of an Assemblage

I propose, therefore, that the history of women architects be written by considering in the widest possible manner the scope of the architect's domain of practice in order to bring to light all those who worked in the shadows, far from the kind of recognition which is awarded to project management.

But the identification of a number of practices, however wide in scope, would not suffice to answer the question: how did women architects exercise their profession?

In my view, to answer that question, one must adopt an attitude wherein one no longer aims to reveal forgotten figures or ways of exercising a profession. Rather one should study and understand the various practices of a whole professional population, in this case women architects who worked during the period 1890 to 1975 in the Île de France Region, in order to obtain a true and correct analysis.

Translated by Denis Griesmar

²⁷ Mesnage, "Actrices de l'architecture," 62.

²⁸ Mesnage, "Actrices de l'architecture," 84.

²⁹ "Juliette Biard, première femme architecte," *Normandie Actualités* (programme broadcasted on March 12, 1965), <http://www.ina.fr/video/RCF07002127> (accessed August 1, 2015).

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