

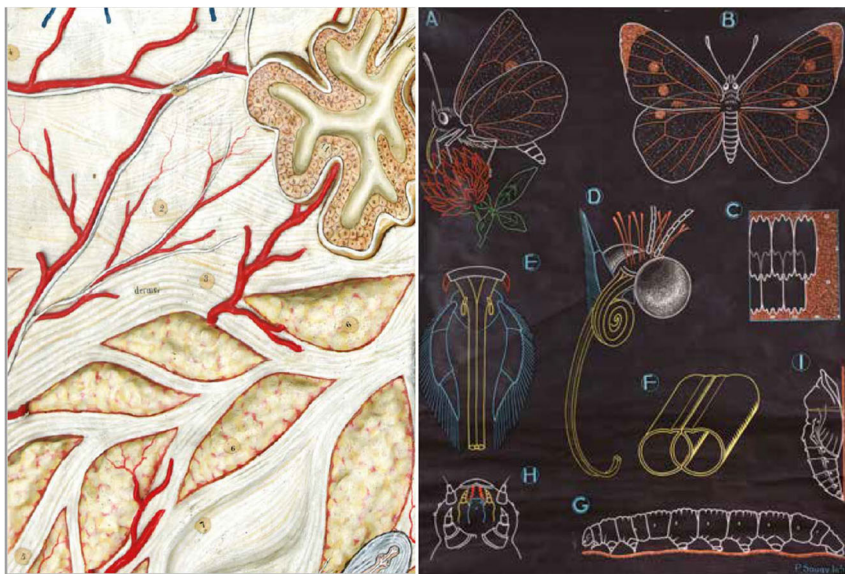
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The foundations of a future capital city for images

“Once, Hippocrates was from Kos. Now you’d say he is from Montpellier.” This is the motto of the Faculty of Medicine in southern France’s Hérault department, highly regarded since the Middle Ages and the oldest medical school in the Western world still in activity today. Many people know that the city of Montpellier’s history is closely linked to that of medicine, but very few know that there is also considerable local expertise in the field of images, dating back to the same period and taking root in the same location. In fact, two- and three-dimensional images have been developed in Montpellier for as long as the scalpel!

1220

Yes, that’s correct. When the Faculty of Medicine was founded in 1220, “medical imaging” as we know it today did not exist. Therefore, doctors relied on talented artists, illustrators, and sculptors to **understand human anatomy** and know how to map it. **Anatomical drawing** occupied a prominent position in teaching at the Faculty of Medicine and the School of Fine Arts. Moreover, the excellence of these schools was so well known throughout Christendom that Pope Nicholas IV granted them the official status of a University in 1289, a privilege that was still very rare anywhere in Europe!



Source: *Cross-section of skin, detail, papier-mâché, 1902. Conservatory of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, University of Montpellier. Classified as a Historical Monument on Oct. 4, 2004 (left). Zoology plate: cabbage butterfly, 1953. Faculty of Education, University of Montpellier (right).*

Prodigies of Nature, the Creations of Doctor Auzoux (1797-1880). From the University of Montpellier collections

Credits: ©Jean-François Peiré, Photographer, Drac Occitanie, Toulouse site

Today, many people working in Montpellier are following in the footsteps of this prestigious past, without even being aware of it: even though teaching has evolved significantly and technologies have revolutionized creation, anatomical drawing is still part of the learning fundamentals for **animated image professionals**. Understanding

¹ The documentary “Corps & Âme” (Body & Soul) may be watched as an illustration. The works of Dr. Auzoux (“Les Écorchés”) and other artists from Montpellier are also available for viewing.

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the body, its proportions, balance, and movement is a prerequisite for bringing any character or creature to life realistically. Medical students during the Middle Ages would probably have made excellent animators!

Lord Guilhem VIII of Montpellier (1157-1202), who changed the city's destiny by favoring the establishment of doctors by passing a wise law, would not have snubbed the Metropolitan area's current abundance of image, audio, and digital technologies. After all, he was the one who, by accelerating Montpellier's openness to the world and its intellectual growth, made it a **favorable place for creation, research, and innovation**. He was also a great admirer of the arts and literature who played the harp himself and whose court was already full of artists, actors, and troubadours from the Pays d'Oc area. The relationship between Montpellier and Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) has been like a courtly love story from the start!

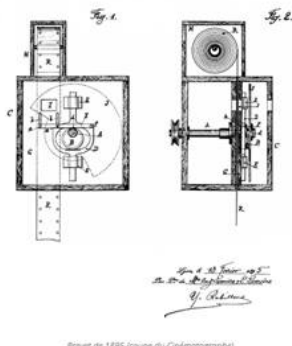
This state of mind oriented towards the arts, culture, and innovation has undoubtedly played an important role in the emergence of CCIs in and around Montpellier.

1896

As early as 1896, spectators began attending screenings of the **Lumière Cinématographe** presented at the General and National Exhibition held in the Hérault prefecture. And the gods of the seventh art were already watching over the city: when a fire ravaged most of the exhibition's other pavilions, the cinematograph, located off to the side, was spared and saw its appeal increase tenfold! All it took was a tiny spark to bring Montpellier into the era of cinema once and for all!



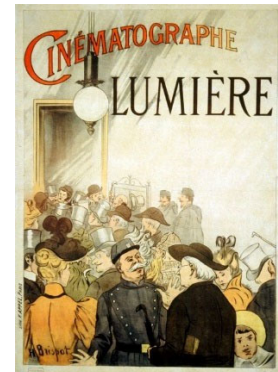
Le Cinématographe des frères Lumière



Brevet de 1895 (coupe du Cinématographe)



Position treize de l'appareil



Source: *Cinématographe Lumière Prototype equipped for filming, around 1896*

©InstitutLumière - *Cinématographe Lumière poster by Henri Brispot* ©BIFI
Bibliothèque du film - Cinémathèque Française

1898-1908

Starting in 1898, screenings were held in the **Eden-Concert** auditorium, which became a cinema theater a decade later. Montpellier then acquired a proper 900-seat cinema in 1908, with the construction of the **Pathé** facility (now the Rabelais Center). After that, it comes as no surprise that moviegoers flourish in the city!

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Source: *The first Pathé cinema in Montpellier (today's Rabelais center)* ©CN

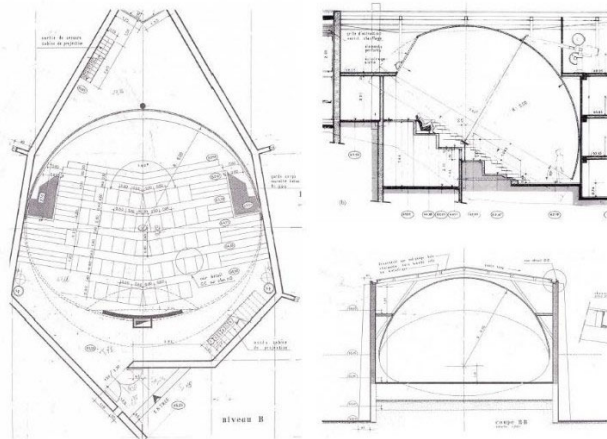
1920

A doctor actually played a leading role in promoting cinema: **Dr. Paul Romain**, a graduate of Montpellier's Faculty of Medicine, founded an association called Les Amis du Cinéma (Friends of the Cinema). He played piano to accompany silent films on scores that he wrote or improvised, gave lectures, and published countless articles. He became one of the most prolific film theorists in France in the 1920s, until the advent of talking pictures!

1954 - 1969

Montpellier continued to be a hotbed for innovation throughout the years that saw cinema take a fundamental place in the culture industry. This was confirmed once again when a local architect, **Philippe Jaulmes**, designed the **Panrama** in 1954 as part of his architecture degree: a hemispherical room that immersed the audience in films shot with a special lens. After testing the device's feasibility on small domes around the city, he built an experimental 50-seat theater in Clapiers (just north of Montpellier) in 1969, with a 12-meter diameter screen covering 180 square meters. It was the world's first hemispherical movie theater, serving as inspiration for the Omnimax process!

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Sources and credits: Plans and photos of the Panrama room in Clapiers, Association Les Amis du Panrama, © French Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Photography Media Library. All rights reserved.

1979

Montpellier added to its cinematographic footprint in 1979. That year, two enthusiasts of the Jean Vigo Film Club - **Henri Talvat and Pierre Pitiot** - organized an "Italian Film Week". Eighteen films were screened for 1,200 spectators: **CINEMED**, the Festival of Mediterranean Cinema, was born! From that point on, the festival continued to grow in terms of scope, content, impact, and attendance, now attracting more than 60,000 spectators per year! The city thus reconnected with its long tradition of commercial and intellectual openness and became a platform for exchange and dissemination oriented towards the Mediterranean region.

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The pioneers of creation “Made in Montpellier”

1965 - 1989

At the same time as CINEMED was taking off, a technological disruption was taking shape that would, within the next few years, turn the entire entertainment industry upside down and open an infinite number of creative possibilities. The computer revolution had arrived. The establishment of industry giants IBM (1965) and DELL (1989) in Montpellier clearly boosted the city's positioning as a place for *technological* innovation. The context was highly conducive to *creative* innovation based on digital tools, which allowed new and increasingly ambitious projects to be undertaken.

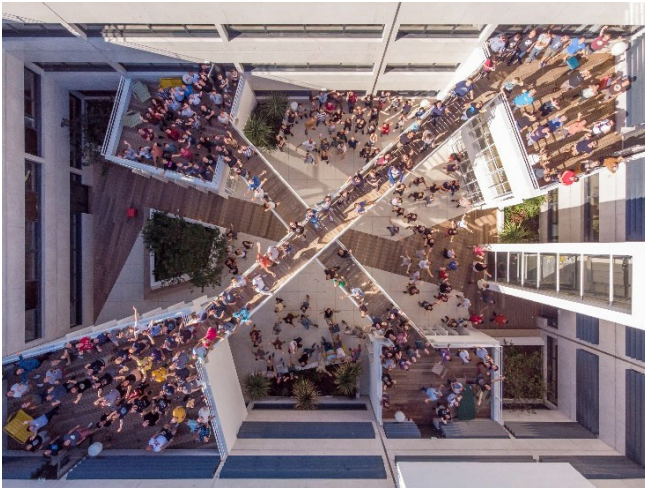
1992-1995

The creator of the hero who transformed the city's destiny is named **Michel Ancel**. He studied in Montpellier before getting a job at Ubisoft and moving to Paris. But he missed his family and Montpellier's sunny weather. In early 1992, he decided to return to his beloved city to design a new video game. He spoke to **Frédéric Houde**, a childhood friend who had become a programmer at Ubisoft, and they presented their project to the Guillemot brothers. Another great idea! The Guillemot brothers were convinced and decided to open a studio in Montpellier. Michel Ancel assembled a team of illustrators, animators, and musicians - including the composer Rémi Gazel - and created a remarkable artistic frenzy. This led to Rayman's original settings, cartoonish look, and catchy soundtrack, which helped make the game a worldwide sensation when it was released in 1995. The “Crossroads of Dreams”, Rayman's virtual world, became a reality. An amazing franchise was born! *A few years later, on March 13, 2006, Michel Ancel was decorated as a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture, Renaud Dennedieu de Vabres.*

From then on, **Ubisoft Montpellier** grew at the speed of light and stepped up its creations: *Rayman 2 and 3* (1999, 2003), *Beyond Good & Evil* (2003), *King Kong* (2005), *Rabid Rabbits* (2006), *The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Licorne* (2011), *From Dust* (2011), *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (2014) ...the list is long.

These games, ranging from the most joyfully playful to the most serious and moving - aimed at different audiences - have little in common other than their very pronounced “creative touch” - that remarkable diversity of tones and styles that enables teams to think outside the box every time. And that's actually what makes Montpellier so special: open-mindedness and capacity for constant innovation!

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Crédits : © Ubisoft

1993-2004

However, it takes talent to create such inventive and diverse worlds! For sure, the city has no shortage of talent, but it is the local schools that play a decisive role in bringing it to the surface. Taking advantage of Ubisoft's rapid growth, **ESMA** (1993), then **Objectif 3D** (1999) and **ArtFX** (2004) introduced very high-level courses in the digital arts field, leading to the creation of an industry of excellence in animation, design, and video games in just ten years. ESMA and ArtFX are quickly earning top rankings worldwide, and their students are being hired by leading studios. From *James Bond* to *Star Wars* and *The Avengers*, along with *Call of Duty* and *League of Legends* games, the world's top productions are in their hands. Soon, other schools followed suit and even University of Montpellier embraced the CCI route. "Montpellier the Gifted" (as it was called) gradually developed into a veritable breeding ground for digital wizards!

2010 - 2015

The presence of Ubisoft and a growing pool of specialized schools encouraged a new generation of ambitious entrepreneurs to set up operations in the Montpellier area in the early 2010s: **Mad Films**, **Dwarf Animation**, **Isotropix**, **Wardenlight**, **Les Films d'Ici Méditerranée**, **Les Fées Spéciales**...all are overflowing with talent and are making it known. In a few short years, they will become the pillars of content production thanks to their high-quality and innovative artistic approach. They will make the "*Made in Montpellier*" brand shine throughout the world. Just think about it: a documentary animation series sold in more than 90 countries for Mad Films (*Points de Repères*); contracts for series with Netflix and Disney at Dwarf (*Trash Truck*, *Monsters at Work*, and *My Dad the Bounty Hunter*); a string of prestigious awards for special effects in films using Isotropix's Clarisse software; an Oscar for Wardenlight's work on the sets for the movie *Spider-Man: New Generation*; and a César Award and a European Film Award 2020 in animation for *Josep*, produced by Les Films d'Ici with the participation of the studio Les Fées Spéciales!

Encouraged by this technological and creative momentum and collective emulation, a dozen Ubisoft veterans decided to set up their own development studio in Montpellier. Rising stars with diverse profiles and expertise continue to emerge: **The Game Bakers**, **Wild Sheep Studio**, **Magic Design**, **Pixel Reef**, **Digixart** (winner of

five Pégases awards in 2022 for *Road 96*) ... And that's not all! Several independent

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companies are also setting up operations in the metropolitan area and building a reputation for themselves, proof that talent can become contagious very quickly: **Féérik Games**, **Alt Shift**, **Scimob** (now part of the Webedia group), **1492 Games**, acquired in 2018 by Ubisoft after the worldwide success of their *Is It Love?* video game. Not to mention **Wysilab**, specializing in ultra-fast 3D terrain generation, and the code learning, skill assessment, and recruitment platform **CodinGame**, of which Facebook and Electronic Arts are customers and which has more than 2 million registered developers worldwide. The message is clear: excellence is now a plural concept in Montpellier!

Ecosystem consolidation and growth

Montpellier, a hub for cinema since the time of the Lumière brothers, had for some strange reason been underutilized as far as audiovisual filming was concerned. In 2010, the city of Montpellier addressed this issue by creating the “Bureau d’Accueil des Tournages” (BAT, Film Shooting Bureau). Another great idea! An increasing number of film shoots, a growing number of big names are coming to walk the streets of Montpellier: Samuel Benchetrit, Nicole Garcia, Sandrine Kiberlain, Audrey Lamy, Alexandra Lamy, Christophe Honoré, Cédric Kahn, Roshdy Zem... What more could you want? Perhaps a landmark location?

That is what happened in 2017, when Montpellier became an ultramodern production hub under the leadership of a player who is deeply convinced of the area’s potential, ready to invest massively, and determined to promote it under the best possible light!

2017 à aujourd’hui

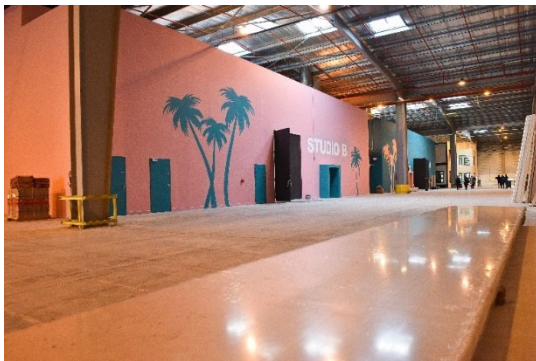
That player is **France Télévisions**. Building on the success of its daily soap opera *Plus Belle La Vie*, broadcast on France 3, the public broadcasting group announced in 2017 the upcoming launch of a new daily soap opera to be broadcast on France 2. The people in charge of the new series project were soon convinced that Montpellier had everything needed to host the filming: good transportation connections (3.5 hours by TGV from Paris), good weather (an average of 260 days of sunshine per year), plenty of interesting locations around the city - on the coast and in the backcountry (the Mediterranean Sea, Camargue marshlands, Cévennes mountains, and more), and a large number of actors, technicians, and qualified talent in the digital field, especially in 3D and animation. Naturally, the project was supported by public authorities, including Montpellier Métropole, which was well aware of the exceptional potential of the CCI sector.

France Télévisions built all the infrastructure necessary to shoot the series in a few months in a warehouse in Vendargues (just east of Montpellier), then established a partnership with **Les Tontons Truqueurs**, an innovative company specializing in “on-set VFX” (integrating virtual sets in real-time against a set’s green background, visible directly on camera). “Un si grand soleil” successfully began airing in 2018. The group then acquired additional facilities, including a virtual studio (allowing sets and 3D backgrounds to be displayed behind actors), a post-production studio (allowing this Paris-based activity to be relocated), and facilities for decoration and painting. The metamorphosis was spectacular: not only did projects come rolling in (Tandem,

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Les Pennac, Sophie Cross), but the studios also opened up their services to the outside world. Renowned producers and broadcasters flocked to visit the premises. An artistic project turned into a major industrial project!

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Furthermore, several French players foresaw the upcoming boom in the metropolitan area after France Televisions moved in, and the local ecosystem experienced rapid consolidation in 2017-2018 that enabled it to reach a critical size. Three ambitious new studios arrived in the animation and special effects sector: **The Beastmakers**, **Menhir FX**, and **Illogic Studio**. From then on, the number of people arriving in the area continued to grow. Montpellier is attractive and radiates well beyond the borders of the metropolitan area! 2020 was marked, in particular, by the arrival of three major animation companies: **Fortiche Production**, the animation studio behind the *Arcane* series (adapted from the League Of Legends video game), a 2021 box office hit on Netflix; **Nobody Studio**, which is switching to a legal form that is still uncommon in the CCI field, that of a “cooperative company” (SCOP); **Karlab**, a 3D character design studio based in Paris that works for Illumination Mac Guff and Disney, among others, and has chosen to relocate its headquarters to Montpellier.

As far as video games are concerned, a key player in the publishing and distribution of independent video games, the **Plug-in Digital group**, is also setting up operations in the city, with its catalog of more than 250 games and its links with over 70 platforms. The field of sound, until recently somewhat scattered and discreet, has been reinforced with the establishment of **Audio Workshop**, followed by **Saraband**, which, along with **Tomato Sound Factory** and **Kitchen TV**, offers a wide range of services including mixing, editing, dubbing, sound effects, music, and training. The sound industry has organized itself around the **Coodio** association, the first national cluster in France for audio, radio, and voice, bringing together all the sector’s stakeholders. Montpellier now has the optimal level of expertise, equipment, and infrastructure to round out the animated image industry.

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Montpellier is finally showing its full potential as a versatile metropolitan area that has all the assets needed to be ultra-competitive in the international arena! Local authorities have understood that the players are present, and are working alongside them to help them grow in the region. This includes developing a flagship district - the Cité Créative, and organizing professional meetings, launching a fund to support creation, and setting up a video game startup incubator... When will you decide to join the adventure? 😊