



THE MONUMENT

Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879)

Rationalism, Invention, and the Science of Archeology

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ABSTRACT

Viollet-le-Duc immediately stood out for posterity through his pragmatic training, original profile, institutional influence, theoretical capacity, and substantial oeuvre, both as a "rationalist" builder (Saint-Denis-de-l'Estrée church) and a restorer (Sainte-Chapelle, Notre-Dame de Paris). He laid the foundations for a science of archeology, which was initiated at the Basilica of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine in Vézelay, and applied to numerous churches and cathedrals. His reconstruction of the château de Pierrefonds sought to found a national art inherited from the excellence of the Middle Ages.



Château de Pierrefonds (Oise), built between 1396 and 1407 by Louis d'Orléans to control the route between Flanders and Burgundy, and at the request of Emperor Napoléon III restored by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc starting in 1858, who reconstructed the castle art of the late fourteenth century for the exterior, and conceived an imaginative neo-medieval residence for the interior. ©Photo J.-Y. Andrieux.

One of the masters of French architecture of the nineteenth century, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc stood out to posterity for his unusual profile, larger-than-life personality, and outstanding legacy: he received a non-academic training (for which he was criticized in 1863 when Napoléon III named him professor of art history and esthetics at the École

des beaux-arts); he produced a colossal oeuvre, both applied and theoretical, and held an important institutional role under three successive political regimes; he cultivated a well-rounded professional position that led him, on the one hand, to pass judgment on the creation of his time by organizing and dominating the "rationalist" school and, on the other, to define the French position regarding the restoration of old buildings; all of these elements culminated in a genuine system of thought that underpinned his success, but whose coherence--and rigidity--were strongly criticized afterwards. This is why he is especially known as a restorer, even though he also conceived and produced religious buildings (Saint-Denis-de-l'Estrée church), furniture and decor, residential buildings and homes (Paris), as well as a number of châteaux (Ambrières, Pupetières, La Flachère, Mérimée).

He came from a cultured and liberal environment on both the side of his father Emmanuel (1781-1857), an administrator of royal residences under the July Monarchy, and his mother Eugénie Delécluze (1785-1832), a woman of the world who held a Parisian salon attended by Stendhal and Sainte-Beuve. After gaining early experience with the architects Jean Huvé (1783-1852), builder of the Madeleine in Paris, and Achille Leclère (1785-1852), a student of Charles Percier (1764-1838), he decided to train not at the École des beaux-arts, but through a series of voyages, a personal Grand Tour of sorts that, from 1831 to 1837, prompted him to gather the elements of an archeological science of the Middle Ages in France, before going to Sicily, Pompeii and Herculaneum, Rome and Venice. Upon his return to Paris, he contributed to Baron Taylor's (1789-1879) *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France*. This collaboration, along with the support of his uncle Étienne Delécluze (1781-1863), a painter and art critic, brought him into the network that Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870) was constituting to establish historical monuments as links in the "chain of time," as requested by the historian who served as minister under Louis-Philippe, François Guizot (1787-1874).

In 1840, the same year that the first list of monuments supported by the state was created, Viollet-le-Duc was given responsibility over the Basilica of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine in Vézelay, and then was appointed to the Sainte-Chapelle, where he assisted Jean-Baptiste Lassus (1807-1857). It was on this site--whose particular choices led early on to a reconstruction of the original state, in honor of the memory of Louis IX so dear to Catholics--where he learned to manage a restoration agency. At the same time, in Vézelay he was confronted, on his own, by a remarkable romanesque building that was at risk of demise. His immediate technical choices saved the building from ruin, while his restoration of the nave eliminated three gothic vaults to recreate a romanesque stylistic unity, one with no material evidence but that intended to recreate an original esthetic ambiance.

In 1842, he began the series of dizzying tours that took him to every corner of France, and prepared with Lassus the competition for the restoration of Notre-Dame de Paris, which had been the object of great enthusiasm since Victor Hugo's novel (1831). The work began in 1845, aiming first to re-establish the spire and the entire sculptural program--including the gallery of the kings of Juda that had been decapitated in 1793--and later (until 1864) to apply mural ornamentation to the nave's lateral chapels, one based on an interpretation of the ornamental painting of the Middle Ages as a framing of space and as a lesson in moderation.

Aside from his interventions on a number of churches and cathedrals (Troyes, Marseille, Clermont-Ferrand, Narbonne, and then Amiens, Reims), he never ceased to extend his range, tackling the château de Coucy in 1856, and that of the Cité de Carcassonne in 1862. In 1847, he undertook a controversial restoration project for Saint-Sernin of Toulouse: he weighed down its contours by adorning the apse and apsidioles with stone from Carcassonne (his technical concerns turned against him, for this material was unable to withstand time, and it was decided in 1979 to revert to the church's initial state). In 1857, he worked on the Synodal Palace of Sens, where he made the most of the location's social history--as he interpreted it--as a guide for his restoration. Judging that the building associated both civil and religious functions, he reconstructed a room with ribbed vaults of his own creation, and topped the walls with crenels of his invention.

He strengthened his institutional position by joining in 1860 the Commission des monuments historiques, although

in 1861 he lost the competition for the construction of the Paris opera. In 1857 he published a theoretical illustrated restoration of the château de Pierrefonds, which sparked the enthusiasm of Napoléon III and initiated the restoration project that--along with the Lausanne cathedral decided on in 1872--would occupy the entire end of his career. This exceptional restoration had a multi-faceted impact. On the outside, he reconstructed--as a loyal archaeologist--the defensive system of an early fifteenth-century fortified castle. On the inside, however, aside from the floors and rooms of the square dungeon, he gave his inventiveness free rein, one bordering on the greatest creativity. The chambers and salons of the emperor and empress were creations without the least hint of pastiche, and whose mural polychromy sought to model space in the same manner as light, with the help of sharp contrasts in the private apartments, and dark tones in the public sections. The salle des Preuses was given a monumental chimney with historied capitals foreshadowing the trends of Art Nouveau. The chapel, which was totally remodeled, took on striking proportions.

After this unrivalled renovation, Viollet-le-Duc was accused of being an agent of the Empire. In reality, he was driven by his conviction that he was fulfilling a patriotic act by resurrecting a national art inherited from the excellence of the Middle Ages, and by asserting France's superiority. After its proclamation, the Republic made this message its own, and adopted the project that the architect had called for in 1855 and put forward in June 1879, shortly before his death: to create a Musée de sculpture comparée [Museum of comparative sculpture], where this national prominence could be demonstrated, and its principles transmitted to contemporary artists.

According to Viollet-le-Duc, restoration did not consist of maintaining, repairing, or renovating a building, but "reestablish[ing it] to a finished state, which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time." Expressed in the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI^e au XVI^e siècle* (1854-1868)--the major work, along with *Entretiens sur l'architecture* (1863-1872), from his substantial written activity--this position is based on the scientific theories of the time (anatomy, paleontology). It sought to construct perfect typological models, link them to historical and political values, and then apply them to the works discussed by deciphering the "silent language between monuments and men." It entailed imagining places as they existed in the past, in order to reproduce them in their primitive state for use in the present, by asserting the most rational harmony between form and function.

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