



PRIX
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Award ceremony

Monday 9th December 2024, 6:00 PM, Grande Salle des Séances

Speech of Maryvonne de Saint Pulgent

Winner

Mr. Chancellor,
Mr. President of the François Guizot Association,
Mr. President and distinguished members of the jury,
Ladies and gentlemen, members and correspondents of the Institute,

I receive this honor with profound emotion, in the presence of my publisher and friend, Pierre Nora, in this grand assembly hall of the Institute, where so many scholarly debates take place, including those of the three academies to which Guizot belonged and which support this prestigious prize, re-established under the Institute's auspices just eleven years ago. I am particularly honored that you have chosen my work in the year when France Mémoire commemorates the 150th anniversary of François Guizot's birth. Guizot notably founded the Historic Monuments Service, which I had the privilege to lead over a quarter of a century ago. Without Guizot, Notre-Dame might not have been restored in the 19th century, or certainly not in the way it was under Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.

When I accepted the challenge posed by Gallimard and its president Antoine Gallimard to write about Notre-Dame de Paris after so many eminent authors, I asked myself several questions raised by the aftermath of the April 2019 fire. Among them, I wondered why the heritage community so vehemently and almost unanimously rejected the idea of a contemporary spire commemorating this event, which had become a global catastrophe, even though the cathedral remained standing and there were no human casualties.

This refusal of anything but a reconstruction of Viollet-le-Duc's spire did not, in my view, reprise the age-old quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, with the modern architect championing innovation. Instead, it reflected the modern concern for cataloging and preserving ancient monuments, a sentiment that emerged with the Enlightenment in reaction to the prevailing practice of destroying degraded or outdated structures that could not be adapted to contemporary tastes. Today's heritage policies rely on the full arsenal of modern sciences and advanced techniques, as evidenced by the ongoing restoration of Notre-Dame. This ambitious

and extensive project, funded by the generosity of hundreds of thousands of donors from nearly 200 countries, has significantly advanced scientific research on the Gothic cathedral, which had previously been poorly understood. Similarly, the 19th-century restoration served as a training ground for the Historic Monuments Service, newly created by Ludovic Vitet and Prosper Mérimée. This decades-long project gained international renown for Viollet-le-Duc and was instrumental in developing the French doctrine of restoration, which later influenced international restoration principles enshrined in the Athens and Venice Charters.

Notre-Dame is thus the birthplace of France's heritage policy. It was crucial not to undermine a cardinal principle of historic monument restoration: "the valid contributions of all periods to the construction of a monument must be respected," and "additions" that disregard this rule are forbidden. Who could seriously contest that Viollet-le-Duc's spire is one such valid contribution and, being thoroughly documented by its creator, its exact reconstruction was both possible and necessary?

However, my purpose today is not to justify the State's decision in July 2020 but to emphasize what Notre-Dame owes to Guizot's policies and how its architectural destiny was shaped by them. I align myself with Dominique Poulot's observation in his 1987 presentation on Guizot: "Guizot appears to be a victim of a memory lapse in heritage historiography, overshadowed by a small group of pioneers to which he does not belong and by institutions he established without direct involvement." Yet Guizot endowed heritage with a historicist theory, a methodology he called "modern archaeology," political legitimacy, and an administrative structure.

Despite this, as Poulot noted, Guizot is absent from the pantheon of French heritage's "founding fathers" — figures like Alexandre Lenoir, Chateaubriand, Victor Hugo, Augustin Thierry, and Prosper Mérimée. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc is traditionally added to this group as the forerunner of France's Chief Architects for Historic Monuments, even though this corps was established in 1892, 15 years after his death. Viollet-le-Duc belonged to the diocesan architects, responsible for concordat monuments like cathedrals and episcopal palaces.

Without Guizot, however, Viollet-le-Duc would not have been able to practice as an architect, and Notre-Dame de Paris might have suffered the unfortunate fate of many ancient monuments vandalized by their restorers, a fate denounced by Victor Hugo in his 1831 novel, where he condemned the misdeeds of architects, whom he saw as more destructive than revolutionary vandals. Such was the case with the Basilica of Saint-Denis, which lost its northern tower due to the brutal interventions of successive architects between 1806 and 1846 under the direction of the Civil Buildings Administration. This administration, inherited from the Ancien Régime, adhered to a doctrine—similar to that of the Cult Administration responsible for cathedrals and the National Palaces overseeing royal buildings—that sought to adapt ancient structures to their function without regard for their authenticity. It thus encouraged these "regrettable transformations inflicted on sacred buildings by a misunderstood taste for renovation," as Guizot's famous 1830 report to the King blamed solely on the clergy, likely to avoid offending the bureaucracies.

These three administrations recruited their architects from among former students of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, where there were no courses on architectural history, and where the instructors ignored—and above all despised—medieval architecture. They shared the views of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, dominated by neoclassicism, while knowledge of ancient history and archaeology was relegated to the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, the only

public institution, alongside the *École des Chartes*, to take an interest in the Middle Ages until Guizot created the General Inspection of Historical Monuments. Entrusted to one of his close associates, Ludovic Vitet, this office was directed from 1834 by Prosper Mérimée, who, like Vitet, was a member of the Council of State. A third Councilor of State, Jean Vatout, was chosen in 1837 to establish and chair a Historical Monuments Commission to assist the General Inspection.

These three figures were either close to or sympathetic to the "Doctrinaires" group—a name given to Guizot and his political allies during the Restoration—a group that held significant influence in the Council of State during the July Monarchy. It was this small Historical Monuments Administration, the latest addition to the already complex system of state construction projects, that was tasked with mobilizing research networks on ancient architecture and art, which had been gaining momentum since the 1820s and which Guizot sought to harness for his policy of national unity reconstruction. In the circular announcing to prefects the appointment of a General Inspector of Historical Monuments, Guizot urged them to encourage the creation of learned societies modeled after the Society of Antiquaries of Normandy, founded in 1824 by Arcisse de Caumont, the pioneer of medieval archaeology in France.

In 1839, another circular invited prefects to use these learned societies to identify volunteer "inspector-correspondents" capable of locating monuments to protect and restore. These individuals prepared lists of monuments to be submitted to the Historical Monuments Commission for classification. The first of these lists, published in 1840 and known as the "Mérimée List," included 1,090 buildings. However, prefects were also tasked with overseeing the activities of these learned societies, limiting them to an auxiliary role in supporting state action and preventing them from influencing restorations. The methods and personnel involved in restorations were chosen by the Historical Monuments Administration, often clashing with local preferences, which tended to align more closely with those of the Académie des Beaux-Arts than with scholarly research.

It was ultimately the Beaux-Arts doctrine that prevailed in the initial restoration projects for Notre-Dame, which were envisioned during the Empire but only began under Louis XVIII. Entrusted to Hippolyte Godde, the cathedral's diocesan architect, the first campaign of works conducted between 1816 and 1821 provoked the indignation of archaeologists after 1830, notably Adolphe Didron. A close associate of Guizot, Didron was appointed in 1834 as secretary of the Historical and Scientific Works Committee, tasked with "directing research and publishing unpublished documents relating to the history of France," and in 1835 as secretary of the Historical Committee for Arts and Monuments. Ludovic Vitet served on both committees, while Prosper Mérimée sat on the second alongside Victor Hugo. The committee also included a fervent archaeologist who was the head of the Cult Administration's office. These members shared a strong aversion to the neoclassical style of Godde's additions, such as a new Chapel of the Virgin aligned with the high altar, and to his reliance on modern materials like cement and putty. Similar criticism was leveled against François Debret, an Académie des Beaux-Arts member and Prix de Rome laureate, for his work on the Basilica of Saint-Denis.

Victor Hugo's scathing remarks in *Notre-Dame de Paris* were primarily directed at Godde, contributing to the architect's dismissal when a comprehensive restoration of Notre-Dame was approved in 1842. The cathedral's "extreme dilapidation" had been decried in a petition to the

Cult Administration, signed by prominent figures such as the Archbishop of Paris, Montalembert, Hugo, Ingres, Vigny, and Didron. Didron also spearheaded a press campaign to replace Godde with Jean-Baptiste Lassus, one of the restorers of the Sainte-Chapelle. Lassus's appointment was facilitated by a competition that Vitet arranged to include him. Lassus, in turn, partnered with Viollet-le-Duc, whom he had met through Mérimée. This duo of "young men full of promise" was selected in 1844 after protracted debates within the Civil Buildings Council, presided over by Jean Vatout, who also chaired the Historical Monuments Commission.

During these debates, Guizot's network leveraged its influence. Mérimée, a council member since 1842, was tasked with reporting on the candidacy of Lassus and Viollet-le-Duc alongside Félix Duban, Lassus's partner in the Sainte-Chapelle restoration. Together, they persuaded their colleagues that this proposal best met the criteria for "a proper and appropriate restoration" and was "the only feasible" option. This marked the beginning of Viollet-le-Duc's rise to fame and fortune. He became a leading figure and advocate of the burgeoning archaeological movement, contributing actively to specialized journals such as the *Annales Archéologiques*, founded by Didron in 1844, as well as to the medievalist circles of the Royal Library and the École des Chartes. He also played a key role in Guizot's commemorative institutions, including the Société de l'Histoire de France, which Guizot helped establish in 1833.

Viollet-le-Duc hailed from an Orleanist family; his father served as the curator of Louis-Philippe's royal residences and maintained close contact with the monarch. At just 19, Viollet-le-Duc was commissioned by Louis-Philippe to produce watercolors of the Tuileries Palace, which impressed the king and led to his appointment as a professor of ornament composition at the Royal Drawing School. Among his students was Hector Guimard, one of the pioneers of Art Nouveau. Viollet-le-Duc's artistic and historical education began early, traveling across France with his uncle, the painter Étienne Delécluze, a friend of Mérimée and an art critic for the *Journal des Débats*, the most influential newspaper supporting Guizot and his policies. Sketching everything he encountered, he developed a deep appreciation for French architecture and, by refusing to enroll at the École des Beaux-Arts, avoided the neoclassical and antiquarian biases of official circles. This led him to embrace the archaeological movement at an early stage.

His entry into the movement was facilitated by Baron Isidore Taylor, a member of the Historical Monuments Commission, who recruited him in 1838 as an illustrator for *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France*. This series, published between 1820 and 1878, greatly influenced public taste in favor of Gothic architecture. That same year, Achille Leclère, a Prix de Rome-winning architect and a family friend, secured him a position as an auditor on the Civil Buildings Council and entrusted him with overseeing the Hôtel des Archives project, for which Leclère was the lead architect—a remarkable opportunity for a 24-year-old largely self-taught architect. Viollet-le-Duc's formal architectural training had been limited to a few months in two firms, including Leclère's. He later supervised the restoration of the Sainte-Chapelle, winning the friendship of its two architects, Duban and Lassus, who integrated him into their team.

Without the creation of the Historic Monuments Service, however, Viollet-le-Duc might never have transitioned from inspecting the works of others to undertaking architectural projects of his own. Mérimée had developed the habit of taking Viollet-le-Duc along on his inspection

tours of provincial diocesan buildings, valuing his ability to identify problems and propose solutions backed by convincing sketches and drawings. When, in 1840, the desperate state of the Romanesque Basilica of Vézelay—recently added to the list of classified monuments—deterred even the best architects from intervening, Mérimée took the risk of entrusting the project to Viollet-le-Duc. By the end of the year, Viollet-le-Duc had averted disaster with well-judged emergency repairs. This marked the beginning of his career as an architect. Four years later, he was entrusted with the restoration of Notre-Dame in partnership with Lassus. It was, therefore, the Historic Monuments Service, established by Guizot and developed by his "circle," that launched Viollet-le-Duc's career and enabled him to become the "doctrinaire" of French heritage, notably as co-author of Mérimée's circulars outlining principles for restoring monuments managed by the service.

Notre-Dame owes even more, however, to the "Guizot moment," as Pierre Rosanvallon described it in his 1985 essay. As Dominique Poulot analyzed in a 1987 paper, "historicism is, if not the driving force, at least the foundation of Guizot's conception of heritage," and "the preservation of the past is part of an intellectual strategy—of using the past for the future in the age of the nation-state." In 1834, the minister wrote, "No study reveals more vividly the social state and true spirit of past generations than that of their religious, civil, public, and domestic monuments, the diverse ideas and principles that governed their construction—in short, the study of all the works and variations of architecture, which is both the origin and the summary of all the arts." Guizot argued in his *History of Civilization in France* that the medieval period was "the cradle of modern societies and customs. From it originate: 1) the modern languages... 2) modern literatures... 3) most modern monuments, those in which people gathered for centuries and still gather—churches, palaces, town halls, works of art and public utility of all kinds; 4) almost all historical families... 5) a large number of national events, important in themselves and long popular... in short, almost everything that has preoccupied and stirred the imagination of the French people for centuries."

This judgment from the "first intellectual prime minister of Louis-Philippe" applies strikingly to Notre-Dame de Paris, even if we cannot go as far as Michelet and Hugo in seeing its medieval builders and artisans as freethinkers and Freemasons, precursors to the Revolution. Still, as Dominique Poulot observes, Guizot "exemplarily links this evocation of the past to the administration of a public spirit nourished by memory." Thus, "respect for the art of bygone eras" contributes to "mobilizing the capacities needed to build the present and illuminate the future."

It was in this spirit that the president of the Committee for Arts and Monuments urged his colleagues in 1840 to draw on the study of past monuments to also "concern themselves with the art of the future, [with] the monuments to come," and to ask, "What architectural style should France preferably adopt for construction?"

All who have read Viollet-le-Duc's theoretical work will recognize, as Bruno Foucart noted in the catalog for the 1980 exhibition marking the architect's centenary, that he was one of the most faithful disciples of Guizot's philosophy on heritage, even as a theoretician of architecture. He adhered to Guizot's vision of the role of the past in shaping the future when he advocated for modern architecture inspired by the best principles of ancient architecture, particularly Gothic architecture, to design buildings suited to the needs of their time—what he

called “reasoned eclecticism,” as opposed to the stylistic eclecticism practiced by Charles Garnier’s school. This fidelity extended to his role as a restorer of Notre-Dame.

Contrary to the dark legend surrounding Viollet-le-Duc, Lassus and his young associate approached the restoration project as archaeologists and historians, not as inventors or imitators. In preparation for the proposal they submitted to the 1842 competition, Viollet-le-Duc spent that summer surveying Notre-Dame with pencil in hand, meticulously documenting its details. This effort culminated in 22 sheets of plans, drawings, and watercolors, supplemented by daguerreotypes specially commissioned to capture the cathedral’s state of ruin. By employing this cutting-edge technology—introduced by Arago to the Academy of Sciences in January 1839—Viollet-le-Duc enhanced the technical credibility of the proposal he and Lassus presented, while giving it a “scientific” character that, as Dominique Poulot phrased it, “modernized” traditional architectural methods.

The two restorers delved deeply into the cathedral’s past, identifying traces of damage that explained alterations to the upper structures in the 13th century and reconstructing the earlier designs of the nave’s windows to justify a return to certain historical states. Their work on restoring and recreating stained glass, ornaments, and lost statuary adhered to a strict fidelity to authentic vestiges that served as their models. In so doing, they sought to recover a “stylistic unity” aligned with their resolutely “historicist” conception of restoration, guided by their interpretation of Gothic civilization, as Guizot had advocated.

Viollet-le-Duc also positioned himself as the anatomist of Gothic architecture, striving to grasp its essence, uncover its secrets, and address its shortcomings where necessary. The spire he designed alone in 1858, after Lassus’s death, sought to correct the flaws of its predecessor, which had been dismantled during the Revolution due to its poor wind resistance. When this spire was later replicated identically, contemporary science validated the accuracy of Viollet-le-Duc’s diagnosis and the relevance of his solutions, even in the face of climate instability. Far from being a pure invention, the spire drew on existing historical models from the cathedrals of Orléans and Amiens, studied in the “Spire” entry of his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*, published starting in 1854.

The restoration of Notre-Dame by Lassus and Viollet-le-Duc—hopefully demonstrated here as an embodiment of Guizot’s philosophy on heritage—should be considered part of Guizot’s ministerial legacy, even though it was largely financed by Napoleon III. Nonetheless, the project was not without its pitfalls, due in part to the state of archaeological knowledge at the time and to the architects’ somewhat uncompromising pursuit of stylistic unity. This led them to reject many 18th-century additions, deemed suspect for their neoclassicism or, worst of all to Viollet-le-Duc, their Rococo style.

Ultimately, the work of Lassus and Viollet-le-Duc was a “child of its time,” to quote Bruno Foucart in his article *Viollet-le-Duc et la restauration des Lieux de mémoire*, directed by Pierre Nora. It garnered contemporary approval and established France’s international reputation in heritage policy, making the country what British historian Gerald Baldwin Brown called in his 1905 work *The Care of Ancient Monuments* (published by Cambridge University Press) “the founding land” of respect and admiration for ancient monuments.

Let us, once again, thank François Guizot for this achievement.