

## The hero as artist: an English view of Viollet-le-Duc

1979 was, as the whole world of conservation must know, the year of Viollet-le-Duc. The commemoration of his death in Lausanne 100 years before began, quite rightly, with an exhibition at the Hôtel de Sully, Paris, which examined *Le 'Gothique' retrouvé avant Viollet-le-Duc*.<sup>1</sup> Having looked at the awakening of interest in the art and architecture of the Middle Ages before the hero's birth in 1814, the next phase was the celebration of his youthful skill as an artist in *Le voyage d'Italie d'Eugène Viollet-le-Duc 1836-1837*;<sup>2</sup> after being seen at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (the institution to which he had a lifelong aversion), this collection of brilliant watercolours, sketches and measured drawings moved to the country which had inspired them and drew crowds to the Accademia delle Arte in Florence. At the same time the nearby Museo di Santa Maria Novella housed the imaginatively presented essay in discovering what had preceded the present figures in the Gallery of Kings on the west front of Notre-Dame de Paris. *Il ritorno dei Re*<sup>3</sup> presented the remains of the medieval originals which had been removed by the Paris Commune during the antimonarchical frenzy of 1793, comparing them with Viollet-le-Duc's replacements. Finally, the whole corpus of his work was magnificently presented at the Grand Palais, Paris under the simple title of *Viollet-le-Duc*.<sup>4</sup> All four exhibitions were accompanied by finely produced scholarly catalogues which added considerably to the bibliography of the best documented of all architect restorers. The Monnaie de Paris struck a commemorative medal (*Fig. 1*), and the only sour note might have been heard in Toulouse where the hero's additions to Saint-Sernin were at that time being removed in order to restore the building to its pre-nineteenth-century appearance. All these events were fully reported in the professional press and in articles in more popular journals and newspapers;<sup>5</sup> collectively, in their respectful admiration on the one hand and their questioning on the other, they represent a significant phase in the evolution of conservation which we shall have occasion to refer to in other contexts later. But as a postscript to all these activities, we reproduce a tribute paid to the French architect by an English admirer in the last decade of the former's productive life.

Having heard much of the extensive restorations which have been in progress for some years past in France, and of M. Viollet-le-Duc, under whose directorship most of these works were being carried out, I resolved to accept the offer of an architectural friend familiar with the ground to act as my cicerone on a visit to a few of the structures in question . . . My companion was personally known to the architect . . . who, with the utmost courtesy, facilitated our examination of the buildings we proposed to visit by giving us letters to his various inspectors.

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FIG. 1. The medal struck by the Monnaie de Paris to commemorate the centenary of the death of Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc.

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue published by Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques et des Sites, Paris 1979 with introduction by Louis Grodecki.

<sup>2</sup> Catalogue published by Centro Di, Florence 1980, with essays by Geneviève Viollet-le-Duc, Michel Vernes and Jean-Jacques Aillagon.

<sup>3</sup> Catalogue published by Vallecchi, Florence 1980, with essays by Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, Roberto Salvini, Franco Borsi, Gabriele Morolli and Cristina Acidini Luchinat.

<sup>4</sup> Catalogue published by Edition de la Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris 1980 with an introduction by Bruno Foucart.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. *Architectural Design*, nos. 3/4, London 1980, with essays by Sir John Summerson, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, Geneviève Viollet-le-Duc, etc.

That was how Charles Wethered, self-described as ‘a country doctor’, came to write a valuable contemporary description of Viollet-le-Duc at work.<sup>6</sup> He and his nameless friend visited Notre-Dame in Paris, the Abbey Church of St. Denis, and the Château of Pierrefonds; and as he travelled onwards his admiration increased for the man whose ‘re-creative mind . . . set before us, with an added lustre of its own, all that was grand in ornamentation and truthful in construction of the churches and palaces of those middle ages when men wrought nobly from sheer love of their handiwork’. The published account of his impressions, which appeared in 1875 as a companion piece to his English translation of Viollet-le-Duc’s essay on restoration, concludes with an enthusiastic assessment of the architect himself, ‘an intellectual king among men, with personal attractions of dignity and grace befitting a descendant of the old *noblesse*’.

I have never seen a nobler head or a countenance more expressive of mental power. He comprises in himself the seriousness and solidity of the English character with the *verve* and *esprit* of the French temperament . . . here we have a notable living example of the hero as artist, as poet, or seer, who speaks to us for our instruction and delight, not only in the printed volume, but in the still more fascinating language of form and colour. He approaches truth on its aesthetic side, and his doings are the record of its perception and embodiment in outward visible shape. He is not less successful in the representation of ideal thought and sentiment than in the rendering of direct specific fact. He never repeats himself, and nothing can stale his infinite variety—from the delicate aerial lines, woven as if by fairy work, of the aspiring *flèche* which so gracefully crowns the cathedral of Notre-Dame, to the grand simplicity and aptness of every detail in his own house in Paris . . . His mission has been to make the world more beautiful, and therefore better than he found it.

In the course of our trip I learnt from my friend something of the daily routine of life and study by which this eminent man has been able to accomplish so much fine and enduring work . . . He enters his studio at seven in the morning, where he is engaged till nine in getting in readiness the work that will be called for, and preparing for his visitors, whom he receives from nine till ten, during which he takes his frugal breakfast standing. At this hour will be found lying ready the manuscript for the publisher, a pile of wood blocks for the engraver . . . plans for the builder, designs for the sculptor and blacksmith, and cartoons for the decorator or glass painter—every one of which is the product of his own hand. For each of his staff as he arrives, after his ‘*Voilà, monsieur, votre affaire*’ and verbal instructions, he has a kind word of friendly inquiry, encouragement, or advice. At ten his studio is cleared, and he works at his drawings without interruption until his dinner hour at six. At seven he retires to his library, where he is engaged with his literary pursuits till midnight. This, his daily life at home, is but little varied when away. He generally travels by night, often taking journeys of several hundred miles; for he visits every building upon which he is engaged once a month, making any special drawing required on the spot. He gives his instructions personally to the workmen, each of whom he notices in making his round of inspection. Though he has himself a perfect acquaintance with the technicalities of every craft, he does not disdain to consult their opinion, and he can, so we were assured by the men themselves, always teach something worth knowing belonging to the practical department of each. He will take the hammer

<sup>6</sup> Wethered, C., *On Restoration by E. Viollet-le-Duc and a Notice of his Works in Connection with the Historical Monuments of France*, London 1875.

and pincers of the plumber and show him how to beat or twist his lead to the required form, or the chisel from the sculptor, and with a few strokes gain for him the desired expression. He gives a perspective drawing of every detail, however small, and his designs for sculpture and goldsmiths' work are drawn with photographic accuracy. His most accomplished sculptors say that it is impossible for them to render all the *finesse* of his delineations. And these beautiful sketches come from his hand by thousands; those forming the exquisite illustrations which adorn his published works would of themselves bear testimony to a life of rare industry and skill. But the most surprising thing of all is that he works entirely alone, unaided by clerks or assistants of any kind.

The thousands who work under him may well look up with sincere admiration and respect to a master who has done so much to extend the beneficent scope of art by bringing it home to the daily lives and aptitudes of a most intelligent class of handicraftsmen. One of his principal employees said to us with hearty enthusiasm, 'He knows everything, from astrology and geology down to cookery, and it all comes like music from his lips'. '*C'est un homme universel*' was the exclamation of a scholarly friend capable of appreciating the many-sidedness of his genius—his greatness in arts, in literature, and in practical science.

In his construction generally Viollet-le-Duc employs and combines the various modern materials with a scientific knowledge and artistic feeling unapproached by any one engineer or architect of our own day. He is becoming in France the veritable founder of a new school of architecture, which, though based on careful study and analysis of the ancient schools, aims not merely at a revival or copy of what has been before, but at a faithful expression of our present requirements and means . . . The more they are studied the more I am convinced it will be seen and felt that the achievements of this celebrated Frenchman in the associated arts of architecture, sculpture, and painting are not less remarkable for their catholicity of range than for the beauty of their design and mastery of expression. Having myself derived mental health, pleasure, and profit from devoting a . . . short holiday to their inspection, my object in making these notes will be fully served if they should in any way be the means of prompting others to more thoroughly investigate works whose fame will be for ever identified with the historic buildings it has been their restorer's happy fortune to hand over to posterity in a state of renovated completeness, not unworthy of their original nobleness and grace.