

Viollet-le-Duc and Villard de Honnecourt

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Good afternoon.

(01) The first facsimile edition of the portfolio of drawings of

Villard de Honnecourt was published in Paris in 1858. The text was by the architect Jean-Baptiste Antoine Lassus, best known for restoring the Sainte-Chapelle. Lassus died on July 15th, 1857 before his facsimile was complete. The project was made ready for publication by his pupil Alfred Darcel, who claimed to have “closely conformed to Lassus’s manuscripts.” A photographic reprint was issued by Léonce Laget in Paris in 1972.

In Lassus’s facsimile the original drawings by Villard and others were lithographic reproductions drawn by Gustave Jules Leroy—an example is

fol. 16v, here on the left. Generations of medievalists have used the Lassus plates to study Villard's drawings without realizing (or, if they knew, without caring) that they are re-drawings. The first photographic reproductions of the drawings appeared only in 1906, in the facsimile edition of Henri Omont.

Photographic reproductions of the portfolio leaves reveal the shortcomings of Leroy's re-drawings. In his lithographs there is no indication of shading, of filling-in of drapery loops, and only in rare cases is there any indication of preliminary drawing or of corrections and erasures. You never see the bleed-through of inks. Any argument about Villard's drawing technique or style based on these lithographs is fallacious.

(I have recently finished preparing a new, critical facsimile edition of the Villard portfolio with 1:1 reproductions of the leaves in color. I have brought along some proof samples if anyone would like to see them after the program.)

(02) One of Lassus's associates in the restoration of the Sainte-Chapelle was Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. The drawing on your right is their 1843 project of restoration of south flank of the cathedral of Notre-Dame. Most of the tourists who flock to Notre-Dame have no idea of how extensive these restorations were—or even that there *were* restorations. And they certainly don't know just how threatened the building was in 1843. The slide on the left is a daguerreotype by Noël Lerebours (LUH-RHEE-BOOR) made several years before restoration was begun.

(03) Although successful as collaborators, Lassus and Viollet-le-Duc's philosophies of restoration were quite different. Lassus was deeply religious and insisted that a restored building meet the needs of the cult by reflecting medieval ceremony. He studied burial records, ceremonials, and cartularies. He looked at old views. He read old descriptions. Viollet-le-Duc was the archaeologist. He trusted the stones, as any archaeologist must,

but his focus was aesthetic result. This is Viollet-le-Duc's definition of restoration:

RESTORATION. Both the word and the thing are modern. To restore an edifice is not to maintain it, or to repair it, or to rebuild it. It is to reestablish it in a completed state that may never have existed at any given moment.

It is certainly fair to call Viollet-le-Duc an eclectic archaeologist. He preferred the appearance and technique of twelfth-century stained glass to those of the thirteenth century. But he preferred Gothic architecture of the thirteenth century to that of the twelfth. This left, in Elizabeth Pastan's words, "an ambiguous legacy," a point other speakers have discussed this afternoon.

(04) Lassus and Viollet-le-Duc shared a messianic belief in the primacy of Gothic architecture as *the* national style of France. In the

Dictionnaire, Viollet-le-Duc wrote: “French architecture [understood to mean Gothic] formed itself in the midst of a conquered people, defying its conquerors; it took its inspiration in the bosom of this indigenous group, the majority of the nation.” And Viollet-le-Duc believed fervently in the rationalism of French Gothic architecture. In his words: “We are struck by the appearance of our French buildings, by the wisdom and science that controlled their execution, by the unity and harmony and the methodology followed in their construction as in their decoration.” Lassus had written, “...we find on our soil, in our tradition, a style more applicable than all foreign styles. This style is that of the thirteenth century. It unites all desirable conditions, is proved by its construction, by its forms appropriate to [our] climate, and by its ornamentation.”

(05) Moreover, both men shared an intense distaste for neo-Baroque *Beaux Arts* architecture such as Charles Garnier’s Opéra. In the context of this bond Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus became interested in

Villard's drawings—for each saw in them proof of the brilliance of French architects of the thirteenth century. They doubted not for a moment that Villard was a professional architect/mason/builder—a fallacy that distorts Villard studies a century and a half later.

However, they approached Villard quite differently. Lassus was scholarly, formal, and often pedantic. Viollet-le-Duc could likewise *sound* scholarly. In his *Dictionnaire*, in the entry “Architect,” he wrote of Villard as follows:

“The names of ... [the architects] who built the cathedrals of Chartres and of Reims, of Noyon and of Laon, the admirable façade of the cathedral of Paris, are not preserved, but the diligent research of several archaeologists daily discovers information of great interest on these artists, on their studies, and on their manner of working. We

have a notebook of sketches of one of them,
Villard de Honnecourt, with observations and
notes on the monuments of his time. Villard de
Honnecourt, who possibly directed construction of
the choir of the cathedral of Cambrai, now
destroyed, and who was called to Hungary to
undertake important works, was the contemporary
and friend of Pierre de Corbie, celebrated
thirteenth-century architect, builder of several
churches in Picardy, and who could well be the
author of the radiating chapels of [the cathedral of]
Reims.”

Now, this reads as a tidy, short biography of Villard. But there are
problems. First, no one knows either when or why Villard went to Hungary,
or what he did while he was there. Second, the attribution of Cambrai to

Villard is no longer accepted. Third, nothing is known about Pierre de Corbie, and certainly not that he was a “celebrated thirteenth-century architect.” He is known only as a collaborator with Villard on a curious double-ambulatory plan that we will see in a moment.

(06) Viollet-le-Duc’s entry in the *Dictionnaire* mentioning Villard is scholarly-*sounding* although not based on documentation. In his next two writings Viollet-le-Duc found a very clever way to use Villard to promote his theory of the primacy of Gothic architecture without pretending to be scholarly. In these writings Viollet-le-Duc met Villard face-to-face. In the first issue of *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, published in 1859, the year after Lassus’s facsimile appeared, Viollet-le-Duc wrote an essay called “The First Apparition of Villard de Honnecourt, Architect of the Thirteenth Century.”

Viollet-le-Duc was sitting in his study at night, looking perhaps like Honoré [ON-OR-RAY] Daumier’s *Le Connoisseur*. Suddenly Villard appeared, and

his first question was: “Why did Lassus go to the trouble of publishing my ‘incomplete notes’?”

(07) Villard then explained some of his drawings, for example, that he drew a window of Reims after he had been invited to go to Hungary to build the Cathedral of Kassa because he didn’t want to forget the details of the Reims window, should he need them. This is *not* what Villard or his scribe wrote. The text reads, simply, “I had been sent to the land of Hungary when I drew it [= the window] because I liked it best.”

(08) Villard’s most amazing revelation was that he and Pierre de Corbie drew a plan as a project for Reims. This is the upper plan in the slide on your right. There could scarcely be two more dissimilar concepts of plans. Villard and Pierre’s combination of square and rounded radiating chapels is itself an apparition—a scheme Robert Branner called “somewhat monstrous.” By contrast, at Reims Jean d’Orbais designed a compact, sinuously undulating chevet with identical radiating chapels.

At the conclusion of his first apparition, Villard promised to return to talk some more, then disappeared.

(09) The second apparition was recounted in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* a year later. This time Villard became the *alter ego* of Viollet-le-Duc, a second self. Villard claimed that “I have been in many lands”—as it is written in the portfolio: *jai este en m[u]lt de tieres*. He then described to Viollet-le-Duc a visit he made to Rome where he was *ravi d’admiration* for the ancient architectural monuments he encountered.

(10) Now, who else went to Rome to study ancient monuments? Viollet-le-Duc, in 1836. The slide on the left shows Viollet-le-Duc at age 20, two years before his trip. His trip included a seven-month stay in Rome and he was no less *ravi d’admiration* for Rome than was Villard. On Christmas Day 1836 he wrote in his diary: “O! What Rome is for artists! One cannot understand it unless one has enjoyed the grand fantasy it inspires, the memories that so occupy the imagination, the sweetness of its

air, its golden color, its endless treasures... .” Of Venice he wrote in a letter to his father: “Venice is the most poetic city in Italy ... If I had a large fortune, I could find nothing more delicious than to come to live three or four months a year in one of the its palaces which, with little effort, could be restored to their original state.” The slide on the right is Whistler’s etching “Nocturne: Venetian Palaces.”

During this second apparition Villard claimed that in Italy he came to realize that French artists were more sensitive and skilled than those he encountered in Italy. Viollet-le-Duc agreed, at least indirectly, when he wrote from Pisa to his father “... truly, Italian Gothic and Byzantine [architecture] are pitiful construction and have nothing in common with the execution of our Gothic monuments....”

The earliest known published mention of the Villard portfolio, by André Félibien in 1666, also compared medieval French and Italian artists: “Recently there fell into my hands an old parchment book by a French

author whose calligraphy and language prove it to be from the twelfth century. There are in it a number of ink figure drawings that make it known that taste in drawing [in France] was then as good as in Italy in the time of Cimabue.”

(11) During this apparition Villard demanded to know “Why is the great flourishing of art in France in the thirteenth century not recognized as a Renaissance?” He told Viollet-le-Duc that the French Renaissance began in the twelfth century and that “what passes for the French Renaissance of the sixteenth century is but a superficial importation of a few grandees.” This is the heart of Viollet-le-Duc’s belief. As he confided to one of his traveling companions in Italy: “I say this, perhaps to my shame, but I find Palladio, Sansovino, and Vignola beyond boring. In my opinion their architecture is a mélange of antique and rococo, totally cold and without character.”

(12) Viollet-le-Duc took great pride in being master of many aspects of architecture—construction, decoration, stained glass, sculpture,

furniture—the slide on the left is his drawing of *tas-de-charge* vault-springer construction. In his *Discourses on Architecture* Viollet-le-Duc railed against “specialitiés: “In the present day, ‘specialities’ alone are recognized. It is not imagined that a savant, an artist, or a man of letters can move in a wide circle. Each is confined within a narrow sphere, beyond which he cannot pass.”

It is little wonder, then, that he had Villard explain that he (Villard) drew a great variety of subjects in his portfolio because, as an architect, he was responsible for many aspects of building projects. As Villard put it, “We had not invented what you call ‘specialists,’ a term as barbarous as what it describes.” The slide on the right is one of Villard’s choir stall poppets.

(13) Viollet-le-Duc’s theses were not new with him. They came mostly from Lassus and looked back to Victor Hugo and Ludovic Vitet.

What *was* new is that he hammered them into a nationalistic, iconic mantra.

His *modus operandi* was to use Villard as a French ancestor to propagandize his own views on the merits of French Gothic architecture.

And to hear him tell it, Viollet-le-Duc was responsible for the very survival of the Villard portfolio. The portfolio actually came into the French national collections when it was confiscated from the library of Saint-Germain-des-Prés during the revolution. However, Viollet-le-Duc provided a far more poetic—and personal—explanation of the survival of the portfolio. In his account, at the end of the second apparition Villard gave him a small volume bound in calfskin that he said is “... interesting and instructive, having been written long *after* the Renaissance.”

Thank you.

2005 CAA Paper Slides

- 1 L Lassus Fol. 16v: Seated Christ, Leroy Lithograph, 1857
1 R Portfolio Fol. 16v: Seated Christ, Bibl, nat. Color Slide
- 2 L Paris, Notre-Dame: West Façade, Lerebours Photo, ca. 1840
2R Paris, Notre-Dame: Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus South Flank, 1843
- 3L Saint-Denis: Chevet Window Detail, Martyrdom of St. Vincent, 1140s
3R Bourges, St. Etienne: Nave Interior, begun 1195
- 4 L Amiens, Notre-Dame: Chevet High Vault, 1250s
4R Paris, Sainte-Chapelle: Upper Chapel Interior, begun 1245
- 5L Paris, Opéra: Façade, Charles Garnier, 1861-1874
5R Portfolio Fol. 31v: Reims Nave (?) Bay Elevations
- 6L Photo of Viollet-le-Duc, Charles Marville, 1860
6R Daumier: The Connoisseur, 1863/1866
- 7L Reims, Notre-Dame: So Transept West Aisle Window, 1230s?
7R Portfolio Fol. 10v Detail: Reims Nave Aisle Window
- 8L Reims, Notre-Dame: Chevet Exterior, begun 1211
8R Portfolio Fol. 15r: Chevet Plan by Villard and Pierre de Corbie
- 9L Étienne Du Perac: Rome, Pantheon Exterior, 1575
9R Portfolio Fol. 9v: Laon Tower Plan
- 10L Raymond Monvoisin: Viollet-le-Duc at Age 20, 1834
10R Whistler: Venice Palaces, Nocturne, 1879/1880

- 11L Chambord, Château: North Flank, begun 1519
11R Bourges, St. Etienne: Exterior from the East, begun ca. 1195
- 12L Portfolio Fol. 7r: Lectern
12R Portfolio Fol. 29r: Choir Stall Poppet
- 13L Paris, Notre-Dame: Statue of Viollet-le-Duc (?)
13R Portfolio Front Cover: Interior

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Length of Talk: 10 MINS

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