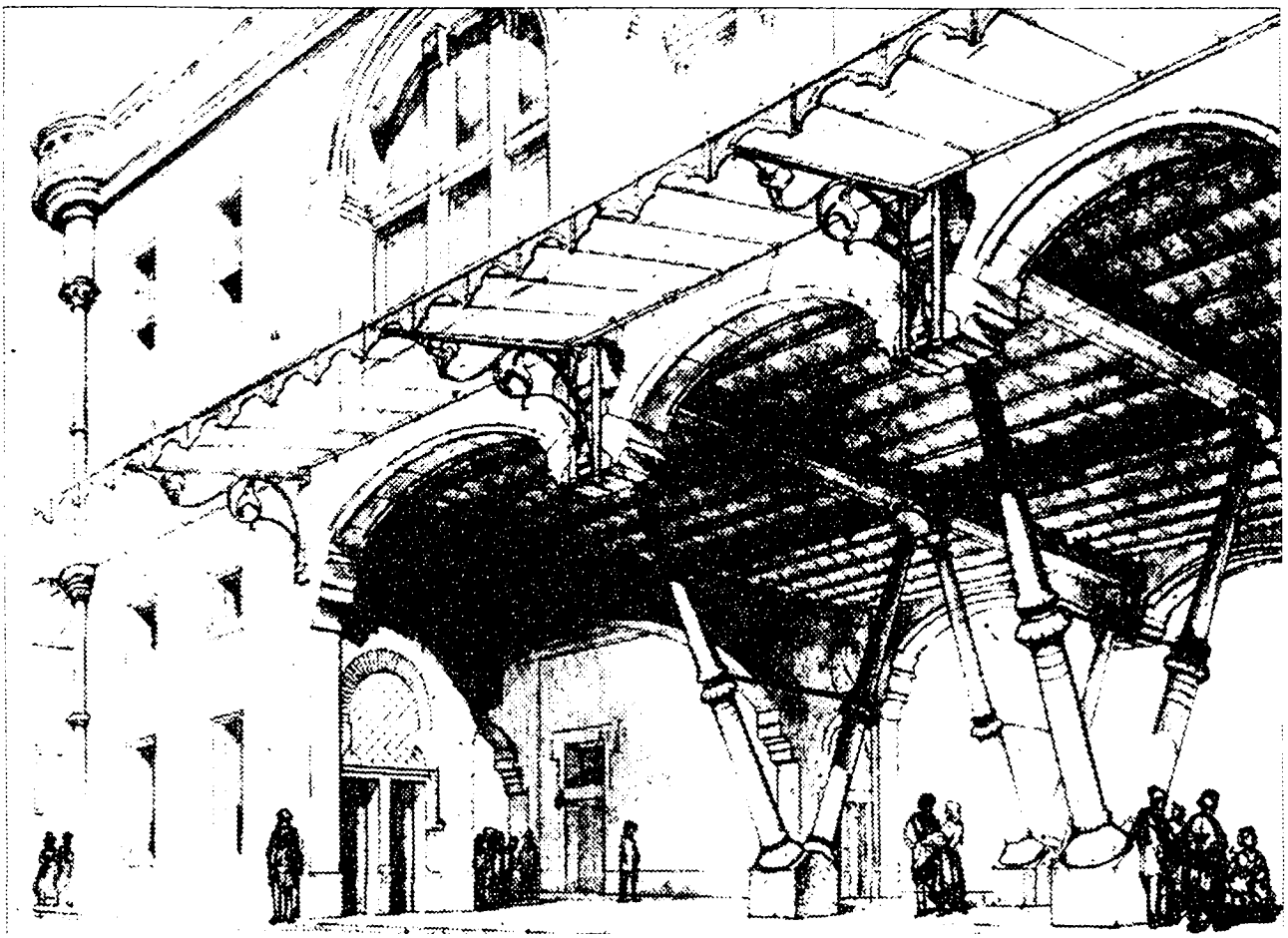

Viollet-le-Duc's drawing of ironwork supports in the Paris show

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Resurrecting a Prophetic 19th-Century Practitioner

In any survey of out-of-favor architects least likely to be revived, the easy winner, until very recently, would have been Eugéne Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. Probably no architect has been more consistently put down in this century; it is hard to look at a medieval monument in France, from the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris to the walled town of Carcassonne, without hearing imprecations against Viollet-le-Spoiler. He is the 19th-century French architect (1814-79) who spent his life elaborately reconstructing the buildings of the Middle Ages and who represents everything the 20th century has disdained: the over-restoration of monuments, the popularization of quasi-historical styles and, perhaps most unforgivable of all, the preeminence of the traditionalist in official art and culture. From the 1830's to the 70's, Viollet-le-Duc was one of the most active, influential and respected architects in the Western world.

On second thought, that would probably make him a prime candidate for revival. In today's spirit of revisionism, scholars seem bent on standing history on its head, with the rediscovery prize going to the most unexpected choices. Last year was the centenary of Viollet-le-Duc's death, a moment when reputations have a way of beginning to rise. There has been talk of reassessment studies in progress. All

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The Resurrection of A 19th-Century Prophet

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this has come together now — the rumors, the research, the serious reappraisal — in a major exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, "Viollet-le-Duc," which will be on view through May 5.

This exhibition, which is attended by the same kind of long lines waiting to see the Monet show, also at the Grand Palais, is one of the year's notable cultural events. It is the first one-man show ever given to an architect in this prestigious setting, under the auspices of the French National Museums. The display takes up three floors and includes drawings, paintings, models, photographs, furniture and objects of decorative art, material gathered from archives and collections all over France. The comprehensive documentation covers every facet of Viollet-le-Duc's extraordinary career — as restorer of monuments, builder and theoretician, artist and painter, champion of innovative technologies, master of decorative arts, guardian of the past and prophet of the future. An excellent catalogue provides useful essays.

The viewpoint is neither the customary condemnation of Viollet-le-Duc as the dead and destructive hand of convention and violator of the past, nor the one-sided reading of his progressive tendencies in such things as his vision of metal construction as the key to a new architecture.

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This extensive and even-handed presentation gives a picture of a whole, quintessentially 19th-century man. If a little special pleading makes him come off more heroically than necessary — he is still a far better theoretician than designer — we are finally able not only to see the true dimensions of his work but also to understand it in the appropriate context and framework of his own time. It was a complex time, with established traditions being shattered by political, social and industrial revolutions, and it was not an easy time for architecture, which was caught between the poles of technological advance and cultivated practice. In France, under the Beaux Arts, that schism between architecture and engineering was particularly troublesome.

But aside from the contributions that the exhibition makes to an understanding of the man and his period, there is a great deal of pleasure in the viewing; the drawings and paintings on display have a skilled and ravishing delicacy. In everything from the controlled curve of a carved acanthus leaf and the details of a stone grotesque peering from the foliage of a crumbling capital, to serene views of nature, these are refined and beautiful renderings by a man whose acute visual perceptions were accompanied by a freshly sharpened pencil wherever he went. He drew like a dream.

In his travels through France, all during his life, he recorded mountains and monuments, landscapes and ruins, in meltingly lovely watercolors. And whether it was a design for sculpture or stained glass (an art he largely revived), a minutely detailed church steeple, a piece of furniture for his major antiquarian invention, the Chateau at Pierrefonds, the decorative woodwork and ironwork for the Imperial train, or a sketch of a bat in flight, there is the ease and enchantment of a fine eye and great technical expertise.

The controversial restorations form a long and impressive list; among them are the monuments of Vezelay, Sens, Amiens, Beaune, Avignon and Toulouse; there are churches, cathedrals, chateaus and hotels de ville. This work was based on the best archeological knowledge at that time, but the art and science of archeology have advanced immeasurably since then. Viollet-le-Duc overreached, undeniably, and his confidence in his ability to recreate the past, to recapture the irretrievable, was boundless. But his concerns, as recorded in his writings, were often surprisingly sound and sensitive.

One must remember that the preservation philosophies of the 19th and 20th centuries could not be more unlike. Viollet-le-Duc's world wanted things put together the way they were, Humpty Dumpty fashion; he played the delicate and dangerous game of "restoring back." The 20th century stresses the value of whatever is left of the original fabric over everything else.

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The important point is not how much of what we see today was put there by Viollet-le-Duc and his sculptors and artisans, but that without them, there would be little or nothing to see at all. France's superb medieval heritage was literally crumbling away, and sheer structural survival often made considerable rebuilding necessary.

The recent rediscovery of the statues of the kings from the portal of Notre Dame in Paris reveals both how amazingly close to the originals Viollet-le-Duc and his sculptors were, and yet how critical the difference is in the tilt of an eye or the turn of a lip. The softer modeling and insidious 19th-century sweetness of the reproductions replace the greater strength and sharpness and subtly exotic character of the earlier vision and style. That kind of thing has given him his bad name.

But he has a good name among modernist historians. Sigfried Giedion, in his account of skyscraper development in Chicago in the 1880's, quotes LeRoy Buffington's claim to the "invention" of the steel-framed tall buildings based on the inspiration of Viollet-le-Duc's widely published and translated "Entrepiens sur l'Architecture." The French architect's earlier endorsement of the radical possibilities of the structural ironwork that was being actively pursued and his emphasis on the visible, rational structure and truth-to-materials of medieval architecture and design, had a strong appeal for the esthetic reformers of the 19th century. Viollet-le-Duc himself considered medievalism the most "modern" of all styles.

It is not surprising that the historian and critic Henry-Russell Hitchcock has characterized Viollet-le-Duc's work as "curiously ambiguous." He praises the iron projects, but calls them paper boldness. He condemns the restorations as "no contribution to 19th-century architecture; rather they represent a furious diminution of authenticity in the monuments of the past." Even in the sympathetic display at the Grand Palais, Viollet-le-Duc's new buildings do not come off well. They remain correct and spiritless exercises in revivalist styles. It is not surprising that he lost out to Charles Garnier's flamboyant planning and theatrical sense of circulation in the competition for the new Paris Opera in 1860-61. Good show won over good form, to Viollet-le-Duc's considerable and lasting distress.

Still, the man who emerges from this exhibition is tremendously impressive. He was the architect-born, who never wanted to be anything else from the time he was a child. At 16, when revolutionary barricades were being erected in the streets of Paris, he gave advice on their construction. He bypassed formal education at the Ecole des Beaux Arts to work in architects' offices as soon as possible, and his travels in France and Italy established his taste for the past as a very young man.

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A daguerreotype at the age of 30 shows him as vibrantly attractive and assured, with a dark beard and remarkably clear and observant eyes. His cross-legged position is debonair; there is a bit of stylish Scotch plaid on his vest and a gold chain and fob hang below a well-cut coat. Only his carefully combed hair displays any signs of youthful unruliness. This is already a confident and elegant man.

Photographed at 65, the year before he died, the elegant air and clear gaze are undimmed, but the beard and hair are white and everything is impeccably under control. Perhaps controlled is the key word to Viollet-le-Duc. His art was one of precedent, rules and measure. It did not aspire to break out of tradition or to transcend expectations. He practiced architecture as the controlling art to which other arts were subordinate, and he practiced all of them exceptionally well. But he could neither control nor resolve the ambiguities of the 19th century, the split between the world of art and the world of technology that the 20th century has devoted so much of its esthetic energy to try to heal. What he left us is a superb record of his delights and dilemmas, and the work of that rare kind of artist — the universal man. ■

'The important point is not how much of what we see today was put there by Viollet-le-Duc and his sculptors and artisans, but that without them there would be little or nothing to see at all.'