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Notre-Dame and National Unity: From the July Monarchy to the Twenty-First Century



Fig. 7.1: Notre-Dame in Paris in flames, viewed from the Quai des Augustins, 15 April 2019. Photo: Milliped/Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Even as the Gothic cathedral of Paris was still burning in 2019 (Fig. 7.1), French President Emmanuel Macron declared that “Notre-Dame is our history, our literature, part of our psyche, the place of all our great events, our epidemics, our wars, our liberations, the epicenter of our lives.” Not only did Macron thereby assert the absolute centrality of the cathedral to French cultural, political, and psychological life, but also, when he referred to “epidemics,” inadvertently foreshadowed the coming global public health crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic—that would stall reconstruction of the

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building (Macron undoubtedly was thinking of the nineteenth-century cholera outbreaks that had a disproportionate impact on the working-class population of the Île de la Cité neighborhood that surrounded the cathedral). Moreover, President Macron claimed Notre-Dame, a place of Christian worship, as a monument of and to the French people as a whole, one which had been deeply inscribed in the soil and in national identity over the *longue durée*: “Let’s be proud, because we built this cathedral more than eight hundred years ago, we’ve built it and, throughout the centuries, let it grow and improved it. So I solemnly say tonight: we will rebuild it together.”¹

Macron’s perspective on Notre-Dame conceived of the building as a preeminently secular monument, not a religious one. He furthermore sketched its history as one of continual organic improvement, rather than the process of periodic intentional alteration, repair, neglect, destruction, and renovation that actually characterized the means by which it has come down to the present. Most significantly, when Macron imagined the cathedral’s projected restoration as a collective effort in which the French people would act “together,” he echoed arguments for Notre-Dame’s reconstruction that had been made in the nineteenth century. As this essay will demonstrate, the restoration of Notre-Dame in the 1840s and ’50s was likewise promoted on the grounds that the cathedral was the foremost French monument that embodied the cultural identity of France.

The national, secular conception of Notre-Dame on which Macron’s commentary rested (and which he seemed to take for granted) would have been unthinkable if not for the cathedral’s nineteenth-century history. Although from its inception the building had had strong associations with secular authority, it was in the mid-nineteenth century, at the moment of its first major restoration under the direction of architects Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–79) and Jean-Baptiste Lassus (1807–57), that Notre-Dame was definitively reconceptualized as a monument to the longevity of the French nation rather than to the glory of the Catholic church and cult. At that point, its religious functions and meanings were given correspondingly less weight in the official justifications for the funding bills that enabled the project to go forward. This first systematic restoration, which began in 1840, followed in the wake of a series of cataclysmic political events in France: the Revolution of the late eighteenth century, the establishment of the Napoleonic empire and its demise in 1814, and the subsequent political restoration of the Bourbon monarchy and its respective collapse at the time of the 1830 Revolution which eventually put King Louis-Philippe (r. 1830–48) on the throne of the liberal monarchy.²

1 Quoted in “French President Macron: ‘We’ll Rebuild Notre-Dame Together,’” *Reuters*, 15 April 2019; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-notredame-macron/french-president-macron-well-rebuild-notre-dame-together-idUSKCN1RR2E5>.

2 On Lassus and the restoration project see Jean-Michel Leniaud, *Jean-Baptiste Lassus, 1807–1857, ou, Les temps retrouvés des cathédrales* (Geneva: Droz, 1980); Michael Camille, *The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame: Medievalism and the Monsters of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3–50;

Similarly, the current restoration followed the fire, which came at a moment of extreme political division in France. As architectural historian Aron Vinegar wrote, “the burning of Notre-Dame has operated as a symbolic quilting point for a ‘unified’ French Nation precisely at the moment when it is at its most antagonistic and divided state.”³ The period of Macron’s presidency, which began in May 2017, was characterized, as Vinegar suggests, by extreme polarization, evidenced by the *Gilets jaunes* (Yellow Vests) protests that began in November 2018 in opposition to proposed fuel taxes. Those national protests, in which many participants wore yellow safety vests, grew into an opposition to the perceived partiality of Macron to the wealthy and to business interests.⁴ Seen against the backdrop of these highly publicized protests and other evidence of factionalization, Macron’s call for a collective restoration project could be seen as politically expedient, as Vinegar suggested. To maximize support for the effort by making it appeal to the broadest spectrum of French society, Macron necessarily had to minimize the relationship between Notre-Dame and Catholicism, just as his nineteenth-century predecessors had when they sought financial resources to restore the cathedral.

This brief comparison of the two moments at which major restorations of Notre-Dame were embarked upon—1840 and 2019—demonstrates the degree to which the cathedral has served during the modern period as a rallying point for advocates of political and social cohesion in times of extreme polarization in France. As critics have pointed out, both in the nineteenth century and at the contemporary moment, using Notre-Dame as an image of stasis risks underrepresenting those points in the past when it in fact occasioned conflict and dynamic change, if not actual revolution. Indeed, the nineteenth-century restoration, which erased evidence of political conflict, can be seen as part of a larger movement to make the monuments of France speak to a highly selective, consensual history. As this essay will show, that popular project nonetheless had its detractors, even in the nineteenth century, who believed that the restoration would actually rob the building of its historic character. In 2019, construing the Gothic cathedral as the product of a unified secular nation was something that could only be achieved because nineteenth-century critics and restorers were so effective in reshaping the meaning of the building, both through physical reconstruction and by rewriting its history in texts, transforming it into an icon of an enduring notion of Frenchness largely divorced from religion and political strife. This article will focus on the nineteenth-century history of Notre-Dame and, especially, on

Kevin D. Murphy, *The Cathedral of Notre-Dame of Paris: A Quick Immersion* (New York: Tibidabo Publishing, 2020), 124–56.

3 Aron Vinegar, “In Flagrante: On Some Burning Questions for Restoration,” *Future Anterior* 17, no. 1 (Summer 2020): 1–16, at 11.

4 Angelique Chrisafis, “Who are the Gilets Jaunes and what do they want?,” *The Guardian* 7 December 2018.

the moment of its restoration beginning in the 1840s, when its centrality to national identity was cemented.

When Macron made reference to the cathedral's eight-hundred-year history, he was alluding to the construction that began in 1163 on or near the possible sites of a Roman-era temple and four earlier Christian churches. That process resulted in the cathedral that continued to be transformed up until the time of its major nineteenth-century restoration. The historical figure most prominently associated with the definitive construction of Notre-Dame in the Gothic style was Maurice de Sully, bishop of Paris from 1160 until his death in 1196. His grand vision for a metropolitan cathedral that would rival in scale and sophistication the nearby Gothic abbey church of Saint-Denis shaped the construction at Notre-Dame, which continued into the first half of the thirteenth century. The facade and nave, which had both been begun earlier, were joined between about 1210 and 1220; the famed Gallery of Kings was installed above the portals of the facade in 1220; and, by 1245, the two facade towers had been completed to their current levels.⁵

That is not to say that the building was complete by the mid-thirteenth century, for the twelfth-century construction continued to be altered and expanded after that time. A noteworthy change to the Gothic structure was the reworking of the nave elevation in the 1220s, which took it from four to three stories and expanded the clerestory windows, thereby increasing its sense of height and making the interior more light filled. Similarly, the original double-span flying buttresses were then replaced with single-span flyers. Chapels were added between the buttresses on a piecemeal basis into the early fourteenth century, additions that were contemporary with ongoing work to the transepts.⁶ Not only was the cathedral itself transformed over time; the surrounding buildings of the complex (including the now-vanished archbishop's palace to the south, between the nave and the Seine River) underwent parallel processes of construction and reconstruction, while the urban setting was also developed, especially with the establishment of the broad parvis in front of Notre-Dame.

The general decline, from the Renaissance onward, in the appreciation for the Gothic style weakened respect for the medieval fabric at Notre-Dame; hence, a number of alterations were made to the building during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that introduced classicizing elements. Indeed, the appearance of the interior was fundamentally altered through the removal of the Gothic altar and choir stalls, the installation of Doric columns in the apse, the whitewashing of walls, the installation of new pavement, and the replacement of some of the medieval stained glass by clear glazing (Fig. 7.2).⁷ On the exterior, significant changes were made by the neoclassical architect Jacques-Germain Soufflot, who, in 1771, removed the column

⁵ Murphy, *Cathedral of Notre-Dame*, 40–66.

⁶ William W. Clark et al., "Notre-Dame de Paris (Cathedral)," Grove Art Online, published 10 October 2022.

⁷ Murphy, *Cathedral of Notre-Dame*, 110–12.



Fig. 7.2: Ferdinand Delamonce and Antoine Hérisset, *Grand Autel de Notre Dame*, from Germain Brice, *Nouvelle Description de la Ville de Paris et de tout ce qu'elle contient de plus remarquable* (Paris: J. M. Gandouin et al., 1925). New York Public Library. Photo: Public Domain Archive (CC 1.0 Generic).

that divided the central portal on the west facade and surmounted the door with a pointed arch that disturbed the original tympanum sculpture in that location.⁸

A period of deliberate destruction followed during the Revolution, when the properties of the church, monarchy, and aristocracy were nationalized. In conformity with official measures to eliminate royal iconography from public buildings, in 1792 the crowns were removed from the twenty-eight figures of the Kings of Judea and Israel located in the famed Gallery of Kings on the cathedral's facade. A year later, the kings were decapitated and removed entirely per the orders of the council of the city of Paris (see Fig. 1.2). The interior was virtually emptied as it was transformed from a place of Christian worship to a Temple of Reason. Most notably, the spire—which had experienced structural issues earlier—was ordered removed in 1792 and would not be replaced until late in the mid-nineteenth-century restoration campaign.⁹ In the context of state-ordered destruction, or “vandalism” as it was known (the word was

⁸ Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, “Soufflot autour de Notre-Dame,” in *Autour de Notre-Dame*, ed. Action artistique de la ville de Paris (Paris: Action artistique de la ville de Paris, 2003), 180–82.

⁹ François Souchal, *Le vandalisme de la Révolution* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1993), 31–41.

coined in the revolutionary era), saving works of art or architecture that had resulted from royal or ecclesiastical patronage depended upon their being conceptually untangled from the abolished institutions and reconsidered as the material manifestations of French national artistic genius. This effort is often found epitomized in the establishment of the Musée des Monuments Français in 1790, in the former convent of the Petits-Augustins in Paris by Alexandre Lenoir (1761–1839). As its director, Lenoir gathered there fragments of buildings and works of art from nationalized properties that he argued transcended their royal or ecclesiastic pedigrees by virtue of their artistic worth and connection to the national past: “Because of [Lenoir’s] rather typical Enlightenment belief that progress in the arts reflected the progress of society and civilization in general, the progress of French history was the true lesson to be learned at the Musée des monuments français.”¹⁰ Moreover, the museum offered the opportunity for visitors to experience the nation’s history in carefully designed spaces that used distinctive architectural features to present particular moments in the historical past. Those moments were not only illustrated: “They were felt.”¹¹ The same immersive experience of history was offered in the historic buildings that were eventually restored across France. The romantic movement brought new attention to the ways that buildings, particularly those of the Middle Ages, could provoke emotions in those who moved through them. This belief in the ability of architecture to create inspiring spatial experiences, not only to illustrate the past but also to provide an enveloping and emotionally touching sense of it, underwrote the government’s nineteenth-century investment in historic preservation.

Following the revolutionary period, Emperor Napoleon I laid symbolic claim to Notre-Dame with his coronation at the cathedral in 1804. Thereafter followed several attempts to restore the building, although because of the lack of knowledge of medieval architecture on the part of those government architects who were entrusted with the project during the Empire and subsequent Restoration, very little actual repair was accomplished. Further deliberate destruction of the complex took place during the early July Monarchy, notably with the sack of the archbishop’s palace during the days known as the *trois glorieuses* (27–29 July 1830), which ultimately led to its being razed.¹²

The competition for the restoration of Notre-Dame, which was conducted by the national government between 1842 and 1844, signaled that the administration of the Catholic church was taking a new approach to the repair of historic buildings. The 1801 concordat between the government of Napoleon I and the papacy recognized Catholicism as the majority religion of the French people; consequently, the national

¹⁰ Christopher M. Greene, “Alexandre Lenoir and the Musée des Monuments Français during the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 12 (Autumn 1981): 200–222, at 219.

¹¹ Andrew M. Shanken, *The Everyday Life of Memorials* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 297.

¹² An 1831 drawing by John Scarlett Davis (1804–45), *Remains of the Archbishop’s Palace* (London, Tate Gallery, Oppé Collection T10562), shows the damaged building prior to its demolition.

government assumed responsibility for supporting the church financially.¹³ A separate architectural service was set up to maintain the buildings used by the church, the priorities of which were to provide suitable facilities for religious practice. By the 1840s, mounting failures in the realm of restoration by classicists working on behalf of the church administration or other government architectural services had begun to shift opinion within the administration toward the employment of restoration architects with specific interests and training in medieval French architecture. In particular, this was a result of the actions of Prosper Mérimée (1803–70), named inspector general of historic monuments in 1834, who was a champion of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Even before the competition for the Notre-Dame restoration began, administrators imagined that the project would be “great and national” and that its results would be “worthy of the government.”¹⁴ The word choice here significantly skirts direct references to religion, or to any particular political regime, and instead ties the project to a generalized, transhistorical concept of the nation.

At the same time, the 1831 publication of Victor Hugo’s famed Gothic novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, contributed to the growing preservation movement of the 1830s and ’40s and connected medieval architecture with the sensibilities and themes of romantic literature. As both a novelist and activist on behalf of historic monuments, Hugo helped to create a cultural and intellectual atmosphere in which Gothic architecture could be celebrated outside of its associations with religion or the institution of the Catholic church. This conceptual shift was manifested in the development of a secular government administration charged with overseeing historic buildings, including those that had religious functions.¹⁵ Shortly after the July Revolution, in October 1830, Ludovic Vitet (1802–73) was appointed the first inspector general of historic monuments, a post he held until Mérimée took over three years later. The Commission des Monuments Historiques was created several years after that as an advisory group for the inspector general. The fact that this agency could exert authority over historic religious buildings was a consequence of their reconceptualization, in which Hugo played an important role. As Stephen G. Nichols wrote, Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* “dramatize[d] the rethinking of the cathedral as a religious symbol, on the one hand, while illustrating the need to recuperate it as a secular artifact.”¹⁶ The existence of two parallel architectural administrations with claims to authority over historic religious buildings produced a certain amount of conflict between the personnel in the different agencies.

13 Peter C. Hodgson and Robert F. Brown, *Church and Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 21.

14 Directeur des Cultes (Culte Catholique), “Rapport au Ministre [de la Justice et des Cultes] (M. Marin du Nord),” July, 1842, Paris, Archives nationales (hereafter cited as AN), F/19/7803.

15 Richard Wittman, “Churches and States (Updated),” *Future Anterior* 17, no. 1 (Summer 2020): 31–32.

16 Stephen G. Nichols, “‘Le livre tuera l’édifice’: Resignifying Gothic Architecture,” in *Autobiography, History, Rhetoric: A Festschrift in Honor of Frank P. Bowman*, ed. Mary Donaldson-Evans, Lucienne Frapier-Mazur, and Gerald Prince (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 140–47, at 144.

Hugo attributed the damage that had been inflicted on Notre-Dame, which for him constituted a valuable historical record, to masons and architects, *nos iconoclastes d'écoles et d'académies* (our iconoclasts from the schools and academies).¹⁷ Since architectural training at the time emphasized mastery of the classical tradition, Hugo was implicating the neoclassicists in the injuries Notre-Dame had sustained. This sentiment was shared by some government administrators, especially those around Mérimée, and led to the declaration of Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus as winners of the competition for the restoration. When work actually began on the cathedral in the mid-1840s, it became clear that the deteriorated state of the building meant that the original budget (first estimated at two million francs) would be inadequate to complete the project. As work dragged on into the Second Empire in the early 1850s, both secular advocates and religious supporters of Notre-Dame's restoration argued for additional funding for the project because of the significance of the cathedral which, they all insisted, went beyond its importance to the Catholic church.

For instance, in 1852 the Archbishop of Paris wrote to Emperor Napoleon III (r. 1852–70) to drum up support for the project on the basis of the religious feelings the building stirred in the Catholic faithful, but also the “national sentiment” it provoked in the people of his diocese: “The metropolitan Cathedral is, effectively, before the Palace of Justice, before the City Hall, before the Louvre, the first building of the nation.” Completing the restoration, the archbishop argued, would be tantamount to bringing “national glory” to the state.¹⁸ This striking claim shows that the move to reconceive Notre-Dame as the embodiment of the secular state had succeeded to the degree that even the church spoke of the building in those terms. As the comments of the archbishop demonstrate, the concept of the “nation” and of its inherence in Gothic architecture was sufficiently broad that it could appeal to vastly different political regimes; restoring Notre-Dame began as a prestige project for the July Monarchy, but that did not preclude its being sold to the Second Empire as an effort that would bring credit to Napoleon III. The very scale and architectural audaciousness of Notre-Dame confirmed the high aspirations articulated for the French nation by its political philosophers from the eighteenth century onward, as described by historian Liah Greenfeld: “It was not just a nation, it was the Great Nation, *la Grande Nation*, the most national of nations, which carried to perfection the virtues required by the new cult.”¹⁹

In order to meet the challenge of representing the unified French nation, Notre-Dame had to be presented as itself being unified. Hence the scars of those periods in which it had been neglected or deliberately damaged had to be removed. The restoration proposal of Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus aimed to stabilize deteriorated fabric, but also returned to its original configuration the central portal of the facade (previously altered by

¹⁷ Quoted in Nichols, “Le livre,” 147.

¹⁸ Archbishop M.D. Auguste to Napoleon III, 11 December 1852, AN, F/19/7805.

¹⁹ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 154–88, at 188.

Soufflot) and replaced the lost figures from the Gallery of Kings; the blank appearance of the latter had been considered “shocking” by the government agency that reviewed the proposal.²⁰ The voids left by the removal of the figures were undoubtedly objectionable, but the empty niches also recalled the moment at which the cathedral had been the object of deliberate destruction. Thus the two proposed repairs (to the central portal and the Gallery of Kings) removed traces of the Ancien Régime and the Revolution, respectively, from the cathedral’s facade. But the architects sought to bring about an even more dramatic transformation; they attempted “to give back to our beautiful cathedral *all its splendor*, to restore to it *all the riches of which it has been robbed*.”²¹ Even if the perpetrators of this robbery were not named, it can be inferred that both the Revolutionary vandals and the neoclassical architects reviled by Hugo were to blame.

When the work was largely completed, in 1862 (Fig. 7.3), the progressive art critic Jules Castagnary lamented the loss of these traces of the Revolution, not just from Notre-Dame but from other restored buildings as well: “Vainly will history have passed over [the monuments]. . . . Vainly will the Revolution, coming into their sanctuaries like the Angel of Death, have extinguished their candles with its wings and melted their reliquaries with its blazing sword It would seem that this most recent past must give way to a more ancient past.”²² That remote period was the Middle Ages, imagined as the birthplace of a unified French nation. Castagnary’s position is complex. He would have liked the impact of the Revolution to be visible in religious buildings, but, at the same time, his view of their desacralization was not entirely triumphant since he represented the secularizing force in the guise of the Angel of Death; however much Castagnary championed the memory of the Revolution, he still mourned the loss of the trappings of religion.

In the context of a nation that had been riven by fundamental political conflicts over the previous half century or more, the restoration of Notre-Dame in the 1840s could only gain support when its champions argued that it would result in an image of national cohesion, not the turmoil that in fact characterized the period. In a similar sense, the restoration of Notre-Dame following the 2019 fire was described by Macron as the project of a unified nation, even though the political situation in France at the time was inflammatory. France was then one of “many countries across the Euro-Atlantic region [that] have seen an alarming shift to the right in the past few years, not least fueled by anti-migrant sentiments,” espoused by “populist and right-wing extremist parties like the National Rally in France.” Approximately 85 percent of Euro-

²⁰ Report of the Conseil Général des Bâtiments Civils, 1 June 1843, AN, F/19/7803.

²¹ Restoration proposal of Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus quoted in César Daly, “Restauration projetée de Notre-Dame de Paris,” *Revue générale de l’architecture et des travaux publics* 4 (1843): 137–41, at 140; emphasis in original.

²² Jules Castagnary, “Notre-Dame restaurée,” in *Les livres propos* (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1864), 140.



Fig. 7.3: Edouard Baldus, *Notre-Dame (facade)*, ca. 1860s; Albumen silver print from glass negative. Photo: New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, David Hunter McAlpin Fund, 44.55.7 (open access/public domain).

peans surveyed in 2019 believed that populism was then a serious threat to the region's peace and security.²³

Architectural historian Richard Wittman has convincingly read Macron's advocacy for the rapid restoration of Notre-Dame as a metaphor for his neoliberal politics. Wittman wrote that, in the wake of the fire, it was hard not to see the conflagration as symbolic of the "deep unease" in France, provoked by "the emergence of confrontational political movements that seek not reform but revolution (*Nuit debout*, Extinction Rebellion, and especially the *Gilets jaunes*) as well as the unexpected electoral successes of Marine Le Pen's right-wing and xenophobic *Rassemblement national* (the erstwhile National Front)." To this litany of potentially destabilizing groups that threatened to upturn French life must be added Macron's own neoliberal policies, for instance, the dismantling of labor regulations and social safety nets on which the

²³ European Leadership Network, *YGLN [Younger Generation Leaders Network] Annual Trend Survey 2019* (London: European Leadership Network, 2019), 11–12.

French have relied for decades.²⁴ Indeed, according to one account, discussion of Notre-Dame literally replaced that of the issues raised by the *Gilets jaunes*: “[On 15 April 2019] President Emmanuel Macron was at the Elysee [sic] Palace, where he had just recorded a televised national address for that evening responding to the ‘yellow vests.’ . . . He canceled the speech and rushed to the cathedral. Notre Dame [he said] is ‘our history, our literature, our imagination . . . the epicenter of our life. . . . This cathedral, we will rebuild it, all of us together.’”²⁵ To succeed in winning support, the project had to be connected with a very general notion of French cultural achievement and a sense of national identity that superseded particular religious or ethnic associations.

That meaning of Notre-Dame also had to be compelling for an international, even global, constituency of potential funders. While France’s elite pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to the cathedral’s restoration fund, national and multinational corporations immediately stepped up with donations that, by the fall of 2019, had amounted to nearly a billion dollars.²⁶ As in the 1840s, in 2019 the restoration of Notre-Dame was supported by legislative action by the French government, in this case a bill of 29 July which provided for a “national fundraising effort” on behalf of the project and a “complex system of tax breaks” to benefit the French contributors.²⁷ The international funding of the project distinguished it from the nineteenth-century restoration which was financed by the French themselves, at least in part in a spirit of cultural nationalism and competitiveness. Mérimée was just one of the leaders of the French preservation movement who believed that the nation had fallen far behind other European countries and Great Britain in taking care of its historic monuments. A travel writer himself, Mérimée was aware of the role that restored monuments played in attracting increasing numbers of international visitors.

The foreign observers of the nineteenth-century French restoration efforts were, in their turn, critical of the nation’s restoration campaign. For instance, a contributor to the British journal *The Ecclesiologist* wrote about Notre-Dame in 1846 that while the French government had ordered “just now . . . this or that work to be well done,” there was no certainty that in the future a new regime might not lead to one being “ill done.” Skeptical of the centralized approach to restoration in France, the author did express faith in “the generous liberty of local action” in England.²⁸ British authors also noted the distinction between the French approach to restoration, epitomized by Viollet-le-Duc’s claim that it entailed returning a building to an imagined state of com-

²⁴ Wittman, “Churches and States (Updated),” 19.

²⁵ See Robert Kunzig, “Notre Dame After the Fire,” *National Geographic* 241, no. 2 (Feb. 2022): 36–71, at 49.

²⁶ Stefanie Waldek, “Where Paris’s Notre-Dame Cathedral Stands One Year After the Fire,” *AD [Architectural Digest]*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/where-paris-notre-dame-cathedral-stands-one-year-after-fire>.

²⁷ Dominique Poulot, “The Flames of Notre-Dame and the Ravaged Landscape of French Heritage Management,” *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 7 (2019): 202–17, at 206.

²⁸ “Notre Dame de Paris, the *Annales Archéologiques*, and Church Restoration in France,” *The Ecclesiologist*, n. s., 5 (1846): 66.

pletion, which may never have been actually realized in the past, and the British attitude to historic buildings, which was to preserve them along with the signs of age and wear that the French were keen to expunge.²⁹

Just a few years before the anonymous contributor opined in *The Ecclesiologist* about the nationalization of restoration in France, a writer in the *Illustrated London News* in May 1843 called the completion of Cologne Cathedral, the “pre-eminent” architectural project under way in Europe at that time. Although, as Astrid Swenson has demonstrated, finishing the incomplete medieval cathedral was an international project that drew the support of the British, French, and others under the rubric of a “common [Gothic architectural] heritage,” it was not completed until 1880, by which time the major restoration of Notre-Dame was long since finished. By their natures, the two projects were very different, yet as Swenson points out, the hoped-for completion of Cologne Cathedral was often invoked by Viollet-le-Duc, Mérimée, and other leaders of the preservation movement in France as a justification for nationally significant projects like the restoration of Notre-Dame.³⁰

In 2019, the funding of Notre-Dame was undertaken on a far broader level than it had been in the nineteenth century because, although the building was still considered a French achievement, it was also construed as part of a global patrimony. The outpouring of financial support for Notre-Dame from around the world was not without its critics; for example, a member of the *Gilets jaunes* who protested the day after the fire with a sign reading “We are not Notre-Dame” pointed to the seeming paradox of investing untold millions of euros in the restoration project while failing to attend to the needs of the French people. The philosopher Paul B. Preciado pointedly wrote that “The archbishop of Paris proclaimed that everyone’s house was burning,” when Notre-Dame was in flames. “We hadn’t known until then that Notre-Dame was everyone’s house, since every night there are thousands of homeless people sleeping on the streets and refugees are constantly expelled from the city.”³¹ The claim made by the clergy itself for the universal significance of the cathedral was thus connected to the critique of the restoration project based on the simultaneous lack of attention to the social needs of the diverse population of France.

The aspect of the project that excited the most heated debate, and that inspired the most exotic proposals, was the repair of the roof and reconstruction of the spire.

²⁹ See Stephan Tscudi Madsen, *Restoration and Anti-Restoration: A Study in English Restoration Philosophy* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976). Viollet-le-Duc wrote in his *Dictionary of Architecture* that: “To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or to rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which may never have existed at any given time.” Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, “Restauration,” in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture* (Paris: Morel, 1866), 8:14–34, at 14; cited from *The Architectural Theory of Viollet-le-Duc: Readings and Commentary*, ed. M. F. Hearn (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1990), 269.

³⁰ Astrid Swenson, “Cologne Cathedral as an International Monument,” in *Rewriting German History: New Perspectives on Modern Germany*, ed. Jan Rüger and Nikolaus Wachsmann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 29–51, at 31.

³¹ Quoted in Valeria Costa-Kostritsky, “Trial by Fire,” *Apollo* 191, no. 686 (May 2020): 22–26, at 24.

At its core, the discussion was about a philosophy of preservation, although it was not exactly framed in those terms. In early 2020, an international groundswell of support for the idea of reconstructing the spire in a frankly contemporary manner, based in some cases on what Wittman has pointed out was a flawed understanding of Viollet-le-Duc's approach, resulted in an array of proposals for such flagrantly modernist gestures as a glass roof and spire, a shaft of light projected upward in place of the burned structure, and "a 'permanent flame' made of carbon fiber coated with gold leaf" (Fig. 7.4). In the end, President Macron resolved to rebuild the roof structure and spire of Notre-Dame as they existed before the fire.³² This approach was more consistent with preservation practice throughout the West, as well as with the objective of making the project a unifying one; a dramatic contemporary gesture would have had the drawback, among many others, of being potentially divisive.

The concept of a restored monument that supported the objective of political unity was controversial in the nineteenth century, as it is today. In both instances, the physical transformations of the building were seen as antithetical to its religious meaning. On the brink of Notre-Dame's restoration, in 1837, the Catholic commentator Jean-Philippe Schmit argued that once it had been made new again, Parisians would treat the cathedral as they would a museum or any other secular urban form of entertainment.³³ In a similar vein, American architectural historian and critic Michael Lewis exclaimed that through a new treatment of the interior of Notre-Dame, paradoxically proposed by the clergy itself, the space was "to be transformed into something akin to a contemporary art installation or theme park" with the addition of Renaissance paintings and projected images educating the 12 million annual visitors, many of them non-Christians, in the faith. Developed by Father Gilles Drouin, an advisor to the archbishop of Paris, the project was approved by the French National Heritage and Architecture Commission, albeit with some slight modifications likely made in response to the uproar against the original plan.³⁴

The rush to rid Notre-Dame of the traces of the fire as quickly as possible, while the monuments and material remains of diverse populations around the world continued to suffer from deliberate destruction and environmental degradation, was at the core of the critique of the project made by medievalists Clare Monagle and Amanda Power. Given the loss of knowledge of the building techniques used in the original structure, they argued that "Notre Dame cannot be restored to herself. Even with meticulous reconstruction, she will be something else. She will be a kitsch monument to modernity's inability to sit with scars, and to reckon with loss."³⁵ This critique

³² Wittman, "Churches and States (Updated)," 28.

³³ Jean-Philippe Schmit, *Les églises gothiques* (Paris: J. Angé, 1837), 158–64.

³⁴ Michael Lewis, "An Incendiary Plan for Notre-Dame Cathedral," *Wall Street Journal*, 1 December 2021; Constant Méheut, "Modernization of Notre-Dame Interior Gets Green Light," *New York Times*, 10 December 2021.

³⁵ Clare Monagle and Amanda Power, "Notre-Dame is Burning: Medieval Futures," *Parergon* 36, no. 2 (July 2019): 169–72, at 171.



Fig. 7.4: Mathieu Lehanneur, Project for Notre-Dame, 2020. Photo: Mathieu Lehanneur.

directly parallels the one leveled by Castagnary against the nineteenth-century restoration of Notre-Dame where he argued that, by effacing the marks of the Revolution from the fabric of the building, the restorers risked rendering meaningless that crucial moment in the social, political, cultural, and religious redefinition of France.

Monagle and Power argued that there is a striking, yet generally unrecognized, disparity between the passion for Notre-Dame, which they attribute to white supremacy, and the ways that the monuments of indigenous, Muslim, and presumably other people whose material culture is a low priority for Europeans are ignored.³⁶ A few journalists noted that on the very day of the Notre-Dame fire, another one occurred at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, considered one of "the world's most prominent holy sites." Admittedly, the Jerusalem fire was less destructive than the one in Paris, but the fact that it was "largely overshadowed" by what happened at Notre-Dame has been taken by some to indicate a relative lack of concern for non-Christian monuments.³⁷ Throughout the West, including in France, xenophobia and racism are on the rise. Both underwrite the vaunting of Christian monuments, often to the exclusion of the material remains of other religions. Thus, a 2015 report to the European Parliament "stresse[d] the importance of developing a true democratic and participative narrative for European heritage, including that of religious and ethnic minorities" and "[drew] attention to the presence of heritage sites which embed different or contested pasts."³⁸ In 2019, the medieval art historian Anna Russakoff, who identifies as a Jewish American, reported that "The fire at Notre Dame has made me reflect on the religious minorities of France, and how our monuments fail to define the city," meaning that they do not represent its religious and cultural diversity. She equated the failure to officially acknowledge the minaret of the Great Mosque of Paris, constructed in the early twentieth century, as a defining element of the city's skyline, with French anti-Muslim bias.³⁹ In the context of increasing attention being paid to inclusivity and diversity in the field of historic preservation, and at a politically volatile moment, President Macron used the reconstruction of Notre-Dame as a potentially unifying national project, building on the discourse that had surrounded the cathedral since its restoration in the nineteenth century. Doing so, he sidestepped the obvious religious meanings of the cathedral, as had his nineteenth-century predecessors, and instead emphasized its standing as (to paraphrase the Archbishop of Paris speaking more than 150 years earlier) the first building of the nation.

³⁶ Monagle and Power, "Notre-Dame," 169–72.

³⁷ Meilan Solly, "A Small Fire Broke Out at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque as Flames Ravaged Notre-Dame," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 17 April 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/small-fire-broke-out-jerusalems-al-aqsa-mosque-flames-ravaged-notre-dame-180971983/>.

³⁸ European Parliament, Committee on Culture and Education, *Report Towards an Integrated Approach to Cultural Heritage for Europe*, 24 June 2015, 12.

³⁹ Anna Russakoff, "Some Reflections from Ground Zero," *Postmedieval* 10 (2019): 513–15, at 514.

