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State Politics, Rural Piety, and the Complicated Afterlives of the Combefa Entombment Sculptures



Fig. 9.1: The Entombment, Pietà, and Crucifixion sculptures in 2018. Monestiés, Chapel of Saint-Jacques. Photo: Author.

In the late 1480s, Louis d'Amboise, the bishop of Albi between 1474 and 1503, installed in the private chapel of his episcopal summer palace in nearby Combefa a large sculptural ensemble depicting scenes of Christ's Passion: the Entombment, Pietà, and the Crucifixion (Fig. 9.1). Nearly three hundred years later, in 1774, residents of the closest village, Monestiés, loaded all the elements of this enormous, multipiece medieval monument onto oxcarts and transported them down a rocky, vertiginous path to the village's pilgrim hospital chapel. They have remained in this location ever since, despite several attempts over the centuries to move them both elsewhere in the village and farther afield to the regional capital of Albi.

This essay will discuss how the medieval statues were physically manipulated and symbolically interpreted through time by actors on a local, regional, and national level and how the changing uses and displays of the sculptures reflect their history. I focus on two periods in the complicated afterlives of this medieval monument—the nineteenth century and the 1940s and '50s—to reveal the role enacted by various political players, including the previously ignored but vital hyperlocal actors, the villagers themselves. I also show how conflicting motivations determined the fate and appearance of the Monestiés sculptures. The displacement of this ensemble in the late eighteenth century to a new location, for a new audience, and for new purposes effected a series of events that would see the statues used as metaphorical tools by various parties with conflicting political aims. Although my analysis concentrates on the co-option of the monument in two consecutive centuries, it also extends chronologically and geographically to perceive common themes around the politics of preservation and to demonstrate continuity in the actions and reactions of the different social groups involved. I conclude with a consideration of the monument's most recent iteration, a restoration and redisplay conducted in the 1990s to show how the strategies employed by heritage professionals demonstrate the crucial role that tourism played in remote rural locations in France during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In economic terms, the stakes are high in sparsely populated villages like Monestiés, where tourism provides employment and income and can stem the exodus of inhabitants seeking work in urban centers. From the nineteenth century on, such financial considerations frequently affected the physical and political reconfigurations of these medieval sculptures.

Ruin, Removal, and Dislocation

Due to their interventionist actions at the tail end of the eighteenth century, the villagers of Monestiés have been described in the written record as principal disruptors in the biography of the Entombment sculptures. I nuance their role through analysis of the manipulations and reception of the monument over the centuries. Louis d'Amboise's episcopal palace and its chapel fell into ruins over the course of the nineteenth century, but the Passion-cycle group escaped destruction due to a now-mythologized event in 1774 that saw the residents of the nearby village of Monestiés save the statues by loading them, along with other liturgical and decorative elements of the chapel, onto oxcarts. Villagers steered the oxen and their precious cargo down a steep, rocky track that led from the palace, taking them to the thirteenth-century hospital chapel

of Saint-Jacques in Monestiés, an extraordinary act loaded with symbolic significance reminiscent of medieval oxcart miracles.¹

We should avoid explaining this spectacular migration purely through the prism of simple rural piety in which the local villagers singled out these medieval monuments to rescue them from certain destruction. However, the two subsequent periods in these statues' afterlives that I discuss below do clearly demonstrate the ongoing relevance of piety in how they were treated. But piety was not the only factor. The removal of the statues in 1774 was a dramatic intervention that came on the back of assiduous planning and protracted negotiation by a number of local dignitaries. A dossier in the Tarn departmental archives describes how, over three days in 1774, the road between the chateau of Combefa and Monestiés thrummed with activity, with more than thirty-one people driving a convoy of twenty-eight oxen and horses pulling fourteen wagons.² It names the artisans paid to lift and move the statues and the eight men who were remunerated for losing time in their workshops while carrying the chapel's thirty-two window panels (now lost). Financial gain evidently oiled the wagon wheels of the villagers' display of devotion.

The hospital chapel, which had been funded in the sixteenth century by a Confraternity of Saint-Jacques (St. James) consisted of a single room that served as a place of worship, a dormitory, a refectory for pilgrims, and as a meeting place for administrators. So the chapel that was to house the Entombment group had served from the start as a multipurpose space, with worship, sleeping, eating, and secular business all taking place under the same (often leaky) roof.³ It was frequently in a bad state of repair, with the "poor in Christ" who sought refuge there often required to sleep on the floor because the hospital's four beds were not fit for purpose. By the eighteenth century, the space had acquired something of a lugubrious reputation, with mass no longer celebrated there. Why, then, was this large, religious monument rehoused in a seemingly ill-adapted place? As mentioned earlier, the Entombment's move was no act of spontaneity.

A Toulouse judge with familial links to Monestiés had acquired a fragment of the True Cross, which he donated in 1761 to the chapel of Saint-Jacques. In 1775, the year after the statues had arrived, Pope Pius VI authorized the establishment of a Confraternity of the True Cross. The statues of the Entombment would therefore have served as useful liturgical props for celebrating mass in the chapel. Moves were made to ac-

¹ Discussed succinctly in Barbara Abou-El-Haj, "The Urban Setting for Late Medieval Church Building: Reims and its Cathedral Between 1210 and 1240," *Art History* 11 (1988): 17–41, at 18–19.

² Albi, Archives départementales du Tarn (hereafter cited as ADT), 112 EDT GG8, published in Antoinette and Jacques Sangouard, "La chapelle de l'hôpital Saint-Jacques de Monestiés en Albigeois. 2. Les statues de Combefa de 1761 à 1825," *Revue du Tarn*, no. 158 (Summer 1995): 277–319, at 279.

³ In 1682, for example, bad weather caused the collapse of part of the roof over the bell tower, requiring a new roof for the whole building. Antoinette and Jacques Sangouard, "La chapelle de l'hôpital Saint-Jacques de Monestiés en Albigeois," *Revue du Tarn*, no. 146 (Summer 1992): 177–95, at 180.

commodate the new relic appropriately, a process that started in 1758, even before the actual gift, with stones transported to the hospital for repair and rebuilding work. The commune then brought in a village carpenter to build a wooden reliquary chest and a local sculptor to fashion a reliquary in silver for the True Cross relic (this was the first of four reliquaries made to house this relic). Accounts reveal both the financial and practical contributions that members of the commune made for these religious items. The Monestiés carpenter Jean Dalet, for example, recorded in his account book in 1775 that it took him five-and-a-half days to build the reliquary chest, for which he charged ninety-nine livres, while the Rodez sculptor Alexis Salanier commanded 200 livres to build the reliquary itself.⁴ Consider also the significant investment made to restore the medieval statues shortly after their arrival in the chapel. Expense accounts describe the purchase of iron bars to secure the heads and arms of two of the figures of Christ, along with the payment of 218 livres to a renowned local painter to restore the polychromy and gilding on the statues.⁵

An adjoining room was built next to the chapel in 1776, paid for by the parish priest, who wanted a sacristy as well as a place to house archives and hold meetings. The initial building work, the repair to the statues, and the addition of a sacristy all suggest a community—its congregation, artisans, and priest among others—unifying to accommodate and preserve its medieval religious artifacts. The first reliquary commission of 1775 and those that followed attest to the continued piety of the local community through more than a century of changing religious and political beliefs. I note this marker of continuity because the role the rural community played, from the moment the medieval statues left their original location, has previously been ignored or undervalued. The local agents' early engagement with the monument provides crucial background for understanding the display, treatment, and political exploitation of the Combefa Entombment sculptures during the mid-to-late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries and the villagers' resistance to moving them from the chapel of Saint-Jacques.

Revolutionary Village Politics

The French Revolution effected a tumultuous ideological rupture from monarchy to republic. How did the fallout that swept through the provinces, damning and saving religious buildings and artifacts in its wake, affect Louis d'Amboise's Entombment sculptures? From 1793, the small southern village of Monestiés, along with every other diocese in France, felt the social and physical effects of the introduction of the republican calendar, which, until Napoleon Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII signed the Concordat in 1801, effectively banned religious practice (Sundays and saints' feast days were

⁴ Sangouard and Sangouard, "La chapelle" (1992), 192.

⁵ Sangouard and Sangouard, "La chapelle" (1995), 282.

no longer days of rest). More consequentially, many churches were transformed into “temples of Reason.” In Monestiés, the administration of the parish church and the chapel of Saint-Jacques passed from the diocese to the state-run Bureau de Bienfaisance (a nationwide charity organization created by the law of 27 November 1796 to replace the charity associations of the Ancien Régime) and the Confraternity of the True Cross was dissolved. The chapel was emptied of its contents, including furniture, liturgical objects, and the silver reliquary. The precious metal items were, in all likelihood, taken to the mint in Toulouse to be melted down, while the relic of the True Cross was hidden by a villager (to be brought back out of hiding in 1805). The statues also escaped destruction, mutilation, or confiscation. Eugène de Combettes-Labourelie, a local aristocrat who lived in Monestiés, reported that, during the revolutionary period, a popular assembly was convened in the hospital chapel, but that the statues avoided unwanted attention due to draperies that separated them from the meeting space.⁶ The statues appear to have been lucky survivors in a case of out of sight, out of mind, although their fate might have been less propitious had they been made from precious metal rather than plain stone. The revolutionary government was principally concerned with funding its political ambitions by plundering the spoils of the Ancien Régime’s religious past. Violent acts of iconoclasm against symbols of feudalism, however, played out across the country, most famously in the capital with the destruction of the royal tombs at the Abbey of Saint-Denis and the desecration of Notre-Dame’s facade, when the stone statues of Old Testament kings were attacked after being misidentified as medieval French kings. Such zeal was not always the work of the angry mob. Occasionally, a lone citizen would be moved by patriotic spirit to destroy the financially worthless religious talismans of the medieval past. Astrid Swenson notes the undocumented but persistent anecdote of an apothecary from Dijon said to have beheaded a statue at the local church of Notre-Dame every day on his way to work.⁷ Worthless though they may have been to the state treasury, the Entombment statues of Monestiés had luck on their side when the revolutionary winds blew through their tiny village.

The later political use of the statues followed on the heels of this volatile revolutionary period, in which the decisions made by a few in Paris affected millions of rural Christians in the provinces. Although Monestiés had to submit to national rulings, the community maintained significant continuity through its administrative personnel. When the running of the chapel passed from clergy to state at the end of the eighteenth century, many of the bourgeois individuals involved in the use and management of the chapel up until that point—the clerics, notaries, and magistrates—found themselves performing the same roles regarding the chapel, just under their new state-mandated municipal titles.⁸ Throughout the political turmoil of the nine-

6 ADT, Series J: 32.

7 Astrid Swenson, *The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31.

8 Sangouard and Sangouard, “La chapelle” (1995), 286.

teenth century, however, during which religion found itself politicized, what were regarded as communal spaces in rural communities, such as the parish church and the multifunctional hospital chapel in Monestiés, became ideological battle grounds.

A Compulsion to Preserve and a Desire to Stage Medieval Art

The Entombment statues may have escaped destruction during the Revolution, but as with any religious statuary in the early part of the nineteenth century, their *raison d'être* was now questioned by the authorities. Throughout France, those individuals seeking to preserve religious art had to justify their position for fear of being regarded as counterrevolutionaries. The conflicting moods regarding such contentious religious objects in different parts of France in the early part of the century provide crucial context for the rationale behind the display of the Entombment statues in the chapel and explains how they were appropriated by the authorities on a local level. The themes of center versus periphery and national versus regional came into increasingly sharp focus as the turbulent century progressed. Medieval monuments throughout France, including in Monestiés, became pawns in political power games being waged in accord with ideological currents that varied by institution. By the start of the nineteenth century, French people everywhere in the country had witnessed the demolition and destruction of their religious built heritage. Some of these witnesses, acting on what historian Daniel Cazes describes as the “rescue reflex,” effectively commandeered the broken pieces of classical and medieval culture that these demolitions revealed.⁹

In Paris, Alexandre Lenoir (1761–1839) picked his way through the revolutionary rubble of the capital’s churches to display medieval monuments—or bits of them—in his Musée des Monuments Français (open from 1795 to 1816). Lenoir had to defend his actions vehemently, arguing that he was motivated by the need to preserve historical objects rather than by any ideological allegiance to what they had come to represent to the revolutionaries.¹⁰ From 1800, in its attempt to repair the broken bonds between nation and church, Napoleon’s regime closed down the heritage collection amassed by Lenoir and reinstated several of its tombs in Saint-Denis. For the same reason, it began to repatriate other religious monuments back to their original churches if they remained standing. In 1816, with the regime change and the return of the monarchy, the collection

⁹ Daniel Cazes, “Alexandre Du Mège et le Musée des Antiques de Toulouse,” in *De las ánforas al museo: Estudios dedicados a Miguel Beltrán Lloris* (Zaragoza: Institución “Fernando el Católico,” 2015): 265–77, at 267.

¹⁰ Alexandra Stara, *The Museum of French Monuments, 1795–1816: “Killing Art to Make History”* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013); Francis Haskell, *History and its Images. Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 241.

assembled by Lenoir was officially closed once and for all. Many of its secular monuments, however, found their way to the Louvre, in a gallery of French sculpture created especially for them by the director general of museums, Vivant Denon. And despite the closure of Lenoir's museum, his concept of presenting sculpture chronologically proved popular elsewhere in the capital, inspiring the display of the collection of medieval artifacts at the Hôtel de Cluny in the 1830s by the antiquarian Alexandre du Sommerard.¹¹ Though open for only twenty years, Lenoir's Musée des Monuments Français exerted a powerful influence, igniting scholars' curiosity to reengage with the sculptural remains of a feudal past the Revolution had fought so hard to destroy.

The fallout from the period of revolutionary destruction and the emergence of the display of medieval artifacts in Paris gave rise to an era where heritage preservation, religion, and politics intermingled. In 1839, the government created the Direction des Cultes (Ministry of Worship) to administer clerical salaries and to fund essential upkeep of church buildings (4% of state expenditure under the Restoration of 1814–48, reducing to just 2% under the Third Republic between 1870 and 1940).¹² Whereas under the Ancien Régime the ecclesiastical elites had underpinned politics and given legitimacy to secular rulers, now the power dynamics were reversed, with the state and its civil servants becoming the protectors of religion and its sites of worship. Prosper Mérimée (1803–70), the inspector of historic monuments from 1834 to 1860, was himself a non-believer who classified monuments according to their cultural and historical value rather than their religious function. In this official role, Mérimée visited the south of France, including the Tarn department, in 1834. His account of the voyage commented on the cathedral and the collegiate church of Saint-Salvy in Albi, the chateau of Castelnaud, and the village of Cordes.¹³ But it was silent on Monestiés, which was yet to attract the attention of such national actors.

At a more local level, in the southwest of France, the antiquarian Alexandre Du Mège (1780–1862) shared the same compulsion to preserve as Lenoir, his northern compatriot. In 1806, he congratulated Pierre Sentetz, a colleague living in Auch (Gers), for finding and bringing an early Christian sarcophagus to his home. Du Mège also pleaded with Sentetz to extract as quickly as possible the carved stone inscriptions found in the old Benedictine cloister of the Church of St. Orens in Auch, saying, "If these objects appear primitive to you and you don't wish to keep them in your own home, I will take care of them. I will pay you what they are worth and for their carriage. But above all, save them: the monuments of the Middle Ages are becoming, thanks to Revolutionary vandalism and the ignorance of those throughout our nation who acquire them, of an extraordinary rarity."¹⁴

¹¹ Stara, *Museum of French Monuments*, 33–36.

¹² Denis Pelletier, *Les catholiques en France depuis 1815* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997), 7.

¹³ Prosper Mérimée, *Notes d'un voyage dans le Midi de la France* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1989), 237.

¹⁴ Marcel Durliat, "Alexandre Du Mège et le Moyen Age à Toulouse," in *Le "Gothique" retrouvé avant Viollet-le-Duc* (Paris: Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques et des Sites, 1979): 85–91, at 85.

Du Mège made unearthing such items his life's work, assuming the role from 1810 onward as inspector of antiquities for the Haute-Garonne (of which Toulouse was the capital). Du Mège's task to describe and catalog monuments was then extended to include the departments of Aude, Gers, the Basses-Pyrénées, and Tarn (where he would, in 1811, encounter the Entombment statues in Monestiés). In 1815, he proposed to the mayor of Toulouse the idea to create "for our region the most beautiful gallery of antiquities that could possibly exist."¹⁵ Inspired in part by Lenoir's work in Paris, Du Mège went on to assemble an astonishing collection of ancient and medieval monuments. In Toulouse's relatively new museum, founded in 1794 and housed in the old Augustinian church, he displayed classical, medieval, and Renaissance sculptures in separate cloisters. Prints of these galleries offer a useful insight into how sacred art was exhibited in a once-religious, now secular setting. One shows the wealthy classes of Toulouse strolling



Fig. 9.2: Gallery of the Middle Ages in the former convent of the Augustinians, Toulouse; drawing (nineteenth c.) from a lithograph by Charles Mercereau (1822–64). Bibliothèque municipale de Toulouse, Fonds Ancely. Photo: Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

15 Cazes, "Alexandre Du Mège," 268.

through Du Mège's Gallery of the Middle Ages (Fig. 9.2). Viewing medieval religious sculpture seems to have been a leisure pastime for the urban bourgeoisie or at least for those who appreciated it as an edifying, romantic backdrop to their perambulations.

Most important for how we analyze the reception of the Entombment sculptures in the second half of the nineteenth century, Du Mège's enterprise reveals how the first generation of antiquarians after the ravages of the Revolution staged medieval art in the south of the country. The Gallery of the Middle Ages in Toulouse demonstrated this on a large scale, but even more illuminating is Du Mège's fictitious and anachronistic reimagining of the medieval mausoleum of Jean Tissendier (?–1348), bishop of Rieux. Du Mège had mounted in a blind arch of the chapter room in the church/museum of the Augustins a genuflecting statue of the bishop offering up a miniature version of the chapel he had commissioned for the convent of the Cordeliers in Toulouse (Fig. 9.3). This image was framed by fifteenth-century statues of John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalene, each from a different church. The reimagined monument follows Lenoir's montage approach at the Musée des Monuments Français where, for example, he had reassembled the tombs of Héloïse and Abélard beneath a



Fig. 9.3: “Mausoleum” of Jean Tissendier in the former convent of the Augustinians, Toulouse, ca. 1820. Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France. Ms 4178. Photo from Cazes, “Alexandre Du Mège.”

newly designed arched canopy made from debris retrieved from Saint-Denis.¹⁶ Given the historical southern French resistance to directives from the capital, it seems more likely that it was Du Mège's impassioned vision of the medieval past that had a greater impact on the nineteenth-century renovation and representation of the Entombment sculptures in Monestiés than did Lenoir's collection in Paris.

By contrast, the aesthetic adopted in Monestiés for its restoration of the statues later in the century ran counter to Du Mège's political stance. Despite devoting his career to preserving the material heritage of southern France, Du Mège doggedly pursued a centralized approach, in which he aimed, as had Lenoir, to remove sculptures and architectural fragments from their original sites and to gather them all together under one roof. In terms of the politics of preservation, then, this antiquarian frequently worked in opposition to local municipal actors throughout the region who wanted to hang on to their religious heritage. His ambition to collect all the region's antiquities "menaced by vandalism and ignorance," which one scholar has described as bordering on megalomania, saw him come up against opposition in the Pyrenees, for example, where mayors and clergy from various mountain villages decried his actions as disregarding sacred objects and disrespecting property rights.¹⁷

The Politics of Restoration and Display

Although the Entombment, Pietà, and Crucifixion from Combefa had escaped revolutionary destruction, the sculptures' survival hung in the balance due to the ruinous humidity of the pilgrim hospital chapel in Monestiés. But preserving these medieval statues in their new location became a political issue. The previously mentioned "rescue reflex" finally resulted in action in the 1860s, fueled not so much by the villagers but by the interventions of antiquarians and historians. The Société Française d'Archéologie (SFA), created in 1834 to make the study of historical monuments a precise scientific discipline, held its annual congress in Albi in 1863.¹⁸ On 13 June 1863, the society took an excursion to Cordes and Monestiés. One of its members, Elie Rossignol, wrote a report for the publication, which appeared in 1864. He offered the first description of how the statues were then displayed—perhaps spruced up for the historians' visit—which reveals that the Pietà was at this point placed against the wall above the Entombment and that the statues of the attending figures were arranged on either side of the entombed Christ. If he noticed the Crucifixion sculpture during the visit, he did not deem it worthy of note in his report.

¹⁶ Stara, *Museum of French Monuments*, 27–30.

¹⁷ Durlat, "Alexandre Du Mège," 86.

¹⁸ For details on the growth in learned societies through the nineteenth century, see Stephane Gerson, *The Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 3.

While he also failed to describe the state of preservation of the statues, he observed that the villagers were “justifiably so proud to possess them,” a comment that points to the local awareness in the mid-nineteenth century of the patrimonial treasure they held.¹⁹ Rossignol’s report situated the monument in the historical record and the visit overall marked a change in the statues’ fortunes. For the first time since their removal from their original location in the chapel at Combefa, they were seen by a group of educated, elite men from elsewhere in France as well as from the region, whose key collective purpose was to preserve and study medieval monuments. These men agreed that the statues should be saved; and that they should be restored to their former glory.

To restore the statues would cost money, a resource lacking in the tiny rural village. State funding was not an option because, while restoration funds could be granted to *monuments historiques* (buildings officially recognized as having cultural value by the state-run Commission) they did not extend to freestanding statues. Private financing was therefore required.²⁰ In 1866, Jérôme Ludovic, Marquis de Solages (an old aristocratic family from nearby Carmaux), offered five thousand francs to enlarge the parish church of Saint-Pierre in Monestiés, with the goal of installing the Entombment group there instead of having it remain in its current location in the chapel of Saint-Jacques. The marquis’s donation was approved by the minister of fine arts, who said that the sculptures “would be infinitely better off” there.²¹ But the local Bureau de Bienfaisance vehemently opposed the move and hastily organized a petition, signed by many inhabitants, which they submitted to the Commission des Monuments Historiques on 6 August. Without furnishing any justification or explanation, the petition stated that the statues “should not be sold, donated, and especially not moved [from their current location].” On 9 September, the order was given to restore them in their present location. The Commission, however, rescinded the offer to co-fund the restoration. The commune had won the fight but not necessarily the war, as the Marquis de Solages’s contribution was dependent on the statues moving to the parish church. The municipality still had to raise the money to restore the statues.

Already in 1865, an aristocratic inhabitant of Monestiés, Eugène de Combettes-Labourelie, together with Édouard Nelli, a local sculptor, had impressed upon the mayor the urgency of the situation regarding the statues’ deteriorating state, suggesting they arrange a lottery to raise funds. The mayor of Monestiés wrote to the Empress Eugénie, the wife of Napoleon III, to “ask for assistance which will guarantee success in our enterprise.”²² In addition to the written plea, Nelli sent miniature copies he had made of the Entombment statues, so that the empress, a fervent Catholic, might better

19 Elie Rossignol, “Excursion à Cordes et à Monestiés, le 13 juin 1863,” in *Congrès archéologique de France, 30^{ème} session. Séances générales tenues à Rodez, à Albi et au Mans en 1863 par la Société française d’archéologie pour la conservation des monuments historiques* (Paris: Derache, 1864): 442–45, at 444.

20 Sangouard and Sangouard, “La chapelle” (1995), 290.

21 For this and the next quote, see Sangouard and Sangouard, “La chapelle” (1995), 304.

22 Sangouard and Sangouard, “La chapelle” (1995), 290.



Fig. 9.4: Edouard Nelli, Miniature copies of the Entombment ensemble from Monestiés, ca. 1865. Photo: Ministère de la Culture (France), Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie (objets mobiliers).

visualize the monument the villagers wanted to save (Fig. 9.4). Eugénie obliged, offering the main prize in the raffle that the prefect had organized: a table service enclosed in a case marked with the imperial crest. Nelli made a second group of miniature copies of the Entombment to offer as the second prize, although who won them remains unknown. The registers of the Bureau de Bienfaisance show that the lottery raised the ten thousand francs needed to embark on restoring the statues in the damp chapel.

The fundraising success also appeased members of the municipality who were disgruntled at the up-front costs required to employ Nelli to produce miniature models of the Entombment. We should also note that the artist's use of the situation of the deteriorating statues to his own financial and commercial advantage shows another facet of how individuals could capitalize on medieval artworks during this period. In addition to the sets of the Entombment sculptures made for the empress and the lottery, Nelli made another, which he submitted to the exhibition of art and technology (*Exposition des Beaux-Arts et de l'Industrie*) held in Toulouse in 1865. He received a silver medal and the Cross of the Pontifical Order of St. Gregory the Great for his work.²³ These accolades resulted in the young sculptor's name appearing in the press, thereby advertising his professional skills.²⁴ Several other iterations of his miniatures have been conserved, one of which was donated by the Combettes-Labourelle family to the parish church in Brens (close to Gaillac in Tarn), where they are now displayed in a dark cabinet in a side chapel (Fig. 9.5).

²³ *Exposition des beaux-arts et de l'industrie à Toulouse: Année 1865* (Toulouse: Viguier, 1866), 560.

²⁴ A. Cavalié, "Exposition de Toulouse, Groupe du XVe siècle: Christ au Tombeau, Réduction de M. Edouard Nelli," *Journal du Tarn* (28 June 1865): 2–3.



Fig. 9.5: Édouard Nelli, Miniature copies of the Entombment ensemble from Monestiés. Brens, Church of Saint-Eugène. The sculptures were photographed outside their permanent vitrine in 2021. Photo: Author.

Restoration, Reinterpretation, and Viollet-le-Duc

There are two important strands to consider regarding the politics of the fundraising and restoration program at Monestiés. The first is the need to situate the restoration of medieval monuments in the context of a frenetic church-building program that took place in France following the Concordat of 1801, during the Restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, and into the Second Empire (1852–70). Nearly a quarter of all the currently extant churches in France were built in the nineteenth century, a total of nine thousand new places of worship. The Restoration of 1814 had reestablished the national network of congregations banned in 1792, driving the need to create new churches and revive existing ones, particularly in places with a growing population. In the diocese of the expanding city of Toulouse, for example, whose population more than tripled between 1830 and 1872, 186 churches underwent significant building or

decoration programs. Of these, eighty-two were built from scratch and 104 were restorations.²⁵ Under the Ancien Régime, property owners in the parish usually covered the costs of church maintenance and restoration. But after the general rule of 30 December 1809, in villages with fewer than five thousand inhabitants these commitments were taken up by the mayor, the priest, three members of the commune nominated by the bishop, and two by the prefect. Despite this nationwide practice of appointing a relatively diverse body of local people to manage the income and expenditures of the parish, the responsibility of maintaining or restoring churches often led to the long-lasting debt of the parish and the commune.²⁶

Accounts detailing the cost of restorations in the popular neo-Gothic style show that repairing original medieval monuments could be more expensive than commissioning brand new ones. A case in point is the tiny church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Mouillac (Tarn-et-Garonne), a village as geographically isolated as Monestiés. Here, the priest and inhabitants raised money to pay the renowned Toulouse manufacturers, the Virebent family, to produce a retable depicting scenes from the Passion. These neo-medieval sculptures were installed in 1874 and cost 2,169 francs.²⁷ This puts into perspective the 10,000 francs the villagers of Monestiés raised to restore their medieval Entombment group, revealing the significant financial difference between fixing up medieval sculptures versus creating new ones that emulated them.

Moreover, the nascent national debates about restoration that developed alongside the idea of a *monument historique* and the growing taste for medieval religious imagery determined the Entombment renovation program and the monument's display in Monestiés. These factors also affected its reception and practical uses for the community. The prefectural commission tasked with arranging the restoration program comprised men of influence. They were all local save for César Daly (born in Verdun, in the north), whose extensive work on the cathedral of Albi had introduced and clearly endeared him to the medieval built heritage of the south.²⁸ Daly and Combettes-Labourelie shared the attitudes and approaches of national cultural heavyweights such as Mérimée and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–79). Daly dedicated his 1861 book, in which he advocated the use of competitions to reinvigorate public art, to Mérimée. And he was a professional colleague of Viollet-le-Duc, who, at the time this tiny rural renovation project began, was the national *architecte du gouvernement* and

25 Nelly Desseaux-They, *La manufacture Virebent, l'art sacré: Les maîtres bâtisseurs toulousains* (Toulouse: Terrefort, 2020), 9.

26 Pelletier, *Les catholiques en France*, 9, 20.

27 Desseaux-They, *La manufacture Virebent*, 94–95.

28 The prefectural commission included the mayor of Monestiés, the general councillor and mayor of the nearby commune of Carmaux, the diocesan architect Daly (a member of the SFA congress party that made the excursion to Monestiés in 1863 who had received the Legion of Honor in 1861), the departmental architect Emile Hess, the notary Angély Cavalié, Combettes-Labourelie, and the departmental archivist Emile Jolibois.

inspector general of diocesan buildings.²⁹ Combettes-Labourelie, for his part, possessed in his library a copy of the seventh volume of Viollet-le-Duc's dictionary, in which the author favored repainting rather than the simple repair of medieval paintings. Although the national state was not interested in funding the restoration of this southern monument, it exercised considerable cultural influence. Thus, the commissioning body of dignitaries and the artists carrying out the project made choices that reflected their satellite status in the orbit of the national taste maker and heritage influencer, Viollet-le-Duc.

In October 1866, the chapel was emptied and the statues stored in a specially built outbuilding. The sculptor Nelli prepared the statues to be painted by the Toulouse artist Joseph Engalières, a member of the SFA who was among the visiting party of 1863 to Monestiés.³⁰ Engalières had recently made a name for himself restoring the rediscovered medieval wall paintings of Notre-Dame du Bourg in Rabastens (Haut-Garonne) and would later secure the prestigious work of repainting several chapels in Albi's cathedral.³¹ Both Nelli and Engalières adopted the interventionist approach of Viollet-le-Duc, "perfecting" and reinterpreting medieval art through a modern lens. Nelli added or reworked broken elements of the statues such as fingers and noses. He replaced the medieval altar commissioned by Louis d'Amboise with a new one made from regional limestone. He sawed the original altar in half lengthwise, using one piece as the base for the Pietà sculpture and the other for the base of the gisant of the entombed Christ.³² As to Engalières, he repainted the polychromed statues with oil paint, using colors in keeping with the popular medievalizing Troubadour style.³³ He then treated them with wax to prolong the life of the polychromed surfaces.

A photograph taken shortly after the restoration shows that he also embellished the gilding and decoration on some of the figures' clothing and painted a theatrical backdrop of skeuomorphic curtains, using motifs that came straight from Viollet-le-Duc's catalogue of "medieval" design (Figs. 9.6 and 9.7).³⁴ Beneath the figure of the entombed Christ, Engalières added in Gothic script an acknowledgment of the program's benefactors (while conserving for posterity his own role as restorer): "This restoration was completed under the patronage of Monseigneur Lyonnet, archbishop of Albi, and

29 César Daly, *Des concours pour les monuments publics dans le passé, le présent et l'avenir par M. César Daly, Architecte du Gouvernement, Directeur-Fondateur et Propriétaire de la revue "Revue générale de l'Architecture et des Travaux Publics"* (Paris: Morel, 1861).

30 *Congrès archéologique de France, 30^{ème} session* (1864), 268–72, at 270.

31 Jean-Louis Biget and Céline Xifra-Vanacker, "Les ambitieuses transformations du XIX^e siècle," in *Albi: Joyau du Languedoc*, ed. Jean Legrez (Strasbourg: La Nuée bleu, 2015), 112–33, at 125–29.

32 Sangouard and Sangouard, "La chapelle" (1995), 298.

33 Marie-Claude Chaudonneret, *Fleury Richard et Pierre Révoil: La peinture troubadour* (Paris: Arthena, 1980).

34 Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture Française* (Paris: A. Morel, 1864), 7:85, 95, 97.



Fig. 9.6: Postcard (late nineteenth century; photograph taken after 1868) showing the restored and redisplayed Entombment sculptures in the chapel of Saint-Jacques, Monestiés. Photo: Archives départementales du Tarn.

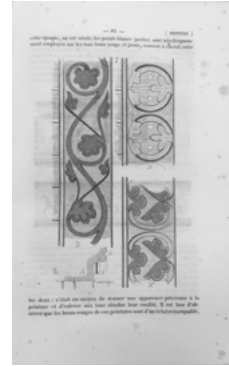


Fig. 9.7: Examples of painted decorative medieval designs from Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire raisonné* (1864). Photo: Author.



Fig. 9.8: Photograph of the tomb of Christ, with the neo-Gothic inscription added in 1868, ca. 1925. Photo: Ministère de la Culture – Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, Dist. Grand Palais Rmn / Georges Estève.

Monsieur De Levezou de Vesins, prefect of Tarn. Under the care of the members of the Bureau de Bienfaisance, the mayor Palazy, the priest Palazy . . . in 1868” (Fig. 9.8).³⁵

This inscription, removed in 1952 during another restoration campaign, asserted the collaborative nature of the funding and management of the Monestiés chapel restoration project in the 1860s, although the order of the names surely speaks of the political hierarchy, in which the beneficence of the archbishop in Albi and the departmental prefect outranked the villagers.

The program of the 1860s did more than just restore the chapel and the statues in it. It returned the chapel to its original purpose as a place of worship. The political turbulence of the first half of the century and the problem of dampness in the chapel had disrupted religious practice there. Records of expenses claimed by the Bureau de Bienfaisance show the purchase for the chapel of liturgical objects required for saying mass.³⁶ The new arrangement of the three elements—the Pietà displayed at the west end of the chapel facing the Entombment and the Crucifixion hung over the door between the chapel and sacristy—*did* change the viewer’s experience of the original ensemble, which had been designed to decorate the east wall of Louis d’Amboise’s chapel in a triangular composition. While the nineteenth-century restoration repurposed and revalorized the sculptures, it separated the three works and so nullified their theological unity. Their composition in the Combefa chapel had faded from public memory, in part because of a lack of knowledge about the ensemble’s original arrangement and in part because of the cultural value placed by the “heritage makers” on the different sculptural elements.³⁷ The Entombment formed a complete, physically impressive display of medieval sculpture worthy of rescue, whereas the Pietà and Crucifixion were regarded as subordinate. Such a hierarchy is reflected in the decision by the Commission des Monuments Historiques to classify each element separately rather than to acknowledge the unity of the ensemble. The Entombment was listed in 1904, the Pietà in 1908, and the Crucifix not until 1953.

Rural Piety and Local Pride in the 1940s and 1950s

The nineteenth-century renovation ensured that mass continued to be celebrated regularly in the chapel until its deconsecration in 1902, not long before the 1905 law of the separation of church and state effectively secularized the nation. This changed the use of the chapel, which now served to host concerts, meetings, and other community events. Nonetheless, the inhabitants of Monestiés continued to try to keep the religious medieval monuments there, perhaps in recognition of their significance to the

35 Sangouard and Sangouard, “La chapelle” (1995), 294.

36 Bureau de Bienfaisance, *Registre des délibérations 1853–1909*, ADT, 170 EDT 1 Q 1.

37 Swenson, *Rise of Heritage*, 66–143.

community. Whereas in the nineteenth century the villagers had fought to keep the restored Entombment from being moved to the parish church by national directives and by local benefactor Solages, in the twentieth century they engaged in a genuine David-and-Goliath battle to prevent it from being moved to the regional capital of Albi. In the eyes of the regional politicians, the Entombment and its sister statues became during the 1940s and '50s a potential tourist attraction, but one only useful if the sculptures could be moved away from the remote village of Monestiés. In February 1949, for example, local heritage enthusiast Pierre de Gorsse wrote to the director general of architecture to push for a transfer of the statues to Albi, saying "There is no need to stress how worthwhile such a transfer of the statues would be in terms of conservation, display, and appeal."³⁸ The Commission des Monuments Historiques concurred, adding that they wanted to see the Entombment installed in "the chapel of Louis d'Amboise" in the former episcopal palace in Albi.³⁹ For this move, the conservator of the museum in Albi offered the commune of Monestiés five thousand francs per month for the loan of the medieval statues (the duration of the agreement was not specified) and would provide casts of the sculptures to stand in their stead in the chapel of Saint-Jacques. Still, the villagers of Monestiés would not give up their medieval statues.

Perhaps scenarios such as this were playing out across France in the mid-twentieth century. Was it common for obdurate rural village communities, in the face of pressure from regional or national state bodies, to dig their heels in to keep medieval monuments in the churches where they had belonged (some might say languished)? There are records of clashes between national government officials and locals over restoration projects in the nineteenth century. Examples include the Romanesque Church of the Madeleine at Vézelay or Viollet-le-Duc's removal of reliquary chests of the "Holy Bodies" from the tower to the tribunes in the basilica of Saint-Sernin at Toulouse.⁴⁰ But I am unaware of specific cases of dissent in the twentieth century. Still, the situation in Monestiés appears to reflect a more widespread rural distrust of urban, centralized authorities that were seen to interfere in village life. In any case, the defiance of the villagers of Monestiés, however noble and genuine, exasperated the civil servants. Take a report issued in 1949 by the Commission des Monuments Historiques titled "To persuade the recalcitrant municipality [of Monestiés] to consent to the removal of the Entombment sculptures."⁴¹ It stated that the display in Monestiés was "insufficient," that

³⁸ Sangouard and Sangouard, "La chapelle" (1995), 304.

³⁹ It is not clear which chapel they mean, as Louis d'Amboise is not known to have built or even redecorated a chapel at the episcopal palace in Albi.

⁴⁰ Respectively discussed by Kevin D. Murphy, *Memory and Modernity: Viollet-le-Duc at Vézelay* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000) and Nathalie Heinrich, *La fabrique du patrimoine: "De la cathédrale à la petite cuillère"* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, 2009), 81.

⁴¹ Communal archives of Monestiés, ADT, 170 EDT.

Albi's episcopal palace chapel offered instead a suitable location for the statues, and that this city was incomparably more attractive to visitors.

On this last point, others shared the view that Monestiés was a backwater. The debate played out in the press as well as behind closed doors between civil servants. One local daily newspaper stated in a piece about the statues in December 1949: "You can't ask tourists without a car to make a huge detour to see eleven statues, however admirable they might be."⁴² By contrast, the inspector of the Commission des Monuments Historiques noted that "the chapel is less than fifty meters from the route between Carmaux and Cordes, which could be easily incorporated into what is essentially a tourist circuit."⁴³ It appears here that the inspector wavered over the issue of the statues' current site. If, as he stated, the chapel of Saint-Jacques was within easy reach of a convenient thoroughfare, the case to move them to somewhere more central lost its credibility. Again, the stakes were high for the villagers relying on keeping their tourist attraction. If they were to be moved to Albi, would anyone ever again bother to visit their village?

Mid-century Restoration and Display

Despite the seeming inevitability of the move to Albi, the village of Monestiés won the right to keep the statues in the chapel and even received funding to restore them. In 1952, the restoration project was instigated and led by Jean Taralon, then inspector of the *monuments historiques* in the Tarn. Taralon became particularly influential in the reception of religious medieval monuments in the 1960s when he cocurated a groundbreaking exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris of French church treasures, *Les Trésors des églises de France*. The restoration program in Monestiés was carried out by the sculptor Marcel Mainponte and by Michel Mastorakis, head architect of the Monuments Historiques, for the fabric of the building (Fig. 9.9). Mainponte was tasked by Taralon to remove the nineteenth-century overpainting to recover the medieval hues, but he used harsh detergents that damaged some of the original polychromy and then touched up the painting and polished the statues. The architect Mastorakis, meanwhile, removed all of the chapel's richly painted décor of the 1860s, stripping the walls, removing the chandeliers, and replacing the old altar with a pared-down modernist example. The front entrance of the chapel was bricked up, meaning that the interior of the chapel was deprived of air and natural light; it was now accessible only through the sacristy. Spotlights, added to the niche behind the entombed Christ, cast dramatic shadows on the sculptures, a reimagining just as staged

⁴² Yves Andouard, "Les statues de Monestiés: Le chef-d'œuvre sous le boisseau," *Sud Ouest* (1 December, 1949), n.p.

⁴³ Sangouard and Sangouard, "La chapelle" (1995), 304.



Fig. 9.9: Postcard (ca. 1960) showing the Entombment sculptures after restoration in the 1950s. Photo: Archives départementales du Tarn.

as the nineteenth-century display. In short, the restorers created a modernist grotto in which the pure form of the statues was celebrated against a stark background more reminiscent of a contemporary art gallery or museum. From the theatrical staging of the nineteenth-century restoration, the Entombment sculptures in the 1950s were transformed into a different kind of anachronistic display, as hallowed exhibits for a secular audience.

The mid-century aesthetic adopted in this redisplay can be considered a political choice in that the people determining the program for rural Monestiés were cultural heavyweights on a national scale, just as they had been in the nineteenth century. The curators at the museum in Albi, who wanted the statues for themselves, oversaw a large collection of works by the town's poster boy, Toulouse-Lautrec. The museum's focus in the 1950s was modern art, not medieval, and in 1961 it marked the centenary of Toulouse-Lautrec with a big exhibition about the artist. On a national scale, however, medieval art enjoyed the limelight in Paris with *Les Trésors des églises de France* in 1965 (Fig. 9.10). In this landmark exhibition, hailed by Francis Salet as "the cultural event of 1965,"⁴⁴ religious objects from the treasuries of churches all over France were displayed and the reliquary of St. Foy in Conques (Aveyron) pitched as its star exhibit.

⁴⁴ Francis Salet, review of *Les Trésors des églises de France*, by Jean Taralon and Roseline Maître-Devallon, *Bulletin Monumental* (1966): 450–53, at 450.



Fig. 9.10: Exhibition view of *Les Trésors des églises de France*, Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1965. Photo: Ministère de la Culture, France.

That work appears on the front cover of the exhibition catalogue and earned a full five pages of commentary.⁴⁵ While objects from the south, the St. Foy reliquary among them, formed an integral part of the exhibition in the capital, inexplicably the Tarn department took a back seat. Indeed, and despite Taralon's personal investment in the religious heritage of that department while inspector of *monuments historiques* in the 1950s, the ecclesiastical treasures of the Tarn department did not feature heavily, with only Albi cathedral loaning a thirteenth-century enameled and gilded cross made in Limoges.

Although one cannot precisely compare the differing environments of a museum showing many objects for a limited period with a large religious monument in a permanent location, one can detect similar approaches at work. In the exhibition in Paris, vitrines displayed collections of smaller objects, with medieval tapestries mounted above

⁴⁵ *Les Trésors des églises de France* (Paris: Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1965), 289–94. Discussed by Michele Tomasi, “Tutela e conoscenza: *Les Trésors des églises de France*: Parigi, Musée des Arts décoratifs, 1965,” in *Medioevo/Medioevi: Un secolo di esposizioni d'arte medievale*, ed. Enrico Castelnuovo and Alessio Monciatti (Pisa: Edizione della Normale, 2008), 313–30.



Fig. 9.11: Exhibition view of *Les Trésors des églises de France*, Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1965 showing the Virgin and Child sculpture from the Church of Saint-Mathieu, Morlaix. Photo: Ministère de la Culture, France.

them on the walls. Larger pieces, such as the enthroned Virgin and Child from the Church of Saint-Mathieu in Morlaix, were placed on pedestals in the middle of the galleries (Fig. 9.11). In the same vein, at Monestiés, Mainponte and Mastorakis curated the display in the chapel, literally staging it by lighting it like a film set, with spotlights on the stars. At a time when modernism dominated the cultural sphere, the parties tasked with presenting these monumental medieval statues did so using the techniques of their era and for an audience primed to respond to formalist aesthetics rather than to religious meaning. But who was the intended audience? Other authors in this volume address the issue of audience, but especially pertinent is Kevin Murphy's contribution about the reconstruction of Notre-Dame of Paris, describing how the restoration of religious monuments offered a chance to foreground national unity in challenging times. The political aspect of restoration is understandable with the capital city's iconic cathedral, but what about a sculpture in the provincial backwater of Monestiés? In such a remote location, this significant restoration program had a relatively limited public. The battle that Monestiés won soon after the war to keep the statues on-site rather than

lose them to Albi highlights an intense local pride in the region's religious medieval culture. Paris may as well have been a foreign country to the villagers of Monestiés.

Conclusion: The Triumph of Tourism?

In the 1990s, the Monestiés sculptures underwent another significant intervention, which saw the Entombment, Pietà, and Crucifixion reunited in the same space, at the east end of the chapel of Saint-Jacques (see Fig. 9.1). The other major addition to the curation of the monument was the new identification of the figure at Christ's head in the Entombment ensemble. In the iconographic tradition, Joseph of Arimathea holds the shroud at Christ's head. The local art historians involved with the restoration program, Antoinette and Jacques Sangouard, identified the figure as the original patron of the monument, Louis d'Amboise (Fig. 9.12). This reidentification continues to be disputed by art historians, yet the statue is still touted both on-site and in the chapel's pro-



Fig. 9.12: Joseph of Arimathea (Louis d'Amboise?) from the Entombment sculptures; Chapel of Saint-Jacques, Monestiés. Photo: Author.

motional materials as representing Louis.⁴⁶ The naming of the statue—as the medieval prelate and powerful bishop of Albi—serves as an added attraction to persuade tourists to make the detour from Albi to this tiny village. It offers a good example of how a personal commemorative monument can evolve (and be shaped) into a *lieu de mémoire*.⁴⁷ The Sangouards' identification of Joseph of Arimathea as Louis d'Amboise can be regarded as an astute promotional strategy necessary for the village's ongoing prosperity. Consider, for example, the case study of the small village of Collonges, in Corrèze. In 1969, the village's mayor renamed the village Collonges-la-Rouge to distinguish it from six other villages with the same name. Then, in 1982, he founded the association and initiative Les Plus Beaux Villages de France (France's Most Beautiful Villages) and named Collonges-la-Rouge as its first recipient. This initiative and labelling system has proven hugely successful in bringing visitors from all over the world to villages that for centuries escaped the notice of all but their closest neighbors. There are now more than 190 Plus Beaux Villages; Monestiés received the accolade in 2001.

I have argued that the Entombment ensemble statues represent a compelling case study for how medieval artifacts were exploited physically and ideologically over several centuries by national and regional politicians, whose views and decisions were shaped by both personal and broader cultural agendas. The thread running through the various re-presentations and attempts to relocate the statues remains the determination of the actors closest to home: the villagers of Monestiés. Because of the effective collaboration of local historians, municipal representatives, and inhabitants, the latest presentation of the Entombment statues marks a new chapter in the political manipulation of the medieval statues, one with tourism and the threatened rural economy at its heart.

⁴⁶ Jacques Dubois, "Les travaux de Louis d'Amboise," in *L'Art des frères d'Amboise: Les chapelles de l'hôtel de Cluny et du château de Gaillon*, ed. Agnès Bos and Thierry Crépin-Leblond (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2007), 58–63, at 61.

⁴⁷ Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997); Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1, *Conflicts and Divisions*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Heinich, *La fabrique du patrimoine*, 19.