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Kevin D. Murphy, *Memory and Modernity: Viollet-le-Duc at Vézelay*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. xiv + 200 pp. 53 black and white illustrations. \$45.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-271-01850-X.

Review by Barry Bergdoll, Columbia University.

The mid-nineteenth-century restoration of the Romanesque church of the Madeleine at Vézelay has long been seen as a threshold in the history of architectural restoration, an opening showcase both of Guizot's young Commission des Monuments Historiques and of the prolific career of the maverick architect Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. Viollet-le-Duc was little known outside Parisian literary and artistic circles when he was appointed, age 26, in 1840 to restore the abbey church whose vaults threatened collapse. By 1858, as the last major budgetary outlay was devoted to erecting a new tower over the south transept so that the church might cut an even more impressive figure in the rolling hills of this part of rural Burgundy, Viollet-le-Duc himself had become a towering figure in French architecture. In that year the fourth volume of his great ten-volume *Dictionnaire Raisoné de l'Architecture* appeared with the key article "Cathedral" summarizing his theory of French Gothic as a high point in rational architectural design. Likewise in 1858, restoration work was underway at the Abbey of Saint Denis and at the cathedrals of Paris, Amiens, and Carcassonne, all under Viollet-le-Duc's direction, and the first studies had been approved for the reconstruction of the fortified château of Pierrefonds in the forest of Compiègne to the north of Paris to serve as a pleasure pavilion for the Emperor Napoleon III. Not only had Viollet-le-Duc succeeded in transforming understanding of the nature and history of both sacred and secular Gothic architecture, but he had carried his message to the very nerve center of French political power. Begun during the reign of Louis Philippe, when the liberal historiography of the middle ages pioneered by Augustin Thierry and François Guizot laid the foundations for establishing architectural preservation and restoration as a legitimate concern of national government, the restoration of Vézelay was only completed under the Second Empire as Viollet-le-Duc found state support for his campaign to have instruction in the national tradition in architecture admitted into the classical bastion of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which had for decades fought the notion that Gothic architecture held lessons for modern culture.

Yet relatively little of the extensive literature on Viollet-le-Duc has concerned itself with the modern political circumstances that surrounded the formation of a theory and practice of national monument preservation. Since the mid-1950s when positive appraisals of Viollet-le-Duc's contribution first began to question the criticism of his interventionist approach to correcting the accidents of time in the name of the clarity of history, emphasis was laid on discerning the modernity of Viollet-le-Duc's vision of gothic as rational structure, which was shown to be—stripped of its obsessive historical narratives—a key early step in the formation of a modern functionalist theory of design. In the process, Viollet-le-Duc's

practices as an architect and as a restorer of medieval buildings were marginalized in order to celebrate the contribution of his writings to the larger development of modern architectural theory. Historians of medieval architecture, in particular, have long decried the heavy hand of Viollet-le-Duc's restoration, at times involving such a thorough changing of the confused palimpsests of the passage of time to achieve his famous paradoxical dictum that "to restore an edifice is not to maintain it, repair or remake it, it is to re-establish it in a complete state that may never have existed at any given moment in the past."

More recently a revisionist view of nineteenth century architecture has reevaluated Viollet-le-Duc's theory as both a product and an agent in the historicist culture of the period, examining the ways in which his vision of historical development, for instance, was greatly influenced not only by romantic historiography's celebration of the twelfth century as the period of the emancipation of the city states, but also by the Saint-Simonian vision of a cyclical rhythm of organic golden moments of culture and long periods of cultural crisis and transition in between. Yet careful studies of actual restorations, the laboratory in which Viollet-le-Duc both studied and transformed the evidence, are mostly still wanting--Jean-Michel Leniaud's study of the Sainte Chapelle, where Viollet-le-Duc and his mentor and friend Jean-Baptiste Lassus worked side by side with Félix Duban, is a notable exception. For the most part studies of individual restorations have been undertaken by medievalists, more eager to peel back the layers of nineteenth-century culture than to examine those very layers as a document of their own time with insights into larger currents of modern political and cultural history.

Not until the great enterprise of Pierre Nora's history of the institutions and sites of memory, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984-92), were Viollet-le-Duc's restorations as works of modern historicist architectural practice reframed to be considered as works of both architectural and cultural inventiveness, although the 1980 Viollet-le-Duc exhibition organized by Bruno Foucart at the Grand Palais offered in its catalogue quickly sketched portraits of each of the architect's principle restoration projects. One of the most insightful contributions to *Les Lieux de Mémoire* was Guy Lobrichon's study of the construction of Vézelay's lynch pin position in the nineteenth century construction of the history of the French nation and of frenchness, a study to which the book under review owes an enormous debt. Lobrichon showed that despite its small size and remote location, the picturesque hilltop town of Vézelay, dominated by its pilgrimage church, loomed large in the relationship between the emergence of a secular town culture and individual religious experience, all factors, moreover, that resonate in Viollet-le-Duc's own nationalist history of gothic architecture, in which Vézelay and its citizens played a role. Lobrichon argued that Viollet-le-Duc's view of Vézelay as a key transitional monument between the Romanesque and the Gothic, and thus between a feudal/monastic and an emerging civic culture, colored his entire restoration, leading Viollet-le-Duc to underscore elements that pointed to the future in this pioneering historical restoration!

Lobrichon dealt only summarily with the actual restoration techniques and philosophy honed at Vézelay so that a cultural history of restoration as one of the great inventions of the nineteenth century remained to be written. Despite the fact that it was Viollet-le-Duc himself in the entry "Restoration" in the next to the last volume of the *Dictionnaire*, published in 1866, who first noted of restoration that "both the word and the thing are modern," it was not until recently that the symbiosis of memory and modernity that serves as the title of Kevin Murphy's case study of Viollet-le-Duc's very first restoration at Vézelay was formulated as a subject for architectural history.

Methodologically Murphy's work presents an interesting marriage of the study of sites of memory, which has become a veritable cottage industry since Nora's volumes were published, with the study of architectural institutions, a major theme of much of the most innovative work in the architectural history of nineteenth-century France in recent years. Trained under the architectural historian David van Zanten, whose work has increasingly focused on the infrastructure of the peculiarly bureaucratic world of French architecture, restoration, and town planning, Murphy frames his study of memory on a canvas whose two-point perspective system has been constructed from the points of view of centralizing national institutions and local administrations and sentiments. But far from a simple conflict between Paris and the provinces, Murphy proposes a complex give-and-take in which there is occasional acknowledgement of the ambiguous status of individuals in the bureaucratic mechanism—the Prefect of the Department might, in the Napoleonic ethos, know only Paris and be known only to Paris but often had profound local attachments. Unlike so much of the work of Van Zanten or his French counterpart Jean-Michel Leniaud, who have tended to view bureaucracies as almost flawless machines, Murphy admits a decisive role for individuals who might not fully act according to their bureaucratic role: "My intention," Murphy explains, "is to show how [Prosper] Mérimée [the director of the Commission des Monuments Historiques] and Viollet-le-Duc manipulated the administrative structure in ways that enabled them to promote their conceptions of history, architecture and restoration" (p. 26).

Murphy is eager to show that Viollet-le-Duc's historical diagnosis of gothic was still being formulated as he turned his hand to his first theater of operation on an actual patient, and he thus draws a portrait of a give-and-take between Viollet-le-Duc's quest for an impeachable system of gothic and his willingness to learn from the accidents and incongruities the building fabric might reveal to him as the work progressed. This is altogether admirable, for in all too many cases Viollet-le-Duc's restorations of the 1840s and 1850s—even before he had managed to train a whole cadre of architects to work under his direction or independently according to his principles—have been interpreted largely in light of the famous theory of restoration only set down, partly because of the accidents of the alphabet, in 1866 when his *Dictionnaire* reached the letter R. Murphy concludes his introduction with the promising provocation that "The church of the Madeleine at Vézelay is ... as fully a work of nineteenth-century architecture as [Henri] Labrouste's [contemporary] Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève," which nearly all histories of modern architecture have seen as one of the seminal new creations in which memory and modernity are as much at stake as solving the novel problem of making books available in a commodious public place to readers.

This slight volume has, as its very title announces, enormous ambitions as well as a compelling overarching argument. Murphy implicitly works from the assumption that the Commission des Monuments Historiques had two interdependent functions which have remained the dual activities of modern historic preservation. For in addition to the actual restoration of buildings, the Commission had a nationally scaled museological function, namely to elevate specific buildings to the new status of "historical monuments." Murphy poses the intriguing question of just what happens once a building is subjected to considerations that come primarily from the discourses and narratives of the history of art and of nation—and in the nineteenth century the two were intimately related—rather than from the multiple quotidian functions a building performs in its local setting. He suggests that with the Commission des Monuments Historiques, founded but a few years before the announcement of the invention of photography, a restored building addresses itself as much, perhaps even more, to the modern tourist, as to the local inhabitant. He then tests this hypothesis at the vital threshold when the Commission des Monuments Historiques, which hitherto had primarily concerned itself with the

restoration of ancient Roman monuments--the arch and the theatre at Orange, the monuments of St. Rémy de Provence--that had long ceased to have modern functions, turned its attention for the first time to a functioning church building. The tensions between the living and the museological functions of historic monuments is both the object of Murphy's study and the dramatic thread of his narrative. Set in the context of mid-nineteenth-century French political life, this tension was often doubled by friction between local and national government, and between government and populace, as the forward march of nationalization and modernization spread even to such small towns as Vézelay.

Disappointingly Murphy's argument shares more with his book's dimensions than with his title's aspirations. Both the evidence and the demonstration are thin, and working definitions of memory and modernity are never offered. Murphy unfortunately was not given access to the rich collection of papers held by Viollet-le-Duc's descendents in Paris and, therefore, could not make use of a vitally important correspondence between the architect and his lieutenant in command on the restoration site. But even without this evidence, it should have been possible with archival sources to offer a much more fine-grained chronology and description of just where, how, and when Viollet-le-Duc intervened in the physical fabric of the building than the summary account offered here. Reference is frequently made to drawings that are not reproduced (p. 128 for instance). Indeed a German doctoral dissertation is currently underway to address just this lacuna in our understanding of both the medieval and the modern fabric of this important building. Murphy's archival energies were focused more intently on letters, documents, and published accounts that might point to tensions between the diverse constituencies with a claim over the building--from the local administration to national government, from the clergy to the local residents, and finally to Viollet-le-Duc and Prosper Mérimée's own art historical and political agendas.

The political situation was complex and can be reduced to no simple set of oppositions, but unfortunately Murphy's account often adds further confusion. Despite a brief review of the legal status of church property and of church administration in post-Revolutionary France, we are never in fact told who owned (or owns) the church at Vézelay and in what ways administrative decisions here are typical or atypical of the administration of religious buildings in July Monarchy France. Murphy clearly wants to pit the local inhabitants against the centralizing discourses of state and architectural restoration in order to sustain his central argument that at Vézelay the atheist Viollet-le-Duc and the skeptic Prosper Mérimée were able to impose their "concept of an artistically significant, hence practically useless religious building." But despite this claim there is ample evidence both in what Murphy unearths--and what he ignores--that these two functions are not necessarily incompatible, nor were they necessarily perceived that way by the people involved. Murphy cites Mérimée's dismay in his travel diaries of 1834 that the inhabitants of Vézelay, who seemed none too pious, treated the interior of their grand church with little respect. Yet pages later he claims that by confining the celebration of the mass to side chapels rather than the high altar, Viollet-le-Duc negated the central religious function of the building in the local life of the town, effectively expropriating the building from a rich local culture.

The book's final chapter serves as the tribunal in which all the supposedly aggrieved parties are allowed their day in court. The case opens with an anonymous letter of 1842 mailed in Avallon, the site of the departmental administration, to the Minister of public works in Paris in which shrill complaints are voiced over suspicions that the government's funds are lining the pockets of two individuals, C and D. C and D, Murphy claims, are in all likelihood the architect Comynet, a figure Viollet-le-Duc had brought in from outside the region much to local chagrin, and Viollet himself (although in a footnote he admits

that D might just as well refer to Demray, a local contractor employed on the site, whose name actually begins with D). This single anonymous letter we then are told can "be seen as a protest against the visible transformation of the Sainte-Madeleine by 1842 and can be understood as part of a larger pattern of resistance to the project." A single letter can scarcely be evidence of a pattern, and to my reading of the extracts offered this letter concerns only a petty dispute over who's getting the money and can by no means be construed as betraying the slightest interest in the architectural nature of Viollet-le-Duc's transformations or the future function of the restored building. It is a stretch to see here the first salvo in a protest against transformation of the church's status from a viable place in a local society to a landmark in a national map.

Even as evidence of political tensions between local traditions and the centralizing and tentacular reach of centralizing modernization, this letter seems to me no more significant than an equally anonymous painted sign that did not catch Murphy's eye despite his interesting analysis here of the growth of Vézelay in modern tourism. On the main street of Vézelay, the one that led religious pilgrims to the towering facade of La Madeleine in the middle ages as it does modern cultural tourists, a faded sign can still be clearly discerned on the second floor of a former tavern: "Here Viollet-le-Duc played billiards during his sojourns in Vézelay while restoring the basilica." Could we not construe this piece of anecdotal evidence to conjure up a group of citizens in Vézelay who saw the Parisian restorer as something of a hero to be celebrated, or at the very least turned to advertising purposes in the growing tourist industry? More questions come to mind that Murphy does not address: Why must we suppose that carrying a sketch pad or a camera precludes religious pilgrimage, in short that art would preclude religion, despite the opposite efforts of so much romantic art and piety in this period? If architecture is capable of multiple meanings, why cannot it accommodate multiple functions? If the restoration approved in the 1840s was so stamped by an agenda that corresponded with Louis Philippe's regime, why was it not placed in question when work continued under Napoleon III?

The most important question is methodological, and it merits serious consideration because there is a growing interest in the vital but difficult subject of expanding the history of architectural reception to include the voices of a public larger than architects and bureaucracies. But by glossing over rather than confronting and working with the inherent difficulties of such a venture, Murphy's book, which might have served as a model, instead is flawed fundamentally by preconceived notions as untested and as pervasive as any Viollet-le-Duc ever dreamed up about gothic architecture.

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