

COUNTRY LIFE



Athena Cultural Crusader

Visions of the Middle Ages

IN 1840, Prosper Mérimée, most familiar today as the author of the novella *Carmen* (1845), but then acting in his official role as Inspecteur Général des Monuments Historiques, commissioned a certain Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc to restore the great 12th-century Cluniac church at Vézelay, Burgundy. This was the first architectural commission the 26-year-old architect ever received, but it quickly led to a host of others. Cumulatively, these would establish him as the leading figure in the Gothic Revival in France. His single most famous project is the restoration of Notre-Dame, Paris, secured through an 1843 competition. Others are scarcely less celebrated, such as the restoration of the fortified town of Carcassonne, Aude, and the rebuilding of spectacular Pierrefonds castle,

Oise, for Napoleon III. Even for those who never visited these buildings, his publications gave his ideas extraordinary reach, notably through his 10-volume *Systematic dictionary of French architecture from the 11th to the 16th century* (1854–68), which enjoyed an international readership.

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At the root of Viollet-le-Duc’s success was an exceptional facility as a draughtsman and watercolourist. Born in 1814, he first developed these skills as a child, but they were improved by his uncle Étienne-Jean Delécluze, a painter and critic, who took him sketching as a teenager. To his experience of drawing landscape and buildings, he soon added an understanding of rendering complex objects, working as an instructor at the École royale gratuite, which offered free tuition to sculptors, joiners and metalworkers, and worked on architectural drawing in the offices of Jean-Jacques-Marie Huvé and François-René Leclère. Wider political

and cultural circumstances—combined with his own imagination and sense of purpose—turned this remarkable breadth of technical experience to dazzling effect.

Europe was in the sway of the Romantic movement, one strand of which—fed in France by publications such as Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831)—had a strongly antiquarian and nationalist flavour. Initially through his drawing and later his architecture, Viollet-le-Duc was able to reimagine the past in a fulsome and full-blooded manner that still appeals; the famous gargoyle that stares across Paris from Notre-Dame is not the creation of a medieval mason, but it answers a Romantic expectation of what such work should look like.

He produced tens of thousands of drawings, from which an exhibition, ‘Viollet-le-Duc Drawing Worlds’, is being staged at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York, US, in partnership with the Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, from January 28–May 24, 2026. Athena has been enjoying an advance copy of the catalogue by the curators, Barry Bergdoll and Martin Bressani, which presents a full sweep of his work to 1879, the year of his death. Viollet-le-Duc is one of the impresarios of modern perceptions of the Middle Ages, so it’s a pleasure to encounter him here directly.

