

***First Major U.S. Exhibition on Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc
Explores the Centrality of Drawing in His Multifaceted Career***

***Viollet-le-Duc Drawing Worlds
January 28, 2026 - May 24, 2026***

Viollet-le-Duc Drawing Worlds marks the first major U.S. exhibition dedicated to visionary French architect Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879), and the first to explore the central role of drawing in his career. For Viollet-le-Duc, to draw was not merely to represent the world—it was to understand, dissect, and reimagine it. Best known for restoring France’s most iconic medieval monuments, including Paris’s Notre-Dame Cathedral, he was also a prolific draftsman who placed drawing at the heart of his wide-ranging practice, using pen and pencil to study the anatomy of medieval buildings, map geological formations, and give life to an imagined past.

The exhibition brings together over 150 works spanning four decades, from Viollet-le-Duc’s evocative depictions of ancient buildings and his expertly drafted commission to restore Notre-Dame, to hand-drawn instructions for craftsmen and innovative use of scientific systems of visual representation. It also explores his later turn to natural and human histories, using drawing to explore how forms emerge, evolve, and cohere. Uniting these diverse projects is Viollet-le-Duc’s lifelong quest to recover the past—especially the Middle Ages—which he imagined as a world grounded in craft and collective intelligence, offering a model of artistic freedom and national identity.

Viollet-le-Duc Drawing Worlds is organized by Bard Graduate Center in partnership with the Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, a department of the French Ministry of Culture. The exhibition is co-curated by Barry Bergdoll, Meyer Schapiro Professor of Art History at Columbia University and former Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture & Design at the Museum of Modern Art, and Martin Bressani, William Macdonald Professor at McGill University’s Peter Guohua Fu School of Architecture.

“The tragic fire at Notre Dame has brought the name of Viollet-le-Duc, one of the most influential architecture theoreticians of the nineteenth century, back to the very center of public discussion and debate,” said Barry Bergdoll. “Not only are his ideas about historical memory in architecture, and the role of society in shaping buildings, as relevant today as they were in his own time, but his practice of drawing as a way of seeing and knowing is revelatory in our current age of computer-aided design and AI production of imagery. The aim of this show is to invite visitors to have an up-close encounter with the prowess of Viollet-le-Duc’s pen and brushes as he invented new forms of representing architecture.”

“Most people know Viollet-le-Duc as the restorer of Notre-Dame, but this exhibition reveals a far more expansive figure: a visionary who used drawing to connect the worlds of architecture, science, and history,” said Martin Bressani. “Rather than passively recording appearances, Viollet-le-Duc drew in order to make the world his own—rationalizing its forms, reconstructing its past, and projecting it into new futures. His passionate inquiry into the living structures of time speaks powerfully to our own moment, when questions of heritage, memory, and the environment press upon us with ever more urgency. Bard Graduate Center, with its focus on the material practices of art and design, is the ideal place to show how his drawings—at once beautiful and analytical—turned pen and pencil into instruments of discovery, making the past vividly present for the future.”

Viollet-le-Duc Drawing Worlds advances BGC’s mission of championing new ideas and narratives in design, decorative arts, and material culture, many of which have been previously overlooked or understudied. It follows in the path of past BGC exhibitions that have focused on influential architects and designers, including explorations of the work of Charles Percier (1764–1838), Thomas Jeckyll (1827–1881), Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, 1887–1965), Josef Frank (1885–1967), and Eileen Gray (1878–1976).

Exhibition Themes and Highlights

Exploring Viollet-le-Duc’s sweeping practice across four floors of gallery space, the exhibition is organized chronologically around the following themes:

Restoration and the Theater of Time

The introductory gallery on the first floor of the exhibition explores Viollet-le-Duc’s earliest drawings and paintings created during the 1830s. Viollet-le-Duc’s lifelong devotion to drawing, honed from childhood and enriched during his travels in France and Italy, was a way of taking hold of the world—turning it into a space he could analyze, order, and bring back to life. This can be seen in his two drawings of the ancient theater at Taormina, Sicily: one a sweeping panorama of the theater’s chaotic ruins, the other a fully reimagined reconstruction, animated by a performance of Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*. These works reveal, in their sharp contrast, the dynamics of the making and unmaking of a world.

Notre-Dame de Paris

The entire second floor is dedicated to Viollet-le-Duc’s restoration of Notre-Dame (1844–1864). By the early 1830s, Notre-Dame de Paris had fallen into severe disrepair, its fabric altered, neglected, and even desecrated during the French Revolution. Renewed interest in France’s medieval heritage, spurred in part by Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), led to a government-backed restoration campaign. In 1844, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and Jean-Baptiste Lassus won the competition to restore the cathedral, launching one of the most significant and influential preservation projects of the nineteenth century. This section presents the full scope of drawings produced for the effort—from competition designs and working drawings to instructions for stone sourcing and details for sculptures, bronze, and painted decoration.

The second floor will feature drawings made for the cathedral’s ornamental sculptures, including a series of gargoyles that though today are so iconic of the monument, were entirely new inventions, as well as a model (ca. 1858) and large-scale drawing of the final project for the flèche of Notre-Dame (1857), the most recognized and daring element of Viollet-le-Duc’s restoration of the cathedral.

Viollet-le-Duc at the Crossroads of Art, Science, and Empire

The third floor brings visitors to the apex of Viollet-le-Duc’s multifaceted career in the late 1850s, when he published his most influential works and oversaw major restorations at Carcassonne and Pierrefonds, along with commissions for new churches, monuments, private châteaux, and urban residences. Through his friendship with Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870), a close confidant of Empress Eugénie (1826–1920), he gained privileged access to the court and to Napoleon III (r. 1852–1870), shaping Second Empire cultural policy that sought to legitimize the regime by celebrating both France’s modernity and its historical legacy. Despite this prominence, he grew disillusioned with politics and increasingly turned to nature during the early years of the Third Republic (c. 1870). Studying

Mont Blanc's glaciers and rock formations, Viollet-le-Duc drew parallels between geological upheaval and human conflict. In this period, he also adopted racial theories that cast history in terms of struggle and dominance, reflecting his belief in the harsh laws of natural selection.

Several of the drawings in this section have never been shown in the U.S. before, including his series of mountain drawings and large-scale map of the Massif du Mont-Blanc as seen from above, drawn at a scale of 1:40,000 (1876). The landing on the third floor features Viollet-le-Duc's personal oak working desk (after 1862)—on view for the first time outside of Paris—reflecting the translation of Gothic constructive principles into objects of daily use in the nineteenth century. Also on view are drawings of his famed restorations of the medieval fortified city of Carcassonne and the medieval castle of Pierrefonds, and sketches for his numerous publications, including children's books.

The Atelier

The fourth floor of the exhibition is fashioned as an interactive atelier where visitors can explore how Viollet-le-Duc's nineteenth-century restorations have shaped—and continue to inform—our contemporary conception of the medieval period. Each hands-on station follows the legacy of his gothic designs in toys, games, movies, and contemporary craft, giving voice to creators who have turned the architect's drawings into speculative restorations.

Catalogue

While the literature on Viollet-le-Duc in French is extensive, with the notable exception of curator Martin Bressani's monumental monograph *Architecture and the Historical Imagination: Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, 1815–1879* (2014), there have been only a handful of titles in English on the architect. The exhibition's catalogue, *Viollet-le Duc Drawing Worlds*, is the first to address Viollet-le-Duc's drawing practice and its relationship to the intellectual, scientific, artistic, and political context of nineteenth-century France. It includes essays covering the many overlapping aspects of Viollet-le-Duc's drawing practice, punctuated by shorter essays that provide in-depth analyses of specific drawings.

Published by Bard Graduate Center and distributed by Yale University Press, the designed volume is edited by Barry Bergdoll and Martin Bressani, with texts written by Stephen Bann, Laurent Baridon, Irene Cheng, Shana Cooperstein, S. Diane Daussy, Gaël Favier, Jean-Charles Forgeret, Jean-Philippe Garric, Bérénice Gaussuin, Ralph Ghoche, Ségolène Le Men, Jean-Michel Leniaud, Aisling O'Carroll, Antoine Picon, Estelle Thibault, Arnaud Timbert, and Peter Sealy. It also includes an interview, conducted by Barry Bergdoll in 2024, with Philippe Villeneuve, the architect-in-charge (*architecte en chef*) of Notre-Dame, who oversaw its rebuilding after the fire of 2019.

Exhibition Support

Support for *Viollet-le-Duc Drawing Worlds* is generously provided by the Achelis and Bodman Foundation, the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, the Tavolozza Foundation with additional support by Furthermore: a program of the J. M. Kaplan Fund, Camilla Dietz Bergeron, Ltd., the Fondation Napoléon, and other donors to Bard Graduate Center.

About Bard Graduate Center

As the leading research institute in the United States dedicated to the study of decorative arts, design history, and material culture, Bard Graduate Center has pioneered the study of objects to better understand the cultural history of the material world. Offering experiences for scholars,

students, and the general public alike, Bard Graduate Center is built on multidisciplinary study and the integration of research, graduate teaching, and public exhibitions. Since its founding in 1993, Bard Graduate Center has established a network of more than 400 alumni who work in leading museums, universities, and institutions worldwide to advance new ways of thinking about material culture. For more information, visit bgc.bard.edu.

Bard Graduate Center Gallery

18 West 86th St.
New York, NY 10024