

# Burning Gothic: Reflections on Notre-Dame de Paris

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*“But no matter the destruction, the spirit of what it means to be a cathedral can and does survive such catastrophes.” – Becky Clark, Church of England director of cathedrals and church buildings, April 17, 2019*

The destruction of the sacred will engender moving responses. But the scope, and the particularity of that response varies. The conflagration affecting Notre-Dame de Paris, located on the Île de la Cité, has become a twenty-four-hour saturation phenomenon. Thirteen million annual visitors, a geographical pride of place at the centre of Paris, and vast repository of France in all matters religious, cultural and political, would have ensured that.

The attention given to other sites of sacred worth tends to be limited. It is unlikely, for instance, that pledges of up to \$113 million, promised by François-Henri Pinault to assist in the rebuilding project, are going to be heading the way of the more obscure sites of desecrated or damaged history. A south Louisiana parish, for instance, is desperate for funding in rebuilding three Black churches of historic significance burned down in “suspicious” circumstances.

“There is clearly something happening in this community,” suggested State Fire Marshal H. Browning.

The [funding target](#) for the GoFundMe campaign is \$1.8 million. To date, \$1.5 million has been secured.

Notre-Dame will do that to the millionaire and billionaire set: draw attention from the well-heeled and a chance for celebrity posterity in the premier culture league. (Even wineries such as the Château Mouton Rothschild are re-directing money from auctions to the cause.) While the idea of purchasing a place of heaven is not as popular as it once was, it still exerts some hold in the secular world through the idea of enduring reputation. Such gestures of financial promise have also stirred the pot of [misplaced empathy](#) for the cultural artefacts of a former colonial power.

People, in short, are not permitted their own singular ways of commemorating or grieving over a damaged or lost icon: they are to be scolded into appropriate acknowledgments and qualifications. A fine, and slightly perverse example of this came in responses to a [remark](#) by Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN), who was rebuked for suggesting that Notre-Dame might be considered in the same breath as “art and architecture”. Former congressman Joe Walsh [fulminated](#).

“It was a house of worship. A Catholic Cathedral. It wouldn’t have been difficult for you to acknowledge that.”

Looking at such structures are also exercises of mutual and mass deception. Gothic architecture did not always share the enchanting mystery that has made structures such as Notre-Dame de Paris the subject of gooey adoration. Having lapsed into a mysterious, almost barbaric prior life before the preferences towards Romanesque and the Classicist, such architecture was redeemed by the calls of Romanticism. Victor Hugo's pen praised the Gothic form for its freedom, its daring, "encouraging license and dissent from authority," [asserts](#) John Sturrock in his introduction to the 1978 translation of *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), commonly known in Anglophone circles as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Hugo's pen, in making the cathedral the protagonist, did the trick: interest in restoring the weathered, damaged structure was stimulated, halting the till then relentless drive towards tearing down Gothic Paris.

The fire that went through the Cathedral has been described variously as catastrophic and disastrous, but the nature of such creations is their permanent vulnerability and susceptibility to change. A scene from Hugo's own masterpiece is worth retelling, describing flames as the hunchbacked bellringer Quasimodo attacks the Truands in an effort to save Esmerelda. "All eyes were raised to the top of the church. They beheld there an extraordinary sight. On the crest of the highest gallery, higher than the central rose window, there was a great flame rising between the two towers with whirlwinds of sparks, a vast, disordered, and furious flame, a tongue of which was borne into the smoke by the wind, from time to time."

The building is all (well mostly, now) points, sharpness. It is jagged, skyscraper coherence. But to suggest that its body and shell was pure in its medieval form is to fall for a common deception perpetuated from the nineteenth century. The Gothic restoration mania of the period had the effect of turning Notre-Dame into a modern mutilation.

Eugène Emmanuelle Viollet-le-Duc, aided by Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Lassus, tended towards heavy restoration between 1845 and 1864 on the grounds that the original Gothic idea of the cathedral needed fuller realisation. They *knew* better. Being somehow in touch with those spirits, they went to work, [warned](#) by archaeological preservationist Prosper Mérimée about the dangers of overly keen touching up.

"A restoration may be more disastrous for a monument than the ravages of centuries." Hugo, in the same spirit, observed "the countless defacements and mutilations to which men and time have subjected that venerable monument."

The now destroyed barbed spire of wood and lead (*la flèche*) was itself was an addition. Viollet-le-Duc also added a new pulpit; original statues were removed from their resting places of centuries; spectacular gargoyles became a feature; and the south façade's rose window received undue attention. Paris-born photographer Danie Aubry aptly [observed](#) that the Gothic-mad restorer "should have worked for Disney." Ironically enough, Monday's fire is [being](#) "potentially linked" to the \$6.8 million renovation work that was already underway.

The visceral and rapid response from French President Emmanuel Macron was one of rebuilding. Cathedral spokesman André Finot spoke of the structure having suffered "colossal damage", with the frame obliterated. Not so, countered an optimistic Macron, taking on board the inspirational guise of Viollet-le-Duc. The rebuilding project would be grand and hurried. Forget decades; the President wants the structure to be finished in time for re-opening for the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. "We will rebuild Notre-Dame even

more beautifully, and I want it to be completed in five years.” To that end, an international design competition to [rebuild](#) parts of the building has been announced.

The Gothic concept was itself an act of daring on the part of Abbot Suger, who embraced lightness and light in his 1137 design for Saint-Denis. Platonism, Christianity and religious architecture were wed. The reconstruction of Notre-Dame might dare to be something different, but many expect a simulacrum of the original.

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