

AN ENDURING ICON

NOTRE-DAME CATHEDRAL

On April 15, 2019, a massive fire ravaged the 850-year-old cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris. The fire destroyed the medieval wooden trusses supporting the roof, toppling the famous spire and severely damaging the building. Though the structure's stability remains in question, all of the historic relics and works of art—including the celebrated rose windows—were saved by the rapid response of emergency workers and the cathedral's staff, as well as experts charged with preservation of the art and architecture. The disaster reverberated around the world while people watched in horror as events unfolded live on their screens.

Included on UNESCO's List of World Heritage Sites since 1991, Notre-Dame has come to embody a range of meanings in the cultural imagination: a major religious structure, a masterpiece of medieval architecture, a repository for important relics and art, a symbol of Paris, and a French landmark. In recognition of the historic event and its aftermath, this exhibition offers a glimpse into the history and art of this architectural and religious icon. Paintings, photographs, engravings, and books from the collections of the Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute, and a private collection elucidate the importance of the cathedral in European art history, from its construction in the Middle Ages to its restoration in the mid-1800s, including its central place in Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.



Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome in the exhibition.

NOTRE-DAME

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

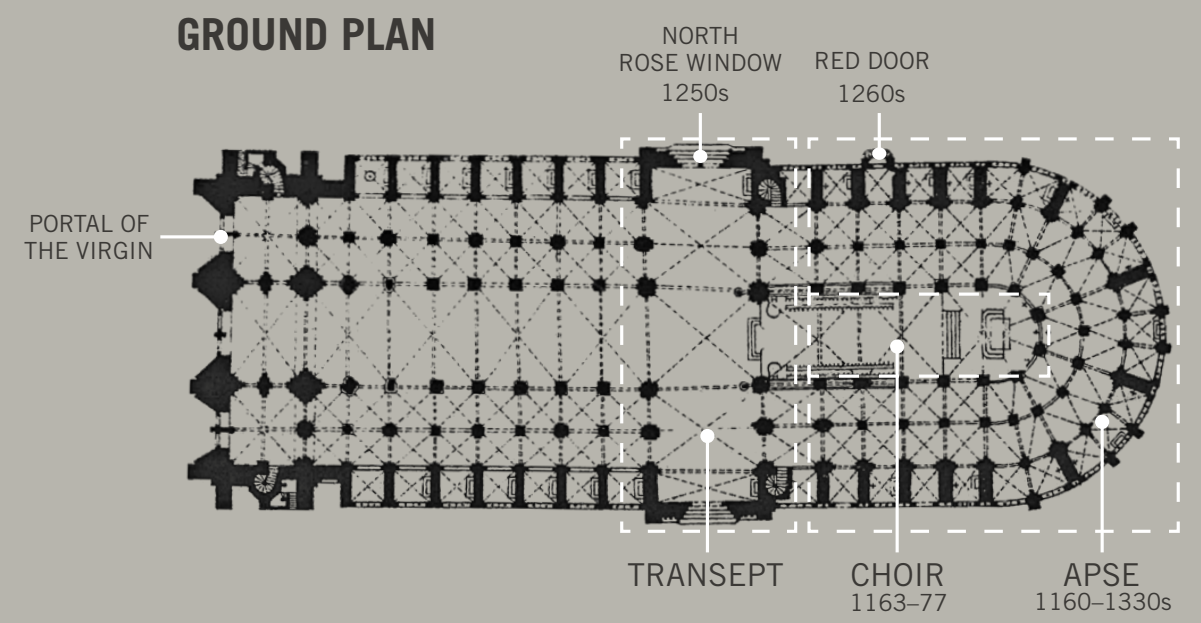
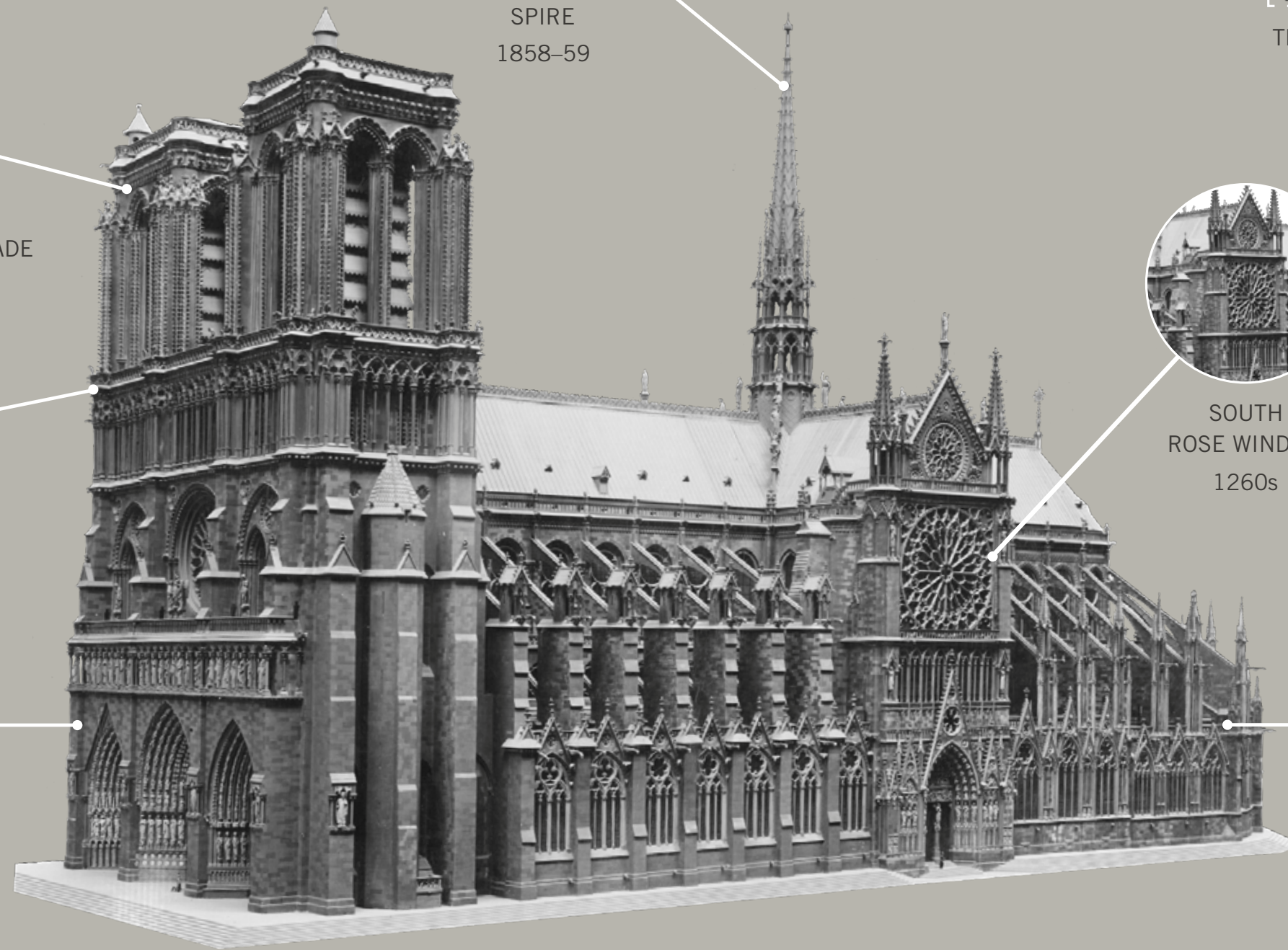
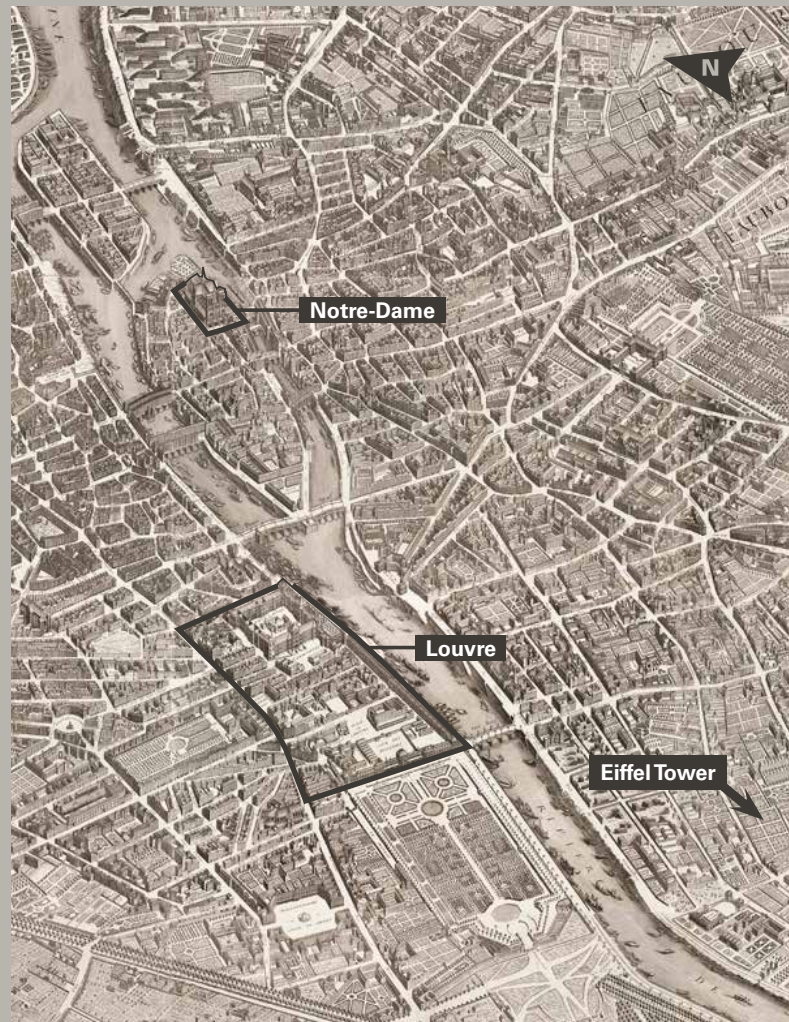


Image: Architectural model of Notre-Dame, n.d. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of the Getty Research Institute (76.P.19)
Floor map of Notre-Dame. From Karl Baedeker, *Paris and Environs...*, 1913, PIMS - University of Toronto. Image: Lämpel, via Wikimedia Commons

NOTRE-DAME

CENTER OF FRANCE, CENTRAL TO FRENCH HISTORY



Turgot Map of Paris (detail), 1739. Louis Bretez (French, died in 1738). Norman B. Leventhal Map Center. Image: Wikimedia Commons

Notre-Dame was built on the Île de la Cité, the largest island on the Seine River, in the center of Paris. Its massive twin towers, 226 feet high—the tallest structure in the capital before the Eiffel Tower was built in 1889—stand out against the skyline. Since 1769, a milestone on the square in front of the cathedral has served as the *point zéro* for calculating distances between French cities and Paris.

Given its scale and location, Notre-Dame has served as the ideal setting for significant events in French history. While French kings were traditionally crowned in Reims cathedral (northeast of Paris) and buried in the Saint-Denis abbey (north of Paris), major royal celebrations took place in Notre-Dame. In 1804, Napoleon chose Notre-Dame to stage his coronation as emperor. Since the mid-1800s, the cathedral has hosted most official French celebrations.

NOTRE-DAME

ART AND ARCHITECTURE



Choir with *The Vow of Louis XIII*, 1708–25. Marble. Notre-Dame, Paris. Image: Myrabella (CC BY-SA 3.0), via Wikimedia Commons

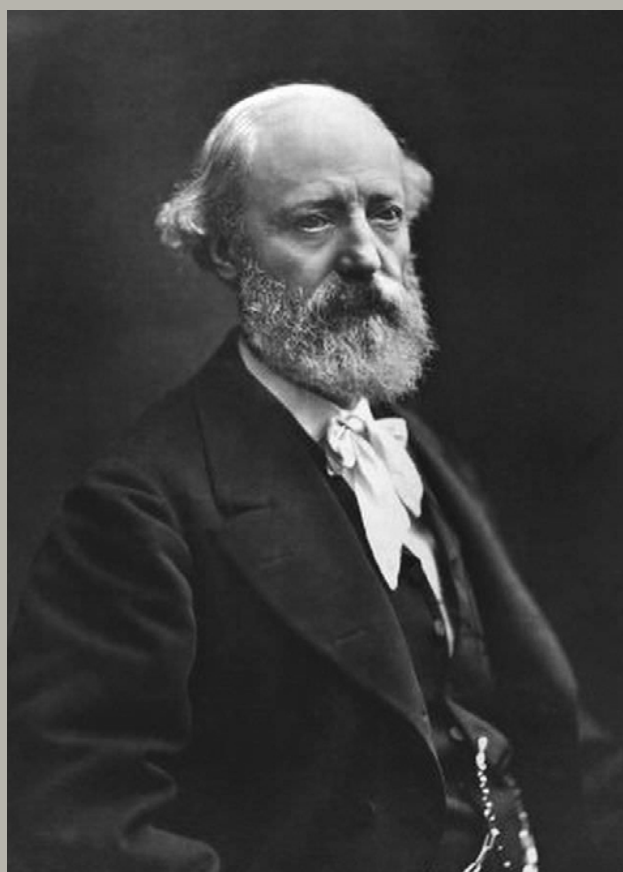
Notre-Dame is at once a magnificent work of architecture and a repository for masterpieces of art—all of which fortunately survived the recent fire. The cathedral's exterior portals preserve exquisite examples of sculptural ensembles from the 1200s, and its three large rose windows count among the most remarkable stained glass from the medieval period. In the interior, the high, pointed arches of the nave and transept, together with the choir and more than thirty chapels, shelter priceless sculptures, paintings, and ecclesiastical furniture. Scenes of the life of Christ, sculpted in stone in the early 1300s, are set around the choir screen, while within the choir wooden stalls dating from the 1700s shine with their delicately carved panels. A large marble group of the *Pietà* and kneeling figures of Louis XIII and Louis XIV were added in the 1720s to honor the Virgin in fulfillment of a vow made by Louis XIII. In the transept and chapels, thirteen large canvases—offered to the cathedral during the 1600s and 1700s—include some of the most ambitious French religious paintings of the period.

NOTRE-DAME

REVIVAL AND RESTORATION

At the start of the 1800s, the cathedral was in terrible disrepair. Dedicated during the French Revolution to a “Cult of Reason,” the edifice was looted and damaged; many of its sculptures, associated with the despised monarchy, were deliberately destroyed; and the decayed medieval spire was dismantled.

Two impressive personalities helped save the cathedral, the writer Victor Hugo (1802–1885) and the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879). The enormous success of Hugo’s novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831; published in English as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*) sparked renewed interest in the cathedral, enough to exert pressure on the authorities to address its decrepit condition. A decade later, the commission responsible for historical monuments organized a



Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, 1878.
Nadar (French, 1820–1910).
Woodburytype, 23 x 18 cm.
Image: Wikimedia Commons

competition and, in 1844, selected Viollet-le-Duc as well as Jean-Baptiste Lassus (1807–1857) to oversee a huge restoration effort. After the death of his collaborator, Viollet-le-Duc completed the immense project, finally finishing in 1864. The contributions of both Hugo and Viollet-le-Duc, true orchestrators of Notre-Dame’s revival in the 1800s, became permanently associated with the cathedral’s mystique.

This material was published in 2019 to coincide with the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *An Enduring Icon: Notre-Dame Cathedral*, July 23–October 20, 2019, at the Getty Center.

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