

Ringing the changes

Jonathan Lopez welcomes an exhibition that explores the legacy of France's historical revivalism in the 19th century.

The bell-ringing hunchback Quasimodo plays such a memorable role in Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) that readers often think of him as the novel's main character. In the text, however, that part is reserved for the cathedral, an edifice that Hugo extols, along with the gothic style more generally, as 'la pensée écrite en pierre'. Heavily romanticised and somewhat melodramatic, Hugo's affection for Notre Dame nonetheless had profound consequences. The building, horribly damaged during the anti-clerical tumult of the revolutionary period, underwent a massive restoration, beginning in 1845, prompted by the throngs of tourists who visited after reading the book. Much of the sculptural ornamentation that one now sees at the church is rather fanciful, although admittedly charming, and dates back only to the middle of the 19th-century – the highpoint of historical revivalism as an aesthetic ideal.

'Gothic Art in the Gilded Age', a captivating exhibition curated by Virginia Brilliant at the Ringling Museum and soon to travel to the Marble House at Newport, Rhode Island, considers the complex international legacy of France's 19th-century revival movements, tracing the path of a single, decidedly chic assemblage of late mediaeval and early renaissance art and decoration as it moved from the apartments of Parisian marchand-amateur Émile Gavet to the home of American socialite Alva Vanderbilt and then to the collection of circus impresario John Ringling. The shifting presentation of these objects sheds light not only on the evolution of taste and collecting habits immediately

before and after the turn of the 20th century but also on certain limitations in the way collections from that period are displayed and looked at today.

An architect as well as an art dealer, Gavet designed an impressive decorative scheme for a flat he maintained, from 1877 onwards, on the Île de la Cité, close by Notre Dame. Some of his rooms evoked the French renaissance, with richly carved woodwork and coffered ceilings; others presented a domestic interpretation of the high gothic style, featuring elaborate vaults with moulded ribs and smooth panels enlivened by a painted interlace of floral and geometric motifs. This fantasy environment served as Gavet's living quarters and his commercial showroom. He filled it with an abundance of costly possessions – paintings, sculpture, majolica, enamels, metalwork, carved gems – which he periodically sold off with great fanfare, only to start collecting again.

Gavet's activities as a dealer, like his forays into interior decoration, involved an element of glamorous fiction. Many of the works he sold – especially the paintings – were excellent, but others were fake, over-restored, or imaginatively reworked. Sculptural fragments of little inherent value were sometimes matched up to form spurious suites or groupings, such as a droll quartet of unrelated 'saints', smartly outfitted with identical – and quite modern – quatrefoil roundels. Panels presumably salvaged from wrecked pieces of antique furniture might find themselves mated together in new and unusual chests of heterogeneous design.



1 Émile Gavet's Paris flat. Photo published Gavet catalogue, 1897. 2 Châsse, mid 13th and mid 19th century, enamel on copper, fixed to oak core, with glass panel, 19.1 x 15.8 cm. All objects in this article: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

Due to the absence of detailed records, Gavet's precise role in these matters is elusive. The dealer himself may well have been duped by the fraudulent reliquary châsse that he sold sometime between 1889 and 1895 to Alva Vanderbilt, along with approximately 340 other items that would adorn her Gothic Room at the Marble House. Given that the enamelled front panel of the châsse implausibly depicts the three Magi in a hunting procession attended by raptors, it is hard to believe that no suspicions were raised, but without wishing to excuse this particular fake, one might suggest that the issue of authenticity in Gavet's collection, and in others like it, was rendered all the murkier because aesthetic revivals naturally entail a measure of falsehood.

Aimé-Napoléon Perrey, the sculptor responsible for the stonework on the best neo-gothic churches in France was also entrusted with the restoration of the Sainte-Chapelle: 10 of the 12 apostles that lean on the columns marking the bays in the Sainte-Chapelle are original (albeit repaired in some places); two are entirely the work of Perrey – replacements for those lost when the contents of the chapel were carted off in the summer of 1797.

Perrey's apostles are, in some sense, fake, but his work wasn't really about faithfully conserving the past. It was about mending the rift in French history caused by the Revolution. The antiquarian taste that Gavet cultivated was a commercial offshoot of this trend, and its popularity, like that of Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, seems to

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have derived from an appeal to currents deep in French culture.

At the Marble House, an entirely different set of forces animated a penchant for a similar backward-glancing aesthetic. One thinks of *The Pirates of Penzance*, in which Major General Stanley laments the shame he has brought to the storied line of ancestors buried on his newly acquired estate – calling himself ‘their descendant by purchase’. Newport, circa 1890, was filled with Stanleys, whose extravagant ‘cottages’ desperately needed Old World pedigrees.

This summer, when the Gavet objects are temporarily reinstalled in the Gothic Room (designed for Mrs Vanderbilt by Richard Morris Hunt), items like the reliquary-that-never-held-relics (Fig. 2) will once again make sense as part of a decorative ensemble. Under normal circumstances, this is something they cannot do in Sarasota, where they have resided since 1927, when John Ringling acquired most of the Gavet material after Alva Vanderbilt tired of it. Intent on creating a rigorous museum, Ringling integrated these pieces into his chronological display of art history. Today, any fake, badly restored, or otherwise dubious items are relegated to storage (except on the occasion of the current exhibition). The benefit to this approach is that outstanding pieces, like Piero di Cosimo’s *The Building of a Palace* (Fig. 3), are shown in a rational context and at eye level, rather than 10 feet up a wall, above a panelled dado, à la Gavet. What’s lost, however, is a creative era when art-historical



artifice was itself a significant mode of expression. This fine exhibition has brought it brilliantly, if briefly, back to life.

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‘Gothic Art in the Gilded Age: Medieval and Renaissance Treasures from the Gavet-

3 The Building of a Palace by Piero di Cosimo, ca. 1514-18, Tempera on panel, 31.5 x 77.5 cm.

Vanderbilt-Ringling Collection, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 19 December 2009-4 April (+1 941 359 5700), Marble House, Preservation Society of Newport County, Rhode Island 8 May-31 October. Catalogue by Virginia Brilliant et al., ISBN: 9780916758561 (cloth), \$40.00, (Ringling Museum).