

## Chapel I

### THE RETURN OF THE ROYAL TOMBS

During the Ancien Régime, the royal tombs lay in the middle of the abbatial church, in the chancel and transepts. The monument to Henry II and Catherine de' Medici joined them under the French Regency from 1715 to 1723 when the Valois Rotunda on the north side was demolished. The Bourbon coffins were placed in the chapel of Hilduin, named after the abbot of Saint-Denis Abbey from 815 to 840, in a simple, plain arrangement, with the exception of the last ruling king, whose body remained in the ceremonies vault after being embalmed (ill. 1 and 2).

The abbatial church was ravaged from 1793 until the beginning of the Consulate (1799-1804) and turned into a warehouse (ill. 3). Charles Percier (1764-1838) produced several drawings of the interior in ruins (ill. 4). The funerary stone sculptures were spared from destruction at the request of certain well-known figures, including Alexandre Lenoir (1762-1831) (ill. 5).

The chapel of Hilduin was forced open so that the royal mummies could be removed (ill. 6) and thrown into two communal graves dug in the former cemetery on the church's northern side. Several accounts describe the state in which the mummies were found when the coffins were opened: the intact mummy of King Henry IV, who was still the most popular king among the French, was drawn and engraved in multiple copies (ill. 7) which were circulated to rekindle remembrance of the monarchs.

Transported to Paris, the stone sculptures were placed in successive order of reigns and exhibited by Alexandre Lenoir at the Musée des monuments français he founded in 1795 (ill. 8), where the current École des Beaux-Arts is located. The initiative was a tremendous success and helped give rise to a collective passion for the Middle Ages.

On advice from his director of the Louvre, Vivant Denon (1747-1825), Napoleon decided to close the museum, a decision that was enacted during the Bourbon Restoration (1814-1830) as of 1816 and the funerary sculptures were taken back to Saint-Denis. With the help of Alexandre Lenoir, the architect François Debret (1777-1850) positioned them in the crypt in a poignant museological display admired by visitors and foreign tourists (ill. 9 and 10). To complete the series of sovereigns, Debret came up with an idea for an addition to the crypt: a marble depiction of Charlemagne, sculpted by Étienne Gois (1731-1823) (ill. 11 and 12) and commissioned by Napoleon.

Under the reign of Charles X (1824-1830), as remembrance of monarchs (ill. 13) returned from 1815 onwards, the architect installed two altars (ill. 14) in 1828 on either side of the chancel entrance (ill. 15). Acts of commemoration took place in front of the south altar, rather than in the crypt.

During the Second French Empire (1852-1870), Eugène Viollet-le-Duc received permission from Napoleon III to remove the museographical display designed by Debret and Lenoir and transfer the tombs up into the wings of the transept. The architect can be seen among the tombs, conversing with a canon of Saint-Denis (ill. 16). The project undertaken by Viollet-le-Duc corresponds to the current arrangement.

## Chapel II

### A SENIOR PUBLIC ARCHITECT

Born in 1777 in Paris into a family of shopkeepers and judicial officers, François Debret was elected to the learned society the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1825 (ill. 1). He was related to the painter Jacques-Louis David (ill. 2), who was exiled to Brussels under the Bourbon Restoration, along with others who voted for Louis XVI to be executed and who supported Napoleon during the period known as *Les Cent-Jours* [Hundred Days] that followed the Emperor's return from exile. In 1808, François Debret married Rosalie Duban, whose brother Félix Duban (1797-1870) (ill. 3) pursued an illustrious career as an architect. He helped train the latter and ensured he succeeded him as supervisor of works on the École des Beaux-Arts Fine Arts School in 1832.

His elder brother, Jean-Baptiste Debret, had begun a career in painting, devoting his artworks to France's imperial saga (ill. 4 and 5). Opposing the Bourbons, he left France in 1816 to settle in Brazil and became the first ethnographic painter there (ill. 6). In Brazil, he prepared material for his work *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil* [A Picturesque and Historic Voyage to Brazil], a volume published by the printer Firmin Didot upon Jean-Baptiste Debret's return to France in 1831 and which brought the painter fame.

In 1796, when he was 19 years old, François Debret contended for the Grand Prix de Rome, the award having just been restored by the governing French Directory (1795-1799). But, enlisted under conscription, he had to give up his pursuit of this goal. In 1804, he was placed in charge of works on Napoleon's coronation, under the supervision of Charles Percier and Pierre François Léonard Fontaine, the most influential architects at the time. He travelled to Italy in 1806 (ill. 7) with a fellow student, Hippolyte Lebas, then gathered material to publish the complete works of Vignola, Italy's great architectural theorist during the Renaissance.

Debret was then appointed architect of Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral and later, in 1813, of the Basilica of Saint-Denis, succeeding Jacques Cellerier (1742-1814). In 1819, Debret became the supervisor of a large-scale project: the construction of the École des Beaux-Arts Fine Arts School (ill. 8) on the site of a former Augustinian convent. With eclectic tastes, he drew the Pavillon de Hanovre, which was constructed on the orders of the Marshal of Richelieu and built by Jean-Michel Chevotet between 1758 and 1760 (ill. 9).

The construction of theatres featured among his specialities. In 1827, he built the first Théâtre des Nouveautés. In the meantime, he oversaw a major yet delicate project: the reconstruction of a new opera house after Louis XVIII decided to demolish the Royal Academy of Music on the Rue de Richelieu, where the Duke of Berry had recently been assassinated.

The building was erected in the space of a year on Rue Le Peletier, its structure influenced by Palladian art (ill. 10). The theatre, which featured remarkable acoustics, was among the most beautiful in Europe (ill. 11 and 12). It was here that the most brilliant operas and ballets were created for half a century. In 1873, a fire destroyed the entire building just when the construction of the Opéra Garnier opera house was nearing completion.

Debret was also tasked with restoring the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin in 1818, for which he produced a plan for a curtain (ill. 13). Coming from a Bonapartist milieu, Debret was unfavourable to the Bourbons. Like his brother Jean-Baptiste and his backers Percier and Fontaine, he was a member of the Freemason order, in which he held high-ranking positions as early as 1823 (ill. 14).

## Chapel III

### THE PATRONS

At the beginning of the French Empire, the basilica was in a catastrophic state (ill. 1). Chateaubriand denounced this in his work *Génie du christianisme* [The Genius of Christianity], published in 1802. Napoleon, at the height of his power, decided to restore the basilica (ill. 2) to sanctify the burial place of emperors and commemorate past kings (ill. 3 and 4).

Religious communities having been forbidden, Napoleon ordered the creation of an episcopal chapter (see Chapel IV) to ensure the continuity of funerary commemoration. Under the July Monarchy (1830-1848), Debret was keen to underline the role the Emperor played in saving the monument (ill. 5).

During the Bourbon Restoration, a long series of funerary ceremonies began. For half a century, these rituals transformed the basilica into a temple dedicated to the eternal rest and memory of sovereigns. On 21 January 1815, the ashes of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette were brought there in a grandiose ceremony (ill. 6 and 7). From then on, a so-called "end-of-year" ceremony took place each year on the anniversary of the passing (ill. 8).

On 21 January 1817, after excavations had been carried out by torchlight on the basilica's northern side (ill. 9), the remains of kings, queens, princes and princesses that had been piled up in the communal grave in 1793, were transferred to an ossuary in the crypt. On 13 February 1820, the Duke of Berry – the son of Charles X and heir to the throne – was assassinated on leaving the opera house on Rue de Richelieu. The incident occasioned a mass ceremony in Saint-Denis (ill. 10). Four years later, the funeral of Louis XVIII (ill. 11) provided another chance to display the sumptuous decor designed by the Menu-Plaisirs du Roi, the royal department that organised regal festivities and shows. François Debret coordinated the event.

In addition to these temporary decorations, the architect restructured the Bourbon funerary vault in the centre of the crypt in the chapel of Hilduin, opposite an expiatory chapel (ill. 12 and 13) installed in the axis chapel. The remains of Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, the Duke of Berry and Louis XVIII were placed in this vault. Debret also designed the decor of a chapel (ill. 14) that was never built, dedicated to Saint Louis and the memory of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, with statues of the latter two kneeling in prayer, sculpted by Edme Gaulle (1762?-1841) and Pierre Petitot (1760-1840).

Louis-Philippe (1773-1850), who was from the cadet branch that never occupied a place in the royal burial ground, barely took an interest in the basilica at the start of his reign. But he still viewed it as part of the major architectural projects he planned to carry out (ill. 15).

Active progress was made in the works, but on 9 June 1837, lightning struck the north spire, dangerously destabilising it. The upper section had to be entirely rebuilt. Emotions ran high. The king visited the site to assess the situation (ill. 16), ordered the works to be sped up, emphasised the monument's funerary purpose and the chapter's role, and even entertained the idea of transferring Napoleon's ashes there, in line with the intention expressed by the Emperor himself. Under Napoleon III, a decision on the latter issue was made definitively in favour of Les Invalides.

## Chapel IV

### THE EPISCOPAL CHAPTER

By decree of 20 February 1806, Napoleon created a chapter that brought together ten former bishops tasked with replacing the Ancien Régime monastic community to ensure that funerary liturgy ran smoothly. A priestly chapter was added to this episcopal chapter, the latter seldom spending time in Saint-Denis. To avoid them having to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours in a chancel of the basilica, which was then a worksite, Jacques Cellerier planned for a winter chancel to be built, which was erected under the supervision of Debret.

It was located on the south side of the nave (**ill. 1**) and its construction (**ill. 2**) emulated Gothic contours, with 13th century-style buttresses, ogive apertures and tracery (**ill. 3**).

The interior was fitted with liturgical furnishings, stalls (**ill. 4**) and panelling (**ill. 5**), which also imitated Gothic design. The winter chancel was reached from the southern side-aisle of the nave, part of the exterior masonry of which had been replaced with Gothic openwork joinery (**ill. 6**).

The winter chancel was the first large-scale construction in France to be built in the neo-Gothic style. Viollet-le-Duc demolished it in 1872 to build an enormous heating system, which was likewise later razed.

While the winter chancel was being built, Cellerier also made a magnificent sacristy for preparing worship. Under the Bourbon Restoration, a choir, probably made up of children, was set up to provide the liturgy with musical accompaniment. Debret planned construction of an edifice for the choir's rehearsals, but this was never built (**ill. 7**). Plain, elegant and finely proportioned, the facade betrays the Roman influence of models published by Percier and Fontaine.

Halfway up the basilica's ambulatory, in the clerestory gallery, medallion stained-glass windows were made on Debret's orders, representing the figures in France's history who played the most important roles in building the edifice. One of the most influential canons of Saint-Denis, abbot de Cugnac, can be seen next to Louis XVIII, his wife Marie-Joséphine of Savoy, Charles X, the Grand Almoner of France Cardinal de Talleyrand-Périgord and his successor Cardinal Prince de Croÿ (**ill. 8**).

A new organ (**ill. 9**) was installed in the neo-Gothic gallery constructed on the orders of Vivant Denon and built by Cellerier and Denon between 1812 and 1813. The techniques used on it by renowned organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll in 1840 were extremely modern at the time. The casing was designed by Debret (**ill. 10**) in all its details (**ill. 11**). Joseph Brun (1792-1855), who had just finished work on the mutilated sculptures of the western doorways, produced the angel musicians (**ill. 12**) To commemorate the three proto-martyrs – Saint Denis, considered the first bishop of Paris, and his companions Rusticus and Eleutherius, who were decapitated around the middle of the third century and buried in Catulliacus, where the basilica now stands – Debret ordered the installation of a monument near the current Saint-Louis chapel (**ill. 13**), but it was later demolished by Viollet-le-Duc.

To house the martyrs' relics rescued from the French Revolution, he had already installed, in 1819, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century canopy placed on a pillared baldachin at the end of the apse (**ill. 14**), above the seat of the chapter's leading dignitary: the primicerius. Only the canopy was retained by Viollet-le-Duc for the martyrs altar, which he built in the same place. This altar is still there today (**ill. 15**).

## Chapel V

### EXPERIMENTAL RESTORATIONS

From 1813 to 1846, Debret oversaw the first ever recorded restoration work and largest ever undertaken in France on a medieval edifice prior to the restoration of Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral (1844). His work marked a significant step in the history of monument restoration, even though it was overshadowed for more than a hundred and fifty years. Viollet-le-Duc, Debret's successor in 1846, and his entourage and disciples reviled his work to such an extent that a significant portion of it was irreversibly demolished, notably the winter chancel. Indeed, Viollet-le-Duc and his circle sought to invent a heritage of medieval rediscovery built exclusively on his own initiative and through his works as a restorer.

François Debret lived against the backdrop of a romantic current that took an avid interest in a medieval period that was then unknown in terms of details taken from 1860s positivism, but which was imagined to be one of the most glorious eras of France's history. Following research on Greek temples that emphasised the paintings that adorned their interiors and exteriors, Debret sought to give the basilica a colourful decor, even making it entirely polychromic.

The architect Debret also helped revive the art of stained-glass windows, the main techniques in which had been lost over the course of the 18th century, by calling upon the expertise of the workshop in Choisy-le-Roi and glass painters, who grew in number in the 1830s. He drew up an ambitious programme that combined the beginnings of Christianity (**ill. 1**), the story of Saint Denis and the monarchy

(**ill. 2**), and the story of the Church. He wanted to depict the Druidic religion and its destruction by Julius Cesar (**ill. 3**), but gave up on this plan. Similarly, he did not complete the window showing the Adoration of the Magi (**ill. 4, 5 and 6**).

The walls, especially those of the apse, were covered in decor that drew inspiration from the painted accounts collected by Charles Percier during the French Revolution and his own observations. Those of the chapel of the Virgin are shown here (**ill. 7**), as well as those of the Sainte-Osmanc chapel (**ill. 8**).

The painting by Thomas Allom, engraved by James Baylis Allen, gives a precious insight into the arrangement Debret sought to produce (**ill. 9**). A photographic document evidences this decor that could still be seen in the 1950's (**ill. 10**).

Contested in the 1830's by supporters of rigorous archaeology, the works gave rise to fierce controversy from 1841 onwards, which contributed to the resignation of Debret in 1846 and his replacement by Viollet-le-Duc. Little by little, between the 1850's and 1950's, all was mercilessly demolished, including the remains from the Middle Ages and later, which had survived up to then.

Debret was also noted for his keen interest in the technology that emerged over the course of the industrial revolution: iron and cast-iron framework (**ill. 11 and 12**) and copper roofing (**ill. 13**). Fortunately, Viollet-le-Duc failed to get permission to take down this technological masterpiece.

## Chapel VI

### THE FACADE AND THE NORTH SPIRE

Following damage inflicted on the doorway due to modernisation in 1771 and vandalism in 1793 and thereafter, and probably also due to poor maintenance of the masonry under the Ancien Régime, the basilica's western facade was in a terribly dilapidated state when Napoleon decided to undertake its general restoration. But works did not begin before the Bourbon Restoration.

The architect put together copious documentation on the facade's former state (**ill. 1 and 2**), remodelled the parvis with the installation of grand railings in front of it (**ill. 3**), and rebuilt the main door based on the original model. The large clock, designed by Bernard-Henri Wagner in 1834, was put in place in 1843.

In 1840, inscriptions were engraved in the stone to tell the story of the monument, from its beginnings up to Louis-Philippe. At the same time, the sculptor Joseph-Sylvestre Brun (**ill. 4**), a Grand Prix de Rome laureate tasked with various sculptures on the Arc de Triomphe and the Rouen law courts, was chosen by Debret to restore the western facade doorways. He notably recreated all the missing heads with great skill and installed eight statues of kings (**ill. 5**) who marked the abbey's history on either side of the rose window. Now inside the cathedral, they have been replaced by mouldings.

The worksite installations were positioned on the basilica's northern side (**ill. 6**). In 1833, the painter Dauzats depicted a bustling worksite (**ill. 7**) but, on 9 June 1837, lightning struck the 90m-high north spire (**ill. 8**) and damaged it over a stretch that was 10 to 11 metres high (**ill. 9**). Emotion reached fever pitch in opinion, Louis-Philippe visited the site and the legislative chambers voted for a loan. The engineer Apollinaire Lebas, renowned for having built the obelisk on Place de la Concorde, was called upon as an expert, and Debret's plan was approved (**ill. 10 and 11**).

The following year, the works, which were undertaken with remarkable meticulousness, as demonstrated in the documents conserved (**ill. 12**), were completed, and the facade was fully restored in 1840 (**ill. 13**).

But in 1841, bitter controversy was caused by Prosper Mérimée and the Commission des monuments historiques [France's commission for historical monuments], who unfoundedly claimed they had no authority over the Saint-Denis works. Since 1806, there had not been a single project they had not criticised. Kept alive by the press, these harsh polemics wore out the architect, who nevertheless continued his works.

In January 1846, the north spire, which had been struck by lightning on 9 June 1837 and destabilised three times by strong storms in 1845, started to tilt considerably. Debret began emergency works but the heated debate raged even more fiercely. In 1846, he resigned, thinking that responsibility for the worksite would be handed over to his brother-in-law Duban.

His successor, Viollet-le-Duc, took down the masonry, promised to put the tower back together and drew up an imaginary restoration plan (**ill. 14 and 15**) that he never carried out. He did, however, spend much energy demolishing the work of his predecessor. The current works bring their own positive contribution to this 200-year-old worksite.