2 An ‘absurd prodigy’ turned hyper-monument: the Eiffel Tower

Why was the monumental heritage embodied by Auguste Bartholdi shunned in the early 20th century when the Eiffel Tower, erected at the same time as the Statue of Liberty and the Lion of Belfort, was gradually becoming a figure of lasting inspiration to avant-garde artists, from Robert Delaunay to Jean-Michel Basquiat?[145] Why did these two contemporary artists and friends (Gustave Eiffel helped build the Statue of Liberty) achieve such radically different posterity, one sinking into oblivion and the other inspiring biographies, films, comic strips, and documentaries? How did the Eiffel Tower come to embody France's heritage and identity, designed as it was to be free of any reference to a historical event and conceived to defy the people's idea of heritage at the time? Does this imply that the Eiffel Tower is an ‘involuntary monument’? That it is heritage despite itself? An ‘absurd prodigy’, a ‘vain miracle’ as described by the poet François Coppée[146] in his time? This is an enigma that bears investigation in light of the centenary of the death of its creator, Gustave Eiffel (1832–1923), which was celebrated in 2023.

It could even be described as a mystery, given that the Eiffel Tower, the world's most famous and popular monument, was not intended to last and was contractually fated to disappear. Its sudden appearance in the Paris landscape at the 1889 World Fair was a shock because of the disruptive novelty of this monumental concept, which sparked a smear campaign in the intellectual and artistic world. Could iron, a product of the Industrial Revolution and a symbol of modernity and industrial progress, be considered a material worthy of monumental art and the source of a new aesthetic? It had already been used experimentally for the Statue of Liberty in New York (inaugurated in 1886): Eiffel designed the metallic framework that supports the hammered copper cover from which Liberty emerges. However, in this instance, the idea was to expose the structure for

145 The exhibition *Basquiat x Warhol à quatre mains*, held at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in 2023, featured their painting *Eiffel Tower*, composed in 1985, from a private collection.

146 François Coppée, « Sur la Tour Eiffel », 22 juillet 1888. Poem published in: François Coppée, *Les Paroles Sincères*, Paris, Lemerre Alphonse éditeur, 1891, p. 93–101.

all to see. Therein was the novelty and the scandal, compounded by the fact that this monument conveyed no apparent message. It was heritage without a past, an ideal to exalt, and with no justifiable use. A hollow icon,[147] a 'useless force' (François Coppée).[148] As far as the average public opinion was concerned, the intolerable had been reached in terms of taste. This is why it was denied monument status for such a long time.

We aim to analyse this hostile perception and, in particular, the difficulty that France has experienced in accepting the idea of an 'industrial culture,' i.e., an attempt to reconcile the realms of technology and art in a capital city that had trouble conceiving of the presence of metal architecture as anything other than an affront on noble stone. This challenge was not merely the reflection of an academic stance. A more fundamental issue was at stake, which involved a Catholic mindset that rejected the Eiffel Tower as an affirmation of scientific and technical progress and republican values.

Primitive inspiration: The technical revolution of the Statue of Liberty

Auguste Bartholdi was a sculptor and architect, and Gustave Eiffel was an engineer who graduated from the École Centrale des Arts et Manufactures in 1855, the same year that the first major World Fair was held in Paris, after London.[149] They were from two very different worlds, but they were brought together by the cultural revolution that was the Industrial Revolution and their shared quest for a new approach to building monuments.

After spending a few years in southwest France, where he supervised work on the major Bordeaux railway bridge, Eiffel set up his own business in 1864 as a 'builder,' that is, a contractor specialising in metallic structures. His exceptional career as a builder was marked by achievements such as the Porto viaduct over the River Douro in 1876, followed by the Garabit

147 Here, I transpose the notion that the American historian Albert Boime used (wrongly, in my opinion) to describe another work: Albert Boime's « La statue de la Liberté : une icône vide », *Le Débat*, n° 44, mars-mai 1987, p. 143.

148 François Coppée, « Sur la Tour Eiffel », 22 juillet 1888.

149 Gustave Eiffel participated in the 1867 and 1878 World Fairs as an 'independent locksmith contractor'. In 1867, he was commissioned to build the metal section of the Gallery of Fine Arts and Archaeology in Paris. In 1878, he contributed to designing the main building. The 1889 World Fair would mark his coronation before the downfall. It is worth mentioning that Bartholdi visited the London World Fair in 1851 with his mother and brother. The bust of Liberty was presented at the Paris World Fair in 1878.

viaduct in 1884, the Pest railway station in Hungary, and the Nice observatory dome. With his reputation on the rise, he was appointed by Auguste Bartholdi to design the metal structure of the Statue of Liberty, a world premiere.[150] The building of the Statue of Liberty was a massive endeavour involving every industrial trade. This experience inspired Eiffel to invent the tower that bears his name. His career as a builder came to a brutal halt following the Panama Canal affair. In 1893, the Compagnie, chaired by de Lesseps, was caught in a vast financial scandal linked, among other things, to the corruption of some members of parliament responsible for covering the Compagnie's near bankruptcy. Eiffel would go on to lead an active life of experimental scientific research into meteorology, radiotelegraphy and aerodynamics.

The technical challenge of the Statue of Liberty was to design a structure (which was to be the tallest of its time) capable of withstanding its load and the horizontal forces exerted by the wind. Eiffel was an expert in solving such problems. A specific challenge in this instance was the object's irregular shape. Bartholdi was particularly interested in the engineer's ability to design the pylons supporting massive viaducts capable of withstanding the wind. Eiffel entrusted the project to Maurice Koechlin, an Alsatian. Together, the two men invented a new technique: the copper casing was to be hung over an iron framework, which would serve to hold it up. This tall pylon is fixed on the statue's masonry pedestal in four places. The copper casing is connected to this pylon using flat-iron reinforcements on the casing's inner face. The breakthrough was to ensure that the casing would be supported and not load-bearing. This is the principle on which the architecture of skyscrapers would be based, and America would exploit it admirably. Elevation was favoured over gravitation.

The first monument created 'as a kit', the Statue of Liberty is a major technological masterpiece. Through Eiffel, industry found its way into the world of statuary art. The Statue of Liberty is also an example of industrial art. Not surprisingly, the first published study of the Statue was signed Charles Talansier, an engineer from the Arts et Manufacture, who wrote an article for *Le Génie civil*, a magazine of French and foreign industries. An offprint would be published in 1883.[151] The magazine *Le*

150 Robert Belot, « La statue de la Liberté. Une révolution technique et esthétique », *Cahiers de RECITS*, n°3, 2004, p. 77–89

151 Charles Talansier, *La Statue de la Liberté éclairant le monde*, Paris, Publications du journal *Le Génie civil*, 1883.

Mouvement scientifique showed interest,[152] as well as *Scientific American*. In fact, the original meaning of Lady Liberty was as much political freedom as economic free trade. As Édouard de Laboulaye, chairman of the French-American Committee, put it, it was 'a pacific celebration of industry and universal science'.[153] At the inauguration, Ferdinand de Lesseps mentioned a tribute to America and its 'faith in progress'[154] This achievement encouraged Eiffel to venture into the art world with the Tower that bears his name, which purported to shamelessly show the iron framework hidden by Lady Liberty's dress. This was his monumental revolution, symbolic of the emergence of a new culture: industrial culture. Conservative artists who criticised the Tower clearly saw the link between Liberty and Eiffel's project. We know that Koechlin presented his friend Bartholdi with a preliminary design for the Eiffel Tower. Koechlin's—the Tower's true designer— first sketch showed a superimposition of several monuments (in particular Notre-Dame de Paris and the Arc de Triomphe), which included the Statue of Liberty.[155]

Bartholdi and Eiffel expressed the 'decadent' modernity symbolised by the new and 'mercantile' United States. The poet François Coppée illustrated this point of view in his poem entitled '*Sur la Tour*':

> 'Œuvre monstrueuse et manquée,
> Laid colosse couleur de nuit,
> Tour de fer, rêve de Yankee,
> Ton obsession me poursuit.'[156]

Yet, compared with the Statue of Liberty, Eiffel added a specific dimension that would cause a scandal: not only was his work useless, but it did not convey any accessible meaning. This is why François Coppée stigmatised and ridiculed 'this nonsensical pyramid'. The Eiffel Tower revealed a paradigmatic shift in monumental design, in which 'the form is the

152 Charles Julien, *Le Mouvement scientifique*, 1ère année, n° 9, 29 december 1883.
153 « Le discours de M. Laboulaye », *L'Evénement*, 1 mai 1876. Fonds du Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers.
154 Speech by Ferdinand de Lesseps, *Courrier des États-Unis*, 6 November 1886.
155 Caroline Mathieu, « La Tour de 300 mètres. Histoire d'un mythe », *Gustave Eiffel. Le magicien du fer*, Paris, Skira/Flammarion, 2009, p. 125–127.
156 François Coppée, « Sur la Tour Eiffel », 22 July 1888. ('Monstrous and flawed work/ Ugly night-coloured colossus/ Iron Tower, a Yankee's dream/ Your obsession haunts me.')

message'.[157] People were not ready to embrace this shift. The meaning was either hidden or implicit: Gustave Eiffel also meant it as a 'summary of contemporary science',[158] as evidenced by the 72 scientist names inscribed on the border of the tower's first floor.

Engineer art

Gustave Eiffel also intended to create a work of art. He projected to dare show what Bartholdi had hidden in the Statue, namely the iron framework. However, were the mentalities of the time ready to accept that an engineer should dare venture into the territory of art and claim, as Eiffel put it, 'the art of the modern engineer', in other words: 'The art of the century of industry and science we live in, and whose path was paved by the great scientific movement of the late 18th century and by the Revolution of 1789'? The resistance to change in the urban landscape through the emergence of radically new forms has been a constant feature throughout history. Consider the creation of the Centre Beaubourg (1977), the Buren columns in the Palais Royal in Paris (1986) or the Louvres Pyramid (1988). To those complainants who denied his work as unartistic, Eiffel answered that they did not have a monopoly over beauty and that an engineer also had a say in the matter:

'And what if, once built, my tower were a thing of beauty instead of an eyesore? Would artists not regret having been so quick to unthinkingly campaign against the preservation of a monument that was yet to be erected? I will tell you what I think and what I hope. I think that my tower will be beautiful. Why should one think that, because we are engineers, beauty is of no concern to us when we build (…)? Well, I believe that the curves of the four ridges of the monument, as defined through my calculation, will give off an impression of great strength and beauty because they will convey the boldness of my design'.[159]

Gustave was influenced by his friend Bartholdi and the latter's fondness for the 'colossal', in line with the dominant Egyptomania of the time and

157 Françoise Gaillard, « Le monument involontaire, le cas de la Tour Eiffel », in *L'Abus monumental* (sous la présidence de Régis Debray), Paris, Fayard, 1999, p. 119.

158 « La réponse de l'ingénieur à la lettre de protestation des artistes », *Le Temps*, February 1887.

159 G. Eiffel, « Réponse », *Le Temps*, 14 February 1887.

which progressively became a defining criterion of monumentality in the late 19th century:

'Besides, the colossal has its own appeal and charm, to which ordinary theories are scarcely applicable. Would anyone argue that the pyramids have powerfully captured the human imagination through their artistic value? (…) And where is the source of this admiration if not in the immensity of the endeavour and the grandeur of the result? My tower will be the highest building ever erected by humans. Will it not be grand in its own fashion? And why should something admirable in Egypt become hideous and ridiculous in Paris?'

What Eiffel meant was that it was now possible to design the 'colossal' through technical innovation born of the Industrial Revolution. The Eiffel Tower was part of a movement toward the technicizisation of art, which included the photographic revolution (1839), the discovery of the phonograph (1877) and the invention of cinema (1895). Photography would spark debate because it illustrated the intrusion of technology into the artist's work; it was an artefact interposed between the artist's hand and the artwork. Together with photography, recorded music and film, this marked the transition from the visual arts to the visual industries. This shift would meet with resistance from the contenders of 'pure' art. On 15 December 1862, for example, the magazine *Moniteur de la photographie* published a 'protest by leading artists against any assimilation of photography to art'. The Eiffel Tower met with a similar fate.

Photography also established a different relationship to the work of art, with the emergence of 'repeatability' and 'reproducibility' (Walter Benjamin). In multiplying the unique work of art, photography contributed to the development of the (political and aesthetic) democratisation that marked the last decades of the 19th century. 'Soon, we shall see the beautiful prints only found in the homes of wealthy connoisseurs adorning even the humblest homes of labourers and peasants.' (*La Revue Française*, 1839). The artistic event, marked by its uniqueness and an exclusive following among bourgeois circles, became a mass phenomenon. This was also the significance of such *palladiums* as the Lion of Belfort, the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower. These three achievements were also 'repeatable' insofar as they promoted a new form of communication: their reproducibility was achieved by manufacturing miniature objects that ensured their worldwide distribution. It was the advent of the 'gadget', or of by-products, to use a contemporary term, as well as a financing source. Some were shocked by

this form of communication. The newspaper *Le Temps* ironically commented on the enthusiasm of 'manufacturers who set about building miniature Eiffel Towers in gold, silver, steel, ivory, etc. to send all over the world as watches, seals, or charms'.[160]

The famous sociologist Roland Barthes was well aware of the original dimension of the Eiffel Tower, a unique object that is constantly reproduced, both grandiose and commonplace:

> 'Perspective, object, symbol, the Tower is everything Man invests in it, and this is infinite. A spectacle both seen and seeing, a useless and irreplaceable building, a familiar world and a heroic symbol, a witness to a century and an ever-new monument, an inimitable object that is endlessly reproduced, it is the pure sign, open to all times, all images and all meanings, the unbridled metaphor; through the Tower, humankind exercises this significant function of the imagination, which is its freedom since no history, however dark, has ever been able to take it away'.[161]

The Eiffel Tower was the brutal witness of the new universe in the making and focused on vapour, electricity, and mobility. From 1880 onwards, the consolidation of the Republic went hand in hand with the development of a work *ethos*: the worker became a heroic figure who embodied social justice and progress. The 1889 World Fair was a hymn to this ambitious and working Republic. The President of the Republic at the time was Sadi Carnot (1887–1894), a graduate of the École Polytechnique and a leading figure in French engineering. It was a time of celebration as national energy merged with modernity and progress.

Industrial culture transformed culture. New industrial landscapes became a source of inspiration for some painters, such as François Bonhommé (1809–1881). The Impressionists, who incorporated features of the industrial landscape (railway bridges, locomotives, stations, smoke, urban landscapes, etc.), were viewed as outsiders[162] and needed Émile Zola to

160 *Le Temps*, 26 February 1889.

161 Roland Barthes, *La Tour Eiffel*, Paris, Delpire, 1964. Republished in: Roland Barthes, Œuvres complètes, tome I : 1942–1965, édition établie et présentée par Éric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 1993, p. 1400.

162 Pierre Daix, *Pour une histoire culturelle de l'art moderne. Le XX^e^*, Éditions O. Jacob, 2000, p. 15.

encourage them: 'Our artists must discover the poetry of stations, as their fathers discovered that of forests and rivers'.[163]

New 'artificial landscapes'

The advent of the railway and industry created 'artificial landscapes'[164] and reshaped urban forms in every major city affected by the Industrial Revolution: Paris, London, New York, etc. The Eiffel Tower should also be considered as part of a new way of ideating the city, in keeping with the work of Paris prefect Haussmann (from 1853 to 1870). The town centre is structured around thoroughfares which, with their straight lines, resemble a continuum of the rails. The newly built iron and glass railway stations in the city's heart are integral to the urban fabric (such as the covered market). A symbol of modernism, they brought the railway revolution to capital cities. In the writer Théophile Gauthier's words, they resembled 'palaces of modern industry that display the religion of the century, the railway. These cathedrals of new humanity are the meeting places of nations, the centre to which everything converges, the core of gigantic stars with iron rays that stretch to the end of the Earth.' In Émile Zola's *The Masterpiece,* the painter Claude Lantier hailed these new look-outs of modernity as symbolising 'the greatness of our conquests.'

The Modernists were fascinated by the creation of the Saint-Lazare railway station (1868), the Pont de l'Europe and the new European district completed in 1867. The first act of Offenbach's *La Vie Parisienne* (1867) is set in the Saint-Lazare railway station. The station features in *Remembrance of things past*, where Proust evokes 'those marvellous places called railway stations, where one sets off for a distant destination'. In 1872, Édouard Manet moved near the Pont de l'Europe. Claude Monet followed suit in 1877. Fascinated by train engines and the reflection of vapour and light on the iron framework, Monet painted *Le Pont de l'Europe, gare Saint-Lazare* (1877), as did Gustave Caillebotte and many others.

Construction and architecture were also undergoing a cultural revolution at the time.[165] Metal architecture was the major innovation of the 19th century. Concealed for a long time, iron (an industrialised, prefabricated,

163 Émile Zola, *Les peintres impressionnistes de 1877*.
164 Marc Desportes, *Paysages en mouvement*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 99 et suiv.
165 Bertrand Lemoine, *L'architecture du fer. France : XIX^e siècle,* Seyssel, éditions du Champ Vallon, 1986.

transportable material) gradually became a legitimate building material, exposed in many buildings, notably market halls, railway stations and department stores. The art of assembly was developing, as evidenced by the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower. New cultural buildings were being erected, such as the *Bibliothèque N*ationale (National Library), rue de Richelieu. Henri Labrousse (1801–1875) was the first architect to incorporate an all-metal framework into a public building. The *Bibliothèque Nationale* boasts a delicately decorated iron and cast-iron framework concealed beneath compact masonry. The library's cast-iron columns are connected through a network of iron arches, with domes that let in light. Its two reading rooms can accommodate a large number of people. It was inaugurated in 1869, 20 years before the Eiffel Tower. After significant renovations, it was reopened to the public in 2023 and became the *Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art* (National Institute of Art History). Other examples include the Grand Palais, with its metal framework, its great nave, which is unique in Europe, and its immense glass roof, not to mention the levels built using reinforced concrete elements, one of the first applications in architecture.

Gustave Eiffel was attuned to this new atmosphere. The Eiffel Tower was a brutal signal of the new world that the convergence of art and technics was in the process of inventing.

A temporary installation to highlight the 1889 World Fair

May 1884: The French government announced that a World Fair would be held in the capital in 1889 to mark the centenary of the French Revolution (1789). The organising country had a duty to unveil an exceptional building for this celebration of progress, in line with the following equation:

REPUBLIC = PROGRESS = SCIENCE = INDUSTRY

At a time when skyward construction was the order of the day, the decision was made to build a one-hundred-foot (300-metre) tower. The Eiffel Tower remained the tallest building in the world for 41 years.[166]

After the terrible defeat of 1870, the goal was to enhance France's prestige and showcase its technological excellence. We should remember that in 1889, Otto von Bismarck, who had brought France to its knees, was still

166 The Tower was dethroned by the Chrysler Building in New York in 1930.

the Imperial Chancellor of the German Reich. Bismarck had banked on France's isolation as the only republican regime in a Europe of monarchies to permanently weaken the country. The designers of the 1889 World Fair meant to show that, on the contrary, the Republic was a regime with a promising future because it had understood that progress hinged on embracing scientific and technical culture, a culture based on rationalism. Eiffel never sought to put forth his tower's political message. It was apparently of secondary importance to him. All that counted was to achieve a feat: erecting a metal tower that would be the tallest in the world. Yet, a draft pencil and ink sketch of the tower produced by the engineers of the '*Maison Eiffel*' in 1884, entitled '*Gallia*', reads: 'Project for a monument commemorating 1789'.[167]

Two men, two corporations, and two projects were in competition. Jules Bourdais, the famous architect who had built the Palais du Trocadéro (torn down in 1937), presented a project for a gigantic stone lighthouse to light Paris. He was supported by the President of the Council, Charles Freycinet. Gustave Eiffel, an engineer, presented a project for an audacious iron tower. He was not the only one to claim authorship over the tower: its rightful designer was the Franco-Swiss engineer Maurice Koechlin (1856–1946), a friend of Bartholdi's who worked in his firm. However, Koechlin did not enjoy the same networks as Eiffel, who was supported by Édouard Lockroy, the new Minister for Trade and Industry, a radical Socialist and a Freemason. The obsession with lighthouses was a myth of the time. Eiffel would file a patent for improvements in the construction of iron towers, especially lighthouse towers. Eiffel's argument was decisive: he committed to covering the building costs in exchange for a ten-year concession. In late May 1886, he won the competition (which was said to be 'biased'). From the outset, the press emphasised that it was technically impossible because of the soggy terrain. Charles Garnier, the architect of the Paris Opera, launched an attack against his project.

The challenge was won on March 31st, 1889. The Eiffel Tower was inaugurated according to schedule. It attracted 2 million visitors in six months. In the run-up to the 1900 World Fair, a competition was launched to determine whether to destroy, conserve, or transform the Eiffel Tower. The Tower was on borrowed time. Projects, some of them outrageous, were submitted to the higher commission for the Fair. For instance, Henri Mind-

167 Caroline Mathieu, « La Tour de 300 mètres. Histoire d'un mythe », *art. cit.,* p. 126.

erof's project for a '19th century column', which consisted in wrapping the Tower in masonry to render it invisible.[168] All sought to distort it, to remove the essence of its profound originality: its geometric poetry. Finally, it was granted an additional period of ten years. It was to be destroyed in 1910. Between 1901 and 1914, the Tower only attracted between 150,000 and 250,000 visitors annually. It did not enjoy 'monument' status at the time. At the very best, it was an experiment. So, what saved it? The new technique of signal transmission, wireless telegraphy, which had begun to emerge in the 1890s. Scientists such as Hertz, Marconi, Tesla, Branly, Popov, Tissot, etc., were working to develop it. The first radio link was established in 1898. On 5 November 1898, Eugène Ducretet succeeded in establishing a Morse code radio link from the Eiffel Tower to the Pantheon (4 km). A year later, in 1899, the first link with London was established. The military authorities began to take a serious interest in this technology. They commissioned Captain Gustave Ferrié, a 31-year-old polytechnician, to conduct experiments. Gustave Eiffel then offered to put the tower at his disposal and finance the installation of an antenna support at its top. Ferrié moved into a barrack at the foot of the south pillar to continue his experiments, aided by a small team of specialists. 1908: Ferrié established a communication link with the Bizerte naval base in Tunisia. The Tower's strategic interest was confirmed. Eiffel obtained an extension of the concession for the Tower for 70 years starting 1 January 1910.

So, the army initially saved the Tower, not artists or intellectuals. Its importance in terms of heritage and tourism would come much later.

Bourgeois culture saw the Tower as a symbol of the 'barbaric' power of industry

The Third Republic did not become genuinely Republican until the early 1880s. The centenary of the French Revolution was an opportunity to assert its values. France had just lost the war against the Prussians and had not yet recovered Alsace and Lorraine. The government wished for a politically potent symbol of technical progress and the power of French industry vis-à-vis Germany. Although Eiffel acknowledged this political dimension, he did so rather discreetly. Eiffel, a Freemason like Bartholdi (they belonged

168 World Fair of 1900. The 19th-century column, a project to transform the Eiffel Tower, by Henri Minderof. Watercolour, National Archives (Paris) F/12/4446/D/Minderof.

to the same Grand Orient lodge), believed in republican values and the religion of technology as a source of human progress. His achievement was indeed political and would be perceived as so. As a patriot, Eiffel believed that the power of industry would wash France clean of its defeat. But he also intended to make art. And that is why people would not forgive him!

A few days after the ground was broken (work started on 1 February 1887), a petition entitled '*Protestation des artistes*'[169] (Artists' protest) was published. It was signed by Charles Gounod, Leconte de Lisle, François Coppée, Guy de Maupassant, Victorien Sardou, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Alexandre Dumas, Eugène Guillaume, Sully Prudhomme and many other long-forgotten names. All of them were celebrities of their time and had, for most, an academic background. Two Prix de Rome, and one member of the Académie Française (Sully Prudhomme). Not all of them were hostile to the regime. For instance, the sculptor Eugène Guillaume produced portraits of Jules Grévy and Jules Ferry, two great figures of the Third Republic. Sully Prud'homme[170] would support Captain Dreyfus. However, most signatories were not known for their Republicanism or audacity. The organist Gounod was a papist, and Huysmans, the writer of refinement, went from dandyism to strictly observant Catholicism. Maupassant had nothing but contempt for politicians, democracy and the homeland. Garnier designed the opera that bears his name, commissioned under Napoléon the Third. Leconte de Lisle was known for his anti-Communard positions, shared by François Coppée, herald of the Parnasse movement, which would embrace anti-Dreyfus hypernationalism.

These artists spoke up as 'lovers of the still pristine beauty of Paris'. They protested 'with all (their) might, with all (their) indignation in the name of the underestimated taste of the French, in the name of French art and history under threat'. The only construction material they tolerated was stone: 'The soul of France, creator of masterpieces, shines through the august blooming of stone'. Eiffel's 'stupefying' dream would insult 'the Paris of sublime gothic art, the Paris of Jean Goujon, Germain Pilon, Puget, Rude, Barye, etc.' In fact, they expressed resistance to modernity, change,

169 « À Monsieur Alphand », *Le Temps*, 14 February 1887. Jean-Charles Alphand was the Director General of Public Works for the City of Paris, including the World Fair.

170 « La Tour Eiffel, discours de M. Sully Prudhomme » in *Revue scientifique*, 20 April 1889.

the 'babelisation' of the world, 'decadence'[171] and dreamt of times immobile. Let us read François Coppée's poem '*Sur la Tour*' (On the Tower):

'Ô Moyen Âge!
Ô Renaissance!
Ô bons artisans du passé!
Jours de géniale innocence,
D'art pur et désintéressé;
Où, brûlant d'une foi naïve,
Pendant vingt ans, avec amour,
L'imagier sculptait une ogive
Éclairée à peine en plein jour; (…)
O vieux siècles d'art, quelle honte!
À cent peuples civilisés
Nous montrerons ce jet de fonte
Et des badauds hypnotisés'.[172]

Many people found the building fashion and the speed of construction unbearable. No monument could be a Meccano of 18,000 parts assembled by 2.5 million rivets and completed in 26 months. Iron is a material that speeds up the building process. Above and beyond what it is, the Eiffel Tower embodied this new iron era.

Many were offended by the rough aspect of iron. Gustave Planet, director of the magazine *La Construction moderne*, had nothing against the fact that Eiffel put 'every resource he had in the service of Art'. However, he believed that the artistic dimension of the Tower was only conceivable if the metal framework was concealed: 'This metal scaffolding, this iron carcass can only be a skeleton that must be clothed in flesh, and afterwards dressed'.[173] One might as well say that he understood nothing about the Eiffel project and could not understand it. Among the projects in competition, preference

171 'Building of decadence', in François Coppée's words.

172 François Coppée, « Sur la Tour Eiffel », 22 July 1888. 'O, Middle Ages! / O, Renaissance!/ O, ye good craftsmen of the past!/ Days of marvellous innocence/ Of pure and selfless art;/ When, burning with naive faith,/ Twenty years long, lovingly,/ The sculptor would carve an ogive/ Barely lit in daytime/ O, old centuries of art, shame!/ To a hundred civilised peoples/ We shall show this spray of cast iron/ And hypnotised onlookers.'

173 Gustave Planat, « L'Exposition de 1889 et la Tour de 300 mètres », *La Construction moderne*, 20 May 1886.

was given to the one by architect Jules Bourdais, which combined masonry with metal.

Institutional cultural players saw the Tower as a 'desecration' of art, and this for five reasons. By proposing to use a 'vulgar' material, the author broke with the aesthetic, sculptural and urban tradition that had marked the 'genius of so many centuries': 'Notre-Dame, the Sainte-Chapelle, the Saint-Jacques Tower, the Louvre, the dome of the Invalides, the Arc de Triomphe'. Eiffel was not seen as a 'genuine' artist who cherished 'all things beautiful, great and just' but as a 'builder of machines' who could only produce 'mercantile ideations'. The protesters saw this tower as a symbol of the 'barbaric' power of industry. They denounced 'the vandalism of industrial companies': it would be 'a black and gigantic factory chimney', an 'odious column of bolted sheet metal' that would be like an 'ink stain' on the city. As bearers of the idea of beauty, the dominant cultural players declared that the Tower was ugly: 'it is truly and disconcertingly ugly'. Huysmans felt it resembled a 'horrible aviary'.[174] Maupassant saw it as a 'giant ungainly skeleton'. Not only was it an insult to 'beauty,' but it was also devoid of significance, purpose, and reference. It was perceived as a 'monument, without use, without a name' because it 'is neither a building, nor a tower, nor a pyramid, nor a column, nor a spire'. The reactionary newspaper *L'Univers* (4 April 1889), wrote that it resembled nothing more than 'an enormous stock sitting on four disproportionately open legs and topped by a tiny bell tower. The stock lacks both proportion and purpose. It is said to be a tour de force of metalwork; it is certainly not a masterpiece of art.' People of bourgeois culture were incapable of perceiving the modernity of this work, which is an end in itself and whose message is subsumed by its form.

In short, the Eiffel Tower was 'the dishonour of Paris': 'Because the Eiffel Tower even the commercial Americans wouldn't want, will without a doubt dishonour Paris. Everyone knows it, says it, is deeply afflicted by it, and we are but the weak echo of the universal and legitimately alarmed opinion'. Guy de Maupassant would convey his horror of the Tower in his novels. *The Wandering Life* (1890) begins as follows: 'I left Paris and France too, on account of the Eiffel Tower.' Other writers such as Paul Verlaine and Léon Bloy also expressed similar distaste. Another generation of conformist artists, notably André Maurois, Paul Landowski, Maurice Genevoix and

174 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Certains* (ITAL), Paris, Plon, 1908, p.163-177.

Julien Green, would echo this contemptuous point of view. The Eiffel Tower was not beautiful, and it was too republican.

The dispute between the Ancients and the Moderns

The dispute over the Eiffel Tower posed the question of modernity. To deflect criticism, Gustave Eiffel emphasised the progressive dimension of his project. He evoked the 'undeniable services it would render to science' (meteorology, astronomy, physiology, military research). In a lecture delivered to the *Association Française pour l'Avancement des Sciences* (French Association for the Advancement of Science) on 10 March 1888,[175] Eiffel justified the use of iron as a new material. He praised the innovations in metallurgy that made it 'extremely easy' to work iron. Regarding the 'constant battle' between iron and stone (or wood), he stressed the superiority of iron and its virtues for large-scale constructions: resistance, lightness, fire resilience, and transportability. 'To mention but one example, that of the Tower for the Fair, I astonished more than one person who was worried about the load on the ground of the foundations by saying that it would be no heavier than that of a house in Paris'.

The *Société d'Encouragement pour l'Industrie Nationale* (Society in support of national industry) supported him.[176] They were initially fascinated by the project's technological aspects, particularly a stability issue that had never been solved before. This Society meant to overcome the prejudices of those who criticised the Tower for 'not being sufficiently artistic'. It argued against comparing it with other buildings and advocated concentrating on its specific originality instead. La *Société française pour l'avancement des sciences* was also on board and provided powerful support for Eiffel.

While it was at odds with how 'monuments were made' and upset the critics of modernity, Gustave Eiffel's Tower was in tune with the industrialist ideology of the time, which was at one with the republican idea. The election of Sadi Carnot, an engineer by trade, as President of the Republic

175 Gustave Eiffel, « Les constructions métalliques », conference delivered at the Association française pour l'avancement des sciences, on 10 March 1888. On this occasion, he explained the combined use of 800-tonne hydraulic presses and a sandbox to lift the pillars and minutely secure them in place.

176 « Exposition universelle. Note sur la Tour Eiffel ». Signé W. *Bulletin de la Société d'encouragement à l'industrie nationale*, décembre 1888, p. 680.

in 1887 was viewed as the emblem of this modernist Republic, heir to the two revolutions. A journalist of the time observed, 'The French Republic had already had a politician, a soldier, and a lawyer as presidents. Elevating Mr Sadi Carnot to the presidency has consecrated the definitive triumph of a new figure, the offspring of the Revolution and modern science: the Engineer, the true king of the late century'.[177]

Yet this faith in scientific and technical progress was not unanimously shared. Conservatives, artists and non-artists alike, whose intentions were not devoid of ideological ulterior motives, were putting up a united front. What united them was the feeling that the modern world posed a political threat. Anti-modernists mixed politics with aesthetics. This is hardly surprising, given that the 1889 Universal Exhibition's very purpose was political: to commemorate the French Revolution and bolster the republican sentiment. It should be noted that the Third Republic, which emerged almost inadvertently from the defeat of 1870, did not become genuinely republican until later. The republican elites supported Gustave Eiffel. One example: the '*dîners de la Marmite*', monthly repasts gathering the cream of republican intellectuals. *La Marmite* was a club created in 1873 in the wake of the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* (Education League). It only accepted hard-lined Republicans.[178] Such as Paul Bert, of course, the founder of *La Marmite,* the Jesuits' eternal foe. I found a collection of menus in Bartholdi's archives. The March 1887 menu brought Auguste Bartholdi, Lockroy and Eiffel together. A dinner in his honour was held on 17 January 1890: the invitation illustration shows him carrying the Tower on his shoulders. Gustave Eiffel would chair *La Marmite* from 1890 to 1892. Bartholdi, Lockroy and Eiffel had one thing in common: all three were Freemasons. Eiffel's membership in the Masonic movement was a critical factor in the hostility he aroused against him.

Conservative Catholics were the most vocal critics of Eiffel's project. The popular right-wing catholic and antisemitic newspaper *La Croix* viewed the Tower as a 'second Babel'. Industry was perceived as a challenge to an immemorial order, and modernity was represented as an act of violence committed against heritage, equated with a rigid and traditionalist conception of society. Modernity was also feared as a vector of democratic culture. This was also the underlying issue in the debates concerning the Tower. *La*

177 Hugues Le Roux, *Le Temps*, 7 December 1887.

178 Janelle Dietrick, *Alice & Eiffel: A New History of Early Cinema and the Love Story Kept Secret for a Century*, BookBaby, 2016.

Croix wrote: 'Witnessing the introduction of the European parliamentary system, Joseph de Maistre, shortly before his death, predicted that it would lead to so much division that, by the end of the century, no two men would be able to agree'.[179] In their *Protest* against the Eiffel Tower, the artists intended to react against a 'grovelling' press that 'exalts the genius of Mr Eiffel' (Huysmans), a press they considered one of the fundamental components of democratic culture. The crowds that rushed to the World Fair were a harbinger of the rising power of the people that threatened the traditional elites. The Eiffel Tower would, therefore, be the triumph of ordinary taste, the takeover of symbolic power by the people in support of democracy.

Guy de Maupassant expressed this in no uncertain terms: 'This proves definitely that the triumph of democracy is complete'. In *The Wandering Life*, he openly stated this elitist rejection by depicting the 'nightmare' that was for him the 'horrible spectacle that a crowd enjoying itself may be to a disgusted man'. The 'very instinct' of art, according to him, would have been denied to the 'élite of the nation' in favour of 'the aristocracy of science, or rather, of scientific industry'. This is why anti-industrialism held such a central role in the argument against the Eiffel Tower. Progress in science and technology was central to republican values, as evidenced by the *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers*, founded in 1792 by the Abbé Grégoire to educate the people and introduce them to the Enlightenment. This is why anti-Republicans rejected the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution outright. They regarded it as an anti-Christian ambition, a desire to overturn an immutable order dating back to the Middle Ages.

The Eiffel Tower as a spiritual threat to the Nation

Through its condemnation of the Tower, the catholic press revealed its anti-modernism. One should not forget that the Tower had been intended to serve as a beacon to light part of the capital. It was also the symbol of electricity, which had presented the Church with a host of theological issues.[180] The corpus of criticism revolves around five themes:

179 *La Croix*, 10 April 1889.

180 See Michel Lagrée, *La bénédiction de Prométhée Religion et technologie*, Paris, Fayard, 1999. On the Tower's electricity vocation, see: *Le Génie civil*, 13 December 1884; 7 February 1885 and 19 June 1886.

– Industry is against (healthy) rural order, against nature, unfalsifiable
– Industry is 'protestant' and cosmopolitan
– Industry is materialistic, secularist
– Industry brings comfort, a source of vice, and keeps mortification at bay
– Industry turns man into a Promethean demiurge (the Creator's rival).

The Abbé Combalot summed this all up in his article '*Un bûcher pour les industriels*' (A Pyre for Industrialists) (*Le Siècle*, 24 November 1854): 'Our century is the century of matter and demands everything from matter. It is the century of machines. Purely physical knowledge, chemistry, algebra, mathematics, industrialism and machines are dulling and automating intelligence'.[181] With a 'pre-Orwellian' inspiration, Maurice Maignen looked to anticipate the future in his article '*L'An mil-neuf-cent. Légende de l'avenir*' (The year one thousand nine hundred. Legend of the future). He condemned 'science and industry', calling them 'new powers of destruction': 'Dreadful instruments were invented, and steam and electricity lent them power. Holy Father, there are no more armies; all that is left are executioners and engineers'.[182]

As a monument 'to the glory of the rationalisation of our relationship to the world,' the Tower's materialistic semiotics offended anti-modernist spiritualists. In this sense, the Tower emerged as 'a monument to the disenchantment of the world'[183] and stood as a parable of a godless century that had lost its sense of traditional values, leading to France's decadence. In the words of Joris-Karl Huysmans, it was the emblem of an era 'ruled by the passion of profit', 'the steeple of the new church in which the divine service of high banking is celebrated'. It was a 'Yankee's dream' (François Coppée), a 'beacon of disaster and despair' (Léon Bloy).

Hence, the reference to Babel is a recurring metaphor in every anti-Tower argument. The newspaper *La Croix,* forgetting that it spearheaded the anti-Eiffel polemic, lamented that a 'breath from hell' was in danger of destroying France: '... there is, so to speak, no longer a homeland, but a conglomeration of people who clash, insult each other, tear each other apart, perhaps waiting for their throats to be slit in the struggle'. Amid these 'ruins', there was only one resort/rescue: 'Blessed Marguerite-Marie'

181 Quoted by M. Lagrée, *op.cit.*, p. 38.
182 *Ibid.*
183 Françoise Gaillard, « Le monument involontaire, le cas de la Tour Eiffel », in *L'Abus monumental, op.cit.,* p. 171 et p. 120.

of the Sacré-Cœur, like a 'second Joan of Arc' who harbours 'the secret of the reconstruction of our national edifice'.[184] Indeed, construction work on the Sacré-Cœur basilica on the Butte Montmartre had begun in the 1880s. It was the victory of moral order. I discovered that Auguste Bartholdi had lamented this project dedicated to the atonement of the French, as he would have liked to build a gigantic monument instead dedicated to his hero, the Republican Gambetta. The reactionary Catholic magazine *L'Univers* wrote: 'It was the revenge of Babel, the triumph of modern society'. It went so far as to deny Eiffel's capacity for architectural innovation: 'The Christian ideal has created an architecture that no ability of modern engineers will surpass. The Middle Ages have not been defeated.' (4 April 1889).

Because it expressed Man's Promethean intent to equal God, the Eiffel Tower was of a 'demonic nature' (Huysmans) and impious. If proof were needed, it was inaugurated on a Sunday, with no benediction:

> 'To the very end, the Lord's Day was profaned to be ready in time. It was also imperative to show that the undertaking was wholly secular and that the tower would bear no signs of clericalism. The ceremony was a civil one: no benediction, not even the slightest prayer, nor a tribute to God. The Republic does not acknowledge the Creator, and the engineer perhaps feels that he is equal to He who made the mountains'.[185]

The Tower was more than a mere technical object. It was 'a challenge to Christian civilisation: either the Tower will fall, or something higher will one day be erected to bear the cross'.

The Tower became the muse of modern painters and poets 'weary of the old world'

As the Tower began to emerge, the artists who supported it were less vocal than those who opposed it. Painters, in particular, saw it as an encouragement to prowess and a promise of modernity. The Eiffel Tower is unique in that it is the only monument that has been 'rescued' and honoured by painters from the outset.

184 *La Croix*, 10 April 1889.
185 Arthur Loth, *L'Univers*, 4 April 1889.

From the moment it was built, the Tower inspired painters and illustrators.[186] A painting by Paul Louis Delance, *La Tour Eiffel vue de la Seine* (The Eiffel Tower seen from the Seine) (1889), shows the tower under construction with remarkable realism. The engraver and photographer Henri Rivière was probably the first to produce a lithograph of *La Tour en construction vue du Trocadéro* (The Tower under construction, seen from the Trocadero), set against a snowy and confidential landscape. In 1889, he produced a very original photograph of the Tower, showing the iron monster's innards. One should also mention his book, published in 1902, *Les Trente-six Vues de la Tour Eiffel*. In a very Japanese atmosphere, he shows views of the Tower from different places in Paris. Another example is Albert Robida's more tongue-in-cheek drawings and lithographs, including *Les amoureuses de la Tour Eiffel* (The Eiffel Tower Enthusiasts) (1890). A magnificent, very classical oil on canvas was brought to life by Luis Jiménez Aranda's paintbrushes in 1889, *Une dame à l'Exposition universelle de Paris* (Lady at the Paris World Fair). In this painting, the Tower is only featured as a backdrop. Although the Impressionists were sensitive to new forms emerging from the Industrial Revolution, they ignored the Tower. Georges Seurat would be the first to exploit the opportunity presented by the Tower as a source of inspiration. He composed a Tower of multicoloured dots powdered in light. His work would become a reference in the pointillist movement. Seurat's interest in optics shielded him from the objections of classical artists. Other innovative painters would follow suit. The Tower was represented as it was (such as in Paul Signac's *Seine-Grenelle* in 1890) or in the background (as in the Douanier Rousseau's *Moi-même, portrait-paysage* in 1890). In 1899, Louis Welden Hawkins, a British painter who became a naturalised French citizen, produced a highly original 'The Eiffel Tower, seen from the Trocadero'. Marc Chagall would later take an interest in the Tower, first with the painting *Paris à travers mes fenêtres* (Paris through my windows) (1910) and then with *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (The Bridal Pair with the Eiffel Tower). Others include Raoul Duffy (Paris 1926), Maurice Utrillo (*L'Avenue de Versailles et la Tour Eiffel*, 1921), and Marcel Gromaire (*Nu à la Tour Eiffel*). Paul Gauguin was ecstatic about its 'Gothic iron lace'.

1907 is a crucial year for understanding the Tower's long-lasting place in the Paris landscape. A new type of paint, Ferrubron, and a new yel-

186 Sylvie Girardet, Claire Merleau-Ponty, Anne Tardy, « La muse de fer », *Monuments Historiques*, n°132, avril-mai 1984, p. 28.

low-brown shade were chosen and approved by Gustave Eiffel. 'This new use of paint can be interpreted as the transition from industrial colour (red-brown) to the colour of Haussmannism, characterised by its ashlar facades (ochre and yellow-brown)'.[187] The new aesthetic effects produced by this colour appealed to a young non-conformist painter and architect, Le Corbusier. When he saw the Eiffel Tower for the first time, it was love at first sight. On March 11, 1909, he wrote to his parents:

> 'Apart from that, I have been in love for 15 days now, and from something of the female sex still, and very, very tall to boot. Oh, so as not to cause you deep anguish, I will tell you right away that it is the Eiffel Tower which lights such a blazing fire in my heart! Paris is the enchantment of grey, of the most beautiful shaded and rich grey; the Eiffel Tower is a work of delicacy and bold elevation; and of mist; Paris turns it into a poem and a work of art: a superb shape and such a harmonious texture when presented diagonally! From dark grey at the tip to light grey at its base, when the sky is floating with grey eiderdown. Sharp red in the fire puddles of the setting sun amongst the thick and opaque blue islands of the clouds. It's Japanese! And, as I had the rare privilege of holding in my hands, eight days ago, around sixty original prints by Hokusai, please excuse this very orientalist predilection, which would have all my buddies and the rest jeering …quite unjustly besides'.[188]

Many years later, the Tower would have its own painter, Robert Delaunay (1885–1941). He painted the Tower 30 times in two series (1909–1911 and 1922–1928). Delaunay glorified this new symbol of the union between industry and art. He recognised the Tower's aesthetic potential for cubist expression. He was fond of disarticulating the linearity of the iron lines, simultaneously combining planes and angles, and breaking the perspective frame by showing several depths of field. The Eiffel Tower allowed him to express his concept of 'pure' and 'absolute' painting, which is free of subject matter to give voice to 'the only reality: light.' In October 1911, Robert Delaunay sent photographs of his recent work, including the Eiffel Tower, to Wassily Kandinsky (a Russian painter who became a German and then a French citizen). As a pioneer of abstract art, Kandinsky was enthralled.

187 Pierre-Antoire Gatier, « La tour Eiffel, une histoire de couleur », https://www.academiedesbeauxarts.fr/la-tour-eiffel-une-histoire-de-couleur.

188 Letter written by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret to his parents, 11 March 1909. Fonds Jornod. Excerpts. Le Corbusier, *Correspondance. Lettres à la famille, 1900–1925*, t. I, Paris, Infolio/Gallimard, 2011, p. 106.

Non-conformists had found their muse, a muse of steel. They would dictate their conceptions and thus legitimise the Eiffel Tower. It was no coincidence that he was commissioned to design the Electricity Pavilion at another World Fair in 1937. Like many artists of his time, Robert Delaunay was fascinated by the early days of aviation. This is reflected in his *Tour Eiffel et jardin du Champs-de-Mars* from 1922. An aerial photograph taken by André Schelcher and Albert Omer-Décugis inspired this painting. These two balloonists had launched into aerial photography at the beginning of the 20th century. On 5 June 1909, their *Tour Eiffel vue en ballon* (Eiffel Tower, Seen from a Balloon) was published as a double-page spread in the magazine *L'Illustration* (the first aerial photograph to be published in this mainstream magazine)[189] This photo shows a unique view of the Tower that inspired painters. Aerial photography is a 'shift of the gaze'.[190]

It would find favour with poets such as Guillaume Apollinaire. The poet enjoyed the imprint of industry on the city: 'iron constructions, machines, automobiles, bicycles, aeroplanes' were, for him, 'masterpieces of modern style (which) are made of cast iron, steel and sheet metal'.[191] He saw the source of a new lyricism in these 'Paris evenings drunk on gin/With electricity ablaze' ('Song of the Unloved'). He understood that the Tower would please anyone who was 'At last (…) tired of these antiquities' and had 'had enough of living in ancient Rome and Greece'. The famous verses of *Zone* are well known: 'At last you are tired of these antiquities/ O Shepherdess Eiffel Tower, this morning the flock of bridges bleat'. In 1919, the year he published *Anthologie nègre*, another writer of modernity and everyday life, Blaise Cendrars,[192] published a collection of poems that included a poem about the Eiffel Tower. This poem, *Tour*, was written in 1913 and dedicated to Robert Delaunay. It consecrated the Eiffel Tower as a 'giant firework display at the World Fair' and also as a universal monument. The poem ends as follows:

'Gong tam-tam zanzibar bête de la jungle rayon-X express bistouri symphonie

189 André Schelcher et Albert Omer-Décugis, *Paris vu en ballon et ses environs*, préface de Georges Cain, Paris, Hachette, 1909.

190 Thierry Gervais, « Un basculement du regard », *Études photographiques* [En ligne], 9 | Mai 2001, mis en ligne le 10 septembre 2008, accessed 25 April 2024. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/916.

191 Guillaume Apollinaire, *L'Intransigeant*, 6 June 1912.

192 Blaise Cendrars, *Dix-Neuf poèmes élastiques,* avec un portrait de l'auteur par Amedeo Modigliani, Paris, Au Sans Pareil, 1919.

Tu es tout
Tour
Dieu antique
Bête moderne
Spectre solaire
Sujet de mon poème
Tour
Tour du monde
Tour en mouvement'[193]

The Tower would inspire filmmakers, such as René Clair's *Paris qui dort* (Paris asleep) (1924). Photographers were also quick to seize upon this symbol of modernity. This was the case, among many others, of Ilse Bing, who produced a silver print full of mystery in 1931 entitled *Paris, Champ de Mars depuis la Tour Eiffel* (Paris, Champ de Mars from the Eiffel Tower).[194]

'Should the Eiffel Tower be knocked down?' A look back at a survey from 1929

In June 1929, literary critic Gaston Picard launched a provocative survey to mark the 40th anniversary of the Eiffel Tower: '*Faut-il renverser la tour Eiffel*'[195] (Should the Eiffel Tower be knocked down?).

The answers were often funny, such as Clément Vautel's proposal to flip the Tower over and stand it on its tip: 'And what a symbol of our world this would be, where everything is upside down ...' Fernand Vanderem wanted to award the Tower the Croix de Guerre for services rendered during the Great War. Georges-Armant Masson praised its developing role in 'radiophony'. Conversely, the sculptor Paul Landowski mentioned, 'The Eiffel Tower is not beautiful'. The very reactionary Guy de la Fourchadière considered that it did not correspond to the idea one had 'of a monument

193 'Gong tam tam zanzibar jungle beast x-ray lancet symphony/ You are everything/ Tower/ Ancient God/ Modern Beats/ Solar Phantom/ Subject of my poem/ Tower/ Towering over the world/ Moving Tower'

194 This photograph is in the collections at the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris).

195 Gaston Picard, « Faut-il renverser la Tour Eiffel? », *La Revue Mondiale*, 1 June 1929 and 15 June 1929. The following quotes are taken from both editions. On Picard, see: Anna Krykun, « La passion de l'enquête littéraire, ou l'étrange cas de M. Gaston Picard », *Fabula / Les colloques*, L'âge des enquêtes, Enquête sur les enquêtes (dir. Alexandre Gefen, Guillaume Métayer), URL : http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document8033.php, accessed on 28 April 2024.

today' because of its practical nature, a point of view which would have changed since the war. In his opinion, a monument should be related to death:

> 'A monument is a thing that is allowed not to be beautiful (and which sometimes abuses this prerogative) but must have a symbolic and, as far as possible, a funereal meaning. (…) The *Panthéon* is a mausoleum. The *Arc de Triomphe* is a tombstone. The *Invalides* is a necropolis for superior heroes. The *Dôme de l'Institut* is home to a graveyard where the shadows of the illustrious unburied dead wander …'.[196]

On the contrary, Léo Poldès, a leftist and radio personality, described the Tower as the 'Pantheon of anthumous glories', i.e., living glories. He saw it as 'an indispensable monument', 'a 20th-century cathedral'. While la Fourchardière felt that the monument was condemned to be part of the past, it was quite the opposite for the journalist Armory (Chares Dauriac); the Tower was the promise that Paris was a city 'with a great future'. In fact, Georges Normandy argued that it was because the Tower was 'ahead of its time' that so many writers, painters, sculptors and architects were 'immediately nauseated' by it.

Jean Ajalbert of the Académie Goncourt also thought that 'without it, Paris is an old thing': 'What a sudden rejuvenation it brings, in a sky with new wings!' The young poet Blaise Cendrars, who was also interviewed as part of the survey, felt that it was time to rethink the concept of monuments: 'The great monumental constructions of the near future will be aeroplane stations in the middle of the ocean'. His friend Robert Delaunay, whom the investigator described as 'the Tower's resident portraitist', agreed: 'The Tower shows the near future', 'the best collective life', and something 'extremely vital' because new art, in his view, must turn away from 'reminiscence' and the 'corpse of the past'. Yet he was lucid and brave when he argued that the Tower's opponents reflected the 'mediocrity' that prevailed in 'artistic circles' where one could find 'the most retrograde, the most prejudiced people against everything that changes and transforms life'. Those who can transform and innovate were a 'minority', 'but like the visionary Eiffel, they are right regardless of the odds'. For Delaunay, 'the Tower has become one of the wonders of the world'. He 'loved' it and, through his paintings, demonstrated 'multiple forms of my (his) love'. Gustave Eiffel was one of the 'authentic inventors' who 'faced in their time the passive

196 He evoked the Académie Française.

idiocy of those who are afraid'. The painter Delaunay believed in the 'Global Spirit of industry' as the vector of the 'dynamism of our modern life'. He saw the Eiffel Tower as the precursor of the 'Modern'age', as there had been the Middle Ages. He felt that Paris must be granted a 'new life,' and power must be given to those who 'love the light, the sky, the sun and speed.'

Delaunay mentioned the 'side of the idiots' that spawned the anti-Eiffel Tower 'followers'. The painter Von Dongen, on an ironic note, spoke of 'stupidity': 'Tomorrow will be free shaving day. I can easily envisage a monument dedicated to human stupidity, which would have the advantage over the Eiffel Tower in that it would never go out of fashion. To shave down the Eiffel Tower, call a barber'.

For Georges Delamare, director of radio broadcasts at the Eiffel Tower, the Tower was 'the only original building that the Republic has managed to create. Because the regime is rather weak in architecture …'. Waldemar-George, an art critic with *La Revue Mondiale*, praised the Tower as the 'epitome of our age' and 'the clearest and most uncluttered example of contemporary art':

> 'The Tower defies the traditional laws of statistics, equilibrium and gravity. It marks a new attitude of humankind towards the world. Its perforated volume, its aerial, clerestory carcass, rises into the infinite. In my eyes, it embodies the concept of abstract architecture, without object or purpose, of mental architecture, the pure poetry of forms staggered through space'.

Most contributors agreed that the Tower was 'now part of the Parisian landscape'. In a sense, it progressively became a familiar feature, 'Is the Tower beautiful or ugly?' André Foy wonders. 'My God! It has been in the same spot for so long that one no longer knows. (…) It's an old acquaintance … and then, Paris without it …'. The former combatant writer Maurice Genevoix wrote something similar: 'Now that it is past its flowering, that it is part of the landscape, even of the Parisian family, let us allow it to radio broadcast and erect its vertical advertisement in the night. Whether it is ugly or not, we will no longer know: it is there.'

Some past opponents made amends, such as the writer Yvonne Sarcey. In 1889, she thought that 'nothing in the world' seemed uglier to her than the Tower: 'So let's keep this once cursed forty-odd year old, so beautiful on certain evenings with her fiery illuminations, she has earned her rightful place.'

Le Corbusier, an apostle of the 'machinist civilisation' and a member of the younger generation of artists who wanted to overturn the old order, wrote an inspired preface to Charles Cordat's book *La Tour Eiffel*, based on a collection of drawings and photos of the monument. It was an opportunity for him to mention an anecdote: 'I heard his voice on the telephone around 1923. I asked him for an illustration of the Garabit Bridge for an article in *L'Esprit Nouveau* entitled *Pérennité*'. Le Corbusier neatly summarised the reasons for the overall hostility shown by academicism:

> 'Its height, line, appearance? Pathetically, solemnly and pompously proclaimed a holy horror in the Artists' Protest, who called for the worksite to be closed! Artists and engineers? A hiatus, incompatible! Little did we know that the time would come when artists, engineers and architects would (will) be unified in the caste of builders.'[197]

Le Corbusier was right to claim that Eiffel had been 'saddened not to have been recognised as a donor of beauty' because 'his desire was elegance'. Indeed, Gustave Eiffel, replying to his critics in *Le Temps* (14 February 1887), defended the artistic dimension of his project: 'The Tower will have a beauty of its own'. Roland Barthes recognised that the Tower was 'a sign of boldness and modernity that has become over time a work of art, a work of laced iron, a sign of lightness and, through its verticality, of the impossibility for Man to reach the sky'. A year later, in 1929, Le Corbusier ideated the *Plan Voisin*, which aimed to destroy the centre of Paris to erect gigantic towers. This plan would be fiercely criticised. He then drew a sketch showing the *Arc de Triomphe*, Notre-Dame and the Pantheon (small-sized) facing a giant Eiffel Tower, with the following caption: 'The future of Paris today faces the same ghosts as in 1887'.[198]

Conclusion

A study of the reactions to the Eiffel Tower reveals the conformism that prevailed in French artistic circles and the difficulty the fledgling Third Republic had in winning a foothold in people's minds. The Tower embodies a new conception of Beauty, blurring the boundaries between art and

197 Le Corbusier, préface Charles Cordat, *La Tour Eiffel*, éd. de Minuit, 1955. See also: Le Corbusier, « Vers le Paris de l'époque machiniste », supplément au *Bulletin du Redressement français*, 15 février 1928.

198 *Gustave Eiffel. Le magicien du fer*, Paris, Skira/Flammarion, 2009, p. 235.

non-art, between artistic and technical objects. Minds were not ready to accept such a revolution. The Tower also testifies to the persistent resistance in the late 19th century to the establishment of the industrial world, which was perceived as an attack on a natural, imaginary order willed by God.

Artists played an essential role in the process of de-ideologising the Eiffel Tower. They deactivated it politically. At the same time, they brought it into another dimension, transforming it from a technical feat into a poetic promise. It was they who were responsible for the first step in making the Tower a heritage site. By representing the Tower, they contributed to its cultural and patrimonial emergence. Gustave Eiffel saved it by showing its military and scientific utility. But it was the artists who made it a part of our heritage, and unbeknownst to its creator, the new landscape that the Tower created in Paris made it famous the world over. However, its first mission, commemorating 1789, has disappeared.

This 'absurd prodigy' has become a worldwide hyper-monument, in other words, a monument that defies time, attracts and inspires as if it were a work of art that is still relevant today. It survives, and it is alive. So much so that its creator and the circumstances in which it was created may remain unknown in the sole interest of its ability to appeal to future generations. The Eiffel Tower is the most striking illustration of this modernity, which means that a work of art can escape its creators and belong to its future, i.e., to those who will see and interpret it. Another monument falls into this category: the Statue of Liberty.

The ultimate irony, however, is that the Eiffel Tower wasn't included in the supplementary list of historic monuments until André Malraux became General de Gaulle's Minister of Culture. This happened in 1964, the year Roland Barthes wrote his enlightened text on the Eiffel Tower. It was finally granted institutional heritage status, albeit timidly, as it was not listed as a '*Monument Historique*', the highest form of protection. And unbelievably, 60 years later, it still hasn't. Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, refused to submit the application in 2024.[199] The Iron Lady has a consolation prize; it has been listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List since 1991. But the Eiffel Tower can live without a certification!

199 In response to the controversy surrounding this refusal, Anne Hidalgo explained that the Paris City Council would be allocating €360 million to the 20th renovation of the Eiffel Tower, starting in 2020.