

New Nation, New History: Alexandre Lenoir and the Musée des Monuments français (1795–1816)

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In answer to one of this conference’s foundational questions, “How has the concept of the national museum been understood and defined by different actors in the past?”, this paper proposes a case study of the design and creation of the Musée des Monuments français (1795-1816) by its founding curator, Alexandre Lenoir, in late eighteenth-century France. As France’s original national museum of sculpture, architecture, and monuments, the Musée des Monuments français emerged in the wake of the French Revolution – indeed as a direct consequence of this revolution – just as the nation’s first national public museums were taking shape.

The paper considers the Musée des Monuments français as one individual’s endeavour to explore the new aims of history and its uses in the expanded social and public spheres of France’s post-Ancien régime, and positions the Musée as an example of a specific museological genre – the *narrative* history museum. As a hermeneutic study of this genre, the terms of engagement range from parallel readings on the subjects of historiography, pedagogy, and cultural reform, in addition to landscape and architectural theory, to demonstrate how a changed sense of history and theories of sense perception informed museum scenography at a pivotal moment in its development.

Preface: The Narrative History Museum and the Hermeneutic Circle

The narrative history museum is one that purports to represent historical events in a continuous and cohesive narrative environment, effected through the aesthetic, spatial, temporal, and architectural *mise-en-scène* of the museological setting and the placement of objects within this setting. Recent scholars have claimed the narrative history museum to be an outcome of the twentieth-century appearance of the Holocaust Museum, citing Yad Vashem as the first example of this genre when it was completed in Jerusalem in 1970. I suggest the narrative history museum has roots dating back to the late eighteenth century, and developed contemporaneously with the birth of the modern museum institution in France.

I use the concept and genre of the narrative history museum as one possible defining feature of the national museum, and in my doctoral dissertation, I explore the genre's import in relation to the creation of the revolutionary Musée des Monuments français (1795-1816) by its founder and curator, Alexandre Lenoir (1761-1839). This means that my study of this national museum of history and art does not ground its analysis uniquely in theories of art and aesthetics, nor does it endeavour to trace a stylistic or typological genesis of the national museum in the tradition of Pevsner or Selig, but considers issues related to narrative as well.¹ My dissertation derives its terms from a philosophical and hermeneutic study of the museum and its political, cultural, and historical context, by engaging in an interpretation of this subject. The modern practice of hermeneutics is premised upon our belief that the very act of understanding history entails our recognition that we are also always an active part of the historical process, and thereby requires our on-going participation within this process. According to Gadamer, for this to occur, one must fully engage with historical texts by entering into a dialogical relationship with the past. Hermeneutics insists, by its very nature, on a truly comparative approach in order to gain a better understanding of the past.

I have sought to engage the world of the Musée des Monuments français through a parallel reading of contemporaneous texts on the subjects of historiography, conservation, and pedagogical reform, in addition to landscape and architectural theory. These texts have permitted me a greater understanding of the larger spatial, representational, and cultural practices that shaped modern historical consciousness and the construction of subjectivity in the late eighteenth century. My project considers how a changed sense of history at this time led to significant innovations in scenography and architectural program in the Musée des Monuments français. For Lenoir, the concept of an art museum was inherently tied to the display of history, and this display was to be apprehended experientially by the visitor. Lenoir's empirical ideas were clearly informed by Enlightenment conceptions of subjectivity and indebted to Lockean theories on the processes of human memory, the imagination, and sense perception, and the sensationist theories of the French philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714-1780).

I therefore use the architectural concept of the "program," which I define as the theme of the arrangement of a series of spaces into a coherent whole, as key to understanding the Musée's meaning and philosophical purpose. Its use in this sense has enabled me to interpret the site of the museum as the embodiment of two alternating and complimentary intentions:

1 Nicolas Pevsner, *A History of Building Types* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976) and Helmut Selig, "The Genesis of the Museum," *Architectural Review* 141 (February 1967), p. 103-114.

narrative and enactment. This dual structure opens up the museum to an analysis of both cause and effect, as text and place of engagement. Through a combined consideration of the narrative voice of the museum catalogue, of the architectural program of the diverse conceptual spaces of the museum, of the scenography of the museum as *gesamkunstwerk*, and of the texts of visitor accounts, the concept of the national museum in late eighteenth-century France may be understood in its most comprehensive, and richest, sense.

I. Concepts and Contexts of the Musée des Monuments français

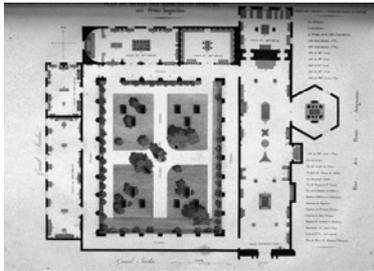


Figure 1.

Plan of the Musée des Monuments français at the monastery of the Petits-Augustins in Paris, from Jean-Baptiste-Bonaventure de Roquefort, *Vues pittoresques et perspectives des Salles du Musée des monuments français* (Paris: Impr. de P. Didot, l'aîné, 1816). Courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada.

In answer to the question, “How has the concept of the national museum been understood and defined by different actors in the past?”, this paper proposes a case study of the conception and creation of the Musée des Monuments français (1795-1816) in post-Ancien régime Paris, by its founder Alexandre Lenoir. I would like to suggest this case study as a way of engaging this conference’s foundational questions on the concepts and contexts underlying the national museum, not in any totalizing or generalizing way – I do not and would not make the claim that Lenoir’s ambitions in designing the Musée des Monuments français were indicative of the general trend in late eighteenth-century France; quite the opposite, this museum was the product of the singular vision of its founder – but rather as an early example of a national museum that has, since its creation a little over two hundred years ago, exerted influence on the program and design of national museums the world over, with significant repercussions today.

As France’s first national museum of monuments, the Musée des Monuments français emerged in 1795 in the wake of the French Revolution – indeed as a direct consequence of this revolution – just as the country’s earliest public museums were taking shape.² From its origins as one of Paris’s temporary storehouses for the country’s newly-seized “national” collections, the Musée des Monuments français housed the confiscated objects of France’s monarchy, nobility, and clergy which had, since mid-October 1790, found temporary refuge at the dispossessed monastery of the Petits-Augustins on Paris’s Left Bank. Under Lenoir’s guardianship at the monastery, these objects became the nucleus of an evolving collection organized to highlight a chronological evolution of French art and history.

It must be emphasized from the outset that the Musée des Monuments français was not a museum institution in the conventional sense of an organization mediated by a community of professionals; rather it was the vision and creative undertaking of a single, highly-motivated,

2 Contemporaneously in the nation’s capital, the Musée du Louvre was also undergoing transformation as a public museum. Prolonged discussions pertaining to its organization and display strategies marked the early stages of its museological development.

and arguably idiosyncratic, individual. In this observation lies the suggestion of the personality of the collector as an important consideration above and beyond the parameters assumed by the traditional institutional framework of the museum. As founder and director of the Musée, Alexandre Lenoir was also its only administrator and curator.³ It was Lenoir who conceived of transforming the temporary storage depot into a museum, and it was Lenoir who had begun, even before the idea of a museum was officially sanctioned by the relevant governing authorities, to undertake the measures toward a more permanent, and choreographed, installation of objects. In short, Lenoir was the Musée, and the Musée was Lenoir's project – and a highly original project it was.

Alexandre Lenoir's creation of the Musée purported to recount the history of the French nation through the arrangement and aestheticized presentation of sculpture, monuments, and architectural fragments in a progression of century-specific halls. Toward this end, Lenoir recreated a philosophical *parcours* throughout the cloisters and halls, chapel and courtyards at the Petits-Augustins, which sought to materialize through the art object six centuries of French artistic heritage and history, beginning with the thirteenth century and culminating with the birth of the French republican nation in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Each hall was given its own distinct "character" (a concept borrowed from contemporary architectural practice and theoretical writing) through the modulation of light and various scenographic techniques. Lenoir completed the historical cycle with an Elysium garden at the rear of the site, modelled on contemporary principles of landscape design and the picturesque. Unlike the century halls, however, the Elysium garden did not use chronology as a structuring device, but rather substituted linear time with the suggestion of cyclical time as the garden's main compositional device. The common thread in both interior and exterior spaces was the presence of the monument and its narrative role in each of these settings.

It could be argued that through its display strategies, the Musée achieved the enlightenment's larger ambitions as a nationalist and didactic institution, and I would not deny that this is true. Through a heightened attention to the conditions of the exhibited object, and innovations he brought to the arrangement of works of art that disrupted the Baroque paradigm of decorative patterns of display, Lenoir radically altered the spatial structure and ideological premise of the collection of art at a transitional moment in the museum institution's history. In his design of ambient, century-specific halls, Lenoir inaugurated one of the earliest examples of the period room,⁴ while his museum was one of the first in Europe and the first in France to realize a chronological sequence of galleries for the arrangement of art.⁵ Both of these

3 There has been at least one mention of an assistant curator, Pierre-Claude Binart, in Lenoir's employ in the *Archives du Musée des monuments français*. Pierre-Claude Binart was Lenoir's father-in-law. Lenoir's wife, Adélaïde (née Binart), was herself a respected portraitist.

4 The idea of the period room entailed the design of a hall so as to evoke historical attributes suggestive of the period in which the objects on display were created. Lenoir's initiative would be followed by period designs undertaken by his son, Albert Lenoir, who, in 1843, was appointed architect of the newly-established museum of medieval art, the Musée de Cluny. This museum rendered the collection of medieval objects, bequeathed to the state by Alexandre Du Sommerard, public. The museum was curated by his son, Edmond Du Sommerard.

5 The chronological arrangement of galleries had previously structured the lay-out of two museums in Northern Europe. Lambert Krahe and Christian von Mechel oversaw the design of the Dusseldorf Gallery in 1755 and, on the basis of his work there, von Mechel was subsequently involved with the re-design of the Imperial Collection in the Belvedere in Vienna in 1781.

display strategies would shortly thereafter be incorporated into the museographic practices of the “modern” museum, and the chronologically-organized (read scientific) collection is now a mainstay in many museological traditions. Furthermore, the Musée’s strict focus on French sculpture served the dual purpose of challenging the long-standing authority of Greco-Roman statuary in France, while valorizing a national Gothic style.

However, if Lenoir’s scenographic interventions seemed innovative, many of them were in fact inspired by existing traditions outside of the museum paradigm, and born not of the French Revolution, but rather from established literary and urban contexts, most notably the *histoire monumentale* and the picturesque garden. In these alternative spaces, where questions of representation were no less central than they were in the narrative museum, new pictorial and literary discourses altered conventional historiographies and constructions of subjectivity.

The use of the monument to narrate an object-based history had already acquired common currency by historians such as Bernard de Montfauçon (*Les monumens de la monarchie française*, 1729-33) and Aubin Louis Millin (*Antiquités nationales, ou, Recueil de monumens pour servir à l’histoire générale et particulière de l’empire françois*, 1790), whose epic works related the history of a nation through the artefact. Yet even in these texts, historiographical traditions were undergoing significant transformation throughout the eighteenth century. Montfauçon’s massively influential volumes were still the work of a monarchical history, and his picturing of objects generally featured these objects intact and in neutral settings. Two generations later, Millin’s *Antiquités nationales* instigated significant changes to the pictorialization of the monument. Millin’s panoramic selection of French sculptural and architectural monuments – ranging from chateaux and tombs to churches and convents – presented a dramatically different historiography than Montfauçon’s more traditional history of French monarchy had before him. Beyond the change in pictorial subject matter to architecture and sepulchral sculpture, certain formal changes also took place. If some plates recalled Montfauçon’s precedent in their placement of images against neutral backgrounds, a far greater number of Millin’s plates featured buildings and sculpture in the context of an urban or landscape setting. Like Millin, Lenoir also narrated an artefact-based history that focussed less on monarchical lineage (although this was an important element in the interior of the Musée), and increasingly on the achievements of accomplished individuals, specifically in the garden of moral virtue that was the Elysium. And like Millin, Lenoir placed his monuments within a specific, defining setting – be it the century hall or the Elysium – to enhance the narrative context of the artefact. Thus Lenoir’s innovations at the Musée combined the subjects of a changed historiography with new scenographic and contextualizing techniques, and these were further indebted to contemporaneous theories in landscape theory which served to heighten awareness of the sensorial potential of the exhibition setting.

Lenoir’s attempt to provide a context for the object was developed on many levels, however it was particularly enhanced by the use of the *parcours*, an idea that Lenoir borrowed from contemporaneous traditions in the eighteenth-century garden. The *parcours* was as much a concept as it was a tangible construction, and it introduced the idea of the path, or narrative itinerary, to the museum’s program that was primarily structured by the logic of chronology. By its association with the planned itinerary of the garden, the *parcours* established the notion of a “sense” or intention to the museum visit, and its use in the Musée highlighted composition, movement, and metaphors of time as seminal elements of its design. Effectively, the idea of the *parcours* shifted the philosophical focus of the Musée from the object to the visitor, and more specifically, to the visitor’s experience of the Musée.

Contemporary garden theory had also popularized the desire for an aesthetic experience, jointly produced by a choreographed environment and the introduction of objects into this environment which served to stimulate poetic associations through the arousal of emotions and the imagination. Lenoir achieved this condition in his designs for the Elysium garden,

however he also imported these ideas inside the Musée, where each century hall was intended to inspire the visitor's identification with history. Thus, in addition to the interior's didactic narrative of chronology, Lenoir also emphasized the character and physiognomy of the halls, that is to say, features that accentuated modalities of experience rather than rational organization. For this reason, the Elysium garden was to have an air of the melancholic, so as to induce the ideal state of contemplation and reflection required for its proper understanding.

Dans ce jardin calme et paisible, on voit plus de quarante statues; des tombeaux, posés ça et là sur une pelouse verte, s'élèvent avec dignité au milieu du silence et de la tranquillité. Des pins, des cypres et des peupliers les accompagnent; des larves et des urnes cinéraires, posés sur les murs, concourent à donner à ce lieu de bonheur la douce mélancholie qui parle à l'âme sensible.⁶



Figure 2.

View of the Thirteenth-century Hall, engraved by Jean Baptiste Réville and Jacques Lavallée; from Jean-Baptiste-Bonaventure de Roquefort, *Vues pittoresques et perspectives des Salles du Musée des monuments français* (Paris: Impr. de P. Didot, l'aîné, 1816). Courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada.



Figure 3.

View of the Sixteenth-century Hall, engraved by Jean Baptiste Réville and Jacques Lavallée; from Jean-Baptiste-Bonaventure de Roquefort, *Vues pittoresques et perspectives des Salles du Musée des monuments français* (Paris: Impr. de P. Didot, l'aîné, 1816). Courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada.

In a not unrelated way, Lenoir designed each century-specific hall with a similar intention for eliciting emotive response, using analogies of light to support narratives of progress or decline in the century's artistic practices. When describing the décor of the thirteenth-century hall, for example, Lenoir claimed that:

6 Lenoir, *Musée des monumens français, ou Description historique et chronologique des Statues en marbre et en bronze, Bas-reliefs et Tombeaux des Hommes et des Femmes célèbres, pour servir à l'Histoire de France et à celle de l'Art; ornée de gravures; Et augmentée d'une Dissertation sur les Costumes de chaque siècle*, Vol. 1 (Paris: De l'Imprimerie de Guilleminet, 1800-1821), p. 19. Emphasis my own. "In this calm and peaceful garden, one sees more than forty statues; tombs, placed here and there on a green carpet, rise with dignity amidst silence and tranquility. Pines, cypresses and poplars surround them; worms and urns, placed on the walls, compete to render this happy place the gentle melancholy that speaks to the sensitive soul." Translation my own.

La lumière sombre qui éclaire ce lieu est encore une imitation du temps; magie par laquelle on maintenait perpétuellement dans un état de faiblesse des êtres que la superstition avait frappés d'effroi. Car j'ai observé que plus on remonte vers les siècles qui se rapprochent du nôtre, plus la lumière s'agrandit dans les monumens publics, comme si la vue du soleil ne pouvait convenir qu'à l'homme instruit.⁷

Conversely, for his portrait of the sixteenth-century, "siècle régénérateur des beaux-arts,"⁸ Lenoir adopted a much brighter and more celebratory decorative scheme, in order to accentuate the artistic accomplishments of the era.

These narrative strategies were not lost on the Musée's visitors, the most famous being Napoleon and his wife Joséphine, as well as a future generation of Romantic writers and historians, including Victor Hugo and Jules Michelet. Years after his childhood visits to the Musée, Michelet would recall their lasting effect on his sense of history in a particularly poignant passage of his memoirs: "C'est là, et nulle part ailleurs, que j'ai reçu d'abord la vive impression de l'histoire,"⁹ he claimed. He would further describe his childhood visits to the Musée in equally visceral terms

Even now I can recall the feeling, still just the same and still stirring, that made my heart beat when, as a small child, I would enter beneath those dark vaults and gaze at the pale faces; and would then, keen, curious and timid, walk and look, room after room, epoch after epoch. What was I looking for? I hardly know – the life of the time, no doubt, and the spirit of the ages. I was not altogether certain that they were not alive, all those marble sleepers, stretched out on their tombs. And when I moved from the sumptuous monuments of the sixteenth century, glowing with alabaster, to the low room of the Merovingians, in which was to be found the sword of Dagobert, I felt it possible that I would suddenly see Chilpéric and Frédégonde raise themselves and sit up.¹⁰

II. Book, Tool, Trove: The Musée des Monuments français as Program and Text

In his own words, Lenoir described the two-fold aims of the Musée as visibly demonstrating the progress of French art and history through the object. Lenoir elaborated at length on his intentions for the Musée in two contemporaneous publications he produced on the subject of his museum: his eight-volume compendium, *Musée des monuments français* (published from 1800-1821), and the more modest museum catalogue, *Description historique et chronologique des monumens de sculpture réunis au Musée des monumens français*, which he updated continually over the course of the museum's existence. In the former, Lenoir described two points of view, derived from models in Antiquity, that all museums should aspire

7 Lenoir, *Musée des monumens français*, Vol. I, p. 181. "The sombre light that illuminates this place is an imitation of the period; magic by which people were kept in a perpetually feeble state, people whom superstition had filled with fright. I have observed that the closer we come to our own century, the more we see light in public monuments, as if the vision of the sun could only be apparent to the educated person." Translation my own.

8 "the regenerating century of the beaux-arts" Translation my own.

9 "It's there, and nowhere else, that I first experienced a vivid impression of history." Translation my own.

10 Jules Michelet, as quoted in Frances Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 252.

to having: the first, political, the second, pedagogic. As a political institution, he argued, the museum should be impressive enough to attract the interest, and treasures, of other nations. Yet it was as a didactic institution that Lenoir's insight was most interesting. With a totalizing vision that aptly characterized both enlightenment thinking and the psyche of the collector, Lenoir claimed that the museum must contain "tout ce que les arts et les sciences réunis peuvent offrir à l'enseignement public,"¹¹ and these were to be displayed chronologically. For it was the dual criteria of chronology and completeness that would achieve the museum's second point of view or intention as a didactic institution: "de ce moment il devient une école savante et une encyclopédie où la jeunesse trouvera mot à mot tous les degrés d'imperfection, de perfection et de décadence, par lesquels les arts dépendans du dessin ont successivement passé."¹²

Lenoir understood his art museum as the spatial equivalent of a book, and it was in the literary traditions of the *encyclopédie* and the *histoire raisonnée* (literally, an analytical, or reasoned, history) that Lenoir modelled the Musée. From the literary genre of the monumental history and the German archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann's (1717-1768) canonical art historical texts,¹³ Lenoir appropriated the structure and values of progress, decadence, and decline that would form the narrative basis of his museum,¹⁴ while the encyclopedia imparted the idea for a totalizing collection of French artistic heritage to be centralized in one location. Indeed, Lenoir was obsessed with the dual task of locating objects that would further his historical narrative, and transporting these to Paris, even when the latter were the important heritage of the country's different regional communities. Lenoir was heavily criticized for this approach, and the argument against decontextualization was one of the principal reasons for the eventual closure of the Musée in 1816. Yet to Lenoir, the complimentary notions of chronology and completeness justified such acts over any attempt for political correctness, and he insistently sought out works almost to the point of fanaticism in his quest to illustrate France's past.¹⁵

Lenoir's vision of the pedagogic potential of the Musée as a site of comparative study was in fact intended to challenge the very hegemony of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* as the sole source of teaching for artists, a community from which he felt bitterly excluded and never missed an opportunity to condemn:

Versé dès ma jeunesse dans l'art du dessin je me suis convaincu que les collections étaient plus précieuses pour les progrès des arts que les écoles, où les élèves ne voient ja-

11 Lenoir, *Musée des monumens français*, Vol. I, p. 51. "all that the arts and sciences combined can offer to public instruction" Translation my own.

12 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 52. "from this moment it becomes a learned school and an encyclopedia where youth will find word for word all of the imperfections, perfections and decadences, by which the arts of drawing have successively passed." Translation my own.

13 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, 1764.

14 "L'objet d'une histoire raisonnée de l'art est de remonter jusqu'à son origine, d'en suivre les progrès et les variations jusqu'à sa perfection, et d'en marquer la décadence et la chute jusqu'à son extinction." Lenoir, *Musée des monumens français*, Vol. I, p. 47-48. "The goal of an analytical history of art is to return to art's origins, to follow its progress and its variations until its perfection, and to observe its decadence and decline leading to its extinction." Translation my own.

15 Lenoir was required to transfer many of the depot's original objects to the Louvre for its sculpture collection. Before doing so, Lenoir made plaster casts of these sculptures, with the intention of displaying them in a specific gallery at the Musée. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 13-14.

mais de monumens, et dans lesquelles ils n'entendent aucunes dissertations. Les exemples que l'on a sous les yeux, les comparaisons que l'on fait d'une manière de faire avec une autre, forment le goût et constituent l'étude raisonnée. Sans ce travail de l'esprit, l'étude n'est plus qu'une routine, l'art devient un métier et se dégrade infailliblement.¹⁶

In a footnote, Lenoir confided that for these reasons, he intended to offer drawing classes and a course on theory within the Musée des Monuments français. Yet practically speaking, Lenoir was far too preoccupied with ensuring the very survival of the Musée to have developed a school in the manner that his British contemporary and counterpart, the architect John Soane (1753-1837), did from his home and museum at number 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, in London. Lenoir's most immediate concerns as founding director and curator of the Musée were to oversee its daily operations, and to secure the financial means to enlarge and complete its collection, to renovate the exhibition halls, and to restore the objects on display. Indeed, the very integrity of his museum was continually threatened by the competing interests of the city's other developing national museum, the Musée du Louvre,¹⁷ as well as by critics of Lenoir's unorthodox curatorial practices, which blended invention and fantasy with the object's reconstruction.

III. Revolution, *fabrique*, and Restoration of the Self: Performance and Reconstruction at the Musée des Monuments français



Figure 4.

Lenoir's *fabrique* monument to Bernard de Montfaucon, featuring a composite of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman sources, designed by Lenoir; from Lenoir, *Musée des monumens français*, Plate 202, Vol. 5, opposite page 202. Courtesy of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University, Montréal, Canada.

16 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 46. "Versed in the art of drawing since my childhood, I concluded that collections were far more precious in the quest for progress in the arts than schools, where students never see monuments, and in which they never hear theoretical ideas. The examples that we have before our eyes, the comparisons that we make, form good taste and are the basis of analytical study. Without this intellectual work, study is nothing more than a routine, and art becomes an occupation and devalues." Translation my own.

17 It was decided that the Louvre, or the Muséum Français as it was then known, would open to the public with much pomp and circumstance on August 10, 1793, on the same day as the Festival of National Unity, commemorating the first anniversary of the birth of the Republic. After great debate about the nature of the design and pictorial display of the Grand Gallery, an ahistorical, mixed-arrangement display was decided upon over a modern, chronological one.



Figure 5.

Lenoir's *fabrique* monument to Héloïse and Abélard in the Elysium garden at the Musée des Monuments français, engraved by Jean Baptiste Réville and Jacques Lavallée; from Jean-Baptiste-Bonaventure de Roquefort, *Vues pittoresques et perspectives des Salles du Musée des monuments français* (Paris: Impr. de P. Didot, l'aîné, 1816). Courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada.

Though limited public access to monarchical collections had been granted as early as 1757 with the partial opening of the Luxembourg palace to visitors (which may have indicated the beginning of a changed social attitude toward culture and the arts), a broader museum movement emerged as a direct result of the political and cultural implications of the French Revolution. This revolution instigated the nationalization of monarchical and ecclesiastical collections, as well as a new outlook toward the related concepts of conservation, preservation, pedagogy, and historiography. For the first time in French history, culture was being formally politicized, and the concept of a comprehensive and binding cultural heritage was being formulated. It could also be argued that the democratic ambitions of the Revolution needed to be legitimized, and in a highly visible way. The emergence of the national museum at this historical moment was by no means strictly a question of convenience or pragmatic necessity, but rather it fulfilled the need to divest the object of its pre-Ancien régime symbolism, and insodoing the museum served to reposition the object as “art” in a wholly new and modern context. At the Musée, the issue was particularly pressing: determining how to recycle the spaces of a former religious building, and the objects of a régime now deposed, from their former identification with the politics and ideologies of the Ancien régime was key, providing these objects had not already been reduced to their primary materials and commandeered by the war effort.

The effects of the revolution must not be overlooked in any assessment of the emergence of the French national museum at this time. The political events that preceded the creation of the first generation of national museums in France conditioned the very way objects were understood within the new museological context, by undermining their originary symbolic significance. Lenoir's museum was no exception: the funerary and monarchical origins of much of the Musée's collection were overridden by a narrative that sought to reconstitute a cohesive sense of nationhood in line with the revolution's principles of liberty, fraternity, and equality over the realities of a monarchical past. Lenoir's narrative of French national history promised a restorative poetics by virtue of its re-writing of national history, a re-writing that occurred in no small measure through the use of the *fabrique*.

The tradition of the *fabrique* had its origins in landscape painting in the mid-eighteenth century. The French artist and landscape theorist Claude-Henri Watelet coined the term *fabrique* in a 1756 entry in the *Encyclopédie*, though his description at that time was confined to the language of painting. The *fabrique* was, in essence, an invention or construction in the landscape, a cross between a confabulated ruin and an imaginary structure, often composed of disparate elements. Lenoir appropriated the concept and developed it in different ways in order to realize his own curatorial vision at the Musée.

Although he completed reconstructions of monuments and *fabriques* in the interior halls, it was the *fabriques* Lenoir placed in the Elysium that demonstrated the most outlandish and



Figure 6.

View of the Elysium garden, engraved by Jean Baptiste Réville and Jacques Lavallée; from Jean-Baptiste-Bonaventure de Roquefort, *Vues pittoresques et perspectives des Salles du Musée des monuments français* (Paris: Impr. de P. Didot, l'aîné, 1816). Courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada.

unorthodox designs. The monuments in the Elysium were often odd sculptural constructions in their complex and creative combination of emblematic and symbolic iconographies and it is doubtful that any single reading was intended for these objects. Lenoir described his design for the monument dedicated to the antiquarian and historian Bernard de Montfauçon, for example, as a composite of “hieroglyphs, Egyptian figures, Greek reliefs, figures from the late Roman Empire and remains of monuments from the first years of the French monarchy”¹⁸ – a hybrid arrangement of motifs intended to recall the diverse historical interests, and writings, of the scholar. This was one of many monuments that Lenoir created from the remains of others: a curious conservationist practice by our current standards, and not without significant criticism in his own time as well. Although Lenoir insisted that the monuments he fabricated combined only materials from similar historical eras (much like the criteria by which he organized his period halls), he did not always abide by this dictum. In the very popular chapel he re-created for the medieval lovers Héloïse and Abélard, Lenoir combined a newly-commissioned neo-gothic canopy, the twelfth-century funerary monuments of Héloïse and Abélard he had purchased from their original setting at the Abbey of Paraclet near Nogent-sur-Seine, and a contemporary death mask of Héloïse he commissioned from the sculptor – and later detractor of his practices – Louis-Pierre Deseine.

As Lenoir confessed in his own writing, in the absence of authentic objects, an invention will do, providing that it conformed to (one might read “evoked”) the character of the period. This very viewpoint also underlay Lenoir’s spatial conceptions of the period halls. These two examples of *fabriques* – the monument to Montfauçon and the monument to Abélard and Héloïse – equally attest to two traditions of *fabrique* that co-existed at the Musée. The former was pure invention, pure fantasy on the part of Lenoir; the latter was intended to be created in the likeness of an original, be that “original” a human being, or an existing (but damaged) monument. Neither traditions conformed to contemporary conservation policies, but their distinction is an important one in the museological context of the Musée des Monuments français. In the case of Lenoir, whose intention it was to illustrate a history of progress of French art, the *fabrique* tipped the scale toward artistic innovation over that of veracity, even if, as he famously proclaimed, to leave disassembled monuments in a heap would surely con-

18 Lenoir, *Musée Impérial des monumens français: Histoire des arts en France, et description chronologique des statues en marbre et en bronze, bas-reliefs et tombeaux des hommes et des femmes célèbres, qui sont réunis dans ce Musée* (Paris: De l’Imprimerie d’Hacquaret, 1810), p. 290. Translation my own.

tribute to their ruin. In other words, Lenoir was committed to illustrating an idea of progress at all costs.

It could be argued, like Michel Makarius has done in more general terms, that Lenoir's *fabriques* were a form of ruin.¹⁹ But by virtue of their composition of fragments, of sculptural and architectural "ruins," the *fabriques* promised the antithesis of the ruin: regeneration. They were, in effect, the anti-ruin. It is true that in the shape of the *fabrique* lay the demise of one aspect of the ruin's poetic dimension: in the object re-constituted there could be no acknowledgement of the lived past, at least not through the object itself, and therefore no contemplation of the future – not in the traditional sense. However it is also true that Lenoir was engaged in re-writing France's past, indeed his entire project of the Musée des Monuments français was dedicated to this single goal, even if he did not allow the stones to speak their own history. If, as Christopher Woodward has elegantly articulated, "The ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator,"²⁰ Lenoir's anti-ruins sought the opposite: to reconstitute a sense of totality and wholeness on a post-Revolution, fractured French psyche. And thus Lenoir's *fabriques* spoke of another truth.

Lenoir's intent in using the *fabrique* was to arouse feelings and emotions, much like the traditions popularized by the eighteenth-century irregular garden and its use of the *fabrique*-ruin. It is therefore no surprise that the most daring designs for the *fabrique* appeared in the Elysium, rather than in the interior halls of the Musée, as the monuments dedicated to the philosopher René Descartes and historian Bernard de Montfauçon would suggest. Just as the picturesque garden movement with its follies and *fabriques* had emerged as the alter ego of the overseeing château in eighteenth-century traditions, so too did Lenoir's Elysium perform a discursive transgression to the official discourse of the interior chronological narrative and historiography of the Musée.

But unlike the folly of garden traditions, many of Lenoir's *fabriques* paradoxically required something of the authentic object for their completion. Divested of the pure vestige, the anti-ruin could not speak of the future, it merely contained the past, not to erase it, but to present it as something entirely *new*. Ultimately for Lenoir, the *fabrique* was a manner to reinscribe the past; to borrow again from Christopher Woodward, it functioned as an inversion of the Ancien régime's folly. If the ruin imposed a certain catastrophic image of the present, the *fabrique* inverted that image and invested it with another order, one capable of re-animating the past and the stasis of the ruin.

The *fabrique* in the garden performed a second, no less significant, role in Lenoir's Elysium as a legitimization of opposing styles. As Barbara Stafford has demonstrated,²¹ the ruin permitted a certain co-existence of two competing traditions in Northern Europe, one imported (the Classical) and one local (the Gothic), through its unique relationship with the landscape. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the co-existence of Classical and Gothic forms was first valorized within the setting of the garden, where Gothic elements were prized precisely for their poetic associations at the same time they were disregarded within the larger

19 Michel Makarius, *Ruins* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005). See especially his chapter entitled "In the Garden," p. 118-130.

20 Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 139.

21 Barbara Maria Stafford, "'Illiterate Monuments': The Ruin as Dialect or Broken Classic." *Space Site Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 64-83.

urban landscape. The *fabrique*, which first positioned the Gothic as ruin and therefore as picturesque, was the vehicle by which two separate phenomena gained acceptance by uniting them in the public imaginary. In the same tradition and at virtually the same historical moment, the museum also provided a public space to endorse competing styles.

The *fabrique*, then, permitted Lenoir to pursue his ideal of a museum of progress by illustrating a perfectable history. Contemporaneous to Constantin-François Volney's meditative and highly influential *Ruines, ou, Méditation sur les révolutions des empires* (1791), which used the ruin as a departure point for moral reflections on the decline and decay of empires, there could be no greater antithesis in the creative endeavours produced during France's era of revolution than Lenoir's own project of the Musée, which nevertheless shared a similar pedagogical intention to sum history up through the subjects of empire and revolution. Where Volney sought enlightenment in human actions through his invocation of the ruin (according to Zucker, Volney elevated ruins into "universal symbols of the philosophy of history"),²² Lenoir's was an effort to correct human (read artistic) shortcomings through his very re-construction of the ruin.

Thus unlike his contemporary John Soane, in whose museum of architecture in London the fragment was left intact precisely for its poetic associations, Lenoir did not leave the object in a fragmented state. His obsession with reconfiguring the object to a pristine, though not necessarily "authentic" condition, seems to have been informed more by a literary sensibility, such as that espoused by the renowned philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, than by the prevailing views of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors in architecture and the fine arts. Just like the rhetorical device of the "embellishment" – Rousseau's equivalent to Lenoir's *fabriques* – sought to overcome memory lapses, not to confabulate or to promote falsity but to avoid emptiness ("and if by chance I have used some immaterial embellishment ('quelque ornement indifférent') it has been only to fill a void due to a defect of memory"²³), so too did Lenoir's impetus seem to have been a post-Revolution need to fill in the void: to rewrite a cohesive history of France and to render this history visible, tangible, felt, even as the nation itself was revising its own history.

Like Rousseau, who freely resorted to invention to fill in the gaps, Lenoir used the compositional freedom of the *fabrique* to achieve wholeness rather than accuracy in the individual monument. With their emphasis on verisimilitude as distinct from exactness, these objects functioned outside of an official "national" narrative as poetic suggestions of human accomplishment, and made appeal to the body – not simply the intellect – through the heightened sensorial devices and associations of the mythic elysian garden. These monuments' presence in the garden highlighted universal themes that served to challenge modern historiography and a past burdened by a relentless obsession to record all things historical. In this manner, the Musée des Monuments français can be said to have upheld the aesthetic, historical, and didactic innovations that conditioned the foundations of the modern museum, at the same time that it sewed the seeds for this institution's self-reflexive, philosophical critique. Lenoir's appropriation of the narrative techniques of contemporary landscape theory posited the Elysium

22 Paul Zucker, *Fascination of Decay* (Ridgewood, New Jersey: Gregg Press, 1968), p. 198.

.198.ood, Bernard, N.Y., 1969) 433.ical fiction, eux ou des monumens publics."ainting. "loguee other illustrious remains. lea

23 Suzanne Nalbantian, *Memory in Literature: From Rousseau to Neuroscience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 27. Please see her footnote 17.

as an act of poetry in the manner it put history to the service of life rather than bearing the burden of the past – recalling Nietzsche’s caution of the hypertrophic sensibility that conditioned the historical sciences at the turn of the nineteenth century.²⁴ Poetry, Aristotle famously proclaimed in his treatise *Poetics*, described the universal, whereas history dealt with particulars.²⁵

Perhaps Antonio Gramsci best characterized the significance of Lenoir’s work within its post-Ancien régime context in an unrelated passage he wrote in the *Prison Notebooks*: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears.”²⁶ Not all projects undertaken in the post-Ancien régime were of such morbid character, however many were concerted efforts to construct a new modern self, and to this end, public spaces and objects figured prominently. This construction of the new modern self involved adopting a particular attitude to the past and to objects. Monuments in particular were poignant statements about history, but ones that could be modified. Within this context, the ruin was an ambiguous locale, where an unpleasant past could be revisited, and exorcised. The monument speaks of entitlement and disparity, hierarchy and privilege, and in Lenoir’s hands it metamorphosed into a tool for democratizing history and the space of a convent-turned-museum. The curator’s ambitions were thus two-fold: he endeavoured to over-write France’s decaying past, while simultaneously repairing this past and putting it to the service of the edifying ideals of the Revolution dedicated to educating, enlightening, and leading the new, modern public toward progress.

Thus to speak of a form of emplotment in the Elysium is to recognize the role of the visitor in linking separate monuments – or episodes – into their own personal and cohesive narrative, a narrative that stood as the interior’s other within the overall framework of the Musée. The garden for Lenoir presented all of the possibilities that the interior halls did not. With its predominance of *fabriques* and the variety of historical figures to which these paid tribute, through its use of the relic and the reconfigured ruin, through its characterization and alliance with contemporary landscape theory, the Elysium was neither bound by chronology nor monarchical historiography, and in this liberated space Lenoir posited themes that lay outside of the dialectic marked by notions of progress and decline. He was free to explore history as a continuum, rather than as a linear evolution, and to this end it was in the garden that cycles of nature, time, and humanity itself were given full expression.

To consider the Elysium as in some way existing outside of time is to ignore Lenoir’s most important commentary about the past. What we gain from the *parcours* of the Elysium is the understanding that history is best understood not as a chronological sequence towards progress, but as a continuum. This insight normalizes the atrocities of the Revolution as but one instance of many throughout time. By emplotting the visitor within the Elysium’s *parcours*, Lenoir placed the visitor within this continuum, corporeally affirming the premise of hermeneutics itself: that we are all part of history, that we have a tangible and visceral con-

24 Frederick Nietzsche, “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life.” *Unfashionable Observations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 83-167.

25 Aristotle, *Poetics* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1997).

26 Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, quoted in Geoffrey James, *Morbid Symptoms: Arcadia and the French Revolution*. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1986), [3].

nection to the past, and that our memory of the past constitutes an important aspect of who we are today.

What emerged in the halls of the Musée des Monuments français was hybrid. Part monument to French accomplishment, part mythic narrative, Lenoir's project was an embodiment of Enlightenment ideals in its deliberate attempt to provide moral and didactic instruction to its visiting publics through the sequencing of objects in choreographed spaces. Yet the Musée's claim to didacticism must be qualified, for the reality was that this museum was born of the unique social, historical and political circumstances of the French Revolution – a singularly tumultuous and radically transformative moment in modern social history – and in form and content the Musée bore witness to a society coming to terms with beginnings and endings in ways that recalled the paradoxes of the very horizon in which the institution first took shape. Lenoir's almost fanatical obsession with fragments and their reconfiguration, and his desire to evoke mythic origins and traditions, proved fertile concepts in the psychological recovery of a nation emerging from revolution and the denial of its feudal and monarchical past. Thus it was as a direct consequence of the Revolution – to which the Musée owed its fortuitous origins – and in response to this Revolution, that the Musée truly realized its poetic dimension as an evocative narrative of history. The Musée des Monuments français was both museum of art, and museum of history, and in the fissures of the discursive historical/chronological structure that Lenoir gave to its program lay a poetic intention that served to open up this museum to other possible relationships with history, through the very unity that Lenoir gave to the building and the objects this building housed.

The Demise of the Narrative History Museum

I would like to conclude this paper by exploring the legacy of Lenoir's scenographic and philosophical innovations at the Musée des Monuments français and by noting some of the historical changes that have occurred in national museums since Lenoir's creation of this museum in 1795. These changes demonstrate not only a transformed societal understanding of, and relationship with, the past, but more importantly, they reveal an alarming observation about the museographic representation of societal relationships with this past. Today, the larger industry that has developed out of our desire to represent history in an evocative way is in crisis, marred by a culture dominated by the narrow, one might even argue impoverished, definition that it has given to the notion of experience. Re-enactment in this context has been re-defined through the lens of simulacra – to trivializing effect – and has dramatically altered our capacity to relate authentically with the past.

At its essence, the Musée des Monuments français was one individual's endeavour to explore the new aims of history and its uses in the expanded social and public spheres of France's post-Ancien régime. As a museum marking the origins of the museological genre known as the narrative history museum, the Musée des Monuments français emerged in opposition to the scientific model of most history museums. By definition, the narrative history museum is philosophical, not rational, and tells a cohesive story through the combined narrative of its collections, scenography, and architectural program. As a synthesized or "total" narrative environment, it is the museological equivalent of the *gesamkunstwerk*. Today, this genre has undergone profound change, owing to transformations in societal attitudes toward time (emphasis on the here and now; technologies that permit instantaneous representation and the continual "making" of historical events; and the phenomenon of telescoped time), representation (our sensationalist attitude toward representation which privileges trauma, victimization, and shock value), and technological innovations that permit simulated rather than authentic experience. But to understand the intentions of the narrative history museum at its genesis, indeed to appreciate the very concept of the national museum at its origins, it is imperative to reconstitute these institutions within their own historical and hermeneutic context.

Although not all national museums have been the product of such momentous political change as those of the revolution that created France's first democracy, increasingly in the contemporary moment the content and context of our major history museums are being generated by specific historical (often traumatic) events rather than a collective of historical phenomena. Witness the generation of Holocaust, Apartheid, and Human Rights museums that have proliferated around the world and consider their narratives and scenographies. It is these museums, with their common subjects rooted in civil war and human oppression, that are our latest national museums, and their *raison d'être*, like the contexts of their creation, has signalled a profound change in societal attitudes toward history and its representation in the public sphere. Commensurate with this is a changed subjectivity and positioning of the visiting public, from witness to victim, from the detached observer of the history museum to the engaged participant of the increasingly popular narrative history museum.

My work stems from a genuine concern for how history is being represented and transmitted in national museums in our contemporary moment, and a desire to determine how this condition came about. In this moment of impoverished notions of time and durability, which are reinforced by the all-too-often uncritical celebration of technologies of representation, event-generated institutions have become our new national museums, and visitors, these museums' simulated victims. Determining a modern origin for historiographical traditions in the museum, such as in the example of the Musée des Monuments français, reveals a very different motivation for animating the past than the one we are faced with today. My research has concluded that, far from a desire to render the visitor a "victim" of the traumatic historical narratives that are the focus of many contemporary national history museums, Lenoir's museographic innovations were entirely different. Beyond realizing the larger pedagogical and historiographical objectives of the French Revolution, Lenoir's ambitions for the Musée des Monuments français were to reconstitute the fractured ethos of a nation recovering from a severed past.

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