



ARC DE  
TRIOMPHE

# VICTOR HUGO AND THE MONUMENT



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RÉPUBLIQUE  
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*Liberté  
Égalité  
Fraternité*

CENTRE DES MONUMENTS NATIONAUX

# THE SPECIAL BOND BETWEEN A POET AND A MONUMENT

Witness to its construction, Victor Hugo maintained a strong connection with the Arc de Triomphe and expressed his admiration for the monument in a number of poems and narratives. As a committed writer in causes that mattered to him, he was also a great admirer and defender of heritage and this is evident in his writings.

In addition to this attraction to the monument, it is under the Arc de Triomphe that the national funeral of the poet began, ultimately concluding at the Pantheon for his burial in 1885. This ceremony marked a significant moment for both monuments, serving as an “apotheosis” for this writer who represented one of the literary and political figures acknowledged as among the most important of his century.

Even today, the Avenue Victor Hugo reminds us of the special connection that existed between the famous writer and the Arc de Triomphe. Renamed in his honor during his lifetime, it is one of the twelve converging avenues at Place Charles de Gaulle, at the foot of the monument.

This educational document traces some major themes that link the poet to the Arc de Triomphe. It first introduces a brief biography of Victor Hugo, and then explores the links he had with the Arc de Triomphe. It also details the national funeral organized in his honor, followed by the mention of his connection with the Pantheon, where he rests today.



01 Adolphe-Jean-Baptiste Bayot, Philippe Benoist and Louis-Julien Jacottet, *Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile, Paris side*, around 1838, lithography. Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris

**Victor Hugo was a novelist, poet, and playwright, recognized as a major figure of Romanticism. He has long been the emblem of the committed writer before becoming, in the second part of his life, the embodiment of the national writer\* and the symbol of the Republic. Throughout his life, he fought to defend liberties.**

### HIS CHILDHOOD

Born in Besançon on February 26, 1802, Victor-Marie Hugo was the third child of Sophie Trébuchet and of the Empire general Léopold Hugo. He grew up in a certain duality: one of his parents supported the Bourbons\*, while the other backed the Emperor. After their divorce, as the Napoleonic Code\* granted parental authority only to the father at that time, Victor Hugo and his two brothers were compelled to go to Madrid where their father was. In 1812, on the way back to France, the future writer witnessed the horrors of war, which laid the foundation for his commitment against the death penalty.



02 François-Séraphin Delpech, *Victor Hugo*, 1840, lithography. Château de Bussy-Rabutin, Bussy-le-Grand

### \*Lexicon

See the glossary, page 12

### A COMMITTED WRITER

Various issues concerned Victor Hugo from a young age, notably the abolition of the death penalty. In 1829, he published the novel titled *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, in which he opposed the very principle of this punishment, considering it barbaric. He continued this struggle throughout his life, both in his literary work and as a deputy.

**TO GO FURTHER:** ¶1.

**SEE AT THE END OF THE DOCUMENT**

Another topic he was sensitive to concerns the link between delinquency and poverty. He observed and described an unequal society, with a bourgeoisie enriching itself at the expense of the poor. In 1846, for example, he was shocked to see a man arrested by the police for stealing bread, while he stared at a duchess playing with her child in a luxurious Berline. This scene later inspired his novel *Les Misérables* (1862).

### A DEFENDER OF HERITAGE

A fervent defender of heritage, he lamented the abandonment and destruction of ancient monuments in some of his writings, such as *La Bande noire* (1823). During his numerous travels and strolls through the capital, he visited, drew, and described cathedrals, churches, towers, and castles. His novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) triggered a real awareness of the cathedral's condition, accelerating the restoration of the monument.

**TO GO FURTHER:** ¶2.

### HIS POLITICAL COMMITMENT

In the 1840s, Victor Hugo broadened his scope of action and aligned his political ambitions with his already renowned literary career. He became an academician, a Peer of France\*, a friend of King Louis-Philippe, and later a deputy in the Second Republic. For him, this was a way to act concretely and have a more direct impact on society, thus defending the causes close to his heart.

Some contemporaries reproached him at his time for frequently changing his political orientation throughout his life, moving from ultraroyalism to liberalism, then to the Republic, ultimately adopting a position of radical left.

## HIS EXILE

On December 2, 1851, the *coup d'état* by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte led Victor Hugo, who had become a republican, to leave the country and exile himself successively in Brussels, then in Jersey, and finally in Guernsey. Refusing the amnesty decreed by Napoleon III in 1859, he declared, “When liberty returns, I will return”, and remained in the Channel Islands until the abdication of the man he referred to as “Napoleon the Little”. There, he embodied the Republic and free France. The writer returned to Paris on September 5, 1870, following the fall of the Second Empire and the proclamation of the Republic. A fervent crowd awaited him at the Gare du Nord.

**TO GO FURTHER:** ¶3.

## THE NATIONAL WRITER

From 1870 until his death, the literary reputation of Victor Hugo remained intact in France and abroad. This is explained not only by his recent publications but also by the release of his complete works in various formats and at various prices, often accompanied by illustrations, thus reaching a broad and diversified audience for the time.

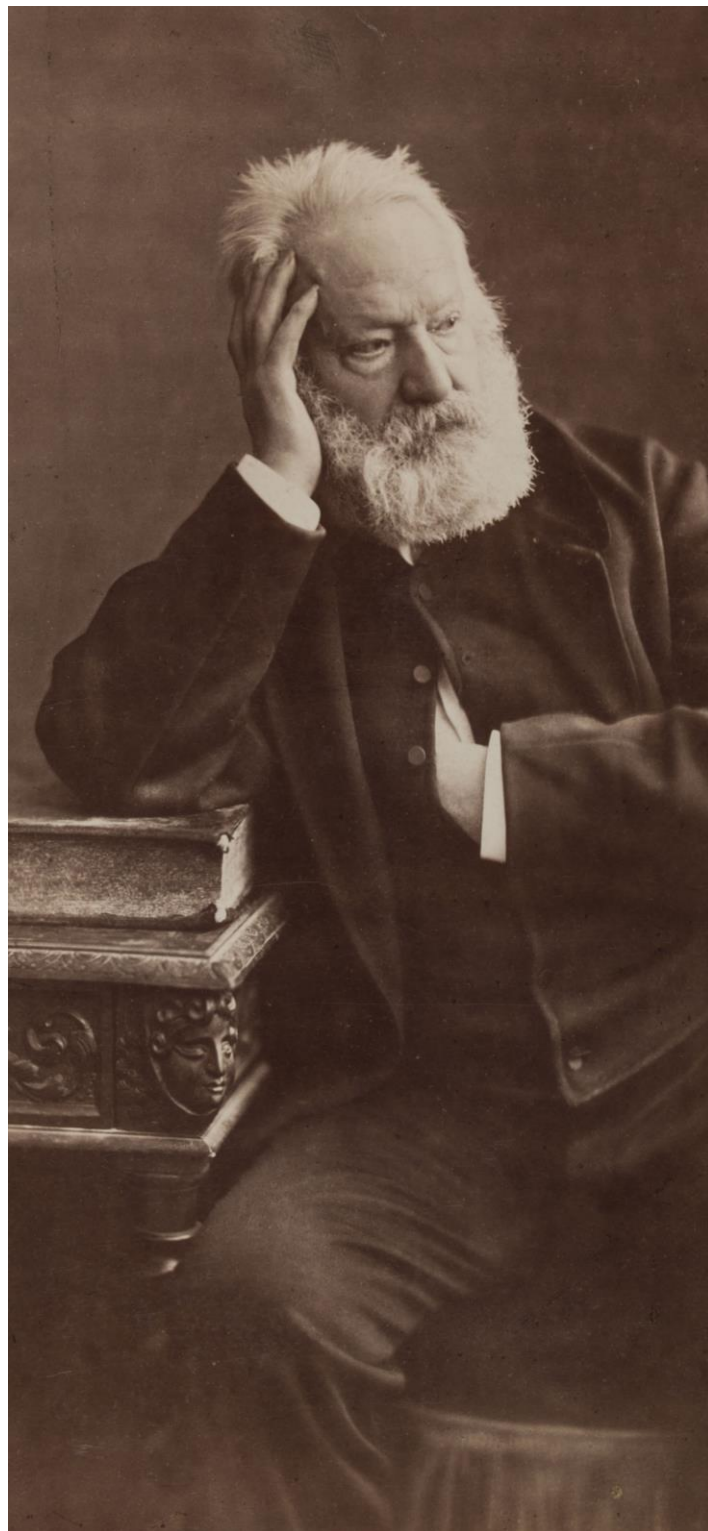
His literary genius, his proximity to the people, and his political awareness were publicly recognized in his time by the elite, who bestowed upon him the symbolic status of a national writer.

## THE DEATH OF THE POET

When Victor Hugo was struck by pulmonary congestion in 1885, he knew he would not survive. All the dignitaries gathered at the poet’s bedside, while a crowd of anonymous individuals assembled outside his residence, hoping for good news.

On May 22, 1885, surrounded by his loved ones, Victor Hugo breathed his last. The news was conveyed to the gathered crowd, and quickly, thousands of people rushed there, moved, gathering in front of the deceased’s residence. The decision was made to bury him in the Pantheon, considering that he deserved the recognition of the nation due to his work and political commitments.

**TO GO FURTHER:** ¶4.



03 Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, dit Nadar, *Victor Hugo*, 1878, photography, 41,8 cm x 28 cm. Maison de Victor Hugo – Hauteville House, St. Peter Port

**Victor Hugo had a special and strong connection with the Arc de Triomphe and with the people associated with it. He would express his admiration for the monument in some of his poems.**

### VICTOR HUGO AND ARCHITECTURE

The writer greatly appreciated architecture, considering it the foremost of the arts. It holds a significant place in his work, starting from his early writings, especially in *Hans of Iceland* (1823), *Odes et Ballades* (1826), and *Les Orientales* (1829).

### AN ILLUSTRIOUS WITNESS

Witness to the construction of the Arc de Triomphe, Victor Hugo witnessed the suspension of the works in 1814 following the fall of the Empire. It is nine years later that Louis XVIII declared the resumption of the construction by the ordinance of October 9, 1823, stating that “the Arc de Triomphe de l’Étoile will be immediately completed”.

**TO GO FURTHER:** [1](#).

Victor Hugo, a royalist at that time, then wrote his first poem dedicated to the Arc de Triomphe. He particularly paid tribute to the king who decided to complete the construction of the monument. This poem, titled “À l’Arc de Triomphe de l’Étoile”, was published in *Nouvelles Odes* (1824) and was part of a series of poems in praise of the Bourbon dynasty.

*Triumphal arch! the lightning, by striking down your master,*

*Seemed to have struck your forehead even before it was born.*

*Through our new exploits, you are now revived!*

*For in our illustrious army, it was not desired*

*That he should be, in our renown,*

*An unfinished monument!*

Victor Hugo, *À l’Arc de Triomphe de l’Étoile*, 1823.

**POEM AVAILABLE IN ANNEXES, PAGE 14**

### HIS INVOLVEMENT IN THE CROWNING OF THE ARC DE TRIOMPHE

It was initially planned for the Arc de Triomphe to be crowned with a sculpted group that would sit on the terrace of the monument. Adolphe Thiers, Minister of Commerce and Public Works from 1832, was notably responsible for commissioning this sculpted group intended to adorn the structure. Victor Hugo expressed his opinions several times regarding the choice of the artist who would crown the monument.

In the *Revue de Paris*, an article was published on the subject, strongly in favor of James Pradier, a recognized sculptor who had already been involved in creating decorations on the Arc de Triomphe: “In the present case, Mr. Pradier presents himself, all competition must disappear before him, and we do not doubt that Mr. Thiers, by choosing him, will satisfy the wish of all enlightened friends of art”. Two weeks later, a second article was published. Although both articles appeared anonymously, a letter from Victor Hugo addressed to Achille Brindeau, director and co-owner of the *Revue de Paris*, mentioned the first article and shown that he is indeed the author<sup>2</sup>.

According to an annotation by François Buloz (who became the owner of the magazine in 1834) at the bottom of the letter, Victor Hugo sought to promote Pradier’s candidacy due to the situation of someone they both have in common: Juliette Drouet. Having had a child with James Pradier earlier in her life, she later became the lover of Victor Hugo. According to Sheila Gaudon<sup>3</sup>, enriching the father of her daughter through this official commission could have been a way for Madame Drouet to make him more generous with her, as she was experiencing significant financial difficulties at the time. However, these articles did not have the intended effect but quite the opposite. The magazine *L’Artiste* responded to the *Revue de Paris*<sup>4</sup> by criticizing Pradier’s project and accusing Thiers of being influenced. Faced with all these attacks, Thiers preferred a cautious reaction and suspended his decision. Hugo’s attempt to impose Pradier thus ended in failure.

**TO GO FURTHER:** [+1](#). [¶5](#).

1. *Revue de Paris*, nouvelle série, 1834, t. VII, 3<sup>e</sup> livre, p. 209-211

2. Université de Manchester, Special collection

3. Gaudon, S. (1968). James Pradier, Victor Hugo et l’arc de triomphe de l’Étoile. *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France*, 68(5), p. 713-725

4. *L’Artiste*, 1834, 8<sup>e</sup> vol., 1<sup>re</sup> livr., p.12

## HIS DISCOVERY OF THE COMPLETED ARC DE TRIOMPHE

The day after the official inauguration of the Arc de Triomphe in July 1836, it was the turn of the Parisians to discover the monument, whose construction was finally completed after 30 years. Victor Hugo was among the crowd on the Place de l'Étoile.

On the inner pillars of the Arc, names of generals were inscribed according to the list established by General Baron Cyr Nugues, a former senior officer in the Spanish army, tasked by Auguste Thiers to compile a list from Valmy (1792) to Ligny (1815). However, many citizens, upon discovering these names, complained about not finding the name of one of their family members, believing that it deserved to be engraved there. Victor Hugo's father, Joseph Léopold Sigisbert Hugo, seemed to have been forgotten. Disappointed, the writer concluded his poem *À l'Arc de Triomphe* with these verses:

*When my thought, thus aging your assault,  
Creates a magnificent past from your future,  
Then beneath your greatness, I bow in awe,  
I admire, and, a devoted son animated by art,  
I regret nothing before your sublime wall  
Except the absent Phidias and my forgotten father!*

Victor Hugo, *À l'Arc de Triomphe*, 1837.

### EXCERPT FROM THE POEM AVAILABLE IN ANNEXES, PAGE 15

O4 Pascal Lemaître,  
*Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile*,  
commemorative  
table bearing the  
names of generals,  
photography



TO GO FURTHER: +1.

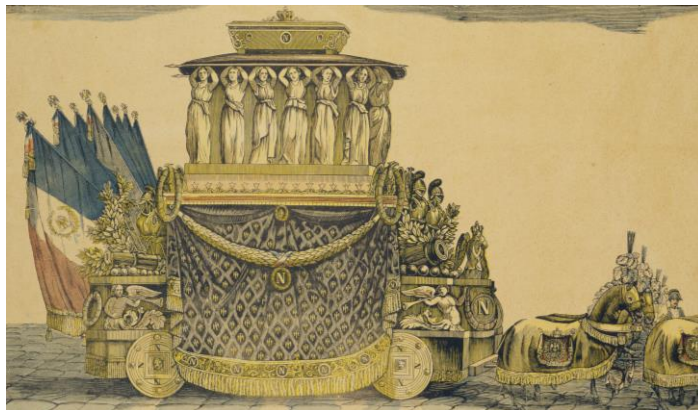
#### \*Lexicon

See the glossary, page 12

## THE RETOUR DES CENDRES OF NAPOLEON

Victor Hugo successively published other texts dedicated to the Arc de Triomphe. We can, for example, mention writings related to the *retour des cendres* (literally “return of the ashes”) of Napoleon.

In 1840, after being transported aboard the ship *La Belle Poule* from Saint Helena, the body of Napoleon I continued its journey on the Seine aboard a steamboat to Courbevoie. It then passed through the Arc de Triomphe on its way to the Invalides.



O5 Pellerin printer's, *Funeral carriage of Napoleon*, 1840, engraving, 46 cm x 64,5 cm. CMN collections, Arc de Triomphe, Paris

Victor Hugo, who attended the ceremony, regretted what appeared to him as a lack of sincerity, which he felt even in the architecture of the catafalque\*. The Victories\* supporting the coronation bore a false coffin, the real one being concealed in the hollow of the pedestal, out of sight. In his collection of notes *Choses vues*, he described the ceremony and shared his feelings as follows:

*[...] the fourteen Victories of the coronation carrying a simulacrum of a coffin on a golden table. The real coffin is invisible. It has been placed in the cellar of the pedestal, which diminishes the emotion.*

*This is the serious flaw of this chariot. It hides what one would like to see, what France has demanded, what the people await, what all eyes seek: the coffin of Napoleon.*

Victor Hugo, *Choses vues*, 1887.

TO GO FURTHER: ¶6.





He also criticized the sculpted group created by Guillaume Abel Blouet, crowning the monument for the occasion.

*A mediocre opera set occupies the top of the Arc de Triomphe, the emperor standing on a chariot surrounded by Renown, with Glory on his right and Grandeur on his left. What does a statue of grandeur mean? How do you express grandeur through a statue? Is it by making it larger than the others? This is monumental gibberish. This poorly gilded decoration faces Paris. Going around Tare, you see it from behind. It's a true theater farm. On the Neuilly side, the emperor, Glories, and Renowns are nothing more than roughly carved frames.*

Victor Hugo, *Choses vues*, 1887.

**EXCERPT FROM THE WORK IN ANNEXES, PAGES 15 AND 16**

**TO GO FURTHER: +1.**

Victor Hugo's writings on the Arc de Triomphe reflected his political shifts. In 1823, Victor Hugo had already compared the Arc de Triomphe to Napoleon in the poem *À l'Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile*. Being a royalist at that time, he praised the completion of the monument's construction decided by the Bourbons, while admiring the monument itself. In 1840, Victor Hugo, after having initially opposed the policies and person of Napoleon Bonaparte, shifted to a liberal stance and began to embrace his ideals. He saw Napoleon as a glorious figure associated with freedom, and the *retour des cendres* appeared to him as a reward for the Emperor, allowing him to pass through the Arc of his triumphs.

*He said, "Oh! I will return!  
I will return! always the same,  
Alone, without purple and without diadem,  
Without battalions and without treasures;  
I want, outlawed, banished, what does it matter?  
To choose, to return, this door,  
This door through which I exit."*

Victor Hugo, *Le Retour de l'Empereur*, 1840

**EXCERPT FROM THE POEM IN ANNEXES, PAGE 16**

**AVENUE VICTOR HUGO**

On February 27, 1881, on Victor Hugo's birthday, an event resembling a national celebration took place. The French gathered at the poet's residence and celebrated his entry into his eightieth year. Residing since 1878 in the former Avenue d'Eylau, near the Arc de Triomphe, Victor Hugo watched and greeted the 600,000 people parading beneath his windows. On this occasion, the part of Avenue d'Eylau where the poet resided was renamed Avenue Victor Hugo. From that day on, mail addressed to him bore the inscription: "To Victor Hugo, in his avenue". During his last four years, his birthdays turned into grand festivities, both republican and political, featuring parades from the Arc de Triomphe to his home. The popular Republic honored and celebrated the poet while he was still alive.

On the day of his death, the municipal council decided to give the writer's name to the second half of the avenue, which still bore the name Eylau, the section leading to the Arc de Triomphe. Since then, Avenue Victor Hugo has been one of the twelve avenues converging at Place Charles de Gaulle.

**NATIONAL FUNERALS**

Stricken with pulmonary congestion, Victor Hugo passed away at his Parisian residence on May 22, 1885. For nearly three weeks, the illness, death, and the poet's funeral received extensive media coverage. Not a day went by without the writer making headlines or being the subject of articles spanning several pages. This event marked a turning point on a national scale, leading to the decision to organize national funerals in tribute to the writer. Starting from the Arc de Triomphe, the funeral procession transported the writer's body to the Pantheon, where he was later buried.

The Prime Minister, Henri Brisson, announced to the Senate the submission of a bill to grant national funerals to the poet. He declared at the opening of the session, "His genius dominates our century. France, through him, shone upon the world. Letters are not alone in mourning, but also the homeland and humanity, anyone who reads and thinks throughout the entire universe... It is an entire population who will lead his funerals". The organization of these funerals was voted on almost unanimously by the Senate, then by the Chamber of Deputies, and a commission tasked with organizing the event was created.

## THE WAKE UNDER THE ARC DE TRIOMPHE

On May 31, 1885, at five-thirty in the morning, the coffin left Avenue Victor Hugo where the poet resided to reach Place de l'Étoile. There, an increasingly large crowd was already waiting. "Long live Victor Hugo!" chanted accompany his arrival at the place de l'Étoile. The event began with the display of Victor Hugo's remained at the Arc de Triomphe during the day on May 31 and the night from May 31 to June 1. The monument became, for a day and a night, a funeral chapel, open to all, so that everyone could come and paid their last respects to the poet.

A massive catafalque, resembling the shape of an inkwell, was located under the grand arch of the Arc de Triomphe. Charles Garnier, the architect of the Opera, had created this platform in a week, free of charge to offer it to Victor Hugo. This impressive structure was in proportion to the grandeur of the square and reflected the celebrated personality. Placed between four funeral urns, distant viewers could have a sight of the coffin placed at the top. The catafalque was composed of several tiers, from which numerous draperies fell. It was adorned with palm branches crossing a wreath, as well as a republican emblem and the republican motto. In the center, French flags emerged from a shield adorned with the writer's initials. At the base of this significant catafalque, several hundred flower wreaths were placed.

TO GO FURTHER: ¶7.



06



07

The two small lateral arches of the Arc de Triomphe were closed with black drapes, and a black crepe veil hung on the left side of the monument. During this period, monument was crowned by a sculpted group created by Alexandre Falguière, covered with a veil for the funeral. On the corners, at the level of the upper platform of the monument, four masts bore black flags waving in the wind.

The square was surrounded by forty-four candelabras\*. Garnier chose to highlight the nocturnal spectacle to enhance the moment of the wake taking place under the arch: the candelabras emitted blue and green flames, the urns or incense burners diffused incense vapors and flames, while the cuirassiers\* on guard brandished torches. On each side, there were large medallions with the portrait of the poet, accompanied by the inscription "France in mourning. To V. Hugo". His initials were written in many places, and banners bearing the names of his works hung on the vaults of the monument.

On May 31st, long queues formed to allow people to pay their respects to the remains, but one entire day was not enough, and not everyone managed to do so. During the night, a part of the crowd stayed on site, keeping watch over the deceased in a less solemn manner. There was singing, drinking, eating, and purchasing souvenirs. It was a genuine popular celebration taking place in the upscale neighborhoods. This scandalized especially the Catholic press, and some even called it a "funfair". According to Alexandrine Achille and Judith Perrignon, the deceased himself could have been the author of such a scene<sup>5</sup>.

07 Guiaud, *Victor Hugo's funeral, the catafalque under the Arc de Triomphe*, after 1885, drawing, 61,4 cm x 84,4 cm. Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris, Paris

06 Charles Garnier, *Erection of the cenotaph built under the Arc de Triomphe for the national funeral of Victor Hugo*, 1885, drawing, watercolor and gouache, 52,2 cm x 31,1 cm. CMN collections

\*Lexicon

See the glossary, page 1

5. Achille, A., Belaval, P., & Audinet, G. (2020). *Victor Hugo: la liberté au Panthéon*, p. 140



## THE FUNERAL CEREMONY

At ten-thirty in the morning on Monday, June 1st, twenty-one salvo fired from the Hôtel des Invalides officially opened the funeral ceremony. Fired every half-hour, they marked the entirety of the event. The Republican Guard played Frédéric Chopin's *Funeral March* before the speeches were delivered. Representatives of the state, the department, and the city spoke at the Arc de Triomphe, while representatives of artistic and foreign organizations expressed themselves at the Pantheon. In total, nineteen speakers delivered speeches in honor of Victor Hugo on that day.

After the funeral praises given at the foot of the immense catafalque, glorifying the man and his work, the funeral procession set off. Eleven floats, pulled by horses and laden with wreaths and flowers, were preceded by drums. They were followed by the simple and modest hearse carrying the late poet.

If the hearse was so simple, it was due to the request in Victor Hugo's will: "I give fifty thousand francs to the poor. I wish to be carried to the cemetery in their hearse". Part of the public saw this grand ceremony as contradicting the deceased's wishes, considering this "hearse of the poor" as hypocrisy, given the grandeur of the event taking place all around. Victor Hugo's wish regarding his hearse dated back to the *retour des cendres* of Napoleon, for which he had regretted not seeing the real coffin, which was placed in the base.

The floats and the hearse were preceded by a group of twelve poets chosen by the family, a delegation from the city of Besançon, Victor Hugo's hometown, as well as the press and artistic societies. A few meters away, the family and friends of the late writer walked silently. The republican procession consisted of twenty groups, each bringing together dozens of societies, circles, associations, or committees, among others.

The procession took the Avenue des Champs-Élysées to Place de la Concorde, crossed the Seine, and followed Boulevard Saint-Germain before finally reaching the Pantheon. The head of the procession arrived at its destination more than two hours after leaving Place de l'Étoile. A second catafalque awaited there, covered in black and silver drapes, echoing the ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe. It was set up at the top of the steps of the monument, where dozens of flower crowns had been placed. Speeches were given before the ceremony continued inside the monument with Victor Hugo's close associates, as well as public figures and official representatives. The last groups of the procession had not yet left Place de l'Étoile when the coffin was lowered into the crypt.



08 Jean-Paul Sinibaldi, *Victor Hugo's funeral*, 1885, oil on canvas.  
Maison de Victor Hugo, Paris

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CROWD

These funerals mobilized a very significant turnout, bringing together between one and two million people. Among all these participants, a large number came from other cities or countries to attend the event, leading to a complete occupation of all hotel rooms in the capital. Everyone was impressed by the magnitude of this crowd of "unprecedented greatness", equivalent to nearly a third of the Parisian population.





This crowd reached unprecedented proportions. Dense and difficult to quantify, it played a major role at the heart of the event. Period photographs depicted a veritable human tide, gathered on sidewalks, at windows, and on rooftops, moved as the hearse passed before them. Chairs were rented, and people climbed on stepstools, scaffolding, trees, roofs, statues, fountains, and even kiosks. Owners bargained for their spots, renting out a space at the front of a balcony for 15 francs, or 150 francs if it was located on Rue Soufflot, the most sought after. This unprecedented mobilization illustrated the extent of Victor Hugo's popularity.

However, this crowd was both anticipated and feared by the organizers of the funeral. The committee was afraid of disorder and excesses, so it supervised the event to ensure its smooth progress. In the end, no serious incidents had been reported.

Schools, theaters, and stores were closed for the occasion, allowing a majority to attend this celebration. However, even though the initially planned date was Sunday, May 31, to enable everyone to participate, the events ultimately took place on Monday, a workday. This meant that workers and employees could not attend. Despite some complaints expressed by a few of them, the date did not change.

Usually held in enclosed spaces such as churches, funerals are often reserved for a select few. This was not the case for Victor Hugo's, which took place in the street, an open space accessible to everyone, without distinction of social class. These funerals thus took on an egalitarian and, consequently, democratic dimension.

**DISCORDANT VOICES**

Despite the popular enthusiasm surrounding these funerals, criticism was not lacking. Some compared it to a bacchanalia\* and criticized the laxity of law enforcement, which, according to them, had transformed a sacred ritual into a general debauchery.

The secular nature of these funerals also caused controversy, setting the secular Republic against the Catholic and royalist Church, which criticized the absence of a religious dimension for an event such as a funeral.

**AN EVENT WITHOUT EQUAL**

There is no shortage of testimonials to demonstrate how unprecedented this event is.

At the Pantheon, it was heard, "No funerals have been more magnificent, more significant, more triumphant". The poet and academician Émile Augier declared, "We are not witnessing a funeral, but a coronation", and Charles Floquet went further, referring to it as an "apotheosis\*". Even today, we find no equivalent. Victor Hugo's funeral remains the reference for national exaltation.



09 Anonymous, *Funeral of Victor Hugo - the hearse on Rue Soufflot*, 1885, photography, 8,4 cm x 17 cm. Maison de Victor Hugo – Hauteville House

**\*Lexicon**

See the glossary, page 12

6. Avner Ben-Amos, « Les Funérailles de Victor Hugo », *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Pierre Nora [sous la direction de], p. 451



10 Guillaume Dubufe, *L'apothéose de Victor Hugo*, 1888, oil on canvas, 97 cm x 168 cm. CMN collections, Arc de Triomphe, Paris

*L'Apothéose de Victor Hugo* (literally “The Apotheosis of Victor Hugo”) is a sketch for the *Trinité Poétique* (meaning “Poetic Trinity” in English), created by Guillaume Dubufe in 1888. In this work, the painter allegorically depicted the funeral of Victor Hugo, which had occurred three years earlier.

The artwork features an architectural structure, composed of two columns dividing the painting into three distinct parts. The central arch opens onto the wake organized at the Arc de Triomphe in honor of Victor Hugo. In this scene, one could see Charles Garnier’s catafalque, as well as a tricolor French flag floating at the center of the artwork, capturing attention with its vibrant colors. The crowd is depicted at the base of the Arc, and it is almost possible to imagine the surrounding clamor by seeing trumpets in the hands of some. Behind all the smoke, the monument takes shape in the blue night, and ghostly angelic figures add a fantastical touch to the scene unfolding before our eyes.

This work is a sketch, and it is possible to identify the broad brushstrokes applied to the canvas, a testament to the speed of execution. The final work was presented at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1888, under the name *Trinité poétique*. It is a very large triptych, with the three compartments connected by golden arches. The central panel is dedicated to Victor Hugo, the right one to Lamartine, and the left one to Alfred de Musset. The central part thus represents the funeral of Hugo, similar to its sketch, *L'Apothéose de Victor Hugo*. The figures hovering like a cloud of birds are, in reality, the muses of the poet: the muse of *Les Orientales*, the muse of *Les Feuilles d'automne*, the muse of *Les Voix intérieures*, the muse of *Les Contemplations*, and the muse of *L'Année terrible* who brings the national flag to the poet’s tomb. They bear the names of volumes of poetry written by the author.

**Guillaume Dubufe’s *Apothéose de Victor Hugo* is stored in the reserves of the Arc de Triomphe for the year 2023. A re-exhibition project of the artwork in the attic room of the monument is scheduled for 2024.**

TO GO FURTHER: ¶8.

## VICTOR HUGO'S CONNECTION WITH THE PANTHEON

It seems that Victor Hugo preferred the Arc de Triomphe to the Pantheon, as he once confided to the writer and journalist Richard Lesclide: “The Arc de Triomphe is truly grand; I doubt the Pantheon will ever be so. It’s not just because it resembles a Savoy cake, but in this superposition of domes, cupolas, and pediments, nothing surprises me, nothing attracts me”.

However, Hugo also expressed a strong attachment to the Pantheon, as can be inferred from this excerpt from his poem *Hymne*:

*It is for these departed, whose shadow is welcomed here,  
That the lofty Pantheon rises into the sky,  
Above Paris, the city of a thousand towers,  
The queen of our Tyres and our Babylons,  
This crown of columns  
That the rising sun gilds every day!*

Victor Hugo, *Hymne*, 1831

### POEM IN ANNEXES, PAGE 17

## THE FUNERAL OF MIRABEAU

In April 1791, Honoré de Mirabeau became the first person to enter the Pantheon by decree of the French National Assembly, stating that “the new building of Sainte-Geneviève will be destined to receive the ashes of great men, starting from the era of French liberty”. Victor Hugo wrote about Mirabeau’s death and funeral in 1834. He described similarities with his own funerals, which would have taken place ninety-four years after those of Mirabeau. This included the significance of the crowd during the event and the special connection Mirabeau had with it.

*This man, who had just died, was Honoré de Mirabeau. [...] The next day, the people formed a procession for his funeral that stretched over more than a league.*

Victor Hugo, *Étude sur Mirabeau*, 1834

These writings also discuss the symbolism that Mirabeau’s entry into the Pantheon represents:

*He dies on April 1st. On the 5th, the Pantheon is invented for him.*

Victor Hugo, *Étude sur Mirabeau*, 1834

### TO GO FURTHER: ¶9.

## THE BURIAL OF VICTOR HUGO AT THE PANTHEON

The church of Sainte-Geneviève was transformed into the Pantheon during the French Revolution and oscillated between these two functions for a long time. It regained its status as a church for the last time in 1851, with the advent of the Second Empire under Napoleon III. The monument was thus closed to great men by the man whom Victor Hugo dubbed “Napoleon the Little”, before the burial of the poet definitively transformed the place into a secular temple. Some described this entry into the Pantheon as a sort of ironic vengeance of history.

However, this desacralization of the monument was not universally well-received. *L’Univers*, a French Catholic daily newspaper, wrote: “God will be driven out to make room for Mr. Hugo”, seeing this secularization as a symbol of a return to the “cult of the dead understood in a pagan manner”.

The burial of the poet remains an exceptional event that will immortalize Victor Hugo, simultaneously elevating the Pantheon within the Republic.



11 Victor Hugo - Crypt of the Panthéon, 2023, photography. Arc de Triomphe, CMN, Paris

### TO GO FURTHER: ¶10.

# 5. HUGO AND THE PANTHEON

\* **Apotheosis**

An apotheosis is an exceptional honor granted to an individual, recognized by public opinion as eminent.

\* **Bacchanalia**

A noisy party, degenerating into all sorts of excesses.

\* **Bourbons**

The Bourbons were a royal dynasty that played a major role in European history. They ruled France from 1589 to 1789, and then from 1814 to 1830. With the abdication of Charles X in 1830, the last sovereign of the senior branch of the Bourbons to reign in France, the July Monarchy was established, placing Louis-Philippe on the throne as a member of a younger branch of the House of Bourbon.

\* **Candelabra**

A candelabrum is a metal column supporting a light source for public illumination.

\* **Catafalque**

Decorated platform designed to accommodate a real or symbolic coffin.

\* **Napoleonic Code**

The Civil Code of the French is a legal code consisting of laws pertaining to French civil law. The original edition of the French Civil Code was promulgated in 1804 under the initiative of Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1807, the emperor associated his name with what he considered to be his work, renaming it the Napoleonic Code. Even today, some still refer to it as such due to the history of its creation.

\* **Cuirassier**

In the past, a cuirassier was a soldier belonging to the heavy cavalry and wearing a cuirass. Today, it is a soldier belonging to certain units of the army referred to as “arme blindée et cavalerie” (literally “armored and cavalry”).

\* **National Writer**

A national writer is an individual creator recognized as a spokesperson for a collective identity. They embody an image of the nation, both through their work and their persona, navigating between literature and politics.

\* **Peer of France**

The Peers of France were members of the Chamber of Peers, the upper house of the Parliament from June 1814 to February 1848. The members were appointed by the king.

\* **Victory**

Divine figure, most often represented in the form of a winged woman, holding a crown in one hand and a palm branch in the other.

## § Guillaume Dubufe (1853-1909)

Guillaume Dubufe was born in Paris in 1853. He came from a family of artists, being the son of Édouard Dubufe and the grandson of Claude-Marie Dubufe, both painters. He was a student of his father and of Mazerolle, a renowned decorator. The latter steered him away from the family tradition of portraiture by teaching him the fundamental rules of grand decoration. Guillaume Dubufe executed, among other works, the ceiling of the Sorbonne library, that of the Comédie Française foyer, and the three ceilings of the Élysées reception hall. Less known as a portraitist than his father and grandfather, he more usually worked on large surfaces. However, he was also a master of watercolor, a technique from which he created some beautiful small-scale portraits. He was, in fact, one of the founders of the French Watercolorists Salon. Guillaume Dubufe passed away off the coast of Buenos Aires during a journey in 1909.

## § Charles Garnier (1825-1898)

The architect Charles Garnier was born in Paris in 1825. He trained in architects' studios, and at the age of 17, he entered the École des Beaux-Arts, working simultaneously as a draftsman in Viollet-le-Duc's studio. In 1848, he received the first grand prize in architecture from the Prix de Rome, and then he went to Italy, where he stayed for several years before making a trip to Greece. Upon returning to Paris, he undertook some small tasks and had very few accomplishments to his name when he won the competition for the new opera house in 1861. Along with his collaborators, he worked for over twenty years on this immense project, which is now recognized as a remarkable monument and the most representative of the 19th century. Although Charles Garnier is primarily known today for designing the opera house, his activity continued after this major project. Among the buildings he worked on, we can notably mention the Nice Observatory and the Monte-Carlo Casino, for which he designed the gaming and concert halls.

## § Honoré de Mirabeau (1749-1791)

Honoré-Gabriel Riquetti de Mirabeau was a writer and a major political figure of the French Revolution, renowned for his oratory skills. He was a deputy of the Third Estate at the General Estates of 1789, his poor reputation preventing him from representing the Nobility, from which he originated, at the Assembly. Officially, he fervently advocated for the ideas of the Revolution. His sudden death plunged the people into shock, and it was decided by the Legislative Assembly, of which he was the president, that he should be buried in the Pantheon. However, after his death, it was discovered that he was secretly corresponding with Louis XVI, working in favor of a constitutional monarchy and serving his personal interests. When this double game was uncovered, he was removed from the Pantheon.

## § James Pradier (1790-1852)

Born in Geneva in 1790, Jean-Jacques Pradier moved to Paris at the age of 17. In 1809, he joined the studio of François-Frédéric Lemot with the aim of studying sculpture and enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1811. It was on this occasion that he anglicized his name to James Pradier. He won the Prix de Rome in 1813 before staying at the Villa Medici. His career continued upon his return to Paris and was very successful. He received prestigious commissions from the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy, including the *Fames* adorning the spandrels of the Arc de Triomphe. In addition to these significant commissions, Pradier is now known for his female nudes. Throughout his career, the sculptor received numerous distinctions and awards and held prestigious positions. Elected professor of sculpture at the Academy des Beaux-Arts in 1827, he was also made a *Chevalier* ("knight") of the Legion of Honor in 1828 and an *Officier* ("officer") of the Legion of Honor in 1834. His works were distributed to all national museums in France, but he received fewer public commissions than most of his competitors.

## À L'ARC DE TRIOMPHE DE L'ÉTOILE



I

*France has palaces, tombs, and porticos,  
Old castles brimming with ancient banners,  
Her pious valor, lavish with proud examples,  
To adorn these proud temples,  
Strips foreign camps bare.*

*In her cities, one sees populated monuments,  
Rome and its gods, Memphis and its dark mausoleums;  
The lion of Venice has slept within their walls;  
And when, to beautify our vast Babylons,  
Bronze is lacking for its columns,  
She asks it from the enemy!*

*When her flaming armor gleams in battles,  
Her august standard adorned with fleurs-de-lis  
Drives squadrons away like herds;  
Then, she offers gifts to the vanquished after wars,  
And, like common trinkets,  
Mixes in their own flags.*

II

*Triumphal arch! the lightning, by striking down your  
master,  
Seemed to have struck your as-yet-unborn front.  
Through our new exploits, you are now resurrected!  
For in our illustrious army, it was not desired  
That there be an unfinished monument  
To our renown!*

In 1823, Victor Hugo wrote his first poem about the Arc de Triomphe. A royalist at that time, he paid homage to the king who decided to complete its construction, while also admiring the monument.

*Tell the centuries the name of their magnanimous leader.  
Let it be read on your forehead that no sublime laurel  
Can escape French swords.  
Rise up to the heavens, portico of victory!  
May the giant of our glory  
Pass without bowing!*

**Victor Hugo,**  
« À l'Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile », *Nouvelles Odes*, 1824, Paris,  
Ladvoat editions









*A mediocre opera set occupies the top of the Arc de Triomphe, with the emperor standing on a chariot surrounded by Renown, with Glory to his right and Grandeur to his left. What does a statue of grandeur signify? How can grandeur be expressed through a statue? Is it by making it larger than the others? This is monumental gibberish. This poorly gilded set faces Paris. When circling around Tare, it can be seen from behind. It is a true theatrical farm. On the Neuilly side, the emperor, Glory, and Renown are nothing more than roughly carved frames.*

**Victor Hugo**

*Choses vues*, 1887, Paris, J. Hetzel et Cie ; A. Quantin editions

### **LE RETOUR DE L'EMPEREUR**

#### **[EXTRACT]**

In this poem, Victor Hugo addressed the *retour des cendres* of Napoleon. No longer a royalist at this time, he did not approach the subject in the same way as in his first poem on the Arc de Triomphe published in 1823 (see annex page 14). With his poems and narratives, the author contributed to the significant resonance of the event.



*He said, "Oh! I will return!  
I will return! always the same,  
Alone, without purple and without diadem,  
Without battalions and without treasures;  
I want, outlawed, banished, what does it matter?  
To choose, to re-enter, this door,  
This door through which I exit.*

*"One night, in a storm,  
Brought back by a wind from the skies,  
With lightning on my head,  
I will emerge, alive, joyful!  
My old companions of adventure  
Will sleep in the dark mist,*

*"And suddenly, in the east,  
They will see shining, oh deliverance!  
My eye, radiant for France,  
Flaming for England! »*

*"I will appear in the darkness  
To this Paris that adored me;  
Day follows funeral nights,  
And my people will rise!  
It will rise with joy,  
As long as in the shadows it sees me  
Chasing away the foreigner, vile herd,  
Pale, hands soaked in blood,  
With the hilt of a sword,  
With the tatters of a flag!"*

\*

*Sire, you will return to your capital,  
Without tocsin, without combat, without struggle and  
without fury,*

*Drawn by eight horses under the triumphal arch,  
In emperor's attire!*

*Through that same gate where God accompanies you,  
Sire, you will return on a sublime chariot,  
Glorious, crowned, holy like Charlemagne,  
And grand like Caesar!*

*On your golden scepter, which no victor shall tread,  
One will see your eagle with the crimson beak gleam,  
And on your mantle, your bees in multitude  
Quivering in the sunlight.*

**Victor Hugo**

« Le Retour de l'Empereur », *La Légende des siècles*, 1883, Paris, J. Hetzel et Cie ; A Quantin et Cie, final édition

## HYMNE

This poem was written in July 1831, on the occasion of the commemorative ceremony for the fallen during the *Trois Glorieuses* (“Three Glorious Days”). It testified, among other things, to his attachment to the Pantheon.



*Those who piously died for their homeland  
Have the right to have the crowd come and pray at their coffin.  
Among the most beautiful names, theirs is the most beautiful.  
All glory near them fades and falls ephemeral;  
And, as a mother would,  
The voice of an entire people lulls them in their tomb.*

*Glory to our eternal France!  
Glory to those who died for her!  
To the martyrs! to the valiant! to the strong!  
To those inspired by their example,  
Who seek a place in the temple,  
And who will die as they have died!*

*It is for these dead, whose shade is welcome here,  
That the lofty Pantheon rises into the sky,  
Above Paris, the city of a thousand towers,  
The queen of our Tyrs and our Babylons,  
This crown of columns  
That the rising sun gilds every day!*

*Glory to our eternal France!  
Glory to those who died for her!  
To the martyrs! To the valiant! To the strong!  
To those inspired by their example,  
Who seek a place in the temple,  
And who will die as they have died!*

*Thus, when such dead lie in the tomb,  
In vain forgetfulness, dark night where all that falls goes,  
Passes over their grave where we bow down;  
Each day, rising more faithful for them alone,  
Glory, an ever-new dawn,  
Shines on their memory and burnishes their names!*

*Glory to our eternal France!  
Glory to those who died for her!  
To the martyrs! to the brave! to the strong!  
To those inflamed by their example,  
Who seek a place in the temple,  
And who will die as they have died!*

**Victor Hugo**

« Hymne », *Les Chants du crépuscule*, 1835, Paris, Eugène Renduel editions



## ÉTUDE SUR MIRABEAU

### [EXTRACT]

In 1834, Victor Hugo wrote about the funeral of Honoré de Mirabeau, the first person to enter the Pantheon by decree of the National Assembly in April 1791. The reader could find passages reminiscent of the funeral of Victor Hugo, which had taken place almost a hundred years later.



[...] in 1791, on April 1st, an immense crowd congested the surroundings of a house in the Chaussée-d'Antin. This crowd was somber, silent, dismayed, profoundly sad. There was a man in the house who was dying. The people flooded the street, the courtyard, the staircase, the antechamber. Several had been there for three days. People spoke in hushed tones, as if afraid to breathe, anxiously questioning those who came and went. This crowd was to that man like a mother to her child. The doctors had no more hope. Occasionally, bulletins, snatched by a thousand hands, scattered through the crowd, and the sound of women sobbing could be heard. A young man, exasperated with grief, loudly offered to open his artery to infuse his rich and pure blood into the depleted veins of the dying man. Everyone, even the less intelligent, seemed weighed down by the thought that it was not just a man who was dying; it might be a whole people. Only one question was being asked in the city.

*This man breathed his last.*

A few minutes after the doctor, who was standing by his bedside, had said, "He is dead", the President of the National Assembly rose from his seat and exclaimed, "He is dead", so quickly did this fatal cry fill Paris. One of the leading speakers in the Assembly, Mr. Barrère de Vieuzac, rose in tears and said the following in a voice that let out more sobs than words: "I request that the Assembly record in the minutes of this mournful day the testimony of the regrets it expresses at the loss of this great man; and that, on behalf of the nation, an invitation be extended to all members of the Assembly to attend his funeral."

[...]

The directory of the department proposed to give him as a tomb "the new church of Sainte-Geneviève", and to decree that "this building would henceforth be destined to receive the ashes of great men". On this matter, Mr. Pastoret, the prosecutor-general syndic of the commune, said: "The tears shed over the loss of a great man should not be sterile tears. Several ancient peoples enclosed their priests and heroes in separate monuments. Let us now render this kind of homage to piety and courage to the love of the happiness and liberty of men. Let the temple of religion become the temple of the homeland; let the tomb of a great man become the altar of liberty!"

The Assembly applauded. [...] There was no longer left or right that day in the National Assembly, which unanimously passed this decree: "The new building of Sainte-Geneviève will be intended to gather the ashes of great men. Above the pediment will be engraved these words:

TO GREAT MEN  
THE GRATEFUL HOMELAND.

The legislative body will decide alone to which men this honor will be awarded. Honoré Riquetti Mirabeau is deemed worthy of receiving this honor."

The man who had just died was Honoré de Mirabeau.

[...] The next day, the people formed a procession for his funeral that extended over more than a league [...].

### Victor Hugo

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11. page 02

**Theme:** The struggle for the abolition of the death penalty

**Continue your visit:** The Conciergerie (Paris), which was the prison of the Palais de la Cité, is the setting of Victor Hugo's work *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* (1829).

12. page 02

**Theme:** The novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831)

**Continue your visit:** The Notre-Dame Cathedral of Paris.

13. page 03

**Theme:** The exile of Victor Hugo

**Continue your visit:** Hauteville House, Victor Hugo's exile home in Guernsey (St Peter Port).

14. page 03

**Theme:** The life and work of Victor Hugo

**Continue your visit:** La Maison de Victor Hugo (Paris).

15. page 04

**Theme:** James Pradier

**Continue your visit:** The *Fames* on the spandrels of the Arc de Triomphe, Pradier's works exhibited at the Louvre Museum (Paris), *The Amazone* at the Cirque d'Hiver (Paris), the Victories around Napoleon's tomb at the Invalides (Paris). The Pradier Fountain (Nîmes) and the sculptures at the musée des Beaux-arts in Nîmes.

16. page 05

**Theme:** The *retour des cendres*

**Continue your visit:** The tomb of Napoleon at the Invalides (Paris), the Musée Carnavalet collection (Paris).

17. page 07

**Theme:** Charles Garnier

**Continue your visit:** The Palais Garnier, the Observatory of Nice and the Casino de Monte-Carlo (Monaco).

18. page 10

**Theme:** Guillaume Dubufe

**Continue your visit:** The musée Jean-Jacques Henner (Paris) which was also the residence of Guillaume Dubufe, the musée d'Orsay (Paris) where a sketch of the ceiling of the foyer of the Comédie Française is exhibited, the virtual tour of the Palais de l'Élysée (Paris) to discover Guillaume Dubufe's decorations in the reception hall.

19. page 11

**Theme:** The burial of Honoré de Mirabeau at the Pantheon

**Continue your visit:** The sculpture by Jean-Antoine Injalbert at the Pantheon (Paris).

10. page 11

**Theme:** The burial of Victor Hugo at the Pantheon

**Continue your visit:** The Pantheon (Paris), including the visit to the crypt.

1. page 04

Learning resource – The Arc de Triomphe

+1. page 04

Learning resource – The sculpted decorations

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