

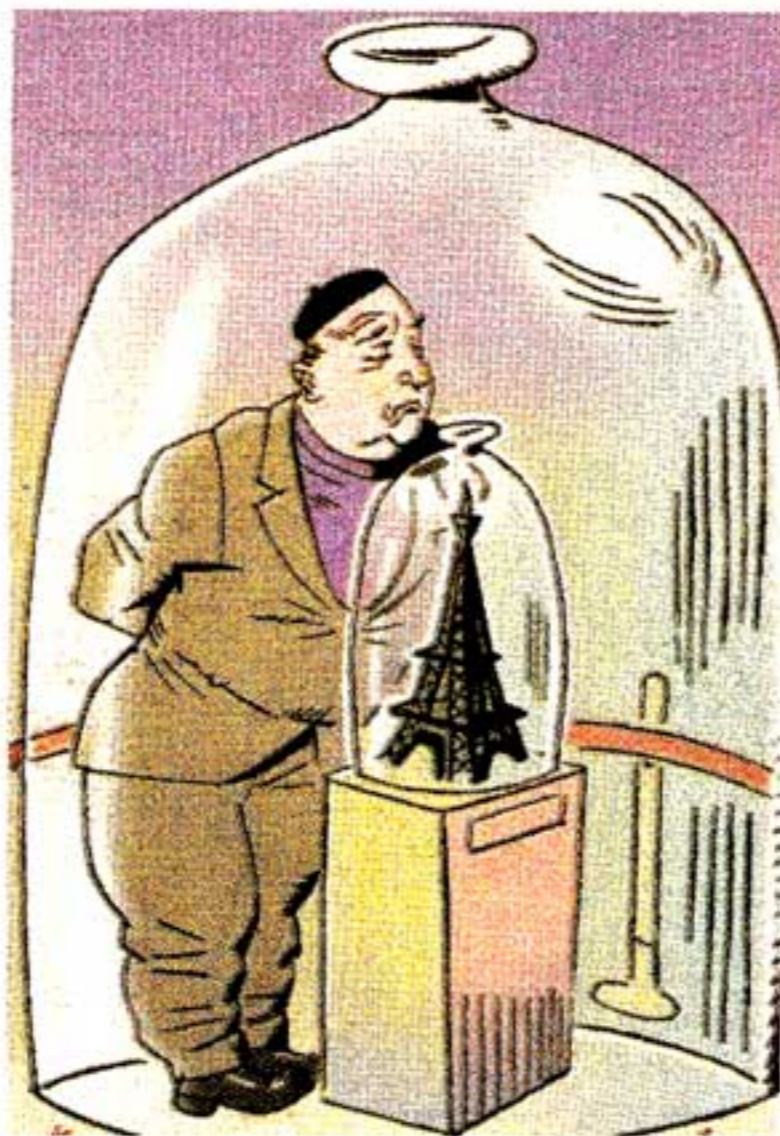
Taking Stock of the New Museum Tour-de-France

FRANCE IS neither the leading political nor economic power in the western world, but it is energetically reinforcing its position as a cultural preserve. Of course, the French are renowned for the pride they take in their art, cuisine and history. But the scale on which public buildings, chateaus, gardens and even old factories are being named "heritage" sites in today's France is remarkable.

It also seems grandiosely nationalistic: The industry now burgeoning around these artifacts of French heritage is quite deliberately aimed at encouraging citizens to admire them as emblems of the glory of "La France." The proper preservation of its riches in art and architecture should, the common belief goes, secure the greatness of France at a time when much of its impact on the new global order is decisively waning. But as much as the world at large venerates the impersonal goods afforded by speed, information and expanding commercialism, the French will always cling tenaciously — almost admirably — to the belief that culture is power.

The Culture Ministry's departments of architecture and heritage were united last year to manage more than 40,000 historic sites. Fortified with a budget of nearly \$300 million in 1999, the Architecture and Heritage Department has been busy carrying out its sweeping policy of restoration, targeting the great cathedrals: Notre Dame in Paris, Chartres, Bourges, Tours, Strasbourg, Lyons and Rouen. The new department pursues a "global vision" in city planning, ensuring that new building projects respect architectural heritage. Which is to say, in effect, that they must submit to it.

Vigilance about respecting heritage extends down to the smallest architectural details. Before Giorgio Armani refurbished his boutique in Paris's exclusive



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Place Vendome, for example, heritage experts advised him on the appropriate color of the window trim. They produced drawings of the 18th-Century entrance door he was obliged to replicate in keeping with the original design of the square.

The same sort of anxious, antiquarian attention to detail is being lavished upon venerable old buildings across the country. Conservation, in France as else-

where, has become a mantra of civic responsibility. This is a good thing, generally, given the alternatives of neglect, ruin or a wrecking ball. Lasers are scaling away layers of grimy pollution from Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, revealing the lovely sand-colored stone underneath. The front facade alone has taken a decade to complete (the unveiling will be in December). The architect in charge, Bernard Fonquernie, sees himself as a doctor extending the life of a patient. But conservation is like trying to keep a man of 130 alive: You can do it only with a plastic heart, a plastic brain, a plastic limb, Fonquernie explains, but you must do it.

Why not let some buildings go? This he has no answer to: It is unthinkable. The French don't find the heavy presence of the past constricting; it is the very source of their identity. The vigorous restoration program under way in Paris includes the Opera Garnier, being refurbished for 2000 and the grand moss-covered fountains at the Place de la Concorde. Some half a dozen museums are closed for renovations. Yet the innumerable acts of preserving, memorializing and historical-labeling sweeping through the country suggest that France is turning itself into an immaculately tended museum.

The French may be more infatuated with their past than others — but they are also worried. Old communities, customs and kinds of knowledge are disappearing here, as is the case everywhere else. During the 16th annual Journées du Patrimoine (Heritage Days) last month, thousands of France's most guarded institutions and monuments, normally off limits, threw open their doors to the public for a weekend. At the opening ceremony, Minister of Culture Catherine Trautmann proclaimed that cultural heritage was a means to reinvent the future when society lacked other fixed reference points.

The annual Heritage Days are meant to help the French reconnect to their past. Regardless of whether they succeed in this aim, they offer fascinating glimpses into corridors of power and wealth. Under this year's theme of "patrimony and citizenship," the public was invited into ministries, embassies, banks, law courts, mayor's offices, the National Assembly,

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Museum Tour

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museums and archives. Visitors were also able to tour a nuclear power plant, a coal mine, a World War II bomb shelter and other 20th-Century constructions tossed into the grab-bag labeled Heritage for fear of being lost in the chaotic present.

I wanted to see General de Gaulle's office most of all but the line was too long. Instead, I settled for the headquarters of the French Legion of Honor in the Hotel de Salm around the corner. Behind the grand facade of this palais lay more grandeur: a marble foyer with trompe l'oeil ceiling paintings; a portrait gallery of military heroes watched over by guards in full uniform; a rotunda decorated with mirrors and bronze figures in gold robes holding up candelabras. The French filed by in awestruck silence.

The pomp and circumstance resounding through Napoleon's Legion of Honor — essentially a Hall of Fame — distilled the ambience of many Parisian institutions. Along the Heritage rounds, each building seemed more magnificent than the other, giving ordinary citizens a heady taste of everything they never had any access to. All told, 11.5 million visits were made to heritage monuments across the country.

The French are hungry for views of their history and glory, and the state's heritage enterprise tries to satisfy this need at great effort and expense. Though historic buildings may lose their meaning, their facades do make the present more beautiful. But the sheer scale of France's heritage initiatives makes the structures seem, more than ever, like set-pieces: They are propped up, polished and protected — and made to stand for all the things that have vanished.