



Large
Print

Astonishing Things

The Drawings of Victor Hugo

The Jillian and Arthur M.
Sackler Wing of Galleries

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- Click “Open file” once you have selected your settings and Voice Aloud will begin reading your file.

Astonishing Things

The Drawings of Victor Hugo

Sackler Galleries

21 March 2025 – 29 June 2025

Contents

North Gallery	Page 2 continued on Page 54
South Gallery	Page 15
West Gallery	Page 36

This exhibition has been made possible as a result of the Government Indemnity Scheme. The Royal Academy of Arts would like to thank HM Government for providing indemnity and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council England for arranging the indemnity.



Department
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Astonishing Things: The Drawings of Victor Hugo is organised by the Royal Academy of Arts in collaboration with Paris Musées - Maison de Victor Hugo and the Bibliothèque nationale de France.



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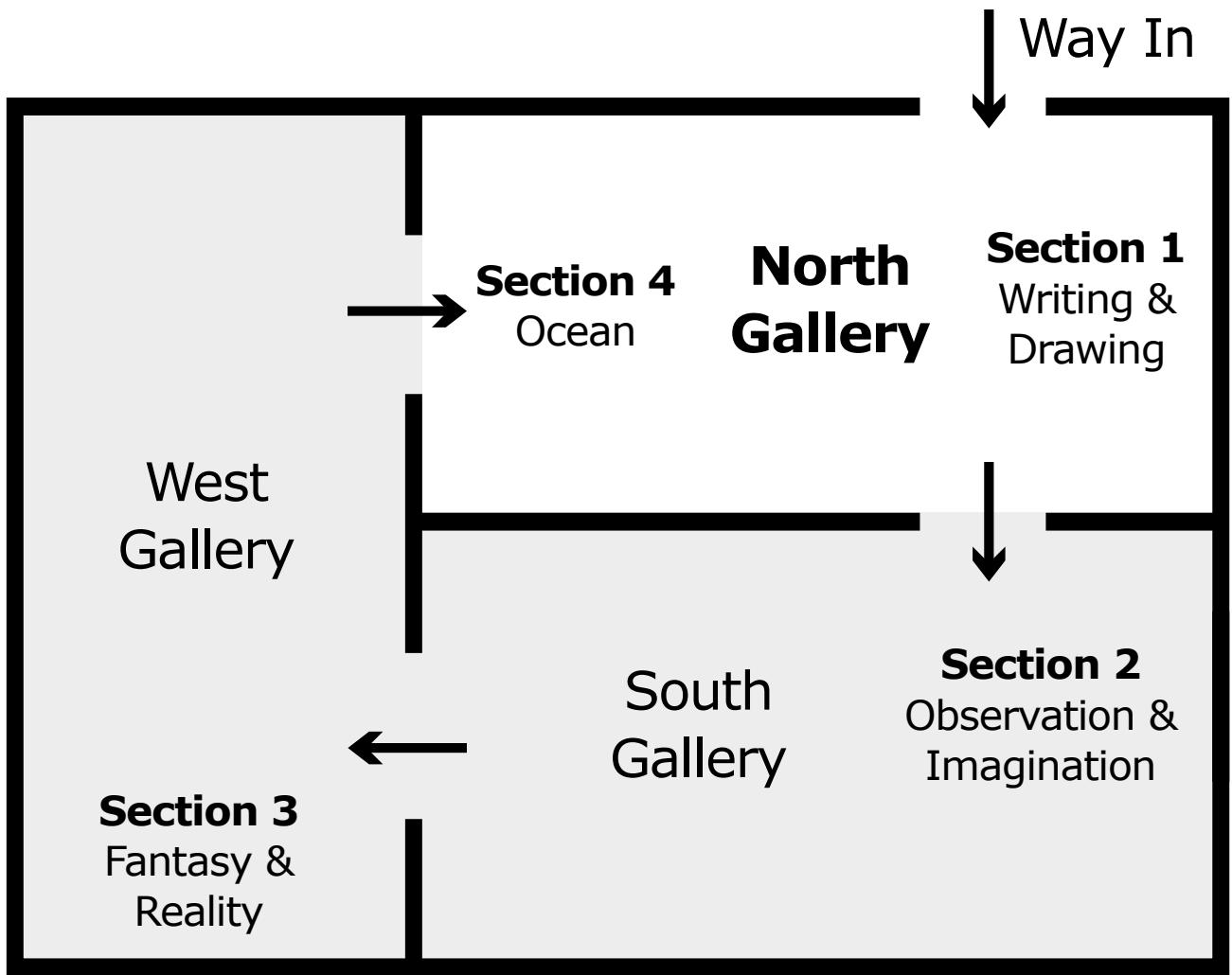


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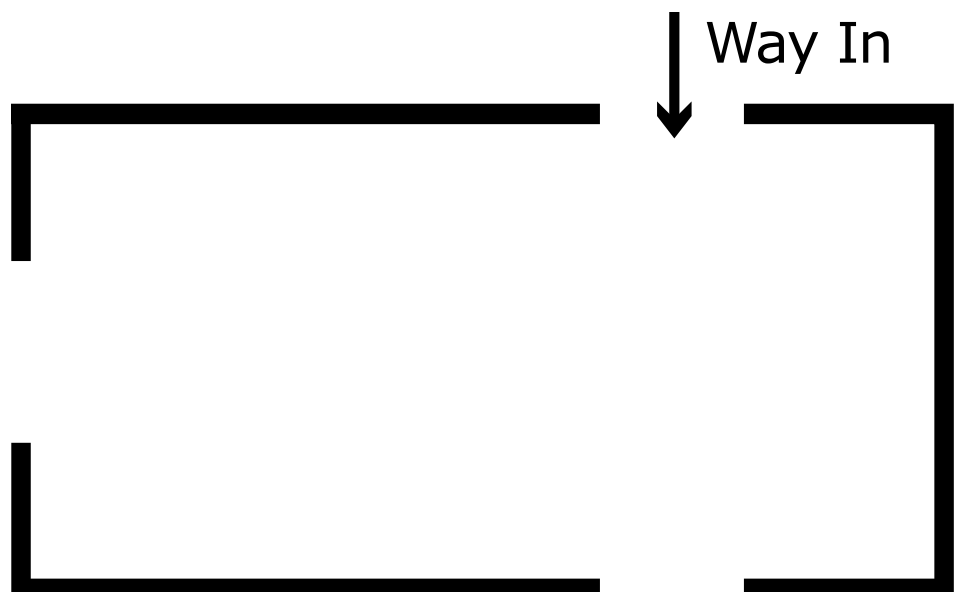
The ISLANDS of
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You are in North Gallery



Writing & Drawing

‘These things people insist on calling my drawings... made in the margins or on the covers of manuscripts during hours of almost unconscious reverie with what remained of the ink in my pen’. – Victor Hugo, 1863

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was a poet, playwright, novelist and politician of extraordinary global fame in the 19th century. Hugo began his career as a royalist, but from 1851 onwards - during a near twenty-year exile on the Channel Islands in opposition to Napoleon III - he came to represent the ideals of the French republic. His life was full of contradictions and personal tragedies, and yet many of his ideas endured: he imagined a “United States of Europe”, campaigned for the abolition of slavery and against capital punishment, and advocated to preserve historic architecture.

In 1890, Vincent van Gogh compared Victor Hugo's works to "astonishing things". It is uncertain whether he had in mind Hugo's drawings - first exhibited in Paris in 1888, three years after their creator's death - or passages from his novels such as 'Les Misérables' (1862), which Van Gogh read avidly, and whose characters had become part of the cultural landscape. The two never met, but shared ideas about creative kinship across times and disciplines. For them both, writing and drawing were parallel creative processes that enriched one another.

Gathered in this exhibition are 70 of the more than 4,000 drawings Hugo is known to have made; those that survive are now so fragile to light that they are scarcely exhibited.

This exhibition is principally drawn from the important collections of the Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris/ Guernsey and the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.

Direct connections to his literary works are rare, most of Hugo's beguiling drawings are not illustrations but deeply personal, exploratory visions. He often gave these works to close friends and family, although a small number were known more widely via published prints. Hugo's public writings and private drawings drew upon shared metaphorical frameworks in his imagination, rooted in grand themes of nature, history and time, and expressed through motifs such as mountains, castles and ruins.

List of works clockwise in order of hang

The Art Lover

1834

Ink and pen on paper

Hugo began drawing informal caricatures in his late twenties, inspired by satirical illustrated magazines like *Le Charivari*, in which he, as a famous figure, was often depicted. Writer Antoine Fontaney described evenings during which Hugo entertained guests by drawing whimsical caricatures which he occasionally left on his children's beds to be discovered when they woke. Throughout his life, Hugo continued to make cartoons of people he observed, protagonists in his stories and, later, mythical creatures.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Charles Hugo (1826-1871)

Victor Hugo Seated on the
Rocher des Proscrits (Exiles
Rock), Jersey

1853

Photograph

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

A Visiting Card for the New Year, Guernsey

1 January 1856

Pen and brown wash, watercolour, gouache, charcoal
and lace imprint on paper

This greeting was probably sent to a friend,
although the recipient is unknown.

Hugo has soaked lace in red ink to make a print, enriching the layered textures of the composition. Here, as elsewhere, Hugo added his surname in the foreground, overshadowing the ruins of a church or a castle in the background. Hugo made this drawing while in exile from France on Guernsey (1855-70), following his outspoken attacks on Napoleon III.

Courtesy of The University of Manchester Library

Le Mythen

c. 1855

Pen and brown ink wash, graphite pencil, black ink, charcoal, black chalk and gold on paper

This drawing uses powerful chiaroscuro to accentuate its subject.

Likely made in exile on Jersey (1852-55), the motif may have origins in an earlier trip Hugo made to Mount Rigi in 1839 and a story told by Hugo's father - a general in Napoleon I's army - about Victor's conception "almost in mid-air" on a peak in the Vosges Mountains. It has been connected to Hugo's poem "The Mountains" ("Les Montagnes") from the collection 'La Légende des siècles' (1855-76), suggesting the drawing became an inspiration for his written work.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Les Orientales

c. 1855–1856

Charcoal, pen, brown ink and wash, white, blue, green and red gouache and lace imprint on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13351, Fol. 8

The Shade of the Manchineel Tree (Notes from a Trip to the Pyrenees and Spain)

1856

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper

The inscription reads:

'It was siesta time. It was midday and the sun was shining in triumph. The vast, bare plain breathed heat like the mouth of an oven. He looked for a tree in whose shade he could sleep and rest. He came across a Manchineel tree'.

Native to the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, the Manchineel trees are so toxic that sheltering beneath them during rain can cause burns, and their fruits, when ingested, can be lethal.

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13350, Fol. 7

The Nest

1867

Pen and brown ink wash and graphite pencil on paper

On 1 January 1868 Hugo dedicated a copy of 'Les Chansons des rues et des bois (Songs of the Streets and Woods)' - poems on themes of nature, often with erotic overtones - to his friend the writer Paul Meurice by adding this drawing of a nesting bird as an informal frontispiece. The drawing was later reproduced in the 1886 edition, is a rare example of how a very personal drawing became public, in this case one year after Hugo's death.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Meeting Room of the Municipal Council of Thionville, after the Entry of the Prussians

1871

Pen, brown and purple ink wash, graphite, black ink and watercolour on paper

When Hugo returned to France in 1870, it was to a country defeated and a capital in chaos; having been in Paris during its Siege, he left the city before the Commune - the violence of which he condemned, but vowed only to return once amnesty for the Communards was guaranteed. Hugo recorded his experience of making this drawing of the municipal council building in Thionville destroyed by fire following bombardments during the Franco-Prussian war.

He refers to his father, an important general in Napoleon I's army:

'In this room, which was the great hall of the city, there was the portrait of my father. He disappeared in the fire with the freedom and nationality of Thionville. The mayor told me this with tears in his eyes. I told him: I am charmed by this ending [...] My father should not have been a prisoner of Prussia, even in effigy. [...] The women know that he defended and saved their city in 1814 and 1815. I drew this room on 30 August 1871, at four o'clock in the afternoon. Next door is the public garden. I saw a Prussian soldier on sentry, and while I was drawing I heard children singing the Marseillaise'.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Town of Vianden Seen through a Spiders Web

1871

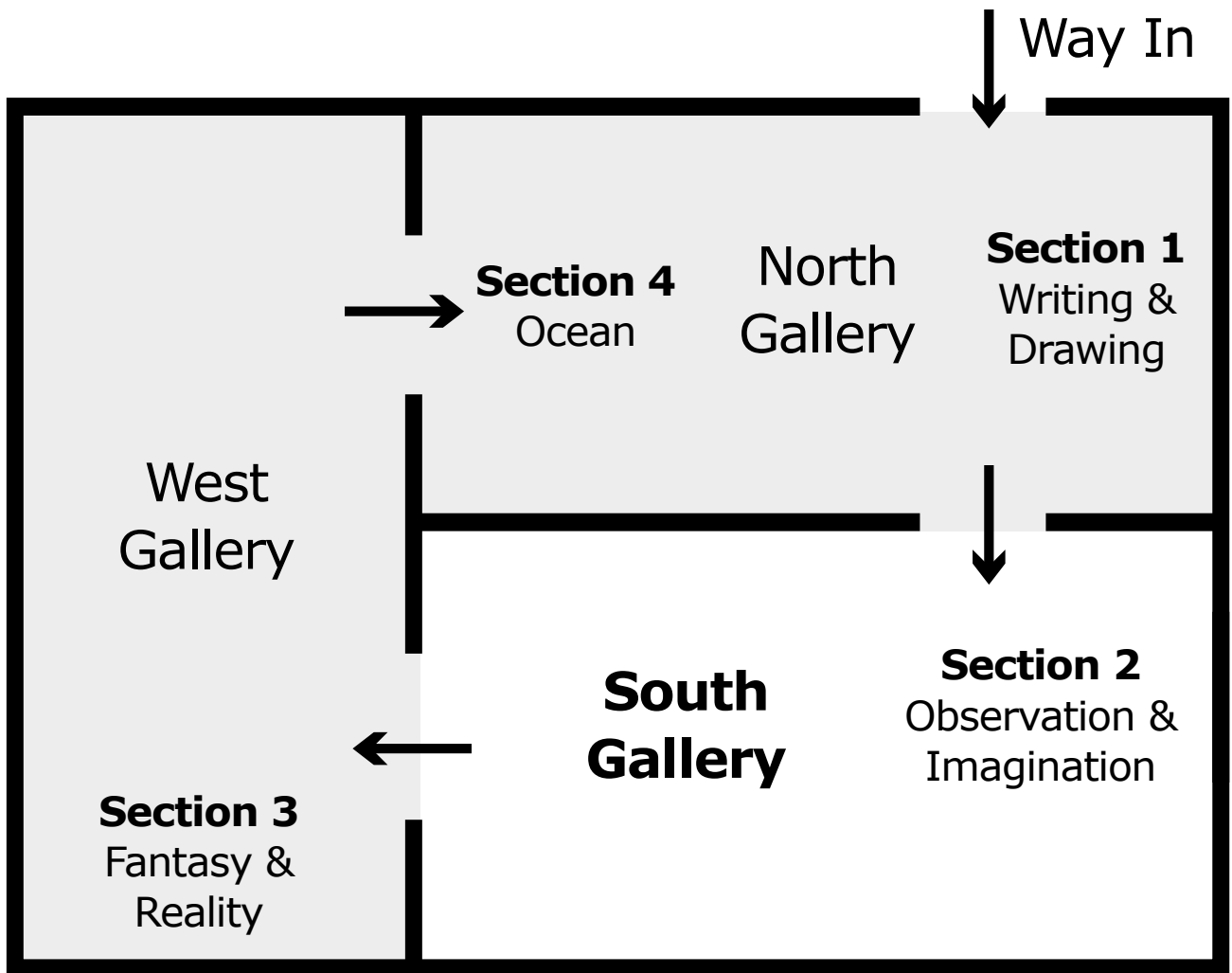
Brown ink and wash and blue watercolour over graphite on paper

Hugo explores scale and turbulence in this drawing. It was created during his stay in Luxembourg after being exiled from Belgium for offering asylum to Communards.

He wrote of this work:

“August 13, 1871. I drew in my travel book the large spiders web through which we see the ruin of Vianden like a spectre”.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey



You are in South Gallery



Observation & Imagination

Hugo's artistic journey reflects his fascination with architecture and landscape, subjects that invite different modes of drawing and explore the interplays between the monumental and the minuscule, the illusionistic and the abstract. His drawings can be difficult to date precisely, but this gallery encompasses works made from across Hugo's lifetime that represent the exceptional range of processes and materials he used.

Beginning in 1834, Hugo kept travel journals to capture things that caught his eye. He filled sketchbooks with precise pencil drawings of coastal cliffs, cobbled streets, architectural details and floorplans, sometimes later reworked in ink. During the late 1840s, Hugo's preoccupation with landscape and the atmospheric effects of weather or times of day drove his experimental techniques.

These innovations culminated in a series of large-scale pictures, including the enigmatic Mushroom, made in Paris in 1850, a politically tumultuous time for Hugo.

In Jersey (1852–55), Hugo engaged with table-turning seances in the hope of contacting the spirits of the dead. When drawing, he continued to explore unconventional methods like ink blots, rubbings, lace prints, stencils and collaged elements, such as postage stamps. Some compositions are entirely abstract; these are known as taches, translated as “stains” or “accidental marks”. These mysterious drawings express Hugo’s interest in unconscious creativity. His experiments with “automatic” processes long predate the Surrealist movement that adopted similar techniques in the 1920s, and reveal his ability to meld artistic innovation with deeply personal and symbolic themes.

List of works clockwise in order of hang

Malines

19 August 1837

Graphite pencil on paper

This work was given by Hugo to the actress Juliette Drouet, with whom he took romantic trips during the 1830s and 1840s. Juliette secured her lover's escape from Paris in 1851, and would follow he family in exile, always living close by, and she was a strong supporter of his art. This precise and carefully shaded drawing records a building they saw whilst travelling through Belgium.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Towers and Spires of a Gothic Cathedral

c. 1836–1837

Pen and brown ink on paper

This drawing is thought to be inspired by Chartres Cathedral, which Hugo spent several days observing. Here, he juxtaposes architectural and natural features, incorporating a grove of trees with intricate, interwoven branches beside the cathedral. The drawing echoes the grandeur of Notre-Dame in Paris, made famous by Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (or 'The Hunchback of Notre-Dame', 1831), which had recently prompted the cathedral's restoration (1844-64).

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

La Tour des Rats

1847

Pen and brown ink wash over graphite pencil, black ink and charcoal on paper

Following the death of his daughter Leopoldine in 1843, Hugo took a break from publishing but continued to draw. Revisiting compositions he made during his travels along the Rhine in 1839 and 1840, Hugo incorporated multiple techniques and materials in this drawing, the largest he had made up until this date. He used a cloth to pull ink across the wet paper to imitate teeming rain.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Mouse (Velmich)

1840

Pen and brown ink wash, pencil and graphite on paper

Hugo frequently included drawings in his letters to family and friends. During his travels along the Rhine River, Hugo visited Burg Maus ("Mouse Castle") in Wellmich, Germany, which he sketched in a letter to his son Charles. The day before, Hugo had written a letter to Charles's brother, François-Victor ("Toto"), which depicted Burg Katz ("Cat Castle") in nearby Sankt Goarshausen. The two letters are known as "The Cat" and "The Mouse".

Part of the letter reads:

'If you've read my letters my Charlot you know what the Cat and the Mouse is. I give Toto the Cat I send you the Mouse. In the picture they are the opposite of the way they are in nature.

The mouse is much bigger and much more fearsome than the cat. The day I drew it the sky in which it was vanishing had something violent and tumultuous about it. You'll notice at the bottom of the neighbouring mountain the face of a giant with his mouth open. I've drawn it very precisely'.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Windmill on the Roof of a Farmhouse near Courtray

8 October 1864

Graphite pencil on paper

After 1859, Hugo began to travel once more, avoiding France but revisiting the Rhine and Belgium. In this drawing he records a windmill atop a farmhouse near the Belgian city of Courtray.

Now drawing in fluid and more confident lines, he is inspired by a real building because of its very ability to seem fantastical. It is believed that he must have seen this extraordinary assemblage, which appears not to exist today.

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13345, Fol. 17

Walcourt

c. 1864

Graphite pencil on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Furteneck in Mist

1840

Pen and brown ink wash on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

City on the Rhine

Undated

Pen and brown ink wash on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Architecture Renaissance

c. 1847–1850

Brown ink, charcoal and black pencil on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

His clavis:, alias porta (Here the key:, elsewhere the door)

1850

Pen, brown ink and wash, black ink wash, graphite pencil, crayon, charcoal and white gouache on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Mushroom

1850

Pen, brown ink and wash, charcoal, crayon and green, red and white gouache on paper

This is one of Hugo's largest drawings, created in Paris amid turmoil in his public role as a politician. Hugo made a number of similarly sized works at the dining table in Juliette Drouet's home, experimenting with techniques and compositions. This group, probably conceived to be displayed together in his apartment. The meaning of this work is enigmatic: it shows a poisonous mushroom looming over a seemingly post-apocalyptic landscape, within its stem a ghostly human face.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Dead City

c. 1850

Black ink, graphite and Indian ink on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Tache on Folded Paper Retouched with a Pen

1850–1857

Pen and brown ink on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des
Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13351, Fol. 28

Wall mounted showcase

Sketchbook Depicting Imaginary Creatures (Human, Animal Plant) and Musicians

15 March-18 April 1856

Sketchbook

Hugo's relationship with the spirit world and unconscious creativity is reflected in this extraordinary sketchbook. Hugo may have used a deliberate lack of control to produce random shapes on the page. These meandering pencil lines are elaborated to conjure imaginary hybrid monsters, animals and humans brandishing musical scores, singing, drumming, playing horns, flutes and violins. Some figures have fragmented faces, are transmuted into seahorses or converse with menageries of birds; others ride flying dragons and row interstellar boats. Elsewhere contours depict mysterious map or wing-like structures.

Lace and Spectres

c. 1855–1856

Pen and brown ink wash, charcoal and lace imprint on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Undergrowth

c. 1847

Pen and brown ink wash on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Abandoned Park

before 1855

Pen and brown ink wash and black pencil on paper

This small drawing is reminiscent of an earlier sketch, 'Undergrowth', displayed nearby.

At its centre is a statue or monument overgrown by trees and shrubs. It is believed Hugo gave the drawing to the artist Jules Laurens in April 1854 during a visit to Jersey. Laurens later engraved it, and it was published in 'L'Artiste' in September 1855, alongside verses by Auguste Vacquerie, also exiled to Jersey. The drawing reflects Hugo's questioning of monuments to power.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Twilight, stubborn, black, hideous

c. 1859

Pen and brown ink wash on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Taches and Silhouette of a Castle

1856

Black ink wash and graphite with collaged postage stamp on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13355, Fol. 90

Planet-Eye

c. 1854

Graphite, black ink and wash on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13355, Fol. 106

Ink-blackened Page with Half-moon and Fingerprints

1864–1865

Brown ink and wash on paper

In this work, named by its technique, Hugo combines traditional materials like brown ink and wash with unconventional methods such as his own fingerprints to create an abstract composition. Usually shown this way up (its orientation was not prescribed by Hugo), some have interpreted the image to be heads peering down a well.

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13345, Fol. 28

Taches

1875

Black and grey-blue ink and wash on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 24807, Fols 41-42

Tache with Circular Imprint

c. 1864–1869

Wash and brown ink on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Taches-Planètes

c. 1850

Brown ink and wash on paper

One of Hugo's larger works, possibly made as early as 1850, this is an exceptionally resolved abstract composition formed of 'taches' (marks or stains). He appears to have soaked the paper in water, applying pools of ink on its surface to create marbled, abstract stains interspersed with perfect circles, which indicate the application of stencils, and have been likened to planets within a solar system.

Musée du Louvre, Paris Département des Arts
Graphiques

Landscape: Town and Towers on the Horizon

1856

Pen, brown ink, wash and gouache on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13355, Fol. 100

Landscape Reflected in Water

1850

Pen and brown ink on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13355, Fol. 61

Works in showcase

Travel Sketchbook: Cliff at Bois-Rose, Fecamp

16 June – 19 July 1836

Graphite pencil, black pencil and brown ink on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

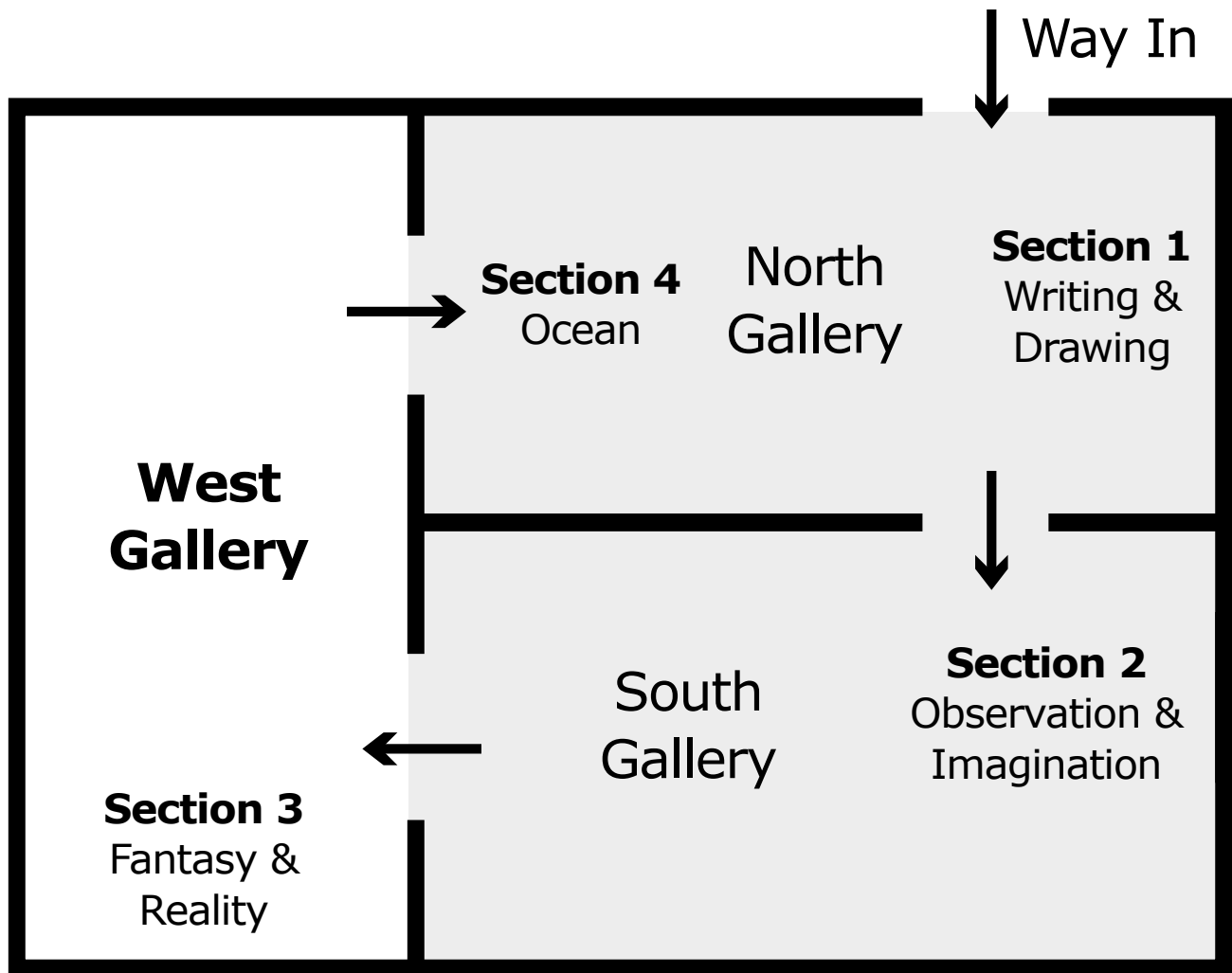
Travel Sketchbook VII: Trip to the Pyrenees, with a view of the port of Pasaia, Spain

1843

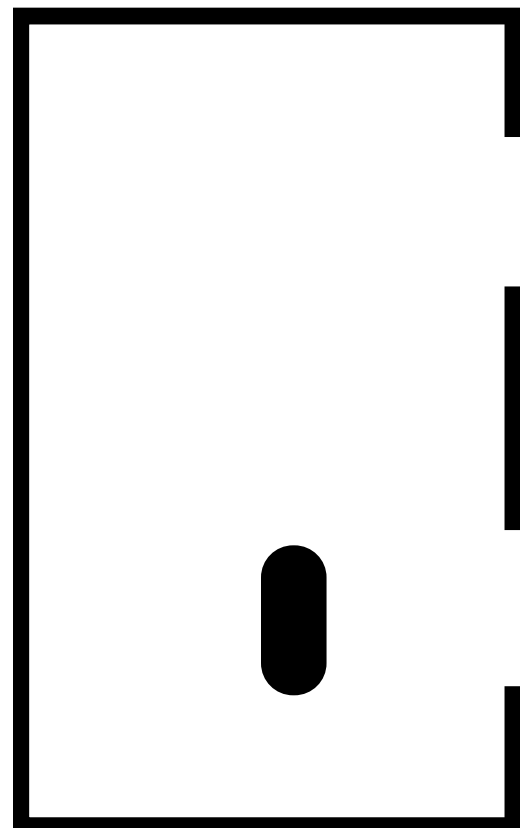
Bound sketchbook with drawings in brown ink, wash and graphite on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13346, Fol. 25



You are
in West
Gallery



Fantasy & Reality

Hugo had a lifelong obsession with castles. The motif of the 'burg' (from the German for castle, fortress or walled town) stemmed from his interest in the Middle Ages, and it featured in many of his writings. While some depictions recall real structures he encountered during his European travels, especially along the Rhine, Hugo often created fantastical castles, ranging from whimsical and colourful to stark and foreboding.

His role as a politician in France, and his interest in current events and people – specifically his opposition to capital punishment – informed a number of his drawings. Following the 1854 execution of John Tapner in Guernsey, Hugo created a series of powerfully graphic drawings depicting a man being hanged, of which *Ecce Lex* is one. Later, in 1859, he passionately appealed for a pardon for John Brown, an American abolitionist sentenced to death.

His campaign was unsuccessful, and he wrote to the London News condemning Brown's execution, declaring it a moral and political tragedy; Hugo's drawing known as Le Pendu (the hanged man) was reproduced as a print bearing Brown's name.

Ecce Lex was the drawing Hugo kept on the wall of his study at Hauteville House, his home in Saint Peter Port, Guernsey, from 1855. His very own castle, he decorated it top-to-bottom to form a Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) that incorporated diverse influences from many countries and cultures: delftware tiles and heavy oak panelling inspired by European trends, alongside Chinese and Japanese styles of porcelain (largely English or French imitations), with tapestries and silks from across east Asia. Hugo once said that he had 'missed his true vocation', that he was 'born to be a decorator'.

List of works clockwise in order of hang

The Cheerful Castle

c. 1847

Pen, brown ink and wash, black ink and wash and crayon on cardboard

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Castle with the Angel

c. 1863

Pen and brown ink wash over graphite pencil, watercolour, gouache and scrapings on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Fortune-Louis Meaulle (1843-1916) after Victor Hugo

The Castle with the Cross

c.1875

Etching

This multi-plate print was engraved to 1:1 scale after Hugo's largest drawing. The original was created in 1850, and remained in France during his exile, protected by his close friend Paul Meurice. Hugo appreciated the skill of the engraver Meaulle in 'translating' his drawing into the fine matrix of engraved lines seen here. On Hugo's return in 1871, he created the bespoke frame and gave the work to Meurice, who would later found the museum that now holds the primary collection of Hugo's drawings.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Silhouette of Castle with Three Towers

1856

Charcoal on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13351, Fol. 34 (2)

Silhouette of Castle with Three Towers

1855

Charcoal and black ink on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrit

Inv. No. NAF 13351, Fol. 34 (3)

Landscape with a Castle on a Cliff

1857

Brush and brown wash, with stencilling and white gouache on paper

Although many of his works are reminiscent of buildings seen on his European travels, Hugo particularly enjoyed depicting fictitious castles. He routinely used stencils while doing so, selecting positive and negative silhouettes to create tonal contrasts.

Here he applies a paper stencil (displayed nearby) and applies a background wash over the top, later adding architectural details to the negative area.

British Museum, London, Inv. No. 1930,0716.3

The Two Castles

1850

Pen and brown ink wash, graphite pencil and charcoal on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Town of Vianden, with Stone Cross

1871

Brown and black ink, brown and purple wash, graphite and varnish on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13349, Fol. 19

The Town and Castle of Vianden by Moonlight

1871

Pen, brown and purple ink wash on graphite on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Charles Alexandre Leballeur-Villiers (1815-1870)

Victor Hugo in his study at Hauteville House, Guernsey, before the construction of the 'Lookout'

1860–1861

Print on albumen paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Edmond Bacot (1814-1875)

Eight Views of Hauteville House

1862

Prints on albumen paper

During his exile Hugo developed an interest in photography, collaborating with the photographer Edmond Bacot, whose images of Gothic monuments in Normandy greatly impressed Hugo. He praised Bacot, saying, "I congratulate the sun for having a collaborator such as you": Hugo's son Charles studied photography under Bacot, later establishing studios on Jersey and Guernsey with Auguste Vacquerie. In 1862, Bacot visited Guernsey, documenting Hauteville House over fifteen days through twenty-nine known photographs and stereographs, including twelve views, several of which are displayed here.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Edmond Bacot (1814-1875)

Views of Hauteville House

1862

Prints on albumen paper

From left to right:

'The Vestibule at Hauteville House

'The Fireplace in the Dining Room'

'The Dome and the Chandelier on the Staircase'

'The Study and the "Lookout" '

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Home of 'Hugo-Tete-d:Aigle'

1860

Pen and brown ink wash, blue ink, gouache and gold ink on cardboard

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Mirror with Birds

1870

Hand-painted and inscribed wooden frame, oil paint and varnish

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Fireplace in the Dining Room at Hauteville House

1857

Graphite pencil, brown, black and blue ink and blue, purple and white gouache on paper

Hugo designed many features of Hauteville House, often painting directly onto frames or panelling. He instructed carpenters to repurpose pieces of furniture and decorative objects into larger integrated structures. Several drawings exist relating to the centre-piece of his dining room, a monumental fireplace surrounded by a floor-to-ceiling wall of blue delftware tiles. At its middle is a projecting ceramic “H” for Hugo, crafted to his specifications.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Ecce Lex

1854

Pen and brown ink wash, graphite pencil, black ink and charcoal on paper

In his early novella 'Le Dernier jour d'un Condamné (The Last Day of a Condemned Man)' (1829), Hugo expresses his opposition to the death penalty. While in exile, he had attempted unsuccessfully to intervene in the case of the murderer John Tapner, who was hanged on 10 February 1854 in Guernsey. After this execution, Hugo made four drawings: 'Ecce Lex, Ecce (Le Pendu), Le Pendu and Ecce'. The word "Ecce" is Latin for 'behold' - 'Ecce Lex' translates as "Behold the Law"; 'Le Pendu' translates as "The Hanged Man".

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Sketchbook Depicting John Tapner's Prison Cell in Guernsey

31 October 1855–1830

September 1857

Sketchbook

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des
Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13446, Fols 62-63

Letter from Victor Hugo to Paul Chenay, giving his agreement to allow Chenay to reuse the image as John Brown

21 January 1861

Letter

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des
Estampes Et De La Photographie

Inv. NO. QF-1 (1859-12-02)-Fol

'Dear Mr Chenay,

You wished to engrave my drawing of John Brown, and now you wish to publish it; I agree, and I add that /find it useful.

John Brown is a hero and a martyr. His death was a crime. His gallows is a cross. You will remember that I wrote at the bottom of the drawing: Pro Christo, sicut Christus.

When, in December 1859, with deep sorrow, I predicted to America the break-up of the Union as a consequence of the murder off John Brown, I did not think that that event would follow my words so quickly. Now, the inevitable consequences of the hanging of John Brown are emerging: preordained events, of which we were unaware a year ago, are becoming apparent. Henceforth the following must be considered certainties: the break-up of the American Union, which is a great calamity, and the abolition of slavery, which is a great step forward.

Let us therefore once again draw the attention of all to the lessons of the gallows of Charlestown, the starting point of these serious events.

My drawing, which through your fine talent has been reproduced with striking fidelity, has no other value than this name: John Brown - a name that must be repeated unceasingly, to the supporters of the American republic, so that it reminds them of their duty to the slaves: to call them forth to freedom.

I shake your hand'.

Paul Chenay (1818-1906) after Victor Hugo

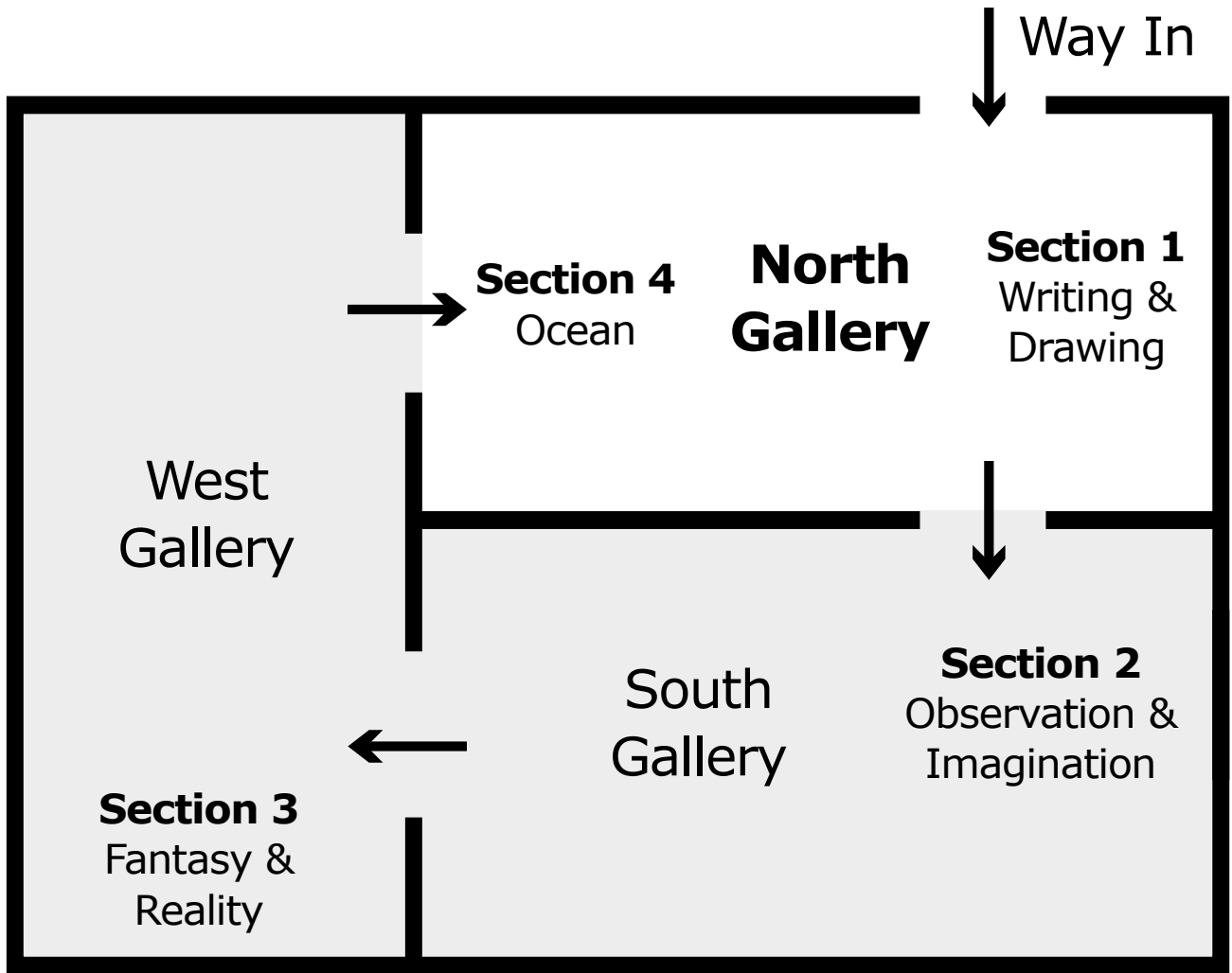
John Brown, 1861

Aquatint

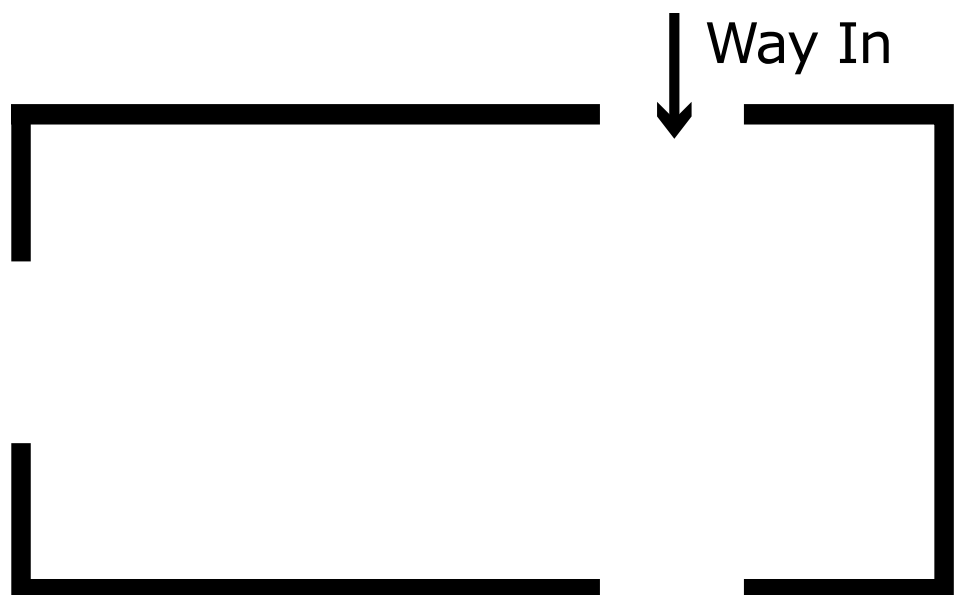
In 1863, Hugo appealed to the “United States of America” against the death sentence passed on American abolitionist John Brown on charges of treason, murder and conspiracy to incite a slave insurrection. Hugo’s image of execution by hanging made its way into the public spotlight through print reproductions by Hugo’s brother-in-law, Paul Chenay. Chenay’s engraving was later published with a new title, ‘John Brown’, and circulated in protest at Brown’s execution.

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Estampes Et de La Photographie

Inv. No. QF-1 (1859-12-02)-Fol



You are in North Gallery



Ocean

This gallery returns to the theme of nature through Hugo's enduring fascination with the ocean, a recurring motif in his writings and drawings. The ocean's boundless, ever-changing nature served as both a metaphor for his creative process and a profound source of artistic inspiration.

Nicknamed "ocean man" (homme océan), a term Hugo coined, the influence of the sea became particularly prominent during his exile on Guernsey (1855–1870).

Between 1861 and 1862 while in residence at Hauteville House, Hugo constructed the lookout on the top floor which offered sweeping views over Saint Peter Port and the open sea, with glimpses of the French coastline in the distance. This vantage point became his sanctuary for reflection and creation.

As Hugo wrote: “Thoughtfully, I write at my window, I watch the flow being born, expiring, reborn, and the gulls cutting through the air. The ships in the wind open their wingspans and look in the distance like large figures strolling on the sea.”

During his exile, Hugo published *Les Misérables* (1862), chronicling France’s political upheavals, and *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (The Toilers of the Sea) (1866), a novel dedicated to the island of Guernsey. The latter tells the story of Gilliatt, a solitary figure often considered to be based on the author, who battles the sea’s relentless forces to salvage the engines of a steam ship and win the love of Déruchette, the ship-owner’s niece. A series of related drawings portray fierce storms and a menacing octopus, underscoring the sea’s duality as both adversary and muse. Here, the parallel creative processes of writing and drawing converge, with the rhythms of Hugo’s prose echoing the ebb and flow of his inky compositions.

Causeway

1850

Pen and brown ink wash over graphite pencil, black ink, charcoal, black chalk and gold on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Breakwater on Jersey

1854-1855

Brown and black ink, charcoal and gouache on paper.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Serpent

c. 1856

Pen, brown ink and wash, black ink wash, charcoal, red and white gouache and lace imprint on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

The Bowels of Leviathan

1866

Pen, brush, use of feather, brown ink and wash, black ink wash, crayon and white gouache on paper

In 1862, Hugo published 'Les Misérables'; some of his drawings have been linked to the novel. The title of this particular work, which was not given by Hugo, is derived from the book and refers to a term Hugo used to describe the Parisian sewers. However, this piece is dated after the novel's publication, suggesting it was likely a reflection upon this part of the novel, rather than a writing aid.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Ship in a Storm

1875

Pen, black ink and wash on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 24807, Fol. 40

The Lighthouse at Casquets, Guernsey

1866

Brown ink and wash, black crayon, black chalk and white gouache on paper

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Boat without Sails

1864

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13345, Fol. 30

The Vision Ship or The Last Struggle

1864-66

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper

An unusually large number of finished drawings relate to Hugo's novel 'Les Travailleurs de la mer (The Toilers of the Sea)' (1866) and were integrated into his personal manuscript. Bound by Guernsey-based bookbinder Henry Turner, Hugo's own copy featured 36 original illustrations, some of which are shown here. Many of these pre-date the book's publication, and can perhaps be considered to have aided Hugo's writing process, thus highlighting the convergence in Hugo's work of writing and drawing as parallel creative processes.

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Inv. No. NAF 24745, Fol. 111

'The Durande' Ship after Sinking

1864–1866

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 24745, Fol. 222

Octopus

1864–1866

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 24745, Fol. 382

The Wreck

1864-66

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper

In this drawing, Hugo has dipped the feathered end of a quill, or perhaps simply a feather, into ink and dragged it over the page to emulate with soft contours the waves of the sea.

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Inv. No. NAF 24745, Fol. 314

Octopus

1866–1869

Brown ink and wash and graphite on paper

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 24807, Fol. 3

Chain

1864

Pen and brown ink on paper

This drawing is associated with a similar sketch made between May 1864 and July 1865, which shows a chain with a cartouche bearing the title 'Les Misérables'. Dated after the novel's publication, it could perhaps have been considered by Hugo as a drawing to insert as a personal frontispiece when dedicating a copy to someone, or as a potential illustration for future editions.

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des Manuscrits

Inv. No. NAF 13345, Fol. 7

The Dream

1866

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper with gold edge.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Works in showcase

Signed Pebbles

1856

Ink on pebble

While on Guernsey, Hugo would make daily walks around the island and often swim in the sea. On 22 October 1857 he recorded his 123rd swim at Havelet Bay, a sandy beach near Hauteville House. Hugo would collect pebbles during his walks on the beach, writing his name and the date on them.

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Copeau (wood shaving) for Les Travailleurs de la mer (The Toilers of the Sea)

c. 1864–1865

Facsimile

Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris / Guernsey

Gilliatt at the Grande Douvre

May 1864 – July 1865

Sketchbook

Bibliothèque National de France, Paris Département des
Manuscrit

Inv. No. NAF 13459, Fol. 73

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