

# Stained glass: The new architects of light

In the course of twenty years, contemporary artists and master glaziers have revolutionized the art of stained glass in France.

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**S**TIMULATED by two decades of public commissions from the Ministry of Culture, some fifty well known artists, supported by particularly innovative master glaziers, have shaken up the art of sculpting natural light, which had seemed immutable since the days of cathedrals.

Long mere decorative features, modern stained glass windows in religious buildings now obey more original rules, more effectively exploiting the creative potential of glass, the distinctive character of each designer and the design of the building.

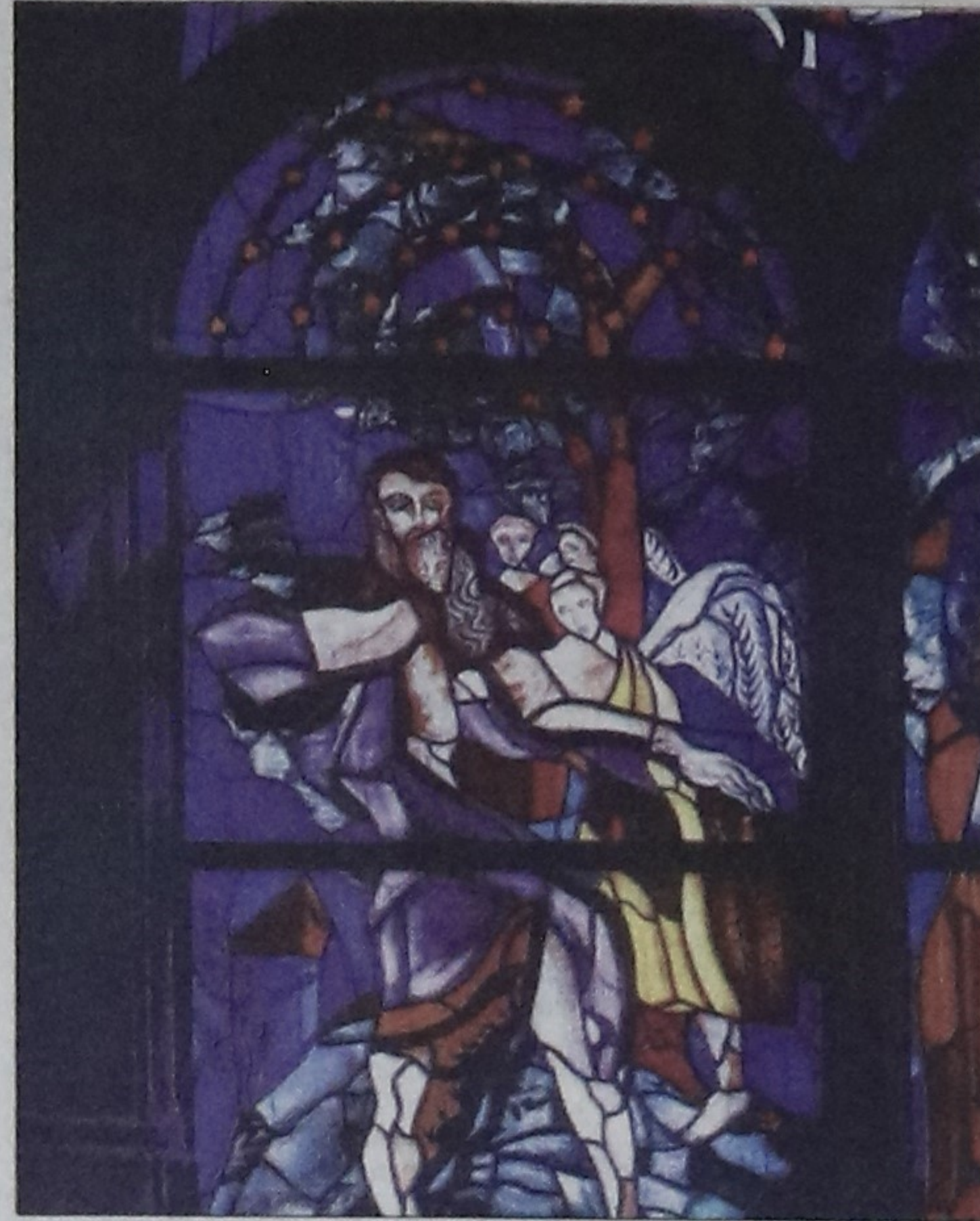
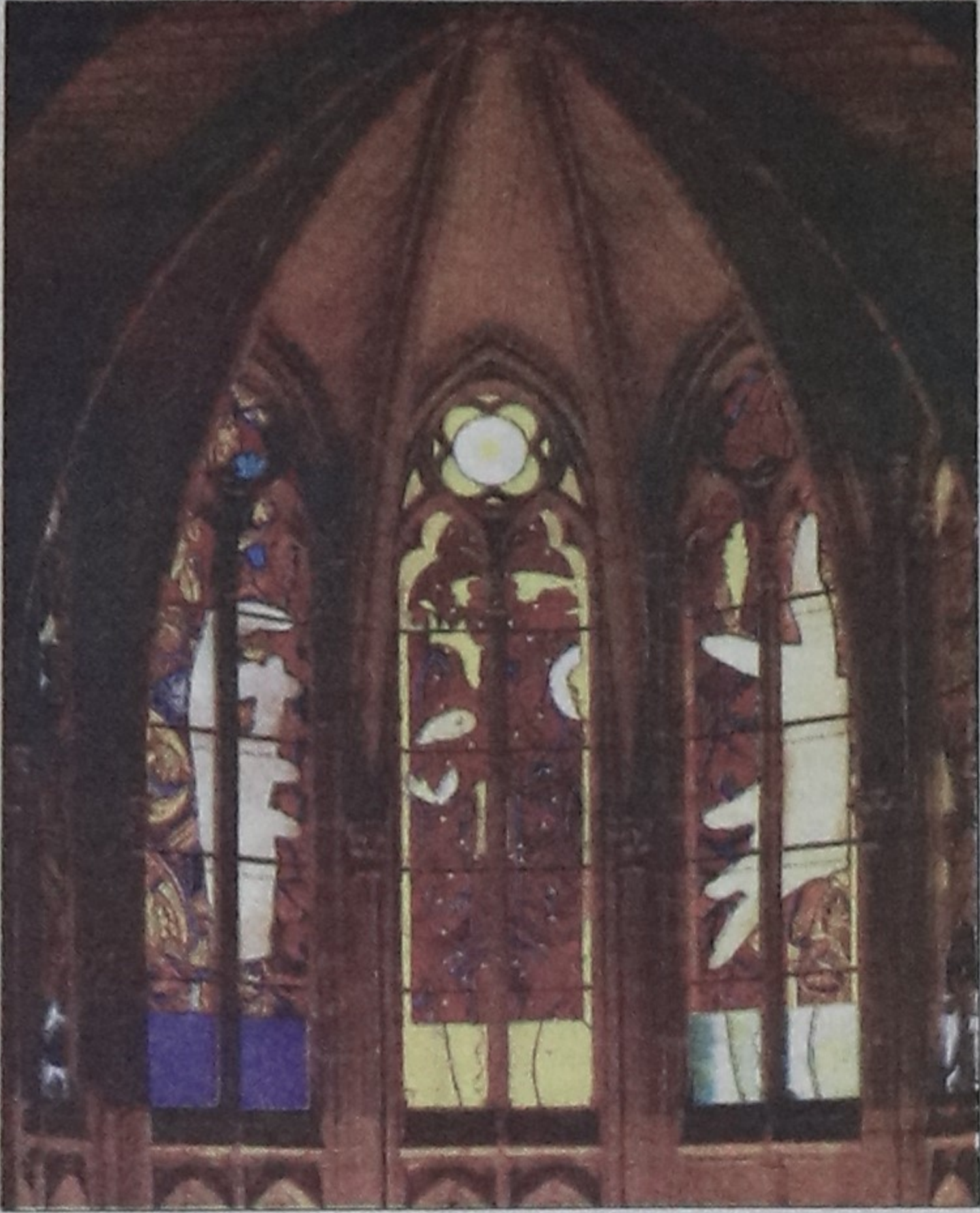
Thus the replacement of the 350 m<sup>2</sup> of glazing in Saint-Louis de Blois cathedral (Loir-et-Cher), blown out by the bombardments of 1944, was entrusted to Jan Dibbets, a Dutch artist who lives and works in Paris, and Jean Mauret, one of today's greatest master glaziers.

Taking his inspiration from the very particular light of the nearby Loire, his stained glass windows

form a line of brightly coloured symbols that stand out against the clarity of the background: the red letters of the words of the Agnus dei fall like drops of blood,...

Nevers cathedral (Nièvre), itself, has, since 1992, been host to no fewer than four great designers of contemporary stained glass windows. The geometric curves of the windows designed by the conceptual artist Gottfried Honnegger allow intense rays of purple to filter through in response to Francois Rouan's windows, consisting of fragments of coloured glass inspired by Matisse's works on paper. The ambulatory was entrusted to Jean-Michel Alberola, who combines abstraction, representation and conceptualism, and the chancel to Claude Viallat, founder of the Supports-Surfaces movement.

**A new religious art**  
Some of these works are already considered to be masterpieces of a new religious art. With the support and assistance of master glazier



Jean-Dominique Fleury, the painter Pierre Soulages has filled the one hundred and six windows of the abbey church in Conques (Aveyron) with opalescent glass streaked with parallel plumb lines, which, as they move, make the walls shimmer.

It took the artists four hundred attempts at CIRVA (the international glass research centre) then three hundred more at the Saint-Gobain Vitrages research centre to find the recipe for a new glass that would suit his work. White, translucent or opaque, it sublimates the Romanesque building by diffusing natural light in every variation of its chromatic scale.

Disinfective for his figurative and spiritual approach, Gérard Garouste has illustrated the subject of the nativity at Notre-Dame de Talant (Côte-d'Or) by juxtaposing two types of glass -- one modern, the other, from the medieval tradition. A blown crown glass, it produces a wonderful low-angled light. To make these fragile disks of glass to order, master glazier Pierre-Alain Parot had to set up a workshop in the building itself. The result is breathtaking -- adorned with its forty-five figurative stained glass windows, the 12th century church becomes an arch of light, dazzling with emotion.

## 30 years of French doctors

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gradually acquired means, founding members rejected the principle of denunciation. So the 1971 charter was clear on that point: doctors 'abstained from publicly expressing an opinion' and 'denied themselves any interference in the internal affairs of states'. It was not until 1980, five years after the installation of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and the massive wave of refugees and boat people in the Sea of China, that this principle was scrapped. They could give evidence and denounce if need be, but had to remain faithful to the principle of neutrality, at all costs avoiding amalgamation with politics, for a victim remains a victim whatever side he or she is on.

Kouchner's generous idea of chartering a ship for Vietnam was rejected by the organisation and led, in 1979, to the split in it and sensational departure of its spiritual father. Far from allowing itself to be disbanded by its intestine struggles, MSF recovered. It is true that, at the beginning of the 80s, the question of the very survival of the association was posed. Rony Brauman, chairman from 1982 to 1994 remembers having to improvise in the early days and his experience in Thailand in 1978. "In the middle of the mission, I found myself penniless. I had nothing left to eat and I was fed by the refugees..." MSF became aware that this amateurishness, while being spontaneous and devoted, could only hamper its efficiency. So it

accepted the collaboration of advertising specialists.

It meant the end of impoverished budgets. In the year 2000, MSF-France had a budget of 78.5 million euros, 91% of which came from private donations. The background of volunteers has also considerably changed in thirty years. Skilled work now accompanies the charitable intentions of the early years with more specialists from the areas of medicine and health as well as administrators and logisticians. At present, there are about 2,000 expatriated volunteers in 85 countries, supported by 10,000 local volunteers. Today, MSF French doctors are an international network made up of 18 sections including five operational centres: France, Belgium, Spain, Holland and Switzerland.

Its area of action has been extended but there are other fronts too. There are fears of members' being won over and manipulated. "Humanitarian action, which long served to compensate for political passivity, today seems to legitimize certain military interventions," Jean-Hervé Bradol, the present chairman, regrets. In this context, MSF seeks to preserve its sovereignty of action, attempts to maintain its credibility with civilian populations and hesitated to accept the Nobel Prize for peace in 1999. It may indeed be proud but it firmly adheres to its initial mission.

## Bicentenary of Victor Hugo's birth

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French frontiers. On 6<sup>th</sup> January, Jack Lang himself went to a school to be present at a reading. He read aloud a few paragraphs from *Les Châtiments* which, according to numerous enthusiasts is an apology of poetry, beauty, light and nature. The text entitled *Siella* (Star), was written in Jersey where Victor Hugo was living in exile in 1853. The French Minister of Education asserted that *reading aloud had to be reinstated*, adding that *there is nothing more wonderful than speaking texts to oneself and that poetry has to come down from heavenly spheres and become accessible to everyone*. Many other events have been organised for 2002, in France and abroad, to commemorate the anniversary of the birth of the writer who came into the world on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1802 in Besançon.

Between 25<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> February, two events made a particular mark on this bicentenary. On 25<sup>th</sup> February, the eve of the poet's birth, his native town had organised a big evening of entertainment on the theme of childhood. The theme was suggested by Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, a French writer and the chairman of the French national committee for Victor Hugo's bicentenary. In Paris, on 26<sup>th</sup> February, the Senate where Victor Hugo had sat, paid homage to the writer and to the politician through the voice of Christian Poncelet, the president of this institution, in collaboration with the national Paris Odeon Theatre. Victor Hugo had sat both as a French peer under the July Monarchy and as an elected Senator in the Third Republic. An official session has been planned for 16<sup>th</sup> November in the Senate to close Hugo Year. Secondary school students will take part in this session during which speeches and poems by the writer will be read. Since 20<sup>th</sup> February, there has been an exhibition in the Upper Assembly on the theme of Victor Hugo, a witness of his century, as a politician, member of parliament and a writer committed to the nobles causes. On 28<sup>th</sup> February, the Académie Française devoted a session to the "Great man" who had been elected as a member on his

fifth attempt and was one of its keenest members.

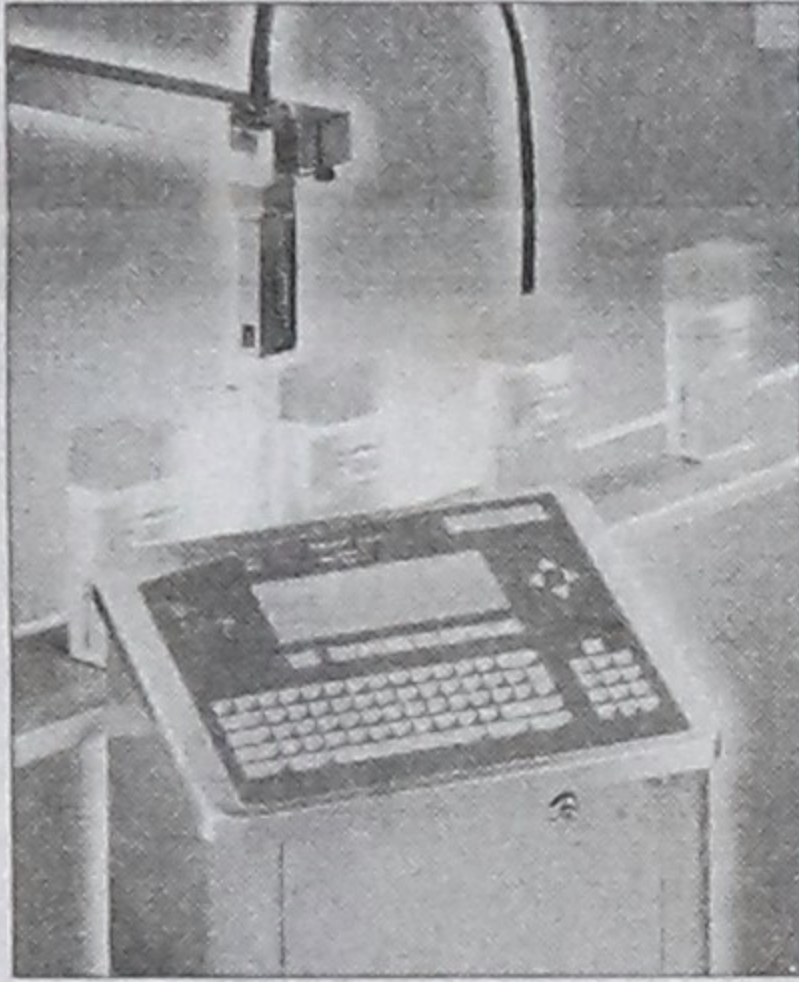
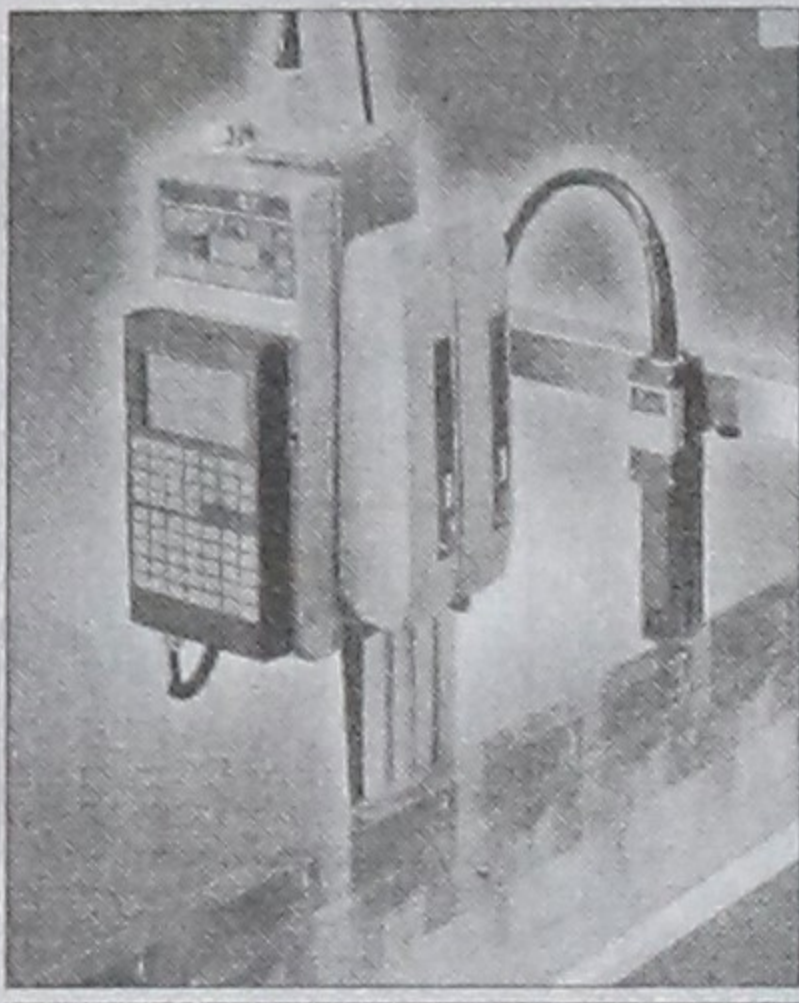
Many other events will be organised throughout the year on the initiative of the committee headed by Bertrand Poirot-Delpech but also of the French Minister of Education and of Foreign Affairs as well as other participants. Performances, exhibitions and conferences will be held. There is, for instance, the exhibition called *Victor Hugo: the ocean man* at the *Bibliothèque de France* (French National Library), in Paris. Manuscripts, letters, drawings, caricatures and pages from notebooks, 380 items in all, coming mostly from Victor Hugo's studio, will be presented there. The French National Library will also present a series of conferences based on the exhibition, in particular with the former Justice Minister Robert Badinter who, on 14<sup>th</sup> March, will speak on the theme of Victor Hugo and the death penalty.

Until 7<sup>th</sup> April, the Picture Gallery at the General Council in Aix-en-

Provence in the South of France, is presenting Victor Hugo and his friend -- *two centuries of art and artists*. This exhibition will put the stress on the drawings in Victor Hugo's work, an essential activity but one which he has always curbed at the expense of writing. With pen and ink drawings, and etchings as well as figurative pictures, the writer expressed the depth of his imagination in sketches and tormented rough drafts playing on the chiaroscuro effect. The *Comédie Française* already started this Hugo year by presenting *Ruy Blas*, Belgium, a land of asylum for Victor Hugo who had to leave France after violently criticising Napoleon III, will also take part in these commemorations. Exhibitions and a conference will be organised there. Germany, Poland, Switzerland, Algeria, Morocco, Cuba, China and Vietnam might also participate in these bicentenary celebrations, once again showing, for those who still doubt it, the enormous extent of Victor Hugo's heritage.

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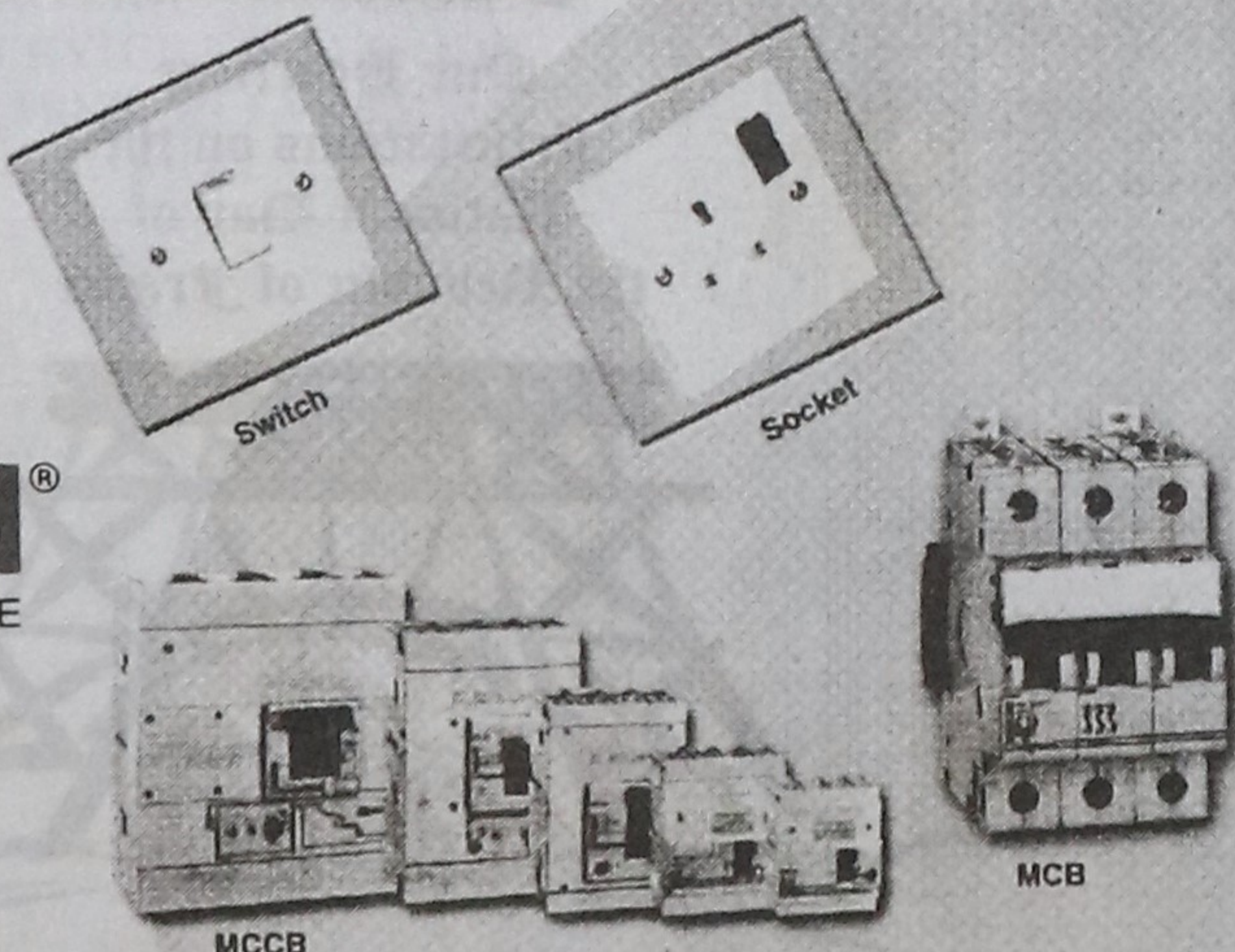
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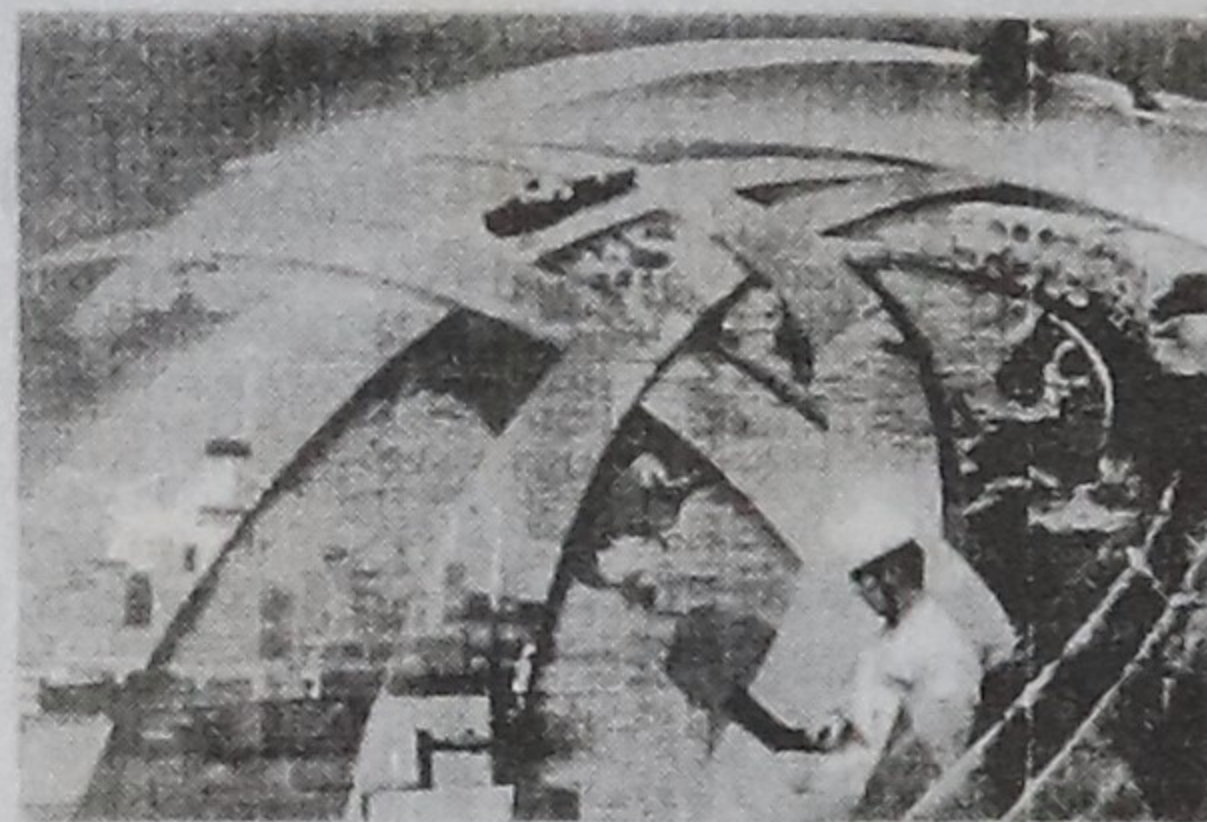
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