Eiffel Tower: Humanity's Dream Come True

OFFICIALLY inaugurated on 31 March 1889, and opened to the public on 15 May the same year, the Eiffel Tower is celebrating its one hundred and twentieth anniversary. Disparaged in its early days, it has today become one of the major symbols of France in the world's collective unconscious.

Its instantly recognisable silhouette is the stuff of dreams the world over. Yet what critics it had in its early days! In a joint letter, the likes of Guy de Maupassant, Charles Gounod and Alexandre Dumas junior vilified "the useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower", "the dishonour of Paris". A "hole-riddled suppository" in the view of Huysmans, an "ungainly skeleton" as Maupassant saw it. But Gustave Eiffel was not to be discouraged. The engineer responded to the artists: "The Tower will have its own beauty".

The public were not mistaken, and visited it en masse from its inauguration at the 1889 Universal Exposition. Two million sightseers flocked to see the tallest building of its day (the Tower retained its title until 1930, when New York's Chrysler Building was completed). Tens of thousands of brave souls did not even wait for the installation of lifts to climb to the top.

But once the exhibition was over the bubble burst and the number of visitors fell dramatically. All efforts failed, even reducing the price of admission. Some malcontents even suggested the construction be dismantled. To avoid such a disaster, Eiffel decided to turn his construction to profit by exploiting its scientific potential. A small observation station was installed, then it was the turn of a wireless telegraphy antenna and finally a television broadcast antenna.

Visitors were still very few, and it was not until the 1960s and the emergence of international tourism that visitor numbers finally rose rapidly. The Tower now easily passes the six million visitors a year mark.

At the time, European leaders realised that technological advances could be used as a political showcase, given that public opinion is very sensitive to progress. By presenting its innovations, a state displays its superiority over its rivals. Gustave Eiffel was not mistaken, promoting the "compendium of contemporary science" that was his construction, but also the "boldness of its conception", and above all the proof that "we are not only a country of entertainers, but a country of engineers and builders who are called upon all over the world".

A symbol of French expertise, the Tower inspires admiration, but also jealousy. We have lost count of the number of replicas and identical copies in the United States, China, Japan, and elsewhere. Although it is a venerable age today, the Iron Lady still has what it takes to make the planet dream.

