

Lightning Rods and Sideshows

The Eiffel Tower, the World's Fair, and the making and remaking of France's cultural landscape.

BY CAROLINE WEBER

EVER since its appearance on the Parisian skyline in 1889, the Eiffel Tower has drawn criticism and praise aplenty. Among its earliest detractors, Guy de Maupassant saw the tower as an affront to his nation's proud cultural heritage and dined regularly in its restaurant because that was the one spot in Paris from which he didn't have to look upon "this giant and disgraceful skeleton." (Otherwise, he complained, "you see it from everywhere... an unavoidable and horrid nightmare.") Maupassant's contemporary Paul Gauguin stood at the opposite end of the spectrum, hailing the tower as a "triumph of iron" and an exciting new art form. But across the board, as Roland Barthes has noted, the Eiffel Tower "attracts meaning, the way a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts." Indeed, to offer an opinion of this monument is to comment, wittingly or otherwise, on the past, present and future of French civilization.

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EIFFEL'S TOWER

And the World's Fair Where Buffalo Bill Beguiled Paris, the Artists Quarreled, and Thomas Edison Became a Count.

By Jill Jonnes.

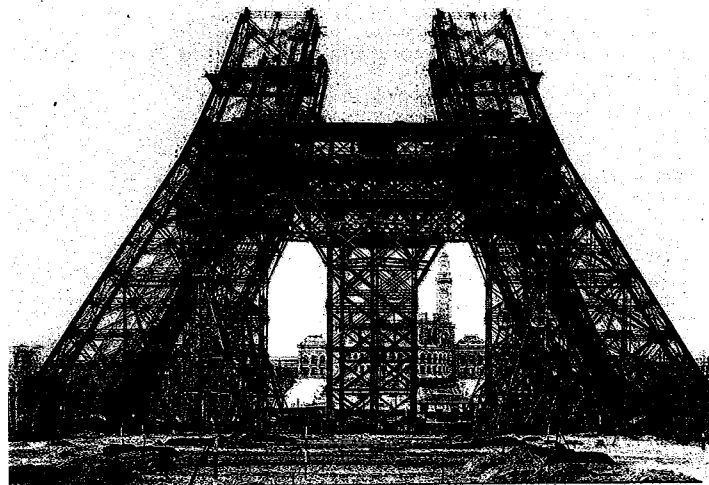
Illustrated. 354 pp. Viking. \$27.95.

PARIS FROM THE GROUND UP

By James H. S. McGregor.

Illustrated. 327 pp. The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press. \$29.95.

son Became a Count," Jill Jonnes examines — with splendid attention to detail, if not always with writerly finesse — the importance of the tower assumed in its own historical moment. Built by the engineer Gustave Eiffel as the centerpiece of the 1889 Exposition Universelle, the vaulting iron structure was intended, Jonnes writes, as "a potent symbol of French modern industrial might, a towering edifice that would exalt science and technology, assert France's superiority over its rivals (especially America) and entice millions to visit Paris." These were pressing goals, for by 1889, the French government had — after a century of pendulum swings between the forces of revolution and reaction — reinvented itself yet again, as the Third Republic. To other European leaders, monarchs almost to a man (or woman), this was an unwelcome development; faced with their opposition, France sorely needed to assert the health and



The Eiffel Tower under construction in early 1888.

robustness of its new regime. The United States posed a somewhat different threat: its industries were booming, its cities were expanding and its people had recently erected the world's tallest structure, the Washington Monument. About 1,000 feet high, Eiffel's tower would be almost twice the height of that daring obelisk — and so put the Americans in their place.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that such broad-based international-affairs issues dominate "Eiffel's Tower," which instead recounts a series of smaller, more personal stories that took the 1889 exposition as their backdrop. As her subtitle reveals, Jonnes, the author of "Conquering Gotham" and "Empires of Light," takes a remarkable cast of characters and documents their respective experiences at the fair. Buffalo Bill, for instance, brought his crowd-pleasing Wild West revue to Paris for the occasion, while Thom-



Buffalo Bill in a studio portrait taken during the World's Fair, 1889.

as Edison traveled there to unveil his new and improved phonograph; both men were overnight sensations — as was Bill's star performer, Annie Oakley, whom the polygamous king of Senegal attempted to buy for 100,000 francs. The artists who displayed their work at the exposition included James McNeill Whistler, whose portrait of Lady Archibald Campbell won a gold medal, and Gauguin, who didn't sell a single painting but who did manage to pocket an exotic sculpture fragment that he found at the fair's Khmer temple. Each of these characters — in different ways and to varying degrees — used the fair as a forum for an idea or a worldview that was to have lasting implications for French culture. (Though this statement may sound dubious in regard to Buffalo Bill, Jonnes credits him with inspiring the abiding "French love affair" with the Wild West. Which, moreover, had some surprising early adopters: "After attending the Wild West show, Paul Gauguin bought a Stetson to wear.")

Yet of all the exposition's trailblazers, none is obviously more central to Jonnes's narrative than Gustave Eiffel, the visionary engineer-cum-millionaire whose success as a builder of bridges and aqueducts emboldened him to apply his innovative technology to the construction of the tower. In so doing, he offended his nation's traditionalists, several prominent writers, artists and architects among them. While Eiffel hurried to get the thing built in time for the exposition's opening, his adversaries condemned it as "a black and gigantic factory chimney," "a lighthouse, a nail, a chandelier" and a "funnel planted on its fat butt." (This last insult came courtesy of Charles Garnier, the architect responsible for the city's magnificent Paris Opéra, whose ornate Beaux-Arts design could not have been more different from

the radically pared-down, industrial look of Eiffel's creation.) As has too often been the case in debates about "French" taste, the attack on modern style was laced with anti-Semitism: on the basis of his last name, Eiffel, a French Catholic, was branded "nothing more nor less than a German Jew," and his masterpiece "une tour juive."

Unfazed by the critics, Eiffel defended his choices on aesthetic as well as technical grounds. "I believe that the tower will have its own beauty," he declared. "The first principle of architectural beauty is that the essential lines of a construction be determined by a perfect appropriateness to its use. What was the main obstacle I had to overcome in designing the tower? Its resistance to wind. And I submit that the curves of its four piers as produced by our calculations, rising from an enormous base and narrowing toward the top, will give a great impression of strength and beauty." Although Jonnes does not make this point, her protagonist's brief, elegant statement of form-follows-function anticipates some of the 20th century's most significant achievements in architecture and design. In this respect, Eiffel's tower effectively — and literally — embedded the modern in the French cultural landscape.

In James H. S. McGregor's "Paris From the Ground Up" — which offers an informative history of the city's art and architecture — the Eiffel Tower necessarily plays a smaller role, occupying only four pages of a book that, by contrast, devotes a 30-page chapter to the Cathedral of Notre Dame. But those four pages are invaluable, as they explain with admirable economy a crucial fact that Jonnes, oddly, never mentions: Eiffel's engineering genius consisted in combining linear and curvilinear support systems — rectilinear cross-braced pylons and arches. This insight is typical of McGregor, who has written three other books in the From the Ground Up series and who is, at his best when elaborating on the technical aspects of Paris's buildings.

UNFORTUNATELY, McGregor sometimes carries this interest too far. His Notre Dame chapter, for example, quickly goes from illuminating to mind-numbing, for he seems never to have met a Gothic architectural term he didn't like. Transept and buttress; trumeau and nave; tympanum, apse and archivolt — the gang's all here, as well it should be. Yet as the author remarks of the cathedral's exterior decorations: "The array is dizzying both to the eye and to the mind," and not in a good way. By the same token, in cataloging at such length what it once took to create "an architecture of the sky" — as Gothic structures have been called — McGregor indirectly reveals what Eiffel, seven centuries later, was up against when he redefined this concept for the modern age. □

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