Victor Hugo's Rhine sketches

#1 Victor Hugo, 'the man of the century', while widely renowned for his epoch-initiating novels, plays and poems, is also responsible for an extensive amount of graphic work - an often-overlooked fact. Today, about 3,500 of his drawings are conserved mainly in French collections, a majority of which are in the Maison Victor Hugo and the National Library in Paris. Among them are many well elaborated sketches – like this one for a cover of his travel guide *The Rhine* – but also many pieces one might simply describe as doodles. Victor Hugo, a self-educated drawer, spent several decades experimenting with ink drawing techniques and figured out a very personal style in the use of motives, tools and materiality. His casual way of drawing holds our fascination even today because it freely strays from the boundaries of convention and tradition. And despite the fact that he conversed with artists, art theorists and critics on a regular basis, he kept most of his graphic work to himself during his entire lifetime.

In my presentation, I would like to show you just a tiny fraction of Victor Hugo's graphic work, and to talk about the different functions and technical approaches of his sketches. Hugo's drawings inspired by his Rhine journeys are a good starting point from which to explore further aspects of his graphic work.

But before we look at some pictures, I would like to say a few words about the context of *The Rhine*. Hugo travelled to the Rhine several times accompanied by his lover Juliette Drouet, first in 1839 where he went from Paris to the Rhine at Kehl, followed by a southwards travel towards Switzerland. Of particular interest to us, he took another, longer trip to the Rhine the very next year, in 1840, in which he also covered a longer distance on the Middle Rhine by steamship. In the aftermath of his trips and based on his experiences, he wrote The Rhine. Its three volumes were first published in France only a short time later, between 1842 and 45. In it, his travel reports are collected in the form of letters to a fictitious friend (subtitle: Lettres à un ami), which are enriched with copious reflections, historical anecdotes and Rhine legends gathered from all kinds of sources. It must be emphasized that *The Rhine* was only published after Hugo had thoroughly edited it, and that the result is a mixture of documentary and fictional sections.

The timing of his travels is also worth noticing: in 1840, France had recently suffered a series of diplomatic defeats in the so-called Oriental Crisis which had severely weakened France's influence among European powers and served as a driving factor for what is now called the Rhine Crisis, occurring that same year. To make a long story short, the French side claimed to re-extend its own territory in the East up to the banks of the Rhine, as it had been before the Congress of Vienna. France's demand for the re-integration of the areas on the Left bank can be read as an attempt to compensate for the losses suffered in the Oriental crisis. This demand was instantly followed by a fierce dispute between France and the German Confederation, in which military, but also rhetorical, armament was being deployed. Thanks to a turnover of the French cabinet, the war did not break out, but left bitter resentment and a strengthened nationalism on both sides, which also echoed in the arts. So Hugo's book, The Rhine, was published immediately after this crisis and raises a strong political voice amidst the tensions, a voice for international understanding and European culture. Right in the preface he pleads for a rapprochement between the neighbors, and a concrete place for a possible agreement of the hostile spirits is the Rhine.

#2 "The Rhine is the river of which all the world speaks and which no one explores, which everyone visits and which no one knows, which one notices as one passes by and which one quickly forgets, which every glance touches and which no one penetrates spiritually. [...] and this admirable river, through its transparent waves, allows the eye of the poet as well

as that of the publicist to see the past and the future of Europe.“

(But now, some pictures)

#3 This first example shows the ruins of the Werner Chapel above Bacharach. The remains of the Gothic nave, destroyed back in the 17th century, were already a well-known and often depicted tourist destination in Hugo's time. In this drawing, Hugo captures the silhouette of the ruins with quick and precise pencil strokes, he works out the details on the gothic tracery windows and sketches shadows and plants in the foreground with cross and zigzag hatching. On top of this, he lays a layer of brown ink with which he traces a few contour lines in different widths. In this way he intensifies the contrasts and creates a more dramatic chiaroscuro effect. It is possible that Hugo added this ink layer a bit later, e.g. in the evening in his hostel. In situ he made do only to the preliminary pencil drawing. According to his own statement, when traveling, the evenings were usually the time when he put down on paper the impressions of the day and thus had pen and ink in front of him anyway.

It is interesting to look at such drawings parallel to the corresponding parts of the Rhine book. In the chapter about Bacharach, Hugo describes the character of the little town as follows:

#4 „Bacharach lies in a wild landscape. Clouds, almost always clinging to its high ruins, steep rocks, wild water, wrap with dignity this severe old town, which was Roman, which was Romanesque, eventually Gothic, and which does not want to become modern.“

According to the author, this is also due to the fact that the people of Bacharach do not give the modern steam ships any mooring in their town and thus prefer to keep civilisation at bay.

#5 This next pencil sketch also entitled "Bacharach" takes up the impression of a city fallen out of time. It shows the “Altes Haus” /"Old House" at the marketplace from the 16th century, which has been preserved until today. In the lower left corner you can see the inscription "Bacharach /2 7bre 4h" (i.e. 2 September, 4 o'clock). Carefully, Hugo depicts the many details of the decorative timber frame elements, indicates with light and shadow the altitude of the afternoon sun, avoiding overly straight and uniform lines. The volumes appear organic, slightly twisted and skewed, the two gables and the corner tower seem to grow out of a common trunk. Although Hugo lets his drawing be determined by the peculiar character of the old half-timbered house, this drawing can also be easily classified under "travel documentation".

#6 Things get a little more interesting with our next example, the Mäuseturm (Mouse Tower) near Bingen. This was an especially important stage for Hugo's trip. In his chapter „From Lorch to Bingen“, Hugo describes his nightly passage to the Mouse Tower, a key event of his journey that lets him experience closely the spooky tales of the Rhine valley. As a child, he had already heard from a German domestic of the terrifying tale of the archbishop Hatto – who was eaten alive by mice in this tower. The Mouse Tower had since then been a constant nightmare vision in his childhood and youth. Or, as he puts it, “one of the most common visions of my spirit.” Thus, on his Rhine journey, Hugo could hardly wait to see the tower with his own eyes. In this ink sketch, Hugo shows the view of the meandering Rhine amidst steep slopes on both sides. In the middle, the Mouse Tower, a little boat with a swollen sail and the silhouette of a ruin in backlight on the right shore form a triangle. It is hard to estimate proportions and distances under the dense ink strokes; the tower itself appears downright tiny. A stroke of wet, blurred color shapes a strip of forest on the ridge, the clouds in the sky right over it are outlined by streaks of ink, some of which trickle almost down to the water surface. This piece is dated September 1840, and is therefore likely to have been drawn in the directly following his visit, just like in our previous

example.

#7 This is not the case for this drawing, titled „Town on the Rhine“, which Hugo has drawn 10 years later, long after his return to France. The silhouette of the town appears almost like in an inkblot painting, and is only distinguishable thanks to a few towering steeples. On the water surface in the lower half, we can see a boat with a sail, shallow rocks and nightly creatures (birds and a bat). Most noticeable here is the dramatic structure of the sky that looks like overgrown or rust-eaten. On the water surface, this effect continues, but a bit softer. Hugo probably has achieved this effect by erasing away the upmost layer of paint from the damp paper with a scraping knife. A picture like this is surely not for travel documentation. The city is anonymous, the subject random – but instead, Hugo focusses on the experimental play of the painting material. Like through a fog of sepia ink, we see the memory of a sensation, of a mood from a past time, shining through; and the scraping effect creates a romantic feeling of evanescence, like an overgrown rock.

#8 A subsequent meditation on seen and experienced things is showing in this example as well, a drawing of 1863 (that's 23 years after his Rhine journey). In this drawing, „Old houses on the Rhine“, Hugo assembles set pieces of medieval architecture. It is hard to recognize a logically explainable spatial link. Here and there, patches of light rise from the overall darkness, watery ink lines circumscribe blocks of stone and sharp-edged ruins or define a cross-window. We can assume that Hugo did not take any specific building as a model, he is more interested in evoking a certain mood, manifesting in the slowly decaying architecture. Drawings made long after his Rhine journey like this one appear to us as blurred visions of the past and meditations on the passing of time – Hugo himself puts it like this in the preface to the second edition of *The Rhine*:

#9 „You only have to open your window on the Rhine, then you see the past.“

#10 Accordingly, ink sketches are for Hugo a medium for intimate reflection. They allow him to dive into a meditative contemplation while following the random play of the color flow. Hugo's grandson George remembers having watched his grandfather draw as a child. When you see one of Hugo's sketches like this, you can easily comprehend his description:

„Sometimes I watched him draw; it was only small, quick sketches […] that he threw on some random papers. He used to let the ink flow aimlessly over the sheet and squashed the goose quill, which creaked and spit wild splashes. Then he kneaded, so to say, the black stain until it turned into a castle, a forest, a deep lake or a stormy sky. He then wet the feather's barb carefully with his lips and, with that, emptied a cloud, from which rain fell on the wet paper. Finally, with a burnt match, he drew graceful architectural details, flowers on gothic ogives, set a grimace on a gargoyle, put debris on a tower and thus, the match between his fingers became a stylus.“

Victor Hugo brought his whole body and all his senses into his sketches: He takes the feather barb into his mouth to moisten it, makes strong gestures, the quill scratches and screeches, various materials are worked and rubbed into the paper. All of this does not seem to follow a certain conception of the finished image, he merely reacts to what appears on his paper by chance and lets his imagination wander freely. He starts with a shapeless ink stain and gradually turns it into figurative elements.

I would also like to point out another aspect. Hugo the drawer apparently liked to work with the same materials that Hugo the writer kept on his desk anyway: Quill and ink, of course, blank paper, notes and envelopes, but also drinks like wine and coffee.

His writing instrument, the quill, may be the most interesting ingredient. Hugo is well acquainted with it, since he uses it on a daily basis, and he can predict the flow of the ink as he draws lines on the paper; he knows when and where it will leave stains. From writer to drawer, by simply turning over the tool. He uses the feather barb to spread the paint and to mix it with water to create washes. But the feather barb is an insidious tool because it tends to split in unpredictable places. Also, it can take in far less water than a hair brush, making it harder to spread liquids on the paper. It rather makes them slide over the surface. So, chance plays a crucial role in the use of the quill, which certainly was very appealing to Hugo. As a brush allows for much more precise maneuvers, we can assume that the quill enabled a swift start, but the details were drawn with the help of a professional tool such as a soft hair brush. The record given by his grandson leaves no doubt that Hugo went quite far with his experiments, and that in this respect he can hardly be compared to any of his contemporaries.

#11 To pick out a random example, here is a drawing titled „Dentelles et spectres" – „Lace and specters". In this picture, Hugo soaked lace fabric with thinned ink, imprinted it on paper and cut it out, glued it on another sheet and added a few accents with charcoal. From the pattern of the lace, he creates skulls or bizarre masks, fragments of a scary face.

#12 In other drawings, that are completely abstract, he concentrates on the flow of the thinned ink, the effect it creates when layers of paint overlap and the little incrustations of the drying paint. When you look at these procedures, it may be little surprising that the surrealists (among them André Breton, notably) were very interested in these experiments that make chance a powerful factor in drawing. And even to our eyes today, Hugo's drawings seem incredibly modern, in the sense that they seem to anticipate certain tendencies for abstraction and elevate material to the actual subject matter long before Modernism.

Hugo himself, it seems, was never too concerned about starting a revolution or even promoting change in the arts of his time. He considered himself clearly a writer, not an artist, and drawing was rather a private, pleasurable pastime which he even almost tried to hide. Only occasionally did he give away drawings to friends, some he framed as a wall decoration for his houses. Overall, he insisted on keeping his ambitions as low as possible in public and always presented himself as an amateur. Thus, he wrote to Charles Baudelaire, who had seen some of his work before:

#13 „I am very happy and proud of the kind words you had to say about the things that I like to call my quill drawings. I have finally gone as far as to mix pencil, charcoal, sepia, dust, soot and all kinds of curious mixtures, to be able to depict, at least more or less, what I have in the eye, or more precisely: in mind. Between to verses, this amuses me." Given his obvious fascination for his experiments, we may be inclined not to believe Hugo that the sketches are just a random pastime next to his actual profession as a poet. But Hugo keeps it modest.

#14 To his editor Castel, who wanted Hugo's consent for publishing some drawings as engravings, he writes : „Chance has brought some of my drawing attempts to your eyes – attempts I have made in dreamy hours, almost unconsciously, with the ink left in my quill, on the margin or on the envelopes of my manuscripts... I fear that these insignificant lines, thrown on the paper in a more or less clumsy way by a man who has other things to do, will stay what they wanted to be: creations of the moment."

Hugo stays humble, and he even claims that his drawings had been created in a state close to unconsciousness. Behind this rhetoric, we can suspect a strategy by which Hugo wants to keep the greatest possible freedom to himself and his

work. By calling his drawings unconscious smears, which he really would rather not show anyone, and which are only a private hobby, he does not even raise the claim of producing 'art'. Thus he does not have to stick to conventions, nor does he have to subject himself to the criticism of a wider audience.

Whilst giving preference to writing over drawing, he avoids, which may be surprising, any theoretical reflection on a potential competition of these two arts – which of them is better in describing things, evoking a certain mood, etc. Neither the difference between figurative and abstract, which we like to stress a lot today, seems to be important to him. What is important though, when you look at a cross section of his drawings, is the enduring fascination of being able to create depth with a few strokes of the brush or quill, a dark space, a pull with the power to evoke an oppressive, uncanny or melancholy mood. Here, researchers have found parallels between Hugo's prose and his drawings: Both live from contrasts – light and dark, new and old, now and then, beauty and horror.

#15 Hugo's drawing process and our gaze, our reception resemble a rêverie, walking in a dreamscape that conjures up and combines random images from the past or arbitrary patterns. Elements from the Rhine travel reappear again and again in ever changing forms. Often times, Hugo draws ruined castles, hills and riversides, rising nobly from the dark. The dark, blackish-brown ink is the diffuse, primordial source from which any object and ornament can be formed. In the dark, in the abysmal, lies the source of every artistic creation. Just as this short verse from the poem *Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre* expresses it (in my own translation), 'L’ab„me est un pr· tre et l’ombre est un po‡te“ – The abyss is a priest and the shadow a poet.“