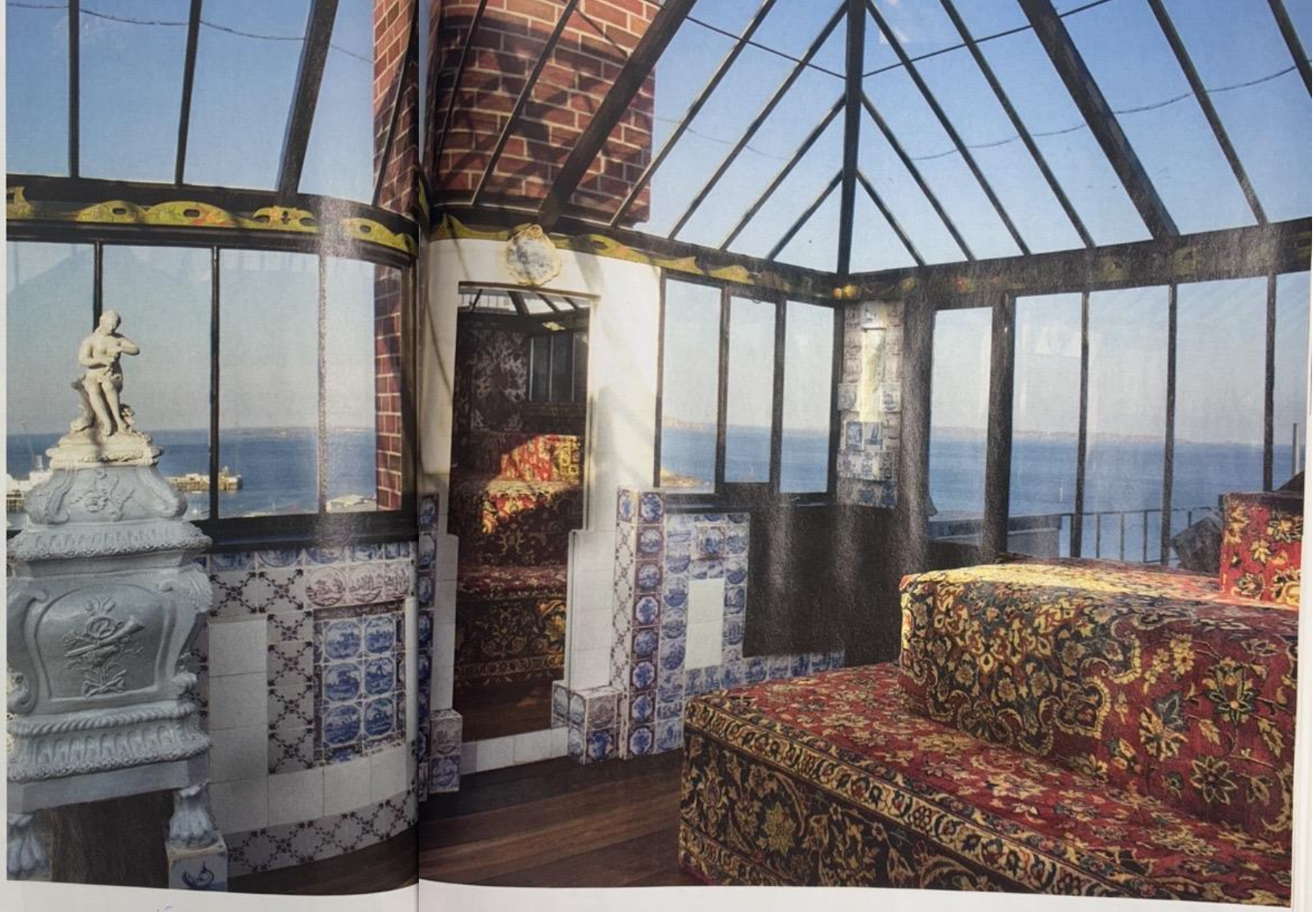
The house that Hugo built



In exile on Guernsey, Victor Hugo completed his iconic saga *Les Misérables*, as well as producing thousands of drawings. He also created an extraordinary house. As the RA exhibition of his visionary art continues, Imogen Greenhalgh **pays a visit**

One day in 1856, Victor Hugo was handed some house keys. He had purchased a property – the only one he would ever own outright. Hauteville House, in St Peter Port, Guernsey. Perched high in the tangle of streets above the island's main town, its grey-fronted façade has an austere appearance which belies the interior. Crane upwards, and you might just glimpse an unusual glass room above the roof – a bird's nest extension grafted between edifice and sky. It's the only clue to passers-by that the house might not be what it seems.

Step inside, and a domestic world unlike any other awaits. Once Hugo had acquired the property, he set about feverishly refurbishing it over several years. Every fixture, fitting and furnishing was ripe for customisation, and the walls, ceilings and floors were to serve as blank canvases for his formidable imagination. The house became a kind of proxy for the writer, a place where ideas could be writ large. Inscriptions in Latin appear in most rooms (some even engraved by Hugo's own hand): 'Exile is Life'; 'I am seated, but I advance'; 'Where there is hope, there is peace'. 'My husband... puts his soul on the walls of his house,' wrote Adèle Hugo to her sister in 1856. 'The result will be a monument raised by the great exile.'

For indeed this house was a kind of recompense for Hugo's shattered life, divorced from his homeland first by political decree, and then, after Napoleon III granted amnesty, on principle. Hugo had arrived on Guernsey the previous year, half expecting a cool reception from locals following aborted stays in Belgium and Jersey. Instead, he found, as he wrote in a dedication to the island, his 'rock

of hospitality and freedom'. Its craggy shores, flecked with numerous wild flowers he loved to observe, became home for 15 years. He returned to France only in 1870 after Napoleon's defeat by Prussia at Sedan.

The house itself became, as Adèle wrote in that same letter to her sister, a sort of 'poem', layered thick with reference and allusion. As well as displaying his drawings in various rooms, Hugo supposedly joked that his calling was surely that of the interior decorator, so committed was he to questions of design. Yet it feels no exaggeration. Besides the endless decorative flourishes – an immense tiled fireplace, resembling the letter H (above); flowers he has carved into walls and furniture; engraved panels he has made; and religious figures he has adorned – there are little bouts of ingenuity. A chair's backrest becomes a decorative lintel above a window, an old oak door a polished table, and, embedded in a wall in the dining room, an inkwell, on hand should inspiration strike over a meal.

Visitors enter Hauteville House through a dark, ill-lit hallway. Like so much in the house, this is a deliberate effect, akin to the dimming of the lights before the stage curtain is lifted (Hugo was passionate about set design too), preparing you for the theatrics to follow. As your eyes adjust to the darkness, a huge carved wood Notre-Dame greets you, mounted on a pillar facing the front door. The room's main source of natural light filters in from a window at the far side of the house, at the end of a corridor lined with china plates. Every square inch of wall and much of the ceiling is decked with engraved wood panels repurposed from old trunks, tapestries, carpets and beadwork, much of it sourced from antique and bric-a-brac sales, then tinkered with by Hugo. Though he would enlist craftspeople, working with some over many years, he too was proficient in woodwork, cloth dyeing and other manual tasks.

Previous pages: Victor Hugo's Lookout, a glass room built on the roof of Hauteville House

Opposite page, top: Hugo on the balcony of Hauteville House in 1868, photographed by Arsène Garnier

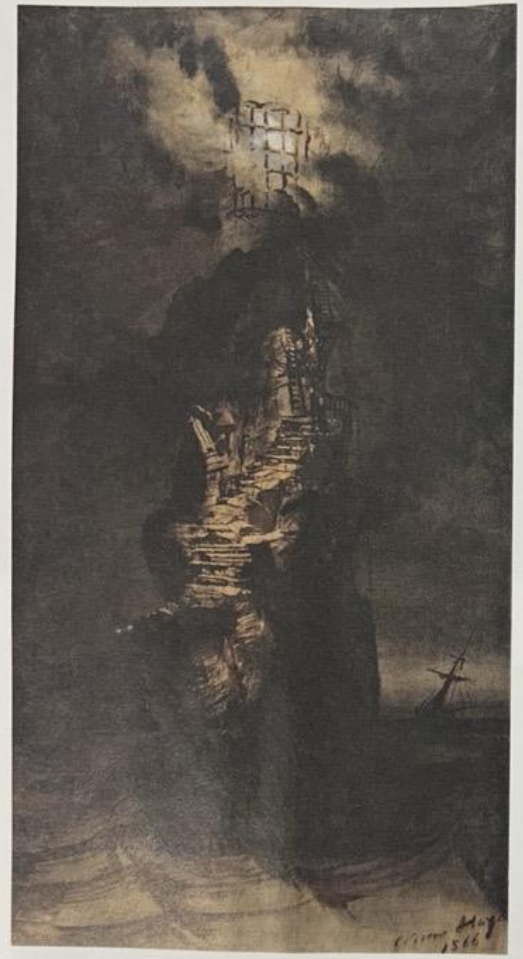
Opposite page, bottom: The Oak Gallery, in the former owner's quarters

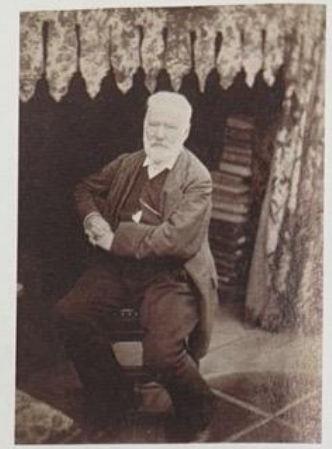
This page, above: The Dining Room, including the bespoke tiled fireplace commissioned by Hugo

The effect is overwhelming; everywhere the eye roves, it uncovers further intrigue. Head deeper inside the house, and light begins to filter into the hallway from a skylight high above the building's central staircase, which leads all the way up to the roof. It serves as a kind of a statement or manifesto: from shadowy beginnings, illumination beckons.

Fanning out from the hallway are various drawing rooms for entertaining, the first a traditional billiard room, intended to occupy his sons, leading through to a smoking room arranged around a vast fireplace constructed with the help of a carpenter. It looms over the room, altar-like in scale and appearance, a polished convex mirror at its centre, inspired by the solar eclipse. Carved into it is a roll call of history's great men: Socrates, Christ, Luther, Washington... This is a house for the living, but also the dead.

The next two floors make space for the Hugo family's bedrooms and more drawing rooms, including the Red and Blue rooms, which reprise designs from his Paris apartment. The former owner's quarters are given over not to sleeping, but rather serve as a kind of ceremonial function room, called the Oak Gallery. This was a room Hugo – deeply religious, but vehemently opposed to the church – kept largely private, and perhaps feels like the oddest, most oppressively ornate room in the house (opposite page, below). At one end sits an imposing desk with three chairs, side by side, as if awaiting a jury. They face out to a cathedral-like room complete with religious figures and a giant candelabra. At the other end of the »





Above:
The Lighthouse at Casquets, Guernsey, 1866, by Victor Hugo

Above, right:
Hugo, photographed in the Lookout at Hauteville House, in 1878

» room is a high, four-poster bed. To reach it, you must pass through an arch with the inscriptions 'Laetitia' (Happiness) and 'Tristitia' (Sorrow) on either side. Life, as Hugo felt so keenly, was marked in equal measure by both. Above the bed's headboard is a small ivory emblem given to Hugo by his friend James Pradier after his daughter Léopoldine drowned. It is of a face, half-man, half-skull.

If this mausoleum-like space reckons with death, then the top floor of the house feels like a kind of redemption. A suite of small rooms tucked in and around the eaves, this was the secluded heart of Hauteville: a carpet-lined study, usually thick with papers, a few personal effects, and a tiny, monk-like bedroom (without fireplace or gas lamps). The pièce-de-resistance is Hugo's glass-panelled 'Lookout', added in 1861-62, with panoramic views out to sea. It was here that he would write, his homeland – an exile's fixation – visible on the horizon on a clear day.

The final artwork visitors encounter in the Royal Academy's Hugo exhibition is *The Lighthouse at Casquets, Guernsey* (1866; left) – a beacon bathed in darkness, the waves around it buffeted by wind. At its top, a beam of light flashes; hope for any souls in peril at sea. Standing in the Lookout, high above the water and separated a little from the world below, one recalls this lighthouse as a kind of allegory for Hauteville House, the writer's study, an enclave of enlightenment on the edge of history's mainstream.

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Imogen Greenhalgh is Deputy Editor of RA Magazine

- **Astonishing Things: The Drawings of Victor Hugo**
The Jillian and Arthur M. Sackler Wing of Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts, until 29 June
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- **Hauteville House** *is open to the public until 30 Sep. All visitors must pre-book a guided tour for entry*