

28 August 2024 marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Léopoldine Hugo, eldest daughter of Victor Hugo and young wife of Charles Vacquerie.

The Department of Seine-Maritime wanted to celebrate the occasion through its various roles.

As owner and manager of the Vacquerie House – Victor-Hugo Museum since 1953, it had to pay tribute to Léopoldine, who appears as a key figure in the museum. As an assertive and determined player in local culture, while its proactive cultural policy, unanimously adopted in March 2024, focused on heritage, cultural and artistic education and public reading is gradually being rolled out with the generosity and enthusiasm that have shaped it for years. The Vacquerie House – Victor-Hugo Museum, a Museum of France and Maison des Illustres, is ideally placed to contribute to these missions.

The museum was born out of a human tragedy. On 4 September 1843, Léopoldine Hugo and her husband Charles drowned in the Seine just a stone's throw from the Vacquerie House. A father's pain and a poet's genius transcended this tragic event to create one of the most beautiful collections of French poetry: *Les Contemplations*, published in 1856.

At the end of 2024 and throughout 2025, the Vacquerie House – Victor-Hugo Museum will be celebrating this anniversary with a series of events.

In June 2024, two exhibitions remembered Léopoldine through the museum's collections. *Léopoldine, jeune fille romantique* was a tribute to the museum's major 1967 exhibition by Elisabeth Chirol and Pierre Georgel, and « *Je t'embrasse comme je t'aime* » was an opportunity to present some of Léopoldine's most beautiful letters.

In September 2024, in partnership with Roseraie Guillot®, the Department named a Léopoldine Hugo-Vacquerie® rose, which will be marketed from 2026 onwards.

In 2025, two temporary exhibitions – « *Aime celui qui t'aime* », an invitation to set designer Jean Oddes, and « *Les reflets de Léopoldine* », an invitation to painter Olivier Desvaux – will each remember « Léopoldine Hugo » in their own way.

Finally, in June 2025, a day of meetings will be dedicated to Didine. All these events will be accompanied by a unique catalogue celebrating Léopoldine Hugo's 200th birthday. This programme is also an opportunity to republish Léopoldine's maiden album, to touch on the creation of a digital version of *Les Contemplations* based on one of the museum's enriched copies, and to present the latest acquisitions linked to Léopoldine. Last but not least, the museum has also worked hard to include a museum album in the "discovery collection", following on from the remarkable first opus on Jumièges Abbey.

It's set to be a wonderful anniversary year for the Vacquerie House – Victor-Hugo Museum, and I encourage you to get involved.

Bertrand BELLANGER

President of the Department of Seine-Maritime

INTRODUCTION

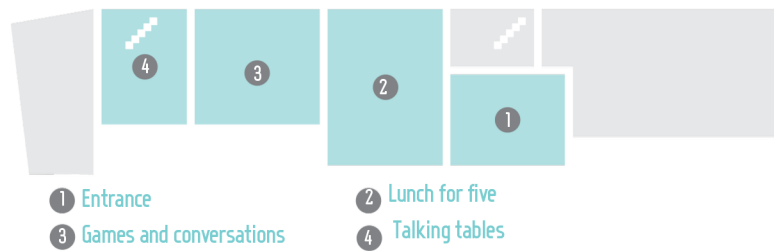
Two centuries ago, Léopoldine was born, daughter of Adèle and Victor Hugo. The woman who discovered Villequier in 1839, at the age of 15, and fell in love with both the place and one of its occupants, Charles Vacquerie.

The love story between Léopoldine and Charles is an integral part of Villequier's history. It began and ended here, was immortalised here.

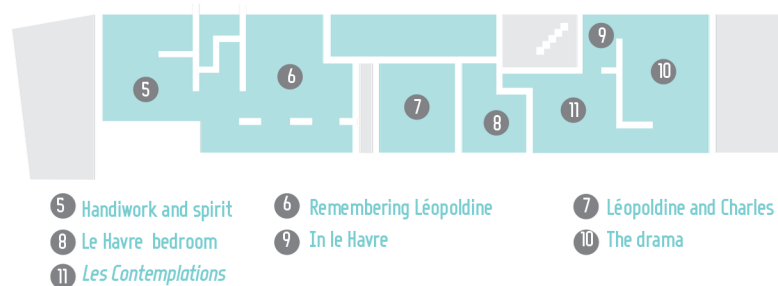
This house, a family holiday home in the original Vacquerie village, has borne the joys and sorrows of this history.

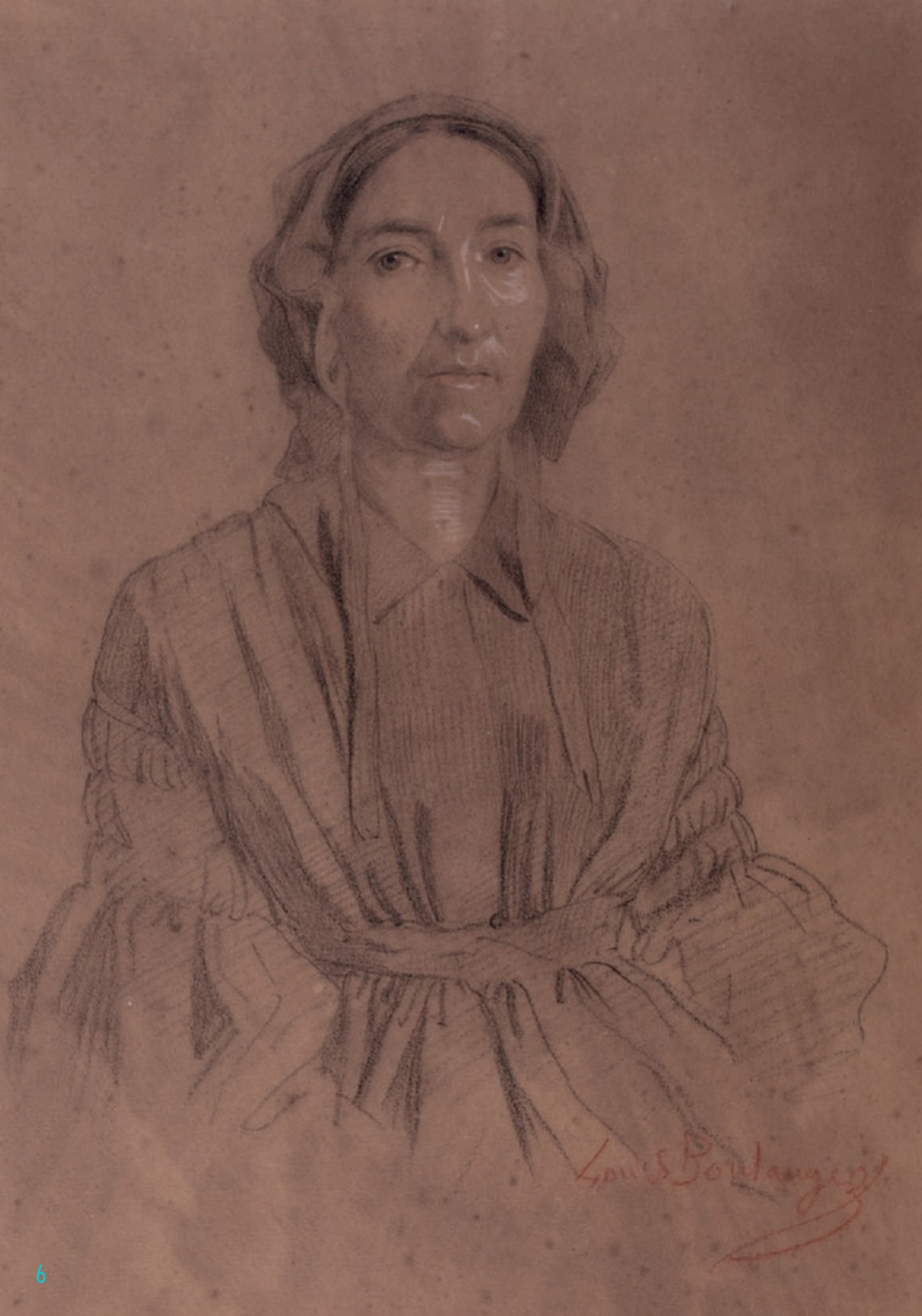
Step into the exhibition and meet Léopoldine, discover the links she forged between the Hugo and Vacquerie families. Marvel at the simplicity of the love between these two young people, which preceded the seismic events of their deaths. Follow the story of *Les Contemplations*, which gave this drama universal resonance, capable of touching us as deeply as ever.

Ground floor



First floor





Lunch for five

It's 4 September 1843, and the history of this house is about to change forever.

The mother of the family, Jeanne-Arsène Vacquerie, lost her husband Charles Isidore a few months ago.

The son, Charles, came to settle the estate at the notary's office in Caudebec-en-Caux. Léopoldine Hugo, his young wife, naturally accompanied him to Villequier: she is so fond of this place on the banks of the Seine, the place where she met Charles, where their love story began four years ago.

The uncle, Pierre Vacquerie, also came to handle the estate. He's with his son, 11-year-old Artus.

Why not take a boat trip while everyone is gathered together ? Léopoldine, who loves boat rides in Villequier, could join the crew, and so could little Artus. Uncle Pierre Vacquerie has just had this sailboat made, and it's a wonderful opportunity to try it out in such fine weather. It may take a while, since there's so little wind, but they'll be back by lunchtime.

Jeanne-Arsène has everything prepared and is awaiting her guests.

Ground floor



◀ Jeanne-Arsène Vacquerie by Louis Boulanger



Games and conversations

When Léopoldine first came to this house for the summer holiday of 1839, she wrote: « We go for a walk until 6 o'clock, then we have dinner, after which we talk, dance, laugh and play in the family room until 10 o'clock ».

Games and conversations are a common thread in the Hugo-Vacquerie relationship.

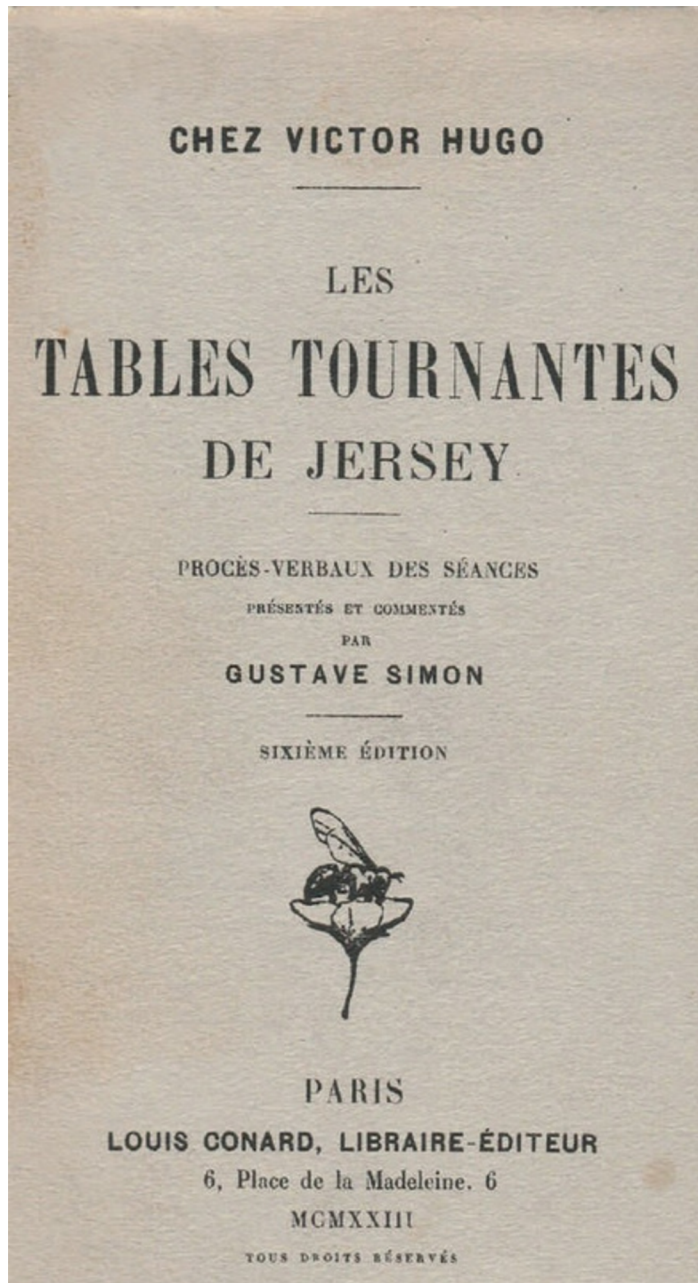
When Victor Hugo goes into exile in Jersey in 1852, his loyal friend Auguste Vacquerie (Charles' brother) followed him. They work, they have long philosophical conversations, and they play billiards. Along with these pastimes, this was also the occasion when Charles Hugo (son of Victor Hugo) experimented with photography with Auguste Vacquerie. They photographed their loved ones, the island of Jersey, and of course Victor Hugo on the « Rock of the Exiles ».

When Auguste Vacquerie returns to France, he had the room you're in now built to house a French billiard table (points are scored by hitting the other two balls). In 1879, during his last stay in Villequier, Victor Hugo played billiards here with his friends.

Rez-de-chaussée



◀ Victor Hugo on the « Rock of the Exiles », by Charles Hugo



Talking tables

During their exile in Jersey, the friends also experimented with other concepts: a friend and supporter of the Hugos, Delphine de Girardin, introduced them to spiritism (communication with spirits). One of the legs of the small table is said to have lifted and knocked on the floor. Each number of knocks corresponds to a letter of the alphabet (1 knock for A, 2 knocks for B, etc.). Auguste Vacquerie is present and notes down all the exchanges. After two unsuccessful attempts, on Sunday, 11 September 1853, the table starts to move:

« Ms de Girardin. - Who are you ?

- Girl.

[...]

(We can all feel the presence of the dead woman. Everyone cries).

Victor Hugo. - Are you happy ?

- Yes.

- Where are you ?

- Light.

- What do I have to do to get to you ?

- Love »



◀ Edition of the *Tables tournantes de Jersey*, 1923

Handiwork and spirit : women's pastimes

It sometimes rains in Normandy. During Léopoldine's holidays with her mother and siblings in 1839, it rained in Villequier for one whole week in September.

What can you do to pass the time? Writing, of course (Léopoldine wrote letters to her father and her young aunt, Julie Foucher), but also sewing and embroidery, an activity in which she excelled. So, she sews a pair of sleeves for Julie.

Within this feminine setting of the time, her mother Adèle (trained by artist Julie Duvidal de Montferrier) also practises drawing. Her portraits are full of simplicity but always portray a certain depth, where viewers can catch a glimpse of something of the subject's inner life.

First floor



◀ Self-portrait of Adèle Hugo (born Foucher)



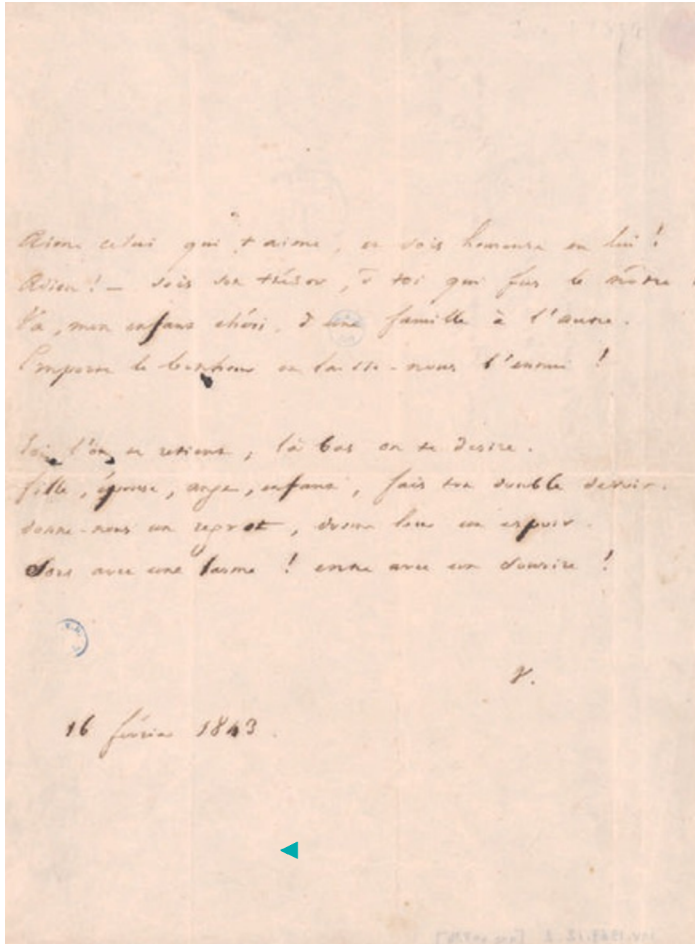
Remembering Léopoldine

Many years after the holiday at Villequier, Victor Hugo returns to the house for his last stay in Normandy, in 1879. A writing desk is made so that he can write standing up, as he usually does. He spends long hours at the cemetery, noting in his notebook « Prayer. Love. They hear me. I hear them. » In this place, he can't help thinking of Léopoldine. This closeness he retained with his daughter, despite her death, was also expressed through objects, such as this portrait by Edouard Dubufe, which Léopoldine had had made for him just before her marriage, and which was very precious to him.

First floor



◀ Portrait of Léopoldine by Édouard Dubufe, photographed by Auguste Vacquerie



▲ Manuscript of the poem « Aime celui qui t'aime » (« Love the one who loves you »)

First floor



Léopoldine and Charles

There is nothing written about the love story between Léopoldine and Charles.

She was the daughter of a well-known writer and a member of the nobility of the Empire, surrounded by brilliant figures, and had received an education that was both classical and unusual: religious education, piano lessons, as well as editing and copying Victor Hugo's manuscripts.

He, the son of bourgeois shipowners, was more interested in outdoor activities (especially swimming) than literature. He was the opposite of his brother Auguste, who also had feelings for Léopoldine.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that Léopoldine chose Charles, so different from her usual environment. For Léopoldine, the holiday in 1839 was surely a moment of freedom that fostered closer ties between the two, in the absence of Victor Hugo (who remained in Paris, and was then travelling with Juliette Drouet). She enjoyed new experiences when she discovered the sea, swimming in the sea in Le Havre (« a bather takes you in his arms and throws you head-first into the water, then supports you » - could this bather be Charles himself?). She also experienced some thrills too: when they visited Jumièges Abbey, Charles took her to the top of one of the two ruined towers, and Léopoldine recounted this « terrible moment of anguish » to her confidante Julie Foucher.

For two and a half years, their love affair was hidden from Victor Hugo, but encouraged by Adèle. In 1842, Léopoldine received marriage proposals from other suitors, and they had to take action quickly: it was Auguste who, out of devotion to his brother, helped bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion. Victor Hugo, despite his reluctance, finally agreed when he came to understand his daughter's determination.

On 15 February 1843, the wedding took place at the Église Saint-Paul in Paris, in a small ceremony (as the Vacquerie family was in mourning at the time). The bridal gown made of silk lace from Caen was a gift to Léopoldine from Charles's elder sister, Marie-Arsène. In the church, Victor Hugo wrote a poem for his daughter. The next day, he copied the poem and sent the manuscript presented here to « Madame Vacquerie-Hugo » at the Hôtel Bergère in Paris, where the couple were spending their honeymoon. This poem, « Aime celui qui t'aime », was a mark of his blessing as a father.



The le Havre bedroom

This room is a reconstruction of the room Léopoldine and Charles lived in after their marriage, in Marie-Arsène's home in Le Havre. The room was reconstructed based on drawings by Adèle and artist Louis Boulanger, and from Léopoldine's descriptions. « I have a lovely little room. It's very small, but the furniture all has a purpose and is proportionate to the size of the apartment, making it very practical. » The portraits on the wall were painted by Auguste de Châtillon (circa 1839 – 1840), and depict the two Vacquerie brothers, Charles and Auguste. Léopoldine wanted to have a picture of her father in her room, so she asked Louis Boulanger for a portrait.

First floor



◀ Charles Vacquerie by Auguste de Châtillon



In le Havre

Léopoldine was separated from her family for the first time in her life. She wrote long letters to her mother, describing her days spent sewing, preparing for the visit of the Hugo family in spring and summer, meeting people and going to the theatre and opera.

« Give my darling father a big kiss; tell him I still can't read his admirable verses to me without crying. Tell him to think about sending us some of his work. Charles has only a few incomplete volumes. I'd like to have it all, quickly. »

One event had a profound effect on her: the fire at the Grand-Théâtre on the night of 29 April 1843: « You see, dear mother, I could live to be one hundred and never forget that night. »

First floor



◀ Fire at the Grand-Théâtre, Archives Municipales, le Havre



The drama

On 4 September 1843, on the way back from the notary's, a sudden gust of wind capsized the boat. Witnesses saw Charles emerge and dive several times, doubtless in an attempt to save Léopoldine, and then never surface again. All four occupants on the boat died in the wreck: Artus, Pierre, Léopoldine and Charles.

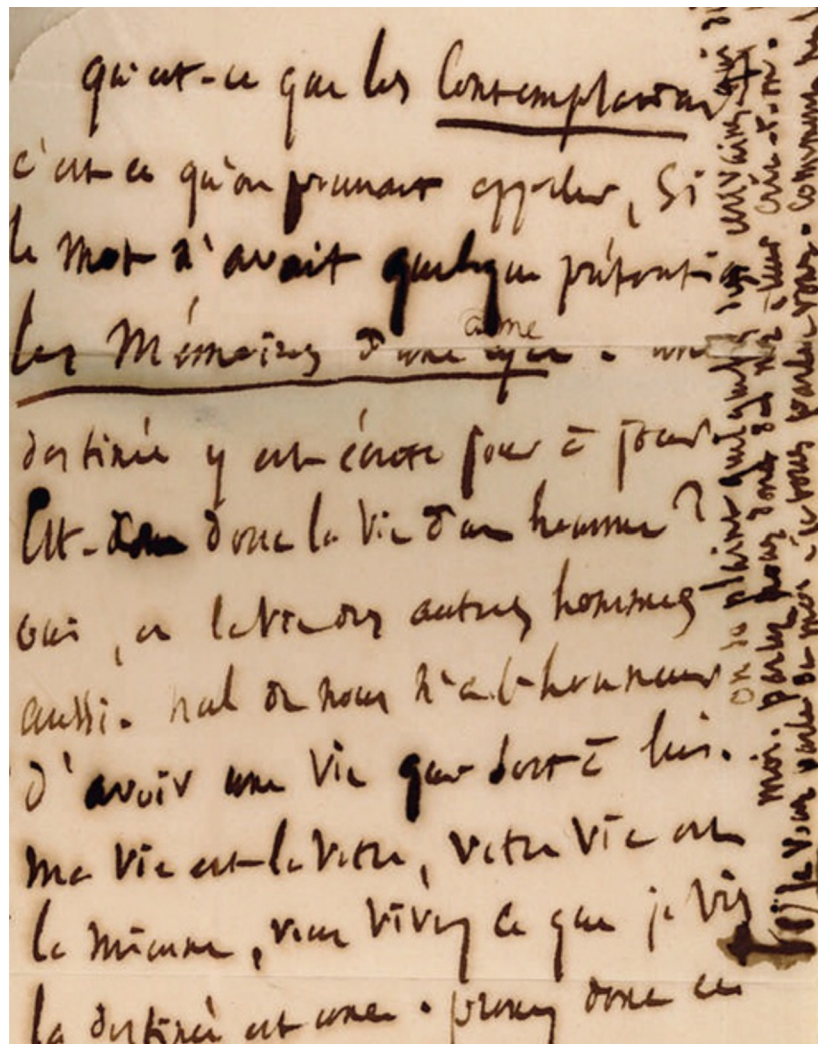
It was a tragedy for both families.

Victor Hugo, who was in Rochefort with Juliette Drouet, discovered the news five days later in the newspaper. Adèle would keep some of Léopoldine's belongings in remembrance, including her wedding gown and the dress she drowned in. Part of Adèle's bedroom would be entirely dedicated to these relics, in their Guernsey home, Hauteville House.

First floor



▲ The banks of Villequier, photograph, 2nd half of the 19th century



▲ Cutting from the preface to *Les Contemplations*

Les Contemplations

Léopoldine's death is the very reason for the existence of the collection of poems, *Les Contemplations*. Published in 1856 while Victor Hugo was in exile in Jersey and then Guernsey, it brings together poems written over more than 25 years.

In his preface, Victor Hugo wrote:

« What is *Les Contemplations*? This is what we might call, if the word were not so pretentious, *Les Mémoires d'une âme* (*Memoirs of a Soul*). [...]

Joy, that swift flower of youth, fades page by page in the first volume, which is hope, and disappears in the second, which is mourning. What mourning? The real, the only: death; the loss of loved ones.

As we've just said, these two volumes tell the story of a soul. *Before, Today*. Separated by a chasm that is the grave. »

Several poems refer to Villequier, such as «à Villequier» or « Charles Vacquerie ». The poem « Demain, dès l'aube » appears to have been written on 4 October 1847 in Villequier, but Victor Hugo changed the date in the published version.

First floor



Follow in the footsteps of Victor Hugo

You can admire the monograms of Léopoldine and Charles in the centre of the garden, as two complementary pieces.

Follow Victor Hugo's path of remembrance and inspiration, leading to the L'Église Saint-Martin. See how an artist of today, Ange Leccia, embodies this poetic and creative bond between father and daughter. This figure of a young girl, seen as if through the veil of a dream, is reminiscent of Léopoldine...

More about Léopoldine

Literary meetings « *Didine!* » | Saturday, 28 June

Reading in the salon « *Lorsque Léopoldine paraît* » | Sunday, 29 June

Musical show « *Demain dès l'aube* » | Saturday, 5 July and Sunday, 6 July

Exhibition « *Les reflets de Léopoldine* » by Olivier Desvaux | 19 December 2025 to 4 May 2026

Explore and book many more events and tours all year round on museevictorhugo.fr

On sale at the museum

- Catalogue of the Léopoldine Hugo exhibition and 200th birthday celebrations
- Victor-Hugo Museum album - Découvertes collection
- Rose Léopoldine Hugo-Vacquerie® - Roseraie Guillot® (rose garden) (available in autumn 2025)
- Léopoldine product line: tea, jewellery, candles, stationery, etc.

« *Aime celui qui t'aime* »

Léopoldine à Villequier

An exhibition produced by the Department of Seine-Maritime and presented from 19 June to 3 November 2025 at the Vacquerie House – Victor-Hugo Museum.

Scientific curators : Jean Cabaret, Caroline Dorion-Peyronnet

Scenography : Jean Oddes (artistic direction), Étienne David (production)

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« Love the one who loves you », Léopoldine in Villequier
19 june to 3 november 2025

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