

MUSÉE



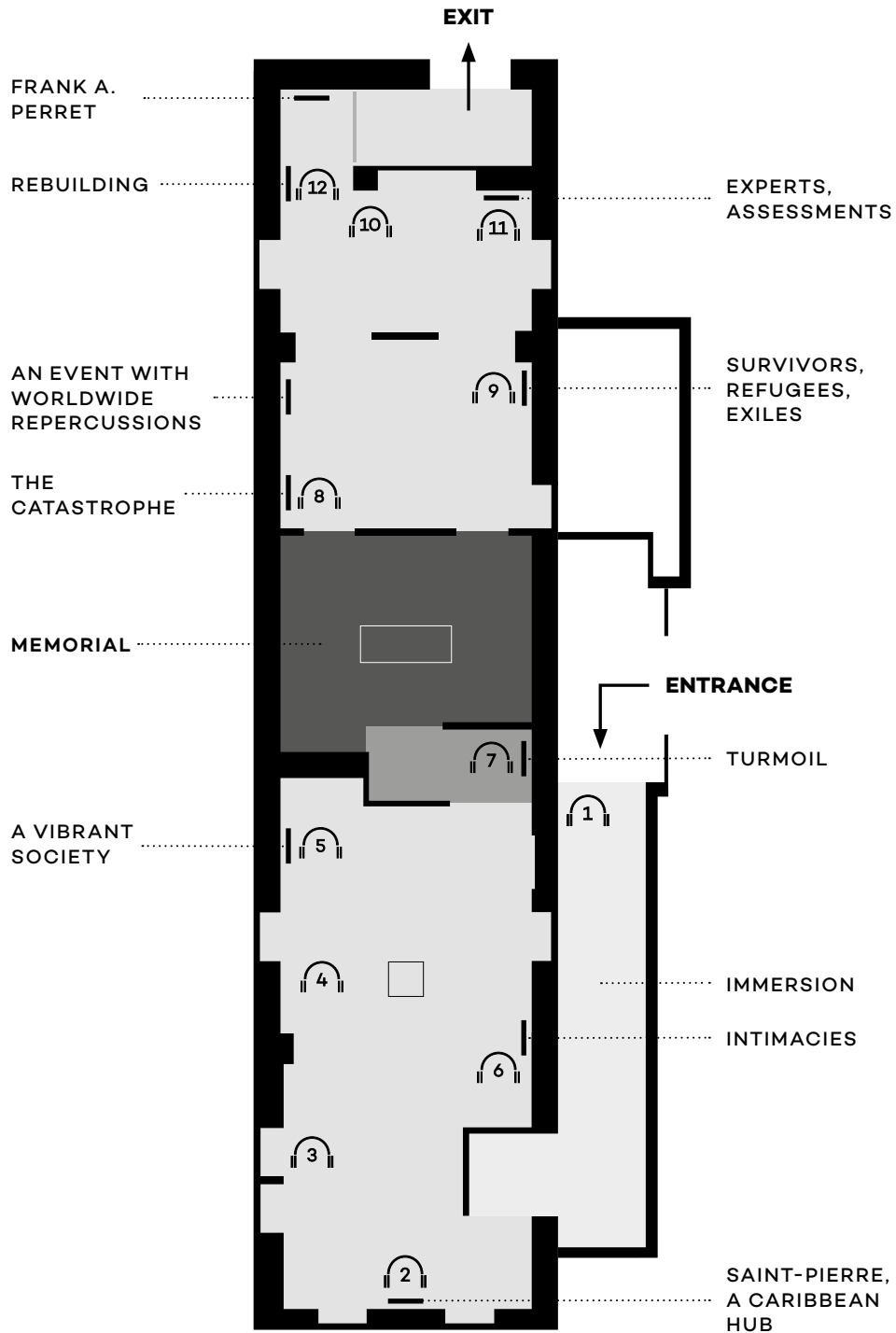
FRANK A.

PERRET



THE MEMORIAL
OF THE 1902
CATASTROPHE

VISITORS' GUIDE
ENGLISH



THE MEMORIAL OF THE 1902 CATASTROPHE



On 8 May 1902, the eruption of Mount Pelée destroyed the entire city of Saint-Pierre, killing thousands and burying all traces of life under layers of ashes and lapilli. Conceived around the catastrophe by the American volcanologist and philanthropist Frank A. Perret, the museum opened in 1933. The first museum ever built in Martinique, it had three purposes: “Scientific, artistic and humanitarian”.

Entirely restructured and rethought, the museum was renovated in 2019. With an architecture based on construction research, its aim now is provide an anchor, an emotional experience and an instrument of cultural excellence. Both a place of conservation and transmission, the museum, now a memorial, is actively serving shared heritage, knowledge and memory.

CHRONOLOGY

OF A VOLCANO...

– 300 000
– 20 000

Formation of the stratovolcano of Mount Pelée

– 382
257

P3. around 2010 ± 140 BP

Plinian eruptions

350–400

P2. around 1670 ± 40 BP

Plinian eruptions

1284–1390

P1. around 650 ± 20 BP

Plinian eruptions

1792

Phreatic eruptions

1851

Phreatic eruptions

1902–1905

Pelean eruptions

1929–1932

Pelean eruptions

AND MEN

VERS 0

First human settlement

1492–1502

First contacts between civilizations

1635

Founding of the colony and the city of Saint-Pierre

1902

Destruction of the city of Saint-Pierre

1929

Evacuation of the population

SAINT-PIERRE, A CARIBBEAN HUB



On the port

Founded in 1635, the town of Saint-Pierre had its heyday in the late 18th century. It was Martinique's main port at the end of the 19th century and remained the island's principal trading center and a key regional and local commercial hub.

—

Located on the sea routes between Europe and the Americas, it was the colony's principal warehouse. Despite its vulnerable natural harbor and lack of port facilities, Saint-Pierre remained an attractive destination due to its dynamism. The shipping agents, merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, employees and workers who congregated there mingled with the migrant population to form a picturesque urban society. Although affected at the turn of the century by the reconfiguration of the colonial empires, the sugar crisis and the devastating hurricane in 1891, Saint-Pierre continued to show its remarkable capacity to adapt...

SUGAR AND RUM

Martinique's economy, based on the processing of sugar cane, completed its transition in the late 19th century. Industrial sugar produced by the inland factories and rum and liqueurs were the chief products. Saint-Pierre specialized in the production of industrial rum, obtained by distilling molasses, a sugar-refining by-product partly imported from other Caribbean islands. Most of the rum distilleries were at Le Mouillage and in the Galère quarter. Saint Pierre became a major rum production and export centre on a worldwide scale. Determining the alcohol content by volume was essential, notably for fiscal reasons. The Salleron-Dujardin still was used for this purpose by the customs in a laboratory at Saint-Pierre and also by the distilleries.

SHOPS AND SHOPKEEPERS

Commercial activity stretched from the port area along the sea front and along rue Victor-Hugo. Warehouses and shops sold all kinds of goods for the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre and the surrounding communes.

Each ship arrived with a new cargo, whose contents were announced in the press. The "porteuses" (carriers) played an important intermediary role. These female street vendors worked independently or more usually in groups organised by the eldest member with links to a shopkeeper. On heavy wooden trays laden with wares they plied their trade in the town's streets and in neighbouring villages.



At the market

NEEDLE AND THREAD

The clothing industry occupied a large portion of the urban population. Fashion shops, haberdashers, wholesale and retail drapers, milliners, tailors, dyers, bootmakers, cobblers, hat sellers and whiteners catered for the most diverse tastes and needs. Garments and accessories denoted social rank and cultural affiliation. With the advent of American sewing machines, handmade articles became status symbols and those who could acquire them were offered terms of payment with interest.

THE NECESSARY AND THE DECORATIVE

Artisans, shopkeepers, jewellers and clockmakers often exercised several of these professions, catering for their privileged urban clientele. Saint-Pierre's 1895 yearbook lists twelve shop-workshops in Rue Victor-Hugo and Rue de l'Hôpital. They produced and sold chains, bracelets, earrings, rings, buttons and broaches, in gold and silver and set with diamonds and other precious stones. Acquiring them was also considered an investment. They were worn by men and well as women and often handed down from generation to generation. Clockmakers produced the chronometers, clocks and watches so vital for seafarers and also the traders awaiting their arrival.

ENTERTAINMENTS, PLEASURES, INEBRIATIONS

—

At a time when there were few entertainments, Saint-Pierre had its fair share of urban attractions: its theatre, its cafés with their billiard tables, its dance halls, and of course its more discreet pleasure establishments. The four hotels and numerous boarding houses near Place Bertin hosted travelling salesmen, seamen between voyages, inhabitants of the surrounding countryside in town on business and the region's carefree youth. Smoking tobacco, which originated in the Caribbean, was a pleasure shared by both sexes. Rum was drunk neat or in a punch, mixed with syrup and more exotic alcohols brought by ship. Coffee, the island's lucrative main export in bygone times, was drunk daily.



Carnival



Life in Saint-Pierre

A VIBRANT SOCIETY

Saint-Pierre's urban landscape took shape at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. The definitive abolition of slavery in 1848 then, a generation later, the creation of the 3rd Republic were key factors in the reorganization of its changing society.

—

Political debate thrived, fuelled by the institution of universal manhood suffrage and the development of the press, represented by Les Antilles, Les Colonies and La Défense coloniale. Divergent interests crystallised in the 1880s when the secularization of education became a controversial issue.

In the late 19th century, the Church was in crisis and as elections approached the town became the theatre for ferocious partisan struggles. Yet the rhythm of Saint-Pierre's daily working life went on unchanged, punctuated by religious and republican celebrations and of course the carnival.



Conservatives versus
Republicans

INTIMACIES

PAST AND PRESENT

—

Saint-Pierre's daily life was directly reflected by the possessions of its inhabitants. The practical and decorative objects found in the most humble and wealthiest homes show the mainly French sources of goods in the late 19th century. They also show how tradition went hand-in-hand with the modern. Stone hearths coexisted with coal-fired cast-iron stoves, earthenware cooking pots, cast-iron and tinware utensils, kerosene lamps and electric lighting, a technological innovation in use at Saint-Pierre well before other French towns.

HYGIENE, BEAUTY

—

Increasing awareness of the importance of personal hygiene, the relative rise in the standard of living and advances in chemistry created the climate in which cosmetic products and brands developed in the second half of the 19th century. Their formulae, often ancient, were adapted and diversified by companies intent on differentiating themselves in an extremely competitive sector. The glass or porcelain packaging of soaps, perfumes, creams and toothpastes had the triple purpose of ensuring product conservation, preventing forgeries and identifying the product's contents. Brands such as Roger & Gallet and Gellé Frères and their design went hand-in-hand and instilled a certain French art of living in the colony.

24.04.1902 — — — — — 08.05.1902

TURMOIL

Martinique was no stranger to devastating earthquakes, tidal waves and hurricanes. In 1902 the legislative election campaign was in full swing when Mount Pelée began to show obvious signs of activity, fifty years after it had last manifested itself. The volcano had come to be regarded as “just one more curiosity of Martinique’s natural history”.



Crisis at the foot of the volcano

Between the election’s first and second ballots disaster victims began arriving in Saint-Pierre from Le Prêcheur and the surrounding area, and curious inhabitants went to see the lake that had formed at Étang Sec. Life in the town became difficult and business slowed almost to a standstill. The number of passengers leaving for Fort-de-France increased daily, the schools closed and events reached a paroxysm when a mud-flow engulfed the Guérin factory at the mouth of the Rivière Blanche. Public opinion was split between incredulity, anxiety and fatalism. A commission charged with “studying the nature of the eruption” was appointed on 7 May, composed of an artillery officer, the pharmacist of the colonial forces, a civil engineer and two natural science teachers at the lycée.

THURSDAY

24 APRIL 1902

dark column of vapors and ashes

FRIDAY

25 APRIL

first ashfalls in Le Prêcheur village

TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY

29 & 30 APRIL

light earthquakes, flood of Rivière Blanche, continuous ash rain between the quarters of Sainte-Philomène and Les Abymes.

FRIDAY

2 MAY

rumblings, dark column full of lightnings, first ash falls on the city of Saint-Pierre

SATURDAY

3 MAY

Le Prêcheur is in darkness, water sources have ran dry, the Martinique-Dominica cable is broken

SUNDAY

4 MAY

failure of the natural dam of l’Étang Sec, destruction of the Guérin factory, 25 dead, tidal wave

MONDAY

5 MAY

flood of Rivière Roxelane and Rivière des Pères as all the rivers of the north of the island

TUESDAY

06 MAI

cable communications breakdown between Saint-Pierre and the island of Saint Lucia, first luminous phenomena observed around the crater

WEDNESDAY

7 MAY

torrential rain, muddy floods destroy the villages of Le Prêcheur, Grand-Rivière, Macouba and Basse-Pointe

THURSDAY

8 MAY 1902

IN THE MORNING

clear sky, continuous plume...

THE CATASTROPHE

Those who witnessed the eruption on 8 May 1902 described a deafening explosion followed by a violent squall, a dark cloud of gas and vapour traversed by rolling sheets of lightning then a deluge of rocks and scalding mud. In a minute, the cloud reached Saint-Pierre, igniting the town and the ships at anchor offshore.

The west side of Mount Pelée was devastated from Le Prêcheur to Petite Anse du Carbet. All buildings in the central zone were destroyed. There was no trace of a living soul. Of the 163 wounded on the periphery or on ships at anchor who were taken to the hospitals only 123 survived. Utter chaos, uncertainty as to population movements preceding the catastrophe and the probable overestimation of the number of inhabitants in the 1901 census made it difficult to assess the number of victims, roughly estimated at 28,000. Although this number now seems exaggerated, it was enormous on the scale of the island.



"We've come from
the gates of hell"

AN EVENT WITH WORLDWIDE REPERCUSSIONS

Saint-Pierre's destruction was followed hour by hour from Fort-de-France by the staff of the French telephone and cable services in communication with colleagues at Saint-Pierre. The news was relayed the same day by the neighbouring island of Saint Lucia then by Guadeloupe and soon by the French and international press. The recently invented cinematograph played its role. Thomas Edison sent a team of cameramen, who brought the first documentary footage back to New York on 28 May, and Georges Méliès filmed two simulations of the catastrophe in his studio near Paris.

Although the news unleashed a wave of generosity, contributions were not always solely charitably motivated. Aid arrived from everywhere, particularly from the United States, and Paris sent funds and organised a national subscription. The disaster immediately sparked a national controversy, fuelled by sensationalism and political manoeuvring but also by sincere indignation at a disaster that with hindsight seemed easily predictable.

SURVIVORS, REFUGEES, EXILES

3,400 survivors trapped at Le Prêcheur were evacuated by sea on 10 and 11 May, while the exodus of the northern population continued with each successive eruption. Refugees flocked to Fort-de-France and the number of disaster victims rose to 20,000.

—

Although some had the means and contacts to find shelter or leave the island, for most the only initial aid came from the authorities. Many smallholders returned to their farms voluntarily or because they had no choice. Overwhelmed by the enduring situation and fearing idleness, “mother of all vices”, social unrest and very real health threats, the administration resolutely encouraged victims to return to homes still threatened by the volcano. Not until the eruption on 30 August, which destroyed Morne-Rouge and Ajoupa-Bouillon with more casualties, did the authorities seriously envisage creating new refugee camps in the central and southern communes. Others sought refuge overseas, going to Guadeloupe, Guyana, Panama, the United States and France and as far afield as Indochina, Madagascar and New Caledonia.



A catastrophe

CYPARIS

—

Cyparis, born Ludger Sylbaris, may not have been the catastrophe's only survivor but he is the one that everyone remembers. The story of his miraculous fate is extraordinary in many respects. Imprisoned in a dungeon in Saint-Pierre's jail, he was found badly burnt but alive three days after the eruption by inhabitants of Morne-Rouge, whose presence there was dubious to say the least. The facts mingle with fiction but journalists, particularly the American press, pounced on the story of an antihero blessed by fate, and Cyparis was soon recruited by the Barnum & Bayley Circus in what was billed as “The Greatest Show on Earth”.

EXPERTS, ASSESSMENTS

The simultaneous eruptions of Mount Pelée and La Soufrière on the island of Saint Vincent were opportunities for competing American, English and French scientific missions to make novel observations and demonstrate their expertise.

—

Alfred Lacroix, professor at the Muséum d'histoire naturelle, was appointed by the Académie des Sciences and the government to head the French mission, which arrived on Martinique on 26 June 1902. Its initial task was to conduct a preliminary enquiry into the eruption on 8 May and plan the first in-depth study of the volcano. After the devastating eruption on 30 August, its brief was enlarged to include the installation of means of surveillance and risk prevention. Although present at none of the paroxysmal eruptions from May to August 1902, he was the first to conduct their rigorous analysis. He developed the concept of the “pyroclastic flow”, a key notion now defining eruptions of the Mount Pelée type.

THE PRODUCTS OF THE CATASTROPHE

—

The initial aim of Lacroix's enquiry was to distinguish the effects of the eruption from those of the fire. The minimum temperature of the pyroclastic flow was easily determined at 450 °C due to the spontaneous ignition of the ships at anchor offshore.

The maximum temperature was estimated at less than 1050 °C by examining copper telephone wires outside of the fire-stricken areas. But the materials recovered from the heart of the fire were of far greater scientific interest. The exceptional conditions to which they were subjected surpassed all laboratory experiments possible in the early 20th century. Every type of material had undergone extraordinary and profound metamorphoses.



Beneath the ashes



Controversies

BELIEFS, RESURRECTION

—

Faced with the incomprehensible, a curse is often the universal explanation. For contemporaries, a curse of God was the obvious cause and in retrospect everything seemed to corroborate this: the date of the event (Ascension Day), the social, political and cultural context and the town's excesses explained such an unleashing of divine wrath.

The idea that the disaster was a curse of the Caribs, the island's indigenous people, fuelled by other senses of guilt, took root after the discovery of traces of their ancient presence during the clearing of the ruins.

Saint-Pierre rose again from its ruins. The cathedral was rebuilt and the statue of Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Port overlooking the town was re-erected. Yet we can still wonder why so many religious objects have survived while so many other relics were dispersed far and wide...

ACCUMULATIONS, CREATIONS, MUTATIONS

—

The objects created by the catastrophe fired imaginations and created a genuine aesthetic upheaval in modern art. Visiting the Musée de la France d'Outre-Mer in 1935, André Breton was struck by a deformed glass, donated by Governor Merwart, whose brother Paul, a navy artist, died at Saint-Pierre. Breton was preparing the exhibition of Surrealist objects shown the following year at Galerie Ratton. One of the exhibits in the “disturbed objects” section was “Bottle, glass, fork and spoon, found after the eruption of Mount Pelé at Saint Pierre in 1902”. And in Picasso's studio in 1946 the photographer Brassai came across an agglomeration of twisted and deformed glasses as intriguing and as beautiful as a work of art.

REBUILDING

After Saint-Pierre's annihilation, the island's economic and trading centre shifted to its administrative capital, Fort-de-France. The catastrophe, and even more the memory of it, may well have accelerated a trend already apparent in the late 19th century.

—

As a new population gradually settled there, Saint-Pierre's territory became part of the commune of Le Carbet in 1910. The town regained its administrative autonomy in 1923 and the census four years later registered 3,250 inhabitants. With a mixture of resilience, recklessness and courage, life slowly returned to normal and the threat posed by the volcano became an increasingly distant memory. The ruins attracted curious travellers. Tourism was still reserved for the wealthy and a mainly American pursuit. Objects found as the site was cleared, derisory and priceless testimonies of a lost world, often found their way into private collections or were kept by families. The reality of the annihilated town gradually dissolved into the myth created by the nostalgia of those who had once known it.



A renaissance

FRANK A. PERRET

(Philadelphia, 1867 – New York 1943)

The American engineer, inventor and entrepreneur Frank A. Perret discovered volcanology in Italy when he met M. R. Matteucci, director of the Vesuvius Observatory.

He joined Matteucci in 1906 to study volcanology and Vesuvius' on-going eruption, writing a remarkable monograph on the subject. He travelled worldwide, deepening his knowledge of volcanoes from Sicily to Hawaii, the Canary Islands and Japan. On 16 September 1929, less than thirty years after the 1902 catastrophe, Mount Pelée suddenly showed signs of activity and sparked an exodus of Saint-Pierre's inhabitants. Convinced by Alfred Lacroix's theories, Frank A. Perret went to Martinique. An atypical scientist and also a philanthropist, he equipped the volcano with analysis and surveillance instruments. He played a major role in evaluating the risks run by the town's fragile community, restoring its confidence with his lucidity.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Open daily, 9am to 6pm

169 rue Victor-Hugo
Saint-Pierre, Martinique

ADMISSIONS :

Adults: 8 €

7-17 years: 6 €

Under 7 years: free

Groups: 6,50 €

www.memorial1902.org



A Museum of the town of Saint-Pierre
managed by the Fondation Clément

