

Claire Tabouret designed Notre-Dame's new stained-glass windows – now they are dividing France

The artist's contentious commission has drawn heavy criticism but she's not shying away from the heritage battle



Claire Tabouret in her studio in Los Angeles © Photographed for the FT by Aleksey Kondratyev

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42

In December, Claire Tabouret won a dream commission. The 43-year-old French artist — now living in Los Angeles — was selected by president Emmanuel Macron and the archbishop of Paris, Laurent Ulrich, to design new stained glass windows for [Notre-Dame](#), as part of its restoration following the huge fire in 2019. It was the first time she had entered a major competition, and she was chosen from a shortlist that included established names such as Daniel Buren and Philippe Parreno.

But a backlash has been growing. The decision to remove the existing windows in six chapels on the Paris cathedral's south side, which were created by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century, and replace them with contemporary designs in 2026 (at an estimated cost of \$4.2mn) has drawn heavy criticism, including an online petition against the project that has garnered more than 280,000 signatures. Recently, French heritage association [Sites & Monuments](#) has taken legal action to block the replacement of the windows, arguing that it runs contrary to the mission of restoring and conserving the cathedral.

In July, France's National Commission for Heritage and Architecture announced its unanimous opposition to the plan. Tabouret — speaking to me over Zoom from her LA studio, dressed in a dark knit jumper and trousers splattered with paint — was well aware of a bubbling controversy. But she still applied. “I hesitated to register my name, I only submitted it minutes before the deadline,” she says. “I had never been in such a public debate and I knew that whoever was chosen would be controversial.”

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Claire Tabouret

The plan is to put Viollet-le-Duc's windows on display in a museum in Paris. But many consider a contemporary aesthetic inappropriate for such a historic building. Others have called it a violation of the 1964 Venice Charter — conservation guidelines for historic buildings — which states “items of sculpture, painting or

decoration, which form an integral part of a monument, may only be removed if this is the sole means of ensuring their preservation”. While the fire that engulfed the cathedral in 2019 caused significant damage to the roof and spire, the windows were unharmed and only in need of cleaning to remove the toxic lead that blanketed much of the building.

“I’m confident this work will see the light,” Tabouret says over email, when asked about the legal challenge. “Looking into the history of contemporary gestures in patrimonial, historical buildings in France, this scenario is a repetition of the past. It is a cross to bear for participating in such a project, and part of the adventure.”

She fits the brief well. The commission called for a French figurative artist, and Tabouret, who is represented by Almine Rech, Night Gallery and Perrotin, creates expressive portraits with loose brushstrokes, often featuring herself and her two young daughters. Her current solo show *Moonlight Shadow* at [Night Gallery in LA](#) features a selection of paintings inspired by her experiences with insomnia and spending hours awake while watching her children sleep. In one work, the artist can be seen lying on a couch. Dark, rich tones of blue wash over the quiet scene, yet her eyes remain open and alert.



'Self-Portrait on the Couch at Night' (2025) by Claire Tabouret © Photo by Marten Elder, Image courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery

Tabouret feels a personal connection to Notre-Dame, which she would pass every day walking to the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts as a student. “The more I looked into it, the more I felt comfortable putting myself into the debate,” she says. “I think it’s good for the country, the culture and the religion to stay alive. Controversy shows people care. I’d be sad for Notre-Dame if no one had an opinion.”

The Notre-Dame commission asked artists to depict the New Testament story of the Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit is said to have descended on Christ’s disciples, allowing them to speak in other languages. With an estimated 15mn visitors expected to visit the reopened cathedral this year, the committee was looking for a design that could be understood across cultures. “I am very sensitive to this — figures can communicate the human experience beyond language,” Tabouret says.

Tabouret was born in 1981 in Pertuis, a small town in the south of France. Her breakthrough came in 2013, when billionaire art collector [François Pinault](#) purchased an entire show of her work. Since then, she has exhibited widely — including her portraits of inmates of a women’s prison shown in the Vatican’s pavilion for the 2024 Venice Biennale, and a bronze fountain at the Musée Picasso, Paris, in 2021. But this is her most publicly visible work to date. For the artist, it is also an opportunity to attend to Notre-Dame’s history. “It’s important for women to be part of the building’s absolutely male-dominated legacy,” she says.

Tabouret’s winning concept pays homage to Viollet-le-Duc’s designs, which feature geometric patterns and are themselves replacements of older windows that needed to be removed to let in more light.



Tabouret in her LA studio with the designs for her stained-glass windows, inspired by the 19th-century work of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc © Aleksey Kondratyev for the FT

“I wanted to create something that imagines that Viollet-le-Duc’s windows have been there for so long that they’ve left an imprint on the atmosphere of the building — not a direct imprint, but an abstract erosion of shapes that have been simplified,” Tabouret says. Using low-resolution images of Viollet-le-Duc’s windows that she printed at large scale and cut into new shapes to abstract the original patterns, Tabouret weaves his designs into her Notre-Dame pictures: windows within windows. She depicts apostles and congregants in luminous hues of blue, red and yellow.

One requirement was that the light streaming through the windows remain neutral. Again, Tabouret looked to Viollet-le-Duc for inspiration. “He was a master of this light,” she says. “A painting might have a patch of deep hues, but a window can’t, as suddenly a visitor would be walking through a puddle of red. With stained glass, you create something that is alive, that changes with the time of day and the weather. This resonates as something I’ve been trying to do with my painting — create a work that feels alive and changes each time you see it.”



“Transformation Self-portrait (dots)” (2023) by Claire Tabouret © Photo by Marten Elder, image courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery

From the roughly 50 sketches she presented to the jury, one for each of the cathedral's bays was chosen. While Tabouret has some experience working with stained glass on small projects with her husband, carpenter Nathan Thelen, she has never worked at such a large scale. Once she has magnified the sketches, she will begin working with Atelier Simon-Marq, a storied glassmaking workshop founded in 1640 in Reims, to turn her vision into glass.

Tabouret describes the Pentecost as "a story of hope and of rebuilding . . . I've been thinking about this a lot in recent weeks because of the fires in LA." As Tabouret saw fellow artists lose their homes and studios to the devastating wildfires, she began to go over the contents of her own studio. Finding unfinished paintings that she had kept for years, she started to rework them, spraying their surfaces with acrylic paint.

"It was like a night-time vision that arose out of nowhere," she says. "I suddenly realised I was spraying what looked like ash." She added blankets to some of the figures in the works. "There is darkness to the way these compositions are evolving, but they are also about recovery and revival, and in that way there is a link to Notre-Dame. My hope for LA is that we can also rebuild."

As the pushback against the Notre-Dame commission continues, Tabouret finds solace in previous moments of discontent with contemporary art, such as *Les Deux Plateaux* (1985-86), Daniel Buren's installation of black-and-white striped columns in the courtyard of Paris's Palais Royal. "The public had the same response with negative press and petitions against the project, but 40 years later the installation is beloved," she says. "I hope I can win over hearts with my work."



Claire Tabouret in her Los Angeles studio © Aleksey Kondratyev/FT

February 15-March 29, nightgallery.ca