

# Notre-Dame paintings removed amid lead pollution fears

AFP | Paris

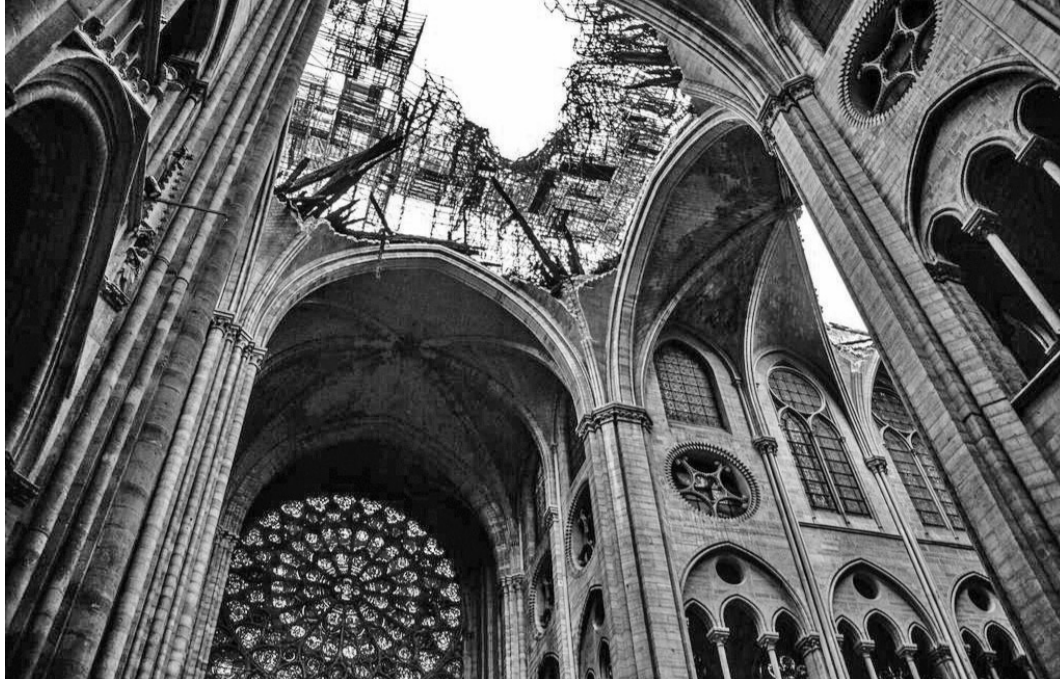
French art experts headed into the stricken Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris to remove all the remaining paintings yesterday despite warnings from an environmental group that the site could be a toxic health threat.

Officials from the culture ministry were allowed into the 850-year-old landmark to begin retrieving the artworks after fire service officials declared the scorched structure safe enough to go inside.

Firefighters and engineering experts have been working on the fragile landmark since a devastating blaze on Monday night, erecting scaffolding and other wooden supports to stop any of the stonework collapsing.

"The paintings inside the cathedral have been saved from the flames and can now be taken down and transported to safe areas," France's Culture Minister Franck Riester told reporters at the scene yesterday.

"All of the paintings will be removed today," Riester added, saying that he was feeling "very positive" given how most of the priceless canvasses, many of them dating from the 17th or 18th century, had been saved.



One of the rose windows below the damaged roof of Notre-Dame-de Paris Cathedral in Paris

As firefighters inspected the top of the fragile southern facade, art experts began carrying out paintings from the cathedral in protective white film and loading them into trucks.

The artworks were taken to the Louvre museum, a centre of restoration, where experts will repair relatively minor damage caused by smoke or water before storing the paintings until they

can be returned.

## Lead pollution?

But as the latest phase of salvage work took place, a French charity warned about the possible health impact from the fire.

The Robin des Bois (Robin Hood) organisation said that around 300 tonnes of lead from the roof and steeple had melted in Monday night's fire, which ac-

ording to officials had reached 800 degrees Celsius (1,470F) at its peak.

"The cathedral has been reduced to the state of toxic waste," the association said in a statement, calling on French authorities to detoxify the tonnes of rubble, ash and waste water produced by firefighters.

"Before launching a competition for the design of a new



**Around 300 tonnes of lead from the roof and steeple had melted in Monday night's fire**

steeple, we should launch a competition to decontaminate what at the moment, alas, can be considered an industrial wasteland," it added.

After fears about air-borne lead pollution on Monday night, monitoring service Airparif told AFP it did not monitor lead levels in real-time but it has sent its filters to be analysed in a laboratory.

There was no immediate reaction from French authorities to the claims by Robin des Bois, which are of most concern to people living and working on the Ile de la Cite island where Notre Dame stands.

Lead pollution can cause neurological defects for humans,

especially children, as well as nervous system and kidney problems.

## Art saved

Thanks to a human chain formed by firefighters and church officials on Monday night, the vast majority of the most sacred artifacts and valuable items inside the cathedral were saved.

These include the Holy Crown of Thorns, which Catholics believe was worn by Jesus Christ at his crucifixion, and a tunic thought to have belonged to 13th-century French crusader king, Louis IX, who was made a saint.

Even a copper statue of a rooster containing relics that sat atop the now-destroyed Notre-Dame spire was found among the ashes, dented but intact.

The paintings being brought out yesterday included several of the great "Mays" paintings, which were commissioned between 1630 and 1707 by the Corporation of the Parisian goldsmiths.

The giant canvasses, as big as three metres by four (10 feet by 13), depict events from the life of the Virgin Mary and were offered to the cathedral every May 1 as a sign of devotion.

## Fraud-tainted Montenegro tycoon challenges president

AFP | Podgorica, Montenegro

Top businessmen in Montenegro accused of fraud has said he was the victim of a racket by politicians and challenged President Milo Djukanovic to a television debate to prove "who is telling the truth."

In mid-January, a video clip from 2016 surfaced in which Dusko Knezevic, chairman of the Atlas Group, appeared to hand the then mayor of Podgorica an envelope containing what Knezevic later said was \$100,000 to fund an election campaign.

## 13 killed as church roof collapses in South Africa

AFP | Johannesburg

The roof of a church collapsed during mass near the eastern South African city of Durban, killing 13 people and injuring at least 16, officials said yesterday.

The accident happened on Thursday evening in the town of Dlangubo, north of Durban, after heavy rains.

"The roof of the building collapsed because of heavy rains last night ... at this point we have a total of 13 fatalities," said a spokesman for the provincial traditional affairs department.

## Journalist shot dead in Northern Ireland in 'terrorist incident'

AFP | Derry, United Kingdom

A journalist was shot dead during riots in Northern Ireland in what police yesterday were treating as a terrorist incident following the latest upsurge in violence to shake the troubled region.

"Lyra McKee was murdered during orchestrated violence in Creggan last night," Assistant Chief Constable Mark Hamilton said in a statement.

McKee, 29, had earlier posted an image that appeared to be from the riots in the Creggan housing estate in the city of Londonderry, also known as Derry, accompanied by the words "Derry tonight. Absolute madness."

Images of the unrest posted on social media showed a car and van ablaze and hood-



Police secured the area where journalist Kyra McKee was shot during rioting

ed individuals throwing petrol bombs and fireworks at police vehicles.

"A single gunman fired shots in a residential area of the city and as a result wounded Ms McKee," said Hamilton, adding that police believed the gunman was a "violent dissident republican".

"We are treating this as a

terrorist incident and we have launched a murder enquiry," he added.

McKee had written for The Atlantic magazine and Buzzfeed News and was named by Forbes Magazine in 2016 as one of their "30 under 30" outstanding figures in media, according to her literary agent Janklow & Nesbit.

## 'World's smallest baby boy' set to go home in Japan

AFP | Tokyo, Japan

The world's smallest baby boy, who was born in October in Japan weighing as much as an apple, is now ready for the outside world, his doctor said yesterday.

Ryusuke Sekiya was delivered via emergency Caesarean section, after 24 weeks and five days of pregnancy as his mother Toshiko experienced hypertension.

At 258 grams (9.1 ounces) he was even lighter than the previous record holder, another Japanese boy who weighed just 268 grams when he was born last year. That baby was discharged from a Tokyo hospital in February.

When Ryusuke was born on October 1, 2018, he measured 22 centimetres (8.66 inches) tall, and medical staff kept him in neonatal intensive care unit.



Ryusuke Sekiya being treated at a hospital in October

They used tubes to feed him, sometimes taking cotton swabs to apply his mother's milk to his mouth.

Nearly seven months later, the boy has grown 13 times in weight, now weighing over three kilogrammes. He will be released from Nagano Children's Hospital in central Japan over the weekend.

"When he was born, he was so small, and it seemed as if he would break with a touch. I was so worried," his mother said.

## Rome's 'Holy Stairs' bared for first time in 300 years

Reuters | Rome

Rome's "Holy Stairs," which some Catholics believe were climbed by Jesus in Jerusalem, have been uncovered from a protective wooden casing for the first time in nearly three centuries and restored.

The 28 marble steps will remain bare temporarily for devout pilgrims to climb on their knees with direct contact with the stone until they are covered again in June.

According to tradition, the

stairs, known as "Scala Sancta," were part of Pontius Pilate's palace in Jerusalem and brought to Rome by St. Helen, mother of emperor Constantine, after she converted to Christianity.

But some scientists believe the stairs are only part of a legend or a symbolic replica of the stairs of Pilate's palace.

Pilate was the Roman governor of the province of Judea who, according to the Bible, succumbed to demands by Jerusalem's Jewish leaders that Jesus be crucified.



Worshippers pray on the Holy Stairs in Rome, Italy

Pope Innocent XIII ordered the stairs encased in wood in 1723 to protect them from damage from pilgrims.

"We have seen these steps carved out in a totally unusual way. The feet of pilgrims had literally excavated them," said Father Francesco Guerra, rector of the Holy Stairs Sanctuary, which hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visit each year.

Under the wood, restorers found coins, photos, rosaries and small hand-written notes with prayers left over the years.