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## Le Carnet de France Journées du Patrimoine

By Martine Dulles

The third week-end of the month of September is a week-end the people living in France really look forward to experiencing. “Is it because it sometimes means the beginning of autumn,” you might ask? Not really: It is the weekend of the “Journées du Patrimoine,” or “Heritage Days.”

In 1984, France’s cultural minister Jack Lang decided to open the doors of monuments sites to the public for a weekend. It became an immediate success and has grown every year; in 2019 it attracted around 12 million persons.

All over France, more than 10,000 sites can be visited free of charge and many of them even organize guided tours. Some of the sites belong to the nation but many are privately owned. In Paris, the Palais de l’Élysée (home and offices of the president) is usually visited by more than 15,000 persons (this year, with the virus, one had to reserve a spot and only 5,000 persons were accepted). The Senate in the Palais du Luxembourg, the Assemblée Nationale (Chamber of deputies), the Palais Garnier (the old opera house), are popular too, but also churches and museums welcome numerous visitors.

In any part of the country, castles, private mansions, gardens, theaters, factories, lighthouses,

old train cars, television studios — everyone can find an interesting site to visit with the family.

It is sponsored by many nonprofit organizations such as the Sauvegarde de l’Art Français, which was created in 1921 to ensure that major French heritage items (such as art and antiques) would not leave France. Since 1972, they have saved and restored more than 3,200 churches and, since 2013, they have restored 50 major works of art; the Fondation du Patrimoine, created in 1996, helps with financing important and interesting restorations in keeping with the local culture. As mentioned in previous articles, Mr. Stéphane Bern is an excellent ambassador for the French heritage with wonderful programs and documentaries on television.

Also, this past September, the *Institut national du patrimoine* (INP) celebrated its 30th anniversary. This higher education institution specializes in educating young people in the conservation and the restoration of the heritage. The premises for the future conservators are located in the Riche-lieu-Bibliothèque National de France (known as BnF), rue de Richelieu in the Second Arrondissement, very close to the Louvre and the Comédie française. The Bibliothèque is a magnificent building dating from 1537,

recently restored and well worth a visit. On the other hand, the ateliers for the apprentice restorers are located in Aubervilliers, a suburb north of Paris in an old match factory, which was redesigned into very modern and functional premises in 2015. For an anecdote, in the 19th century the match factories were all located on the outskirts of Paris in order to avoid catastrophes in case of fire: Today, they have all disappeared.

The program for the restorers last five years. Only 20 new students are accepted each year! Seven different specialties are offered — earthenware, graphic arts and books, textile arts, furniture, painting, photography and sculpture. The INP booklet entitled “Preservation and transmission” states: “Conservators intervene on the material significance of works and objects of cultural heritage in order to pass them on to future generations. They act when this material is threatened; when ageing, accidents or harmful handling have weakened the works, perverted or obscured their image. Most of the conservators work in the private sector. Some of them join a laboratory or heritage institution. The job requires a variety of knowledge and skills: artistic sensibility, a knowledge of history, chemistry, materials and ancient techniques. Above



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

The match factory’s chimney, classified as a Monument Historique of the INP *l’art français*.

all, it requires respect for the works and a flawless code of ethics”.

When I visited the ateliers, the students in the photography department were restoring a very old photo of an American Quaker couple. In the textile department, the young ladies were working on a late 17th - early 18th century Chinese imperial dragon coat. The students dye the threads they use to match the colors still remaining on the original fabric and those threads are as fine as a piece of hair. (The restoration of this magnificent robe started almost two years ago.) Outside the building, the painting department

was creating some frescoes from old documents on a wall they had had to plaster first!

It was very impressive and wonderful to know those young people are extremely well trained to save exceptional items.

As you are reading this article, you know that France is predicted to experience a new wave of the coronavirus and that the whole country (like America and many other countries in the world) is going through lots of restrictions again. The center of Paris is empty! Three out of four hotels are closed; some palaces are reopening after being closed for six months but with

only 5 percent to 20 percent occupancy. A general rule is that a hotel needs about 60 percent occupancy to break even. Many restaurants and shops are closed, as well as theatres and concert halls.

There are no tourists and the French people are not traveling if they do not have to. The trains to Paris are not so crowded. The “télétravail” has taken over, and one controller from the SNCF (railroad company) told me that they have lost lots of regular travelers.

The Louvre and the Musée d’Orsay have reopened, but you have to reserve before going. Most temporary exhibits are postponed as well as art fairs.

In the south of France, Marseille-Aix, the restaurants and cafes are closed and they have to await permission from the government to be allowed to reopen — and when will that be? The problem is that hospitals are getting near capacity and the medical staff must also be able to take care of patients with other illnesses.

Please everyone — stay safe and well.

*Martine P. Dulles lives in Tours, in the Loire valley of France. Martine was a docent at the MET in New York and later a licensed tour guide in Charleston where they lived for 11 years. She now organizes bespoke guided tours in France. She may be reached at mpd@dullesdeleu.com.*