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Le Carnet de France: Le Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature

By Martine P. Dulles

Hunting season has long since opened in the United Kingdom and the United States and shall do so in France mid September, so this is the perfect time to introduce the newly reopened Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature (Museum of Hunting and Nature) in Paris. This museum is situated in the “Marais” (third arrondissement), which can be surprising as one could have imagined it to be in Versailles or Chantilly or other royal palace sites where hunting is practiced. The third arrondissement is architecturally one of the richest in Paris, where you find many private mansions known as “hotels.”

Today, we must recognize that we owe an enormous debt for the restoration and the cleaning of historical buildings to André Malraux, the minister of culture (1959-1969) for President de Gaulle. It is thanks to him that in 1962, a very successful entrepreneur and avid collector who was environmentally concerned, Mr. François Sommer (1904-1973), and his wife, Jacqueline (1913-1993), leased the Hôtel de Guénégaud from the city of Paris for 99 years and created the Fondation du Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, known as Fondation François Sommer since 1966.

L’Hôtel de Guénégaud is named after its first owner, Jean-François de Guénégaud, an aristocrat and politician, who in 1647 bought two adjoining houses on the Rue des Archives and asked François Mansart, a very successful and well-known architect, to renovate them. It is the only *hôtel particulier* (a privately owned mansion) that Mansart renovated in Paris. The Hôtel de Guénégaud was home to its first owner but later was used for professional purposes and suffered from lack of maintenance.

Mr. and Mrs. Sommer had the *hôtel* completely restored to present their large collection of hunting art and artifacts and to create a club for hunters in Paris. Their main objective was to enhance understanding of the rapport between man and nature. The museum was inaugurated in 1967 by André Malraux. In 2002, the *fondation* purchased the next-door Hôtel de Mongelas. A first phase of renovation was done then, but in 2019 a second phase was undertaken to dramatically create more space and to join the two *hôtels*. The museum reopened July 3, 2021.

There are three floors where 3000 of the more than 5000 items are displayed: paintings, engravings, tapestries, sculptures, carpets, porcelain, guns and taxidermized animals from all over the world, from the prehistoric age to the 21st century.

When you visit recently renovated museums, such as l’Hôtel de la Marine, Musée Carnavalet and this museum, you can appreciate the scenography and museography of the space. Items are not just displayed next to one another — there is a real effort to give visitors an understanding of the importance of the pieces and to create a link in the visitor’s mind with the objects presented. In certain rooms, the curators try to make visitors feel as if they were entering someone’s home.

The museum’s space is now on three floors. The “noble floor” (the second floor by American standards, which is the most grandiose with the highest ceilings) is where you will bump into a polar bear or a beautiful deer. Window cases are filled either with birds or with “*appeaux*” (bird or duck calls). Those were instruments reproducing the sounds or screams of an animal to fool birds or game.

In La Salle des Trophées (the trophy room) showcases display parts of François Sommer’s weapons collection, and above those cases are



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

La Salle des Trophées (the Trophy Room).

heads and bodies of animals that had been captured mostly in Africa: leopards, baby elephants, lions, rhinoceroses, antelopes, deer and many more. Many more guns, swords, crossbows and knives, all elaborately decorated, are presented in La Salle des Armes (the weapons room). There is a room dedicated to Charles Darwin (1809-1882), the naturalist who wrote *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwin loved orchids and there are showcases displaying orchids made of paper-mâché by Robert or Reinhold Brendel in the late 19th century. They were used for studying.

In the major rooms, such as Le Salon de Compagnie (the reception room), are hanging beautiful full-size portraits of prominent hunters. They enable the looker to discover how one

dressed to go hunting. There is a large collection of paintings made by Flemish painters such as Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Jan Brueghel (1568-1625) and Franz Snyders (1579-1657) showing hunting scenes with birds, dogs, boars and more. Another major painting was done by the school of the Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), representing Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt.

Among the sculptures, there is a wooden piece dating from 1500 depicting the Miracle of Saint Hubert, patron saint of hunters and also of their dogs, horses and hawks.

You may admire a large collection of ceramics from Sèvres or Adrian Saxe belonging to the Sommers that is also displayed. They are either tableware or pieces of sculpture.

The *fondation* is still purchasing works of art. Their latest acquisition is a painting by two Flemish painters: Jean Daret (1614-1668) and Nicasius Bernaerts (1620-1678) made in 1661 and entitled “*Portrait du Baron du Pille en Chasseur*.” The baron, very elegantly dressed, is seated, surrounded by his dogs and very pleased with his catch of the day.

The top third floor, which was just opened, is completely different with more contemporary items and more pedagogical tools. Markus Hansen, born in Germany in 1963, has created a half log cabin covered with black rooster feathers. Inside are bookshelves filled with fake books that are arranged by the color of their cover. This cabin is positioned in front of the large mirror and therefore it is a *trompe l’oeil*, as one believes it is a real cabin. This composition is a tribute to the French *ethnologue* and *anthropologue* Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009).

Another French artist, Eva Jospin (daughter of the former French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin), has created a “forest” with pieces of cardboard (approximately 8 feet x 12 feet). A temporary exhibit of her work will take place in the museum from November 16, 2021, to March 20, 2022. On the Boulevard Raspail (seventh arrondissement), in the Beaupassage, there is a major piece by Eva Jospin also representing nature.

Since 2012, the *fondation* publishes a magazine called *Billebaude*. The emphasis is on the relationship between man and nature in the domains of ecology, environment and preservation, as well as art and literature.

This museum is a must, not only for hunters but also for nature lovers. It is a wonderful place to visit with children, who will find some interest in every room. It is so rich and interesting that you may want to plan on a few hours’ visit.

Martine P. Dulles lives in France. Martine was a docent at the MET in New York and later a licensed tour guide in Charleston for many years. She now organizes bespoke tours in France and is a translator for cultural material. You can reach her at mpd@dullesdeleu.com.