

An aerial, black and white photograph of a town built on a hillside. The buildings are densely packed, and many have smoke or steam rising from them, suggesting a fire or industrial activity. The town is surrounded by a stone wall, and a river or stream flows through the center. The overall atmosphere is one of devastation or a state of emergency.

COMMUNITY CARE

Aubusson's tapestry industry came to a standstill but Beth Smith discovers the town is keen to restart it



If you've ever wanted to step into a Joanne Harris novel where the French towns are small, historic and character-filled, then book your ticket to Limoges – famous for porcelain – and from there travel an hour or so to Aubusson.

Once past the slightly municipal apartment blocks that flank the main route in, you will find yourself in a picture-perfect town where everyone from the owner of the Hotel Le France to the local bakers seem remarkably “on brand” when it comes to history of their town. Don't be surprised if, while serving you delicious steak and the local blue cheese sauce, your waiter offers a brief overview of the weaving process. Or be shocked to turn a corner and find yourself in front of a petite museum, see pg 26 – so pretty it could have been animated by Disney – filled with pastel-hued tapestry cartoons.

This is not a large place but it has depth – five centuries of textile excellence will do that to a town. In 2009 – alongside Indonesian Batik, Croatian Lacemaking and the Farmers' Dance of China's Korean ethnic group – Aubusson Tapestry was inscribed on UNESCO's list of the “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity”, an act that recognises that this craft is woven into this area.

Limousin, the region of France where Aubusson is found, was until



recently considered part of “empty France”, a sparsely populated area with more cattle than people. An influx of British and Dutch has done something to redress the balance, but the atmosphere remains sleepy and peaceful. Exploring Aubusson itself requires nothing more than a circular stroll round the town centre – but it's possible to step back centuries while you walk.

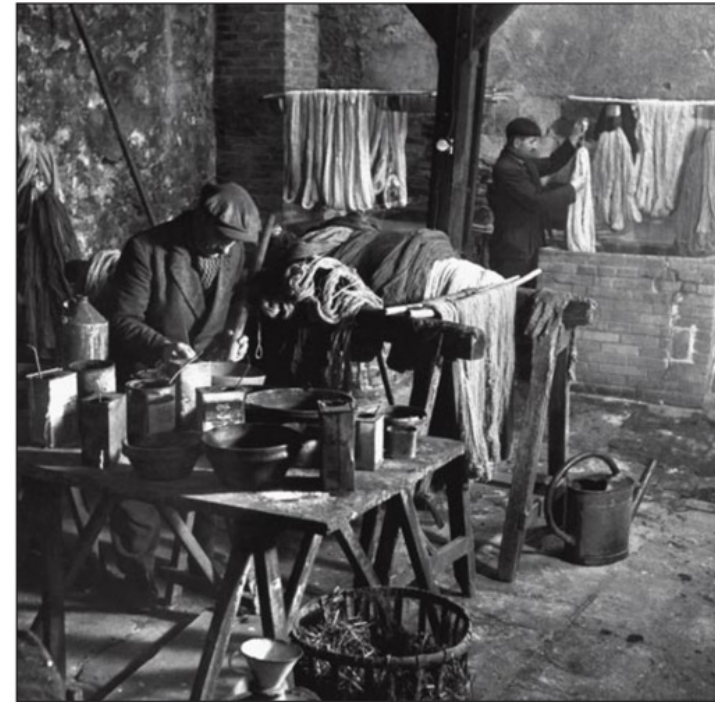
Across the river at the Musée de la Tapisserie, a chronological display of their tapestry collection provides the necessary overview for any visitor with a shaky grasp of the process and its history. Alongside tapestries and a loom, images by renowned French photographer Robert Doisneau, taken in 1945-46 seen here, provide moving evidence of how integral this industry was to Aubusson. And it reminds us that weaving is just one step in a journey that involves spinning, dyeing and much more.

Of course the tapestry always gets the lion's share of attention. Geraldine Gauchy, from the town-next-door Felletin, works to promote wool and natural textiles in the area with an organisation called LAINAMAC, and light-heartedly hints at frustrations. “Tapestry in the region has a reputation like a mushroom cloud! It overshadows other forms of textile production such as felting and dyeing.” With such a rich history the focus is inevitable. ▶



Even the early tapestries, which contend with a common textile problem – colour fastness, are captivating in their composition and detail. Once bright, “verdures’ or garden scenes have been diminished by time, becoming brown-tinged and distinctly autumnal. Nevertheless the huge scrolling cabbage leaves, “Le bestiaire fantastique” and rolling landscapes represent an important stage in the weaving history of the area and evoke the grand stately homes and churches where they once hung.

It is further on in the museum that you begin to comprehend that tapestry is still a living craft in the area. Not on the same scale of course: Bruno Ythier, Conservateur at the Cité Internationale de la Tapisserie, explains that there are just four remaining workshops. What these survivors will have managed to strike is the near impossible balance between speed and skill. Tapestry weaving is slow and it was ever thus; whether hunting scenes, fields of flowers or scenes from mythology, the atelier must pinpoint the sweet spot on a sliding scale of cost and client satisfaction where a profit can still be made. Too fine and the work takes forever and costs a fortune – at the extreme a single metre could take up to nine months to weave. Too fast and it is slapdash and full of mistakes – Bruno points out Armide in her cherub-drawn chariot where the latter look more like floating goblins than celestial



children. It confirms that reckless speed was a false economy.

Specialisation was one option. Historically weavers would work on the part of a tapestry suited to their abilities – flat areas of colour for novices. Only the best would translate the most complex part of the paper design or cartoon, the faces. These weavers (according to Bruno, known as “The Flesh Makers” which sounds like a Stephen King novel) would travel from place to place, weave a face or hand and move on.

The feast and famine nature of the industry, which once relied on the patronage of kings and now courts the rich whomever they may be, has not altered over time. During the 20th century key figures brought tapestry to a new audience and, for the first time, linked the textiles directly to a contemporary artist. Jean Lurçat is feted for his role in this revival: but Joan Miró, Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder and Fernand Leger all translated their work into tapestry. We are now decades past this peak in popularity, but locally there is determination to capitalise on UNESCO’s recent recognition and safeguard five centuries of textile history.

International competitions and calls for new work keep Aubusson at the forefront of creativity and this will only increase in the next ▶







year with the unveiling of the International Centre of Tapestry at the end of 2015 – 350 years after Colbert (Minister of Finances under King Louis XIV) created the Manufacture Royale of Aubusson. The National School of the Decorative Arts has been reinvented by architects and will provide a space to share and teach skills and display the results. Hopes are high for a positive effect on local industry and its international reputation.

While plans are made at city level, independent projects and businesses also demonstrate a reluctance to let tapestry become mere history. Jacques Fadat, author and tapestry expert, has promoted the craft for decades. His latest project *Olympe de Gouges* is a suite of Aubusson tapestries highlighting the Declaration of the Rights of Women, and commemorating the lives of 17 outstanding women from Marie Curie to Berthe Morisot.

A visitor with an interest in tapestry could while away a weekend or more in Aubusson and leave feeling replete. Or, if you have room for more, you could add a trip to nearby Felletin, home to an excellent Friday market and the 150 year-old Pinton atelier. This family-run company continues to weave fine carpets featuring contemporary designs and those inspired by its enviable archive. The town, which is unspoilt to the extent that it has little in the

Robert Doisneau 1945-46

way of visitor accommodation, is up-to-date in one respect. In a converted school with floor to ceiling windows you will find a light-filled workshop using digital technology to bring tapestry into the 21st century. While in the Pinton workshops weavers sit side by side and gradually build a picture, at Neolice things move faster than the eye can follow. The shuttle on the adapted jacquard loom is a mere blur but the economics are crystal clear. At 240 threads per minute and 1.2 x 1.8 metres every thirty minutes, this digital tapestry costs a sixth of the price of the traditional: the commercial possibilities are not yet fully explored.

What Pinton and Neolice agree on is that they are not in direct competition. Digital and traditional approaches are not rivals but points on a creative spectrum and, in this lovely part of the world, I'm sure anything that raises the profile of tapestry is welcome. ●●●

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