

Musée des Jacobins and Maison à Pondalez, Morlaix

Friday morning, 16 September

The exhibition we saw at the Musée des Jacobins, *Bretons & Bretonnes*, consisted of local paintings and related small artefacts. It was housed in a newly restored large gallery, where the enthusiastic French curator (ably translated by Chris Pickvance and David Dewing) explained that the purpose of the exhibition was to link the genre Breton paintings with objects in their collections to give a good indication of everyday life and work in this area of France.

The paintings, mostly from the late 19th century, were largely the work of two local artists, Alfred Guillou (1845-1926) and Etienne Boulle (1858-1933), and illustrated people in Breton national dress, engaged in work and at the local *pardon* festivals. In the well-lit cases

and displayed around the galley were objects from a collection of local artefacts, bequeathed by a Morlaix man, Jacques Burel. They included costume, local pottery and various wooden objects such as spoons, tobacco boxes and clay pipe cases, made variously in boxwood, pear-wood, and sycamore.

The spoons included some highly decorated and dated examples. The decoration consisted mainly of small brass studs in various patterns, and minimal use of fretting. Interestingly, some were made to hinge in the middle in order that they could be carried around by their owners in their pockets with, perhaps, the clay pipe cases, also decorated with small brass studs arranged in a variety of patterns. These pipe-shaped cases protected the brittle white clay pipes used by the men and were hinged along the long sides with integral wooden hinges. The tobacco boxes, again, typically decorated and dated with small brass studs, were also of a size to be carried in the pocket. Unfortunately, the furniture collection was in store at the time of our visit, but other wooden objects included wooden pannier holders which had painted or incised decoration, and were used on the backs of both horses and cows. One was dated 1850.

For the second half of the morning, visits were made to two 16th century houses in the town. The Maison à Pondalez was purchased by the city in 1990, and took four years to restore. The four-storey, half-timbered house was built by a linen merchant as both his home and business premises. The front of the house is jettied so that rain never falls on the lower timbers.

This area of France was rich in oak forests in the 16th century, and the oak was felled and cut in half longitudinally, put in the sea and covered in mud to season for ten years. After this it became impenetrable, and was termed *coueron* or cooked wood. This 'cooking' by immersing the wood in salt water, accounts for the 80% (sic) originality of the woodwork in the house, which included the one-piece carved newel post extending from the ground floor to all four floors (8 - 9 metres high). The spiral staircase was jointed into this, with steps weighing between 60 and 80 kg each, and wooden 'bridges' gave access to the rooms on each floor (a similar one, also from Morlaix, is in the V & A shop). It was estimated that a hectare of oak forest went into the building of such a house. It was interesting to note that on our journeys around the region, the oak trees were remarkable only for their general paucity in number, size and quality, whereas the sweet chestnut trees were numerous, large, and flourishing.

The house was built, it was thought, by a nobleman turned merchant, the two 'occupations' being mutually exclusive. He wanted to show his status in the size and

splendour of his house, with its carved frontage to the street, decorated ceilings (discovered during the recent restorations) and a stone fireplace in every room. This house also had a garde-robe leading off the back room on each floor, besides a well indoors on the ground floor - the ultimate in 16th century plumbing! The original owner of the house was, no doubt, a linen merchant, the equivalent of a modern-day wholesaler, the most lucrative of occupations in 16th and 17th century Brittany. The ground floor of the house would have been used for both selling and living in, and the court side of the first floor was reserved for purchasers from abroad who could spend the night at the house. Unfortunately, there was only a small selection of furniture in the house, including an 18th century mahogany commode, said to have been made in the Morlaix area, and an iron-bound chest, but the woodwork in the building itself was fascinating.

Some members visited a further house of the same construction, the Maison de la Duchesse Anne. In private ownership, we were told it had been owned by a noble family and never used for trade. Apart from the fixed woodwork it contained a particularly fine coffer front with five tall gothic panels, all with different carving, each headed by an ogee arch carved on the top rail.

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