

ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPH BY D'ARLUSSEON

# Tapestry town

**STEVE MELIA** visits the small French town of Aubusson, shaped by the fascinating events of the past into a national centre for needlecraft

**T**he art of tapestry has been woven into the fabric of life in Aubusson for hundreds of years. According to legend, it was brought to the town in the 8th century, by Arabs defeated in the battle of Poitiers and seeking refuge. Like most legends this one contains at least a grain of truth: tapestry did come to Europe from the Middle East, but the reasons for its arrival in the county of La Marche, today the *département* of Creuse, are obscure.

Another explanation, probably nearer the truth, blames the English. In 1310 Louis de Bourbon, Count of La Marche, married Marie de Hainault, Countess of Flanders, an area where the tapestry industry was suffering from a politically-

inspired squabble with their English wool suppliers. The waters of the River Creuse and its sheep-rearing agriculture seemed to offer a better future for the Flemish weavers who followed her. However



The town's pont and châtelet de la Terrade

tapestry began in Aubusson, over the centuries the fortunes of this Limousin town have fluctuated with the industry, as it has suffered and benefited from changes in the course of French history.

Today, after war, revolution, decline and renaissance, Aubusson remains a centre of excellence for tapestry, a place where a full-sized piece often costs more than a house. It is also possibly the only town in France where you can see every stage of the process—from the spinning of wool to the display of the finished product in private galleries—which has scarcely changed since the Middle Ages.

The best way to approach Aubusson from the north is on the one train a day along the single track railway, or take the



minor road—almost devoid of traffic—which follows the west bank of the river. The department of Creuse (named after the river) is one of the least populated in France and Aubusson, with just 4,500 inhabitants, is a relatively important centre within it. A decaying factory surrounded by trees and a terrace of houses of varying sizes and ages sandwiched between the river and a cliff face give the first taste of the town, with its mixture of the faded and picturesque.

## BRIDGE BOOST

The ruins of a medieval castle overlook the town from one of its many hilltops. In the 17th century, Protestantism was strong in Aubusson, enduring after persecution had weakened it elsewhere. Hearing reports of this heresy, Louis XIII ordered the destruction of the castle, a blow which the townspeople soon turned to their advantage. The old bridge, the *pont de la Terrade*, was a rickety wooden affair until the demise of the castle provided the stone to rebuild it in the form which remains today.

The *châtelet de la Terrade*, the 16th-century wood and granite house overlooking the bridge, was bought and renovated recently by Bernard Chirac, nephew of the President. His wife now runs most of it as an antique shop specialising in old *cartons*—the paintings used as the pattern for tapestries. Behind the *châtelet*, other pieces of the old castle can be seen in the façades of several houses. The quarter of *La Terrade*, with its narrow streets winding up another hillside, grew from the 16th century onwards to house the weavers and dyers who were making Aubusson a centre for tapestry.

Henri IV, who granted religious freedom to the Protestants, gave the industry a boost when he banned the import of foreign tapestries and by the early 17th century the workshops of Aubusson employed around 2,000 weavers.

Louis XIV helped by granting them a royal patent, but followed this later in his reign with a decree that all Protestants must renounce their faith or leave the country. Many weavers chose to leave, which damaged local production but also spread awareness of Aubusson tapestry across the countries of Europe where they sought refuge. To learn about the history of tapestry in the town, visit the Weaver's ▶



TOP: The ruins of Aubusson castle and walls CENTRE LEFT: La Creuse and the new bridge CENTRE RIGHT: A demonstration at the *Maison du Tapissier* ABOVE: A tapestry exhibition

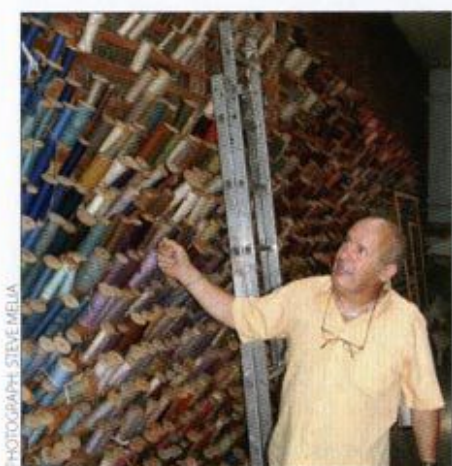




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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Martine Stamm in her workshop; Maison du Tapissier; Aubusson town centre; Manufacture de Saint Jean

House, on rue Vieille. Built in the 16th century for a family of master weavers, it is now a working museum, showing the various stages of the intricate tapestry production process.

The creation of a tapestry begins with the *carton*—a full-sized mirror image drawing or painting which is placed beneath the loom to guide the weaver. In earlier centuries the *carton* painters were self-taught working men. Though their designs were often full of complex imagery, the faces of people in particular, project a certain naiveté. The names of their creators were never recorded.

Today the *carton* painter is recognised as an artist whose signature appears on the finished tapestry. In the Weaver's House, and in several private workshops around

the town, you can watch a weaver at work. The wooden horizontal looms used today are basically the same as those used in the Middle Ages. The technique of weaving from the back of the tapestry, a face-down mirror image of the emerging design, also dates back to the earliest times. The process is intensive and slow: it takes over a month to weave a single square metre, which explains why Aubusson tapestries are so expensive—up to €10,000 per square metre.

## SEW AND SEW

Martine Stamm has a small workshop with a window opening onto the central place de la Libération. The public are welcome to walk in, to watch and question her. Admission is free and she cannot

remember selling a tapestry to a passing visitor. So why does she do it? She smiles; "Parce que je suis gentille!"

The Manufacture de Saint Jean operates on a larger scale but the technique is the same. Its tapestries grace the Kremlin and the château of Compiègne, and a series on display in the factory was specially created for the stars of *haute couture*, from Jean-Paul Gaultier to Vivienne Westwood. A wedding photograph of the owner's daughter shows her in a dress made from material woven as a tapestry. The factory dates back to 1760—the golden era of Aubusson tapestry, before the revolution severed the royal connection along with the royal head. As recently as 1930 it employed 500 people. Today only a handful work on commissions and restorations.

The long transition from mass production back to cottage industry began during the depression, when the involvement of a few renowned artists also sparked a renaissance of tapestry as

*In the past, carton painters were self-taught working men. Today the carton painter is recognised as a true artist*



an art form, with Aubusson at its centre. In the years before World War II, Marie Cuttoli, a wealthy collector, invited the leading artists of the day, including Picasso, Miro and Matisse, to contribute paintings which she arranged to be woven into tapestries here.

For one of those painters, Jean Lurçat, reviving the art of tapestry was to become the rest of his life's work. In the museum which bears his name you can follow the evolution of the art through the ages, from the pastoral and mythological designs of the renaissance to the growing diversity of more recent times.

## FALLEN PATRIOTS

Some of the exhibits bear witness to another painful time in the history of the area. During World War II, Aubusson was occupied by the notorious Das Reich division, responsible for the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane, near Limoges. The Creuse became a power base for the Resistance. Street names and monuments in Aubusson commemorate victims and "fallen patriots".

The war affected the artists in different ways. Some, through conviction or necessity, worked for the Vichy government. Others joined the Resistance, including Lurçat, who was forced to leave the area and work clandestinely. Astonishingly he and several others continued to create designs inspired by the struggle for liberation.

The father and grandfather of Michèle Giffault, curator of the museum, were imprisoned during the war. Her father-in-law was shot for his part in the Resistance. The Aubusson technique had one important advantage, she explains: weaving face-down kept work in progress obscured from prying eyes.

Some of the artists, such as Marc Saint-Saëns, used myth and allegory to depict the struggle at that time. His 1943 masterpiece, *Theseus and the Minotaur*, is 9 feet by 15 feet of burning colour. It is a powerful and moving experience to stand in front of it.

So despite the wars and persecution, the gentle art of tapestry has always managed to bloom again in Aubusson. The coat of arms on the *hôtel de ville* reads 'Inter Spinis Floret', 'Flowering between thorns'. It's a fitting emblem for the tapestry town. 🍷

## HOW TO GET THERE

### By air

Ryanair and Flybe fly to Limoges. Bus and train connections available from Limoges.

### By rail

Take Eurostar to Paris, then take the métro to Austerlitz station for trains to either La Souterraine for a rail coach connection, or Limoges for the one train a day, to Aubusson and Felletin.

### By ferry

Brittany Ferries sails from Poole and Portsmouth to St-Malo. Condor Ferries crosses from Weymouth and Poole. 5–6 hour drive from St-Malo.



## AROUND THE REGION

The Limousin Region lies on the west side of the Massif Central. The countryside is mainly gentle, heavily wooded, full of rivers and small lakes, and very quiet.

The only major city is Limoges (about 90km from Aubusson), famous for its porcelain. There are dozens of châteaux and other ancient monuments to see along with a choice of outdoor pursuits.

## ATTRACTIONS

### Tapestry Museum

#### Aubusson

A guide in English is available with headphones. Entry €4, €3 (concessions).

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 83 08 30

[www.cg23.fr](http://www.cg23.fr)

### Weaver's House

#### Aubusson

Entry €5, €6 for guided visit.

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 66 32 12

### Manufacture de St. Jean

#### Aubusson

Guided visit €8.

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 66 10 08

[www.aubussonmanufacture.com](http://www.aubussonmanufacture.com)

### Église du Château

#### Felletin

A neighbouring town displaying more tapestry exhibits from May to October.

Entry €5.50 (combined ticket available with the Aubusson museum).

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 83 08 30

Several other workshops and manufacturers are open to the public in Aubusson and Felletin. There are also various temporary exhibitions—enquire at the tourist information offices.

### Château de Villemonteix

#### Chénerailles

15th-century castle containing an impressive collection of 16th and 17th century tapestries. Open from Easter to October

Entry €6 (adults) €3 (children).

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 62 33 92

<http://hotelweb.free.fr/villemonteix>

### Wolf Park

#### Guéret

Extensive wooded park with several species of wolves. Interpretation centre and knowledgeable guides, good with children.

Entry €7, €5.50 (concessions).

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 81 23 23

[www.loups-chabrieres.com](http://www.loups-chabrieres.com)

## WHERE TO STAY

The Creuse is not an affluent area. This means value for money is often excellent, but there are no higher class hotels in the area.

### Le France

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 66 10 22

Aubusson's principal hotel, in a 17th-century building on the high street. Two star.

[www.lefrance-aubusson.com](http://www.lefrance-aubusson.com)

## WHERE TO EAT

Among the local specialities, the local cake the *creusois* looks rather plain but tastes delicious.

### Hôtel du Lissier

Hotel-restaurant on Aubusson's high street with high quality local cuisine and excellent value for money—set menus from €13 to €22.

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 66 14 18

[www.hoteldulissier.com](http://www.hoteldulissier.com)

## TO FIND OUT MORE

### Aubusson Tourist Information Office

[www.ot-aubusson.fr](http://www.ot-aubusson.fr)

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 66 32 12

### Felletin Tourist Information Office

[www.mairie-felletin.fr/tourisme.htm](http://www.mairie-felletin.fr/tourisme.htm)

Tel: (Fr) 5 55 66 54 60

Find a place to stay

Go to [www.francemag.com](http://www.francemag.com) and click on France Hotel Search