

Extraordinary textiles in Asterix country

Philippa Scott discovers an ever-changing panoply of rug treasures in the French city of Clermont-Ferrand

Clermont-Ferrand sprawls at the foot of Puy-de-Dôme, one of some eighty dormant volcanoes in this green heart of France; on its peak, excavations continue on a Roman temple to Mercury. But in the city centre, a triumphant statue of Vercingetorix reminds the population that he defeated the Roman army many centuries and a few miles away. The ground floor of the Musée Bargoin holds the original, archaeological collection. Upstairs are textiles.

The neoclassical building was opened to the public in 1903. Then, in 1983, Mme Nicole Mainguet, a local dealer and collector, donated 108 rugs. Other donations were made, and the idea of creating a museum for carpets slowly grew. But the 1980s saw carpet prices soar, and the carpet museum did not happen. Today there are 336 rugs conserved and stored, included in temporary exhibitions. The museum has 1,888 textiles.

For more than twenty years, Christine Bouilloc has been the museum's energetic director, instigating collaborative projects with museums in Iran, Georgia, Vietnam, and others. Gradually, each time, the museum has added to its textile holdings. Silks were bought from the last silk-weaving atelier in Aleppo (2). The example shown here is a small-scale pattern derived from a Safavid original. The 'portrait' next to it is a bag, ingeniously woven from strips cut



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from recycled plastic bags, a work of contemporary art (1).

In these ways, the museum's collection resembles a tapestry still on the loom, unfinished, accumulating colours and patterns as it progresses. The acquisition focus is on nomadic and ethnic textiles, on vanishing skills and cultures, and on traditional skills used in exciting, original ways.

At an exhibition of Syrian textiles in Marseille, Christine Bouilloc met Christine Athenor, a Founder Member of the International Association HS_Projets, based in the textile city of Lyon. Both Christines have textile backgrounds and a deep interest in other cultures,

and their shared vision and passion inspired them to embark on an annual International Festival of Extraordinary Textiles (FITE). They launched the first festival, 'Metamorphosis', in September 2012.

The themes were textile symbolism, transformation of fibres and transmission of knowledge. Incorporating skills and artists from all five continents, with an accompanying illustrated catalogue and series of events, the show was a collaboration with international museums and collectors. In conjunction with the nearby Henri-Lecoq museum and botanical garden, there were events connected with dye

and fibre plants and processes. Skilled knitters were allocated trees, urns and obelisks, which turned into bright woolly edifices in the streets.

One of the rarest loans to the museum exhibition was a byssus shawl, 'sea silk', woven from the marine bivalve *Pinna nobilis*. The museum's own collection provided a tunic of porcupine quills and feathers, a raincoat woven from a type of palm, once widely used throughout the Far East, and skirts from New Caledonia, which in storage look like coolie hats. Historic and traditional textiles were juxtaposed with contemporary Japanese garments made from synthetic fibres giving the impression of malleable metal. A collector loaned an 'undershirt' from an imperial Qing wardrobe, made from minute hollow tubes of bamboo threaded on silk in a grid pattern.



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Visiting

Clermont-Ferrand airport is served by Air France domestic flights and some budget airlines. I travelled by train from London; in 2014 the return ticket cost from £99. Michelin has its headquarters in the city and I am told that one can buy chic handbags made from recycled tyres.

In 2014 the festival theme was 'Renaissance'. I was excited at the prospect of early tapestries and carpets, but I was mistaken. This was not a nod to Italy or the Enlightenment, but to the Phoenix of mythology, symbol of immortality and regeneration. Again, the exhibition combined items from the Bargoin's collection with loans from private and museum sources. From Musée Guimet's Krishna Riboud



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collection came Indian textiles, juxtaposed with pieces by contemporary Indian and Kashmiri artisans working in traditional and innovative ways.

Extraordinary, life-size sculptures were created by a Vietnamese artist working in silks and wool - largely abstract, these were hauntingly beautiful. Japanese garments of patched indigo cloth, faded in varying degrees, were seen beside contemporary designs by the Belgian designer Dries van Noten, recalling a 1930s process for printing silks that predated techniques used today by computers.

In 2015, the Festival for Extraordinary Textiles will take place in Manila, capital of the Philippines. Further exhibition plans for the Musée Bargoin include a second exhibition devoted to indigo.

1 Bag woven from recycled plastic bags, 21st century, Syria

2 Silk from the last silk weaving workshop in Aleppo, Syria, with a design derived from a Safavid original

3 Zemmour carpet, Middle Atlas, Morocco, 20th century

4 Robe, Palestine, early 20th century, indigo dyed with embroidered panels