

# Charleston Mercury

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The newspaper with a cosmopolitan attitude

## Le Carnet de France: Troyes

By Martine Dulles

Upon our arrival in the city of Troyes, on August 26, 2023, we were asked by a policeman to stop our car as a parade was coming by. To our great surprise, the parade consisted of American vehicles from the second World War: jeeps, ambulances, trucks and bicycles, with all the participants were dressed in U.S. Army uniforms.

Later, as we approached the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall), we noticed that the windows on the front of the 17th century building were decorated with the American and French flags. A large group of people including the mayor of Troyes and many other dignitaries welcomed the parade. Music and speeches were heard as they celebrated the 79th anniversary of the liberation of Troyes by American troops. It was very moving indeed.

Troyes is in the in the Department of the Aube in Champagne region of France, in the Grand Est, and it is a 90-minute train ride from the Gare de l'Est in Paris. Unlike the area of Reims and Epernay, no Champagne grapes are grown around Troyes due to the porous nature of its chalky soil.

Nonetheless, Troyes has a lot to offer — it dates from medieval times and is a very interesting and attractive city, one well worth a visit. The historical center is in the shape of a *bouchon de Champagne* (Champagne cork) and there are 3000 timber-frame houses in the city, some dating from the 17th century. Most of the streets (called *ruelles*) are very narrow — the most famous is the *Ruelle des Chats* (cats' alley) — so narrow that cats can jump from one roof to another on the other side of the alley and impassable for cars.

After the war, the facades of the houses were covered with concrete, but thanks to André Malraux, minister of culture under General de Gaulle, a law was established in the 1960s — *Loi Malraux* — for the protection of certain historical areas in France. The city of Troyes was the first one to benefit from this law and most houses have since been restored. François Baroin was elected mayor in 1995 at the age of 30 and still holds office today and he and his team continue to enhance the beauty of their city. The concrete covers on the fronts of the houses are still being removed and visitors can admire the colorful pastel timber-frames.

As early as the 11th century, people of Jewish faith fleeing Spain and Germany established themselves in Troyes where they were protected by the counts of Champagne. In 1040, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (known as his nickname "Rachi") was born in Troyes. He was very well educated and spent many years studying the Talmud, and his writings on the founding texts of Judaism and his analyses writings are still studied in synagogues around the world to this day. The Rachi Cultural Center and the Synagogue are both open to visitors.

Troyes has a very beautiful Gothic Cathedral and no less than ten interesting churches all within walking distance in the *bouchon*. It took three centuries to build the Cathédrale Saint-Pierre-Saint-Paul, starting in the 12th century. Visitors may still admire this ancient stained-glass (fun fact: some claim that the cathedral is still not finished, as it has only one tower).

Out of the ten churches featuring original stained glass, be sure not to miss the oldest: Sainte-Madeleine, built in the 11th century. In addition to its magnificent stained-glass windows and sculptures,



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

A typical paved street of the historical center of Troyes and the timber-frame houses.

it is one of the few churches in the country that still features an extremely elaborate stone rood screen sculpted in Flamboyant Gothic style by the mason Jehan Gailde in 1510. The purpose of the screen (*jube*) was to separate the clergy from the parishioners. Liturgical texts were read from its balcony and music was played on the organ. The Sainte-Geneviève-du-Mont Church near the Panthéon in Paris also features a stone-lace rood screen.

From the 16th century on, Troyes became *le pays des bonnets de coton* — the land of cotton bonnets, as mentioned in the *Guide Vert* on Champagne. It was the major textile center of France and for centuries, knitted garments were made by hand, but thanks to the creation of weaving looms and knitting machines in the 19th century, the industry grew tremendously. Readers may be familiar with names like Dim stockings, Petit Bateau (initially children knitted cloths) and Lacoste — these and many more world-known trademarks were all born in Troyes. The first Lacoste factory was created in 1933 by André Gillier and the famous French tennis player René Lacoste.

Another success story is that of Pierre Lévy (1907-2002), an Alsatian who came to Troyes for his military service and afterwards started working in the textile industry. In 1927, he married the daughter of the owner of one of the major factories, Denise Lièvre. He was a brilliant businessman and the couple became avid art collectors, acquiring paintings by Braque, Courbet, Matisse, Picasso and many more.

Maurice Marinot, an artist born in Troyes in 1882 and close friend of the couple. He was first a painter and later a creator of pieces of art made of glass, including bowls, perfume bottles and vases. All told, Pierre and Denise Lévy owned 140 of Marinot's creations. In 1976, Pierre and Denise donated 2,700 pieces of art to the city of Troyes. The city invited the former Château of the Bishops of Troyes (just next door to the cathedral) to present their collection, and thus was the Musée d'Art Moderne de Troyes created.

Their daughter, Martine, married Léon Clingman,

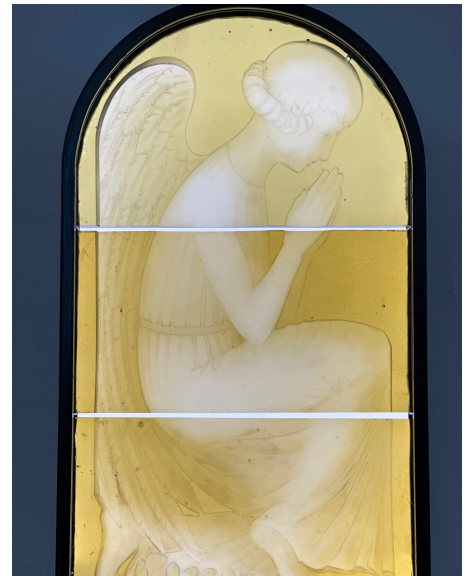


IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

A stained glass window by the well-known Lalique glass maker Cité du Vitrail.

also an entrepreneur in the Troyes cotton industry. Martine is a renowned artist known as Martine-Martine and this couple also built up a rather vast art collection, which they gifted to the Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud (see the April 2022 edition of the *Charleston Mercury*). Mr. Clingman died in May 2022 at the age of 101.

Finally, in December 2022, the Cité du Vitrail (stained-glass center) was inaugurated in the 13th century Hôtel-Dieu-le-Comte, also near the cathedral. In the old days, a *Hôtel-Dieu* served as both a hospital as well as a hospice for orphans, elderly and poor people. So, it is not surprising that the room on the ground floor is the *apothicaire* (antique pharmacy) filled with centuries-old glass ceramic and containers.

This *Cité du Vitrail* is unique to France: Not only does it have temporary and permanent exhibits showing the original stained-glass windows made than 500 years ago, it is also used as a didactic and research center. The steps necessary in crafting the pieces and how to properly use the tools of the trade are well explained. Students may also observe the evolution of the many themes these pieces can feature, from Judeo-Christian religious scenes to Islamic designs and even contemporary decorative and abstract creations.

The Department of the Aube is considered the wealthiest owner of stained-glass windows in France, just ahead of the Seine-Maritime Department in Normandy. Aube claims that more than 350 religious and public sites display stained-glass windows dating from the 12th century to the 21st century, so Troyes was the obvious choice for the Cité. Troyes has a lot to offer — visitors should plan on setting aside a few days to soak in its rich heritage.

*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](mailto:mpd@dullesdeleu.com).*