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Musées
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Musée d'ARGONNE



VARENNES-EN-ARGONNE





Le Musée d'Argonne Varennnes-en-Argonne

The Musée d'Argonne was founded in 1973. Its collections explore the major events that marked the history of this region. The museum revolves around three main subjects: the arrest of Louis XVI, Arts and popular traditions in Argonne and the First World War.

The Museum's architecture echoes the tragic events of the First World War: twelve pyramids overhang its roof, evocative of military tents. The sober colours of the building, the black, grey and white, contrast with the more vivid colours of the hall which symbolise the different nations that fought in the First World war.

The exhibits are displayed in bright, open spaces, providing good circulation for the public and allowing the exhibition of many objects, models and reconstructions.

First section: the arrest of Louis XVI and the royal family



Brigitte DUBOC,
L'arrestation de Louis XVI
diaporama présenté au musée

Varennnes-en-Argonne is inexorably associated to a milestone event in the History of France: the arrest of Louis XVI on June 21st, 1791. A model and various objects evoke this episode in the entrance hall to the museum.

In October 1789, the royal family was forced to leave Versailles for the Tuileries. Louis XVI appealed to foreign powers to help him put an end to the revolutionary movement. But his freedom remained greatly restricted. An escape plan was organized by the Marquis of Bouillé and the Count of Fersen. In the night of 20th to 21st June 1791, the King, Queen, their daughter and dauphin, accompanied by Mme Elisabeth, the King's sister, and Mme de Tourzel, the children's governess, fled in disguise, in a berlin, towards Montmédy, where the Marquis of Bouillé was awaiting them. Louis XVI left a declaration in which he clearly proclaimed his rejection of the Revolution.



*Malle ayant appartenu à
Madame Elisabeth - Soeur du Roi,
18^e siècle*

However the escape had been planned badly and the population was on the alert. The King was recognized in Sainte-Ménéhould by the postmaster Drouet who had him arrested in Varennes-en-Argonne. On June 25th, the King returned to Paris.

In the first room of the museum, a reconstruction scene stages the King's arrest. The Musée d'Argonne also has a travel suitcase belonging to Mme Elisabeth, sister of Louis XVI, a silver bouillon which belonged to Louis XVI, bearing the sign of the "Great Monarch", a gouache by Chaillon, guardian to the Temple, depicting the royal family imprisoned along with a relief map of the city of Varennes-en-Argonne showing the city as it was in 1791. This period is also explored in the last room of the museum, with figurines staging Marie-Antoinette's life, arranged into compositions inspired by paintings.

Second section: Arts and popular traditions of Argonne

The Argonne forest now spans across three different departments. It has always been a region of passage and for a long time was the border between the kingdom of France and the Holy Roman Empire. People were quick to make use of its generous stock of natural resources, favouring the development of numerous craft activities such as glass making, pottery, and roof tile production; the siliceous sedimentary rock, gaize, found here and characteristic of the Argonne massif, was the reason behind the construction of numerous kilns in the region.

Argonne remained on the fringe with the increasing industrialization during the second half of the XIXth century, a period marked by large-scale rural exodus.

Ceramics

Numerous ceramic objects are exhibited at the Argonne Museum. Ceramic production has always been very important in Argonne: wood there is plentiful and the ground is rich in clay. Excavations conducted, notably on the Autrécourt site, revealed the production of **sigillated ceramics** during the 2nd century a.c. This moulded pottery with relief decoration is coated with a slip which glazes and blushes when fired. Ceramic production continued throughout the Middle Ages, benefiting from the development of new techniques. **Paving stones** are a particularly good example of the development of decorative techniques: engraved into fresh clay, stamped or produced by inlaying a white paste.



*Les amoureux,
statuette terre cuite,
11^e siècle*

Suivez le guide

During the 17th and 18th Centuries, one of the largest ceramic factories was the "des Islettes" production - the Musée d'Argonne has numerous examples of their ceramics.

The Islettes factory was founded in 1735 and until the 19th century went by the name of fabrique du Bois d'Épense, the name of the hamlet where it was located. It then took on the name of a village nearby the Epense Wood, "des Islettes", where the majority of the workers and painter decorators lived.

The factory was of modest size until 1775. Then, in its most prosperous period, it had over 200 workers, becoming the largest factory in Argonne, where several other factories were established (Lavoye, Waly, Salvange, Froidos, Rarécourt, etc.). It closed down in 1848, due to competition from industrial ceramic production in Sarreguemines.

The Bois d'Épense factory's main ceramic production was faïence. This earth pottery is fired once, then, soft and porous, is coated with a tin-based glazing and fired a second time at around 1,000°C. The decoration and the enamel are fired together: this is high fire faïence. If the faïence undergoes a third firing phase to fix the decoration on the already fired white enamel, it is low fire faïence.

The pieces exhibited in the museum come from the different factories in Argonne. Floral motifs are very much appreciated by the Bois d'Épense factory, but their pieces also feature "au chinois" motifs, as well as the cockerel – a symbol notably used during the revolutionary period, symbolising the defence of the French Republic.



Assiette,
céramique des Islettes, 19^e siècle



Vitrine sur le verre

Glass

Glass work also held an important place in Argonne, mainly based around the Biesme valley. The pieces exhibited - bottles, flasks, jars, etc. - are undecorated utilitarian objects.

Glass-blowing is an ancient technique that has been used since the 1st century b.c. and is the main process used to shape glass, in both cottage industries and industrial productions.

The majority of Argonne's glass factories disappeared during the 19th century. However the Islettes, founded in 1870, survived until 1936, producing electric insulators and *l'Idéal* food jars in series.

Wood

The *forêt de feuillus* spans across almost the whole of Argonne, providing materials for the different artisans working with wood: lumberjacks, dockers, sawyers, carpenters, cartwrights, coopers, clog makers, button manufacturers, knife handle manufacturers etc....

Several displays in the exhibition are dedicated to rural activities, particularly cartwright work, cooperage and button making. Numerous agricultural tools: hoe, flail, hay chopper, scythe, harrows, sower, straw binder and carding machine, are also exhibited, illustrating the various different aspects of traditional agricultural activity in Argonne. The exhibition also features a very rare wooden roller.

Third section: the First World War

The First World War is a central theme in the Musée d'Argonne. Violent battles were fought in the region. The objects displayed in the museum explore the successive stages of the war in its many different facets.

On June 28th, 1914, Archduke François-Ferdinand de Habsbourg was assassinated in Sarajevo. Alliances between the different nations quickly triggered off Europe-wide conflict. Each side was convinced that the war would be short, but the First World War was different from previous wars due to its wide geographic scope, its length and its murderous nature.

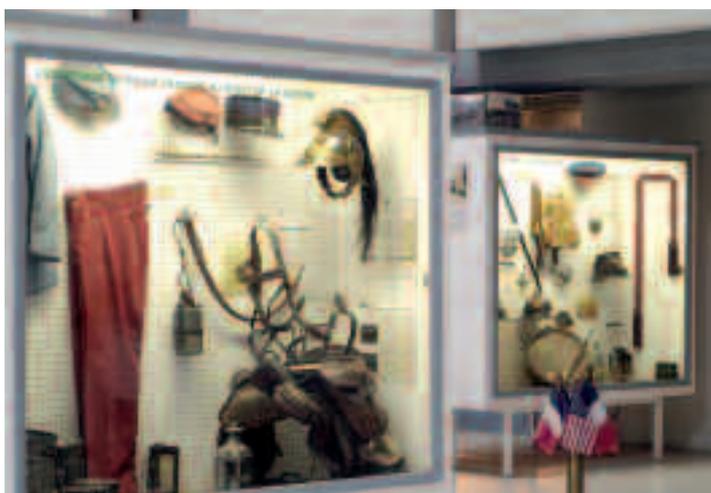
1914: Offensive and defeat in the war of movement

During the summer of 1914, the German army violated the neutrality of Belgium and invaded the North of France. In September, it was 50 km from Paris when its advance was stopped by Joffre's French counter-offensive, the battle of Marne. The front froze, particularly in the Argonne region, to make way for a war of attrition.

Exhibits at the Musée d'Argonne illustrate the beginning stages of the war, in particular changes in French soldier uniforms, which gradually became more discrete and better adapted to a war of position.



Soldat Français, Mannequin



Vitrine sur l'équipement du soldat français au début de la Guerre

1915-1917: war of position and the trenches

The armies dug themselves into trenches to maintain their acquired positions on the front line: in the West along 700 km from the North Sea to the Swiss border, in the East from the Baltic to the Carpathian Mountains.

The enemy tried to cross the front with major offensives resulting in immense loss of human lives. In 1916, the Germans attempted a new strategy to

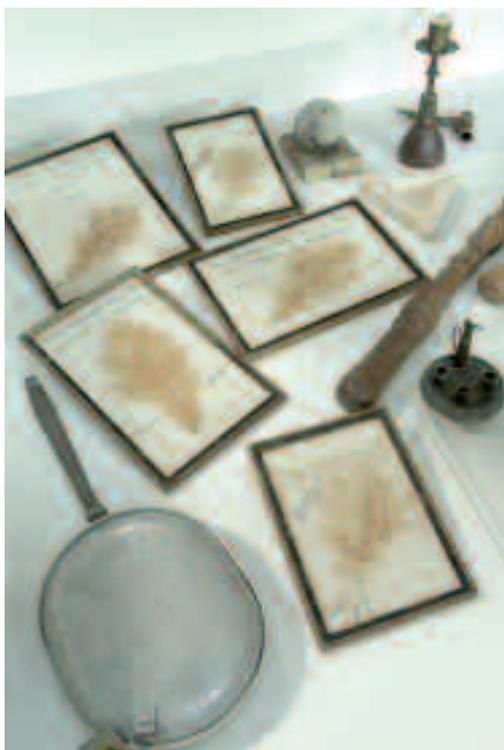
cross the enemy front: this was the war of attrition. Verdun was bombarded from February to December, 1916. It was a failure for Germany, close to 300,000 people were killed.



La guerre des mines, reconstitution



La guerre des mines, gros plan d'une galerie



Artisanat de tranchées

Military strategies evolved with trench warfare. Observation and information techniques developed considerably: captive balloons, held to the ground with metal elements called pig's tails, aircrafts monitoring the trenches using photography, telephones used for sending information. In 1915 a poisonous chlorine gas was used for the first time, in the Ypres salient in Belgium. Soldier equipment had to be adapted due to these fearful new weapons.

The use of gas masks, often ineffective, became essential. Various different types of weapons, both collective and individual weapons, are on display in the museum.

In Argonne, the Butte de Vauquois was occupied by the Germans from September 1914. It was a strategic observation point used for monitoring one of the main access points to Verdun. The Germans and French fought each other using hundreds of mines.

A model, exhibited in the museum rooms, shows the different characteristics of this "war of mines". This siege warfare process consisted in digging underground galleries to destroy enemy positions by exploding machines under the trenches.

Some of the objects exhibited provide direct evidence of daily life in trenches. Created by the soldiers themselves from materials to which they had access, essentially metal and wood, "trench craftwork" took on a wide variety of forms: copper vases, sculpted wooden canes, empty shells...

For those countries involved in the conflict, the war was full-blown and affected all levels of society.

Governments appealed to the population to support the war effort and to finance loans, as shown in numerous posters.



Artisanat de tranchées

1917-1918: The turning point

The war experienced a turning point in 1917, with the entry of the Americans changing the power balance.

On the Eastern front, the October 1917 revolution ended with the signature of an armistice between Russia and Germany.

The Germans then decided to transfer all their forces to the Western front and push through French lines. The offensive was stopped again in the Marne. The German troops were defeated by the French counter-offensive backed by the American intervention and mass use of tanks. Finally, Germany signed the armistice on November 11th, 1918 in Rethondes, near Compiègne.



Fusil dans un arbre

Argonne, like the East of France, was profoundly hit by the harsh battle which took place there - even its landscape had changed. The Musée d'Argonne holds a symbolic object: a German rifle left at the foot of a tree, most certainly at the end of the war, imprisoned by vegetation that has grown around it over the years.

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