Fontaines Pétrifiantes de Saint-Nectaire

Atelier Papon & fils depuis 1821

Press Kit

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Summary

The thermo-mineral springs that feed the Petrifying Fountain constitute active evidence of the volcanic past in the Auvergne, Central France. They have made possible the development of petrification craft industry over the past 200 years. Established in 1821, the firm holds a unique know-how to manufacture low-reliefs out of calcium carbonate. Successively 7 generations of the Papon family, owners of the site, have been inventing new techniques and offering original creations. In 2009 a special label " Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant " was awarded to the firm for its contribution to the preservation of living heritage. Consequently it ranks among fellow-partners famous for their excellence and the family's uncommon occupation is acknowledged.

1. A singular French know-how

Encrustation on mould and making of a mould out of Gutta-Percha

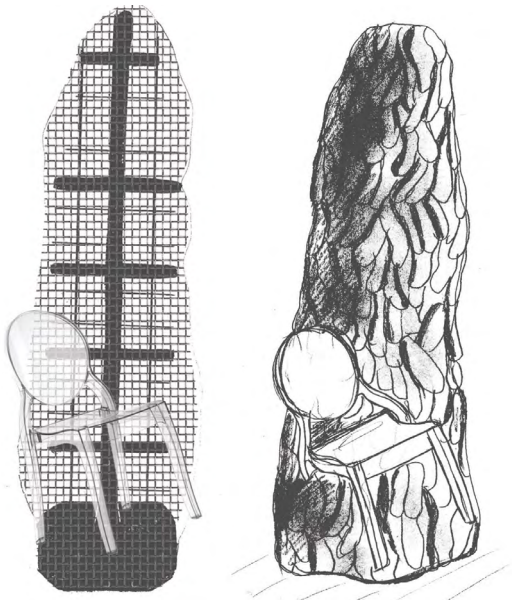
Calcium carbonate is the main actor in that handicraft. It is directed by the craftsman who holds technical and scientific skills which allow him to make artworks with a unique finish.

His technique consists in forcing calcium carbonate that is dissolved in volcanic springs to precipitate onto Gutta-Percha moulds. Gutta Percha, a rubber-type vegetable gum comes from the Palaquium Gutta tree, grown in South-East Asia. Till last century, Gutta-Percha was used for the making of everyday items (like cups or tea pots) and the coating of submarine telegraph cables. Then it was progressively replaced by chemical plastic. This specific gum may be re-used by regenerating it yearly with new Gutta-Percha. Thus the gum currently used by the craftsman dates back to 1870.

The rubber is heated up and kneaded thoroughly to eliminate any air or water bubbles. Then the craftsman applies the gum onto a copper or resin matrix to get a mould. He must be precise and deeply feel any of his actions. Once the mould has cooled down, it is placed onto the petrifying ladder for a period of 6 to 20 months. The mould gets encrusted with calcium carbonate. The craftsman‘s experience of crystallization is required to choose the right location for the mould. He watches and handles the mould daily. Then, he de-moulds the ready low-relief and frames it to enhance its fineness.

That necessary compromise with nature and the long calcium carbonate precipitation only allow a limited production but impart intrinsic value to each low-relief.

2. Constant innovation



« Happée», Crystallization Éric Papon

Besides their yearly output of calcium low-reliefs, the craftsmen develop new making concepts. While keeping Gutta-Percha (vegetable rubber-type gum) that has been used for 200 years for traditional moulds they turn to wax, alginate, plaster and silicon. Those new materials allow the making of specific upmarket technically complicated pieces.

Their total mastery of calcium carbonate deposits allow the craftsmen to create extremely fine and detailed pieces. Artists and firms wanting original authentic works of art are particularly receptive to the esthetic potential of calcium carbonate.
And the directors' constant thinking about that potential use leads to complete any artist's order of a unique piece.

Parallel to those commissionned creations, the craftsmen are still using the 450 copper matrices which the firm owns: copies of 19th century-renowned engravers like Marchino interpreting paintings by Ingres or Boucher, or Becker fixing country daily life, historical and mythological scenes, are on sale in the showroom.

The directors' innovative and classical approach of their handicraft allowed the firm to be awarded "Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant" in 2009 which is a special label for Preservation of Living Heritage, and was renewed in 2015. That Living Heritage Company is also registered on the Inventory of Rare Artcrafts (INMA - Institut National des Métiers d'Art).

Creation of a seat for designer Thibault Huguet

3. A 250-year-long history

The cave and its hot minerals springs (35°c)

After it was invented in Tuscany in 1760, the art of petrification was developed in many countries over the world. Nowadays only the directors of the firm Fontaines Pétrifiantes de Saint-Nectaire master and carry further that know-how.

In the early 19th century local thermo-mineral springs were used for balneology. Their excellent physical-chemical properties made possible the progressive development and finalization of an original artistic craft.

At that time an intuitive and learned man called Jean Serre, started digging around to find thermal springs. He discovered 2 minerals springs and nearby a leaf that had been fossilized in travertine (calcite). Consequently he decided to study the geological phenomenon of encrustation. After he became private tutor to the son of Earl de Montlosier, a local politician and geologist, Jean Serre carried out his first experiments of petrification and set up an ingenious waterfall system to retrieve the calcium crystals from those springs so as to give them artistic shapes with sulphur moulds. In that way he founded the firm Fontaines Pétrifiantes.

In 1844, the petrification industry employed over 60 people shared out in 12 petrifying fabrics in Saint-Nectaire, 2 in Clermont-Ferrand and 2 in Bagni San Filippo (Italy). There was no real outlet for that emerging production since tourism was limited then. But that petrification industry survived thanks to one willing man, M. Michel Papon, who was Jean Serre's son-in-law. During 40 years, Michel Papon exploited those petrifying springs and turned that craft into a unique know-how. In 1922, he and his son Leon, decided to open their fabric to visitors, applying the modern concept of visiting industrial sites. In the 1950's, Roger Hyacinthe (Leon's son) and his son Edmond Michel, further developed that economical aspect by organizing the reception of the public in their own site.

Eric Papon succeeded as managing director and owner in 1998. He converted the old building into a modern structure. He directed his occupation towards specific creations on artists and firms requests. From the 19th century to now, the Papon family have had respect for tradition on mind. As a result, the making process has remained an authentic handicraft with consideration for local environment.

4. A manufacture open to the public

Éric Papon in his workshop - photo : OT Sancy

Petrification handicraft was developed by Michel and Léon Papon who opened the fabric to visitors to sell their products in 1922. As precursors they introduced the modern concept of guided visits on industrial sites. Nowadays, the volume of visitors to the firm Fontaines Pétrifiantes de Saint-Nectaire reaches 60 000 per year.

In 2006, Eric Papon as managing director of the firm launched a large renovating programme to modernize the visitors'building and to make the workshop more functional.

A new scenography was set up : visitors move around in an unusual underground environment to find about the making of art works. The geology room offers a precise introduction to the specific subsoil forming in Saint-Nectaire and the volcanic origin of those thermo mineral springs. The cave shelters the basin where 2 springs spurt out (52°c and 18°c) that are canalized to feed the petrifying ladder.

In the workshops, visitors' attention is focused on the making process, since the craftsmen carry out the successive stages of production before the public all year round.

The 14-meter-high petrifying ladder and its waterfall allow the physical-chemical principle of calcium carbonate deposit to occur revealing the founder's genius who conceived the tool to put the mineral to a fair use. Hundreds of rubber moulds and other items are undergoing petrification on the ladder.

The showroom enables visitors to appreciate the achievement of joint human and nature's actions.

5. Some creations

« **Froissée** »
Calcium encrustation onto a rubber cast

« The essence of my creative work is my conception of time. When the demand for immediate fulfilment is constant, here nature reminds me of the necessity to be humble and patient so as to acquire a know-how, develop my ability to observe and analyse, in order to create art works whose aesthetics has stunned visitors for 200 years.

The art of petrification opens a perspective to an infinite creative process. Creating an art work from natural phenomenons offers an opportunity to make a view of mind come true. Each attempt is a way of exploring the limits of calcium to understand that mineral better and sublimize it.
The craftman's gestures are adapted to the project's constraints, the infiltration of the water drop into the cast, the tactile sound and visual sensitiveness towards the natural elements allow a perfectly harmonious combination of the calcium crystals.

Sometimes non-controlled calcium deposits on the ladders are inspiring to me because of the incidental shapes they form up. "Froissée" was made from my will to force the visitors' emotion and questioning."

Éric Papon

Qui s'y frotte s'y pique

Crystallization

Any plant submitted to water quickly rottens. Following that statement, a year-long experimental investigation research was necessary to implement the crystallizing technique of that thistle flower. The quick fixing onto the thorns of light microscopical carbonate crystals must be obtained to stiffen and strengthen them. That process is further achieved with some thick shiny crystals which give the petrified flower a unique finish.

Making time : 6 months / Artist : Éric Papon

« Mineral Body »

Crystallization for artist Ilana Halperin

Veneered wooden stencil exhibited at National Museums Scotland in 2013. Completion time : 3 months

«Physical Geology»

Calcium cast encrustation for artist Ilana Halperin

Calcium low-relief completed in 8 months

Art work shown at the exhibition *«The Force behind the forms» Geology, matter, process in contemporary art* from 12/12/15 to 20/11/16- Germany

Artist Ilana Halperin

Contemporary artist Ilana Halperin creatively explores the concept of time through fossils, minerals and geological sculptures. Born in New York Ilana trained as a stonemason before she developed a passion for geology. As she was doing research work at the geology department of Manchester Museum she found a calcium low-relief from Bagni San Filippo in Italy. She started exploring that geological phenomenon and discovered the last manufacture of calcium low-reliefs in Saint-Nectaire, France.

During 5 years her creations travelled over the world and were exhibited successively in Berlin, Edimburgh and Los Angeles.

« Premier Pas »

Calcium cast-encrustation fixed on a granit base

Reproduction of a female foot by creating a silicon cast. The details and skin colour of calcium convey a realistic aspect that would be impossible to obtain by sculpting. The smallest features of skin are perfectly reproduced.

Completion time : 9 months / Artist : Éric Papon

Sculptor Romain Langlois

« My work consists in trying to reproduce through my sculptures another creation revealing the beauty and strength concentrated in the most familiar elements of our surroundings : a branch , a stone, a trunk.
The techniques I am using : modeling, moulding, bronzing, patinating, are in keeping with my aim to perfectly imitate nature.
In 2010 I met Eric Papon and he led me to open up my practising to new materials and skills. Calcite like bronze transmutes states, disturbes human analysis and pushes judgment to clash, so that hesitation, as a fruitful source, lingers on.

My challenge is to transcend the states of materials so as to change the vision we have towards our environment ».

Romain Langlois

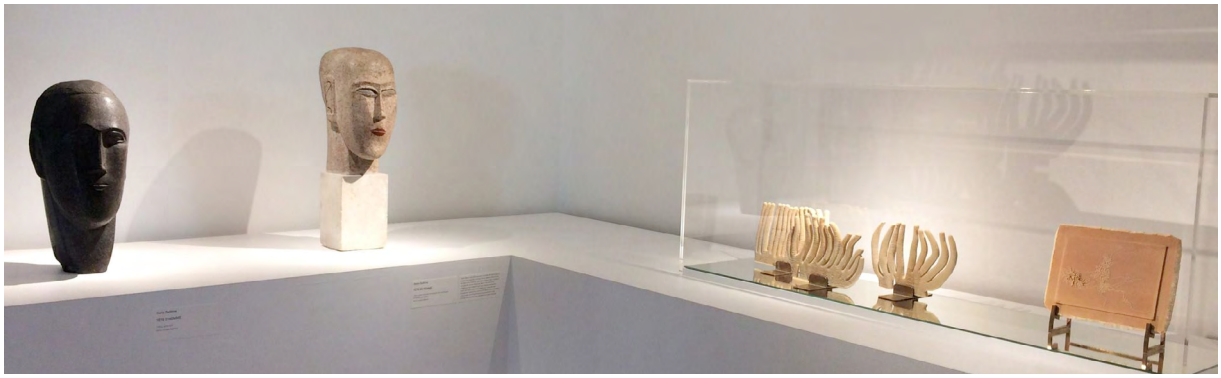
« AVEN »

Calcium and patinated bronze

« Aven », finalist prizewinner of the art competition « Prix Liliane Bettencourt pour l'Intelligence de la main»
Creation Romain LANGLOIS and Eric PAPON - June 2016

Éric Papon and Romain Langlois
They have worked together during 24 months to achieve that unique art work

6. Currents events / Exhibitions



Exhibition «ETRE PIERRE», Zadkine museum, Paris, from 29th September 2017 to 11th February 2018

News spaces opening - *January 2018*
After 2 months of work the site of les Fontaines Pétrifiantes de Saint-Nectaire opened the doors of its new spaces. 300 000 € were invested with the Auvergne Rhône-Alpes Regional Council and the FEADER supports.

Zadkine museum, Paris
Ilana Halperin's artwork «Physical Geology» is presented within the exhibition called «ETRE PIERRE» at the Zadkine museum in Paris alongside Zadkine, Picasso, Rodin and other masters of sculpture from 29th September 2017 to 11th February 2018.

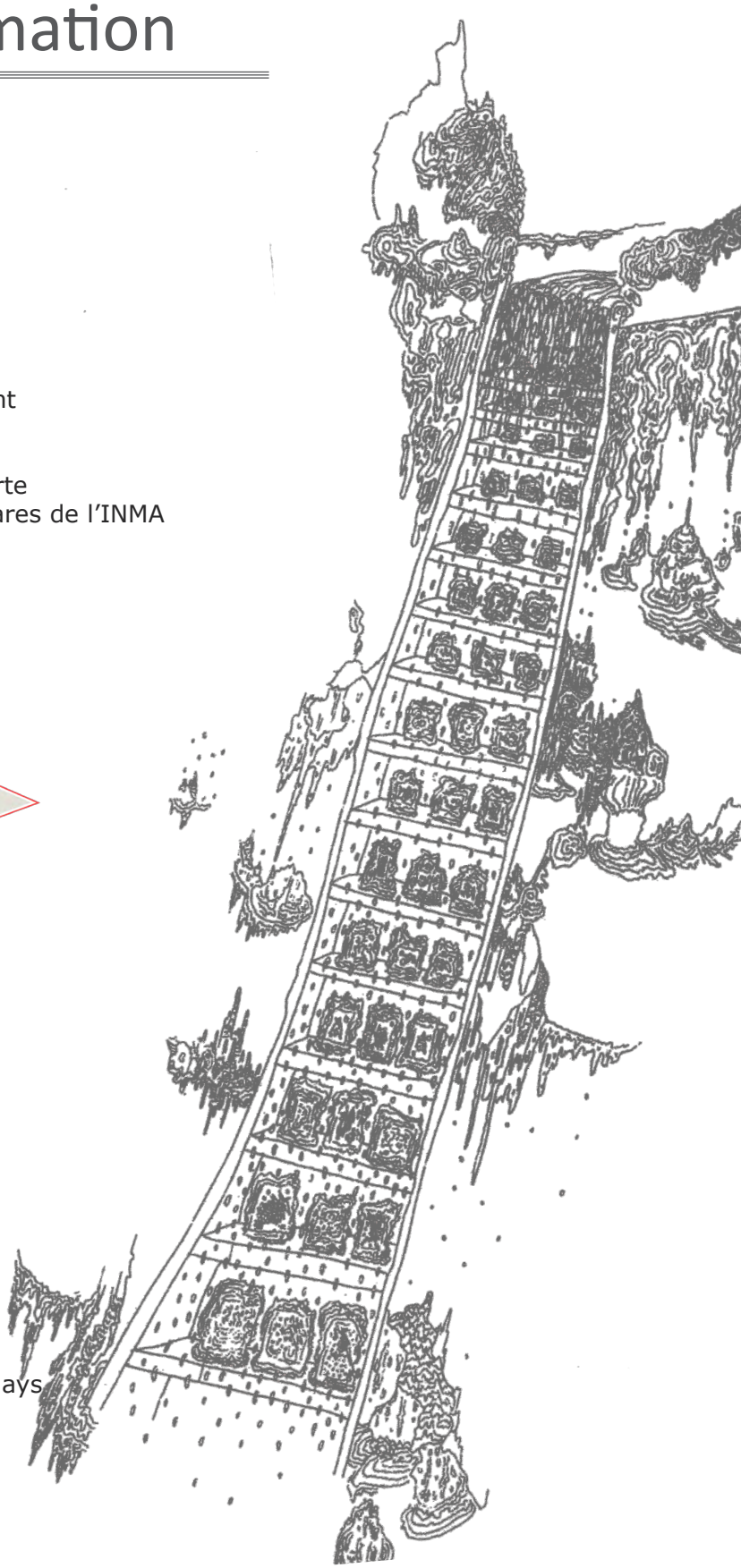
Awarding of the State Label «Qualité Tourisme»
May 2016

Exhibition at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris,
«L'empreinte du geste » from 29th March to 3rd April 2016.
Presentation of artworks made by Eric Papon and sculptor Romain Langlois. Meeting with Minister for Culture and Communication Mrs Audrey AZOULAY, and State Secretary for Handicraft Mrs Martine PINVILLE. *That event was organized by the INMA with the support of the Manufacture Horlogère Vacheron Constantin within the European Days of Artistic Handicrafts 2016. « Métiers d'Art, gestes de demain » - Organizer : Eric-Sébastien Faure-Lagorce.*

Official visit of the Atelier by Martine PINVILLE, State Secretary for Handicraft with Alphonse Bellonte Mayor of Saint-Nectaire. February 2016

Renewal of the Living Heritage Company Label «Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant» and Awarding of the State Label «Famille Plus » 2015

7. Practical information



The firm

Director : Papon Éric, Master craftsman
Managing director : Papon Christine
Established : 1821
First opening to the public : 1922
Staff : 5
Number of petrification sites : 3
Volume of visitors in 2015 : 60 000
Labels : - Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant
- Qualité Tourisme
- Famille Plus
- Réseau Entreprise et Découverte
- Inventaire des Métiers d'Art Rares de l'INMA

Reception of visitors

Non-guided visits
- daily
from 9:30 am to 12 am and 2 to 6 pm
- from half-may to half-september
from 9:30 am to 12 am and 2 to 7 pm

Guided-tours
- for groups : on booking all year long
- for individuals : in July and August

Yearly closure
- 14th November to 17th December
Weekly closure
- Mondays in October, January and March except for school and public holidays

Rates
- Adults : 6€
- Children (from 7 to 15 years old) : 3€
Free for the under 7

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