

# *La Gazette du Moulin à Nef*

Volume 1 Number 1, January 2001

## PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

It is with great excitement that I write this letter, the first in a series from *La Gazette du Moulin à Nef*, the newsletter of the Cultural Exchange Center of Auvillar (CECA). The CECA is charged with discovering and encouraging programs that will enhance cultural exchange in Auvillar. The Center—also known as the Moulin à Nef—is a facility that can be utilized by educational groups from the USA, France and, eventually, other countries. The Center will provide space for artists, musicians, dancers, and teachers in a variety of disciplines to work and teach in an inspiring historic and very French setting.

Auvillar is located in a blessedly quiet corner of France, on the south side of the Garonne River, between Bordeaux and Toulouse. The region has been a crossroads since prehistoric times and reflects Roman, French, Occitan—and yes, even English—influences. Within two

hours of this most picturesque little village (one of the official “100 Most Beautiful Villages” of France) are dramatic escarpments with villages clinging to the sides, mountains in three directions, beautiful lush valleys just perfect for bike riding, and a way of life and pace that transports visitors to another time.

We are working frantically to prepare for the upcoming summer programs. We expect to have the studio building renovated, to have the ceramic studio equipped and running, and spaces for artist's studios and classes available for use. In addition, the administration building will be functioning with additional studio space or temporary living space. On the hillside behind the buildings an experienced vintner has already begun to bring a small vineyard back to life, and we will share a bit of the French culture by learning how it is done. Soon we hope to welcome some students to the village for a competition to design our landscape and placement of future studios.

Despite the hectic pace, we hope to find our (and your) time inspiring and inspired, creative, peaceful and fun. Imagine yourself playing petanque under the trees by the river bank at the end of a productive (or not!) day or lounging on the terrace of the Hotel de l'Horloge, eating a superb supper in the warm summer air with fellow artists. I am very excited and pleased to be able to participate in this adventure and I hope you will join us. I would love to hear from each of you, and, especially, to see you someday in Auvillar.

—*Susan Saarinen*



Honorary Medal  
of Auvillar  
by J. Balme

## Mission Statement

The Cultural Exchange Center of Auvillar believes that the most meaningful exploration of another culture occurs through individual involvement and direct contact with that way of life.

The Center was created to facilitate programs conceived in this spirit and, in particular, to share the rich cultural and artistic heritage surrounding Auvillar, a charming and hospitable village in southwestern France.

To this end, the CECA provides facilities, including artists studios and a ceramics studio, assistance in designing and implementing programs in cultural exchange using these facilities, and most importantly, a natural link to the village, the people, and the region.



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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CECA AND THE MOULIN `A NEF

In the summer of 1994, a group of artists from Denver, Colorado, spent two weeks in Auvillar, a small village in southwestern France, at the invitation of Alain and Lucy Delsol. They were housed with local families or in inexpensive "gites" and the village offered them space in an unoccupied house to gather for group dinners and critiques. The people of the town welcomed them warmly and often stopped by to chat and see how their work was coming. There was an ongoing exhibit and countless evenings of wine and conversation, music and folk-dancing. Some of the artists served on the jury of the town's annual painting competition and a visit to Denver was planned for the first prize winner.

That fall, 26 amateur folk dancers from Auvillar spent 10 days in Denver, performing, sight-seeing, making friends. The experience of this first year marked everyone who participated, French and American alike. For the next four years, every summer brought a new group of artists to the village. Some returned several times. Some even bought houses. Activities have included a watercolor workshop, a mural designed by a Denver artist and painted by volunteers in Auvillar, language classes, a wire sculpture workshop, and always wine, conversation and friendship.

In 1998, the Donnell Kay Foundation, which had been modestly underwriting the program which came to be known as "Auvill'art", purchased a piece of land and two buildings in the village in the hope of expanding the summer program. The Foundation financed the partial restoration of these two houses which were in very bad condition. At the same time, a search began for French and American

partners willing to explore the future of cultural exchange programs and administer their development, perhaps ultimately to become the owner of the property.

In the year 2000, a non-profit organization, the Cultural Exchange Center of Auvillar, was created to manage the property (christened the Moulin à Nef after the floating flour mills that were used on the Garonne River more than a hundred years ago), to oversee the next phase of construction and to seek out and facilitate pilot programs which would begin to define the activities of the Center. Impressed with the enthusiasm the project has generated thus far, the Foundation has made plans to equip the interiors of the two buildings as artists' studios, a ceramics studio and a small office for the CECA. Work should be completed by the summer of 2001.

One of the essential missions of the CECA is, within four years, to propose to the Donnell Kay Foundation the candidacy of one or more suitable institutions to take ownership of the Moulin à Nef and to operate the facility according to the requisite goals and conditions. The Donnell Kay Foundation will select the future owner and transfer the property to them.

The CECA continues to talk with numerous artists and organizations interested in using the Moulin à Nef. We hope to be able to host programs in areas such as painting, sculpture, ceramics, calligraphy, mosaic, folk music and dance, theater, poetry and creative writing, music education and performance, cooking and wine, information technology, and architecture. Have we missed anything?

—Lucy Delsol

# Back to the Beginning

The neighborhood called Le Port in Auvillar was once an important center for the production and distribution of wine. In 1306-1307, some 26000 hectoliters of wine passed through the Port on the way to Bordeaux and to countries in the north. On the outskirts of the chapel of Saint Catherine, a grapevine decorated the small hill and the township: the *blazon* of Auvillar, conceded to the city by Louis XIV, representing three golden barrel staves on a background of azure, bears witness to such a situation.



## The Vineyard, the Wine and Men

It is around the religious buildings that the first vineyards were planted. Members of the religious communities were probably among the first winegrowers, wine being necessary to celebrate Mass. They also had the knowledge and the means to implement it. It is likely that the Convent of Saint Catherine which was present in the Port had its vineyard close by.

Vineyards and the production of wine reached deep into the lay culture as well. In addition to the *blazon* of the city, these age-old traditions reappear in the feast of Saint-Noe, celebrated every year in June. During the feast, whose origins are half-Christian and half pagan, Bacchus is carried in homage to the gods.

Thus, the vineyard and wine constituted a sociological phenomenon before becoming an economic phenomenon, involving both cultural events with the feasts and celebrations of the bourgeois and liturgical events for the Christians.

## The Vineyard and Time

The life span of a vineyard can reach one century and is connected to the concept of gen-

eration: each one preparing the future of the following one. Each generation benefits from the know-how acquired by the previous generation. Thus, like an encyclopedia, as viticulture becomes richer, its wines also diversify and improve. Thanks to the past, today we know how to make, with only one grape, wines as different as champagne, red or rosé wine, wines to drink when they are young and wines to let age.

The wine grower, as the artist, can draw from his palette an infinity of nuances.

## A Restoration

A vineyard landscape is always a very human space. The hand of man creates it and his genius responds to it. Nothing there is left to chance.

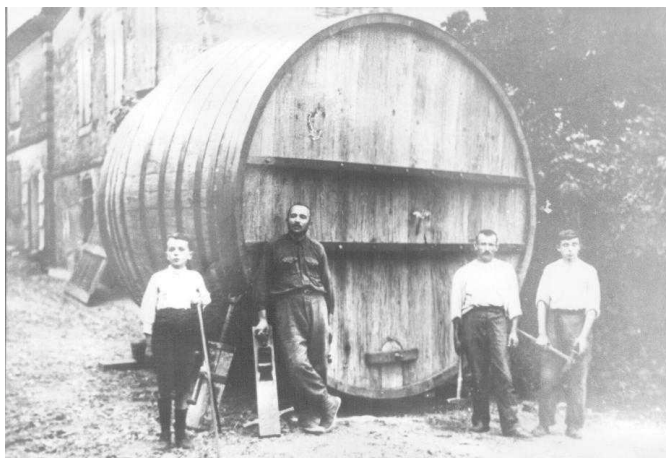
Certainly, the Port of Auvillar can only be embellished by the presence of beautiful rows of grapevines on this small hill that our ancestors had already planted in the same way.

That the initiative to clear the overgrown vegetation and to restore an old wine-growing tradition is not a local one, but comes from abroad, is only paradoxical in appearance. The coming and going of men and women is an enemy to indifference and slackness; thanks to this movement, new eyes look upon a landscape, a tradition, a history and see them in a light many of us have forgotten.

So good luck to the vineyard of Le Port in Auvillar. It will put down its roots there, so that we may rediscover ours.

—*René Dauty*

*M. Dauty is a highly experienced vintner who is leading the project to revive the vineyard on the hillside behind the Moulin à Nef. If you come to visit us, you may be asked to do some work on it!*





## CERAMIC STUDIO

During the many discussions we had in the early days of planning for the cultural exchange program, we spoke about the importance of the sense of history, and the importance of respecting and revealing that history. We spoke about priorities, intentions, and people; the old ways, the new ways, and what was most in need of preserving.

Our research made it clear that the long and vigorous history of earthenware ceramics ("faience") in Auvillar held an especially important position in Le Port (the old river-side port neighborhood), in part because of its proximity to river transportation.

With this in mind, we determined that reintroducing a ceramics program would be very appropriate for the Exchange Center, and an opportunity for visitors and villagers alike to share skills and techniques from their own experience.

In the spirit of cultural exchange, we have chosen to equip the ceramic studio initially with materials with which to teach the techniques used in faience and other earthenware traditions. As time and artists expand their interests, we expect that the studio will evolve.

Last summer, sitting in a friend's yard in Le Port, as the summer sunlight faded into dusk, we were told that there was once a kiln in the studio building at the Moulin à Nef. Instantly, we knew we had made the right decision, picking up a thread of Auvillar's history. And what will this new project add to that history?

—Susan Saarinen

*There is one manufactory from that era that is still in existence, Martretolosan. It is still making faience, and is licensed to manufacture the Moustiers style.*

# THE STORY OF FAIENCE

"Faience" is the French name of the tin-glazed earthenware that was developed in Europe as an inexpensive copy of Chinese porcelain ware. The white table- and servingware with blue cobalt glaze painting was only affordable by the very wealthiest European families. Using local deposits of low-fire red clay, an opaque white glaze, and emulating the Chinese styles, Moorish artisans began in the tenth century to craft their own versions of the Chinese porcelain pieces. By the fifteenth century, this style of ware was well known and quite popular. The word "faience" comes from the style first taught in France by artisans from Faenza, Italy.

Between 1685, when Louis the 14th declared war on the Protestants, and 1700, when a period of 15 years of very cold weather drastically affected plant and river life in the region, France was at war, and she overextended herself financially. The country folk had nothing more to give. The poor people ate on wooden plates, or from the serving bowls themselves, and Louis was finally forced to pass a law ordering the nobles and the Church to give up their gold, silver and plated dishes to replenish his coffers. At the time there were 15 (fifteen!) churches in the vicomté of Auvillar, and a sudden need for dishes!

The Church did everything possible to rehabilitate the faience tradition. France was far behind Holland, Spain, England and Italy in the art of faience. At first, Auvillar copied the styles

and colors of Rouen and Nevers, the two most important manufactories in France. To catch up, the churches of Auvillar employed consultants from Bruges (Belgium), Italy (Faenza!) and other foreign countries to teach local artisans.

In 1789, Pierre Castex, who lived in Le Port and whose sons worked at the pottery works, painted 46 watercolors of the motifs used in Auvillar. Whatever his original intent for those paintings was, they inform us now about the ceramic tradition in Auvillar.

At the height of the faience manufactory in the village, 1840, the studios in the area together made 1,200,000 pieces of faience pottery. Of course, there were lots of manufactories in the area. The main reason that Auvillar was so successful, for so long, was her proximity to the Garonne. Auvillar could transport pottery to Toulouse and to Bordeaux easily.

By 1900 the market for faience had disappeared, trains replaced river transport and the pottery works were transformed for other uses. In houses throughout Auvillar you can still see a precious plate here or there and the watercolor paintings remind us of a great tradition, one we are proud to follow.

—Susan Saarinen

*I'd like to thank M. Labau of Auvillar for his time and generosity in helping me to understand a little of the history of faience. The brief history herein described is a poor summary of his 40 years of research on the subject.*



# A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Among the first American artists to visit Auvillar in the early 90's were three from Colorado, Rob Gratiot, John Lencicki and Dennis Pendleton. Little did they



realize how the house behind them would soon serve as the fulcrum for events leading up to the creation of Auvillar's new Art Center - the Moulin à Nef.

The Maison Vielhescaze was a beehive of activity those first few summers, providing lodging and studio space for the artists, and room for dancing in the evenings with the local Auvillaraais.



Here, M. Sezuer, renowned Auvillar accordionist plays, unmindful of the fact that his nearby house would soon be restored to become the official hospitality center and bureau of the Arts Centre. But from these blithe summer evenings grew the forces which would lead to the eventual creation of Auvillar's new Moulin à Nef.

By summer 1999 work had already begun on the vacant house, seen here in a picture taken by Denver artist John Lencicki, from the backyard of the Maison Vielhescaze.



Lencicki is a veteran of 5 summers in Auvillar, having been drawn back year after year by the opportunity to work in such a hospitable environment. As he put it, "It is unusual in a foreign country to have the opportunity to reunite with people you've met before, and each summer when you come back, to see the children grow up". These human factors of the Auvillar exchange group played an equal part with the great variety of paintable subjects and light which inspired him to talk other instructors from Denver's Art Students League into joining him there.

Among them was Tim Flynn, a wire sculptor whose gift to the



town, "Le Printemps" was highly visible in the garden of the Moulin à Nef last summer.

It is shown here against the wall of the bureau where in August 2000, Lencicki ventured inside with Ms. Saarinen. Much work remained to be done for the formal opening of the building this year.



Next door, he was fascinated by the scale of the unusual post and beam building which had emerged from the ruins of an old port wall. Studying the plans and the lighting possibilities for this studio took immediate priority. Ms. Saarinen explained the plans for the second floor, being constructed this spring.



Like these perennial roses growing wild on the banks of the Garonne, as if to symbolize the revival of the once dusty and collapsing buildings beyond, the plans and goals for the Moulin à Nef bloom with renewed vigor each spring.

—*Barbara Lencicki*

## The “Moulins à nef” in Auvillar

The origin of the “Moulins à nef” goes back to the first centuries. According to Procope, Byzantine historian, in the year 555, the city of Rome was besieged by the Ostrogoths who cut the four aqueducts providing water to the mills of the city. The General Belissaire asked his engineers to transport the mechanisms of the mills onto boats solidly anchored on the Tiber and to power them by paddle wheels. Flour flowed again. The Ostrogoths, discouraged, lifted the siege.

It was not until the tenth century, however, that we find “Moulins à nef” mentioned frequently in the archives. During the Middle Ages, most French and European rivers were crowded with “Moulins à nef”. The Garonne was no exception.

The “Moulins à nef” were anchored directly in the shipping lanes of the Garonne, so boats needed only tie up alongside to load or unload. But this also pre-



sented some drawbacks. They hindered navigation so a fierce war began against them. One can imagine the numerous quarrels that occurred daily between millers and boat people.

From 1792 on, the location and distribution of the “Moulins à nef” had to be submitted to many rules decreed by the Prefect. However one can say that until 1835 a reprieve was granted to the millers thanks to the goodwill of the Mayor of Auvillar and in consideration of their long service.

But on May 5th, 1835, the French government decided to refuse to give any authorization to repair the “Moulins à nef” on the Garonne. These factories were considered to be a danger to navigation and to present too many risks of accidents. So the “Moulins à nef” simply disappeared from the Garonne. Ironically enough, eventually so did navigation.

—*Alain Delsol*

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