

Alexandra Sojfer Umbrellas

By Maisie Wilhelm

Alexandra Sojfer's delightful shop is not for the superstitious. Mounted on the walls and hanging from the ceilings are dozens of umbrellas and parasols, of all shapes and colors, propped open. As your eyes dance from one charming model to another, Madame Sojfer is quick to pounce on these unique umbrellas, whipping them open with a flourish, and twirling them in a jaunty pose. Bedecked in ribbons, lace or sparkling crystals, these umbrellas captivate. The demure parasols trimmed in lace are every little girl's fantasy. Bad luck shouldn't be this pretty, so when Madame Sojfer is asked if it isn't a problem to open all these umbrellas inside, she smiles knowingly and spreads her hand over the merchandise. "Mais, non," she says. "Not here."

Located down the street from Café de Flore, the modest shop is nestled in a quiet stretch of Boulevard St-Germain. Welded metal umbrellas project above a doorway that reads "Madeleine Gély," the "maison" Madame Sojfer took over in 2002. Next door is her eponymous atelier, where seamstresses work meticulously, cutting and fitting together the umbrellas that can take weeks to create. Prices start at 60E, which buys a colorful nylon hood with contrasting trim, a bright rubber handle and a frame of flexible wind-resistant spokes. "Our specialty," declares one of the attentive shopkeepers, "is double lining and reinforced supports," pointing out how a full lining firmly stabilizes the umbrella. "No one else does the work we do."

That may seem a high price for the lowest-end umbrella, but they are completely handmade. If you're willing to spend more, your options dramatically increase: you can have a changeable resin handle carved in animal shapes; curved bamboo handles; colorful nylon fabric with laser-cut patterns; fanciful striped and dotted taffetas; and two-toned umbrellas with inner linings of cheery floral patterns. Many models feature ruffles or

delicate lace trim like Victorian confections. The larger masculine models are mostly black and feature double button closures, sturdy reinforced joints and Malacca handles.

Some of the models—like the "ultra-luxe" mink-trimmed umbrella—are not merely protection from the rain but an extravagant fashion accessory.

For these whimsical styles, the prices easily reach into the hundreds: 850E for the fur-trimmed model or 550E for a large black umbrella dripping with Swarovski crystals that look like sparkling drops of rain. If you don't see what you're looking for, bespoke models are available, "but most people find something here they like," Madame Sojfer confesses, as she gestures to the rainbow of style and color options. Other features include slender metal handles that unscrew for easy packing or decorative metal rings to hold the umbrella closed. For custom orders, be prepared to wait two months.

The omnipresent Madame Sojfer was born into a family tradition of craftsmanship. She learned the trade from her mother, who inherited the passion of umbrella-making from her Hungarian father, a specialist in the sister art of handle-carving. Madame Sojfer started to work in the family business as a teenager. Eventually, she was taken under the wing of Madeleine Gély, owner of the oldest umbrella-making maison in Paris, founded in 1834. On display in the shop, a small, not-for-sale collection of the maison's own antique walking sticks is testimony to the family's legacy of exquisite craftsmanship. For sale are other elegant, modern canes, with rose-shaped handles carved from ivory, or glazed porcelain handles depicting a portrait, or a handle of a brass double-headed Janus.

•Alexandra Sojfer: 218 Blvd St-Germain, 7th. Tel: 1-42-22-17-02. Site: www.alexandrasojfer.fr.



▲ PARIS VISITS ▼

Le Rouvray Quilts

By Jennefer Penfold

On a quiet street in the 5th arrondissement is a colorful outpost of Americana. The Le Rouvray quilt shop is owned by American Diane de Obaldia, who first came to Paris in the sixties to work as a model. After falling in love with a Frenchman and moving to Normandy, she opened the original Le Rouvray in her new home. She sold French antiques and antique American quilts. But, before too long, Paris had become her best market, so she decided to move the shop there. American-style quilting had arrived in Paris.

The original Paris shop sold early-American antiques and antique quilts. A few antiques and many antique quilts remain, but Le Rouvray has evolved into a quilt-making shop, complete with fabric, supplies, kits and books, and an area for quilt-making classes. The large windows of the shop showcase an assortment of antique quilts, multi-hued fabrics, covered boxes and class samples. Step inside and you are greeted by a visual feast of color and texture.

De Obaldia's motto for Le Rouvray is: "Even if you don't speak French, we speak patchwork fluently!" In France, the American style of quilting is called "patchwork" because quilt sounds too much like kilt; French styles of quilting include "picque" and "boutis." American quilters should feel right at home here; Le Rouvray stocks many of the same fabrics that can be found in U.S. quilt shops. But the real attraction for American quilters is Le Rouvray's extensive stock of French fabrics, such as Toile de Jouy and fabrics from Provence.

In 2004, de Obaldia introduced a Le Rouvray line of textile designs called "Promenade." She explained that these are Franco-American fabrics: designed by an American but based on French designs. A second series of Le Rouvray textile designs, "Promenade II," came out in 2005. Be prepared to pay more than you are used to: quilting fabrics are expen-

sive in Paris, averaging \$22-\$31 per meter, compared to \$8-\$10 per yard for the same fabric in the U.S. Le Rouvray packages an assortment of kits, "fat quarter" and other cuts for those who just want a sample.

In 1994, the quilt book "Le Rouvray" (That Patchwork Place, publishers of The International Quilt Shop Series) was published, co-authored by de Obaldia, Marie-Christine Flocard and Cosabeth Parriaud. It is still available in French, but is hard to find new in English (although used copies can be found on Amazon). The book includes quilt patterns and other projects contributed by the entire staff of Le Rouvray (including a pattern of the shop's farm house logo, which can be downloaded at the Le Rouvray website).

Le Rouvray was the first quilt shop in France to offer quilt-making classes. Today the shop offers an extensive program of classes (listed on their website). While some of the classes meet for five or six consecutive weeks, many of them meet just once, which makes it possible for visitors to attend. You can register by e-mail or in person on your arrival in Paris.

While in Paris last fall, I was delighted to take an "appliqué" class taught by Le Rouvray's Cosabeth Parriaud. She taught the class in French and then translated for me (which she does for all English speakers who are taking classes). When she asked me to talk to the class about quilting in the U.S., I explained that quality fashion fabric shops are disappearing but quilt shops are proliferating, whereas in Paris it is the opposite. One of the French ladies noted that "yes, but you have Wal Mart!"

•Le Rouvray: 3 Rue de la Bûcherie, 5th. Tel: 1-43-25-00-45. Open: Tue-Sat 10am-6:30pm. E-mail: lerouvray@easycconnect.fr. Site: www.lerouvray.com.

