Musée Bourdelle

By Paul B. Franklin

On a serene block in Montparnasse is nestled one of Paris' most underappreciated tourist destinations, the Musée Bourdelle. Bourdelle? Bourdelle who, you ask? In the first decades of the last century, after Rodin, Emile-Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929) was France's most celebrated sculptor. The Montauban native arrived in the capital in 1884 and took up residence on Impasse du Maine, a secluded cul-de-sac in the city's then southern reaches. He lived and worked there until nearly the end of his life. Smitten with the Musée Rodin after it opened in 1919, Bourdelle imagined enshrining his artistic output in a museum of his own. While he died before realizing this dream, his widow continued the crusade. Through her tireless efforts, the city acquired the sculptor's humble abode and studio. Inaugurated in 1949, the Musée Bourdelle remains a charming enclave of yore.

From the street, a red brick building, part of an extension realized in 1961 in honor of Bourdelle's centenary, greets visitors. Beyond the vestibule lies the front garden, where several imposing bronzes hold court. Under the portico, one encounters the nude "Adam" (1889), an early work indebted to Michelangelo's muscled "Slaves" and brawny figures on the Sistine ceiling. Like the Renaissance master, Bourdelle resuscitated the ancient tradition of monumental sculpture, evidence of which looms nearby in the form of a giant horse. The elegant, Trojan-like stallion is a study for the colossal monument to General Alvéar (1913-23), Argentina's liberator, that is now in Buenos Aires. Four columnar allegorical figures, part of the same cenotaph, stand at attention along the northern periphery of the garden. Beneath the portico behind them crouches the buck-naked "Heracles the Archer." First fashioned in 1909 and widely praised for its virile dynamism, the piece is perhaps Bourdelle's most famous work. The patinae of several other diminutive bronzes, including a bust of his bearded friend and mentor Rodin, glint among the ivy.

Off the garden, the spacious Great Hall houses the largest objects in the collection, mainly plaster casts. "Dying Centaur" (1911-14) expires in the rotunda at the far end of the room, while "Virgin with Offering" (1922), "France" (1925) and the elements comprising the Alvéar monument dwarf interlopers as they soar toward the glazed ceiling. Modern in sensibility and style, basreliefs of the extensive sculptural program Bourdelle conceived for the façade of the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées (1910-14) line the walls.

The artist's studio is adjacent to the Great Hall and abuts the front garden. With its scuffed parquetry, peeling walls and double-story dormers, little has changed here since Bourdelle's time. Sculptures in wood, marble and bronze are displayed on makeshift plinths throughout, enlivening the already rich atmosphere. A second atelier, once the domain of painter Eugène Carrière, connects to the studio. Accompanying Carrière's canvases are more Bourdelle works, among them a penetrating marble portrait of writer Anatole France (1919). Behind both workshops stretches a second garden in which other versions of Bourdelle's bronzes rise among the greenery. The visit ends in the new wing, added in 1992. Its vast galleries are home to the multiple components of Bourdelle's first and last great monuments, "Montauban War Memorial" (1895-1902) and "Monument to Adam Mickiewicz" (1908-28). The latter, a tribute to the Polish romantic poet, anchors the Place de l'Alma.

Informative placards in various languages, English included, guide visitors throughout. Rarely overrun with crowds, the Musée Bourdelle offers an inviting reprieve from urban din as well as a telling survey of the life and oeuvre of a true artistic luminary.

•Musée Bourdelle: 18 Rue Antoine-Bourdelle, 15th, Tel: 1-49-54-73-73. Open: Tues-Sun, 10am-6pm. Site: www.paris.fr/musees/bourdelle.

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Au Petit Bonheur La Chance

By Maisie Wilhelm

A trove of vintage treasures awaits you at Au Petit Bonheur La Chance. This whimsical store, whose name implies serendipity in shopping, delivers on its promise. The store bursts with charm: French embroidered linens spill out of its cupboards; stacks of ceramic plates teeter precariously on its shelves; and antique school supplies overflow from its open drawers. If you have "la chance" on your side, you may leave Paris with a bit of old France in your suitcase—perhaps an enameled water pitcher from the 1930s, a fine-toothed ivory comb from the 1940s or a child's watercolor set in its 1950s packaging will capture your fancy.

Au Petit Bonheur La Chance is full of surprises and literally brimming with reasonably priced old merchandise, mostly from the 30s to 60s, including pencil cases and ceramic canisters labeled "café," "poivre" and "sel." The "bonheur" one feels just walking in the door is half the reward of a visit. To pick through the seemingly endless nooks and crannies is like walking through a museum of France's commercial past. The antique-lover or nostalgic Francophile could spend hours here—and probably not see everything for sale.

The woman in charge of creating this peculiar world that bewitches window-shoppers and curious passersby is Maria Pia Varnier, a native Parisian. After working as a fashion stylist for fifteen years, she opened the store six years ago. "It's more inspiring to repackage these items than to make something from nothing." Her stylist's eye is evident in both her intriguing selection of wares and in her unconventional way of displaying them—which makes use of every inch of the shop. She rearranges things every day—sometimes even after a customer has left the store. "The idea of the store is to bring together everything from the collective memory of the French people—simple household objects from daily life."

Originally Varnier specialized in kitchenware like the popular Limoges bowls she still offers when she can find them. Now her stock includes a cache of school supplies like World War II-era fountain pens, stacks of onionskin postcard bags from the 60s, packets of recycled scarlet "Par Avion" stickers and antique pharmacy vial labels, which scrapbook lovers will love. Varnier does her bookkeeping in the same kind of vintage notebooks of yellow graph paper she sells. She even wraps purchases in vintage Christmas paper. "It gives me such pleasure just to use these old things."

Varnier happily converses with customers in French or English, and readily quotes prices for the many untagged items. It is impossible to reach everything in the packed store, so she'll climb onto her desk to pull something out of an antique Ricard pitcher, or sift through baskets to unearth stacks of darling "tartelette" tins or taffeta ribbons on their original spools. Varnier hopes to expand but doesn't want to leave this neighborhood of antique stores. "I'll be around forever," she reassures a visiting American couple, who come every time they are in Paris. "As long as there is merchandise, I can sell it."

Most of Varnier's customers come to hunt for something that will simply brighten their day, but many come to replace sentimental objects that they have lost or broken, things that recall their childhoods. "Everyone is looking for something," Varnier says. When she's not in the store, she is scouring the flea markets of Paris and environs, mining "brocantes" and combing estate sales for the treasures that will give you a piece of Paris to take home.

•Au Petit Bonheur La Chance: 13 Rue de St-Paul, 4th. Tel: 1-42-74-36-38. Email: maria-pia.varnier@wanadoo.fr.