

TRIP REPORT: PARIS & THE MUSÉE DE LA CHASSE

I've just returned from a 2 week trip to France, the bulk of which was a cruise on the Rhône and Saône from Avignon to Chalons-sur-Saône. The cruise itself and the impressions I had of the city of Paris (my fourth time there) will be dealt with elsewhere; this essay deals with the Musée de La Chasse et de La Nature, a museum devoted to hunting in the European style. Last time over we'd "discovered" this little-known place thanks to a guidebook with somewhat off-the-beaten-track listings, and I wanted to see it again.

If you're an American, the expression, "...a museum devoted to hunting" probably evokes a mental image of what you might see at a really large Cabela's or Bass Pro outlet (the ones in Hamburg and Harrisburg Pennsylvania will do nicely as examples).

There's always a mammoth display of taxidermy, along with shadow boxes containing old rifles, shotguns, and hunting knives. In such venues classic *Couture de la Chasse* comes in 72 varieties of camouflage or in blaze orange. The walls are adorned with lithographs of The Monarch Of The Forest, as He is being worshipped by a harem of comely, love-struck does. Old

Federal Duck Stamps are tastefully framed as examples of Hunting Art; there are many paintings of Faithful Labrador Retrievers in all three colors. As a nod to the snobbish bird shooters there may be one of a Gordon Setter. Archery gear is displayed in abundance, though none of that is old. There may be a glass-walled fish tank the size of an Olympic swimming pool, in which bored Schnauzer-size largemouth bass lazily and endlessly circle, looking for a way to get those clowns outside the glass to stop staring. Even a fish needs some privacy now and then.

Sometimes there will be a special exhibit, especially if the place is really big and has contracts with big-name stars of the hunting world; this will usually take the form of a "Wall of Fame" of exceptionally large deer antlers, with scheduled appearances by Famous Hunters like Dick Idol or Jim Shockey. (These gentlemen have status akin to the Pope in certain segments of the hunting culture.)



I once attended an event in which a true Holy Relic was exhibited: SAINT JACK O'CONNOR'S PERSONAL .270 was on display. Yes, it was THE .270, the Winchester that Saint Jack himself had used in the 1920's. Not a replica, the Genuine Article: I asked. It was displayed in front of a tractor-trailer set up (indoors!) to reproduce Saint Jack's office from his days at *Outdoor Life*. THE .270 was in a case in front, guarded by Saint Jack's glowering grandson, who periodically wiped drool off the glass.

The drool emanated from worshippers who came to The Shrine of Saint Jack to see THE .270, a weapon with magical powers. Simply by standing close to it, a deer hunter's future luck will improve. The worshipful company consisted of a gaggle of awe-struck middle-aged men all of whom bore a striking resemblance to Larry The Cable Guy. Eventually, compelled by the press of other pilgrims, they would wrench themselves away from the case, wiping away tears, and then proceed to another display to pay homage to an original, unmodified Remington Model 8 rifle, or to gasp in wonderment at a gargantuan stuffed 20-point whitetail buck. Like medieval penitents leaving a Cathedral these men left the event with a sense of their own insignificant status in the hierarchy of hunters, humbled by the grand spectacle; but better men, resolved to carry on The Tradition, inspired by the Great Men they had met and the Great Deeds those Men had achieved.

Things don't look *anything* like this at a hunting museum in Europe, not at all. European hunting traditions are so radically different from those in North America that the Musée de la Chasse is a real eye-opener.

As a percentage of the population, I'd bet there are even fewer hunters in France than here, but the very existence of such a museum—an actual *museum*, not a marketing display—is a measure of the difference between the Old World and the New in these matters. In Europe hunting is and always has been mostly a pursuit confined to the few who can afford it, not the knuckle-dragging *hoi polloi*. As such it seems to command a certain level of societal respect, with an entirely different status, and with entirely different rules and rituals.

The MDLC is housed in an old mansion, one of the many beautiful 18th and 19th Century edifices that (despite the graffiti) profusely grace the boulevards and avenues of the City Of Light. The casual walker sees only the external facades of these grand former homes, but behind those scarified exterior walls are substantial remnants of the glories of the past. Elegant, high-ceiling rooms with magnificent windows open onto formal gardens; marble staircases lead to upper floors, and glorious light floods the spacious entryways and reception rooms. When you contemplate how many servants would be required and how rich the owners must have been, it's orders of magnitude beyond anything even someone who's "rich" by modern standards could afford. It's Saudi-oil-sheik rich, Russian-gangster-rich, Donald-Trump-isn't-in-the-same-league rich. Though nowhere near so grand as Versailles¹, every one of these architectural gems is by any reasonable modern standard a palace. The MDLC is a palace now devoted to the art—in every sense—of hunting and its relationship to Nature. The museum is on three levels, of which the entry level is the most sumptuous, each room of it devoted to a more or less specific theme.

¹ When you see Versailles you understand that the French Revolution was inevitable.



The Gun Room. The drawers hold many accessory items such as powder flasks, swords, and so forth. Not a bit like Cabela's.

swords were used, probably for stabbing boar, and/or perhaps as device for a *coup de grace*. If I encountered a sword-carrying hunter out in Giles County, I'd wonder what he was up to, myself.

The Gun Room leads off the exhibits. Its somewhat eclectic collection of hunting weapons includes a number of amazingly elaborate 15th and 16th Century wheel-lock arms. It's obvious that not even the *Seigneur* of the richest chateau in France would take one of them into the field: they're presentation pieces intended simply to display wealth through eye-popping levels of craftsmanship: works of art, not killing machines. I'd bet that some of these guns have never actually been fired. If one were fired it would require the services of some smelly peasant to clean it, because obviously that would be beneath the dignity of the *Seigneur* himself. What if the poor schlub *dropped* it? Or didn't get it dry enough, causing it to rust? Whipping him and violating his wife and daughters would have brought some emotional satisfaction, but would hardly restore the beauty of the gun. Better to have another one made.

European hunting involves not only guns, but spears, and *swords*. We tend to like big knives in the US, but apparently at one time honest to God



You see a lot of beautiful butts in France: some of them are on 16th Century wheel-lock hunting guns.



There are many less ornate examples of the gunmaker's skill on display, of course. Nor are all of them wheel-locks. Most use flint ignition, a few percussion, and some (especially in the Trophy Room, of which more below) use more modern technology.

Adjoining the Gun room is the Blue Room, in which several beautiful tapestries hang. One depicts the events leading up to the unfortunate demise of Actaeon, the hunting companion of Artemis, the Goddess of the Hunt. Among her many other salient features, Artemis was a) shockingly beautiful; and b) committed to her virginity, or perhaps just overly modest. Actaeon was so unfortunate as to unintentionally come upon the Goddess while she was bathing; in this situation, she was of course buck nekkid. The sight inflamed Actaeon's previously-controlled lust (heretofore he had only seen the Goddess clothed in her somewhat diaphanous hunting gear, but at least she wasn't nude). Crazy with desire, Actaeon attempted to... ahem... force himself upon someone whom he'd previously looked upon as a hunting-camp buddy, just one of the guys.

The outraged Goddess managed to preserve her virtue, and she taught Actaeon a lesson. She turned him into a stag. Hence the depiction of what might seem to be a deer in a 17th-Century suit in the tapestry. It isn't: it's Actaeon, shortly before his hounds—naturally confused by the sudden appearance of a deer where The Master should be—turned on him and ripped him to shreds. *Men*. They only want one thing.



The “Blue Room” has an interesting collection of paintings and a “guardian” who can be better seen if you click on the chair.



The Blue Room is guarded. Not by the usual docent or bored watchman, but by a very pretty red fox, who rests eternally in an armchair near the door to the next room. Monsieur Renard is curled up, keeping a watchful glass eye out for those who would profane the tapestries or sit on the furniture. Not that a stuffed fox could do much about it. He bears a small sign politely requesting the visitor to “*Ne me touchez pas, s’il vous plait.*”

From the Blue Room you pass into my favorite part of the museum: the Dog Room. Dogs and hunting are inextricably intertwined. Dogs domesticated themselves about 100,000 years ago. Some wolves recognized the superior killing power of the Hairless Ape: that strain led to our domestic dogs. A bargain was struck: they would use their superior noses to find the game, we would kill it with our weapons, and in return they'd get the guts. Making allowances for the replacement of mastodon guts with canned beef by-products, much the same relationship is maintained today, and of course dogs are still vital to certain kinds of hunting.



The Dog Room. No dogs allowed unless they're painted on canvas.





This image of maternal tenderness by Jean-Baptiste Oudry, dated 1752, is entitled “*La Lice et ses petits*,” or, with typical Gallic frankness about such matters, “The Bitch and her Pups.”

feelings and sensibilities. Any dog owner could have told you that much, but “The Bitch and Her Pups” expresses this view beautifully.

The Dog Room contains many paintings of canine companions, sculptures, and other doggy things. My favorite is a tender portrait of maternal love, which can be seen over the fireplace in the image above. The notes for this painting point out that by the 18th Century the view of animals was changing to where they came to be regarded as not just “things,” but actual creatures with



Two greyhounds coursing a rabbit. A caption to this painting says “...this is not done any more,” but obviously whoever wrote that has never been on an American rabbit hunt with beagles...Note the guy in the center background who’s restraining a third dog, and the two at right who may be carrying shotguns.



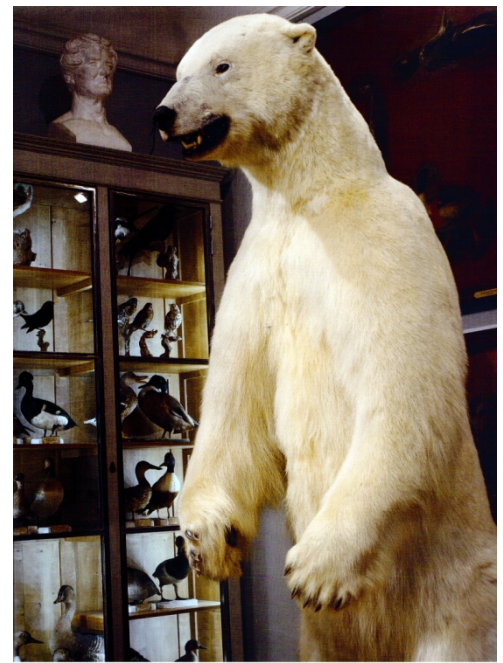
Not all the art was old. Or good. This one dates from 1930, and is so out of place in the collection as to make me want to weep. It's so ugly it really should be at the Pompidou Center.

Also in the Dog Room is one of the few examples in the Museum of modern art. A painting dated about 1930 shows two hunters and what is alleged by the artist to be a dog. Exactly what kind of a dog isn't specified. To me it looks like a Dalmatian, not normally considered a hunting breed here, but what do I know about hunting dogs in Europe?

Beyond the Dog Room is the somewhat smaller Bird Room, which includes a glass case with any number of game birds mounted and on display, all with their scientific names as well as the common names on yellowing note cards. Most of these are ducks and pheasants, but a few are birds we don't normally consider "game" in this hemisphere: my late grandmother told me once that her father in Sicily hunted larks, and by golly, there were larks in the case.

One incongruity in the Bird Room is the presence of a most-unbirdly creature, a huge Polar Bear. God

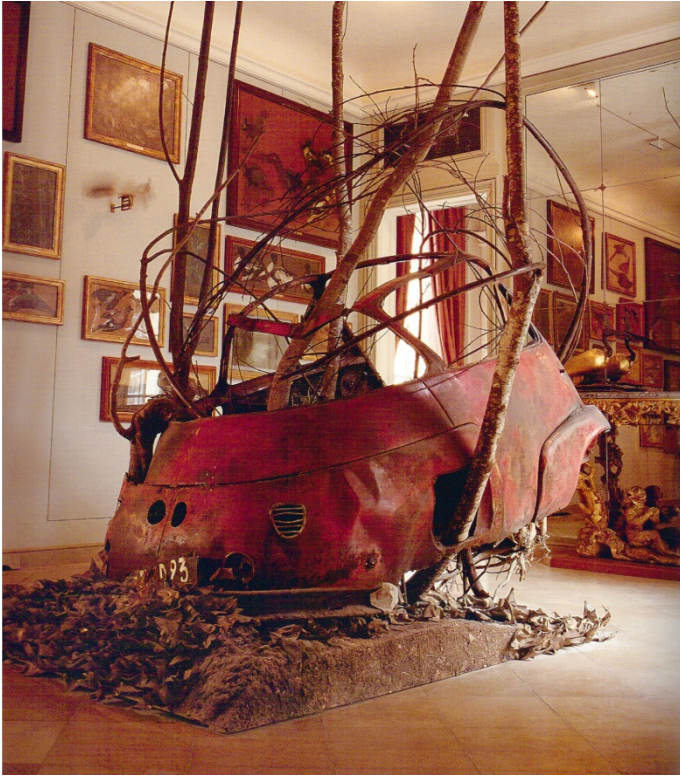
knows why he's here. You would think he'd have been more appropriately placed in the Trophy Room (see below) but perhaps the Bird Room was the only space big enough for him. Or maybe he was just so large they couldn't get him up the elegant marble staircase in one piece, so he stayed on the ground floor, eternally surrounded by stuffed birds. I don't know, and I doubt the bear cares.



For reasons that must make sense to somebody, the Polar Bear is housed in the Bird Room.



The Bird Room also contains another egregious example of what passes for Art in this decadent era. It is the rusted hulk of a three-wheeled automobile, that clearly had been abandoned in the woods many years ago. Tree trunks had grown through it, all the interior was gone, and the front door was missing. (I remember seeing cars like this in Europe 46 years ago and want to say they were made by Isotta. This one might date from that time.) I've seen wrecked cars in the woods, and thought they'd make pretty good hunting blinds.



Whoever had been lucky enough to own this one had also been smart enough to leave it to Nature's tender care when it stopped running. Nature treated it pretty roughly. Not, however, so roughly that some *avant garde* artist didn't recognize its possibilities. It was lifted bodily, trees and all, from the forest floor, and "installed" in the museum. To complete its transition from junkyard relic to Art, the artist created a couple of artificial birds' nests using rope, and placed them in the branches of the trees. Hence its presence in the Bird Room, signifying the bond between Art, Nature, Technology, and Gullible Curators Who Will Pay Good Money For Scrap Metal. This particular item of Modern Art (see below) that makes me wonder what on earth the curators were thinking. I can see a junk car being put on display at the Pompidou Center—the greatest collection

of modern art in the world—but this museum is dedicated to classical painting and sculpture, why is it here?



Albino Russian boars can't be very common...and this one *TALKS*. Fat Albert (pronounced "Fat Al-BEAR") is set up with a moveable jaw and makes grunting noises and squeals when someone walks past: a French version of the "Big Mouth Bass" novelty, but *far* classier, as you would expect from *Les Francais*.

The Bird Room has a case full of what look like musical instruments: eventually I puzzled out from the cards that they're bird calls. Nothing Like P.S. Olt makes, but serving the same purpose, to lure birds into range of the guns.

The second floor of the museum houses the Trophy Room, which is really what this place is all about, so far as I'm concerned. It's a massive display of dead animal parts, mostly the heads, and many of the guns used to obtain said parts. It too has a guardian.

I suppose everyone has seen one of those "Big Mouth Bass" novelty toys, a realistic plastic fish with a motion sensor and an internal automaton mechanism. You think it's a real fish until you walk past it, and then it starts to flex its tail and make smart-alec remarks about fishermen. These are available at Cabela's and Bass Pro and in some parts of North America they're regarded as really classy home décor. Larry the Cable Guy has a couple of them.

But the Bigmouth Bass isn't original. No, the original is Fat Albert, the mounted head of an albino Russian Boar, the Guardian of the Trophy Room. Fat Albert is sufficiently odd simply by virtue of being pure white, but the taxidermist who mounted him went Above And Beyond by fitting him with a recording and a motion sensor, long before the Bigmouth Bass people stole the concept.

As you enter the room, Fat Albert's jaw moves, and he starts to grunt and squeal and make what I assume are lewd comments in an incomprehensible accent. To be honest, I hadn't expected anything like this at the MDLC, and he gave me a bit of a start when he began to make wisecracks in Provençal or Gascon, or whatever dialect albino pigs use.



Not all the boar heads talk: this one's a soup tureen, and there were many more such. Seems to have been a popular motif for game dinner parties featuring soup or stews.

Fat Albert wasn't the only pig on display. Among the other odds and ends scattered throughout the place there were a number of soup tureens shaped like boars' heads. Some were silver and some porcelain. All were very cool. I would like to have a boar's-head tureen myself, or perhaps a cookie jar, but can't afford the ones they have on display. None in the Gift Shop, either. In fact there isn't much in the way of a Gift Shop, at all: another refreshing feature of the place. A few postcards and books and that's it, and you don't have to exit the museum through it.



Horns 'R Us...the Trophy Room



The Trophy Room contains, among other heads, one of a Lord Derby Eland, a subspecies that's the largest antelope the world has to offer. A couple of years ago I shot a big Livingstone Eland, but the head of that Lord Derby dwarfed my very respectable animal. It was simply colossal. It was casually hung on the wall with any number of other heads-and-horns specimens from all over the world. There was a Gaur, a critter seen these days only in zoos. In addition to the numerous head mounts there were full-body mounts of two *mongo* leopards. Leopards

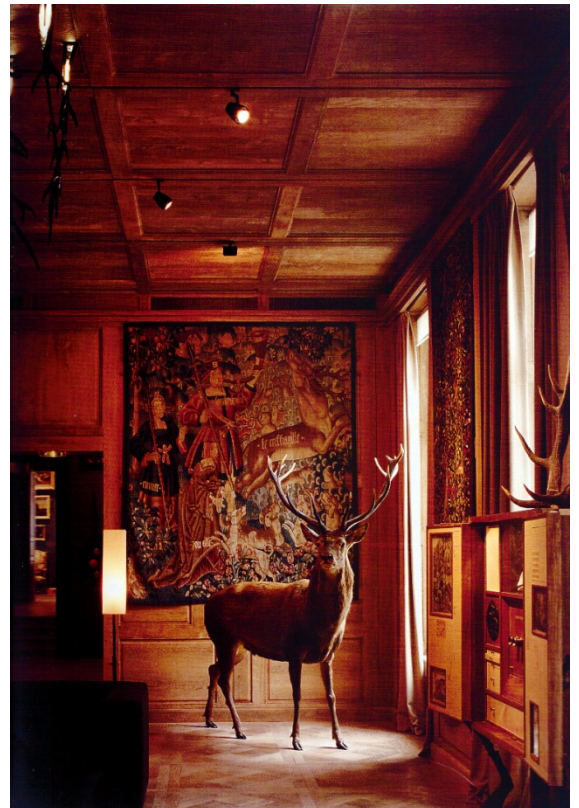
are regarded as the most dangerous of the big cats (even though they're much smaller than the other species) because they have the basic outlook on life portrayed by Glenn Close's character in *Fatal Attraction*: if someone argues with you rip him to shreds. These two leopards were HUGE, and taking even one, let alone two, that size, must have been a daunting and very dangerous thing to do.



More guns and the odd stuffed cat here and there in the Trophy Room. Most of the guns are poorly or incorrectly labeled, including a single-shot Martini described as a “*semi-automatique*.” If Chuck Schumer or Diane Feinstein knew that they’d add Martinis to the “assault weapon” list.

The Trophy Room walls are also lined with gun cases. Most of the guns in them are flintlocks, but there are more modern ones, including a Jeffrey bolt action and a Rigby double. There’s also a single shot Martini sporter that the caption card labels as a “*semi-automatique*,” which is clearly wrong, unless my understanding of French firearms nomenclature is at fault. The Martini does eject an empty shell when the action is opened, so perhaps that’s what they mean.

There’s much more. The Stag and Wolf Room has... a stag in it. A full body mount of a very impressive red stag. In the corner is what is alleged to be a wolf. But it certainly doesn’t look like a wolf to me. It looks a *lot* like a coyote. We have coyotes around here, and this beast is the sort of lean, rangy, and snouty-looking animal I associate with the ones I’ve seen. Not your garden-variety wolf. Maybe in Europe wolves run smaller than ours? That one, even making allowance for



What a hunter dreams of...a stag in the house.

“inflation” by the taxidermist, couldn’t have gone more than 40 pounds. It’s no bigger than my Border Collie.

One change that’s been made in the museum since I was last there (in 1995) is that it has become much more Politically Correct. On the top floor is the Monkey Room, where the attitudes of the past towards the Great Apes and other animals are mocked and pointed out as unworthy of respect, etc., etc. I suppose they



I don't know the French word for "coyote," but if this isn't one, I'll eat it.

had to include this sort of catering to the bunny-hugging segment of French society in order to keep their tax-exempt status (and for all I know, the licenses needed for all those guns). At least the museum staff put it more or less in the least-visited part of the building.

The Musée de La Chasse *et de la Nature* is the official name: it does (and always has) celebrated the connection between Man’s oldest pursuit and Art, and their relationship to the environment. The relationship of hunting, nature, Art, and Man reflect the fact that we have been hunters since we became humans and artists. In fact, we were hunters *before* we were humans and artists: The cave paintings at Lascaux, one of the oldest known works of human creativity, are hunting scenes. The Musée carries on the tradition admirably in a society that seems to have forgotten that those connections exist still.

<http://www.coolstuffinparis.com/Musée-de-la-chasse-et-de-la-nature.php>

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099669/>