

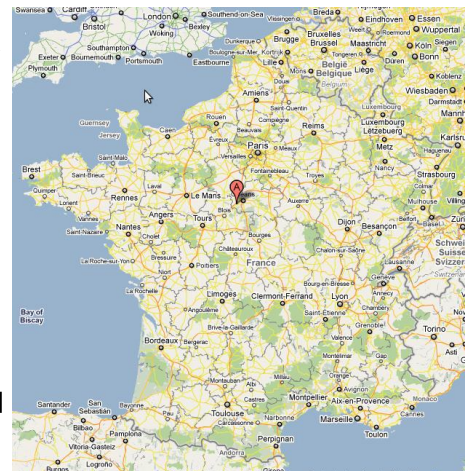
A Visit to Musee Van Oeveren - a Fencing Museum near Orleans in France.  
By Tim Atkinson



Courtesy of the recent royal wedding affording an extended Easter break, my wife and I decided to tour around the Châteaux of the Loire valley in France starting in Orleans (about 90 miles south south west of Paris).

Having spent far too many lunch times surfing the internet looking for fencing websites I had learned of the Musee Van Oeveren – a private collection of absolutely anything to do with Fencing, so I thought it would be rude not to visit.

The Museum is located in a small Château on the outskirts of a town called Meung Sur Loire about 10 miles from Orleans - open to the public in July and August and by appointment at other times. I sent an email about a week before we were due to be in the area on the following (Easter) Sunday afternoon and received a rapid response saying it was fine to visit at about 2pm. *(For those on Public transport, Meung-Sur-Loire does have a station, however it's about two miles from the Museum so you are looking at taking a taxi or bus.)*



Turning up at the appropriate time we drove into the grounds, followed the road round pausing to look briefly at the Scimitar (car) in a large bay window. It didn't occur to me until writing this that a scimitar is a kind of sabre.

Mr Van Oeveren came out to greet us clad in his coaching jacket and explained in perfect English that there was a Dutch family staying in the attached cottage (attached to a fencing room which they had the use of!) who would be visiting the museum at the same time.

First we got to see the fencing room – a beautiful conversion of the old stables, the pistes were marked out in dark wood inset into the floor which was a fully suspended wooden rather springy affair. Round the walls was a huge collection of weapons and masks covering a broad swathe of time and included a few training devices I'd never heard of such as practice weapons for “Bayonet Fencing”, I'd heard of Sword-Bayonets before but assumed they were ceremonial weapons and had never considered the possibility of actually fighting one on one with them.



Mr Van Oeveren told us a little of his background, having been involved in fencing for the majority of his life, he's lived in several countries including the UK and coached the British, French and Dutch teams, his son is still an active fencer on the international scene.

I've only been fencing for just over two years, but when queried about my background I said Foil with a French Grip – he handed me a Foil and just said - “Rolls Royce” and it was, fell into my hand, perfectly balanced and incredibly comfortable (shame it wouldn't fit under my coat on the way out!).

We then moved into the main house. I'm not much of a historian so what follows is just what I can remember....

Mr Van Oeveren conducted the tour personally explaining many facts and figures and some amusing anecdotes (and some less so from Europe's darker past) relating to the collection.



The museum is made up of 5 rooms, the entrance hall is a collection of memorabilia including fencing Smurfs and Disney figurines, an umbrella stand full of sword sticks and various books and pamphlets from events collected over many years – unfortunately due to the age and fragility of the artwork, photos were not allowed so you'll have to take my word (and shaky memory) on the contents.

After that as far as I could tell the rooms covered roughly a century a room, starting in the 1600's with early examples of training aids, suits of armour and everywhere artwork on the walls, some of it rather unique and valuable.



Some amazingly uncomfortable looking examples of the first masks could be found in the 1700's section and in the 1800's there were more examples of evolving kit as things moved in the direction of sport and away from lethal duelling.



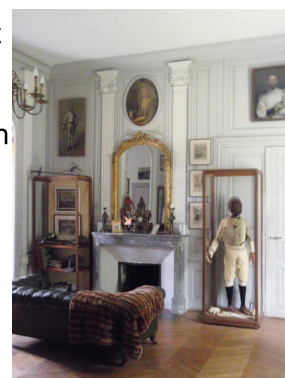
In the 1900's room we began to see some film posters featuring the likes of Errol Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks. There were also some examples of early electric fencing boxes, which looked a bit like something out of a Frankenstein film - all Bakelite, wood and big light bulbs – you'd almost expect lightening flashes when you score a hit.

I don't believe I've done the collection justice with my explanation – it is simply a collection of almost everything to do with Fencing.

At the end we were asked for 6 Euro's (about £5.50 at the time) each for the adults.

Would I go back – definitely, and this time I'd take my kit and maybe have a lesson from Mr Van Oeveren, it would be an experience just to fence in that amazing room.

Meung Sur Loire is a nice fairly typical French town with a Sunday Market in the town centre and there are literally hundreds of Châteaux in the Loire valley, one in particular we visited was called Cheverny (near the town of the same name). The weapons room had walls festooned with dozens of swords of many kinds and as it transpired the house is famous as the inspiration for "Marlinspike Hall" the home of comic adventurer's Tintin and Captain Haddock. At Château Chambord there were regular medieval equestrian displays including the several staged sword fights seeing off the villainous English.



The website for the museum is <http://www.musee-escrime.fr> which includes specific location and contact details. If you are in the area I would definitely recommend a visit.

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