

Transmitters

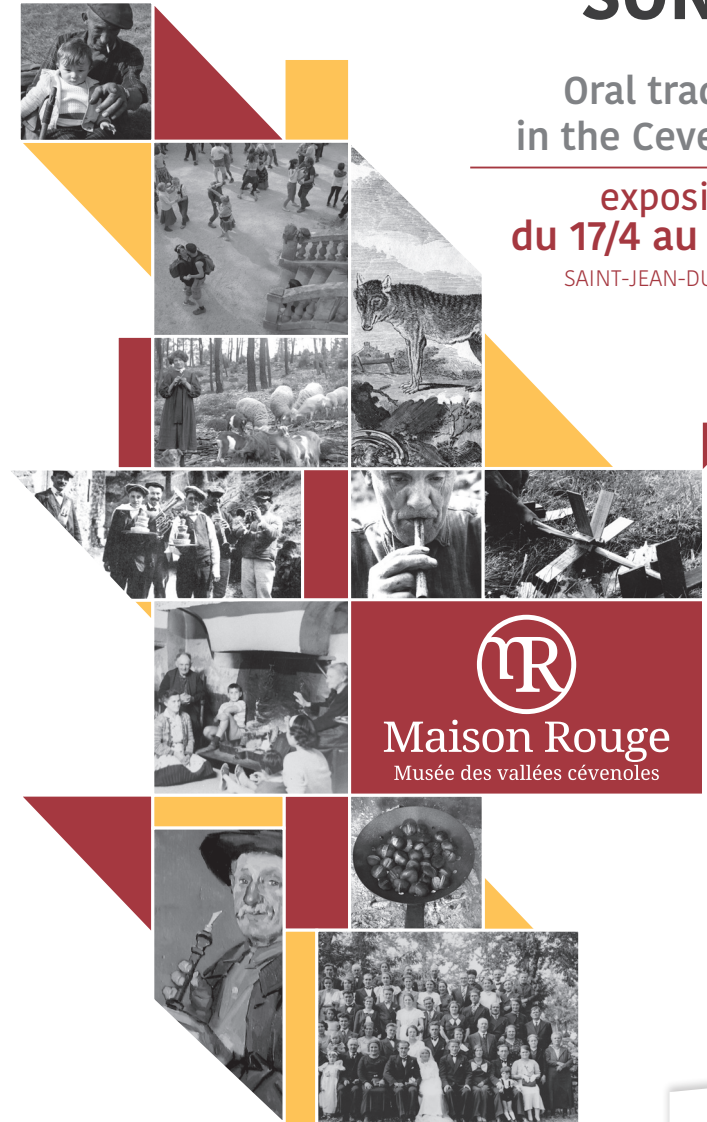
In the Cévennes, as in many regions of France and throughout the world, the transmitters of oral literature – storytellers, singers, narrators – were neither transmission experts nor exclusive owners of any repertoire. The status of storyteller or singer was not a social distinction. At most, such people were recognised for the extent of their repertoire, their knowledge and the quality of their performances. These transmitters were first and foremost ordinary people, often from rural communities, who, at one time or another, carried out an act of transmission. Folklorists of the 19th century often did not even give the names of their sources, and only very few wrote anything at all about the accumulation of their knowledge or their personality. This inattention was precisely due to the vast number of them. However, those who still hold such knowledge are now rare, and it has required special sensitivity, experience and attention for this or that individual to be able to gather, memorise and remember, distinguishing them from others. There is now a decisive relationship between the life of a witness, their personality and their testimony. Marcel Volpilière, his wife Marinette and Roger Valmalle are among the 24 people who can be heard on the visit and who appear on the wall of transmitters that ends this exhibition dedicated to oral tradition.

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REMINISCENCES STORIES SONGS

Oral tradition
 in the Cévennes

exposition **2021**
 du 17/4 au 7/11
 SAINT-JEAN-DU-GARD



REMINISCENCES, STORIES & SONGS – ORAL TRADITION IN THE CÉVENNES

Temporary exhibition from 17 April to 7 November 2021

This exhibition is recognised by the Ministry of Culture as being of national interest.

You will find below introductory texts and titles of accounts presented in the exhibition, grouped by genre, in **Occitán** and/or in English.

Introduction

Until the 19th century, there were few ways in which knowledge could be transmitted and memorised: there was no television, and books were few in rural areas. Knowledge was therefore passed on both by example (handiwork and know-how) and orally.

Beyond stories spontaneously exchanged in the course of daily life, there exists a more elaborate orality known as ‘oral tradition’. This includes non-ordinary stories, validated by a prior memory (‘narrative works’), and ‘literary works’, taken down in a strict and irrevocable way in a fixed form (proverbs and songs, for example). Tales and legends belong to an intermediate status, between spontaneous story and fixed form. Personal invention has no place here: in oral tradition, narrators take up a pre-existing story, which they can adapt if they wish.

The oral tradition evoked in this exhibition is essentially secular. Although it is transmitted outside of any institution, particularly religious, it remains marked by certain elements of religious history and religiosity: the very strong influence of the Catholic clergy in Lozère until the 20th century, the place of the Camisards in Protestant historical memory, etc.

Knowledge transmission could occur in any circumstances: a wedding or baptism meal, conscription, charivari made to people remarrying, etc. But it was the daily or weekly social gatherings in the evenings (*veillées*) that lent themselves best to the transmission of oral literature, as well as of news, comments and reflections on anything and everything.

Melting pot of languages

The vernacular language of the Cévennes, Occitán, remained the unique language of everyday life, the family and the social sphere until the 20th century. However, there is a Protestant Cévenol specificity linked to the use of French since the introduction of the Reformation in the 16th century. Protestants in the Cévennes were bilingual, each language being devoted to a specific use: Occitán for everyday life, French for religious practice. From the late 19th century, Occitán slowly faded out, faced with the single language of the Republic and, specifically, with the forced acculturation carried out by the educational system, which waged a merciless war against Occitán, and more generally in France, against ‘patois’. This rejection of vernacular languages and their consequent erosion have, paradoxically, increased their importance in the eyes of certain scholars, resulting in the creation of dictionaries and lexicons.

Collectors

‘Collectors’ are those who, in the course of history, have intentionally born witness to the oral tradition by collecting and publishing literary works that have become well known in their field: Boissier de Sauvages (1710–95) and his *Dictionnaire Languedocien-Français* of 1756; d’Hombre and Charvet and their *Dictionnaire Languedocien-Français* of 1884, initiated by the Marquis de La Fare-Alais (1791–1846); the collection of tales and songs by Montel and Lambert, published regularly between 1872 and 1912 in the *Revue des langues romanes*, and their prolific collaboration with Pastor Fesquet; the work on the subject of ‘patois’ and its development by *escrivaires* in the second half of the 19th century. Among these ‘collectors’ in the 20th century are members of the advisory board for this exhibition: Jean-Noël Pelen, Claudette Castell and Nicole Colomb, Pierre Laurence. The collections include all sorts of testimonies about daily life in the past.

The disappearance of a world and revivalism

Reminiscences, Stories & Songs is also the occasion to evoke the disappearance, from the 19th century, of a traditional world to which some pay a final tribute with words. From the 1960s onwards, the Cévennes has seen the arrival of ‘new storytellers’, who have tried to preserve and honour a heritage that had disappeared in a new form, that of public entertainment.

Infancy and childhood

In the Cévennes, as elsewhere, oral literature that is part of life – facilitating learning, supporting activities and creating poetry – is present from early childhood.

There are not many lullabies or songs to stimulate the mind and body, but those that exist are very well established. As children grow older, they move from repetitive chants to more complex, narrative or enumerative structures. They enjoy a certain freedom to explore the world. Growing up in the environment of farmhouses and hamlets, discovering the social world, creating friends in the neighbourhood and at school, learning local oral traditions: all these things happen via the acquisition and use of a specific folklore, in which the powerful incantatory dimension recalls the intercessory value of the Word, the only way to interact with the world.

Lo rat al morre traucat / The rat with the hole in its snout

Arri arri borrisquet / Giddy up little donkey

Cabra banèla ent es lo lop / Horned goat

[harvest spider or praying mantis], where is the wolf

Cocut ent as jagut / Cuckoo bird, where did you sleep

Joan caga blanc / Jean poos white

Lo rainal pairin / The godfather fox

Sòm-sòm / Sleep, sleep

Tira la réssa Jan de Vidau / Pull the saw, Jean Vidal

Tales and anecdotes

‘Tales’ are traditional stories that come from the imagination. The oldest texts are marvellous tales, sometimes dating from Antiquity. Other tales may have circulated as early as the Middle Ages and travelled to distant lands. Such is the case with animal tales and certain lewd stories, among others. Their establishment in time and space testifies to the relevance they had for the societies that transmitted them.

In the Cévennes, tales were not collected until towards the end of the 20th century. A corpus of 450 versions was enriched with publications of almanacs from around the 1870s onwards.

The tales are organised into major genres: marvellous tales, tales of the duped Devil, animal tales, cumulative tales, facetious tales, and so on, each covering multiple themes.

La paura fornigueta / The poor little ant

The sick goat

The bad winemaker

The official recognised by the shepherd

Lo Pieronet fotralet / Crazy little Pierre

N'ai un fraire Escaramochet / I have a brother Escaramouchet

Peton-petet / Thumb

The song in oral tradition

‘We sang everywhere and all the time’, ‘everyone sang’: before the radio and the record player, singing played a central role in the daily life of the Cévennes.

In old rural communities, songs were a commodity that was freely available, from which everyone could take their pick, depending on their mood and the moment. No one could say that such and such a song was theirs, for the song belonged to everyone.

Singing was unaccompanied by any instruments. Songs were usually sung as solos, but in any case, always in unison. No traditional polyphony is attested in Occitán. Likewise, there was no notion of wrong notes, nor of voices considered off-key. Any singing was valid.

Adissiatz filhetas / Goodbye girls

Hello Nanon, hello charming blonde

Ent as passat ta matinada corblu corblu Marion /

Where did you spend your morning corbleu corbleu Marion

La lausetà e lo pinçon / The lark and the finch

Nautres beurem de vin / We will drink wine

Lo perroquet / The parrot

Who wants to hear the courage of a good young warrior

Historical legend

The Cévenol of the past had a view of history that neither sustained nor contradicted any methodology or written source. It would be more appropriate to talk of a *representation of time* than history as such, and the times in question varied in their distance from the present day. These stories told of the founding of places and spaces and established the validity of certain forms of the landscape, of individuals, families, hamlets and villages.

Legend had an exemplary function: its narrative was validated by its very existence. How closely it was related to actual facts might or might not be verifiable, but this was not an absolute condition for its validity. People would often point out that they had ‘heard it said’, or that their ‘elders used to say’, which was enough to justify them.

Celestin followed by the wolves

Soft wheat from Grizac

The Château de Saint-Julien-d’Arpaon

and the Château de Montvaillant

Monsieur de Montferrier

The cunning of the Camisards at the Battle of Fontmort

Proverbs and sayings

Proverbs and sayings have remained immensely popular in traditional rural cultures all over Europe and throughout human history. These short and formulaic expressions conveyed all kinds of knowledge, relating both to practical, tangible things and to truths about society, the individual, morality and behaviour. In the absence of school, books and outside expertise, proverbs and sayings constituted an infinite reservoir of knowledge to which people could refer at any moment. They were acknowledged points of reference that had been established by experience and each individual knew several hundred of them. In this way, these sayings became permanently rooted, by common consent, in a body of certainties that had been established by their form and years of service.

Pichòt fais ben liat es mièlhs portat

A small load is better carried when it's well tied

A bona bugadièra manca jamai pèira

A good washerwoman never lacks a stone

Se forelha farà un blasàs

If he starts to make his cocoon,
he will make an aborted cocoon

Son coma martel e aireta

They are like hammer and anvil

Aicí lo picat de la dalha

Here, the hammering of the scythe

L'ola mascara lo peiròu

The pot blackens the charcoal

Tres topins davant lo fuòc anoncian una granda fèsta

- tres femnas dins un ostau una granda tempèsta

Three earthen pots in front of the fire are a sign of a big celebration –
three women in a house, a big storm

Chasca topin tròba sa cabucèla - chasca monsur sa domaisèla

Each earthen pot has its lid –
each gentleman his young lady

Per traversar nòstres mechants camins vau mièlhs

d'esclòps que d'escarpins

For surviving our bad roads,
clogs are better than heels

Es curat com'un brusc

He (she) is as empty as the inside
of a beehive in a chestnut trunk

The supernatural

On the other side of things is a world of fantastic beings, the inhabitants of forests, paths, rivers, the areas surrounding farmhouses, and even the houses themselves. These beings are often nocturnal, abundant and animated with a life similar to that of humans. Their diversity is explained by the multiple places with which they are linked. Some are domestic elves, others are more individualised – *Gripet*, *Romèca*, *Drac*. Some haunt paths, while fairies live in caves, rocks and near rivers. In wintertime, as night fell around the farmhouses and hamlets, it created a vast unknown, which the locals imagined to be inhabited. In this world, deserted by man, the idea that you might meet the dead was considered almost normal. This was no longer the world of the living, and anyone wandering about at night might chance upon *una trèva* – a ghost.

The dead mother who combed her little girls' hair at night
The fairy's revenge

L'escauton de lana / The ball of wool

The *Vitali*: evening gatherings in Nîmes

The *Vitali* healer and priest: the snake's bite

Evening gatherings

Social gatherings in the evenings (*veillées*) depended on the season but began in the autumn. Harvesting and drying chestnuts gave young people the chance to enjoy evenings together in the *clèdes* – the buildings where the chestnuts were dried. But the most popular evenings were those at the end of the pig-killing day (December up to Carnival). As people would say: *per calmantran las velhadas son sota lo bench* ('At Carnival, evenings finish up under the bench'). After that, the spring work resumed. These gatherings were evening events: once the daily tasks had been completed and night had fallen, people would head off, on foot, to *veiller*, sometimes at places quite a long way off. There, they would knit, peel chestnuts to feed the pigs, make baskets, play, sing, tell stories, dance, play jokes and chat. There was no end to the diversity of atmospheres and occupations during these gatherings, which would sometimes last until dawn.