

Wall Carvings in an Underground Quarries in Central France

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Abstract

Central France, in the Loire valley *sensu lato*, is rich in man-dug underground cavities, such as troglodyte habitations or quarries which may have been subsequently turned into wine cellars, mushroom growing grounds, special places for artefact petrification, restaurants, or even sites for tourism (visit of the quarry, old digging techniques, etc.).

In addition, a few quarries have been subject to wall carving, such as the "Cave aux Sculptures" in Denezesous-Doie, between Saumur and Cholet, with its several hundred carved figures, including men and women in old-fashioned dress.

In the region of Touraine, not far from the "chateau de Chenonceaux" (one of the master pieces of the Loire valley area), close to the Cher River, the quarry at Bourre near Montrichard has more than 300 km of galleries. A small part of it is used for growing several species of mushrooms.

Besides, one very interesting gallery has been carved (and was still being carved in 2000) as a traditional street in a typical local village. Houses have been carved out the wall. People, animals, and trees are shown as well, all portrayed in a lively manner. Details are featured very accurately, as in the models, which are houses found in different villages of the region.

The two carvers are local people who specialize in stone work, and who wanted to leave a record of their life, so they are making a "chef d'œuvre" for the pleasure of future generations. They plan to spend around two years carving the gallery, without being paid for their art work. Indeed, this part of the quarry will become a sort of museum, from which they may make some profits.

Stone carving is technically an easy task in underground Touraine, where the "tuffeau" chalk is soft and available, although once exposed to the outside weather, it develops a crust and resists weathering. Tuffeau provides a noble support for recording traces of the generations.

No doubt other underground quarries in Central France will follow this initiative; speleologists from other countries will also be interested in discovering these unusual uses of the underground realm.