



FEUILLES DE POILUS

Decorated leaves from the First World War





I

The central theme of this museum file is a special form of trench art: decorated leaves, oak leaves, particularly, (sweet) chestnut leaves, occasionally. Since mainly — not to say almost exclusively — French examples of this particular discipline are known, it was decided to refer to them as *‘Feuilles de Poilus’*, for the nickname given to French soldiers in the First World War.

Due to their ephemeral and delicate nature, these objects are extremely rare. In Flanders Fields Museum, in fact, has only four decorated leaves in its collections. Fortunately, for the exhibition *Feuilles de Poilus* (In Flanders Fields Museum, 21 September - 31 December 2022) and this eponymous museum file, we were able to call on Luc Volatier’s collection. At the time of writing, his collection counts no less than 700 *‘Feuilles de Poilus’*, an extraordinary corpus. All of the leaves mentioned in this publication — apart from the four from the museum’s own collection — hail from this unique collection.

We opted to showcase a broad selection, with a particular focus on the artefacts whose makers are known. In doing so, we get to know more about the objects’ recipients and origin stories, as well as the connotations of these leaves for their authors and recipients — as well as their descendants. A further selection was made according to typology: framed leaves, leaves mounted on cardboard, leaves with representations of historical figures and leaves with women’s names, the latter being just about the most common motif. Finally, there is a large ‘miscellaneous’ category which includes references to locations, pictures of weaponry or religiously inspired symbols.

In his work *Hommage aux Poilus: Dans l’intimité des feuilles de chêne*, which Luc Volatier published in collaboration with the Historial de la Grande Guerre in 2018, Jean-Jacques Thomas explains how the French soldiers decorated leaves with the — kit — materials at their disposal: “First, one needs to cut out a template of the text or pattern which is to be transferred onto the leaf. The Poilus made these templates out of paper, leather, aluminium or zinc. [...] There are two different techniques: the first one makes use of one of the needles from the sewing kit. The template has to be glued to the top of the leaf or at least held in place tightly. Then, the needle should be traced along the contours of the template to remove the material and gradually make the veins appear. This technique takes the longest and demands great accuracy. The end result occasionally shows slightly jagged edges. The second technique makes use of the small button polishing brush. It’s the softest of the three brushes in the Poilu’s kit. Having glued the template to the leaf, with the veins still pointing downwards, one should carefully place it on a pillow (a folded handkerchief made of thick cloth) and place it on one’s thigh. Gently pat it with the brush. The material detaches and the veins appear gradually. Continue until all of the veins become visible. Now remove the template from the leaf and carefully remove any remaining traces of glue.” This is the method described by Pte André Jumeau (1896-1958) in a letter to his parents dated 5 June 1917 (Luc Volatier collection). Other methods were employed, as well: the three leaves which the French soldier François Gournay gifted to his Belgian friend Georges Debruyne were embroidered with colourful yarn (In Flanders Fields Museum collection). It is a striking observation that, while needlework was considered a traditionally female activity, we can see it appearing here, in the very masculine environment of the trenches, as well.

Painting on leaves may have been yet another decorative method. In any case, the technique is mentioned by Bernard Dauphin in his *La Dentelle sur Feuilles d’arbres. Manuel Pratique de Folio-Sculpture* (Toulouse, 2020) (Lacework on tree leaves. Practical guide to decorating leaves). The publication of this recent manual also indicates that the practice of leaf decoration hasn’t completely disappeared in France, although it is labelled a “forgotten art” even there.

Admittedly, while the In Flanders Fields Museum itself has dedicated numerous exhibitions and publications to trench art, it somehow always overlooked the ‘branch’ of the *‘Feuilles de Poilus’*. Fortunately, this museum file finally rectifies that.



La vie en feuilles: Nature and culture in the First World War

II

Leaves, their symbolism, and war

Leaves, like the trees on which they grow and from which they fall, are good to think with. Small but powerful material metaphors, their substance and colour reference the never-ending cycle of birth, mature life, and death. Few things are as evocative as the sight and sound of dead leaves blown by gusting autumn winds, speaking to the transience of life and the randomness of fate. So strong is this deep-rooted connection that in ancient Greece, Zeus’s oracle at Dodona was home to priestesses who interpreted the rustle of oak leaves in a sacred grove to determine the future. An alternative view is more symbolic, that this oracular sound came from bronze objects suspended from oak branches, blown by the wind as a wind chime. Either way, our experience of falling leaves is a sensual aspect of how we see and reflect upon the passing seasons of our lives. And never more so than in times of war, when the world is upside down, when normal rules of life are reversed, when the dead are mainly the young not the old, and when parents bury their children.

In the First World War, the fragility of Nature, and of human beings exposed to the steel and iron of industrialized conflict, struck a chord in the ephemeral liaisons of battlefield friendships between soldiers, and the relationships between soldiers and their loved ones. One manifestation of this was the making of trench art — souvenirs, trophies, and mementos — from the matériel of war and from the natural world. Most trench art was made from artillery shells, bullet casings, and the general metallic debris of war. But destruction is also creation, and high explosives shattered and reconfigured the countryside elements of Nature, making them cultural rather than natural objects. Splintered trees and millions of leaves blasted from their branches by artillery barrages are as much the artefacts and ruins of war as broken houses, damaged churches, and lunar landscapes. As trench art is fundamentally the recycled debris of war, it should come as no surprise — though it does — that leaves appear as a unique and distinctive form of the genre.

Before 1914, trees were most often portrayed as crowned with their canopy of leaves — invoking a pre-war era of Romanticised sylvan imagery and bucolic innocence. The war destroyed such views, and today stark monochrome photographs of shell-splintered trees shorn of leaves and accompanied by blank-faced soldiers have come to represent the war and what it did to Nature and human beings. Pruned and scalped of their colourful majesty, only the leafless lifeless trunks remain, conjuring images in soldiers’ minds of Christ’s suffering and crucifixion.

This recurring religious imagery which melded the natural and cultural worlds was recalled by the French soldier-author Henri Barbusse who described a night march as being accompanied by ‘dwarf phantom trees, split into palms or completely wrecked into chopped wood or string, bent over themselves, as if kneeling’. Elsewhere, Lt. Richard Talbot Kelly, 52nd Brigade RFA, stated that ‘To me, half the war is a memory of trees: fallen and tortured trees, trees untouched in summer moonlight, torn and shattered winter trees, trees green and brown, grey and white, living and dead.’ This wartime reconfiguration of human senses and memory, and the transformation of the natural world to a surreal one, are captured by an Austrian soldier in the burning heat of the Carso battlefield on the Italian Isonzo front in 1915. Here, he noted, the sun ‘baked the leaves on the trees to a dark crisp, until they crackle on the branch. It blanches the grass until it shatters at a touch’.

A different wartime transformation of flora, both physical and symbolic, was described by Lothar Dietz, a young German soldier, who wrote to his parents in November 1914, from a dugout in the trenches on Hill 59 outside Ypres. In a ‘trench garden’ adjacent to the dugout position, ‘We have planted whole bushes of willow and hazel with pretty catkins on them and little firs with their roots, so that a melancholy desert is transformed into an idyllic grove’.

The world of leaves along the Western Front between 1914 and 1918 was intimately tied to the landscape of conflict of which it was a physical and symbolic part: to the trees which produced them, the flora to which they were related, to age-old symbolism and folklore beliefs, and to the soldiers (and sometimes civilians) who saw, touched, and reflected upon them. It was not surprising given such a complex tapestry of experience endured for four years that leaves became part of the trench art phenomenon that so characterised the war of the trenches.

Trench art leaves

The dominant artistic style of First World War trench art was art nouveau, with innumerable artillery shell cases and smaller items decorated with the flowery and leafy designs of that pre-war fashion. While the work of famous war artists such as Paul Nash, William Orpen, and Fernand Léger, reveals the fundamental change wrought by the war on artists’ perceptions and representations of reality, the appeal of trench-art souvenirs was to traditional pre-war art, not the new shapes and ideas of the post-war era. There was a dichotomy between what many (professional) artists felt they now had to create, and what the general souvenir-buying battlefield pilgrim-tourist wanted. The latter of course needed the emotional shelter of the pre-war world which they had shared with their deceased menfolk, not the new world which those men had never known.

While trees, flowers, and leaves were an integral part of the art nouveau world, they were also among those natural things which had their importance and emotional resonances most changed by the war. This was not least because of the rural settings of the Western Front where so much of the conflict occurred. Yet, while arboreal and floral symbolism in trench art iconography, poetry, and literature has long been acknowledged, and indeed celebrated, that of leaves has remained almost invisible until recently.

Decorated leaves are arguably the most rare, delicate, and difficult-to-create kind of soldier-made trench art and were made in several different ways. An early example, from around 1900, comes from the Boer War as part of a small four-page ‘publication’ entitled *A Souvenir From The Anglo-Boer War: Everlasting Silver Leaves From Table Mountain*, Cape Town, South Africa. It includes a page of three decorated leaves — the first and third inscribed ‘A Souvenir/from the Anglo-Boer War’, with the second showing a soldier with a rifle and a bleeding bandaged head. But this item is rare indeed. It is the First World War that sees the production of almost every other example. In October 1915, during the Gallipoli expedition, three leaves were decorated in ink by Private Frederick Neville Harling and sent home to Australia. The first is inscribed ‘Dardanelles 16.10.15’ and Merry Xmas. And a happy New [Year]’, the second with ‘Dard 11.10.15 to Nino love from Fred’ and a drawing of a soldier standing over the body of a dead soldier, and the third has a sketch of a soldier firing from behind an embankment or parapet. These leaves are dried and damaged today but survived the war as did Private Harling. Nevertheless, these Australian examples are also rare, and is open to speculation how many similar examples may have been made but have not survived.

In this current exhibition, all the decorated leaves are French, with the majority coming from a collection that began with 200+ bought out of curiosity for 20 euros in the early 2000s by Luc Volatier. He investigated the leaves, decorated as they were with talismanic images, and the names of men, women, and battles, and discovered a 5 June 1917 letter by the soldier André Jumeau which included a brief account of how these fragile items were made. It seems, so far, that these objects are almost solely a French sub-category of First World War trench art, with no parallels among soldiers of the British, Belgian, German armies, and with only the Australian example being the exception. Made by French soldiers, the poilus, these leaves belong to ‘Sub-category 1a: Active Service, 1914-1918’ in the general classification of trench art, a category they share more broadly with other carved natural materials made from wood, stone, bone, and chalk. As such, they also share temporal, geographical, and emotional characteristics with these other examples, as objects made, kept, and often sent home by fighting soldiers at or near the front line between 1914 and 1918.

These objects are remarkable of course for their sheer survival. In a world of utter devastation, where entire towns, cathedrals, and innumerable human beings were blasted into nothingness, the existence of delicately

worked oak and chestnut leaves seems like a miracle. And indeed, the survival of leaves parallels that of humans who, as described in various memoirs and diaries, also miraculously survived almost impossible situations.

It is plausible to suggest that soldiers saw themselves in fragile leaves blown by the unpredictable and violent winds of war. And it is true that in literature and poetry parallels were drawn between soldiers and the birds, animals, trees, and flowers of the rural battlefields in which they fought. Fallen leaves are an ancient literary symbol of the dead, and in *The Falling Leaves*, subtitled November 1915, a poem by the atheist, feminist, and pacifist English poet Margaret Postgate-Cole, the trope is subtly expressed,

Today, as I rode by,
I saw the brown leaves dropping from their tree
In a still afternoon,
When no wind whirled them whistling to the sky,
But thickly, silently,
They fell, like snowflakes wiping out the noon;
And wandered slowly thence
For thinking of a gallant multitude
Which now all withering lay,
Slain by no wind of age or pestilence,
But in their beauty strewed
Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay.

Identifying with Nature in this way went beyond a general sense and could be very specific. The French soldier François Gournay carefully and elaborately embroidered several oak leaves into miniature photograph frames — one for himself (containing his own picture) and one for his Belgian comrade Georges Debruyn (containing Debruyn’s portrait). By so doing, Gournay created a delicate layering of matter — leaf, thread, and photograph — that connected Nature with traditional skills and modern technology, and that had been brought together by a kind of warfare that was equally destructive of all three components.

The photographs themselves were particularly ironic, as they captured the two men’s lifelike images, perpetuating a visual presence (especially through the existence of the negatives) that might easily survive what the men themselves could not. It is tempting to believe, though impossible to know, that in Gournay’s mind the emotive symbolism of a fluttering leaf was a simile or metaphor for a frail human life, and thus a suitable frame for the images of the two men drawn together by war.

Conclusion

The power of decorated leaves to symbolise the emotional trauma, suffering, and longing of the First World War is only now being recognised. As we become ever more sensitised to the historical and ongoing effects of industrialised life and war on the natural world, so previously ignored or underacknowledged aspects of conflict become more apparent and insistent. Leaves are small, brittle, and insubstantial, yet through their survival carry powerful messages of the human experience of war — for soldiers who made them and loved ones who received them. First World War trench art leaves were largely forgotten and little known until the late 1990s, and unpublished until 2004, but have now had two exhibitions in five years (2018 and

2022). In all their fragility, these humble objects bear the load of human lives shaped by a century old war, and by so doing join the repertoire of other more durable examples of trench art. They resonate too with deep-rooted and millennia-old beliefs, bridging time and space in the human imagination.

Nicholas J. Saunders

Collecting ‘Feuilles de Poilus’: Luc Volatier, interviewed by Dominiek Dendooven



DD: How did you arrive at collecting the ‘Feuilles de Poilus’?

LV: To be very honest, it was ‘*le hazard*’ — it happened by accident. André Breton would refer to it as the ‘hazard objectif’, meaning it’s never really by coincidence. There’s always something behind the scenes guiding you. I’m a collector, I have different collections, one of them is what we call Art Brut. But then if you start being interested in Art Brut you quickly move to Outsider Art. Which is not as specific as Art Brut. And then you move from Outsider Art to Folk Art. And “folk art” is a very broad concept. I’m always very curious, I always have my eyes looking around. And that’s how one day I saw one of these leaves. And I looked at it and asked myself “What is this?”. I was really intrigued. Then I was told that it came from the First World War, that it was done by a soldier in the trenches. I couldn’t believe it, and I found it so fascinating, so interesting that I decided to buy it. That was the first one. Really by accident. Every time I collect things I want to understand more about what I have, about the art work, about the artist. And that’s exactly what happened with this first leaf. I did some research on the internet, I bought a few books, I talked to people. And, basically, that’s the way the collection grew and probably even outgrew me. Because it’s a beast by itself. And in all fairness, sometimes I wonder “Why me?” Why do I have this responsibility?” Sometimes I ask myself, “Did I really decide to collect these leaves? Or have the leaves decided to be collected by me?”. It’s a bit of a schizophrenic approach. But for sure it also shows that there’s a huge sense of responsibility involved when you collect these little pieces of memory.

DD: What particularly fascinates you in the ‘Feuilles de Poilus’? What strikes you about it?

LV: For me it’s less fascination than emotion. Once I understood what it was all about I was really moved. I said to myself: “How is it possible that this was made by men — not ordinary men, but soldiers, killers, people whose job it basically is to kill the enemy, people who are supposed to be very aggressive, who have learned to wield something awful like a bayonet.” You see that little leaf, so fragile, so delicate — made with a needle. How can it be made by the same individual, the same human being? A bit like saying that behind brutality you still have tenderness, a love of life. And this really moves me, this ambivalence between these two worlds. Yes, they were soldiers. Yes, they were supposed to be killers. But at the same time they were probably very lonely, some of them were probably very afraid, very sad. And in this very challenging situation you have these delicate, feminine, poetic side of them which is coming out.

And then, the majority of these leaves bear a feminine name. My thought immediately was: “These guys they are there, they probably know that they’ll die. Because when you kill the other, the other will kill you. And what do you do in these circumstances? You think about your wife, or about your fiancée, or about your mother, ...” And for me these leaves are also a huge tribute to all these people on the ‘home front’ who also suffered because they lost their loved one.

These little leaves, these very fragile bidimensional objects are for me like two sides of different worlds. Of war on one side with the brutality, and on the other side love, probably. But also man and woman, death and life. And all of that on something which is probably the most delicate thing you could imagine: a little leaf. Which probably explains in my view why these leaves are so little known. I think the majority of the people who collect militaria — as we call objects of the war — are men, and they’re more interested about the masculine side of war. If you collect guns or helmets, you don’t collect these little leaves. I even have friends, knowing about my leaves collection, who jokingly ask: “Oh, how is your collection de feuilles mortes?”. How is your collection of dead leaves going on? But they are not dead leaves, you know.

DD: Why is it also a mission for you to promote this particular kind of trench art through exhibitions and publications? Because you’re very keen on exhibiting your collection and sharing your collection with the public.

LV: There are two different kinds of collectors. You have collectors who are very like Harpagon in Moliere’s The Miser. They keep it all for themselves, they put it in a safe and they don’t show it to

Verdere literatuur

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De Hey, A. (2019) The Great War, a Vegetal Memoir. Hey! Modern Art & Pop Culture: Revue D’Art Bilingue. (September). Seizoen 2 (8):30-37.

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anybody, and they die with their treasures. And you have other collectors who are very happy to share what they have. Because they think it's a pleasure of showing something you like. I'm definitely in that second category. I want to pass on the emotions I had and I still have when I see these leaves. I really hope that when people come to Ypres, and they see the leaves, they'll say: "Wow". And they'll feel something that words cannot convey. Something which goes through the eyes to your brain and to your heart, your guts. Secondly, I think we need to save all these little leaves. Talking about them, making people aware of their existence is hopefully a way for people to protect them, not lose them.

The more people know they exist, the more people will keep them. Keep them in the family or give them to a museum. Or at least take care of them rather than saying: "What is this, never heard of this". And when they're gone, they're gone. It's so fragile it goes very quickly.

And thirdly, it's also a way to pay tribute to the soldiers, and to those on the home front. I always remember my mom talking about my great grandfather who died during the First World War and whose body never been found. And I remember my parents telling me maybe he's the one under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. This is all far removed from my real life. Now when I discovered these little leaves, I asked myself: "Maybe this is something my great grandfather did, or people my great grandfather knew" It's also a way to pay tribute to these people. And in one way or another to keep their memory alive. And that's why I have 700 of these leaves today. When people ask me, "What's your objective? How many do you want?". Well, in fact, I'm acquiring all the leaves I can. Sometimes I buy them, sometimes they're given to me. When people ask me: "When will you stop?". In a way I have this dream that is impossible to achieve: to find one thousand five hundred of these leaves. So more than two times of what I have today. And people say "Why that number? Fifteen hundred, that's a crazy number". Well, because I have this vision of a room which will show these fifteen hundred leaves and each leaf basically represents one thousand dead from the French army. As there were 1.5 million French military dead during the First World War. And what's the price of such a piece of memory, which in my mind represents ultimately one thousand dead? I did a little talk on these leaves for children at school, aged twelve, thirteen. And there was a question from a little girl. And she asked me: "So what's the price of this leaf?". And I said: "You know what, let me tell you, this little leaf which bears the name Marguerite, was done by her husband in the trenches. It took a lot of time doing it, several hours. And then he put it in an envelope and sent it to his wife. And the next day he got killed. His wife never found his body. And in fact, that's the only little memory she has from her husband. And returning the question to you, little girl, what's the value of that leaf?" And she burst into tears and she said "It's priceless!". Exactly, it's priceless, so you can't put a value on something like this.

Showing the leaves to the public is also a way for me to pay tribute, to keep the memory alive. And, the more you do that, the more people trust you to take care of them. In fact, when people give me leaves, they're much more valuable than when I buy them. Because people say: "OK, I give them to you because I know, Luc, you will take care of them."

DD: One of the things that puzzles me, is that nearly all the *'Feuilles de Poilus'*, apart from just a handful, seem to be made by French soldiers.

LV: It's true, all the names mentioned on the leaves, they are quite typically French. I do not come across German or Belgian or British names, it's always French. I have no explanation. Was leaf engraving taught at school in France? Some people say yes: "Yeah, yeah, I remember my grandfather told me that he had learned how to do this at school when he was very young." So that's one possibility. Another one is maybe the rules in the different armies. I know for example that French soldiers were allowed to make engravings on shell cases, Germans, I think, were forbidden. Or was it because they spent more time in the trenches? Or maybe because they had standard a needle in their pack? I don't know. Yet, as these leaves are very, very rare, there is maybe somewhere a pocket of German leaves.

My network is very much a French network. I've been collecting them now for fifteen years. It started gradually. Every time I get a leaf, I reach out to the person and I say: "Please tell me something about the provenance". Because this is my other collection habit: knowing about the previous owners, the history. Most of the time there's no information but once in a while they say: "Oh it was in a mass-book or in a photo album". And these people, most of the time they think: "Oh, wow, this guy's really passionate

about what he does". It creates a connection between the seller and myself and then I tell them: "If you find another leaf, don't waste your time, send it to me and I'll buy it at the same price". So there's no haggling and so on. And one of the reasons that I got so many is, I never rediscuss the price and I always pay immediately. I must have today a network maybe of forty people whose job is basically to go to the flea markets and trying to find these leaves. I don't think most do it for money. I think they do it first and foremost because they know there is this guy who's on a mission and they want to be part of that mission. Now all these hunters or gatherers for me, they're French. I don't have any in Germany or in the UK or in Belgium. This could also explain why most of the leaves, if not all of the leaves, seem to be of French origin. Very often on the Monday morning I get an email saying: "Oh, I found a leaf". Because people go on the flea market on the Sunday morning and they send me an email. I published a little book on the leaves for the centenary of the end of the World War One. And I also sent copies of this little booklet to the people who helped me collecting leaves. It's a way also for me to thank them beyond just money. To say: "You're a part of something a bit bigger."

1



Soldiers-artists

IV

1

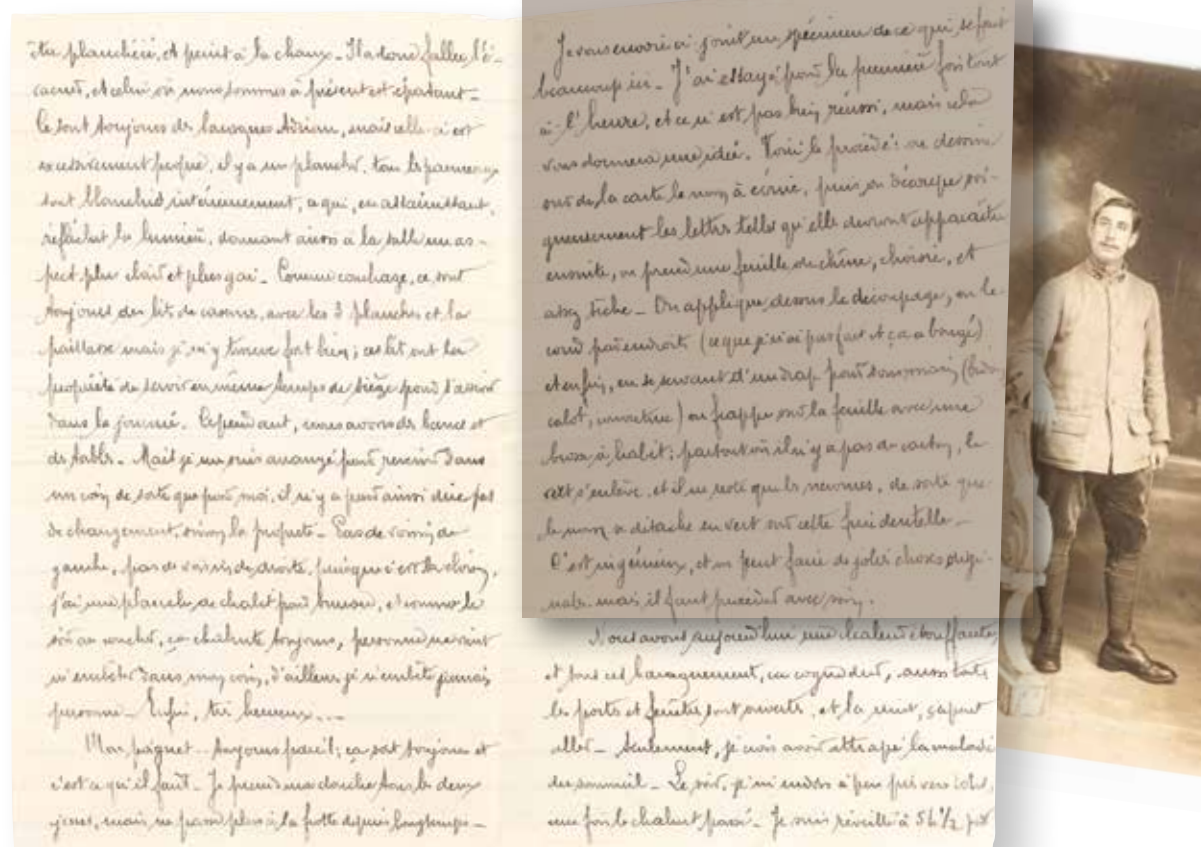
Edouard CABROL

Private Edouard Cabrol or his relatives had the decorated leaves and maps with vegetal motifs he had sent back home from the Lorraine front framed in 1916 at the latest. Cabrol, who probably hailed from the Aude department in the south of France, addressed them to his wife Emilie and his daughter Olga especially. The inscriptions on the cards make it clear that these are in fact highly personal mementos from 1915: “souvenir of the quiet woods where I sleep”, “souvenir of my patrol in the trenches of Grey”, “souvenir of 22 June, the day my 45th year begins. Flowers cut from the battlefield in Montigny“...

2

André JUMEAU

André Jumeau (1896-1958) was an 18-year-old architecture student from Sens when he was called into service in 1914. He kept a little diary and wrote to his parents quite regularly. He encloses a decorated leaf with his letter dated 5 June 1917, mentioning that it is something “many people here do”. He also includes a detailed description of the process of working the leaves. André Jumeau survived the war, unlike his older brother Pierre. “After five years of suffering, the hour of liberation has finally arrived”, he writes upon his demobilisation on 1 September 1919. He settled in Soissons where, as an architect, he contributed to the post-war reconstruction.





3

Maurice GEOFFRIN

Maurice Geoffrin (Bettoncourt-le-Grand, Haute-Marne, 1877- Flornoy, Haute-Marne, 1965) was a teacher who served as a sergeant with the 52nd Régiment d'Infanterie Territoriale. The decorated leaves — over a hundred of them! — which he sent home to his family from the frontline, mainly illustrate the great love he felt for his wife and children. He incorporated the names of his wife Marie and especially of their children Mariette (1905-1990) and Pierre (1910-1982) into these artful little gems with incredible delicacy. He cut out little templates for the child-friendly images of animals he used. One such template has been preserved: a piglet cut from a French field postcard. His correspondence also reveals the tender feelings he held for his family, like the little card with rabbits for his daughter, or the words with which he concluded his letter of 11 November 1918, in which he announces the end of hostilities: "I am looking forward to holding you against my heart again at last, tender kisses to all three of you".

13 le 11 novembre 1918
Mes chers
Enfin, ça y est, l'armistice est
signé! Quelle délivrance! Arrive-
pour fêter cette joie j'ai acheté
du champagne 4 b. à 18.60 et
nous allons trinquer tous ensemble
En parles s'il est cher ce sacré cham-
pagne! Il n'y avait que celui-là
et j'ai été obligé d'y passer. Pour
une fois et pour un tel jour, rien
à dire. Tout le monde a le
sourire. Plus à craindre les obus,
les bombes, les balles, les gaz.
C'est q. q. chose! Mais malheureuse-
ment il y aura des morts par acci-
dents et q. q. uns, les hostilités bien
qu'arrêtées, ne reverront pas leurs
foyers. Il faut aussi compter avec
les maladies. Vous vivrez au 1/2
de leur q. q. temps et certainement
vous ferez l'occupation.



viens occuper un coin de la Boche, est-ce en Alsace-Lorraine? est-ce sur les bords du Rhin dans les pays rhénans? Je l'ignore. Je te le dirai. Je ne pense pas y rester longtemps. Je crois que les fonctionnaires vont d'abord rappelés. Quel bonheur de ne plus être séparés, de rester avec tous les cherchets quittés depuis plus de 5 ans!

Gabriel va nous revenir tout prochainement. Je vais envoyer un mot pour que l'on m'envoie une dépêche lorsqu'il sera de retour, car j'espère bien que j'obtiendrai une permission de 3 jours. C'est lui qui va être heureux et toi, et tous? J'espère que vous rejoindrez toute la famille, à ma suite et à mon prochain retour. L'on parle de camps ou de nos prisonniers mais j'ai jamais pu écrire, d'aucun signe de vie. Si par hasard Henri était encore en vie, quel bonheur de le

revoir! Nous allons être fixés bientôt sur son sort, car s'il est là il sera comme les autres renvoyés immédiatement en France. Les conditions de l'armistice, nous les connaissons pas encore. Elles doivent être dures et nous devons avoir pris nos précautions pour ne pas être bernés. Ah les saurages! ils envahissent la guerre, ils l'ont eue et ils paieront. Il n'est que temps et justice. Nous devons une fière chandelle aux Américains, dans eux nous y passons. Maintenant combien de temps avant la signature du traité de paix? Voilà un problème important. Les négociations seront longues à mon avis, il y a beaucoup de points à élucider. Affaire aux diplomates.

Rien reçu aujourd'hui. Le vague m'est venu à l'esprit, il a le mandat et on

sera le bienvenu. Je ne sais comment il se fait que le porte-monnaie est si plat. J'ai été obligé d'emprunter à l'orgueil pour acheter le champagne. Et puis j'irais liquider la popote et faire le huc à un jeune bleu le travail de bureau diminuant. Chacun à son tour.

J'ai la serviette boche, si te l'envoie. Le travail est mieux que celui que tu as. J'ai une boîte de Valda à t'envoyer. J'ai encore une boîte de Pancetel - Bon pour les abeilles. Mais pour le lit n'as-tu pas un lit à l'été? - Je n'ai pas vu Gaston ici. Il doit être parti. Meilleure santé à Berthe. Bonne santé à tous parents et connaissances et en attendant le plaisir de vous servir sur mon cœur, je vous embrasse tous très bien tendrement.





4



4

Emile HERVAULT

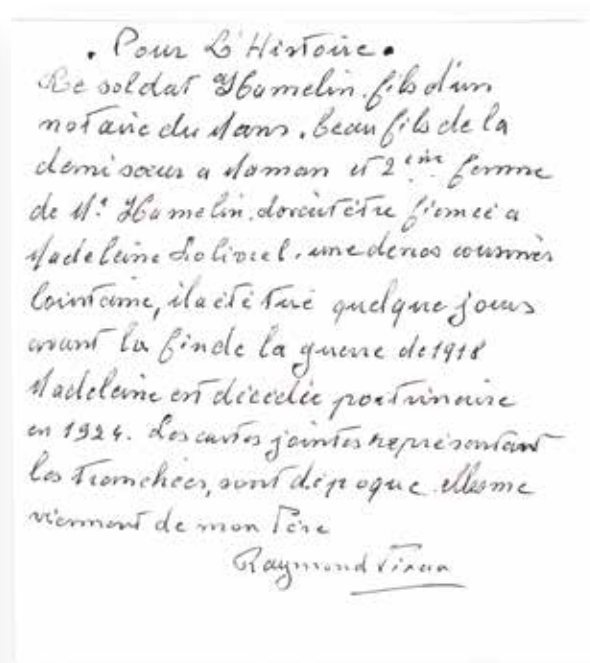
We can only attribute one decorated leaf to Pte Emile Hervault. He did, however, leave us many patterns that were used to apply motifs to the leaves. These small patterns, found in his inheritance, had sometimes been cut out of military postcards. Little is known about Emile Hervault otherwise, except that he was a bricklayer from Dreux (Eure-et-Loire, France).



5

(Maurice ?) HAMELIN

In 1916, Private Hamelin sent an ivy leaf with a quite simple representation of a flower from the trenches in Parroy forest (Lorraine) to his fiancée Madeleine Lolivrel. Ivy leaves are quite hard, making them less suitable and therefore unusual for decoration. According to the previous owner, Raymond Vixera, a distant relative of Madeleine, Hamelin, who hailed from Le Mans, died at the end of the war, with his fiancée following him into death six years later. He is perhaps Maurice Hamelin from Le Mans, who died in a Parisian hospital on 23 December 1918.



Framed leaves

6

Some owners had their leaves framed, further proof that the decorated leaves were considered something special even then. An inscription on the back tells us that the leaves inscribed with Marguerite and Odille were made by Pte Edmond Lenfant for his niece and mother respectively. Of the others, including the chestnut leaf with the intertwined hearts and initials, we unfortunately could not determine the sender and recipient.



6



Historical figures 7

Because of their shape, chestnut leaves seem to be more suitable for depicting human figures than oak leaves. Among the portraits of historical figures depicted on these leaves we recognize the French President Raymond Poincaré, King Peter I and Prince Regent Alexander of Serbia, King Ferdinand I of Bulgaria, the French Marshals Joseph Joffre and Philippe Pétain, the French General Paul Pau, the British Minister of War Horatio Kitchener, and the Russian Tsar Nicholas II. With one hand holding a pipe and the other hand in his pocket, the French poilu is depicted sympathetically. Sympathywise, the German Emperor Wilhelm II fares far worse: sinking his teeth into a globe, he is awarded the inscription "goulu" (vile).

7





7

Women's names 8

Women's names are far and away the most common motifs on the decorated leaves. Madeleine, Marie-Rose, Adelaide, Antoinette, Marie, Noémi, Marguerite, Celina and Augustine (whether or not the saint) are just a couple of them.



8



Leaves on cards 9

Gluing the leaves onto cards did make them sturdier and easier to send and keep, but it also caused them to lose some of their delicate character. The cards used are very often official military postcards. Sometimes the card was used solely as a background for a collage of (unprocessed) leaves and flowers. In rare cases the leaf has a painting on it. The combination of a collage of an oak leaf and flowers with a pornographic photograph such as the card with the inscription "Jean Charles" is exceptional.





1ers. Nat. — Modèle A¹ pour les soldats au dépôt du corps ou à demeure dans une localité.

**CORRESPONDANCE
DES ARMÉES DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE**

CARTE EN FRANCHISE

EXPÉDITEUR :

Nom et prénoms :

Grade :

Régiment }
ou Service }

Compagnie, Escadron, }
Bataillon, Section, etc. }

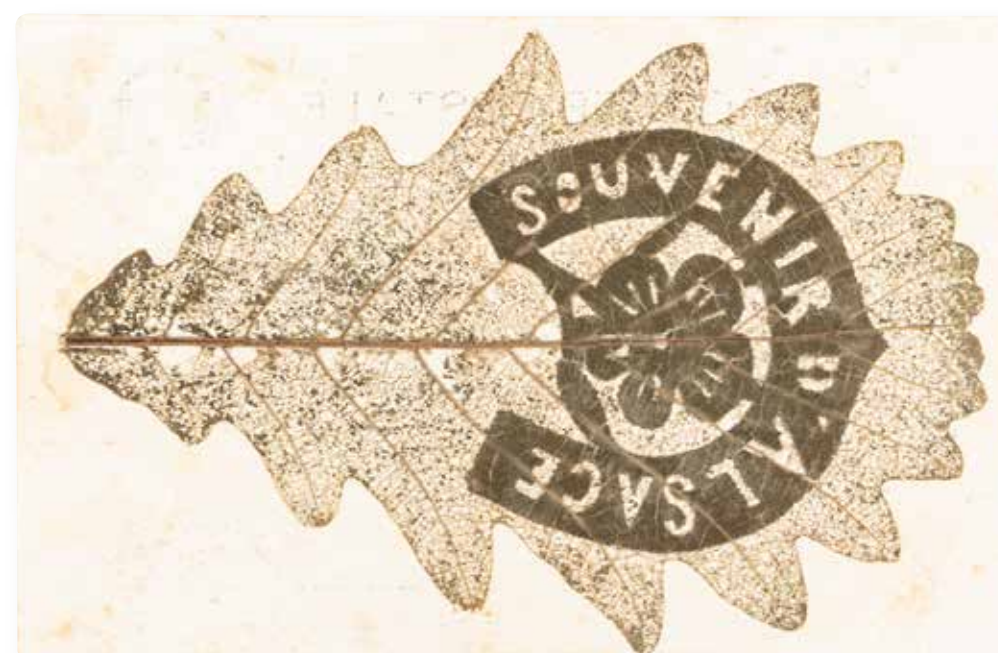
Dépôt du Corps }
ou }

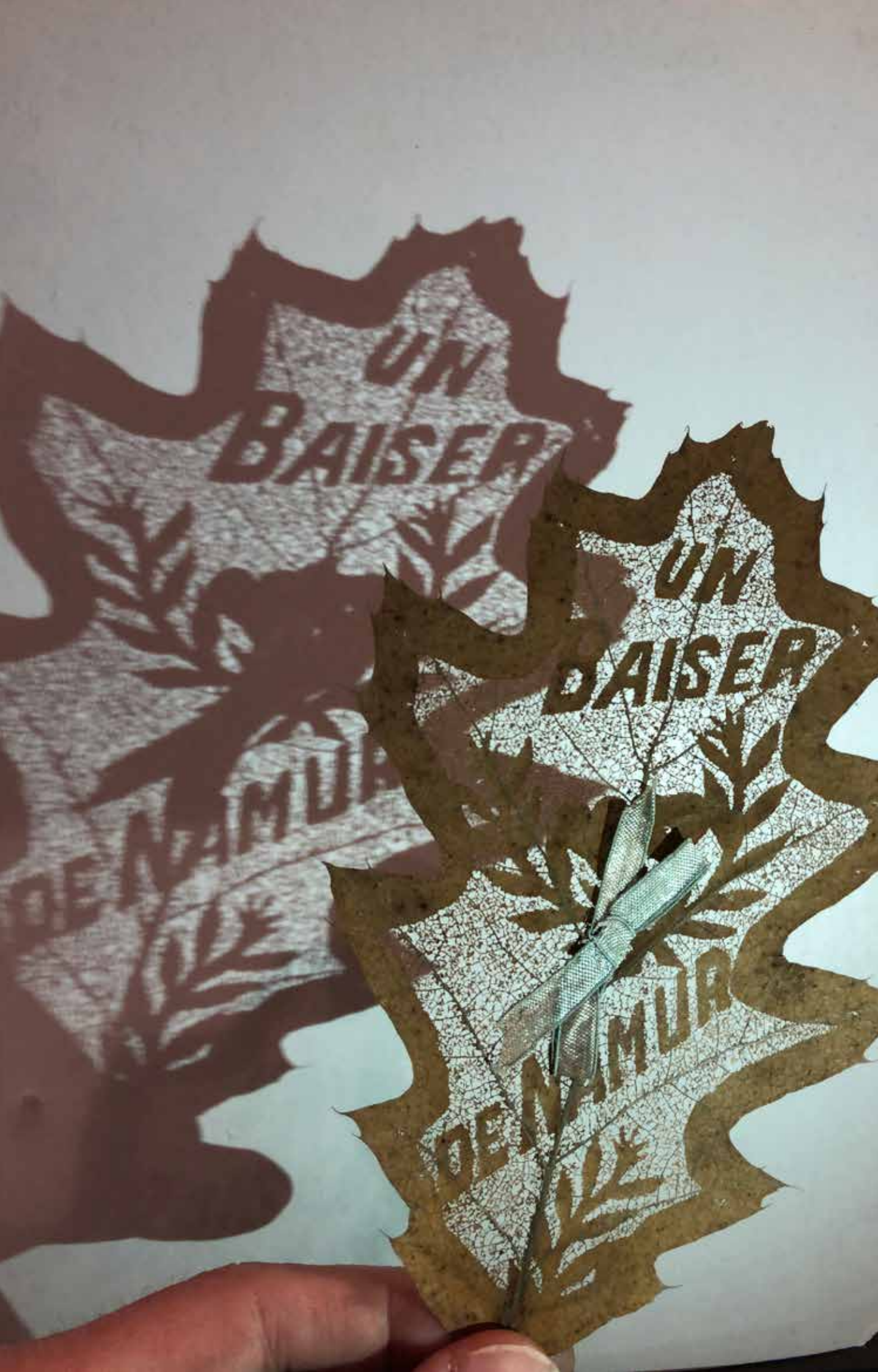
Résidence fixe }
(Les indications ci-dessus sont à reproduire dans l'adresse de la réponse.) }

Adresse :

M.....







A multitude of motifs

The leaves contain all sorts of motifs and references:

Religious symbols with the power of expressing the hope of salvation after suffering, such as on the leaves bearing the cross of Calvary and the tools of passion or the leaf with anchor, cross and the Sacred Heart. A third leaf with a religious theme is a souvenir of a visit to Lourdes.

Lucky charms with traditional symbols such as four-leaf clover, horseshoes.

Symbols of courage like the French War Cross and the edelweiss on the oak leaf that has been painted green.

Tokens of love and friendship, including inscriptions like “A kiss from your husband” or “Kisses aplenty for my Jeanne”, the heart with “Pedro and Zouzou”, as well as the declaration of love to ‘Raymonde’, composed from cut out words and the leaf which Martin, “a musician with the 75th” gifted to the recipient out of friendship.

Many leaves are mementos of certain places, or war years. It’s often more subtle: the double cross of Lorraine is probably a reference to the front in Lorraine, while the castle on the maple leaf may well have been an actual existing headquarters.



10

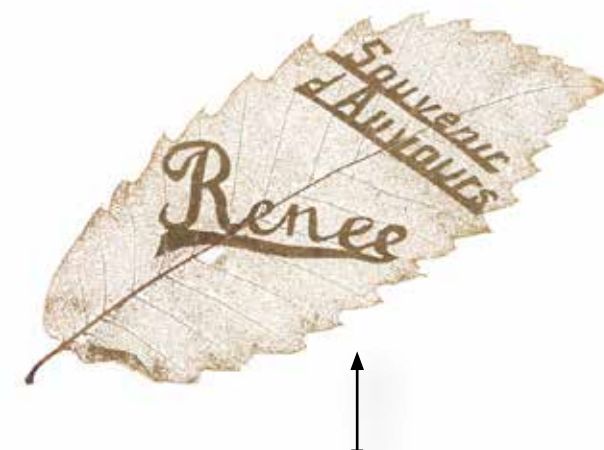


10





A Belgian example? ¹¹



It is quite possible that the chestnut leaf bearing the inscription “Souvenir d’Auvours – Renée” is a Belgian product. Even though the camp was used as a training camp by the French army before and after World War I, this is where the most important Belgian infantry training camp was located from 1914 to 1918.

Definitely Belgian is the leaf Petra Debacker donated to In Flanders Fields Museum in December 2019. Indeed, the inscription reads “Aandenken aan Beverloo – Vanhauwaert Adolf” (“Souvenir of Beverloo – Vanhauwaert Adolf”), the second part in all likelihood referring to the maker of the item. Vanhauwaert probably gifted it to Théophile Bartsoen, Mrs. Debacker’s grand-uncle, during their joint stay at the Beverlo camp. The piece arguably dates back to the period right before or right after the war, since Beverlo was located in the occupied part of Belgium.

An embroidered example of In Flanders Fields Museum ¹²

The French soldier François Gournay from Le Portel (Pas-de-Calais) gave his Belgian friend Georges De Bruyn (Ledeberg, 1890) three embroidered oak leaves. One depicts the Gallic rooster on a German Pickelhaube, crowing victoriously, with the sun dawning behind it. The two others contain portrait photos in embroidered double frames. François Gournay’s picture contains his initials, while that of his Belgian friend bears the Belgian colours: black — yellow — red. De Bruyn, a courier tasked with delivering messages from the main Headquarters at De Panne to the front, poses with his horse.



‘*Feuilles de Poilus*’: fragile, yet so full of power



The *Feuilles de Poilus* are a very intimate form of trench art, in which the human urge for connection really comes to the fore. In addition to an extreme sense of uprooting and trauma, the war also inspired a feeling of intense connection and love in soldiers. Trench art gives expression to these complex feelings. The delicate leaves stand in stark contrast with the harsh devastation inflicted by the war.

Part of the sensitivity lies in the usage of the natural material. Man and nature were both at the mercy of the destruction wreaked by an industrialised war. The soldiers were heavily dependent on the landscape, and the joint vulnerability of their position created a close bond between them.

While metal-based trench art carries the violence of war within, the natural materials present a powerful connection to peace. Nature reminds us of a time that once existed and inspires hope in us that it will return one day.

Nature’s fiercely resistant ... nature manifested itself during the war. Some plants proved resistant against the violence of war and gave colour to the devastated landscapes. As they continued to prosper in the unlikeliest places, flowers like the poppy and the cornflower acquired a strong symbolic meaning. The perseverance of nature, which also continued to fight back, inspired the soldiers to do the same. Nature is not only resistant, but resilient, as well. Even after being subjected to extreme circumstances, it appears to grow back in much the same way, offering hope for reconstruction. Nevertheless, the war left indelible traces in both man and the landscape around him.

Although the natural world is a symbol of power and hope, the *Feuilles de Poilus*, by their very nature, also point out its transience. Reminding us of life’s inevitable course, the leaf’s skeleton is really a memento mori. Nevertheless, the perishable material has been transformed and preserved in a stable state, reflecting the love and memory that are able to withstand and survive death.

The creative process also bears witness to a particular sensitivity. By picking a tree leaf, the object already embodies the location and its testimony. The soldier arguably also has the recipient in mind during his search for the perfect leaf. Carefully bringing back and processing the leaf is in itself an action of love for the recipient.

The most popular motif to appear on the leaves we know are women’s names. Related correspondence shows that these are often the names of lovers or spouses. Sometimes the names were applied without frills, while at other times they might contain decorative or symbolic elements. Some leaves contain tokens of affection such as lots of love, kisses and other good wishes, destined not just for sweethearts but also relatives, friends or brothers in arms.

In doing so, the soldier wants to reach out beyond his letters, by adding a physical object to his correspondence.

This urge to connect could also take on a repetitive character, with templates sometimes being reused and leaves being sent to the home front over and over again. One telling example is the collection of Maurice Geoffrin. He made a habit of sending leaves to his family, as a token of his love and attention, hoping, perhaps, to put a smile on his children’s faces, as well.

People back home kept the leaves with the correspondence, storing them in photo albums or framing them. Handling the delicate object with care and attention expressed and extended their concern and tenderness for the beloved soldier. The leaf was a surrogate for the missed person. In addition to the words in the letters, the soldier’s — indirect — touch was also delivered through the mailbox. Upon the passing of

the leaf’s maker, especially, the artefact came to represent the actual person. The fallen soldier becomes fragmented, scattered across the battlefields, the objects he made and the hearts of his loved ones.

Because of the war and its many losses, human lives and, logically, relationships had become very fragile indeed. Despite the uncertainty, these bonds were sometimes incredibly strong, with love proving a genuine source of power. This is reflected by the *Feuilles de Poilus*: beneath their very fragile exterior lies enormous power. Not only have they — as fragile as they may be — endured for more than a century, they also tell a powerful story of soldiers who, in their search for connection, express their humanity above all else. The ordinary soldier, so often reduced to a number in and by history, shows himself as an individual here. Even when the maker’s name is unknown, his existence is confirmed by the depicted name. The name of his beloved. The leaves may have been partly stripped of their personal context now, but the intimacy and sensitivity they convey live on.

Roos Boons



All the artefacts on display come from the collections
of **Luc Volatier & In Flanders Fields Museum**

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