

Vallauris

Town of 100 Potters (and 21 Residencies)

by Patty Wouters

Vallauris is a small town in the South of France, hidden between metropolitan beach resorts such as Nice, Antibes, Cannes, Monaco and St. Raphael, which attract thousands of tourists. For most of those tourists, Vallauris is of no importance and not worth a visit, but for people familiar with ceramics, Vallauris rings a bell.

Vallauris had been a pottery town since Roman times because the hills around contained a very plastic and strong high-fire clay. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Massier family installed a ceramics factory in the area and started to produce ceramic works with luster glazes that had never been seen before. These became

very popular with the international high society, who would vacation on the Riviera, and Vallauris became known in the European upper class as a “ceramics town.”

Since Picasso settled in this town and started creating ceramic artwork in 1946, many established and young artists were attracted to Vallauris. Artists like Jean Cocteau and Marc Chagall worked together with Picasso, and produced and decorated a limited range of ceramic objects.

In 1968, the city council of Vallauris organized the first International Biennale of Contemporary Ceramics. Ceramists sent in their



Vallauris is a small village on the French Riviera known for fine arts and majolica since the nineteenth century. Every town has its unique shopping areas, and Vallauris has Avenue Georges Clémenceau (above), where many galleries and pottery shops are located.

work from all over the world and traveled to Vallauris to see the exhibition. Nowadays, the town is still promoting itself as the “ville des 100 potiers” (town of 100 potters).

Unfortunately, in recent years, Vallauris has lost some of its international fame. Due to organizational problems, the ceramics biennale has been postponed several times. The new legislature is more interested in real estate development than in ceramics, and some old ceramics studios were torn down and replaced by apartment buildings, which were seen to be more economically viable. In earlier days, potters could count on financial support from the city



Hiroshi Itabashi demonstrating during his workshop, “Making Molds from Air and Water.” He fills a balloon with liquid plaster to make various shapes (here he makes the body of a pitcher). After the plaster sets, he makes a mold of the shape.

to get established and open a studio. Now, prices to rent studios have increased tremendously so ceramists and potters have moved to other towns or changed professions.

Because of the decline in ceramics activity, Dale Dorosh, a young Canadian who had been living in the area for about ten years, developed the idea of starting an international residence center where ceramists (and other artists) could come and work for two months. In 2001, Artist-in-Residence (AIR)—Vallauris was born. Dorosh looked for houses and studios, and negotiated for reasonable

rents with the city council. With a small starting budget and little financial support, he managed to invite more than thirty international artists from Belgium, Canada, Finland, Iceland, Japan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Sweden and the United States.

Residents are lodged in a house at the Place Jules Lisnard, a typical French square in the old downtown area of Vallauris. On the first floor, the gallery *Aqui Siam Ben* is housed. This is a small, charming gallery where residents can exhibit the work they produce during their stay. The second floor of the house has a kitchen and common living room. The third and fourth floors are furnished as small apartments with two bedrooms, a sitting area and a bathroom.

Every two months, two to four residents are accommodated at AIR—Vallauris. They are scheduled to arrive every two weeks so that Dorosh and his assistants can show them around and make them feel at home before the next resident arrives. Every resident is assigned a studio space where they are able to work during their stay. All the studios are situated in the old city center within walking distance of the Place Jules Lisnard. Dorosh helps each resident buy their own preferred studio materials so they can start working.

Although I have a well-equipped studio at home in Belgium and all the materials I need, it is sometimes hard for me to concentrate on my own work because of other responsibilities and engagements. Therefore it was a blessing for me to be able to escape from my daily life and concentrate on my own work in Vallauris during February and March of 2005. I was finally able to produce a new kind of work and experiment with new forms and techniques, which I had been nurturing in my mind for some time.

During their stay, artists are invited to give lectures, demonstrations or to conduct one or two workshops focusing on their specialization. While I was working there, Hiromi Itabashi from Tokyo, Japan, gave an interesting workshop about making molds with the help of balloons and water, creating very interesting shapes with fluid forms, which could then be used to make teacups, pitchers, sculptural forms, etc. Although Itabashi didn't speak any French, and just a little English, the participants were fascinated by his way of working and they were very inspired by his techniques.

AIR—Vallauris' location in the old downtown of Vallauris is near the main street, Avenue Georges Clémenceau, which is known for having a lot of pottery shops and galleries. Unfortunately, many have closed over the years, along with quite a few of the small studios which were installed in the old city center. Today, there are two galleries and about 25 pottery shops in Vallauris.

AIR—Vallauris is also conveniently located near a sixteenth-century château, which was converted to Musée Magnelli, a museum of modern art and ceramics, in 1977. As a resident of AIR—Vallauris, you have free access to all the exhibitions in the château. Part of their permanent ceramics collection is displayed, and throughout the year different exhibitions are organized. The selected ceramics for the biennale also are exhibited in the château. Next to the château is a little Roman chapel that has been converted into the National Picasso Museum, which also hosts changing exhibitions.



The A.I.R. house is located in Place Jules Lisnard, and overlooks the local potter's cafe and restaurant, Lou Pichinet. Residents often meet here for a meal, a glass of wine or just good conversation.

Espace Grandjean is a school where ceramics and pottery courses are organized all year round. Established in 1985, it was named after a famous pottery family who lived in Vallauris. The courses are so popular that students are only allowed to attend classes for two years. Often, the workshops given by the AIR residents take place at the school so that the students also benefit from the residency program. The teachers and students at Espace Grandjean are eager to show visitors around the area and introduce them to other ceramists who teach and/or work in the area.

AIR–Vallauris encourages and facilitates interaction between local artists and international artists. The organization works closely with the city council and has managed to invite international groups

of ceramists to exhibit in city-owned galleries. For instance, across from the AIR house, there is an old chapel that was exhibiting Danish ceramics while I was there. Being in a new environment and meeting new ceramists from all over the world was very enriching and opened new perspectives for me.

“A.I.R.–Vallauris, 2002/2005,” an exhibition of works from the A.I.R.-Vallauris collection, made by former residents, will be exhibited January 21–March 4 at Espace Grandjean in Vallauris, France.

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