

LIFE ON THE RIVER

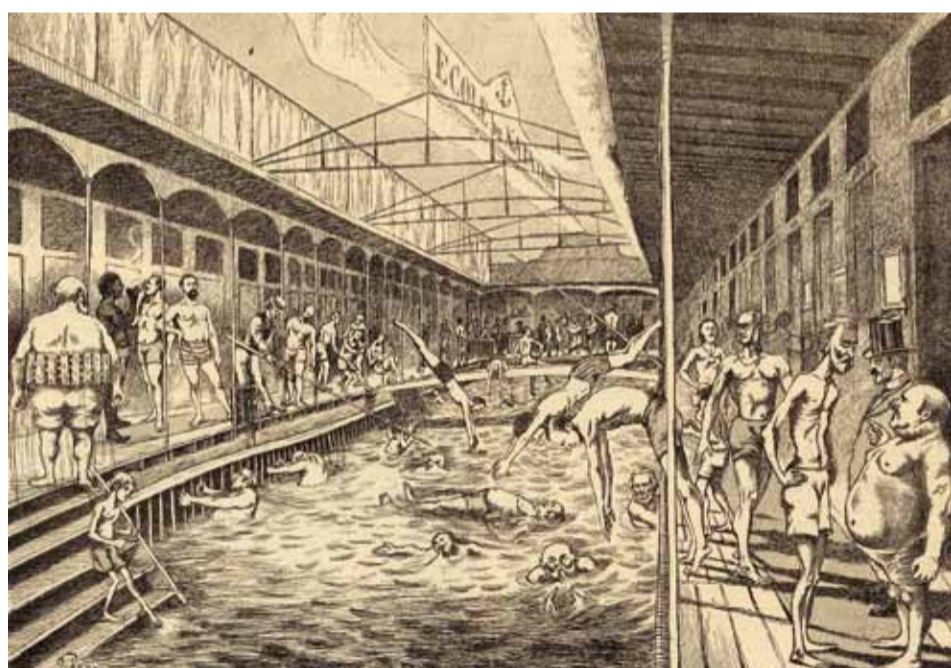
TOPIC

ROOM 26: DAILY LIFE - 19TH C.

Rivers and Leisure Activities

Take the plunge! Bathing in the rivers

Ever since the Middle Ages, the people of Lyons have voluntarily indulged in river bathing and have launched themselves from bridges or riverbanks, simply clad. Bathing areas were organised during the 19thc. Areas enclosed by several boats or “bèches” were naturally supplied with river water. People hurried to take part in the swimming lessons offered in these locations or to enjoy a cold bath or a wash – any dirt being washed away by the current. These “swimming boats” such as the famous “Bains Marmet” sprang up all along the Rhône quays to the detriment of the Saône, which was overlooked because of its murky waters. With separate arrangements for men and women, these friendly establishments were private and fee-paying (**Inv. 46.325 to 46.331 Bathing tickets**): not all social classes were therefore welcome.... but many youngsters* still managed to take a dip in the river when they wanted to!



Pictures of Lyons: the “bèches”, drawing reproduced in le Progrès illustré, Benoît-Joseph-Gustave Garnier, end of the 19thc., Inv. N 188.10

Jousting – Lyons style

Ever since the Middle Ages, bargemen have indulged in water jousting (**Inv. N 2858.123 Jousting in front of the Saint-Antoine Quay**) on the Rhône. In the 19thc., jousting tournaments were structured and organised between districts. Participants (**Inv. 37.619 Jousting from the Vaise district**), stood on a tabagnon* (raised platform) at the back of the boat, bending their legs, attempting to push their opponent overboard “into the drink” with a pole as soon as the two boats – red and blue – crossed each other’s path. In this region, either the Lyons technique (crossing by the left) or the givordine method (by the right) is used.

Music is played during the joust with melodies accentuating the various errors or passes in the game under the watchful gaze of jousting enthusiasts.

The People of Lyons take to the River Boat

In the late 19thc., transport boats with a metallic hull and either blade- or steam-operated belonging to the *Compagnie des Bateaux omnibus de Lyon* (Lyons omnibus boat company) meandered along the river between La Mulatière and Vaise. They were christened “*Mouche 1*” (river boat 1), “*Mouche 2*” (river boat 2), etc., with reference to La Mouche in Gerland district where the shipyard of their inventor, Michel Félizat, was located. In 1867, 30 identical boats were commissioned and escorted to the Seine for the World Exhibition: the “*bateaux Mouches*” (river boats) eventually became famous in Paris!

An abundance of river-related professions

The song of the bargemen

Bargemen “fresh water sailors” are navigation professionals on the rivers. This is a difficult profession because river navigation is hard and the job is not without the odd shipwreck! The bargemen’s cross is hung on the bow (**Inv. 76.11 bargemen’s cross**) protecting the crew, who sing as they go about their duties...

*De Lyon notre départance
Avecque trois bateaux chargés
Chargés de bois pour la marine
Arles notre destinée.*

*De là en suivant notre route
Jusqu’à Condrieu gaillardement
Nous avons bronqué sur la pile
Ah mes amis, ah quel tourment*

Extract from *chanson des mariniers du Rhône* (song of the Rhône Bargemen) prior to 1850.

Go from Lyon–Arles: 14 hours in a ... *pyroscaphe (early experimental steamship)!*

Commercial distribution by pyroscaphe (**Inv. N 3634 model of a 1783 pyroscaphe**), a steam boat propelled by side wheels, was authorised from 1829 onwards.

It was invented in 1783 by Jouffroy d'Abbans from Lyons. Neither animal nor human strength was needed to advance from that point onwards. In the 19th c., numerous companies tried out this new method of transport, which reached a peak between 1840 and 1850... not without a few accidents along the way (**Inv. 53.228 steam boat explosion**)!

The decision taken in 1852 to construct a railway line between Lyons and Marseilles heralded the gradual decline of this form of transport.

Feet in the water

During the 19th c., the Rhône was swarming with workers. On the river banks, large numbers of boat haulers helped to tow the barges up river through difficult stretches of water. On the quay, men equipped with hooks loaded and unloaded the boats, using their hooks to move bundles of merchandise. On the water, raft operators gathered together and floated tree trunks destined for shipyards along the river. They came across boat carriers, who transported passengers across the river in their small boats. On the berthed wooden boats, millers made the most of the hydraulic power to produce Lyons flour, changing their mooring when the water level dropped. Last but not least, on the banks, washer women and plattières washed the laundry on the washing boats; the "plattes" were equipped with boilers to boil the laundry.



View of Ile Barbe, avenue du nord, near Lyons, hauling a small boat on the Saône, lithography, C. Lang, Inv. 55.45.15

View of Ile Barbe, avenue du midi, near Lyons, raft operator on the Saône, lithography, C. Lang, around 1855, Inv. 55.45.6



Quarrels on the Rhône

The existence of so many activities side by side undoubtedly led to tension. Bargemen often hurled abuse at raft operators or boat carriers, afraid of a collision. Or the waves from the steamboats were cursed by the washer women, millers or fishermen. These were everyday arguments where the only winner was the level of the river...

Rate of flooding

The rage of the river

Significant water levels and flooding were recorded on the Rhône and the Saône rivers during the 19th c.:

- **19 October 1840**, after a fortnight of torrential rain, the Saône burst its banks during violent storms and a strong southern wind. This persisted up until 14 November with the Saône flooding the entire peninsula at the point where the water fell back into the Rhône, abating thereafter (**Inv. 60.8.13 Flooding schedule during 1840**). The Tête d'Or barrier was washed away. A proposal was put forward to destroy the bridges and to dig trenches between the two rivers to facilitate water evacuation. 600 homes were destroyed and 20 people lost their lives.
- **On 28 June 1854**, the Rhône water levels rose significantly due to heavy rain. Numerous floating mills were swept away. One of them drifted off before destroying the Saint-Clair Bridge (**Inv. 48.236 accident at Saint-Clair Bridge**), but there were no fatalities.
- **In June 1856**, levels in the Rhône rose significantly, mainly affecting a small population living or working on the left bank of the river. On 1 June, Emperor Napoleon III travelled spontaneously to the town with his Minister of Public Works to inspect the damage. On 4 June after visiting other affected towns, another official visit was carefully organised amidst an enthusiastic population to whom the Emperor donated money (**Inv. 45.2 Napoleon visiting the flooded areas of Lyons**).

Major works

Over the centuries, the rising of river levels has been considered an inevitable quirk of nature. In the wake of the catastrophic floods of 1840 and 1856, Napoleon III demanded a reaction from Civil Engineers and major works were undertaken: construction of dykes, quays and downstream ports, as well as the raising of street levels, etc. It is also at that time that rammed earth* (too permeable) has been forbidden for house reconstructions.

glossary

gone: a child in Lyons dialect.

tabagnon: raised platform at the back of the boat on which the jousters stand.

rammed earth: building technique using the raw materials of earth, lime and gravel.