

# THE CANUT REVOLTS

TOPIC

## ROOM 21: SOCIAL LABORATORY - 19<sup>TH</sup> C.

### 1831: the Canut revolt

#### “Living through work or dying through combat”

In 1831, the economic forecast was gloomy and silk orders were on a downward spiral: employees' salaries fell: the canuts\* lamented the time when, under the Empire (1804-1814), their salaries were guaranteed by “tariffs”, a fixed minimum, statutory wage. On 18 October, the Prefect of the Rhône region, Bouvier-Dumolart, introduced a tariff for manufacturers\* (**Inv. 53.582.1 implementation of tariffs**). But the latter viewed this as an obstacle to their economic freedom and 104 of them refused to apply the fixed fee.



*Silk workers of the town of Lyons, engraving by Bernard-Charles Chapory, around 1840, Inv. 1350.3.*

On 21 November, several hundred canuts took matters into their own hands in the commune of Croix-Rousse (**Inv. 53.199 and Inv. N 3497.4 Events in Lyons**). They marched on Lyons where they plundered the gunsmiths and attacked army guards. After a hard-fought battle (600 victims in both camps), during the night of 22 and 23 November, rioters took over the town (**Inv. 55.140 Battle of place des Bernardines**): the mayor, Victor Prunelle, fled. In Paris, the news was met with disbelief. On 3 December, the Duke of Orléans, the son of King Louis-Philippe, and Marshall Soult entered Lyons, cancelled the tariff, dismissed the prefect, arrested 90 workers (who were eventually acquitted) and opened a large garrison in the town. As far as the workers were concerned, the revolt was a failure.

### 1834: the second canut revolt

#### “Association, resistance, courage”

The new Prefect, Adrien de Gasparin, declared the tariff illegal but nevertheless introduced beneficial social measures: a fixed fee that controlled prices between weavers and manufacturers and a loan fund for married master weavers. Despite everything, the social problems of the Fabrique\* (silk industry) lay dormant.

By 1833, the silk industry was blooming once again. However, employers felt that workers' salaries had soared and attempted to lower them. In February 1834, the canuts launched a general strike: several managers of employees' benevolent associations [**Inv. 2570.162 and 2667.8 Médailles de la Société de Secours Mutuels des ouvriers de soie (Silkworkers' Provident Society)**] were arrested. The incident alarmed the authorities: on 9 April 1834, a law was passed in Paris prohibiting associations.

The revolt broke out amongst the Canuts in the Croix-Rousse

districts, from the right bank of the Saône and the southern centre of the peninsula, 6 000 silk workers rose to the occasion (**Inv.n 3004 events of 9 and 14 April 1834**). The army, led by Minister for the Interior, Adolphe Thiers, seemed to abandon the town to the rebels but launched a counter-offensive between 11 and 15 April: the counter-attack became known as “bloody week” (week of bloodshed) and claimed over 600 victims (**Inv. 54.458 Dreadful massacre in Lyons**).

In April 1835, in Paris, 163 rebels who had been taken prisoner were tried in a process termed as “monstrous”: They were condemned to deportation or to heavy prison sentences. According to Y. Lequin, a mishmash of canut and republican beliefs would stem from this process, due to the politically troubled era paving the way for the July monarchy (1830 -1848).



*Cour des Voraces, passageway across the slopes of Croix-Rousse – famous for its monumental, open-plan staircase, constructed in 1840, Canut style. Sheltered the Canuts during their revolts, site of the 1849 battle, photograph, 20<sup>th</sup> c.*



*Lyons events (April 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>), engraving by Dembour and Gangel, 1834, Inv. 54 457*

**1848 and 1849:  
The Voraces revolts**

**“Long live the Savoy Republic!”**

On 24 February 1848, Louis-Philippe abdicated, thereby drawing a close to the July Monarchy, and the second Republic was proclaimed. Lyons witnessed a period of unemployment amongst the canuts: workers who were not from Lyons, but mostly from Savoy, were given the opportunity to return to their roots...in exchange for “safe passage and a free passport”.

The “Voraces” society comprising armed Republican canuts from the Croix-Rousse region was formed: between 24 and 29 February, the organisation ransacked the textile workshops, took over the Croix-Rousse strongholds and flew the red flag. They rallied the Savoyards of Lyons and soon came up with the idea to invade Savoy and set up the Republic there. The authorities’ position was ambiguous: in a decree dated 28 March, Prefect Arago, the son of the Minister with the same name announced that the “French Republic did not want to chase foreigners away but instead wanted to help people secure their freedom”.

On 29 March, against a revolutionary backdrop, 1 500 people – 200 Voraces and one-third of the Savoyards of Lyons – prepared to depart place Bellecour, cheered on by a large crowd of onlookers. The ill-equipped group crossed Col du Chat on 2 April and took Chambéry on 3 April: it occupied the castle and the town hall and announced the creation of a republic...that was to last only one day!

*Les Voraces lyonnais, a Republican song dedicated to all of the Voraces of the world, Song , Gilbert Randon, printed by Léon Boitel, 1848, Inv. N 2679.1*



grey words: items that can be seen in this room

On site, the Royalist Savoyards, hostile to the republic and to the attachment of Savoy to France, rallied round, supported by the population who condemned the violent methods used by the republicans. The Voraces and the Savoyards of Lyons suffered defeat.

On returning to Lyons, they planted a tree to symbolise freedom (Inv. N. 3339.3 inauguration of the tree of liberty at place des Cordeliers).

The June elections were won by the advocates of law and order even though at la Croix-Rousse and la Guillotière, radical republicans retained their majority vote!

On 15 June 1849, on hearing the rumour of a republican uprising in Paris, the Voraces attempted another revolt (Inv. 53.376 Revolt at Croix-Rousse). Contained at la Croix-Rousse, the attempted revolt was forcibly repressed by the army.

**The Voraces**

This society of Lyons Canuts (silk workers) appeared in 1846 in Croix-Rousse and disappeared in 1849. It supposedly took its name from the société des Compagnons du Devoir, known as the “dévoirants” (a national faction), which became “voraces”. They met up at cabarets and in inns, especially at mère Maréchal, on the corner of la rue des Fossés (nowadays rue d’Austerlitz) and rue du Mail...and probably in the Cour des Voraces. They used their drinking sessions as a façade whilst they planned their take-over of political positions held by defenders of the Republic!

**Influences**

**Rebellious spirit**

The revolts triggered a feeling for community interests in the mind of the workforce. The revolts left their mark on the town, which witnessed its first strikes by female silk workers in 1869, resulting in the creation of the first female trade union by Marie-Louise Rochebillard in 1899.

The canut revolts also influenced great social thinkers such as the Saint-Simonians and Karl Marx, etc.

**glossary**

- canut:** a Lyons silk worker. This term, which was pejorative in the 19<sup>th</sup>c., is supposedly derived from the French term canette or silk bobbin.
- Manufacturer:** in the 19<sup>th</sup>c., manufacturers commissioned and financed the manufacture of items and employed workers (or canuts – silk workers) in line with demand.
- Fabrique:** silk industry refers to all the silk manufacturing activities, including regulations and organisation.
- National guard:** Army militia composed of ordinary citizens responsible for maintaining order in their town and district.