

# THE DISCOVERIES AT FASSY HOUSE AT LARCHANT

**By Anne-Sophie Leclerc**

translated by Rebecca Pike and Anne Bonn

Editor's note: We would like to thank Jean-Bernard Roy and the Musee de Prehistoire de Nemours for their kind permission to allow the HBS to publish this English translation. This article was originally published by the Chateau-Musee de Nemours and the Association Culturelle de Larchant in a limited edition French language publication, *Larchant 10,000 Ans D'histoire* (1988) [*Larchant: 10,000 years ofHistory*] (ISBN 2-904723-10-2). Larchant is a small village near Nemours in the Seine-et-Marne district in the North-Central region of France. While the second part of this article goes beyond this journal's normal range of focus, we have published it in its entirety in an effort to preserve its integrity.

In July 1890, the construction of a cesspool in the garden of Amedee Fassy's house, on the rue de l'eglise, entailed the discovery of a "sort of square shaft, four to five feet on each side and solidly built.' It descended to bedrock, and Eugene Thoison believed it was a former latrine? This pit had been filled up, and the earth fill contained a large quantity of glass and ceramic debris. These objects attracted the attention of Ernest Barbey, former mold maker at the Musee du Trocadero, who retrieved the material and partially restored it. Eugene Thoison describes, unfortunately very briefly, the contents of the furnishings, some of which have since disappeared: "34 musical instruments, intact or nearly so, of which 10 are of glass and 24 of clay. I speak only from memory of other objects such as cups, *flasks*, drinking glasses, a chafing dish, a clay pitcher, etc."<sup>3</sup> He dates the burial of the material to the end of the 16th century or the beginning of the 17th, by the presence of a Henry III coin from 1579 and a small copper spoon which have since disappeared.

Eugene Thoison devoted a great deal of study to these musical instruments,<sup>4</sup> but left the remainder of the items uncatalogued. He noted, however, the presence of a "jack-in-the-box" covered with yellow enamel and decorated along the edge with animals in relief, and an intact pitcher filled with ashes.<sup>5</sup>

Today, some of these finds appear in the collections of the former Musee de Larchant. They consist of fragments of clay and glass objects, among which is the cup adorned with animals, the subject of a somewhat improper restoration that masks the object's original form.

In manuscript notes dating from 1894, made in preparation for a Larchant visit, Eugene Thoison also reports the discovery of a mold made of schist, representing Saint-Mathurin healing the Empress Theodora. It was stolen in 1940.

In 1968, during work undertaken at the same house, presently occupied by Mr. and

Mrs. Moulin, a few vestiges of ceramics belonging to the last century's discoveries were turned up.

### The Musical Instruments

Of the ten more or less complete glass instruments described by Eugene Thoison, only three remain. The scattered fragments indicate, in fact, that the number of complete instruments was originally much higher. The pieces come from small trumpets that unfortunately no longer emit any sound, because, having been broken and restored with material of different nature (polyester resin), they have lost their musical properties.

Eugene Thoison had already taken great interest in the origins and characteristics of these instruments.<sup>6</sup> They most frequently present the profile of a hunting instrument with a more or less pronounced curve; a few of the fragments show, instead, the form of a hunting horn. The surface of the instruments is sometimes smooth, sometimes corrugated. Some have been decorated with a glass paste thread that coils around the piece.



**Figure 1**  
Trumpet of red glass

The colors of the glass vary from opaque red or sky blue to translucent dark blue decorated with red marbling. The instruments are provided with a small glass ring, generally attached to the bell, in order to suspend the instrument in some way. A text from 1387<sup>7</sup> reports the description of such a "glass horn" that hung from the neck and was used to summon people. These objects were considered precious and were protected in cases. They were similar to drinking horns.

These glass instruments, although not particularly widespread due to their fragility, are reasonably well known. The Musée du Conservatoire de Musique possesses several examples; in question is a single-spiral horn that comes from Murano. The origin of Larchant's specimens is unknown. James Barrelet suggests a Parisian origin; a factory there had a monopoly on the production and sale of "Venetian style" glassware until the 17th

century.<sup>8</sup> It is also known that a glass factory at Montceau near Fontainebleau functioned briefly from 1640 to 1643.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 2**  
***Clay trumpet and horn***

If the origin of these pieces remains conjectural, their function is no less so. Eugene Thoison puts them in the category of pilgrimage objects, known during that period as "hardware." For this he relies on a few texts, particularly on one excerpt from "L'Histoire des Singeries de la Ligue" ["The History of the League's Antics"] by Jean de la Taille, taken from the *Satire Menippe*.<sup>10</sup> The text describes a person equipped with a "small horn of glass hanging from his belt said to have come from Saint-Mathurin..."

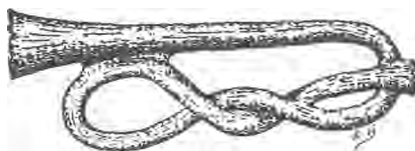
"After the products of a delicate art, I wish to show examples of a coarser type of art." This is how Eugene Thoison introduces his chapter on clay instruments.<sup>11</sup> This remark is surprising, because certain of these objects actually show technical prowess. We, however, recognize that their exceptional character deserves to be noticed. Even if not all twenty-four instruments discovered are still in existence, the remains are numerous. The fragments number well over a hundred. The *Musee National de la Ceramique de Sevres* has eight examples. In Larchant, only one instrument has withstood the centuries without incurring much damage. Six others have been the subjects of former or current restoration. They are grouped into four types:

- trumpet
- single-spiral horn
- double-spiral horn
- triple-spiral horn.

A fifth type, of which only fragments remain, is of an extraordinary form that would have been difficult to interpret without a drawing made by Thoison (the object, at that time, was intact), and evokes some sort of trumpet.

Apart from a few fragments in red and ocher clay, all of these pieces are made of gray, or occasionally black, paste. The exterior surface is generally darker. Small facets indicate that the surface was smoothed. Some of these instruments emit sounds. Thoison, in his time, identified some notes from a double-spiral horn: c', g', c'', e'', g''. These objects are now completely cracked, which has made them out of tune.

The trumpets and single-spiral horns have been known since antiquity and are well attested during the Middle Ages as summoning horns, shepherd horns, and hunting horns. On the other hand, there are hardly any comparanda for the clay horns with two or three spirals. A current investigation being conducted by Catherine Homo-Lechner, a specialist in ancient musical instruments, has revealed up till now only two comparable objects, found, unfortunately, in ambiguous contexts. The Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires possesses an example of a dark gray double-spiral horn of unknown origin; but everything supports the belief that it is of the same manufacture as our horns and thus that it probably comes from Larchant.



**Figure 3**  
Clay trumpet. Drawing by Eugene Thoison.<sup>12</sup>

The Larchant origin of these objects was not a cause for doubt on the part of Thoison. He describes having gathered fragments from just about everywhere in the community. We, however, remain cautious, even though the abundance of these objects is intriguing. Their function poses the same problem as that of the glass instruments. To connect them to the celebrated pilgrimage is a hypothesis that is seductive but without any real basis. The vision of pilgrims strolling down the streets in a cacophonous concert raises, somewhat, the image of [the city of] Epinal, however, and one can't resist the pleasure of calling it to mind.

#### Domestic Glass and Pottery

Especially fragile, the glassware here is more fragmentary than the other remains. There is enough, however, to give a rough estimate of production and usage during the Renaissance. These are known to us, besides, through paintings and engravings. These objects have been dated to the 16th and 17th centuries by James Barrelet,<sup>13</sup> author of a

history of glassware from the Gallo-Roman period to the present, that remains a reference work even today. A range of forms is found throughout the fragments of necks and bases of bottles: a few remains of decanters, flasks, bottles, cups, and especially drinking glasses. The latter consist of glasses with bases that are:

- of biconical form, characteristic of the 16th century,
- possessing a stem, the "leg," or a hollow ball, elements more of the 17th century.

Most frequently, the glass is transparent and lightly tinted with a greenish-yellow or bluish color. Some pieces have an enameled decoration (white, pink, or blue lozenges or bands). Some, however, are of an intense color. Dating, rather, to the 17th century, they show Italian influence. They belong to the product termed "Venetian style," like the trumpets, and present the same technical characteristics: opaque red glass and translucent dark blue glass, plain or ornamented with glass or enamel threads (fine white bands, "feathered" decoration). These objects have, in common, an extremely thin wall that can reach half a millimeter in thickness. Their fragility is the cause of their poor preservation. A large quantity of similar objects was found in the excavations of the Louvre, and their publication will furnish valuable items for comparison."

The pottery remains prove to be much more abundant. Despite their incompleteness, one can determine some container forms commonly used toward the end of the Middle Ages. These pieces also teach us about the techniques used in their manufacture and decoration. Among the most common forms of the collection, we cite first the cooking pot, so named by archaeologists because a number of vessels of this type have been found bearing traces of exposure to fire. Besides its primary function, holding food for cooking it could have served as a container for transport or for conditioning food and undoubtedly for various culinary preparations. This vessel evolved over the centuries." From the 11th and particularly the 12th century, one finds a fairly globular form of pot called an "oule," with characteristic banded rim. Beginning with the 14th and especially during the 15th and 16th centuries, this form gave way to a container with one handle, a slightly flaring straight neck, still without a pouring spout, and called a "large kettle." Both of these forms are present at Larchant. Some of these pots have grips called "ears," made by stretching the still soft clay and pressing it down on the rim with the finger to create undulations.

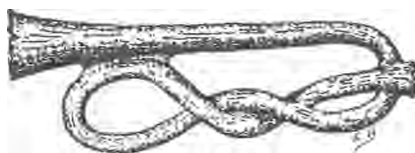
The shards identifiable thanks to this characteristic rim, to the form of the base, and to the curvature of the body, allow us to recognize all kinds of pitchers, jugs with tubular spouts (bottle necks), jars, goblets, cups, and flasks. Some are decorated with glaze containing lead (the flux), applied to the unfired pot. Naturally yellow, this ceramic glaze can change in color with the addition of metallic oxides. Thus, copper or bronze yields a more or less consistent green.

In addition to these culinary items there is a small, well preserved oil lamp. This unfooted lamp is meant to be placed on a circle of metal, or some sort of tripod, like the glass lamps. Other such examples have been found, among other things, in Paris and Orléans in the 12th-century levels," and at Chartres in a 13th-century context.<sup>17</sup>

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Among the diverse ceramics whose color tends most frequently toward ocher, red, or brown is an abundance of pitcher fragments belonging to one manufacturer, well known in Beauce, of containers with a fine surface and made from a sandy red clay.<sup>18</sup> Above all, however, one variety stands out in particular: the stoneware. Stoneware, whose vitrification is due to the fusion of minerals found in the clay, is achieved at a very high temperature (between 1150 and 1300 degrees centigrade). This was not accomplished until shortly before the 13th century. Most stoneware *pieces* occurring here belong to a beige ware, of the Beauvais type, that was manufactured in the 15th and 16th centuries. The fragments reveal a minimum of twelve small bowls, some pitchers, and a flask. Certain parts of the vessels, such as the rim, reveal a brightly rusted surface.

Other elements, less notable because they are so fragmentary, are of dark gray to red-violet clay, and belong to large pitchers. Jacques Nicourt, who has studied this type of container, suggests a Normandy origin for them. He demonstrates that they may have been used to preserve such products as butter, relying on a text by Duhamel du Monceau, "L'Art du potier" ["The Art of the Potter"] drawn from L'Encyclopedie of Diderot.<sup>19</sup>

106 - These cylindrical pots of stoneware, used for carrying butter from Isigny, are known well enough. When they are empty, these small household items are used to hold water.

181...The chestnut-colored stoneware vases used to carry butter from Isigny are durable and resonant...when they break, the grit is fine and glitters somewhat... I had some of this day sent from Gournay in Normandy.

The debris of domestic items, the vestiges of odds and ends, and objects of pilgrimage were found jumbled at the bottom of a latrine. A sad end for these objects that perhaps once decorated the shop window of Mathurin Canto, hardware merchant of Larchant in 1543,<sup>20</sup> when pilgrimage was in full swing.

The comparison of ancient texts and archaeological finds is tempting, but it is advisable to remain cautious. It is possible that this night-soil dump was used over many centuries—some objects go back to the Middle Ages—and it is probable, as a result, that the greater part of this material was buried towards the end of the 16th century or during the course of the 17th century. During that era, Larchant experienced a series of disasters from which it never recovered. Consequently, meager as they are, these vestiges are precious as an access to the everyday life of the Larchantians of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.





**Figure 4**  
Triple-spiral clay horn

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#### NOTES

1. Eugene Thoison, *Petites notes d'Histoire gatinaise* (Nemours, 1893), p. 38.
2. Eugene Thoison, *Ceramique et verrerie musicale* (Paris, 1898), p. 6.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. Thoison, *Petites notes*, pp. 44-45.
6. Thoison, *Ceramique*.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. M. Verdier, *Y eut-il une verrerie a Larchant au XVI siecle? Monuments et sites de Seine-et-Marne* (1984), p.14.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
10. Thoison, *Ceramique*, p. 11.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

12. Ibid., p. 18.
13. J. Barrlet, *La verrerie en France de l'époque gallo-romaine à nos jours* (Paris, 1953).
14. J. Barrera, *Au Louvre: le sol raconte l'Histoire, n.4, C.R.D.P.* (Paris, 1986).
15. J. Nicourt, *Céramiques médiévales parisiennes* (Ermont, 1986) (J.P.G.F.), p. 253.
16. D. Orssaud, "La céramique médiévale orléanaise." *Archéologie de la Mlle d'Orléans 2: Revue Archéologique du Loiret*, no. 11 (1985), p. 144; Nicourt, *Céramiques*, pp. 34, 54, 63, 71.
17. H. Selles, "Céramiques médiévales de Chartres," *Association pour le développement de l'Archéologie urbaine à Chartres* (Chartres, 1987).
18. Ibid.; and D. Orssaud, "La céramique."
19. Nicourt, *Céramiques*.
20. Thoison, *Céramiques*, p. 11.