

ICWA LETTERS

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What the French do When they Have Nothing to do

The author goes out to watch *le film*, reads *le comic*, throws *la pétanque* and pushes *le caddie*.

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

PARIS, France

December, 2000

THE GREAT UNIDENTIFIED CULTURAL OBJECT

A Scotsman lives on the fifth floor of our block, although he hardly calls himself a Scot since he comes from the Orkney islands, and he is half Norwegian on his mother's side. Thorfinn Johnston is his name. The other day, Thorfinn was most offended when he saw in the subway a very charming woman of 30 reading a comic book. She was obviously not a half-wit, but what surprised Thorfinn most is that she made no attempt to conceal the fact that she read that sort of trash. "She even giggled in public!" said Thorfinn with his inimitable chanting accent. After a few conversations on the topic with French people over the next couple of weeks, Thorfinn realized that he had lived for two years in France without knowledge of France's greatest but least-known cultural export — *la bédé*.

Bédé (from the abbreviation BD for *bandes dessinées*, meaning comic strips) are stories told in images and text. Unlike the standard, three-or-four frame newspaper strips of the *Peanuts* or *Wizard of Id* kind, *bédés* are narratives that go from one to 48 pages in length, sometimes more. One of the most typical series is Tintin, a globe-trotting reporter whose adventures take him — and his dog Milou — to places like the moon or the temple of the last surviving Incas. Tintin was so famous 40 years ago that President Charles de Gaulle (1944-46, 1958-69) referred to him as "my only rival." De Gaulle, who was a bit of a caricature himself, didn't know then, however, that another creature called Astérix was just being born. The *Adventures of Astérix the Gaul* tell the story of an imaginary Gaulish village of Brittany holding out against the Roman invaders.

By any measure, the commercial success of *bédés* is fantastic. Astérix has sold 300 million imprints since its creation. Only a third of these sold in France. The rest are sold abroad in 107 languages. The success of Astérix even shades that of Tintin, which sold 150 million copies since its creation in 1929. Nowadays, the great *bédé* rising star is scriptwriter Jean Van Hamme, who has sold 87 million copies of his three series, respectively, named Thorgal (a Viking warrior), XIII (a conspiracy-theory scheme) and Largo Winch (a jeans-wearing billionaire).

The planetary success of the *Schtroumpfs* (the original name of the Smurfs) might lead you to think that the genre is inherently childish. In reality, *bédés* have evolved considerably. Contrary to American comics series — mostly about super-heroes like Spiderman and Superman — the French and Belgian production of *bédés* is extremely varied and goes from the allegorical to the hyper-realistic. Some have a definite documentary quality. Others deal with social issues

or slices of real life. The bulk is fiction, either humorous or dramatic.

The French read and write like most other people, but *bédé* is among their most specific and distinctive reading — and it's all the more surprising if you think of them as cultural snobs. Last year, 1300 different *bédé* titles were published in France alone. To be sure, the Japanese produce even more: the biggest *manga* (Japanese comic) publisher produces more titles than the entire French book-publishing industry! But the point is that *bédé* is not only an important cultural export but also one of the three pillars of French pop culture, along with cinema and music. From a North American perspective, it is certainly the least known. In fact, the French don't produce TV series in the mode of Jerry Seinfeld, Dallas or Dynasty. This cultural space is filled by *la bédé*.

It is difficult to know when this genre was created because it has benefited from many inputs from different countries at different periods. In 1796, in the lower Lorraine town of Épinal, a printer began to produce colored prints with text for the teaching of moral lessons or maxims. The expression of *image d'Épinal*, has passed into the language to mean a touching, traditional scene. In 1827, Swiss teacher Rodolphe Töpffer introduced the idea of making a narrative out of a series of images with text. In 1896, American artist Richard Outcault introduced the dialogue bubble, which allowed more movement and better pace. In the 1930s, the Americans introduced the action hero. And then the genre stopped evolving in the US. Aside from a few underground artists like Crumb, comic-book production doesn't go beyond superheroes, and most of the creative energy now goes into animation under the impulse of Disney.

In French-speaking Europe, it was *bédé* that captured the creative energy of graphic artists and scriptwriters. The quality of drawing and narration are sharply above anything you find elsewhere, and *bédé* progressively acquired the status of a legitimate mode of artistic expression. The art historians' designation for *bédé* is "figurative narration". Belgians played an essential role in this process because it was one of them, George Rémi (a.k.a. Hergé), who created the first *bédé* in its mature form — Tintin. Like Disney at about the same time, Hergé understood that his first public was not children but parents — who had to approve of his stuff before they let the kids read it. He removed all licentious content — nationalistic, religious, sexual — and worked at making his material interesting to both children and parents. Not only did Belgian parents like Tintin, but French parents did too — thus creating a unified and sizeable market for a new genre.

Nowadays, most French and Belgian households, even the well-read, have an ample library of *bédés* — and my parents, in Quebec, also thought fit to build one for me and my brother. When I met my wife Julie, who grew up in Ontario and who had never been exposed to any of



This picture is about everything in this newsletter. It's taken from an Astérix The Gaul album (although the hero doesn't show here). These characters are a spoof from a famous French film, Marius, about life in Marseilles.

While playing pétanque, they debate whether they should t^{irer} (throw) or pointer (roll).

this, she thought, like Thorfinn, that *bédé* was just superhero trash and that this sort of reading was one more eccentricity of her husband's to put up with — until she realized that my friends and I, at suppers, could spend hours joking about it. She then concluded that she had fallen in with a bunch of nerds.

As I write this, the Thorfinn in me feels compelled to justify himself for reading that sort of thing. But I argue that one cannot understand modern France without having a clue about *bédé*. Because they occupy the place of serial TV in French popular culture, *bédés* are one of the best sources of information about contemporary France. Until the mid-1980s, the equivalent of TV channels for *bédé* was magazines, and some of the most creative, like *Pilote*, developed a new form of humor and esthetics, as well as a strong documentary side that not only reflected contemporary life as much as cinema but also defined it.

What never ceases to fascinate me is how so little of this stuff has reached the US. The genre is so unknown in North America — outside of Quebec — that Americans living in France can go for years without even noticing the phenomenon. The only bridgehead of French *bédé* in the US has been Hollywood, and this is because drawn storyboards are the natural means of communication in the film industry. The refined esthetics and effective narrative of French *bédé* has had strong appeal in Hollywood, especially with regards to science fiction and animation — and nowadays multimedia. Costumes in *Alien*, tribu-

lations of *Star Wars*, and sets for the *Fifth Element* were all inspired by French *bédés*.

Yet, Franco-Belgian *bédé* production is possibly one of the strongest cultural exports of *la Francophonie* nowadays, alongside music and cinema. In Europe, much of the production is available in translation. I visited the Frankfurt Book Fair last October and I can testify to the interest that French BD raises among German kids. German-speaking readers have bought as many copies of *Astérix* as the French, over 80 million — all the more surprising given that the topic and humor are quintessentially... Gallic.

I LOVE YOU/ME NEITHER

That the French like French cinema is not the least curious of their cultural traits, but for the purpose of asking what the French do when they have nothing to do, performance arts are important.

If Hollywood can be regarded as the world's cinema factory, Paris is the true capital of movie-going. Where else can you choose between 300 films each day? The entire American production is available, as well as the French, and what's left of European production. The French, who are avid *cinéphiles* (cinema lovers), crave cinema even more than TV — and if you look at any TV schedule, the slot from 9:00 PM to 11:00 PM is invariably dedicated to film. People flock to theaters. Major rebates are given to students, seniors and companies whose employees' committee has struck a deal with cinema chains. To the rest, cinema chains also offer monthly and annual subscription plans.

National film production in France represents only a third of all box-office offerings, but this should not be laughed at. French filmmakers are the ones in Europe that have resisted the onslaught of American cinema. Blame it on generous subsidies if you will. Yet the French public has peculiar tastes that only its national production can meet.

From the perspective of a North American, it is difficult to understand what the French can possibly like about French cinema. Yes, their historical re-creations are first-class. Sure, they have great actors. And great scenarios. But they rarely have the three together at once; action often lags even when they try; and who wants to learn French to get any of this? French filmmakers are regarded as intellectuals. And to hell with it if the films don't follow the slick rules of American action films — that's the whole point of it!

Yet Hollywood has played a silent tribute to French production for years. Of the 150 French films released each year, a good 10 percent are adapted and re-shot by American majors.

Truth is, French filmmakers have been freer than their
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American colleagues — and this has produced both the worst and the best. French cinema never suffered from McCarthyism. In the U.S., this aggressive anti-Communist doctrine of the early 1950s purposefully blackballed any artist suspected of spreading "Communist" ideas. As a result, it emptied American production of its entire social-discourse dimension for nearly 40 years. None of this happened in Europe, where people felt they had to be more polite towards Communists, especially in France.

The French *cinéophile* is an odd cookie by any standard. Even a genre like documentary film receives popular consideration. And the public pays up to 50 FF to be shown, for two hours, how people living in a small village preparing for a solar eclipse (*les Terriens*) — this year's big success.

In addition, the French relish a genre that is absolutely insufferable: the existential love film. Woman says, "I love you." Man answers, "Me neither." In a Swedish production, it generally ends there. But the French Woman takes a spoon and yanks her eyeball out of the socket — or jumps off the Pont-Neuf.

Like most North Americans with any sense, I used to hate this type of film with a passion, but a few months in Paris taught me *how* to look at it. The revelation came to me in March of 1999, on a Sunday afternoon, while watching a film with the promising title of *Rien sur Robert* (Nothing about Robert). My wife Julie had dragged me to the theatre because the film featured her favorite



This is a *Schtroumpf* (a.k.a. *Smurf*). *Smurfs* speak *Smurf*, which consists in replacing every other word with *Smurf*. A whole album of this is *smurfly smurfing*.



Famous French actor Gérard Depardieu playing the friend of Astérix, Obélix, in a film adaptation of the equally famous bédé. The dog is not Tintin's Milou.

French star. As expected, there really was nothing about Robert: it was a two-hour-long story of a messy separation with lines of the I-love-you-me-neither type. In Montreal, the moviegoer stranded in such a production generally looks in awe at all this while trying to get the point. But the reaction of the French crowd taught me that this was no more than intellectual bullfighting. There is no point. They laugh left and right and take it for what it really is: verbal jousting. The meaning is therefore not in what is said, but in the saying, which puts the interest at a different place. It may not make it more interesting, and some films are just plain boring, but it tells you where to look. It's like kung-fu films: the point is not the story, it's not even the fighting, it's the motion, like choreography or ballet. For that matter, have you ever wondered why there should be any music when you watch ballet? It would be boring without it. By analogy, the French like verbal jousting and they sometimes put a film around it to make it more palatable. As to the Americans, they admire the circus with a passion, and they put a film format around it to make it bearable.

French artists are no less French than other French, and I suspect that they're addicted to the chivalric aspect of jousting. Some of their endeavors are downright suicidal, like seeking to re-live the absolute moment when someone falls in love, or the emotion of frying an egg. It cannot possibly be interesting, but they do it in the spirit

of experiment — and to move crowds. Like the charge of the light brigade, it's heroic but hopeless. Don't get me wrong: American independent film producers do this too, but with beginning artists that have nothing to lose. In France, it's the biggest names that fight for this sort of role — for the artistic beauty of it, and damn the torpedoes.

The French have fantastic actors, and a stand-alone star system to match their egos. Oddly, the public and filmmakers develop such fixations on certain artists that they literally fill the screen for entire generations. You would think that agents don't care if their client is over-exposed, but the French just love to see the same actors over and over again. Granted, this verges on the ridiculous. One year, French actor Gérard Depardieu plays the title character of Colonel Chabert in the film adaptation of a Balzac novel. The next year, Depardieu plays Balzac himself in a TV series on the author. Here's an even better example. In 1999, Depardieu played the Gaulish warrior Obélix in *Astérix against Caesar*, a screen adaptation of the famed *bédé*. Bernard Clavet played the title character. Twelve months later, Clavet played the role of Thénardier in a TV series based on *Les Misérables*, where Depardieu played Jean Valjean! No wonder French cinema produces an impression of déjà vu.

This kind of fanaticism is extended to the actors' children: yesterday, there was a TV series directed by one Catherine Huppert (Isabelle Huppert's daughter) starring Julie Depardieu (Gérard's daughter). In a way, French performance art was much influenced by a Renaissance theater genre known as *commedia dell'arte*, in which actors, generation after generation, played the same masked characters like Arlequin, Macaroni and the like. Only in the case of modern France, it's the same six actors that play all characters. Deep down, it's like French politics: same guys, different masks.

The strong empathy the French have for their artists is even more obvious on stage. Even if you don't understand a word of French, you should go see a French play, whichever, for the sake of observing a strange custom: the mandatory 12 curtain calls. In most capitals, London included, the crowd claps twice and off they go. If the performance was excellent, they will give it thrice. If the performance was brilliant, they might stand up — at least to pick up their coats. In Paris, it's not rare to suffer a standing ovation of 10, 12, even 15 *rappels* for mediocre performances — Montrealers do this as well. This is extremely embarrassing as well as annoying, and I've found myself not going to the theater for fear of this abomination.

I still seek an explanation for this odd custom. It may be that the star system is so powerful in France that the public is just hypnotized by at the sight of semi-gods incarnate. Maybe. It's also possible that the French public, being very empathetic, want to get themselves involved in the action of the play by getting the actors to bow and

bow until they develop lumbago. Maybe. But in my opinion, this nonsensical behavior is a relic of 17th-century *cabales*. These were conspiracies of artists scheming to sink rivals. Burning the theater down with the actors inside is one sure means of getting rid of an opponent, but here's the problem: the rival may then die in glory. The surest way of destroying a rival is humiliation, and to do this, what better way but boo the play during the premiere before the King, Queen and gossips (as they called critics back then)? This was *la cabale*. To counter a *cabale*, the artists onstage had to fill the house with their own partisans, who would then reduce resistance to silence — by loudly approving or fighting, and often both. This was how one “triumphed” in Paris — where even artists and intellectuals struggle for greatness, like politicians. *Les cabales* have all but disappeared, but obviously not the tradition of showing overboard and undeserved enthusiasm.

PÉTANQUE AND MODERN-DAY CHIVALRY

Games are a universal pastime, but it's always amusing to look at what people play at, or with. French men do not carry in the trunk of their Peugeots the traditional gasoline-smelling mitt and baseball, but a set of four soot-covered *pétanque* bowls.

Pétanque is a Provençal game whose name is a contraction of *pieds tanqués* (feet together) after the position you take to throw the bowls. For all the fuss the French make about traditions, *pétanque* is a recent one — it was invented in 1907 — but it has spread all over the country. Any patch of gravel is likely to welcome a group of men to throw metal bowls weighing a pound apiece.

I played my first game last summer in the Normandy



These guys are playing rest-of-the-world football. Wearing no helmet or armour, they push the ball with the foot, hence the word.

town of Avranches while my hiking-club friends and I waited for supper. The spirit is more like horseshoe throwing — a Canadian game. It's played in teams of two, and the goal is to get your bowls as close as possible to *le cochonnet* (jack).

Because of the uncanny way the French have of dividing themselves over any kind of issue, a major philosophical debate among *pétanquistes* has to do with whether one should *tirer* or *pointer* (throw or roll). Sometimes, there's a mess of balls around the jack. So you listen to them and sip your pastis while they decide whether you should throw or roll. Most French readers will think I make up the present dialogue, but it's absolutely true. It started when I began to hesitate about what to do.

“Maybe Jean Benoît should roll,” suggested Daniel, the city-hall advisor.

“Non! The guy is a thrower, I tell you,” said Antoine, the retired nurse.

“Do as you think, then,” concluded Pierrot, the train-ticket vendor.

I throw, hit the center but make a mess of the game and we lose.

“Nevertheless, Daniel,” said Antoine. “You see he's a natural thrower.”

“Rolling would have been better.”

“You did fine,” said Pierrot.

Pétanque is the only thing resembling a sport that I have played in 23 months of living in France. I've always hated any kind of organized activity involving lines, rules, sticks, rackets, baskets, bats, pucks and balls. Hence my predilection for the simple outdoors. Some people think sports are an allegory for life. I beg to differ. At 12, I got involved in a Canadian football league one summer, but spent most of the time on the bench — because I couldn't get it into my head that I should wait for the quarterback's call to bash the meaty bully in front of me. Here's my allegory of life: starting before the call is the only sensible way to overrun the opposing bully. But — and here's my tragedy — it's the bullies who make the rules and who regard such behavior as bad sportsmanship. This destroyed all my hopes for a professional sports career. You can sense how sad I am. So I have to admit that such a bad case of pouting made me miss a big chunk of French culture. The only time I even watched organized sports was for the

final game of the Euro 2000 Cup, where France nailed Italy 2-1.

This lack of personal interest in organized sport didn't prevent me from asking questions, nonetheless. The two most important sports in France are rugby and rest-of-the-world football — that is to say, soccer. American and Canadian football should really be called “trench-warfare-ball”. What strikes me about both rest-of-the-world football and rugby is the odd sense of amateurish chivalry that the French put into it.

Professional rugby players in France have a hard time getting the public's approval and respect. People like their favorite players to have better things to do the rest of the week. There's a certain beauty at the idea of amateurs maintaining a high level of competition and risking severe injury just for the heck of it. In sports newspapers, readers, columnists and athletes still debate the worth of professional rugby ten years after the fact. One custom of amateur rugby players is particularly endearing. It's called the “third half”. After the game, players of both teams — those uninjured, anyway — get together at the bar and get smashed. I find this cute, in the way watching hugging 200-pounders can be cute.

French rest-of-the-world football is much more professional than rugby — kids who look promising are taken to special schools at the age of 12. But here too, French fans resist and resent the sport's professionalization, and both professional and amateur teams compete for the French cup. These games between professionals and amateurs raise great interest. Naturally, the pros often beat the whey out of the amateurs, but the French like honorable losers as much as winners, and everyone is happy with the result. Last spring, however, to everyone's surprise, the Calais amateur team defeated *les Bleus* — the world-cup winners. Naturally, this started a polemic just before the European cup, suddenly upping the ante. It probably contributed to the *Bleus's* ultimate victory by forcing them to collect their wits.

I have always thought that this amateur-challenge system should be introduced in North America, if only to break the downward spiral provoked by excessively high salaries and commercialization. I am convinced that professional players would chicken out of the challenge...

BELOTE ET REBELOTE

I don't like organized sports, but I do like organized games. Cards, I think, are supremely interesting because they involve highly mathematical concepts of probability, as well as psychological tricks — their only interest. I have never been brilliant at cards, just lucky. I am a slow wit and often see myself drool in awe at my partners' fantastic capacity for guessing what I'm desperately trying to hide. I'm a sucker at card games, but a good sport.

Naturally, the French play card games of their own. The most common is *la belote*. I played *belote* for the first time last Christmas, which I celebrated with the Marsault family (see JBN-9 and 16). This is how it came up. Jean-Marie, the father, was serving me a second glass of *digestif* when someone exclaimed “*Belote et rebelote!* (Off we go again!)”. I knew this referred to a card game but I didn't get the connection.

“Now, tell me, Jean-Marie, what's that, *la belote?*”

“You don't know?”

“People say this all the time.”

“It's a card game.”

“I know, but I have no idea of how it's played.”

Jean-Marie looked at his children with the small eyes of an Algerian-war veteran who had played more than his fair share of card games between operations. In no time we had a deck of cards, and a table running. I am accustomed to playing some fairly complicated games with friends and family (always at Christmas), but none is more complicated than *la belote*. It is played by four people, in teams, with 32 cards. The trump changes all the time depending on the caller's choice. Cards go from Ace to Seven, but their actual order of strength is Ace, Ten, King, Queen, Jack, Nine, Eight, and Seven. This seems almost normal, except for the odd place of the Ten. But when a particular suit becomes trump, then the order changes to Jack, Nine, Ace, Ten, King, Queen, Eight and Seven! The way they count points is just as confusing, and pointless to describe.

We began with a couple of hands, just to teach me as they said, but they liked the teaching so much that we played for the better part of the next two days — *belote et rebelote*, as they say. Contrary to *pétanque*, the game is not quintessentially French in the least. It comes from central Europe and was adopted by the French only at the beginning of the century. But the French took to it with a passion and four million of them participate in *belote* competitions, with the hope of winning the National Cup of *la Fédération Française de Belote* — yes! So you miss something of the French experience if you don't play *belote* once.

Belote is the only possible preparation for the most obscure of French card games: tarot. This one I discovered when I found myself stranded with people I hardly knew inside a refuge below Névache Pass while a blizzard was raging outside in the French Alps. There was just no way to continue our alpine ski-trek (see JBN-14) that day and I went to ask the refuge warden — the one resembling a cross between a bison and General Custer — for a deck of cards. He gave me the tarot deck.

Tarot is called a card game because it looks like it

from a distance of about 20 feet. There the resemblance ends. As a matter of fact, the game was invented in some 15th-century castle in northern Italy not very far from our refuge, and the game has kept its arcane Renaissance and aristocratic flair. Instead of the standard 52 cards, a tarot deck has 78. Each suit has 14 cards instead of 13 — they inserted a Knight between Jack and Queen. And they added another suit altogether: 21 cards of trump, with allegorical, sometimes sassy figures. The 78th card is known as the Excuse: it can replace any card of any color. This is the easy part.

The game, however, is structurally aristocratic and therefore alien to a North American mind. Like all card games, the goal of tarot is to hoard the maximum number of cards. To do this, all players announce what they can get from the hand they have and the most ambitious player is given the “contract”. Then all other players league against this guy — very medieval. But here’s the odd twist: the conditions to filling the contract change depending on what the caller had in his hand. When the caller has none of the good cards, he must make a lot of points to fill the contract. But if the caller has the best cards, he needs only to do half as many points and less is demanded of him. If any of this sounds fair and logical to you, you’re cut out for tarot.

Outside of France, tarot cards are mostly used for divination purposes, but there are a fair number of Frenchmen and women who know how to use them to divine what the people in front of them hide in their hand. The game is particularly popular among university students and we had no trouble replacing missing players among the loafing Saint-Germain-des-Prés students stranded inside in the refuge below Névache Pass.

SHOP TILL YOU DROP

The French lead a normal, modern, post-industrial life, and most free time is spent doing *le shopping* and pushing *le caddie*. It bears much in common with organized sports, if only because the French wouldn’t tolerate the absence of a referee. In the case of *le shopping*, the referee is the government.

Rebates and sales are carefully regulated in France. The practice goes back to medieval corporation and guilds. Nowadays merchants cannot judge themselves anymore, so the Prefecture of police controls prices. You can consider yourself lucky when a merchant whispers to you an offer for a three-percent rebate. The only period of the year when selling prices are free is during *les soldes* (the sales), which last a month each and start in mid-January and mid-June. Then the game is still on, but the referee is somewhere else having a break.

All these rules do not deter French shoppers from being active the rest of the year. The French shop doggedly, and can spend a lot of time looking around to save
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a franc, which isn’t much. This incessant activity compensates somewhat for low salaries — the French are not paid much, really. But it really owes its interest to one disposition of mind that they hide very well: blame it on the war or on remote Scottish ancestry, but the French are thrifty to the point of avarice.

Naturally, there’s no official source to back up this theory, but dozens of observations point toward the fact that there are 60 million crypto-Scrooges around.

Lighting is one big item familiar to travelers. In France, the term for a well-lighted house is Versailles, which gives you the spirit of it. Any traveler is familiar with the timer lights in corridors, the seven-watt reading lamps in hotels and the B&B owner checking to see if you turned off your light after you left. But there’s more to this. For instance, the showerhead-that-won’t-stay-on-the-wall is another deliberate saving scheme: it makes washing so disagreeable that you’ll skip a day, or stay in as little as possible, and it saves buying a shower curtain. In downscale restaurants and junk-food joints, the paper napkins are never out for free usage, and neither



To the French reader: this is how to fit a showerhead. Notice the water falling vertically.

are the mayonnaise, salt and pepper. Were these free, there would be a genuine Parisian showing to hoard away the entire condiment display.

Progress being what it is, the French have also devised strategies around to avoid three-dollar-per-load-of-washing Laundromats. In every apartment we visited in search for a home, rental agents always proudly showcased the drying rack, almost invariably in the hallway or over the bathtub. There’s a double benefit in walking from the Laundromat with a ton of wet clothes: it saves on the drying, but more importantly on the clothing, since tumble-dry is bad for fabric fibers — spend not, save twice! Those who don’t care about this last detail will, after having washed their stuff at a certain place because it’s 25 FF for six kilos instead of 30FF for seven, cart their wet clothes for drying a block away at the cost of four francs for five minutes per load instead of five francs for



*Renovation
Man
feeling at
home.
Don't tell
his mom.*

six minutes per load. They got it all figured out.

To be fair, physical constraints are just as important as thriftiness in determining shopping karma. In Montreal, Julie and I used to make one grocery trip a week. This is not possible for most French city-dwellers because kitchens are minuscule, space is crammed and the fridge can barely contain two days of grocery. There just isn't room for a cubic meter of toilet paper or a square yard of Coke cans — there's so little space that garbage is collected every day. It's time-consuming to buy what food you need every day, but most have no choice. The upside of this space constraint is that the French have chosen to go to restaurants more often rather than level the entire cityscape and build more square meters from scratch — for which we should all be grateful.

Outside of the food business, the busiest store in Paris is neither *les Galeries Lafayette* nor *La Samaritaine*; it's Castorama, a hardware store whose name could be freely translated as Beaverama. The reason for this is that the French are constantly doing their own home repairs — one of the stupidest money-saving schemes, since it can be so time-consuming. Owners do so, understandably, but tenants too, because under French law tenants are responsible for everything inside their apartments. According to the lease they signed, they must return the place in its original condition if they want back the original two-months-rent deposit that they left with the owner — interest-free, since the landlords are no less penny-mongers than the rest of them. Besides, there's so little space that they go crazy at devising space-saving schemes.

Here's another incentive for renovations: the French often have absolutely no kitchen when they move into a place. The French, being French, think it practical to move from house to house with their kitchen appliances and

cupboards, leaving only the sink behind. Fortunately the law has provisions about sinks, otherwise you could kiss them good-bye as well. I have a Canadian friend, André, who rents a 2000-dollar-per-month flat on boulevard de Courcelles, in Paris. But he had to work his butt off for a month and half building his kitchen before he could live in the place. In proper North American fashion, André concluded it was cheaper to buy a hand drill than to rent it, whereas the proper French behavior is to walk around town to borrow and return the drill in order to save a franc.

This is why Parisians travel around town carrying pipes, planks and plasterboard on their heads, shoulders, bicycles and cars. On bad days, the ambiance is reminiscent of 1910 Canton or Shanghai. In most cases, all this work is an absolute waste of time, since a plumber or carpenter would do it better, but just try to get a plumber or carpenter in Paris. Besides, it costs! All in all, time is less a problem than the franc it saves.

But the French are odd Scrooges: they'll go a long way to save a franc, but they'll use their hard-earned savings to purchase 43-FF-per-kilo range-raised chicken, see a third film that week or buy one more adventure of *Astérix the Gaul*. Different place, different priorities. □

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