

European Stone Festival

A celebration of stone carving and masonry

More than 150 stone carvers and masons from a dozen countries, including England, gathered in the elegant gardens in front of the red sandstone Château des Rohan in the small town of Saverne near Strasbourg in France at the end of May for this year's European Stone Festival, reports Alex Wenham, an English carver living and working in Paris, who took part in the festival.

The three-day event, with two days of carving, was hosted by the stonemasonry school of the town in collaboration with the European Association of Stone Masons & Sculptors (EASMS), the masonry works at nearby Strasbourg Cathedral and Les Compagnons du Devoir, the organisation behind the touring apprentices of France.

The idea for this increasingly prestigious annual event goes back to 1997 when a group of stonemasons from Freiburg, Germany, took part in the annual French competition, *Rencontres de la Pierre*.

The stones provided for this year's contest were a mixture from the region, including the famous red Vosges sandstone, of which the Château des Rohan and Strasbourg Cathedral are built.

The festival was run following the now familiar format of a carving competition over two days. The work is judged and the festival concludes with a prizegiving ceremony followed by a public auction of the works carved during the event. The public are encouraged to come and see the carvers working in the open air and despite bad weather on the Sunday, around

2,000 visitors came to walk through the park and see the stone being worked. A large number of them returned on the Sunday evening to bid for their favourite pieces in the auction.

The proceeds of the auction go towards the costs of the festival and this year will also help establish Intercultural College Fieldwork, which the EASMS intends to set up.

There was a choice of two themes for the carvers – 'Romanesque art' or 'the symbolism of the unicorn' (the unicorn being the emblem of the town of Saverne).

The themes were variously interpreted widely or closely with a high level of creativity, technical prowess and imagination. First prize went to an Hungarian carver, who produced an immaculate double-portrait bust of the heads of a woman and a unicorn in the Vosges sandstone.

I (Alex Wenham) won fifth prize for my relief panel of Christ in a mandorla, inspired by carvings I have seen at Ely Cathedral. Jim Holmyard, a recently-qualified stonemason based in Bristol, also won a runner-up prize for his 'Rampant Unicorn' shield.

The festival is growing in stature every year, so it was encouraging to see at least a dozen Union Jacks among all the different flags on the bankers, including those of one team from Wells Cathedral Stonemasons, and to see the high calibre of work on those bankers.

The organisers of the festival should feel proud of promoting the welcoming and collaborative



Above. Alex Wenham working on his prizewinning 'Christ in mandorla', inspired by work he had seen at Ely Cathedral, during the European Stone Festival last month.



Right. The carving of the heads of a woman and a unicorn that won first prize. It was produced by an Hungarian craftsman.

Below. The scene in the gardens in front of the red Vosges sandstone Château des Rohan in the small town of Saverne near Strasbourg in France at the end of May during this year's European Stone Festival.



atmosphere that encouraged the masons and carvers, who came from the USA, Canada and Armenia, as well as Europe, to interact with each other throughout the festival.

Next year's festival will be held 27-29 May in Freiburg, Germany. Details will appear later in the year on the festival website at the address below.

www.stein-festival.de