

# More *immortelles*

Recording French beaded wreaths in Cuxac d'Aude

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## Introduction

Back in journal 127 I put together some results of research on *Immortelles*, the very characteristic french bead and wire wreaths, ornaments and bouquets which now and again turn up at British antique fairs, in antique shops or in private collections, museums or exhibitions. We have featured them over the years in the Bead Society newsletters and journals, although these have nearly always been perfect examples – some have even been components which never made it into the final item! So (using the new flash drive memory stick which each member will be receiving as a gift in this, our 30th year – see page 4) you can look this up, as well as two other pieces back in Journal 109 (Olson-Phillips 2012 & Robertson 2012),

*Immortelles* were made to be used **outdoors**, and in particular as grave memorials and decorations. They were bought to be used in churchyards, graveyards, cemeteries and in grave structures (mausolea). And the most important thing about them (as compared to fresh flowers or flowers made in more ephemeral media) was that they were meant to last forever – hence *immortelles* (immortals).

Traditionally, they are not recently-made things. For example, we know that they were imported from France into New Orleans before the mid 19th century (Huber et al 1974, 185), and, even though back in 2018 I presented examples still surviving in two french cemeteries in the villages of Capestang and Capendu, it is

rare to find them in situ, and it is worth noting that they will not be found in every region of France.

This year, we were fortunate enough to find another cemetery in the Occitanie region which not only had different types of *immortelles* which we could record, but also many of them could be tied to a particular family mausoleum **and** approximate burial date, so we have now been able to form a rough timeline for not only a general trend in colours, but also a general trend in traditions. Obviously this is only a rough guide, and will have to be tested by future discoveries, but it will serve for now as a skeleton to hang some bead 'flesh' on!

## French Cemeteries

Most of the *immortelles* I have discovered still in situ were in southern french cemeteries in what used to be called

the Languedoc-Roussillon area (now the Occitanie region). In my previous article I compared the rows of 19th century french classical and Romanesque mausolea to their Roman counterparts from 2000 years ago (Morris 2018, 20),

The view in Fig 1 shows an avenue of french mausolea in the cemetery outside Cuxac d'Aude in the Département of Aude. The cemetery was opened in 1878. These are stone-built structures, with or without doors, and all the *immortelles* recorded in this article were placed on or near the outside of one or other of the structures in this cemetery. Wherever people could come and see them, they were placed to be seen.

## Types of *Immortelles* recorded

As can be seen by the many photos presented here, there were lots of different types of beaded *immortelles* which we recorded this year, some of which were new to us (e.g. displays inside glass domes), and others which were more familiar such as crosses and wreaths.





## Crosses/crucifixes

A common type of beaded *immortelle* is the cross or crucifix, and some of those we recorded this year appear to be among the earliest types. They were made by wrapping a wooden or metal core cross with beaded wire made of two strands of beads twisted together (Fig 4). Crucifixes using mainly black and purple beads and metal heads or figures of Christ can be seen in Figs 2–4, dated c. 1880–1895.



## Wreaths & Bouquets

The most popular types of *immortelles* in the 19th and into the early 20th century were wreaths (of various shapes) and bouquets, presenting groups of flowers in permanent arrangements (Figs 5 & 7–13). Some beaded flowers were used in conjunction with ceramic flowers to make very elaborate floral arrangements (Figs 9–13). Ceramic leaves also appear (Fig 12–13)

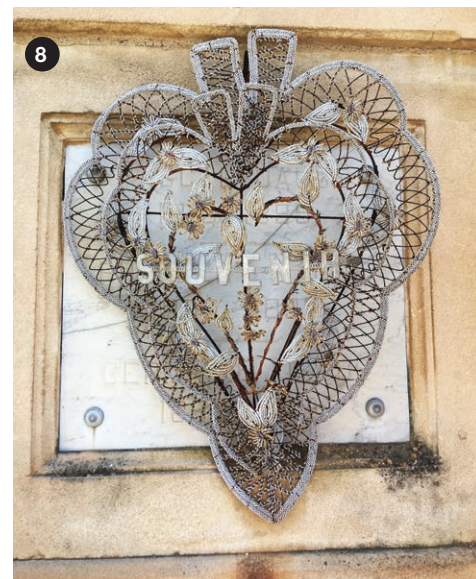


Fig 1 A row of mausolea in the cemetery at Cuxac d'Aude, Occitanie

Figs 2 & 4 A cruciform *immortelle* with black seed beads. c. 1880

Fig 3 A cruciform *immortelle* with purple seed beads. c. 1885–95

Fig 5 A bouquet of beaded flowers with beaded leaves and stems.

Fig 6 A mausoleum with two beaded wreath *immortelles*

Fig 7 A quatrefoil wreath made with pink beads. Probably 1917 (note the rosette denoting military service – these seem to have been added to graves relatively recently)

Fig 8 A heart-shaped wreath made with white beads. Probably 1919.

Fig 9 An oval wreath made with dark pink beads and green leaves, with added pink ceramic flowers. Probably 1918.

Fig 10 An oval wreath made with various pink and purple beads and green leaves, with added pink ceramic flowers

Fig 11 A detail of the beads and ceramic flower in Fig 10





Fig 12 An ogival wreath made with various dark pink and purple beads, with added pink ceramic flowers and leaves. c.1917–1932

Fig 13 A detail of the beads and ceramic leaves and flower in Fig 12.



Figs 14–16 A large wire-framed *immortelle* made with black rounded and tubular beads. Coloured beaded flowers made of smaller seed beads are displayed under a central clear glass oval dome. c. 1897



### Displays inside glass frames

A type of *immortelle* which we found this year is one we have not recorded before and we found two examples (Figs 14–17). These were very large wire frames threaded with large rounded and tubular black beads whose material we were not sure of. Some beads had a shiny surface while others had a patinated matte surface (Figs 15 & 16). They are probably very eroded glass. I had originally thought that they may possibly have been a material such as black ebonite or vulcanite (a vulcanised product of rubber and sulphur) invented in 1846 by Charles Goodyear, but as vulcanite fades in sunlight, their current dense black colour would probably have faded into a yellowish brown over the 100+ years they have been in the cemetery.

These large black beaded frames had originally surrounded a glass domed

compartment, an example of which was still in situ on the more complete example shown in Fig 14, while the similar but very broken *immortelle* in Fig 17 has now lost its glass centre.

The glass compartment in Fig 14 still contains the white, pink and yellow coloured beaded flowers which were originally put in there.





Fig 17 A large wire-framed *immortelle* made with black rounded and tubular beads, like the complete one in figs 14–16, but now broken and decaying. c.1884–1900

Fig 18 The remnants of a beaded bouquet of flowers which is broken, and all that now remains are a few stems and a flower head.

Fig 19 A french legal notice on one of the graves in the cemetery at Cuxac d'Aude. It translates as 'this concession in a state of abandonment is the object of a recovery procedure. Please get in touch with the mayor's office'.

Fig 20 A completely ceramic *immortelle*.

## A Rough Timeline

As many of the *immortelles* we recorded this year were directly associated with dated graves, we were able to make a note of the dates associated with each type. As noted above, this rough timeline is for not only a general trend in colours, but also a general trend in traditions.

- The earliest dated *immortelles* were black or dark purple, crucifixes or large frames with glass domes (Figs 2–4 & 14–16). these date from c. 1880–1900. Various shades of pinks, purples and whites are used for wreaths dated from at least the period of World War I. Bouquets probably also come into this time frame
- Ceramic flowers are being used alongside beaded frames by at least 1918
- Ceramic leaves (as well as ceramic flowers) are being used alongside beaded frames by c.1917–1932.

## Beads, Leaves, Flowers & Components

Most of the *immortelles* shown in this article were made in France using french-made seed beads strung on various grades

and thicknesses of wire. The black beads used in the large frames around glass domed centres were bigger than seed beads, and were probably glass.

Highly-coloured ceramic flowers gradually appear in otherwise completely beaded *immortelles* (Fig 9–11), and ceramic leaves also appear instead of beaded leaves (Figs 12 & 13). Finally, when beaded *immortelles* are no longer made or used, they are replaced by complete ceramic arrangements (large or small) such as that shown in Fig 20.

## Survival, Decay and the Future

Whilst researching my previous article (Morris 2018), I found many *immortelles* which had started to decay, or were in such an advanced state of decay that they were almost unrecognisable, with but a few scatters of seed beads left on the ground. In Cuxac d'Aude we didn't find many, but some were broken and decaying (Figs 17 & 18).

Another feature of french graveyards which will ultimately affect their survival is bound up in french law, as when an old grave becomes derelict and unattended, a notice from the local government is

often attached to the plot requesting any surviving relatives to come forward. If they don't, then the grave is cleared and the plot re-assigned. And clearance would mean that everything (including the wreaths if they were there) would be cleared away. The notice in Fig 19 is such a request.

We are pleased to have been able to record such wonderful beaded examples in yet another french cemetery, but *immortelles* may ultimately be destined to survive only in private collections away from their original contexts? Many are still performing their original function even after 100 years or more, but *immortelles* won't remain immortal forever, so we will continue to search and record!

## Bibliography

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