



Anne Morgan The American Friends of Blérancourt

The grand reopening of the Franco-American Museum in 2017 following expansion and preservation, marks the centennial of the United States' entry into World War I.

Marion Laffey Fox

ON JUNE 24, 2017, the American Friends of Blérancourt celebrated the long-awaited reopening of their beloved chateau and museum in Picardy, about an hour and a half northwest of Paris.

More than 400 guests attended the festivities that also marked the centennial of the United States entry into World War I. During colorful and poignant ceremonies marked with appearances by distinguished patrons and guests, Baroness Bernard d'Anglejan-Chatillon, of Paris

and Palm Beach, was an important part of the program.

As chairman of the AFB board of directors, Didi d'Anglejan has been deeply involved in the preservation and development efforts of the organization since 1985, when she formally founded the group with Eugenie Angles, a Foxcroft School friend who was president of the group for many years. Together, they recruited board members, raised funds for expansion and, as high-profile individuals, created awareness about this

remarkable resource deep in the French countryside.

"It all began the night I had dinner with Pierre Rosenberg, who was curator of Blérancourt as well as a curator of paintings at the Louvre at the time," she explains. "He said, 'Didi, I need your help. There is a unique little museum in Picardy that celebrates three centuries of Franco-American friendship, but it is languishing.'" Shortly after her initial visit there, she says, "I immediately had a vision of what it could become,

and I'm still involved. That was 34 years ago!" Since then she has not only chaired the board of directors, and spearheaded development efforts; she assisted in the establishment of offices in New York and Paris, and is responsible for expansion and preservation efforts as well as creation of the stunning gardens that distinguish the property. It was a bittersweet moment when she handed over the reins of the organization to gallerist and art dealer Franck Laverdin, and d'Anglejan became chairman emerita.

"In the early 2000s, a decision was made to embark on an ambitious plan of expansion and renovation," she says. "But in Spring of 2007 the workers discovered archeological vestiges from the Middle Ages as well as part of the original 17th-century chateau, and that delayed things," she says. Finally, construction got back on track under the aegis of noted architect Yves Lion. A new bridge was built to enter the museum and a dramatic glass structure bestowed an exciting fresh look on the complex. Adrien Gardère, a French museographer, designed a new exhibition incorporating three components: The Influence of the Enlightenment; The American Revolution and Two World Wars.

Today, Blérancourt also celebrates the strong ties between its French and American associates. The very active French Friends of Blérancourt have been responsible for acquiring much of the art that now includes over 15,000 paintings, sculptures, artworks and documents; and a rich concentration of World War I memorabilia that includes a Model-T American field service ambulance. Its important 19th- and 20th-century art showcases American artists who worked in France and French artists who worked in America, as well as a remarkable paper reproduction of the service uniform Morgan wore during humanitarian efforts for the American Fund for the French

Wounded. Created by the famous Belgian artist Countess Isabelle de Borchgrave, the piece is located on a mannequin on the museum's lower level.

The collections of important 19th- and 20th-century art showcasing American artists who worked in France and French artists who worked in America, also include a newly acquired sculpture by Charles Lemire, *Treaty of Friendship*, which depicts Louis XVI with Benjamin Franklin, and portraits of Native

Within the mix is Paul Colin's poster project for *La Revue Nègre*, that memorializes the first appearance of singer and dancer Josephine Baker in France. "It's like a very small Smithsonian," d'Anglejan-Chatillon says.

After opening ceremonies and a festive tented lunch, guests explored the estate and strolled the beguiling Gardens of the New World at Blérancourt, where a soft breeze rustled the leaves of oaks, maples and statuesque Virginia magnolias. Below the specimen trees, wonderful seasonal gardens directed by Didi d'Anglejan to be planted with American species, and designed by Americans Mark Rudkin and Madison Cox, and Frenchman Michel Boullcourt. These are nostalgically augmented by vast fields of red-white-and blue wildflowers propagated from American seed stock.

Created a century ago, in the sobering years of World War I, this idyllic scene then looked much different. Situated on the strategic route between Paris and Brussels, the facility was the brainchild of its founder, Anne Morgan, a daughter of the American financier J. Pierpont Morgan, one of the first listed members of the Social Register. Young Anne Morgan, who spent much of her life in France, was especially devoted to the betterment of women

of lesser means, but threw herself into the war relief effort with gusto.

Accompanied by a handful of wealthy New York friends, Morgan and her little band settled into the Château de Blérancourt, where they organized nurses, drove ambulances, opened libraries, staffed relief centers and cheerfully tackled all manner of hands-on activities. Among her most avid supporters was Anne Vanderbilt, an exceedingly generous volunteer, who later initiated one the first drug-control programs in the US.

At the time Morgan organized the Comité Américain pour les Régions



Above: Anne Morgan (left) with Anne Murray Dike, an American doctor and philanthropist who headed the American Committee for Devastated France. Both women were made officers of the French Legion of Honor in a ceremony held at Blérancourt in 1924.

Opposite page: A contemporary view of Château Blérancourt.

Americans that underscore the French fascination with that particular culture. There are likenesses of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson by Jean-Antoine Houdon and paintings by John Singer Sargent, Childe Hassam, Romaine Brooks, Fernand Leger and Alexander Calder.

Dévastées (CARD) with physician Anne Murray Dike to aid in the reconstruction of French villages, she totally understood the power of photographic images as invaluable tools in her goal of social advocacy. To that end, she faithfully chronicled the often-difficult work of CARD volunteers, that in turn resulted in gratifying fund-raising campaigns.

Many of the most powerful images were the work of Harry B. Lachman, who had moved to Paris in 1912 to become a painter. In a July 29, 1918, letter to her mother, Morgan vividly described Lachman's work. "I do hope you will get to the office to see the photographs that Lachman took up here at Changis only last week. That man is such an artist that it is a joy to have him help this way and he is only too glad to do it... People at home seem to care more about the photos than anything else, as nothing that one tells them is able to give them the real picture," she wrote of the wrenching images of bombed-out villages, tattered and starving children, ghostly refugees and shattered shards of buildings.



Above: Quincy Adams Morgan with a bust of her great-great-aunt Anne Morgan.

As Morgan increased her use of photography as illustrative vignettes, she continued to work in France for years after the conflict was over, and her enthusiastic leadership of the American Woman's Association in New York resulted in massive media attention. Unlike her famous father, who reputedly struck a

photographer with his cane for snapping a photo, Morgan consented to photographs and interviews, and even posed for advertising campaigns to raise awareness about her \$7.5 million campaign for the 27-story clubhouse for the Association she was hoping to build on west 57th Street.

Before the US entered into World War II, Morgan served as chair of the American Friends of France and vice-president of American Relief for France, two roles that again catapulted her into dramatic high-profile publicity campaigns. On the eve of her departure for France in March of 1940, she was seated at a Singer sewing machine, pretending to be "sewing a child's dress which will be sent to a French family evacuated from the war zone." Another image, dated May 11, 1940, shows "French civilians in a border village along the Belgian frontier being evacuated with the aid of the American Friends of France, whose nurses and welfare workers were on hand with cars and ambulances to assist the French authorities."

During the 1940s she was often photographed in the military-style American Friends of France uniform, or no-nonsense business attire. Her 1944 exhibition entitled *France Alive* celebrated Bastille Day in New York, and featured 69 enlarged photographs that highlighted "a resume of the Frenchmen, who since 1940 never ceased fighting and serving on all Allied fronts."

Anne Morgan's life can be said to have been defined by fierce dual passions: She strove to improve the lives of working women by helping them help themselves; and was committed to strengthening the bonds between France and the United States. Eventually, the latter became her overwhelming *raison d'être*.



ABOVE: ANNE MORGAN; BELOW: © IMAGI GRAND PALAIS / ART RESERVE / NY

MUSEE FRANCO-AMERICAIN DU CHATEAU DE BLERANCOURT © MARC POIBIER

The American Friends of France, which Anne Morgan founded in 1939, published a pamphlet to introduce itself as "a direct descendant" of the American Committee for Devastated France, whose mission was to ensure that "the people who were battling bravely to begin life anew in a region ruined by war would be helped to help themselves." Although it is not known if Morgan drafted this document, it was well known that her overarching goal of empowering others to help themselves was an important part of her life's philosophy. Her ideology included access to education, healthful lifestyle alternatives and collaborative efforts with other experts to make change a reality. This novel approach to problem-solving was totally alien to old-fashioned attitudes about so-called "charity" that she felt "solved no problems, but in fact retards their solutions."

If certain regions of France became beneficiaries of Anne Morgan's largesse, her enormous posse of volunteers, including doctors, nurses, librarians and social workers, were women. This is noteworthy, as she rejected stereotypes associated with gender, but embraced "femininity" laced with sensitive qualities such as "tact, intuition, and imagination," and often explained publicly that her new order included the idea that "men and women will no longer be antagonists but mental and spiritual as well as physical partners. After that we will not have a woman question at all, but human questions." Her thinking embraced the entirely radical idea that "women be allowed to consider themselves human beings."

In France, Morgan was determined to change women's lives by providing training in the newly emerging professions of social work, public health, nursing and librarianship. A 1947 pamphlet issued by the American Friends of France sidestepped potential criticism by emphasizing that "any attempt, or even appearance of it, to force American ideas and methods upon the French would be



Above: The "red-white-and-blue" poppy field at Blérancourt.

Opposite Page: Anne Morgan (right) and Anne Murray Dike passing under "the arch of staves" at the Boy Scouts camp in Compiègne.

carefully avoided." Convinced that her ideas would never work without the total cooperation of the French people, she said: "Finally before any project of permanent character was undertaken, the American and the French would agree upon two fundamentals, first that the French wanted to undertake the project, and second, that if successful, the French themselves would carry it on."

Although Morgan expected nothing in return for her years of service, the French government showered her with many awards, including its highest honor, the rank of Commander of the Legion of Honor, and a plaque dedicated to her in Les Invalides. But her life's legacies are

no more apparent than in the stunning, newly reopened Musée franco-américain du château de Blérancourt. she continued to travel there until the late 1940s, but after two strokes was confined to her estate in Mount Kisco, where she died peacefully on January 31, 1952. The New York Herald Tribune obituary read: "Anne Morgan had two countries, her own and France, and today she is mourned by countless friends in both. She was a philanthropist



Above: A historical reenactment at Blérancourt.
Below: The Château as seen from the side.

in the broadest sense of the word, for the causes she held dear, she not only gave money, but her time and fullest energies.”

As such, her dedication to France never ceased, and her will stipulated that ten percent of her residuary estate “be used exclusively for the upkeep of a part of the Château de Blérancourt and its grounds, for recreational facilities for the people of the village.” After other bequests were made, the remainder of funds became part of the Riverside Foundation, “to perpetuate the memory

and spirit of the friendly relations of this country and France, and to help women in their chosen fields of commerce, cultural and social interests.”

A century later, it is fitting that Morgan’s generosity and daring ideas that caused permanent changes in American societal mores, and relieved the suffering of war-torn France in tangible ways, be celebrated. In America, her work is embodied in the activities of American Friends of Blérancourt and its association with other charitable entities such as the

Florence Gould Foundation, which has generously supported Blérancourt causes. In France, it is sweetly poignant, within the scene of red, white and blue American poppies dancing in the fields of Picardy. Their utter simplicity somehow pays her deepest homage, in the place she so dearly loved. 



ABOVE: ANNE WATT; BELOW: MUSEE FRANCO-AMERICAIN DU CHATEAU DE BLERANCOURT © MARC POIRIER