

eventually plunging into the ethnic hubbub of lower Belleville. Here and there, the pace slows to an amble while we take in an astonishing diversity of building styles (old-Belleville architecture students are lucky to have such a repertoire on their doorstep). It slackens again for us to notice an eighteenth-century water "regard," or admire one of street artist Nemo's quirkier murals. Rue des Cascades has us dawdling once more. "No more mediocre apartment blocks!" screams a faded banner hung across the street. "Simone and Fernand deserve better!"

Simone? The incomparable Signoret, of course, who took the lead role in the 1952 classic, "Le Casque d'Or." The movie, filmed at number 44, was based on the fabulous destiny of one Amélie Hélie, so-called "Queen of the Apaches." A local blonde bombshell, she made the front pages in 1902, when her spurned lover and his rival (backed up by their respective gangs, armed to the teeth) fought it out to the death. Flush with notoriety, Amélie went on to briefly star in her very own racy revue. Photos of the day show her posing, scantily dressed and coiffured to kill.

As we thread our way through narrow Passage Platin, it's hard to resist peeping into secluded gardens that once belonged to Belleville's better-off workers. These days, they're home to upwardly mobile "bourgeois bohèmes"—bobos, for short. (Lucky old judges, architects and dental surgeons, who have snapped up the gems of "cottage" Belleville.) Round here, "bobohisation" is pulling the neighborhood up by its bootlaces. Good news, surely? Well, yes and no says Angénic. It also means that some of Belleville's most engaging passageways are disappearing behind locked gates. A Bientôt à Belleville negotiates with residents to keep a degree of access when it can.

At the edge of Belleville Park (shown), the city suddenly spreads out beneath us: the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, the Centre Pompidou in the distance, with its primary colors standing out like a convention centre for clowns. This grandstand view, with its symbolic vines and water cascades, nearly made way for a casino (Angénic still splutters at the memory). Popular protest finally scotched the development. Where the placards once waved is now the site of the educational Maison de l'Air. It's taking a breather for renovations.

According to the official leaflet of Ça-Se-Visite!, groups are kept small to make for more conviviality. Not just literary license, it means participants get to "Meet the Locals" (or at least a few of them). And all the while, our guide has been working hard to deliver on her promise, phoning ahead to keep us on track for our appointment with Creative Belleville. Compact galleries and bijoux studios straddle both the high and low part of the quartier, which for some years has been home to a growing artistic community. At most of the places on Angénic's

calling list, space is genuinely tight, and it's a squeeze to accommodate us all. On the other hand, it gets conviviality off to a flying start, and the conversation soon flows.

Gaby Rouchet restores and re-designs vintage jewelry; his creations sell in the vintage markets of London and beyond. Pliers in hand, a box of ancient buttons beside him, he works by the window where the light is best. In his little shop on Rue du Jourdain every surface drips with bakelite, chrome and crystal. He has lived all his life in Belleville. His natural enthusiasm and local knowledge are a PR person's dream.

"When I was growing up, the area was full of cinemas and music halls. That was a cinema," he tells us, nodding at the grim-looking Ecole Maternelle opposite us. "Whenever there was a storm, the rain came in through the roof, and they'd stop the film until it was over. And, you know, this whole area was full of water source-



es—fountains, ponds, cascades." He reaches for an old map to give us a better idea. "In fact, Rue de la Mare, that was where people came to fetch water, that's how it got the name."

In time-honored fashion, Guy Honoré is a Belleville incomer who has brought his craft with him. He ushers us into his ceramic studio on Rue Dénoyez, apologizing: "There's not much to see; it's all down at an exhibition at the moment." Maybe that's just as well, given that most of the space is taken up by a work in progress, a vibrant tree trunk made from glazed flowerpots. It's a private commission, destined to grace a large garden near Blois.

"It's great when someone puts his trust in you," says Guy, whose work is usually smaller scale. He admits he's still figuring out the best way to fix the flat, painted leaves so they sprout from its branches, rather than, well, drooping "because that would be 'con,'" he adds, grinning suddenly. He takes down an old earthen drinking flask to show us, handling it gently. "I found this in a stream, near where I grew up in Picardy. They used to make lots of things like this, but it's all gone now. You don't have to love money in a job like this, but then I love what I do."

Happy are those who have managed to get a foothold in Belleville before the prices started going up, agrees Ismail Yildirim, who set up studio in Rue Piat some fifteen years ago, some time after fleeing Turkey. A painting on the wall

incorporates his official paper of Safe Conductor; some of the busts he has sculpted are in marble and tufa from his native village. For Belleville, as for Bastille, Montparnasse and Montmartre before them, economics was what originally drew in artists like Ismail. "Who knows," he reflects, "maybe in a few years' time, people will talk about what came out of the Belleville scene at the turn of the twenty-first century."

Now, there are around 300 "créateurs," coming from as far afield as Cuba and the former Yugoslavia—a rainbow of nationalities in an area already known for its potentially volatile population and, let's be clear, some fairly gritty social conditions. Which makes it all the more extraordinary to learn that while the "banlieue" erupted last fall, Belleville stayed calm. Angénic claims some credit for the A Bientôt team, who have kept open a long-running dialogue with local youngsters, but she doesn't take all. "Young people round here always have in their minds the bad things outsiders say about Belleville," she explains. "They're immigrants, they're criminals, it's dirty ... They know what people say and they don't want to prove them right."

In a quartier where such different races and religions live cheek-by-jowl, what emerges is a picture of determination, hard-earned tolerance and pride. A banner outside the Reformist Church in Rue Julien-Lacroix says "God is Love" in half a dozen languages. Several churches in the area offer a regular Mass of Nations (and in Belleville the event lives up to its name). For some years, the Catholic Church down the road welcomed Muslims into its crypt to practice their devotions while their mosque was being built. Under a scheme called "Vivons Ensemble" ("Let's Live Together") young Jews and Muslims are doing just that, taking turns keeping watch over mosque and synagogue.

As the tour winds to a close, it strikes me as having been one of the most educational strolls I have taken in a long while. Above us, on the corner of Rue Julien-Lacroix, two workmen are frozen in the act of hauling up a chalkboard sign. The installation is a favorite with those who like their art, well, off-the-wall. The sign has changed over the years, but the latest motto seems singularly apt for a community that is working so hard to rise above outside prejudices. Roughly translated, it says, "Beware of Words."

Amen to that. But what's in a name? Well, in Belleville, sometimes quite a lot.

•Ça-Se-Visite!: Belleville tours every Sat, 2pm. Tours start from a designated Métro exit. Tours in English by arrangement. Cost: 12€. Tel: 1-40-06-27-41. E-mail: info@ca-se-visite.fr. Site: www.ca-se-visite.fr.

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