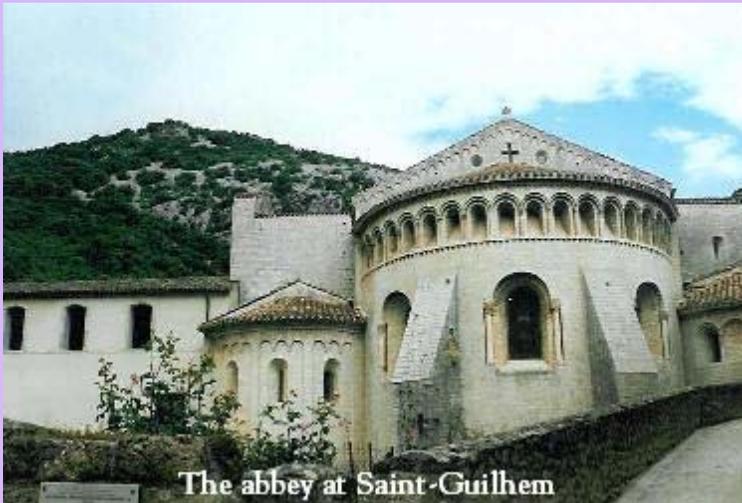


It started out as wishful thinking, really. I'd get an e-mail now and then from a French woman, then from another French woman. At one of the Baltimore Polymer Clay Guild meetings, I met a third French woman visiting a friend in Annapolis. Every now and then, I'd think, wouldn't it be cool to see what the French are up to with polymer clay, but then the thought would drift away as nonchalantly as it came.

Then my husband announced that we were going to spend a month in France -- he would be teaching and I would be *en vacances*. What better way to spend my vacation than visiting French polymer clay artists! An e-mail here and there, and before I knew it, I was on my way to Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert to stay with Xtine (pronounced Christine) Alibert and to meet my pen pals Chris Lajoinie and Claudine Peyrat (see the [Reader's Gallery](#) to see more of their work).



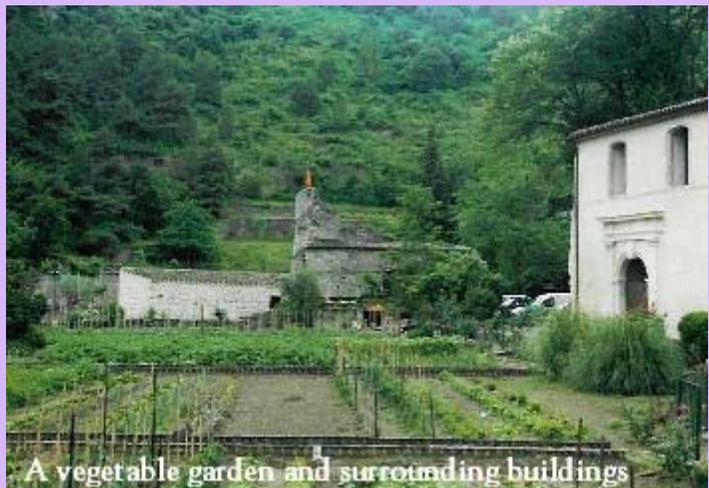
The abbey at Saint-Guilhem

Saint-Guilhem is an extraordinarily lovely hamlet in the south of France, roughly an hour from Montpellier. This small town, built around an abbey founded in 804 by Guilhem, Count of Toulouse and cousin of Charlemagne, is so exceptional that it is protected by the United Nations as a treasure to all of humankind.

As you can well imagine, the homes are all stone and the streets delightfully narrow (*etroite*, for those of you interested in boning up on your French). There are only about 300 residents in Saint-Guilhem, and I was lucky enough to get to spend two nights at the home of one of them: Xtine Alibert.



Narrow street and stone homes



A vegetable garden and surrounding buildings



Xtine, who has a Ph.D. in molecular biology, used to live in the United States, and now lives in Saint-Guilhem where she runs a small store selling beads and her own polymer clay works. When she visits the United States, Xtine also holds polymer clay workshop.

When I asked her how she transitioned from molecular biology to polymer clay, Xtine told a story very familiar to many of us: "I started to play with polymer clay as a hobby." Xtine wore the jewelry she made from polymer clay, and soon people were asking her to sell them her pieces.

Xtine (left) is wearing one of her trademark necklaces -- an explosion of twisted wire and beads

The hobby bourgeoned into a full-time occupation, and Xtine found herself being accepted into craft shows around the United States. She knew about a craft show in Nimes, also in the south of France, so she applied. She was accepted into the show and her pieces sold well, so after some time, she decided to settle in Saint-Guilhem to work on and sell her pieces.

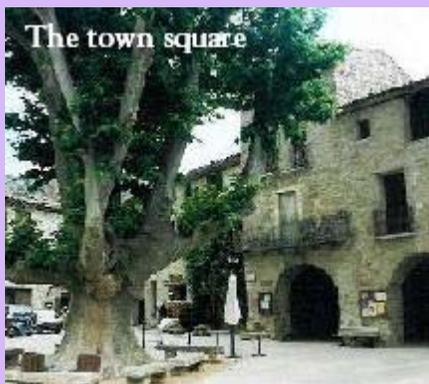
Saint-Guilhem, Xtine told me, is an ideal town for her shop, which sells beads, both purchased and hand-made, beading kits, earrings, necklaces, rings, vases, and many other items both polymer and non-polymer. Although small, Saint-Guilhem is very touristy, attracting thousands of visitors every year. Xtine's store, right next to the town square and across from the hotel, is in an ideal location (of course, in a town this size, all locations are ideal!).



The day I arrived, the town was locked into a cold spell with intermittent rain -- unusual for a June day. No matter -- I was excited to meet the other French women who were on their way from various locales.

I didn't have to wait for long -- Chris Lajoinie soon arrived from Toulouse and Claudine Peyrat from Cannes, and we spent some time in Xtine's home, roughly equivalent to what we in Baltimore would call a rowhouse, but only if rowhouses were made six centuries ago, with vaulted ceilings and plank doors.

The language switched between French and English as the four of us got to know each other better. I had met Xtine once before, and Chris and Claudine never. The three French women knew each other only slightly better, as they were all members of the French polymer clay list, *Créationfimo*.



After a lovely salad of fresh greens and summer vegetables, we decided to go to Xtine's store, where we would be met by another polymer clay artist, Xtine's friend Josiane Daubard.

It was drizzling just slightly as we made our way through the narrow passageways of Saint-Guilhem to the town square and into Xtine's shop. As cold and threatening as it was outside, we thought we would have the shop to ourselves for the afternoon.

Customers crowding into  
Xtine's store



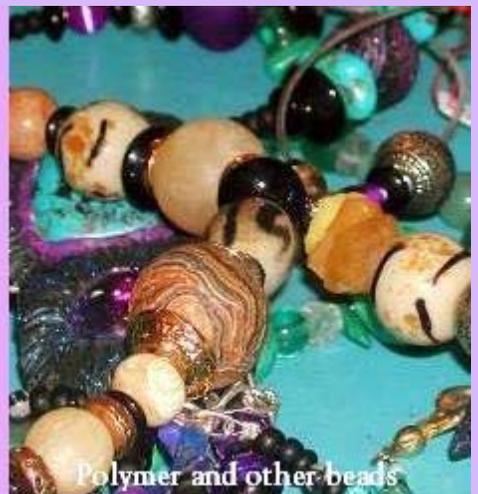
Apparently, a little chill doesn't daunt the tourists who come to Saint-Guilhem, because the shop was busy from the moment Xtine opened the door to let the four of us in.



Xtine's vases



Josiane Daubard, Xtine's friend, was a wonderful surprise since she was unknown to all of us except Xtine. Tall and slender with mounds of blonde hair, Josiane has been selling her work for 12 years. And such work -- lots of glass, stones, and earthy tones characterized her work, which also featured chunky textures and, incongruously, feathers -- but the mix worked wonderfully to produce very sophisticated necklaces and rings.



Josiane's necklaces

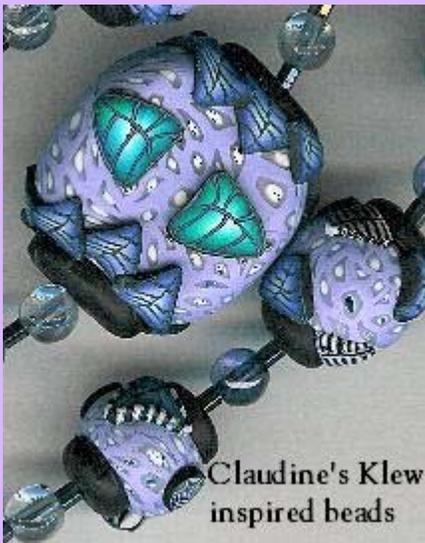
Photos by Chris Lajoinie

Josiane sells her work at crafts fairs in large towns like Reims, in the north of France, Grenoble, near the Alps in the east of France, and Nimes, in the south. As it was explained to me, she sells out of *les chalets*, little wooden houses from which artists sell their wares, usually around the holidays. I still can't quite picture it -- Does the artist bring the house? Does the town provide the house? Are they permanent, like the miniature medieval village near Annapolis that plays host to the Maryland Renaissance Festival every year? -- but it does sound awfully quaint, sitting in a small wooden house, snow gently falling, Christmas carolers in the distance, customers wandering in and out.



Josiane's feather necklaces and large bead necklace

N.B. Chris Lajoinie just told me that *les chalets* are little wooden houses usually rented out by the town organizing the fairs, which occur usually around Christmas.



Also with a box full of treasures was Claudine Peyrat, who by day is a professor of computer science. Although she's only been working with polymer clay for a short time, Claudine showed us some very professional pieces like the necklace at the left, which she created using [Karen Lewis' \(aka Klew\) drum beads](#) as an inspiration

Claudine's work is very much inspired by the ocean, as she lives on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Below, Claudine models a bracelet and a necklace she made that evoke the ocean with the plant-like strings of seed beads mixed with polymer starfish and shells.



Bracelet: ocean life



Necklace:  
ocean theme

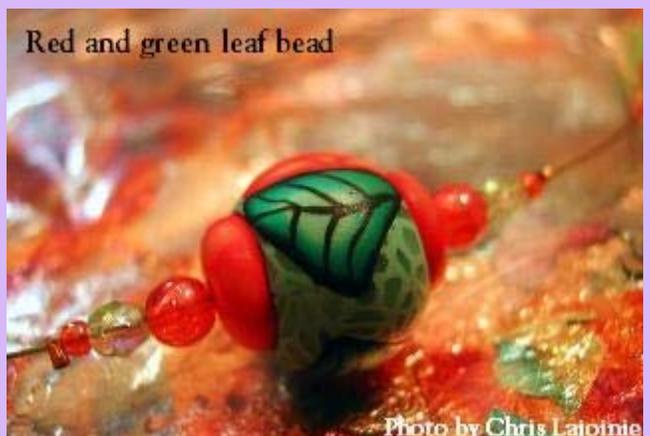
Photo by Chris Lajoinie

Claudine also made the two pieces below -- cats peeking out behind leaves and a Klew-inspired bead.



Cats and leaves

Photo by Chris Lajoinie



Red and green leaf bead

Photo by Chris Lajoinie



Chris models her earring made from polymer clay and beads.

Chris Lajoinie, who inspired me to make this sojourn south, also brought a variety of polymer clay projects with her. Her work is characterized by the use of color -- and a lot of it.



Colorful face cane pin

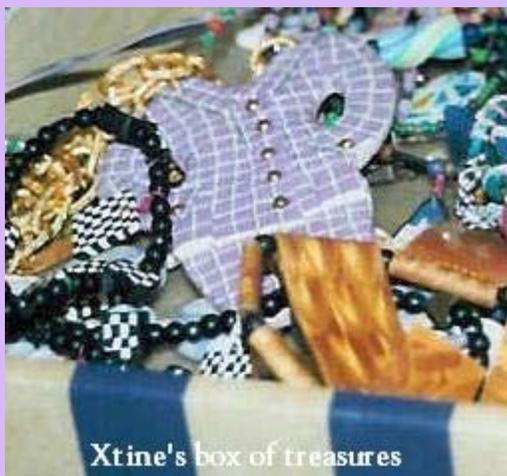
Pin: Lady in the Wind



Bead and fiber necklace

Chris, who used to work for multinational firms in their tax and legal departments, now does both custom work and work she sells in stores throughout France: two in Toulouse, where she lives (*La Fontaine de Boulou* and *La Maison de la Haute Garonne*); two in Bordeaux (*Galerie Agapi* and *Galerie des Créamaniaques*, and one in Paris (*Shadé*, in the Saint Germain quarter). She also has a website: [Couleurs Zaouli](http://Couleurs.Zaouli). Here she has posted many photos of her work, showing off the colors more brilliantly than my camera was able to capture.

Case in point -- the necklace to the left, which Chris made, incorporates fiber and polymer clay. I am so disappointed that the picture doesn't display the depth of color in the layers on the polymer clay beads.



Xtine's box of treasures

Xtine also joined in the show and tell by pulling out a box filled with pieces she has made over the years. Note the fabulous Chanel suit, strung on a Chanel-esque chain.

Below are two pairs of earrings Xtine made -- the flowers are for a friend of mine, and the hearts are for me. Aren't the hearts wonderful?



Flower earrings

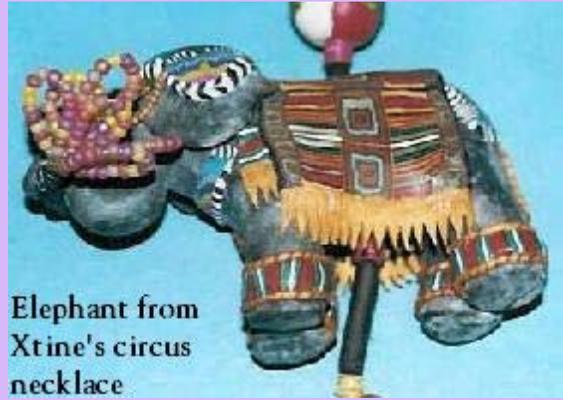


Heart earrings

Xtine also showed us a circus necklace she made. It was incredible. Two trapeze artists formed the center bead, and the rest of the necklace was individual circus animals, including a tiger, horse, and seal balancing a ball on it's nose. The craftsmanship was exquisite.



Xtine modeling  
her circus necklace



Elephant from  
Xtine's circus  
necklace

After spending several hours looking at each other's work (I'm sorry to say I didn't bring any with me to share), we turned to another favorite activity -- looking a books.

Claudine brought with her a copy of Georgia Sargeant and Celie Fago's new book, Polymer Clay: Exploring New Techniques and New Material, which I had never seen and was delighted to look at. Also, I was introduced to a couple of Can Do books I hadn't seen before: Images on Clay and Classy Clay with Rubber Stamps and Wire.

Between ogling the beads in Xtine's store, admiring all the wonderful polymer clay pieces everyone shared, and flipping through books, we were all pretty exhausted. We had promised each other we'd go out for a fancy dinner, and so we did, in the nearby town of Gignac. Dinner was splendid (a wonderfully creamy *escalope de saumon* with several side dishes, including *gateau de ratatouille*, followed by the most decadent *marquise au chocolat*, a dessert for which Chris promised she'd send me the recipe, it was so good), as was the company.

It was a wonderful weekend spent in the company of four gregarious and kind women, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat. I -- and you -- might have the chance: Xtine is thinking about holding a week-long workshop in Saint-Guilhem. If she decides yes, then watch Polyzine for forthcoming details!