

THE FOUNTAINS OF PROVENCE



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According to Webster, the word fountain comes from Latin “Fontana”, feminine of “fontanus” and being described as:

- 1: the source from which something proceeds or is supplied
- 2: a spring of water issuing from the earth
- 3: an artificially produced jet of water; *also*: the structure from which it rises
- 4: a reservoir containing a liquid that can be drawn off as needed

The fountains of Provence offer great architectural diversity. Rustic to elaborate, formerly essential elements of the village, the fountains became decorative elements; sometimes true works of art and engineering.



HISTORY

Before the advent of modern plumbing, the fountain, as the well or cistern, was the source of water for village life. Centrally located in the town, the fountain not only supplied water for the basic needs of drinking, laundry and washing, but also functioned as a social gathering point, being visited almost exclusively by the women.

Architecturally, the fountains vary in style, often as simple as trough, sometimes with divided chambers to serve as a launderette.



EXAMPLES OF UTILITARIAN FOUNTAINS IN RURAL REGIONS



Pictured is a primitive fountain and wash basin in the outskirts of the village of Lacoste. The sign declares the water to be potable. Many locals prefer to drink the mineral water over tap water, and especially for use in making their beloved coffee. Note the iron cross bars use to support water vessels while filling. The “source” is typically underground mineral springs, naturally surfacing or “piped” via clay tiles to a centralized location.



Downstream of the fountain, the mineral water is diverted through carved stone channels to a large stone basin. Here, the community washed their cloths and socialized. In the more affluent villages, basins were sheltered in enclaves cut into the hillsides or covered with clay tile roofed shelters. Today, as these fountains are being preserved and restored, many shelters are reconstructions or modern additions which never previously existed. Though most locals have modern washing facilities in their home or nearby Laundromat facilities, there are still some “old-timers” who prefer to do their washing at these basins.

PERNES: THE CITY OF FOUNTAINS



In the city of Pernes les Fontaines, as the name suggests, one can find more than 40 ancient fountains. From the simple and discrete, tucked into back alley nooks, to the massive and highly ornate iconic village square fountains, all at one time served as the sole source of water for village life.



Above is an example of the prioritized use of water in ancient days. In a Mediterranean climate, water was a limited and precious commodity, not to be wasted, and its use was strictly regulated. First priority was water for drinking. The fountain at the source was usually the most ornate at this point, all having iron cross bars to support portable water vessels. As domestic animals were extremely important to daily existence and could be sensitive to impure water, second priority was given to them, as visible in the middle watering trough above. Third priority was given to washing clothes and the water was diverted from the animal trough to the larger wash basins. Finally, overflow from the wash basin was diverted to irrigation canals.



