

Anne Morgan and the American Women Who Rebuilt France

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By Alexis Buisson September 2, 2015



Credit: RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Blérancourt) / René-Gabriel Ojéda

There were 350 women. Rich American women who came from the four corners of the United States. French-speaking. They left the comforts of high society for Picardy, devastated by the First World War.

The exhibition, “**American Women Rebuilding France**” which opens at the Coral Gables Museum on September 10th after being shown in a dozen cities in the United States highlights these brave women, members of the American Committee for Devastated France. Between 1917 and 1924, they were in close quarters with a population in tatters after four years of war, caring for them, feeding and educating them, rebuilding... Their leader: the dynamic Anne Morgan (daughter of the financier J.P. Morgan), who was in France during the war.

“She taught the children how to play basketball”

“The Germans left Picardy in ruins when they left. The situation was horrible,” explains Elaine Uzan Leary, the exhibition organizer and president of the American Friends of

the Château de Blérancourt. *Anne Morgan brought in cows from Normandy, and rabbits... She created centers, clinics, and classes to teach people how to rebuild a house, she organized parties, sporting events... She taught children how to play basketball, to make them feel hopeful again*".

Touched by the fate of the French civilian population, the French-speaking Anne Morgan traveled all around the United States to raise money for her cause and to find women who would be interested in it. Why women? *"Anne Morgan was helped by French soldiers, but since she was a member of women's clubs, like the Colony Club in New York, it was more natural perhaps to ask women, and women were also freer to take off"*.

Knowing how to speak French

There were three criteria one needed to join the Committee: *"You had to know how to speak French, drive a car and be able to pay for your passage on a ship to France"*. Anne Morgan spared no effort. She mobilized the celebrities and super-rich of the era (the Astor family, Charlie Chaplin, etc.) and came up with a book of recipes to be sold to raise money. She also got herself invited to a big boxing match in New York to publicize her cause. *"She knew that the men were the decision-makers."*

In the group *"of doctors, lawyers, professional women, was the 'unsinkable' Molly Brown, a survivor of the Titanic, who was also part of the effort. "They lived in wood shacks, in mud, with people who were poor, sick or traumatized," emphasizes Elaine Uzan Leary. Some of them went home right away. Others went back and forth between France and the United States. The Committee grew larger in France and was extended to several cities. These women were well-respected in Picardy. Anne Morgan received the French Legion of Honor.*

A story worthy of a film

The exhibition "American Women Rebuilding France" presents photos of these women at work, commissioned by Anne Morgan for fundraising purposes. They were dug up from the archives of the Blérancourt chateau in Picardy, which houses a Franco-American museum. A lecture on the role of women during the war will be given on November 5th at the Coral Gables Museum during Miami's "French Weeks".

The actions taken by Anne Morgan and the women on the American Committee for Devastated France are not well-known, undoubtedly because Anne Morgan herself was not well-known and interest in the Great War declined in the United States when the last veterans died off. Yet there is plenty of material to make a film out of it. *"It's a dream! I could see Meryl Streep in the main role," exclaims Elaine Uzan Leary. We're in the process of writing a biography of Anne Morgan. This type of work is of interest to screenwriters."*
