

# THE Château DIARIES

Artist and author **Lilianne Milgrom** shares her experience at an enchanting creative residency challenged by a coronavirus outbreak in Haute-Marne

Imagine this: You've been waiting a year and a half for the coronavirus to loosen its grip on the globe just long enough so you can take up a much-coveted writer's residency in a magical château in the French countryside. Despite your needle phobia you get yourself vaccinated, because you've got to do everything to try to beat this thing, right? Then you wait with bated breath for President Macron to open France's borders and let the croissant-hungry American tourists back in. You book your flight, get your nose scraped out for the Covid test, arm yourself with masks and wipes and off you go! Maybe there is a normal at the end of this nightmare after all.

On the plane you can almost forget that you've been sitting on your couch watching Netflix for the past 18 months and you toast the resilience of the world with your complimentary glass of champagne. You're not quite sure what you'll find when you land and you're relieved that Paris looks almost the same as you remember. You notice little pop-up tents throughout the city where French citizens wait in an orderly line for their free(!) Covid test, but despite the new pandemic protocols, the City of Light is back. The cafés are hopping and your favourite *boulangerie* still serves mouth-watering pastries.

You're wearing a constant grin on your face (beneath

your mask, of course) as you soak up all that Paris has to offer and you deride yourself for having harboured concerns about travelling. Those pre-trip anxieties and worries have melted away like butter on a freshly baked baguette – at least, that's how I felt as I boarded a train heading towards the sleepy village of Orquevaux in the Haute-Marne *département*, where my creative adventure was about to begin.

## One of a kind

It wasn't hard to identify the motley crew of fellow artists and writers who disembarked at the same station. The bulky canvases and art supplies spilling out of backpacks were a dead giveaway. We squeezed into cars waiting to transport us to the château. The excitement was palpable as we climbed the gravel road and caught our first glimpse of Château Orquevaux silhouetted against an azure blue sky. The original château was built in the 1700s but today's château was designed as a hunting lodge with numerous outbuildings (goat house, boat house, gatehouses, stables) in the style of Napoleon III. The magnificent estate sits in the





French countryside of Grand-Est, about 145 miles (233km) east of Paris.

The lord of the manor who greeted us was a far cry from my imaginary French nobleman sporting a velvet waistcoat and quoting passages from Diderot and Voltaire while twirling his goatee. The current châtelain is Israeli-born American artist and entrepreneur Ziggy Attias, whose duties include goat wrangler, plumber, lawn maintenance, and janitor.

After inheriting the château, Attias began realising his life-long dream of creating an international artists' community. His vision extends beyond the grounds of the gorgeous Chateau Orquevaux to the sleepy (and largely abandoned) little village of Orquevaux nestled at the foot of the château.

In the spacious bedroom I was to occupy for the coming weeks, an antique writing desk was positioned in front of a large casement window. The view was like a movie set:

**Above left:**  
The main *salon* in Chateau Orquevaux

**Above right:**  
The gardens provided creative inspiration for residents

**Opposite:**  
Chateau Orquevaux peeks through the trees

rolling hills dotted with majestic trees, and cows grazing on neon green swaths of land bordered by dark, mysterious forests. Melodic church bells added the perfect touch to an idyllic scene. How could I not find creative inspiration here?

### Trouble strikes

I spent the first few days exploring the magnificent grounds, working on my second novel, sketching, and getting to know my fellow residents. Friends and family back home were understandably green with envy. But on the fifth day, I awoke with a heavy sensation in my chest and a persistent cough. I put it down to the unseasonably cold weather and my inadequate wardrobe. That night I felt a bit feverish so to stay on the safe side, I went to the village pharmacy the next morning and left with a bag full of pills for fever, cough and ear pain – all for a ridiculously low price, might I add.

When I couldn't shake the symptoms, I made an

appointment with the local doctor (it took a good half hour to find his modest *cabinet* hidden behind overgrown hedgerows). The good doctor examined me and declared me healthy aside from some cold-like symptoms. He assured me that I did not have Covid but that the law required me to take a test. I happily complied, especially since the laboratory in question sent their nurses out to one's doorstep to administer the test!

It is hard to describe the shock of seeing the word 'POSITIVE' in my inbox at midnight that same evening. I immediately contacted the château directors and the news spread like wildfire. Although confined to my room, I could hear panicked voices and running feet throughout the château. I was feeling worse by the minute and home seemed very, very far away. But my overriding question was how, where and from whom had I contracted the virus? I was vaccinated, so how did that happen? When I

left the United States for France, the term ‘delta variant’ had not entered popular lexicon.

I felt like a pariah until it was established that three other residents had tested positive and were likewise confined to their rooms. Within a day, all the residents who tested negative fled the château. In an incredibly generous offer on the part of Monsieur Attias, it was determined that those who tested positive would quarantine in the château until such time as we tested negative for the virus.

**Team effort**

Considering that the residency had never had to cope with this type of situation before, the châtelain and his staff met the challenge admirably. There were a lot of logistics to figure out in a very short amount of time. Once the no-contact croissant and meal deliveries were sorted out, we Covid-positive residents were left to our own devices in the deserted château.

In my weakened state, I often lacked the energy to do more than lie in bed and imagine what it would have been like to live in a château a century or two ago. The experience took on a dream-like quality. A day or two could pass without seeing another living soul and I couldn’t help thinking of those



**I wandered alone in the château grounds, I sat on weathered wooden benches and filled my sketchbook with watercolour paintings**

eerie scenes from *The Shining*, starring Jack Nicholson.

At times, I felt as if I were living in a leper colony. The château ‘inmates’ – as we were wont to call ourselves – were forbidden to step foot outside of the château gates, and the outside world recoiled at the thought of coming into contact with us. But once I started to feel better, I was determined to take advantage of this truly unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I wandered alone in the grounds, crossing the little bridges that spanned

**Above:** Mixed media artwork created by Lilianne during her residency at Chateau Orquevaux

**Left:** One of the many objets d’art in Chateau Orquevaux

the dammed waterway and exploring the scattered buildings on the property. I sat on weathered wooden benches and filled my sketchbook with watercolor paintings. At night, I worked on my novel in progress and called loved ones back home who were understandably concerned.

Being stricken with the coronavirus was no fun. But now that I am safely back home and in good health, I feel extremely fortunate and grateful to have been quarantined in such a beautiful setting where for just a few weeks I could pretend that I was the châtelaine of the Chateau Orquevaux. ❤️

*For more information about the Chateau Orquevaux’s artist residencies, visit [chateauorquevaux.com](http://chateauorquevaux.com). Find out more about Lilianne’s creative work at [lilianneilgrom.com](http://lilianneilgrom.com)*



PHOTOS: LILIANNE MILGROM