



Reuge

The Magical World of Feathers

Hedgerow blue tits or hummingbirds from the Amazon – these are the tools of the trade for the plumassière who brings mechanical singing birds to life. We discovered a rare talent at Reuge

Information

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Lecture :

+ 10 min

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REGISTRATION

Perched up in Sainte-Croix (1000 m altitude) since 1865, the Reuge manufacture creates a world of sound and melody with its marvellous automata, many of which feature birds. The smallest of them are nestled inside snuffboxes, emerging on command to chirp their mechanical hearts out. The biggest are installed in pairs inside silvery cages known as Volières de la Cour.



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Inside the workshop, some artisans handle the mechanics, while others are responsible for the musical compositions. But it's the feather worker or *plumassière* who has the delicate task of dressing the avian inhabitants. It's generally agreed that this is "probably the most artisanal role at Reuge. It demands enormous attention to detail and great dedication. When we find a talented feather worker, we do everything we can to keep them." These are rare birds, indeed!

A shimmering tableau

The process of creation begins with the choice of plumage, which can be inspired either by real life or by the imagination. And the possibilities for customisation within the enchanted universe of Reuge's musical automata are virtually limitless.



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When composing the design and layout of the plumage, the artisan goes to an old stock of rare hummingbird feathers dating back to the 1960s. This delicate treasure trove is particularly appropriate for the tiny snuffbox birds, which measure no more than 30 mm. From this joyful iridescent palette, the feathers are chosen for their colours and for how the hues shift in the light. To complete the composition, the *plumassière* also has access to pheasant, partridge and cockerel feathers, as well as synthetics. From each of these, even the rarest, she takes just the tip, leaving behind the down and the thickest part of the shaft. But the utmost care is needed: if she cuts too far, the feather disintegrates.

Fine as a feather

The next step is placing the feathers, each according to its natural curve, beginning with the tail, then moving to the back, the breast, the throat, the wings, and ending with the head. The *plumassière* has to ensure she uses enough glue to stick the feathers firmly to the brass (for the snuffbox birds) or composite (for the *Volières de la Cour*) base. But not too much. For the minute singing birds, the space available inside their tiny nest is calculated to the nearest millimetre. The plumage of these diminutive musicians has to be light enough for them to emerge smoothly from their hiding place to perform.



Volière de la cour © Reuge

So, how many birds can an experienced *plumassière* make? Two per day, every day of the year (or almost...) in every season – whether the birds are leaving the skies of Sainte-Croix for warmer climes, or perching in nearby trees to converse with the musical automata of Reuge.

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