

A World of Labyrinths in Chartres

Jill K. H. Geoffrion

Labyrinth images have been popping up all over Chartres in recent years. The clergy added a labyrinth behind its insignia of Mary's Veil (shirt) and crown.



When the area around the cathedral was repaved, manhole covers with the Chartres labyrinth patterns were installed.

Even more significantly, when a logo was created for the celebration of one thousand years of history of the crypt of the cathedral, a labyrinth design featured prominently in its center.



In Chartres Cathedral it's easy to assume that the most important labyrinth story is the one under foot: an enduring medieval pavement in the nave that has absorbed centuries of prayer, curiosity, and quiet wonder. Yet the Chartres labyrinth has also become something else – an image that travels, multiplies, and returns. In 2025, that “return” took the form of two simultaneous exhibits. One was housed at the Musée de Beaux Arts in Chartres and the other was a plein-air photography exhibition that brought the global life of the Chartres pattern back home to the streets of Chartres itself.

When asked to meet with the head of the museum and the head of the Archeology department of Chartres as they planned the Labyrinth exhibit, I emphasized a desire that the people of Chartres might come to understand and appreciate how far and wide their labyrinth had traveled – as well as how much it had supported those in crisis around the globe.



A contemporary labyrinth created for the Musée de Beaux Arts Exhibit

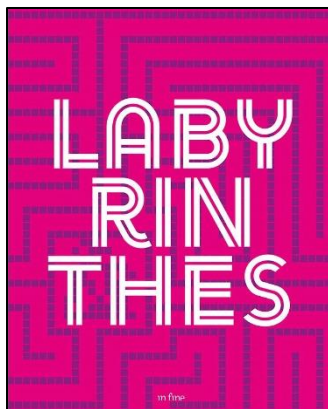
While the museum exhibition traced the labyrinth's long story – from myth to contemporary games – along Boulevard Chasles, one of Chartres's broad central boulevards lined with civic and commercial buildings, everyday passersby on foot and in vehicles encountered a different lens: sixteen large – format photographs of contemporary Chartres-style labyrinths – built and walked across the world.



Photograph of the labyrinth at Myanmar Institute of Theology, Rangoon, Burma, displayed on the Boulevard Chasles

The city magazine *Votre Ville* presented the exhibition explicitly as an opportunity to help residents see “the importance of their labyrinth across the world.” It translated global reach into an immediate, street-level experience. Outdoor exhibitions meet people where they already are – on their way to work, to school, to errands, or to the bakery. This matters in a town where the cathedral is both landmark and neighbor, admired and, for many, familiar. By situating the photographs along a public boulevard, the exhibit functioned as a kind of everyday catechesis of place – not in a narrowly religious sense, but in the broadest sense of teaching people to pay attention to their own cultural inheritance.

Labyrinthes, the museum exhibition, spotlighted the labyrinth's history, symbolism, and form – ancient precedents, medieval imagination, classical myth, manuscript and architectural motifs, artistic reinventions, and the long tradition of the labyrinth as both puzzle (the multicursal maze) and prayerful path (the unicursal labyrinth). The galleries placed objects and stories in dialogue, inviting visitors to make connections across time and culture. For those who wanted to go further, the exhibition guide offered additional depth, including my essay, *La diffusion planétaire du labyrinthe de Chartres* (The Worldwide Spread of the Chartres Labyrinth).



Cover of the Guide to the Labyrinthes Exhibition

The boulevard exhibit complemented the museum exhibit by emphasizing something different: the labyrinth as lived practice – built, walked, and shared. The museum showed the labyrinth as an idea across time; the boulevard photographs illustrated the Chartres

labyrinth as a contemporary social reality across geography. Seen together, the two approaches illuminated a fuller story: labyrinths are not only artifacts we inherit, but patterns we enact. In other words, the museum exhibit asked, “What has the labyrinth meant?” while the photographs asked, “How is the labyrinth being used now?”

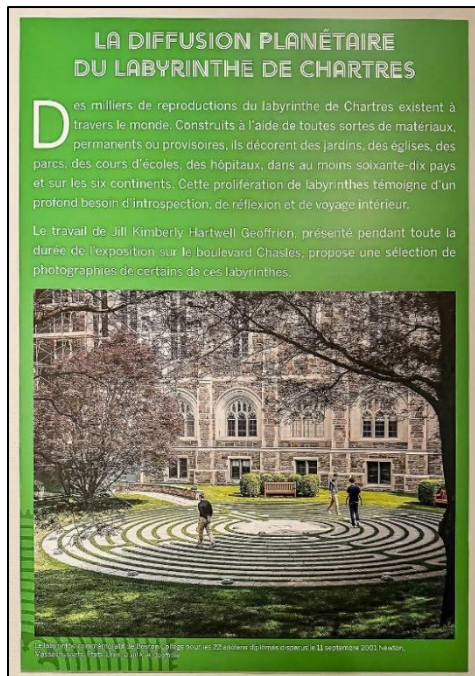


Exhibit notice about the Chartres labyrinth around the world



Temporary masking tape labyrinth installed in Kiev, Ukraine

As a minister and photographer, I approached the selection and preparation of the images with both aesthetic care and attentiveness to spiritual practice. I wanted the photographs – rendered as beautifully as possible – to reflect a sustained inquiry into how a form shapes people, and how people, in turn, reshape the form through the way they build it and walk it. That practical, embodied focus is visible throughout the exhibition: many images show labyrinths in use, with bodies turning and pausing, gathering and dispersing walking in silence, in reflection, and sometimes in prayer.

*Grace Cathedral Labyrinth
San Francisco, USA*



One of the exhibit's quiet revelations was geographical: the Chartres pattern appears in settings as varied as the mountains of Colorado, Centennial Park in Sydney, a Protestant seminary in Burma, Kyiv, Ukraine (before the war), and a Thai retreat center. Seeing these many countries and contexts was meant to widen the imagination of viewers standing in Chartres: the labyrinth is not only “ours,” not only “here,” but also “theirs,” “there,” and “everywhere” – reinterpreted in different landscapes and materials, and shaped to meet the needs of distinct communities.



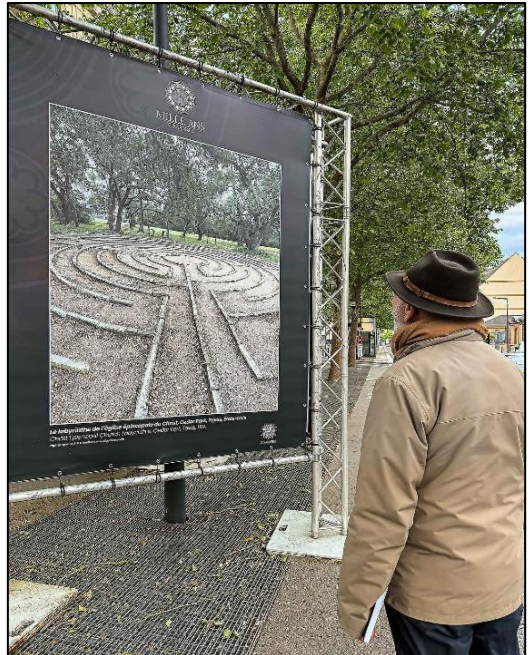
Centennial Park Labyrinth, Sydney, Australia

Importantly, several images emphasize the labyrinth's presence in settings marked by hardship and recovery. In one photograph, a group of women church leaders in war-torn Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo walked a temporary labyrinth laid out on the ground – an image that carries the weight of the region's long experience of conflict and displacement. In another, a stone labyrinth next to a motel outside the Big Bend National Park in Terlingua, Texas set in an immense desert landscape, offering a different kind of starkness: space, silence, and the human need for orientation. These are not sentimental images. They do not claim that a labyrinth “solves” suffering. Instead, they testify to a humble truth familiar to many labyrinth practitioners: when life is disorienting, a shared path to follow can be a gift.



Women leaders' event, Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo

The exhibit sought to make visible how the labyrinth movement works: a design is encountered, loved, replicated, adapted, and then used – quietly, repeatedly, by ordinary people. For residents of Chartres, the exhibit provided an opportunity to reframe the cathedral labyrinth from “a famous thing tourists care about” into “a pattern that communities worldwide use to keep going.”



*Christ Episcopal Church
Labyrinth, Cedar Park,
Texas, USA*

My dream included engaging questions of civic stewardship. As townspeople in Chartres grasp the global reach of the Chartres labyrinth, I hoped that they might ask new questions about access, interpretation, and care. What does it mean to host a world-famous walking practice if the original labyrinth is rarely walkable? How do we tell the Chartres labyrinth story with integrity – historical, spiritual, artistic – without flattening it into a logo? How might the city and cathedral collaborate to welcome visitors who come not only to look, but also to walk? It is one thing to hear that the Chartres labyrinth has replicas around the world. It is another to see those replicas inhabited – by people of different cultures and languages – turning the same path.

*Hôtellerie St. Yves Labyrinth,
Chartres, France*



In the end, *Chartres Labyrinths Around the World* functioned as a homecoming. The medieval labyrinth remains anchored in stone inside the cathedral where last year 12,021 people from Chartres and around the world came and walked it on Fridays from March through October (Lent until All Saints Day). But in 2025, the living story of that labyrinth – its “afterlife” in contemporary practice – returned to the city in photographs, hanging in public view, woven into ordinary days.

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All photos in this article are ©Jill K H Geoffrion.

To see more photos from the exhibit:

<https://jillgeoffrion.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/ChartresLabAroundWorld©JKHGeoffrion-Chartres-4-8-2025.pdf>

For other photos of labyrinth use around the globe:

<https://throughjillseyes.wordpress.com>

LABYRINTH PATHWAYS



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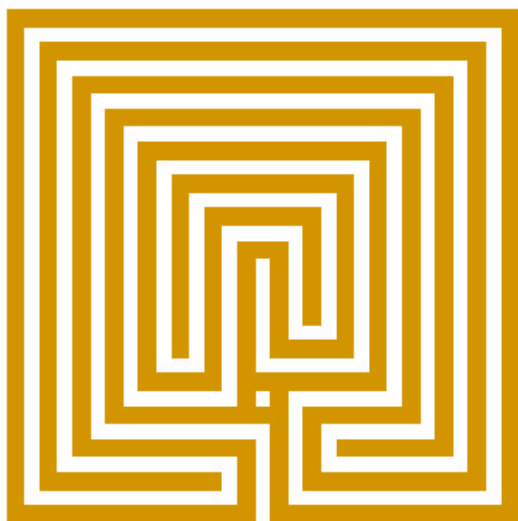
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LABYRINTH PATHWAYS

*Focusing on
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in Spirituality
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