



Jules and Aicha Petroz and daughter Ava with the 'other woman' in their life*

Living with MANET

Like many antique art collectors, Jules Petroz of Geneva does a lot of his work foraging inside banana cartons. His antennae are pricked by stamps, signatures, markings, dates and other telltale signs that prove the old adage: one person's junk is another's treasure.

He's had some coups at the Geneva flea market at Plaine de Plainpalais; Some stamps on a few bits of folded paper bought by Jules for 5 CHF were sold for 6000 CHF to a French art dealer who later sold them to a collector for 30,000 Euros.

But nothing quite prepared him or his

family for his flea-market discovery in 1997.

They were two rather ordinary framed pastel-on-paper portraits of a mother and daughter. Jules noticed a tiny tear in the paper in the corner of one of the frames and under the tear a smear of brown paint. His antennae began to hum.

He quietly told his wife Aicha about his discovery. The seller demanded 20 CHF, but they could only scramble 15 CHF between them. The seller agreed.

Moments later he ripped off the top woman to reveal a dusty, unvarnished, unsigned, oil painting of another

woman: Younger, her dress pulled down revealing her breasts and a nipple.

Jules who has passionately studied art in Geneva, Paris, London and New York was unimpressed. It was Aicha who instantly exclaimed: "An impressionist".

For two weeks the painting hung on the wall of their cramped one-room apartment in Eaux-Vives before Jules took it to Sotheby's and Christie's in Geneva.

Both arthouses were immediately excited by the painting. One painter kept being repeated: Edouard Manet (1832-

1883), the esteemed Parisian father of impressionism. Christie's demanded a photograph of the painting and sent it to their impressionist experts in London.

"They rang me back almost immediately. They called it a Manet and were incredibly excited and described it as an extraordinary discovery and said I just needed to get certificate of authenticity from the Wildenstein Foundation in Paris," Jules recalls.

Rather naively, he says in retrospect, he wrote to the now deceased Daniel Wildenstein, the head of arguably the world's largest and most powerful art house, and enclosed a photograph of the painting. Jules offered him a room at Hotel Le Richmond by the lake if he or his expert would come to inspect the painting.

He received the following reply from Daniel Wildenstein. Translated it read: "Thank you for your letter. Unfortunately in my opinion the painting you have sent me is not a work of Manet. It resembles the work of a later painter, about 1900, however it certainly does not lack in quality."

(For a profile of the Wildenstein family see the The Art of Power sidebar on page 23.)

It was an impasse: "It's a Manet. The painting is magnificent" was the continuous feedback from academics, curators, researchers, archivist and librarians of esteemed galleries, museums and foundations. But without a certificate of authenticity from the Wildensteins the young exposed woman was a work of art lost in purgatory. As Jules was to find out later, there are at least two other paintings deemed to be Manet's by a variety of experts that have also been blocked by the Wildensteins.

In January 2001, after an article in the prestigious Journal des Arts headed 'Manet Discovered', Jules and Aicha received a visit from one of world's largest art dealers, the Paris-based Charles Bailly.

The conversation, Jules recalls, went something like this: Bailly: Listen, your painting is not a Manet. I know who it is by. It is worth between 1.5 million French francs (300,000 CHF) and three million French francs (750,000 CHF), but only if I can take the painting to Paris to be certified by an expert for six weeks. If that works we can share the money.

Jules: Okay then who is it by?
Bailly: I can't tell you. Take it or leave it.

Jules: I'll leave it.

Since then Jules has learnt a lot about the machinations of the art world. He knows, and many of his contacts from galleries, archives and universities have told him: Bailly was buying for a collector. If he offered you 750,000 CHF you can bet he can sell it for at least three times the amount.

It's also common knowledge in art circles that Bailly has hunted down many paintings and sold them to the Wildenstein Foundation.

Fate has dropped Jules into a pool full of seasoned art predators and he knows he is well out of his depth.

After Bailly's visit, Jules and Aicha began their full-time research into the life and works of Manet. The more they uncovered, the more convinced they were that it was work by Manet.

But who was the woman?

According to Jules she was Mery Laurent, a woman of great beauty and charm, one of Manet's closest friends and the subject of a number of drawings by the artist. She was described as an indifferent actress, but a courtesan of genius. (Courtesan: a prostitute or kept woman associated with men of rank and wealth). Right up to Manet's final excruciating death of syphilis, she sent him daily flowers and delicacies.

While Manet may seem conventional if not boring by today's standards, his work rocked Paris society of the day. His paintings attracted the hostility of critics and were lampooned and decried as vulgar and immoral. Manet broke the rules. In a time when painted nudes were subject to a canon of beauty, long defined by the church and royalty, Manet painted women who, obvious to all, were prostitutes.

The story around Laurent is extraordinary. Born in a small village near Nancy in the north of France, she became pregnant at 15 and was forced to marry a shopkeeper to cover-up the scandal. The business went bankrupt, as did the marriage, and this adventurous and headstrong woman set off for Paris. Within a year she was on stage playing the role of Venus the Goddess of Beauty in an Offenbach production in Montmartre.

It was a besotted American in Paris, Dr Thomas Evans, a dentist to royalty, who set her up in her own Paris apartment





Dr. Thomas Evans

Bavarian, Italian and Greek kings and queens, Algerian emirs and Turkish sultans. His Paris clientele included France's imperial family, notably Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie.



Edouard Manet, the father of Impressionism

Mery Laurent's apartment, financed by royal fillings, became her stage on which she entertained her circle of artists and writers and developed a close and loving relationship with Mallarmé and Manet.

If it is Mery Laurent then why was it unvarnished and unsigned and why was it hidden behind another drawing?

Jules has his theories, but no tangible proof. But he has weaved together a strong case.

The stamp on the back of the painting frame is from a Paris street close to where both Mery Laurent and Manet lived. The clothes and hairstyle reflect the fashion of the day. The canvas is the standard size that Manet liked. It has the same dark brown/black colours favoured by Manet. The cracks of his black are similar to those in his other paintings. The proportion between the subject and the size of the canvas are similar to other Manet pictures.

But it is the subject, Jules says, that is positively Manet.

"It smells of Manet. The rough and deliberate brush strokes and the lack of definition between the subject and her background is very Manet. The fact that that she is revealing her breasts, the facial proportions, the way the lips are painted are all very Manet. She has Manet ears. No one else in Paris at that time painted nudes like that."

Perhaps most telling is that during the entire debate about the painting no other painter has been seriously mooted as the artist. Despite the Wildenstein rejection no one has proved that it is not a work of Manet.

Could he be wrong?

"I am sure some people think I am a fool deceived by my own stories or someone with a need to be noticed, a kind of greed for publicity," says Jules. "For me the hardest thing is to remain lucid and clear when talking about this painting.

When you live with a painting like this it sometimes makes you see what you want to see.

"It's interesting to see people's reactions. Everybody knows of Manet. His works are so defined in catalogues; he's everywhere on coffee mugs, t-shirts and in prints shops. Some people just shake their head when they hear our story. You can see them saying that it's impossible, that there can't be another Manet, long before they've heard our story."

After living with the painting so intensely for the past five years Jules and Aïcha have developed a sense of integrity with the extraordinary personages that they believe form the backdrop of the painting. While some of us would be sorely tempted to take an offer of several hundred thousand francs, Jules is determined to play out the drama to the end.

"I cannot let it go now because we have invested too much of our lives in it. I want to know the truth. I don't think it is that far away. Until there is a proper debate and final answer from the so-called experts I will not let it go."

Ironically Jules is not a great fan of Manet. "He's too much of a popular artist. For me he was the Andy Warhol of his era. He courted controversy. I much prefer classical works of the renaissance. But there are perhaps some parallels between him and me. Manet fought against the system. I feel like I'm doing the same in trying to get the painting recognized."

It is very much a work in progress.

The beautiful and provocative Mery Laurent



Edouard Manet
Mery Laurent

The Art of Power by Garry Littman

The Wildenstein family is arguably the art world's richest and most powerful player.

Based in New York, the family over four generations quietly and efficiently amassed art, wealth and power. Until recently the Wildensteins had escaped the glare of publicity, living in an insular opulence valued at some 5 billion USD.

Family secrecy was shattered when Lausanne-born Jocelyn Wildenstein, returning from the family's 66,000-acre Kenyan ranch in September 1997, found husband Alec Wildenstein in a compromising situation with a teenage model.

The messy divorce that followed was gourmet fodder for the tabloids. Despite revelations that the couple spent an estimated one million dollars a month to sustain their lifestyle and paid no tax (not one cent), Jocelyn herself attracted much of the glare.

She is an avid devotee of plastic surgery. To keep herself looking young, and in deference to her husband's penchant for felines, she gradually transformed her facial features into that of a cat.

The Wildensteins have also been accused of collaborating with the Nazis when Europe's great art collections were turned upside down and many great works went missing. The scandals have put some cracks in the family edifice and offered for the first time a glimpse of the lives of this fabulously rich family.

Their art collection, housed in massive secret lead-lined vaults in the USA and Europe (including undoubtedly Switzerland), hold one of the world's largest private art collections. It is said to include some 400 Italian primitives, two Botticellis, eight paintings each by Reubens and Rembrandt, three Velázquezes, nine El Grecos, five Tintoretts, 79 Fragonards, seven Watteaus and an enormous collection of Impressionist paintings (including Manet).

As one art collector told the magazine Vanity Fair in a recent feature on the family: "If it's obtainable privately, the Wildensteins will have it. No one has their resources."

It's an extraordinary monopoly. The family foundation is the omnipotent expert – the catalogue guardian – of artists such as Manet, Monet, Marquet, Gauguin, Pissaro, Courbet to name a few. Nothing moves unless it has the seal of approval of the guardians.

For Jocelyn it's a far cry from her middle-class roots in Lausanne as daughter of a buyer for a department store. As is the Wildenstein family a world apart from the often poor and passionate artists, over the centuries, who through their creativity have offered many a sacred glimpse into our humanity.

"Every artist dips his brush in his own soul, and paints his nature into his pictures." Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887), American clergyman.



The late Daniel Wildenstein and his two sons Alec and Guy. Photo by the late Helmut Newton."

For more information visit www.petroz.com (Mostly French, some English). GEM has 25 posters of the painting 100 cm by 200 cm to give away to the first 25 people who contact them. Posters must be picked up in person at the GEM office at 35 Rue du Stand. Call 022 322 1540 or email info@gem.ch The Geneva flea market (marché aux puces) is at Plaine de Plainpalais every Wednesday and Saturday.

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