

Pictures at an Exhibition

by Sara Houghteling

SYNOPSIS

In Sara Houghteling's first novel, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, named evocatively after Mussorgsky's musical work of the same name, we encounter a Parisian Jewish family caught up in the inferno of World War II. Max Berenzon, the first person narrator, is the only child of prosperous assimilated parents – his father Daniel, a successful art dealer, and his mother, a high-maintenance Polish-born concert pianist.

When the novel opens just before the outbreak of World War II, the Berenzon Gallery is one of the most thriving in Paris. Max's father has a stable of young but already famous artists under contract (including Matisse and Picasso) and Max assumes that he will inherit the family business, as did his father before him. In the evenings Max and Daniel repeat the ritual of meandering through their gallery with Max reciting about the paintings, almost as if he were reciting *Mishnayot* or biblical passages. But before his 17th birthday his father delivers a stinging blow: Max “lacks the hunger, the desire to hunt and chase” that is required of a gallery owner, and unilaterally decrees that Max will study medicine.

Over the next few years, Max, a lackluster medical student whose principle time is spent mooning over his father's ravishing new gallery intern Rose Clement, is determined to prove his father wrong on both counts. When his father gives him a blank check to make his first auction acquisition, he spends an exorbitant amount on what appears to be a fake Manet – ironically, a painting of a ham. Max's relationships – with his parents, with Rose, with his best friend Bertrand – are complicated and often convey more than a hint of disappointment and/or betrayal.

The story then jumps to 1944, with only an impressionistic outline of the war, its broad strokes reminiscent of Daniel Berenzon's works of art. The Berenzons, who have been hiding on a farm outside of Paris, return to find their gallery pillaged, its contents vanished into the great Nazi maelstrom of destruction and greed. As word filters down about the fate of Europe's Jews, Max's mother, who had been attuned to the malevolent potential of Nazism very early on, was distraught about the fate of her family. The senior Berenzons, broken by the enormity of their losses – both personal and material – return to the countryside and Max embarks upon a personal mission to recover at least some remnants of their lost world, and perhaps finally win the heart of his unrequited love, Rose Clement. The character of Rose is based loosely on that of the real-life hero of Nazi-looted art, Rose Valland.

Max takes to wandering the galleries of Paris in a mostly futile search for paintings that belonged to his family. Throughout this part of the narrative, the author evokes the desperation and confusion of post-liberation Paris, as deranged Holocaust survivors straggle back into town and once-prosperous Jews emerge from four years of hiding in attics and farmhouses to find themselves reduced to a life of bread lines.

The characters represent a montage of the fate of Jews in mid-century Europe. Max stumbles upon his own past through a friendship with the religious Chaim Tenenwurzel, a survivor of Auschwitz. In a relationship that is more comforting and forgiving than that with his own father, soon Max is sleeping in the bed of Chaim's dead son.

As the story concludes with Max finally discovering the hidden secrets that had so bedeviled his family for decades, we comprehend the complex of history, culture, religion, and family in this compelling novel, an affecting example of art imitating life.

Study Questions I

- *How would you characterize the relationship between Max and Daniel?*
- *Why doesn't Daniel want Max to inherit the gallery? Why does Daniel make Max rehearse the art of recollection?*
- *Reread the passage about Manet's Almonds (pgs. 8-9) What do you think of Max's insights then? How do you see this early insight in regard to Max's discovery about the role of Almonds in his family's history?*
- *On page 43, Max's mother discusses Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. What are the parallels between the Mussorgsky/Hartmann story and that of Max and Rose?*
- *Why does Rose reject Max, telling him that she does not expect to marry?*
- *What are Bertrand's two secrets?*
- *Why do you think the novel jumps from 1940 to 1944?*
- *"Hope is the devil wearing a new coat" (page 86). What does the concierge mean by that? How does that belief apply throughout the novel?*
- *Why does Daniel insist that Max return the Manet sketch? Is it the same reason he refuses to buy back his paintings from the Americans?*
- *On page 115, Max says, "I could not shake the feeling that [Daniel and Rose] each wanted me to find something in my search for Father's paintings that was different from what I in fact was seeking." Was Max correct about this? Why, or why not?*
- *Reread the conversation between Max and Chaim on page 119. What is Chaim's role in the novel, and how would you describe his relationship with Max?*
- *What is the significance of Rose's cutting of her hair?*

- On page 144, Max describes Rose's apartment as "museum and mausoleum in one." What does he mean by that? What does it say about Rose?
- Discuss the scene in Cailleux's gallery, in which Max learns about Micheline.
- Why does Max go back to medical school?
- Why does Max convince the man in the yellow shoes to buy the Rosa Bonheur in the flea market?
- Discuss Max and Rose's good-bye scene on pages 215–16.
- Why does Rose buy the Manet for Max?
- Does knowing that Rose is based on a real woman change your appreciation of the novel in any way?

Study Questions II

The following notes and questions are not only about the specific details of the story, but also focus on its historical context.

Note 1: Jews in the the World of Modern Art

In recent decades, cultural historians have discussed the affinity of Jews with modern art: its creation, criticism, collection/patronage, and as gallery owners.

Historically Jews were excluded from the formal art world (its creation, institutions, etc) until the late 19th century. Thus, when finally admitted to its orbit, the artistic expression and forms that they encountered were mostly in a contemporary idiom.

Their exclusion from art academies until the late 19th century precluded the development and training of Jewish artists. There are a number of well-known and significant early 20th century artists such as Chagall, Pissarro, Modigliani, Egon Schiele, and Ben Shan, to name a few. There are many more in today, especially in the areas of architecture and installation art.

Jews were often disproportionately represented in other areas of the modern art world: patronage and sales; gallery ownership; art history, the academic discipline which flourished in Germany throughout the 19th century. In the early decades of the 20th century it was imported to the United States by Jewish art historians fleeing Nazi Germany (e.g. Erwin Panofsky, Meyer Shapiro, Otto Kurz); art criticism, the critiquing of art, its context of aesthetics, fostering an understanding and appreciation of art (e.g. Bernard Berenson, Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg).

Question: *How could we understand Jewish involvement in the world of modern art as reflected in this passage?*

“Indeed my father was among a tiny group, the heirs to the patron spirit of Catherine de Medici and the savoir faire of Duveen or Volard, whose genius was not in the handling of paint itself, but in the handling of men who painted. They encouraged the artists’ outrageous experiments so that they could paint without fear of financial ruin. They were not just rug merchants and moneymen. They were as devoted as monks to the beauty of their illuminated manuscripts. Or so my father said, in his most rhapsodic moments.” (6)

Note 2: Connection to Anti-Semitism

The dark side of the disproportionately large number of Jews in gallery ownership and art patronage fed into the anti-Semitism that was rampant worldwide, but especially in Europe.

Question: *Let’s examine some passages where we can glimpse this thinly veiled connection between gallery ownership and anti-Semitism.*

- “They were not just rug merchants and moneymen.” (6) [Max, perhaps acknowledging the hostility towards Jews in this area, offers a more noble interpretation of Jewish art patronage.]
- “This business of yours, it does not have a kosher reputation. And what would people say about my son?” (21) [Eva to Daniel when arguing about the hiring of Rose.]
- Later on, near the end of the novel when Max was speaking with Callieux and his friends [they clearly did not know his identity]:
“Berenzon wasn’t afraid to take on a Jew –”
“Berenzon was a Jew, too!”
“Who wasn’t a Jew then, in this business? They were everywhere.”
“A Jew, though not a cheap one.”
“But crafty.” (181)

Note 3: The Nazi Looting of Art

Since the subject of *Pictures* is about the losses that the Berenzon family suffered during World War II, the examples of looting activities are numerous. There is a growing body of books devoted to this subject, with new ones being written yearly. Houghteling, however, commends the reader to one particular work on which she relied heavily:

For Reading:

The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe’s Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War (1995) by Lynn Nichols. This is a superior (although very dense) account of the ravaging of European art during World War II. Nichols focuses on Hitler’s preoccupation with creating a Third Reich museum to house all of the most famous works of art in the world, and at the same time cleanse the world of its “degenerate” [read: modern] art. She includes a significant discussion about the Nazi wholesale theft of Jewish owned art, furniture and household valuables, including ritual objects. The

second part of the book is devoted the Allied forces' work to recover lost masterpieces after the war and of how governments "are still negotiating the restitution of objects held by their respective nations."

Included in this guide is an article, Charles Dellheim's "Framing Nazi Art Loot" in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp, which covers some of the important issues regarding Jewish looted art.

DVD for Viewing:

Finally, a very compelling account is the PBS presentation *The Rape of Europa*, (Menamsha Film) which can be purchased from Amazon or Barnes & Noble. The film focuses on the Jewish part of the story of the Nazi looting.

Passages in the novel that relate specifically to topics covered in *The Rape of Europa*: **Pgs. 65-68**: The evacuation of priceless art from museums before the Nazi occupation of France. Compare Houghteling's description of "Winged Victory" from the Louvre with that in *Europa* (either book or film):

"The hall grew silent. The bespectacled curator must have given a signal. The statue was hoisted a millimeter, then rocked forward. Four men, two on each side, strained against the ropes that controlled her descent. The wings quivered under their own weight as she rolled down the incline. When the wooden cart reached the ground floor, no one spoke." (Houghteling 68)

- **Pg. 79:** Read Max's description of his return to their gallery when Paris was liberated.

Question: *Can the modern reader understand this sense of loss? What other personal experiences might this bring to mind?*

- **Pgs. 90-92:** Discuss the conversation between Max and Daniel when Max returns home with a Manet that he bought in an antiquary shop.

Question: *What positions do each of them about the purchase? Does this conversation surprise you?*

- **Pg. 123:** In the conversation Madame van Seyvald talks about the furnishings she finds in her home when she returns after the liberation. Near the end of the conversation Madame van Seyvald says:

"We find the strangest things in the house in the house – a child's penmanship book in one drawer, dentures in another, this hat I'm wearing, Fritz's pajamas, bronzed baby shoes. No two things came from the same house. Rather, the Germans brought a desk from one place, an armoire from another, our bed from a third. I picture some central warehouse of furniture from all the Jews in Paris. I dream of it, in an airplane hangar, with towers of chairs, and tables stacked one atop another." (p. 124)

Note 4: Rose Valland: Real-Life Hero

The character of Rose Clement was based upon the real-life Rose Valland, one of the French heroes of World War II. The Nazis used the Jeu de Paume Museum in Paris as a central storage and sorting depot for the art they plundered, pending distribution to various persons and places in Germany. Rose Valland, a curator at the museum secretly recorded as much as possible of the more than 20,000 pieces of art brought for redistribution.

Valland understood German, a fact the Germans were unaware of. For four years she kept track of where and to whom the artworks were shipped and risked her life to provide information to the French Underground about railroad shipments of art so that they would not mistakenly blow up trains loaded with priceless treasures. The museum was visited by high-ranking Nazi officials and Valland was there when Reichsmarschall Hermann Goring came on May 3, 1941 to personally select some of the paintings for his private collection.

- **Pgs. 143:** (middle) Rose describes to Max the German looting of the Berenzon gallery. “Auguste. Pay attention! group of officers...”
- **Pgs. 148-151** Rose recounts to Max how she began her work of secretly recording lists.
- **Questions:**
 - *What images are most visible in your imagination as Rose tells of her work in the Jeu de Paume?*
 - *Based upon her relationships with the family, what might have motivated her secretive activities?*
 - *Do you find this character of Rose Clement believable?*

Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition"

Add music to your program

You might consider listening to a recording of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition". Of the many recordings available, the most classic is a solo piano, Mussorgsky's original composition. The solo piano makes it easy to follow the development of the piece, as the viewer meanders through the exhibit of the paintings (described below). An excellent recording is that of **Sviatoslav Richter** (piano); available through Amazon. [Bunterblatter / Pictures at an Exhibition](#) (2002) - Audio CD by Robert Schumann, Modest Mussorgsky, Claude Debussy, and Sviatoslav Richter by BBC Legends. An additional feature to aid the listener is that the painting vignettes are each identified on the CD tracks.

Connection to the novel

The title of this novel is deliberate. On the most basic level, the story is about a family whose Parisian art gallery is looted by the Nazis. But Houghteling crafts an additional layer of complexity in the conversation between Max and his mother (43) in which she explains the history of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition". At the end of the conversation, Eva says, "This is the closest you can ever get to that exhibition. They say all of Hartmann's paintings have been lost, so there is only the music." The Berenzon's artwork, like Hartmann's is lost.

Question: *What, if anything "is the music" for the Berenzons?*

Background Notes to Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition"

In the mid-19th century, with the spirit of nationalism sweeping across Europe, several young Russian artists banded together to rid their art of foreign influences in order to establish a distinctive nationalist character. Leading this movement was a group of composers known as "The Five", whose members included Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, César Cui, and Mily Balakirev.

Among the associations that "The Five" found in other fields was the artist and architect Victor Hartmann, with whom Mussorgsky became close personal friends. Hartmann's premature death at age 39 stunned the composer and the entire Russian artistic community. Vladimir Stasov, a noted critic and the journalistic champion of the Russian arts movement, organized a memorial exhibit of Hartmann's work in February 1874, and it was under the inspiration of that show that Mussorgsky conceived his "Pictures at an Exhibition".

Musical Structure of "Pictures at an Exhibition"

The movements mostly represent sketches, watercolors and architectural designs shown at the Hartmann exhibit, although Mussorgsky based two or three sections on works the artist had shown privately before his death. The composer linked his sketches together with a musical Promenade in which he depicts his own rotund self shuffling – in an uneven meter – from one picture to the next.

Promenade: This recurring musical motif (the most recognizable) depicts Mussorgsky “roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and, at times sadly, thinking of his friend.” The Promenade motif recurs often – but not always — between musical vignettes.

Gnomus: Hartmann’s drawing is for a fantastic wooden nutcracker representing a gnome who gives off savage shrieks while he waddles about on short, bandy legs.

Promenade II

The Old Castle: A troubadour sings a doleful lament before a foreboding, ruined ancient fortress.

Promenade III

Tuileries (Dispute between Children at Play): Hartmann’s picture shows a corner of the famous garden in Paris filled with nursemaids and their youthful charges.

Bydlo (Cattle): Hartmann’s picture depicts a rugged wagon drawn by oxen. The peasant driver sings a plaintive melody heard first from afar, then close-by, before the cart passes away into the distance.

Promenade IV

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks: Hartmann’s costume design for the 1871 fantasy ballet *Trilby* shows dancers enclosed in enormous eggshells, with only their arms, legs and heads protruding.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle: Mussorgsky originally called this movement “Two Jews: one rich, the other poor.” It was inspired by a pair of pictures that Hartmann presented to the composer showing two residents of the Warsaw ghetto, one rich and pompous, the other poor and complaining. Mussorgsky based both themes on incantations he had heard on visits to Jewish synagogues.

The Market at Limoges: A lively sketch of a bustling market, with animated conversations flying among the female vendors.

Catacombs (Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua): Hartmann’s drawing shows him being led by a guide with a lantern through cavernous underground tombs. The movement’s second section is a mysterious transformation of the Promenade theme.

The Hut on Fowl’s Legs (Baba Yaga): Hartmann’s sketch is a design for an elaborate clock suggested by Baba Yaga, the fearsome witch of Russian folklore who eats human bones she has ground into paste. She also can fly through the air on her fantastic pestle and Mussorgsky’s music suggests a wild, midnight ride.

The Great Gate of Kiev: Mussorgsky's grand conclusion was inspired by Hartmann's plan for a gateway for the city of Kiev in the massive old Russian style crowned with a cupola in the shape of a Slavic warrior's helmet. The majestic music suggests both the imposing edifice (never built) and a brilliant procession passing through its arches. The work ends with a heroic Promenade theme and a pealing of the great bells of the city.

Orchestration

The piece was written originally for a solo piano. In recent years it has been eclipsed by Ravel's orchestration for full orchestra.

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