

Manet's "Rue Mosnier With Flags"



Lost and found

from paris
to palos verdes

Contributing writer and east coast refugee
FABIENNE MARSH finds a home,
thanks to a familiar painting
at the Getty Museum.

I have been walking inside paintings my entire life. As a child, I started with the A (for "art") volume of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. At night, I lay awake with a flashlight, exercising with prisoners inside Van Gogh's Newgate prison or hopping lily pads in the gardens of Monet's Giverny.

By the time I was a teenager, I had

found many of the paintings from my encyclopedia in museums. At the Art Institute in Chicago, Gustave Caillebotte's "Paris Streets, Rainy Day" had me stepping off narrow sidewalks onto glistening cobblestones in order to avoid Parisians wielding black umbrellas, until one day I got lost.

On the way to my grandmother's

house, I was crossing the bridge in "The Pont de l'Europe" when it started to rain in "Paris Streets, Rainy Day." I turned left on the Rue de Berne, my grandmother's street, and the weather changed suddenly. Umbrellas disappeared. The sun melted through what had been a pewter sky.

The day is hot and hazy. I am thirsty, and my feet are swollen in their patent



Clockwise from top left: Manet's street in the Europe District; Paulette's street, today; the author and her grandmother; Place de l'Europe and the tracks from the Gare Saint-Lazare, below; Paulette in her youth; outside Manet's studio.



“WE ARE ECSTATIC. THERE COULD HARDLY BE A MORE IMPORTANT MANET.”

— John Walsh, former director of the Getty

leather Mary Janes. I must have taken the wrong street, because somehow I have ended up inside Edouard Manet’s “Rue Mosnier With Flags.”

“Nice painting!” A woman’s voice pulls me to the second floor of the Getty’s West Pavilion. I want to stay on the “Rue Mosnier.”

The year is 1878. Above me, dozens of tricolor flags dance for the Fête de la Paix (Celebration of Peace). To my left, a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War hobbles on wooden crutches. The street is dusty in what feels like a white summer sun. On the sidewalk to my right, I arrive at an apartment I am certain belongs to my grandmother. A hansom cab is parked near her window.

“8 Rue de Berne?” I ask the one-legged veteran. “Non,” he insists, “Rue Mosnier.”

“They paid \$26.4 million for it in 1989.” I had just swatted away the woman’s voice, when it circled back, redoubling all efforts to land in my

ear. “THAT’S A LOT OF MONEY!” The friendly art-lover is staring at me through a jazzy, rainbow-colored pair of reading glasses. “Yes,” I say. “My grandmother lives on this street.”

I do not tell her the reason behind my white-knuckled need for this to be so. Since moving from New England to the South Bay, my French grandmother, Paulette Caulet died. My mother followed her three months later. Six months after that, my father joined my mother on her birthday. On the day after Christmas, my husband, who had recently moved us into the childhood home still inhabited by his father and stepmother, announced that he had filed for divorce.

Walk Like a Refugee

By the time I saw Caillebotte’s “La Place de l’Europe,” walking in paintings had taken on an eerie quality. The painting’s very name con-

firmed that Caillebotte was intimately familiar with my grandmother’s neighborhood in the eighth arrondissement of Paris. At the age of 7, I remember taking either the metro to the Gare St. Lazare and walking up the Rue de Londres, or the Pont de Levallois line, which stopped at the Rue de Vienne. The number 80 bus dropped me on the Rue de Saint-Petersbourg near the carrefour Moscou, across from the Rue de Berne.



A pencil portrait of Paulette sketched by the writer’s father, Louis V. Marsh, in 1998.

As the little girl in Manet’s “The Railway,” I would stare through the railing where, perilously far below, dozens of rails merged like a cinched corset. Train after train stood ready for departure. The whistle would sound, the “depart!” would be announced—Geneva, Berlin, Charente-Maritime. The soft rhythmic shuffle of the wheels gaining speed would, by the time the train passed my grandmother’s apartment, become a seismic rumble.

Number 8 Rue de Berne is where my grandmother lived. The smells

inside the paintings combined in varying amounts, depending on the weather: dampness, dog droppings, dust, bus fumes and—once inside my grandmother’s courtyard—mold. If underground in the metro, add sweat and urine to the mix. Chewing gum was popular at the time. It held the promise of mint. The *confiserie* had a baptismal display with *dragées*, those sugar-coated almonds—hard as marble and smooth as clam shells eroded by the surf. Mesmerizing were the small, silver balls that looked like beads of mercury.

Investigating the Impressionists

I could insist, as I had despite all odds, that the Rue Mosnier was my grandmother’s street, but it was not until I moved to the South Bay that the painting took its rightful place in my personal history.

Both Impressionists and Parisians were

fascinated by the Gare St. Lazare. In the second half of the 19th century, they would stroll on the bridges to view arrivals and departures. Artists rented studios in the nearby Europe district. The key to the mystery was offered by Manet himself when, more than 100 years after his death, art historians discovered that Manet had painted his studio door in the upper left corner of “The Railway.” With this clue, scholars were able to trace Manet to his second-floor studio on 4 Rue de Saint-Petersbourg from 1872 to 1878.

The sounds I had heard were recorded by Emile Zola. Of Claude Monet’s “Gare Saint-Lazare,” Zola wrote: “You can hear the trains rumbling in and see the smoke billow up under our huge roofs ... That is where painting is today ... Our artists have to find the poetry in the train stations, the way their fathers found the poetry in forests and rivers.”

Because the Rue de Saint-Petersbourg runs perpendicular to the Rue de Berne, I was certain that Manet, then in failing health, had painted my grandmother’s street from his window. His war veteran on crutches was perhaps equal parts painterly-empathy and a prophesy of things to come; Manet’s own leg was amputated in 1883.

Rue Mosnier had to be my grandmother’s street, but what to make of its name? One day, in a museum bookstore, while flipping through Juliet Wilson-Bareau’s *Manet, Monet and the Gare Saint-Lazare*, I came across a photograph from the Musee D’Orsay in Paris: “View of the Rue de Berne (formerly Rue Mosnier) from Manet’s studio windows.” After more than two decades of trying to solve the puzzle of history, geography and, more recently, personal dis-location, I came to appreciate the stifled shouts, huzzahs and eureka of archival discovery, which, after intensive labor, arrests the hearts of obsessed scholars and families seeking their roots. The mystery was solved: In 1884, one year after Manet died and six years after he had painted my personal piece of Parisian real estate, the Rue Mosnier was renamed the Rue de Berne.

“Rue Mosnier” immortalizes my grandmother’s apartment, my mother’s childhood home and the geography of my childhood visits to France. Though the painting lives in a splendid, climate-controlled gallery on a hill overlooking Los Angeles, it belongs to every refugee—domestic or foreign—who seeks or, in my case, *finds* a tangible memory of home inside a work of art. ●