

## THE ARTIST AND A MISTRESS

As many of you know, I love France. It is my other true love. I love the vineyards and the vines and the wines that flow so naturally from the grapes. I love the beauty of the women and the way they dress. I love the cheese and everything about France, at least until last year when certain events happened that may have changed my mind.

Each year, and for many years I have sat at the potter's wheel in Provence in the studio of my good friend the renowned potter, Jean Nicola. He graduated from the art academy at Aix en Provence. He has a thorough knowledge of French artists and more importantly a keen eye for beauty and form.

Small villages in Southern France often have a brocante, a Sunday sale. It is in fact a high-end flea market. One Sunday Jean Nicola and I drove to nearby Malmaison for the brocante. Regimental rows of lavender and olive trees heavy with fruit marked our route. Truffles were growing under scruffy oak trees.

At the brocante I was in the process of buying a shoemaker's hammer with a finely carved handle when suddenly, at the

adjoining booth I saw the most exquisite, pleasingly proportioned small sculpture in clay, a masculine head with a beautiful face.

It had clean, precise lines in its angulated almost geometric structure. It conveyed both pain and comfort. The sculpture, a bit smaller than a real head, had the aged look of kiln-fired clay, not glazed but just natural in color. The balance, the image, the features, and the expression made me say quietly to myself, “This is the most beautiful work of art I have ever seen.”

I turned to John Nicola. “What do you think?” He nodded in appreciation. “It has great internal integrity.”

I said to the man, “How much is this sculpture?” “3,500 euros.” “3,500 euros? Why that price?” He said, “I love this sculpture for its extraordinary beauty. I have a very high price on it because I really don’t want to sell it. Perhaps even more importantly, it’s almost a part of our family.” Our family sculpture story goes like this:

“It was given to my great grandmother by a good friend of hers, a woman called Rose. She rarely mentioned who gave it to her or why. Apparently, Rose had been Rodin’s mistress for many, many

years but then at an advanced age he took a much younger woman as his mistress, Camille Claudel.”

“Rodin, who had given this small sculpture to Rose, asked for it back. He wanted to give it to Camille. Rather than let it get into the hands of Camille Claudel his young mistress Rose gave it to my great grandmother. So now I own this lovely clay piece, but you need to know, the story is not in any way documented. It is only our family lore.”

“We do know, however, that when Rose died, she owned one bronze and one marble by Rodin, both documented in all of the Rodin catalogues.”

I gently held the sculpture and said to Jean Nicola, “Could this possibly be an authentic Rodin? It has strong orderly facets. It is aristocratic yet, more like a peasant creation. Its sense of joy has a sense of sorrow.”

“Non ce n’est pas possible”. it’s not even remotely possible for two reasons. First, I know it’s not listed in any one of the numerous Rodin catalogues. Secondly, Rodin did not leave single clay sculptures. He invariably had the sculptures cast in bronze,

using the lost wax method. He then usually destroyed the original to prevent anyone from copying it

Together we carefully examined the sculpture for marks of a bronze lost wax casting. Nicola said “ il n’y en a pas.” There were none.

“Harry, I know Rodin well. His early works such as the Woman with the Hat of Flowers or The Man with the Broken Nose have little resemblance to this clay face, nor do his later works of the Bourgeois de Calais.

I looked into my wallet. I knew I had the 3500 euros because I was headed to Paris in several days. John Nicola shook his head, an indication that I would be making a huge mistake.

We went across the lane where we sat and had a “coup” , a cool glass of white wine. I loved the face. I loved the strength and its powerful lines. Whoever the artist, it would give me great pleasure and real pride.

The man refused to bargain. I paid him the 3500 euros. He wrapped it in newspaper and put it into a plastic bag, which he

handed to me. “May I have a receipt?” “No, we don’t give receipts at brocante sales.”

Back in our pottery studio John Nicola and I admired the sculpture. We loved it in the morning sun, and even more as the day advanced, colors of burnt umber and raw sienna, touches of yellow and gold. In the light of our valley, a Rodin or not, it made no difference.

As the TGV train sped to Paris, I planned to determine the provenance. I went directly to the Louvre. I passed the I.M.Pei glass pyramid then went to the underground rotunda.

In the middle of the great art treasures of the world, Winged Victory, Venus de Milo, Mona Lisa, I handed my sculpture to the head of the ceramic department saying, “Could this be a Rodin?” She said, “It is very beautiful, well made, so pleasing, but not a Rodin. His more than ten biographers have not mentioned a small ceramic sculpture nor is one listed in the catalogues. Besides, his works in clay were destroyed after he made the bronzes.” She put the sculpture in a nice blue bag for me, prominently labeled “The Louvre.”

A man behind me, who also had a blue Louvre bag had been listening to our conversation. He said “Why don’t you take it to the Rodin Museum for verification.”

At the Rodin Museum, a knowledgeable curator carefully examined my sculpture. I told him the family story about Rose. His interest increased. “Indeed, Rodin kept Rose, Rose Beuret, as his mistress for many years. He gave her at least two of his works, a marble bust and a bronze statue. Camille Claudel, a young, talented, beautiful woman soon became his mistress, replacing Rose Beuret. There must have been incredible jealousy. Rodin may well have asked Rose to return the bronze and the marble, but she wouldn’t. If there was a ceramic piece it is not mentioned in any catalogue and would not fit his usual bronzing of all of his work.”

The young curator continued. “3,500 euros would not have even approached work by Rodin. 100,000 euros or more would be likely if it were real.

As I left, I noticed a man admiring the Rodin, le Baiser, the Kiss. He carried a blue Louvre bag. I wasn’t sure if it was the same man from the Louvre.

On my way to my hotel Le Beaumarchais I stopped for a “coup” at the Rue Rivoli Café. I sipped the wine, enjoying the ending of the day, proud and happy with my purchase. I noticed that the same man with the Louvre blue bag was sitting at the far end of the café.

I checked into Le Beaumarchais. I walked up the stairs to my room, which was warm from the daytime sun. I laid the bag with the sculpture on the bed, cracked open the window for air, showered, then left for dinner. I left the key with the clerk. Upon my return, I took the key then opened the door to my room. The window was still open. The bag and the sculpture were not on the bed. They were gone.

I talked to the clerk, who said, “No one took the key and no one went up the stairs. No one went into your room.” He called the police. When they came and heard the facts they said “We cannot help you. You have no receipt and no picture and, by the way, you left the window open. Your room is just one flight up”.

The tears came, I cried.

Two weeks later, still in Paris I was walking down the Rue St. Paul past the numerous art galleries. I stopped to admire a famous ceramic sculpture of a goat by Picasso. I was in a chic artistic neighborhood. Then, in another window under a tiny spotlight, I saw my lost ceramic face. I went inside. I said to the owner, "Magnificent." He said, nodding, "Rodin." "How much is it?" "115,000 euros." "I didn't think Rodin left any work in clay. After he made bronzes he had the custom of destroying the original." "Ah yes, but Rodin sculpted a small head from clay, then fired it and gave it to his mistress, Rose Beuret.

She refused to allow it to be bronzed because many bronze castings could be made of the same work. She wanted to own this unique one of a kind piece. Rodin asked Rose to give it back. She refused because she felt certain he would have given it to Camille Claudel, his new mistress. Rodin loved this piece."

"Rodin because of his love for Camille Claudel then made a second one, an exact duplicate. He gave it to Camille. There is no way anyone can distinguish between the two. These are the facts which I just discovered from reading the personal correspondence of Camille Claudel."

I had certainly bought the Rose Beuret sculpture, but which one was this – mine or the other one given to Camille? I would never know. There could be no proof which was which. They were exact duplicates by the same artist. A week later, I returned to Rue St. Paul. The sculpture was gone. The owner said, “I sold it for the listed price, 115,000 euros.”

I still go to the brocante al Malmaison. I drink a “coup.” I glory in the wonders of Provence, in the regimented lavender rows, in the branched olive trees, and in the truffles under scruffy oaks. I remember with sadness my lost Rodin.

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