

Sample Feature article

Picasso's Revenge and the Explosive Birth of Modern Art

Ray and Caroline Foulk write together and have already documented in a two volume set Ray's life as a music biz impresario (Ray promoted the original Isle of Wight festivals in the late sixties – including the really big one of 1970), catapulting himself onto the world stage as a promoter. Simply being a father and daughter team is unusual and because they have just written a novel together they are even more remarkable. Given that a novel is usually written in one voice and judging the content of their new work, it seems astonishing that they have made it through and have a date for the publication of *Picasso's Revenge*. "We wrote this because it is the greatest art story not out there," they both insist. Ray is 73, exactly twenty years Caroline's senior, so that they are more like brother and sister and it is just as well considering the sauciness of some of their writing. "The sexy parlour game was my creation, while Dad concentrated on the action inside Madame Greta's brothel," says Caroline of the story, which is set in Belle Époque Paris.

Their tome is a tour de force. If you wanted twitter hashtags of the novel's content you would be spoiled for choice - #Art shock ... unrequited love, mysterious death, protracted grief, early Picasso life, séances, sexual depravity, avant-garde art, impotency, obsession, suicide, scandal, the painting that killed painting, or pact with God ...

The authors are keen to stress that although they have written about Picasso and his greatest painting, the story is told through the eyes of a man on an urgent quest – Jacques Doucet, celebrated couturier and 'patron of the arts' (1851-1929). As an historical novel it is very much based on real life, following research that has spanned 30 years. Caroline has even gone to the trouble of learning French. So why Jacques Doucet?

Couture in its origins was a lowly trade. Descended from an entrepreneurial family with a lingerie emporium, Doucet began life a step away from the birthplace of the first great house of haute couture – the eminent House of Worth. As an ambitious young man he expanded the family business to encompass elite dressmaking. *Maison Doucet* became a top ranking establishment geared to cater to the needs of the aristocracy and celebrities of the day. It was soon an important destination on the society calendar with noble women spilling through the shop doors from their carriages in advance of special events, excited for the presentations of myriad outfits. Each item was exquisitely handcrafted and modelled by the latest innovation - live girls or 'mannequins.'

Doucet's refined bearing was regal, his snowy beard clipped as carefully as a French garden and clothing as crisply perfect as if woven by elves. In time he distinctly tired of dressing his

rich clientele, who refused to see him as anything other than a tradesman. He concentrated on adorning the walls of his fashion house with French masterpieces of the eighteenth century. In addition he commissioned society architect Louis Parent to fashion a mansion house for him on Rue Spontini, which he richly endowed with wondrous art treasures. Paintings formerly in Doucet's collection continue to command vast sums in the salerooms. A Boucher *allegory of poetry* sold at Sotheby's recently for \$340,000, and in 1987 the world record was broken for a painting in auction with van Gogh's *Irises*, for \$53.9 million – provenance, Jacques Doucet. While he operated from Rue de la Paix, Paris (Mayfair on the Paris Monopoly board) his various sobriquets included, 'Prince of Paris.' It was here where he excelled, especially thanks to the stars of the runway of the day – the stage, among whom Rejane and Sarah Bernhardt were most prominent. Yet he was coy about his profession, preferring instead the role of Mécène – sponsor of contemporary artists and writers.

Following the death of his fiancé the mysterious Madame R., Doucet auctioned off in one dramatic stroke, all of his great antique collections in the world's greatest sale. He began to reinvent himself entirely as a modernist. It wasn't that Doucet merely bought things. He commissioned and assembled furniture and art pieces in exquisitely curated collections. He had enormous intuition for surrounding himself by talented people. His advisors included André Breton and chief designers – René Lalique, Eileen Gray and Paul Iribe. It became apparent that he had the Midas touch.

After his terrible personal tragedy Doucet finally identified and promoted the one artwork that had a more profound effect on the era than all others when he acquired the first cubist painting – *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. He set himself apart by securing Picasso's masterpiece. It was perhaps Doucet's most notable achievement and it simultaneously triggered an obsession. While the world at large barely noticed, it was the course of action which followed that is the most fascinating part of Doucet's story. The transaction occurred in the last years of his life and it was the most extraordinary and scandalous purchase possible for his art collection.

Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.) was received with such opprobrium that it was hidden away by Picasso, says Ray, "but the geni was let out of the bottle. It influenced all contemporary artists at the time, and most of all Picasso himself. Ultimately cubism was born in that very painting. It changed the look of the twentieth century – in art, architecture, literature, design ... so many fields." And in the novel Doucet's brothel painting leads its buyer to some desperate confrontations. There is a satisfying solution to the end of the story as well as the suggestion of another mystery to linger over, (spoiler prevention necessary here).

Unwittingly Doucet became the model for all the great couturiers that followed him. In his own words he concluded, "I was successively my grandfather, my father, my son and my grandson." His protégé Paul Poiret, even more celebrated among the early twentieth century couturiers than his master, fastidiously modelled himself upon him. Doucet had

recast the image of the dressmaker, by using lifestyle and incredible art as a route out of a rigid structure of social hierarchy. Poiret followed this path.

There are many other notable devotees of the Doucet model, including Yves Saint Laurent and the recently deceased Karl Lagerfeld, both of whom adopted Doucet's techniques for self-promotion. Each were not only men of exquisite taste but also surrounded themselves with more than simply beautiful men and women, amassing art collections of the highest order. Lagerfeld furnished a collection of apartments decorating them *à la Doucet* in the Art Deco, Modern and Rococo styles, while Saint Laurent collected avidly and widely from ancient Egyptian statues to Picasso paintings. Interestingly Saint Laurent valued pieces with Doucet provenance above all others. It is the Doucet strand of what was later called Art Deco that is most highly sought after.

Picasso's Revenge is about the man who bought a whole 'ism' of art: the painting that kicked off all of the great art 'isms' of the twentieth century. A little like Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* but more firmly rooted upon real characters, the novel shines a light on the origins of modern art and will be available from *Medina Publishing* on 4 June. It is said to rebrand Picasso!