

Robert Wexelblatt

## PETITE SUITE DE MUSÉES

1. *Musée Minimale – scherzo en ré majeur pour piano et violon, assez joli, assez sérieux, déroutant, minuscule, et modestement informatif*

The Musée Pietro Francese occupies a second-floor room in a small building on the Via Milite Ignotus in the town of Ventimiglia.

The nationality of Pietro Francese (? – 1532) is ambiguous. The surname is Italian for French, but in France he is referred to as Pierre de Varenna, after a town on the shore of Lake Como. This suggests that the French saw him as Italian, and the Italians thought him a Frenchman. It is fitting, then, that the museum bearing his name should be in an Italian town a short hike from the French border.

Little is known of Francese. Giorgio Vasari does not mention him in his *Lives of the Artists*, but a librarian at the University of Padua has published a private letter that does. She believes the letter, addressed to the Duchess of Ferrara, was “almost certainly” written by Vasari. It alludes to a notable portrait “*eseguito da Pietro Francese*” of one of the Duchess’s nephews. André Benefiel wrote briefly about Pierre de Varenna in his 1661 treatise, *Les Peintres du Grand Siècle*. Here is the passage in its entirety:

Maître Pierre de Varenna was much admired, especially for his portraits.

He did not paint in the grand style, depicting the mythological and pious subjects popular at the time, especially in the Catholic

provinces, where he was known as Pietro Francese. In some respects, his work has much in common with the painting being done today in the Low Countries. He produced remarkable portraits and scenes from everyday life, always on small canvases. It was the inner truth of his portraits his contemporaries found most worthy of praise. Francesco Della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, said of him, "*Altri artisti dipingono dall'esterno verso l'interno, ma questo Francese dipinge dall'interno verso l'esterno.*"

(Other artists paint from the outside in, but this Francese paints from the inside out.)

Francese did not sign his work, perhaps out of humility, or *ad majoram gloria Dei*, like the artists of the Middle Ages. As a consequence, identifying, let alone cataloguing, his works has been almost impossible. It is likely that his scenes of everyday life and penetrating portraits hang unacknowledged on walls in houses great and small, in provincial museums designated *Pictor Ignotus*, and many sixteen-square-meter room of the modest house in Ventimiglia. The building was owned by an old widow who rented rooms to vacationers, save for the one in which she lived out her life. This woman claimed to be a descendant of a minor branch of the D'Este family. Her will bequeathed the house to the state with the provision that her room would become a museum to display her most prized possession, a family heirloom.

The museum's one exhibit is an eight-by-ten-centimeter detail from a study for a portrait of a young woman and not even all of that, as the paper has been torn. It shows only the left side of the unidentified woman's face. Still, the tiny museum has attracted some attention, and the enigmatic face never fails to evoke a response. The Visitors' Book includes not only the names of vacationers who stopped by on rainy afternoons but also those of professors and painters. Many of these people recorded their impressions of what they saw in the picture. Here is a list: beauty about to bloom, a repressed nature, a tease, determination, anxiety, pride, lasciviousness, piety, rebelliousness, sharp intelligence, placidity, chastity, fortitude, vanity, submissiveness, melancholy, modesty, earnestness, a quick wit, a passionate nature. Of these comments, the longest and most

memorable is that of the Post-Impressionist painter, Marie Serrurier, who wrote “*c’est une muse évidemment aimée de l’artiste*”—a muse manifestly beloved by the artist.

2. *Le Musée des Armes Ratées – marche comique en si bémol mineur et do dièse majeur, pour orchestre militaire désaccordé, dissonant, cacophonique, et maladroit*

Albert Hugo, Comte de Roanne and Capitaine d’Infanterie, and Laurent Vagaray, Caporal and former miner, survived the Battle of Verdun, though narrowly. The Comte had pulled Vagaray from under the heavy clods thrown up by a German shell from a Feldhaubitze. Four nights later, Vagaray returned the favor. He shot dead one of a squad of infiltrators who had slipped into their trench and was about to bayonet the sleeping captain. All the veterans of the hyper-battle shared a bond but the one between Albert and Laurent was stronger than most. Moreover, both were embittered by the stupidity and slaughter they had witnessed and endured.

After the war, the Comte, whose family had considerable wealth in land and investments, loaned Vagaray the money to set up a scrap metal business in Rioges, on the same side of the Loire as Roanne. Vagaray had married before the war. When the Comte wed in 1919, he asked Vagaray to serve as best man, which put the long noses of his snobbish family out of joint.

In 1920, Charles Ginistry, Bishop of Verdun, initiated the project to erect the Douamont Ossuary by the vast National Necropolis. The land around of Verdun was a city of the dead, but the bishop wanted to make a monument of the physical remains of bloodletting on both sides. The Battle of Verdun lasted nearly a year; tens of millions of shells were fired. There were 800,000 casualties.

A year later, on a Sunday morning, the Comte sat across from his friend at the Vigaray family table in Rioges, two pacifists missing mass which Celeste Vigaray and her children were attending, as was the Comte’s bride, Marie-Charlotte. They discussed the Ossuary about which they had mixed feelings.

“It won’t do to pile up bones, let alone to tell people war is the worst of pestilences. It won’t even do to show them the skeletons and the crosses,” said Albert. “So long as war is seen as evil, it won’t lose its fascination. The murderousness will always be turned into honor, glory, patriotism, extolled as heroic sacrifice, as if anybody wanted to be blown to bits or shredded by machine guns.”

“That’s true,” said Laurent, nodding. “I shudder whenever they call me a hero. You?”

“I just want to spit.”

“That Bishop of Verdun is a good man and so is his intention, I’m sure. He’s already raising a good deal of money for his Ossuary. German skeletons will be piled in with ours. I like that.”

“So do I. But I doubt it will do any real good.”

“If displaying 130,000 skulls and pelvises isn’t enough, what is?”

“*Ridicule*,” said the Albert.

“What?”

“There’s no glory in what’s laughable, Laurent, and no one’s going to laugh at the dead.”

Vigaray put down his bowl of coffee and looked closely at his friend. “You’ve been hatching some idea. You look just as you did when you insisted on helping me to set up my business. So, what have you got in mind?”

“I want to do as the Bishop is doing. I want to set up a memorial, and I also want it there, in Verdun. I have my eye on some land in Thierville. It’s less than three kilometers from the city. Maybe those who come to mourn will make a short detour to laugh.”

“No offense, Albert, but it sounds absurd.”

“Absurd? Yes, that’s just the point.”

“And you want my help? I’m no comedian.”

“No, but your business has flourished; you’ve got connections. I think you can help me assemble the exhibits.”

“Exhibits? For what?”

“I’ll be giving you a list.”

It took a couple of years and thousands of francs, but, between them, Albert and Laurent managed to gather, among others, the following items.

1. The MacAdam Shield Spade. The idea here was to make an entrenching tool that would double as a defense against high-velocity bullets. The thick steel had a hole in it through which a rifle could be

aimed. The thing proved too heavy to wield, the blade too blunt to serve as an effective spade, and, of course, it had a hole in it.

2. The Chatuchat Light Machine Gun. This was arguably the worst of all the failed weapons fielded by any side in the war. It was designed to be cheaply made, with thin metal parts that often snapped. The joints were poorly fashioned and let in dirt and sand. The fragile barrel quickly overheated; its semi-circular magazine regularly jammed and, from time to time, the gun simply disintegrated.
3. The Comte managed to get hold of an early pursuit plane of the type that first mounted a machine gun behind the propeller. This was before synchronization was perfected, so the propeller was invariably shot off.
4. Equally useless, and nearly as fatal to the pilot, was a Bréguet XIV fitted with a ten-meter spike bolted to the top wing that was supposed to bring down balloons and zeppelins by popping them.
5. The Mobile Personnel Protector was another misbegotten attempt to shield advancing infantry. It resembled an oversized trash collector and was to be pushed from behind. It had just enough room for four small soldiers inside and was made of iron as were its two oversized wheels. It proved too heavy to lift out of the trenches and, even when this was achieved, the contraption was nearly impossible to move. It turned over on anything but flat ground of which, of course, there was none among the craters of No Man's Land.
6. By far the largest item in the museum was the Paris gun, obtained at a bargain price by Laurent through connections in inflation-ridden Germany. It was designed to propel large shells over unprecedented distances, all the way from the Front to Paris—thus, the name. But it seldom hit its targets because each round fired distorted the extended barrel, quickly making trajectories so inaccurate as to be virtually random.

Le Musée des Armes Ratées opened to the public in 1925 and enjoyed some success. German as well as French veterans brought their families. The former combatants' responses were generally grim and sardonic, but their children laughed and were fascinated. The boys would gather together and earnestly exchange views on how the armaments could have been improved and dreaming up new weapons, fantastical ideas like death

rays but also ones that seemed too plausible, like bombs crammed with germs that would wipe out people and spare buildings.

The decision to close down the museum was reached in January 1933. The Comte's hope that a display of moronic and unworkable weaponry would serve as an effective metaphor had worn away by then. The veterans no longer visited, nor did women; but young men came in numbers, as if to an amusement park. They were too young to have experienced the trenches; they knew only the speeches, the pride of fathers and uncles, the expurgated history. Those who took no lesson from the amputees on the streets and the blind in the Métro would not learn it from a shovel with a hole in it. The weapons that didn't work made them think of those that did—the artillery, machine guns, airplanes. What was once lethal now seemed to them beautiful. They spoke of tanks as though they were toys, of guns as if they were made to spurt water rather than lead. The young visitors from Germany—neatly pressed and stiff—exchanged nods and knowing smiles.

The decision to shut the museum was made on a Sunday evening. The Comte had invited the Vigarays to supper. The wives were now old friends, and Albert's son Georges loved being around Laurent's older children. Everyone had enjoyed a hearty winter's dinner of lamb roasted with carrots, parsnips, and potatoes with braised sprouts for the green. The wine was a sturdy burgundy. Afterwards, the women gossiped, the children went upstairs to play, and the two men repaired to Albert's paneled study where, with grunts they didn't used to make, they sank into matching red leather club chairs.

Pouring cognac into a pair of snifters, Albert said, "You see what's going to happen, don't you?"

"I'm afraid so," Laurent replied gloomily. "All the old business again. Dreams of adulation, swooning women. Loving the country in the wrong way. I really believed—?"

"Didn't we all?"

"Never again, we said. Not possible, we said. But then I imagine that's what people say at the end of even little, ordinary wars."

Albert got to his feet with a grunt, crossed to a cabinet, opened the bottom drawer, and returned with a book bound in tin, heavily dented.

"What's that?" asked Laurent.

“You don’t remember? We took from that dead German, the one who looked to be about seventeen.”

“Oh yes. So, you kept it. I don’t read German. What’s in it?”

“Dangerous nonsense, just the kind to turn the empty heads of thoughtless youngsters. The Boche General Staff had this book distributed to all their troops. It was written by a philosopher who’d been dead sixteen years by the time of Verdun, though I don’t think that excuses him. Listen: *Man hat auf das große Leben verzichtet, wenn man auf den Krieg verzichtet.*“

“Which means?”

“Who has renounced war has also renounced greatness. It was, I see now, a ridiculous notion, jeering war out of existence.”

“Maybe war’s like love? I mean, it always finds a way.”

“Hmpf. Well, they do say all’s fair in both, meaning neither is fair at all. Farce and rape, invasion and seduction, skirmish and frontal assault. But it’s not just that people didn’t know or forget, Laurent. It’s the allure, the exaltation, the downright sexiness. It’s the beauty of a pursuit plane in flight or a star shell going off at night. It’s the comradeship, girls, proud parents, the neighbors. It’s every stupid enticement I hoped we could laugh into oblivion. It’s that mad philosopher’s idea of ‘the great life.’”

After this defeatist speech the men fell silent.

“The tanks are much improved,” said Laurent at length. “They have turrets now. And they say the artillery’s much better too.”

“But the airplanes most of all. I’m closing our little museum, Laurent. You were right to call it absurd. You can sell the exhibits for scrap. I think they’ll be turned back into weapons soon enough.”

“God forbid!”

“It’s shameful to laugh so near to the dead. It was folly to try to thumb our noses in the shadow of that Ossuary’s tower and the National Cemetery. Such things shouldn’t be mocked, can’t be—and they can’t be intimidated either.”

“But they can be expanded.”

“Alas, yes. And next time the weapons will be still stupider—especially the ones that work.”

3. *Le Musée des Guides de Conversation – sonatine pour deux flûtes déplacées et harpe en ut majeur, désinvolte, péripatéticienne, polyglotte et insipide*

The Johanssons were childless mid-century Americans. They met when Hannah, up till then a city girl, applied to and was accepted by Pittsburg State University which her mother assumed was in Pennsylvania. George, a native Kansan, was in Pittsburg to study agronomics. After some hesitation, Hannah chose to major in, of all things, French. They met at a mixer, hit it off, and married right after graduation. Hannah adjusted to her new life on the farm passed on to George by his parents, who inherited the land from George's grandfather, who was bequeathed it by George's great-grandfather, a Swedish immigrant who acquired the 160 acres allowed by the Homestead Act once the Civil War wrapped up and the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kansa, Kiowa, Osage, Pawnee, and Wichita were elbowed aside.

The Johanssons' land produced corn and soybeans, usually in abundance, but the crops came with worries about drought, hail, tornadoes, the cost of fertilizer, repairs, pesticides, what Congress' latest farm bill would say, and the all-important price per bushel. The farm had some cows and chickens too, but it was chiefly just fields of corn and soybeans in the flattest part of Kansas. Most years the Johanssons turned a moderate profit, more than a short-order cook would make but less than a truck driver.

Hannah had an Uncle Jules, childless like herself. He had been exceptionally close to his older sister, Hannah's mother, who pretty much raised him. Unlike their parents, she was unfazed by his homosexuality. In fact, she identified it before he did.

During the war, Jules worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and he met a lot of sailors. He partnered with one in both the personal and business sense, a savvy go-getter from the Bronx. After the war, they pooled their savings to buy a tract of land on Long Island, where, with some almost unimpeachably legal financing, they built thirty-five cheap and identical houses. They took a portion of the profits and bought an apartment in Brooklyn Heights. As a man of property, Jules made a will, leaving all his assets to his sister or, should she God forbid predecease him, her children. A year later, Jules and his partner bought land in Westchester County where they erected fewer but far more expensive homes, fake Tudors and Dutch colonials. When Jules died three years after his partner and one year after his sister, Hannah was surprised to learn that the uncle she hadn't seen in two decades had made a mint and invested it wisely.

The New York lawyer who was Jules' executor sent Hannah a certified letter and followed up with a phone call. He explained everything and saw to all the arrangements. And this is how the Johanssons came into money, a staggering sum by their standards.

"It's yours," said George to Hannah. "What do you want to do with it?"

Hannah didn't hesitate. "We'll keep the farm, of course. It's our home; it's your family legacy and I've been content here. But what I've always longed to do is travel—I want to go to France and Italy and, well, everywhere."

George felt a little hurt. He had long before persuaded himself that his formerly urban wife loved living on a farm in the middle of America. "You never said."

"No point." Over the years, Hannah had become as laconic as her spouse.

The plan was to take four trips a year, one per season. This was at the end of the 1950s when Boeing's 707 initiated the Jet Age. In those days, people dressed up to go to airports and dressed even more up if they were flying. It was the time when American tourists became an important entry on the balance sheets of countries still recovering from the war and when few of their citizens, even the hotel clerks, sales personnel, and waiters spoke English. It was a boom time for guidebooks and bilingual tour guides.

The first trip was, of course, to Paris in April not just because of Hannah's exotic college major but also because of the song. They spent two weeks in the capital and one more in Nice exploring the Riviera. George bought a Leica and took loads of pictures. Back home, he bought a Kodak slide projector and had his rolls of film made into slides they could show friends and neighbors. The Johanssons threw a party for the purpose. The friends and neighbors sat in polite silence through the hour-long display of George's snapshots and Hannah's running commentary. The barbecue afterwards was, by contrast, a smash hit.

The couple's second journey was in January, a week and a half in Germany and four days in Vienna. In June, they did Italy. The friends and neighbors invited in after these junkets kept their reluctance to themselves and most.

Fred and Gert Schultz always came for the slide shows, and even brought their three children though, like everybody else, they found the things tedious. But, after enduring slides of Rome, Florence, and Venice, Gert noticed the little stack of phrasebooks on the mantelpiece. She opened the one on top to a random page. It was the “Shopping” section.

“*Vorrei vedere delle scarpe,*” she read haltingly but out loud.

“What’s that?” Fred asked.

“It means ‘I would like to see some shoes.’”

Fred held out his hand. “Let’s see.”

He paged to the section devoted to “Eating and Drinking” and read *Cameriere la lista, per favore*. He read it badly but with delight.

“How’s that?” asked Sam Ritter who overheard.

“It means ‘Waiter, the menu, please,’ Sam.”

“In what?”

“Italian.”

“You speak Italian?”

“No. Look, it’s from this book they took along with them.”

Fred read another sentence, and with gusto. “*Mi porti un po’ di caffè, adesso.* That’s cup of joe, pronto.”

Sam asked to see the paperback, took a look, laughed, and read out, *Per favore mostrami un reggiseno.*

“Not one I’d need. Please show me a brassiere.”

Drawn by the good cheer, others came over and picked up other books.

Harold Walker read, “*À quelle heure le diner est-il servi dans cet hotel?* What time can a guy get fed in this place?”

His wife Jeannette picked up the German phrasebook, turned a few pages. “Ha!” she exclaimed.

“Listen to this: *Wann wird in diesen Hotel das Abendessen serviert?* It means *exactly* the same thing!”

Pictures of George sweating in front of the Bridge of Sighs, Hannah grinning outside the Sorbonne archway, both of them looking serious under the statue of Beethoven—all these failed to engage their stolid Kansas neighbors. It was no different with the records of later trips, like the picture of the two of them looking

spectacularly out-of-place in front of the forty-one-meter reclining Buddha in Fukuoka. George explained it was taken by a giggling and obliging young woman in a kimono. “Maybe,” he said daringly, “she was a geisha.”

It was the phrasebooks that people liked. They had fun pronouncing the phonetic spellings and working out how many of the identical phrases turned up in all the books—how to ask for a brassiere, for instance. Reading the phrases out loud made them feel sophisticated and provincial at the same time, and pleased to be both.

The Johanssons traveled the world, but the returns diminished. All the airports resembled each other, as did the new hotels designed expressly for them. There were big tour groups in air-conditioned buses. The hotels served hamburgers and fries and Coca-Cola. Everywhere grew crowded and the tourists didn’t care how they dressed. The Johanssons dutifully took in the sights the guidebooks said they ought to, ate what was recommended as local specialties, but they had scarcely any interesting interactions with local people. Every communication was mediated by the phrasebooks which they toted everywhere, just as people now do their cellphones.

The Johanssons kept the farm, but George left three of his four fields fallow. Eventually, they gave up both planting and their travels. They bought a condo in Coral Gables for the winters. George had the idea of turning their Kansas living room into a kind of monument to their wanderings, of which he was proud. He picked out his favorite photos, had them blown up, framed, and hung them on the walls with lengthy typed labels. Hannah laid out all their guidebooks and maps in neat geographical order. But the chief attraction even for the landlocked, isolationist, parochial, and self-satisfied remained the pile of phrasebooks. Over time, grownups no longer visited but their adolescent children did. They read to each other in all the languages with bright-eyed hilarity. The phrases—*Where is the bathroom? How far are we from the river? May I have more sugar?*—struck them as banal but also exotic. They took to calling the old Johansson place The Phrasebook Museum, and it filled those pre-globalist, farm-bred teenagers with intoxicating dreams of adventure, liberation, and escape.