

The phone rang late afternoon. I recognized the voice of Olivier Choppin de Janvry, auctioneer at Drouot, who, after the usual courtesies, asked me the question that burned his lips: "Sir expert, do you know Boldini' paintings? ".

Giovanni Boldini is a portraitist of the late nineteenth century whose brushes immortalized the all Paris of the Belle Epoque and the aristocratic women, countesses and duchesses, and worldly. Because of its fame many forgers had imitated even going so far as to sign with his name.

I replied without hesitation that the work was familiar to me but the confirmation of the authenticity could not do that "firsthand". An appointment was made for the middle of the following week.

Olivier Choppin de Janvry informed me being charged by a guardianship judge of the inventory of the property of a very old lady who ended her life in a nursing home in southern France. The lawyer was to safeguard the assets of its protected and we were in charge to identify and evaluate.

It was a spring afternoon, we found ourselves at the door of an ancient building in the 9th district of Paris, in a romantic area called "New Athens" at the time of its construction in 1824.

The auctioneer was accompanied by his charming partner, Karine Villanfray, and also an assistant photographer, Luc Pâris, not to capture the moment, because we do not know what we would find, but because the photographs are useful for performing authenticity research.

Surprisingly, the key to the building's front door - we had received by post - did not fit the lock, which had also been replaced by a digital code. We have waited a long time in the street, while leaving our imagination wander on what we might find. Finally, an obliging neighbor allowed us to enter the lobby of the building. On the third floor the locks that they corresponded to the keys, opened creaking. Only the door open dispensed a little light in the darkness of the corridor where we were greeted by a stuffed ostrich.

In the apartment, everything was gray: walls, carpets, furniture, chandeliers, tableware. The original colors were fading before the dust of time.

The decor of the interior was classic. A corridor that served a dining room, living room and finally a room. Three pieces I discovered in semi-darkness, the shutters were closed and electricity cut off long ago.

I began my visit in the dining room furnished with classic furniture dating from the nineteenth century, with its buffet service, his table and matching chairs, extra furniture overloaded various newspapers and letters.

On the table were some decorative trinkets, a cup, a fruit bowl, a table mat and taking one of those objects I realized that in fact the tablecloth was yellow!

In the livingroom, the auctioneer had struggled to open a door. He had to remove seats and small furniture to access the window and even then we had half an open iron shutter, the other half being too rusty.

In this setting, cluttered with furniture and knickknacks of all sorts, appeared to me the entire portrait of Marthe de Florian, draped in her pink dress, delicately chiseled facial profile.

Oliver Choppin de Janvry called me, impatient, "So this painting of Boldini is it authentic?"

Absorbed in his reading, stopped by her beauty, I put a few minutes to answer: "A masterpiece."

I do not know that the canvas was listed in no book, no monograph, which is rare given its size - a size scale - and the importance of the painter.

The painting, of this woman still unknown, was realised with a high sensitivity and the laying was singular. The artist had managed to restore her beauty by providing the perfect features of his profile. I admired the hair held back to clear her neck; romantic bits with English on his forehead; deep neckline adorned with a shimmering pearl necklace; her bare shoulder and hands out a rustle of pink silk.

The background of the picture was intentionally dark, of a neutral color intended only to bring out the perfect complexion of the flesh, and wispy pleated silky dress. In his key painting Boldini had extended his brushstroke - long lines to delineate forms - too long for any artist but not for this virtuoso. This spontaneity, this gesture soaring, lyrical trait that were his trademark.

Unknowingly again, I had before me Marthe de Florian, one of the most beautiful women of Paris, whose extreme elegance had inspired the painter.

Boldini realised this portrait in the fullness of her beauty. The artist's talent transcended it and given it what is lacking in photography: the breath of life, which is not found in painting under the hand of a master.

Olivier Choppin de Janvry and his assistant began to inventory each object, movable or trinket, describe and assign an estimate when light blows were struck on the door. It was a neighbor, longtime resident of the building, which amazed our presence and we made it known that she had never seen anyone enter or leave this place for over fifty years.

In this setting of the XIXth century, time seemed suspended as if the owner had slammed the door of his apartment in the morning and come back in the evening but had been away forever.

Intrigued, we looked at the documents that we found without finding a match or any newspaper after 1955. The last occupant had retained not only the furniture but all mail

from previous generations since 1900. The apartment and its contents had crossed a century unchanged.

Letters, tight in the drawers of a desk, gave the identity of the model: Beaugiron Matilda, born into a modest family in Paris in 1864. Of great beauty, she had taken the pseudonym of Marthe de Florian, a custom usual in the wordly. Her charm and grace had subjugated all Paris.

Carefully bonded together by a different colored ribbon were the intimate letters, three for Clemenceau, blue ribbon; five for Raymond Poincaré, red ribbon; seven Paul Deschanel, pink ribbon and others ... All the Department of the Third Republic seemed to have made an appointment in the salon of Marthe de Florian.

She had ordered a car, offered by a suitor, whose interior had been modified luxuriously by the House of Rothschild.

Nobody seemed to resist this ambitious whose granddaughter was this very old lady who ended his days in the south of France.

As a precaution, because of its great value, I brought the portrait in my office where I clung. The possession of such ephemeral work of art which combine beauty and talent - she was a few days or weeks - is one of the expert's privileges. Not a day without looking, soak up its magnificence and discover its secrets.

Then one day we heard that the heirs wanted to disperse any auction at Drouot in the ivory hammer Master Olivier Choppin de Janvry. The preparation of the sale was exciting, advertisements up to the event.

To admire the portrait buyers were from around the world, examining it carefully, commenting, criticizing the mezza voce sometimes the sole aim of discouraging other fans. Finally, came the first day of the exhibition at Drouot. Karine Villanfray had wisely chosen to restore the atmosphere of the apartment, movable partitions reproduced room dimensions, dining room, office, bedroom, hallway, with the same layout.

The crowd of great days had come to see, to feel, to soak up this discovery sometimes escape leaving prognostic on the final auction:

Peter: "One million, I said."

Paul: "Impossible, the highest bid for Boldini is eight hundred thousand euros ..."

Then came the sale. Serious bidders had come forward. Some had asked to be on the phone; others in the room, had the discretion required in the auction.

Everyone in the study of the auctioneer had its role to one, trinkets and furniture buyers; for that one carpets and chandeliers buyers; for others the burden of buyers English, Chinese, American or French. Drouot date was a Tower of Babel.

Then we presented the painting on an easel to deliver the fire auction. First noisy public in the room fell silent in admiration. After a few seconds of silence, I launched the upset price, deliberately low to increase the desire of collectors in their desire to acquire.

I wanted each of them to bring the auction and become for a few seconds holder of the ephemeral portrait of Marthe de Florian, until another auction in the dispossessed, who auction itself will be exceeded ...

This ripple effect animates the game auctions. Well above one million euros, they are three to stay in contention, the attentive face, eyes oscillating between the table and the hammer of the auctioneer.

One seems tense when a bid exceeds his own. Loaded with hope, he relaunched the game until it is the final adjudicator. His face lights up with a broad smile when the auctioneer wins her picture in thunderous applause. The ivory hammer fell removing all their dreams to give our passionate collector.

Marc Ottavi

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I thank Madame Michelle Gable to have grasped the uniqueness of this rediscovery reminder that Paris is at the dawn of the twentieth century, one of the cultural capitals of the world knowing, like a lighthouse, attract and welcome talented artists. One hundred years later, Paris still has its mysteries and secrets.