

The French Art Cruise: A Sojourn on the Seine

BY PETER TRIPPI



Fine Art Connoisseur's fourth adventure abroad, the *French Art Cruise*, delivered exactly what it promised, and then some. Conceived by FAC publisher Eric Rhoads, this journey (October 4-11, 2013) proved an ideal way to mix world-class art and architecture with five-star comforts and a delightfully cohesive group of 36 passengers who eagerly shared with each other their passion for artistic beauty and quality.

The cruise was preceded by an optional three-day “pre-trip” in Paris, based at the Hotel Le Six in the chic 6th arrondissement. On the evening of October 1, the group strolled a few streets away toward the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, a historic art teaching atelier. There, *Fine Art Connoisseur's* editor for California, Vanessa Rothe, arranged our welcome by director Patrick Charpentier, professor Laurent Cattaneo, and coordinator Emmanuel Frochot. The highlight of the evening, however, was a talk on the role of color in French art history given by Dominique Sennelier, the charismatic leader of the eponymous art supplies company his family established in 1887. Afterward, we dined a block away at the lively brasserie La Rotonde, then strolled home to rest up for the adventures ahead.

The next morning, our group was welcomed by the American-born, Paris-based guide Margaret Keith, who brought us to Sainte-Chapelle, the soaring chapel endowed with luminous stained glass by its medieval builder, King Louis IX. After lunch, we passed through the always-closed gates of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, France's most famous art school, where research curator Emmanuel Schwartz showed us highlights of his celebrated campus, including the grand *Hémicycle d'honneur* adorned with a huge mural by Paul Delaroche. (Dr. Schwartz will be in the U.S. often this year, promoting the touring exhibition he has drawn from the school's rich collections, *Gods and Heroes*. Expect an article about it in a future issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.) Next, we walked across the River Seine toward the Musée du Louvre, where chief curator Anne Dion showed us the grand Appartements de Napoleon III and administrators Sabine de la Rochefoucauld and Sarah Galer updated us on the museum's exciting plans. After two hours of

Barbara Scaetta leading our group through Rouen



Conversations underway at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière

free time exploring the Louvre, the group boarded a classic *bateau mouche* that provided dinner and wine while we cruised the river admiring the illuminated facades of central Paris.

The following morning kicked off with an insightful briefing by the arts journalist Didier Rykner (who founded the *Tribune of Art*) on what's really happening in the world of French museums and galleries. We then strolled to the atmospheric studio home of the gifted painter Anthony Palisser, who described his methods and what it's like to work in Paris these days. After lunch, we admired the luxurious riverside mansion occupied by Galerie J. Kugel, where staff member Benoît Constensoux provided an overview of the exquisite historic fine and decorative artworks it sells. Soon we



Eric Rhoads (left) greets Dominique Sennelier.



Eric Rhoads painting in Honfleur



Wendy Chuang and Christiane Hwang



Bob and Charla Nelson

moved a few streets away to the gallery of Vincent Lécuyer, who handles outstanding 19th- and 20th-century European artworks and offered fascinating insights on how he had tracked down some of these treasures. We concluded the day at the Musée d'Orsay, surely the greatest museum of 19th-century art in the world. After a close look at the newly reinstalled Impressionist galleries and a special exhibition focused on male nudes in 19th-century art, our group dined beneath the brilliantly gilded ceiling of the museum's elegant restaurant.

Our final day in Paris began with an exclusive look at Lumiere Technology, where the company's co-founders, Jean Penicaut and Pascal Cotte, demonstrated how their super-camera photographs renowned works of art in mega-pixelated detail. The group moved on to the Musée Jacquemart-André, a jewelbox of a mansion presenting not only its superb permanent collection of fine and decorative arts, but also a temporary exhibition of 19th-century British paintings loaned by Mexico City's Juan Antonio Pérez Simón. We concluded our Paris experience on a high while visiting an outstanding venue for contemporary realist

art, Galerie L'Oeil du Prince. Here the proprietors, Yann and Laetitia Deshoulières, introduced us to several of the artists they represent: Shane Wolf, Béatrice Bissara, Nicolas Martin, and Jaime Zapata. Many purchases were made on the spot, and most of them were carried by our guests directly onto *AMALegro*, the luxurious ship that awaited us on Paris's western edge. The voyage itself began after our first delicious supper on board; mindful of our desire to take great souvenir photos, the captain sailed close to the sparkling (and occasionally blinking) Eiffel Tower before heading westward into Normandy. The *AMALegro* itself carries 150 passengers in total, and although the others seemed perfectly nice, our group of 36 guests ate in our own section of the main dining room and always departed the ship separately for our own customized excursions on land.

ROLLING ON THE RIVER

For the next seven days, our jolly group discovered how verdant and sinuous the mighty River Seine really is. Though patches of heavy industry and canal-style locks punctuate its course, our overall impression of Seine-side life was of genteel comfort — timber-framed houses with spacious balconies overlook the slow-moving river, fertile meadows teem with abundant crops and contented-looking livestock, occasional outcroppings of white limestone are crowned by chateaus, abbeys, or ruins, and small, gray-stoned villages center on their well-tended medieval church towers. During our one-week cruise, I delivered three illustrated lectures for our group only, summarizing the history of this fascinating region and setting its artworks and architecture into cultural and geopolitical contexts.

The Normans are famously friendly, and none more so than our delightful Rome-born, Rouen-based guide, Barbara Scaetta, who welcomed us at our first port, Vernon. Within 15 minutes, she brought us to the colorful house of Claude Monet at Giverny, where his famous gardens still looked remarkably colorful considering we were well into autumn. We also enjoyed a visit to the adjacent Musée des

Impressionismes, with its intriguing show of the Japanese painter Hiramatsu (b. 1941), whose handsome screens draw inspiration from Monet. A special bonus was a pre-arranged visit to Giverny's Baudy inn, where Monet's artistic followers once lived and ate, and to the newly renovated inn Les Jardin des Plumes.

The next day, having docked in the town of Caudebec-en-Caux, our group headed to the pretty port city of Honfleur, from which the 17th-century explorer Samuel de Champlain set sail on his way to what would become French Canada. There we visited the Musée Eugene Boudin, named after the great 19th-century painter of Norman beach scenes, then explored the remarkably well preserved historic quarter, with its extraordinary wooden churches.

October 7 was our longest day, but perhaps also our most exhilarating. The Norman coast has witnessed more than its share of warfare, so we started tracing this troubled history at Bayeux's Musée de la Tapisserie, where the 230-foot long Bayeux Tapestry (actually a cloth embroidered in the late 11th century) illustrates the successful invasion of England



Gale and Greg Meador with Gabriel Haigazian (center)



Janet Smith offers a sweet Norman treat.



Claudia Clayton with the ubiquitous baguette



Dan Whipple, Peter Trippi, Mark Jung, David Orcutt, Libby Whipple, Cecile Pernica, Michelle Jung

by the Norman duke William the Conqueror in 1066. Having already enjoyed (the day before) a fascinating lecture by our fellow travelers Bob and Charla Nelson about D-Day and the recovery of Nazi-looted art, we next headed to the tiny town of Sainte-Mère-Eglise. This is best known to North Americans, through the 1962 Hollywood movie *The Longest Day*, as the place where the unlucky paratrooper John Steele got his parachute tangled on the church steeple and lost his hearing due to the tolling of its bell. After a visit to this town's impressive Airborne Museum, we walked in brilliant sunshine along both Utah and Omaha beaches, and atop Pointe du Hoc, the rugged headland that cost so many American soldiers' lives in claiming it from the Nazis. Alas, the two-week-long shutdown of the U.S. federal government prevented us from honoring those men in their cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, so we instead visited the atmospheric German cemetery at La Cambre.

Normandy's bustling capital is Rouen, with its charming historic quarter centered on the enormous Gothic cathedral that Monet painted so zealously from a second-floor window across the street. Guide Barbara Scaetta showed us her adopted city with evident pride, then set us free to explore its sophisticated shops and cafes. The next day brought us to the interconnected towns of Les Andelys (Petit and Grand), both of which have good views of the ruined hilltop castle Chateau Gaillard, constructed by Richard the Lionheart in the 1190s. After examining it, we headed to the small but charming museum dedicated to the great 17th-century classical painter Nicolas Poussin, who grew up here before making his name in Rome. That night we sailed toward Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, our last port before returning to Paris. This was our hopping-off point for an exciting day in the town of Auvers-sur-Oise, where a descendant of the renowned 19th-century landscape painter Charles-François Daubigny welcomed us to the unspoiled studio house where the artist lived and worked. We moved on to the Auberge Ravoux, the former boarding house where Vincent van Gogh died, and finally to the windswept cemetery where he and his beloved brother, Theo, are buried side by side.

Our final morning together, back at *AMALegro's* Paris pier, was bittersweet. After sharing so much fun together, it was sad to bid farewell to friends old and new, and also to the ship's enthusiastic staff, especially cruise director Sebastien Leroy, who grew up in Rouen. Going our separate ways, we all agreed to try and gather again in the autumn of 2014, and we hope that you will consider joining us then, too. For details on that *Iberian Art Cruise*, please see pages 42 and 43.

Information: For details on the Iberian Art Cruise, contact Gabriel Haigazian, Creative Travel Planners, 5855 Topanga Canyon Boulevard, Suite 220, Woodland Hills, CA 91367, 818.444.2700, ext. 123, gabriel@thectpgroup.com.

PETER TRIPPI is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.