

# Art Theft and Love in Charm City

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A rising museum administrator is infatuated with a beautiful art student at nearby Goucher College. After-hours, he steals a precious gift for her with special meaning known only to them. Thus, a lovely Renoir oil sketch goes missing from the Baltimore Museum of Art for more than half a century. This history came to light when, in 2012, the painting mysteriously appeared, supposedly at a flea market, capturing the imaginations of America. At the time, I was the director of the Walters, and held a piece of the puzzle: a strange package that had mystified me for decades.

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The story of “Renoir Girl” and her “Flea-Market Renoir” emerged with a big media splash in the late summer of 2012. A woman in northern Virginia, who portrayed herself as naive about art and all-but-destitute, claimed to have stumbled upon a tiny, elaborately framed painting at a flea market in West Virginia in late 2009. The work is an impressionistic river view in bright pinks and greens and a metal plaque on the frame says “Renoir.” On the back, a sticker states the work’s title, *Paysage, bords de Seine*. Renoir Girl claimed she found the painting in a box with a plastic cow and a Paul Bunyan doll and paid \$7 for the lot.

After apparently forgetting about her purchase for three years, Renoir Girl decided to check out the painting at her mother's urging. A nearby auction house confirmed the painting was indeed by Renoir, and estimated an auction price of \$75,000 to \$100,000. They told her it was painted in 1879 on linen, likely dashed off as a souvenir for Renoir's mistress on a napkin in a restaurant beside the Seine where they were dining. The auction was scheduled for September 29, 2012, and Renoir Girl was all over the media. *The Washington Post* reporter Ian Shapira covered this art-world fairy tale in depth. My friends in the Baltimore museum scene all wondered, where did that Renoir come from? Could it have been stolen?

Henry Walters didn't like the Impressionists, so this was not an issue for the Walters. It was, however, an issue for the Baltimore Museum of Art, specifically because the Virginia auction house traced this Renoir back to a gallery in Paris where it was purchased in 1926 by Philadelphia-born lawyer and collector Herbert L. May. May's wife, heiress Saidie Adler of Baltimore, bequeathed most of her substantial art collection to the BMA when she died in 1951. Knowing this, the staff of the BMA checked their files. They had no record of such a Renoir ever having been in their collection.

But Ian Shapira did his own research. He visited the BMA library, requested the Saidie May file, and found evidence Saidie lent *Paysage, bords de Seine* to the museum in 1937. That revelation prompted the BMA staff to examine their temporary loan file, where they found that this Renoir did belong to Saidie May, that it was part of her bequest to the museum, and that in fall 1951 it was in an exhibition called *From Ingres to Gauguin*. Most importantly, the painting was reported stolen on November 17, 1951. The theft took place between 4:00 p.m. on November 16th and 1:00 p.m. on the 17th, and there was no sign of forced entry. This revelation

was covered in the *Post* on Thursday, September 27th; the auction was cancelled and the FBI seized the painting.

What caught my attention was that date: November 17, 1951. It took me back to a mysterious package I received at the Walters in 1986, when I was chief curator. It was a book mailer, and the return address bore the name “EGRETTE” preceded by the initial “R” in capital letters. Each stroke was squiggly, as if written by a very old person. Below that was “10 Church Street,” which I recognized to be an address in lower Manhattan, and finally, “New York, N.Y. 10012.” Inside was a handsome wooden carving that I recognized to be a rare Coptic devotional plaque of the 6th century. It looked familiar, so I went to the museum’s photo files. There I found the photo of a wooden plaque that I initially took to be a twin. With a closer look, it was obvious that the object in the photo and the object on my desk were the same. The card said: “Missing, October 2, 1951”—just six weeks before the BMA Renoir disappeared.

The return address now deserved a closer look. This time I recognized it to be not the name “R. Egrette” but rather, the word “regret,” and written not at all by a shaking hand, but rather by someone wanting to look old, feeble, and anonymous. As for “10 Church Street,” the real ZIP code was different from that written on the envelope. This caused me to take the word “church” not as an address but rather as qualifier for the word “regret.” The act of mailing seemed to be an act of repentance.

Not long thereafter I learned that the Department of Classical Studies at Johns Hopkins received a similar package from “R. Egrette” of “10 Church Street, New York, N.Y. 10012.” Those objects, too, went missing in October, 1951. Someone apparently had access to *two* Baltimore collections in the fall of 1951. The return of the works after thirty years indicated that knowledge of their origin was never lost, and the simultaneity of the two mailers suggested

someone was at last setting things right. Someone with security access to those two museum collections (neither thefts involved objects on public display) likely had some seniority in 1951, and would have been at least in their mid-30s. That would make him or her around 70 in 1986.

Who was that person?

Fast forward to Spring 2013. Renoir Girl must reveal her identity as she presents her legal case as the rightful owner of the flea-market Renoir. Marcia May Fuqua, then 51, was a driving teacher with a bumpy employment history from a tiny town in Virginia. She presented herself as a good-faith buyer with no knowledge of art history. But her story quickly unraveled. She forgot what flea market she visited, and the likely candidate, the “Harpers Ferry Flea Market,” had no record of the transaction. Marcia May’s mother, Marcia Mae Fouquet (different spellings, similar pronunciation), then 84, ran an art school for decades out of her home in Great Falls, Virginia, where, according to former students, her daughter often helped out. Certainly, daughter Marcia May knew something about art history.

The most interesting part is the mother’s backstory. In the fall of 1951, Mom was a 23-year-old junior in art studies at Goucher College. Her son Matt told the *Post* that their mother had the Renoir in her house for “fifty or sixty years” and that it came from “a museum in Baltimore.” Matt claimed his mother wanted the painting returned because that would “put this behind us.”

Mother died in September 2013. Matt later stated in court that he had lied about the Renoir being around the house all that time. But forget that: On January 10, 2014, the day Federal Judge Leonie Brinkema of the Eastern District of Virginia ruled against Renoir Girl and ordered the painting returned to the BMA, a triumphant and vengeful Matt (who apparently hates his sister) opened up to reporters just outside the courthouse, seemingly oblivious to what he had

said under oath a few months earlier. The painting, Matt said, *had* been in his mother's house since the '50s. Did she steal it? No, he said, "it was a gift." Mom was a beautiful woman and had plenty of boyfriends. As for its return to the BMA, he said, "My mother wanted this."

Mother Marcia was living in Baltimore in 1951 at the time of the three thefts and was involved in art. Goucher's campus was then within a few blocks of the Baltimore Museum of Art. That does not, however, put her in the BMA after hours on the evening of November 16th, much less in art storage at the Walters and at the Hopkins Department of Classical Studies a few weeks earlier. A student would not have had privileged access to all three local collections. Certainly there is a believable end-of-life, making-it-right flavor to the public appearance of the Renoir in 2012 when Mom must have been aware of her impending death. But there was no make-it-right moment for her in 1986 when the "regret" packages were sent. While mother Marcia was not the thief, she probably knew the thief. Now she's dead, so perhaps we will never know. But there is another intriguing piece that may be part of this puzzle, again, from 1986.

My first major Walters exhibition, *Silver Treasure from Early Byzantium*, opened in April 1986, two weeks before the "regret" mailer arrived. I was especially eager to borrow a silver bowl in the collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art for the show, but the BMA staff could not locate it, so we settled for a photograph. Then, on August 1st, three months after the "regret" mailer arrived at the Walters, the bowl suddenly turned up. The museum's registrars received a call from a former BMA employee saying that while cleaning out his garage, he opened a box and discovered a silver bowl that he said he did not recognize.

He did, however, recognize the accession number on the box as indicating the collection of the BMA, and so he called. How did that box get into his garage? The explanation was odd, as was the fact that the bowl appeared at the exact moment when it was needed for the International

Byzantine Congress, which converged on the Walters that very week to see the *Silver Treasure* exhibition. He claimed that when he left the BMA in the early '70s to take a job in Washington, DC, his successor at the museum packed up his materials and inadvertently included the bowl. He claimed it had taken fourteen years to discover because it was only when he retired that he had "time on his hands" and cleaned out his garage. What else, I wondered, might be in that garage?

The individual in question is familiar to long-time Walters staff as a skilled art packer whose expertise was welcomed at the Walters and the BMA. This person died in January, 1987, just six months after he returned the bowl. Internal records show he had personally transported that bowl between the BMA and the Walters in 1951, which suggests that he should have recognized its packaging in his garage. Finally, in 1951 he was Assistant Building Superintendent at the BMA. This gave him privileged after-hours access. Then, a last tantalizing clue: the Walters "regret" package was sent from the ZIP code of New York University where he had trained in the '50s.

Just maybe there was a budding romance between the rising young superintendent at the BMA, then 35, and the attractive 23-year-old Goucher art student. Baltimore is a small town and they were both devoting themselves to modern art; it is likely they would have met. Recall that brother Matt, when interviewed by reporters outside the courthouse on January 10, 2014, suggested the Renoir was a gift from one of his mother's many suitors. According to family lore, one of her beaux had worked at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Why steal the Renoir? Undoubtedly, the BMA superintendent had heard Renoir dashed it off over lunch for his mistress and soon-to-be wife. Perhaps he or perhaps both of them knew that this beautiful young woman appears in Renoir's famous *Boating Party* at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC.

Assuming that the BMA Assistant Building Superintendent of 1951 (age 35) and Mr. Egrette of 1986 (age 71) are the same person, I suspect he took the Renoir because of the same urge that drove him to steal the Coptic votive from the Walters a few weeks earlier. It is that powerful feeling of connection to people of the past through the objects they created and touched. For the painting there was the magic of identification, of the BMA superintendent with Renoir and Marcia with his mistress. This is the stuff of compounded infatuation. Perhaps this was a surprise Christmas gift in 1951: A work of art with a message and a secret that would bind the two for more than sixty years.

*This tale of art theft and love is adapted from a chapter of Sacred and Stolen: The Confessions of a Museum Director, published by SelectBooks, New York City, available on Amazon.*