

A long, perspective view of a classical colonnade with stone columns and a series of hanging lanterns. The lanterns are illuminated, casting a warm glow. The columns are arranged in two rows, creating a deep, narrow passage. The floor is made of large stone tiles. In the distance, a person is visible walking through the colonnade. The overall atmosphere is serene and historical.

CARSTEN SPROTTE

YOU
SEEK

I FIND

HOUSE-HUNTING AND SOUL-SEARCHING
IN PARIS

YOU SEEK, I FIND

House-hunting and soul-searching in Paris and beyond

By Carsten Sprotte

*Copyright © 2020 by Carsten Sprotte
All rights reserved, including cover photo.*

<http://carstensprotte.com>

*Dedicated to my clients, now friends, who entrusted me with their search for a home in Paris and
beyond.*

Table of Contents

[Table of Contents](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Introduction to the Search](#)

[The price of the Tuileries](#)

[A Loft for Louise](#)

[The Return of a King](#)

[The God Particle](#)

[Birthday and birthright](#)

[Daughter of Pearl](#)

[Lady Lalique](#)

[Victoria's Station](#)

[The Magic Baton](#)

[The Philosopher's Stones](#)

[Afterlaugh](#)

Acknowledgements

Some of you who read are also those who inspired me to write. To you, my clients become friends, I owe special thanks. In addition to your inspiration, you gave me the material means to create. You may or may not be explicitly named in these pages, but you have been encoded and will know who you are. Some stories, for those concerned, have been slightly altered, but their truth remains intact. I have sought to understand and share those personal dreams that brought you to France. I have wanted this to become your book as well as mine, and am forever grateful that you have so enriched my life.

Let the Search Begin!

Anyone who follows through with their dream to live and learn in France is treading a cherished path. I stand at the door to this experience and beckon you with open arms. Many will come because of their appreciation for one particular aspect of French culture, through which they gradually discover others. Others are drawn through the door in search of something less definable...something feather-soft and slightly sweet like a morning brioche that begs them to remain. Or a *je ne sais quoi* that has always been lacking in their lives. I have sought out to name this intimate immensity in my book entitled *EXQUISITE*, from which *You Seek, I Find* is in fact a spin-off. It can be read as a companion book, with some of its chapters irreversibly intertwined, such as *The Return of a King* and *The God Particle with Spirits and Souls*, or *Daughter of Pearl* with *Cuisine and Circumstance*.

You Seek, I Find focuses my attention on my past and future clients and friends. For all of you who pass through the French doors, seduced by stereotypes, my desire is to open room after room within a grand chateau of an expanded existence. And if I may have the honor of finding you an apartment, the adventure of transforming a house into a home only begins when I hand over its keys. It's not just any home; it's a home in France, of which you have long dreamed. It's not just any transformation; it's an expression of who you are and want to become in your new life that is unfolding.

Exquis is the latin word meaning "carefully sought out", and carefully seeking out your future apartment is what I can do for you. "You seek. I Find" could just as well be my marketing baseline. Before I learned that latin word *exquis*, I used to work long hours for one boss after another. *Value-added knowledge-working*, I think it was called, but nobody really knew what it meant. These days, I'm happy to say, I find homes in Paris for those who have the dream of living here. Let's say I make my living around the art of living.

According to the French Administration, the work concerns real estate and requires a professional license. You have to know what walls are worth and what they are likely to be worth in the future. You have to know how to finance them and fix them up, which ones can be knocked down and what you are allowed to do inside them. How do you pay for them and how much does it cost to maintain them? What does all the documentation, as elaborate as the architecture, mean in plain English? There are a host of smart monkeys with a license (even an MBA like me) who can answer all these and numerous other questions, often in a thick French accent.

I see my own value elsewhere, outside of what is expected. I want my clients to walk away not only with the keys to a new home, but to a new life. No doubt many are concerned about their investment, but secretly I care only about their life: that singular sauce they concoct for the sandwich between birth and death. The stories these pages relate pay tribute to that sauce.

The price of the Tuileries

From his quarters at the Hôtel Meurice, General Von Choltitz delivered his last-minute, split-second decision to oppose Hitler's order to destroy Paris. Seventy-four years later, just around the corner from Hôtel Meurice, I am standing on the balcony of a superb apartment from the 1820s, overlooking the Tuileries. With me are George and Sandy, an American couple keen on purchasing it. At 18 000 Euros per square meter, they hesitate. Is it too much? What is the real market price? There are too few apartments for sale on that block to provide any statistically reasonable reply.

The balcony also affords us a view on the Orsay museum; the setting sun is now glistening off its immense clock. Time is ticking down for them to make their momentous choice. I offer to take their photo together, in this happy but uncertain moment in which what could be, has yet to be affirmed. Leaving the apartment, we cross the street and stroll through the sumptuous lobby, bar, and courtyard of the Saint James Albany Hotel (previously L'Hôtel de Noailles), making ourselves quite at home. It feels luxurious and yet is only a pale relic of what stood here before the Revolution.

I point out the plaque commemorating the marriage here of the Marquis de la Fayette to Marie Adrienne Françoise de Noailles in April 1774. La Fayette rallied to the cause of the young American Republic, and was the first to prophetically proclaim that the welfare of America is bound closely to the welfare of humanity. How could he have foreseen the catastrophic events that would unfold 250 years down the road?

We linger for a moment, floating above time and pondering our improbable place in this continuum of history. Time for another photo. I then ask George and Sandy these questions: how much is it worth to have the Tuileries at your doorstep? To stroll or jog its majestic walkways at dawn, when the entire garden belongs to you? To have a regiment of gardeners (and grazing goats) tending to it for you? How much is it worth to cross the garden and find yourselves on the banks of the Seine, with a panorama of Paris? To have the Louvre and the Orsay museum both a short stroll away, almost as if you were walking from one room of your house to another? How does it feel to have the venerable spirit of La Fayette smiling on you, Americans? How much is it worth to own an apartment in one of the finest remaining residential examples of the Directoire-style in architecture?

The answer was nudging its way closer to "more than money can buy", which makes 18 000 Euros per square meter sound a heck of a lot more reasonable. To live in a work of art is worth more than money can buy. A great city is a work of art — one of the highest forms — because it is a complex, collective effort; it is a marvel of molding individual aspirations into a harmonious whole.

One month later on April 15, 2019, I signed the purchase agreement for the apartment on behalf of George and Sandy. That very same day, five hours later, Notre Dame was in flames. The structure was saved only minutes before all was lost. The candle flickered once again

between the eternal and the ephemeral. I'm glad that George and Sandy bought that apartment because life must be lived now or never.

A Loft for Louise

It was all about the river and the rooftop, but I hadn't yet coined the phrase when the search began. Too bad, because it contained the keys to what David and Louise were looking for and that I didn't find until the last minute...when it was almost too late. A property search is not always, as they say in French, *un long fleuve tranquille*. With retirement now closing in fast, David and Louise hired me to find their Paris pied-à-terre, but how would I know exactly what they wanted if they didn't know themselves?

David saw himself everywhere. He was an enthusiast and couldn't wait. Louise didn't see herself anywhere....at least not quite. No doubt, in the center of her reserve, she knew what was right. And so I zig-zagged them across Paris, sampling apartments like so many hors d'oeuvres.

We start off on the Quai des Célestins, in a 1950's building with a fabulous view over the Seine. Ile Saint Louis on one side and the Jardin de L'Hôtel-de-Sens on the other. It really makes you want to open windows...until you hear the maddening traffic noise. No, this will never do.

Then we discover property in a *hôtel particulier* tucked discreetly behind rue des Rosiers. It has French renaissance character (lots of big wooden beams) and a few high ceiling moments. Lovely view on an interior courtyard. Very calm. Except for the living room, it's in bad shape. David always sees the potential, and I am on his side. But this is stretching it. Louise weighs in on the verdict:

"Not sure I want to walk out my door everyday into a falafel feeding frenzy that feels like a flock of pigeons."

A couple minutes away on rue du Bourg Tibourg, there is a 5th floor apartment with a lousy configuration and a disappointing balcony. We tug and stretch the floorplan in every direction, but nothing feels right. Then we visit a large 5th-floor apartment on Boulevard Beaumarchais. This is the clear winner based on price per square meter, but there is wasted space, and the kitchen is closed in. The views are not bad, but the street noise rises even to the 5th floor.

Enough of the Marais. We set off toward the rue du Chevalier de Saint-George near Madeleine, just down the street from the very first Paris Ikea. What an auspicious name, and a practical selling point! The apartment meets all criteria: two bedrooms and two bathrooms, move-in ready. It's a serious candidate I think, but Louise is tinkering around in the master bedroom's walk-in closet, with its nicely hung men's suits.

"Well, it does have good closet space" is the best she can find to say.

Next, we're off to see a rooftop loft with a grandiose view over the Opéra Garnier. We scout the rue Godot de Mauroy, one of those unexpectedly trendy streets in a central office district. The building is grandiose, fitting for any high-image professional firm (should David

decide never to retire). The newly renovated loft is *bobo*¹ like the street: all the right colors, the industrial feel, vintage furnishings, open kitchen, and an authentic zinc bar. David and I think it is all so cool. We are both itching to make an offer. We walk outside to the small terrace, of which there are two, to admire the view and think things through. Louise has taken the other terrace, but if we talk loud enough she can hear. She makes herself clear:

“So, will we each have our own terrace then?”

Now isn't that a silly detail in the greater scheme of things? Or maybe it's a defining moment in a life-long marriage?

“A deal-breaker,” I quietly concede. Two separate mini-terraces make no sense. Unfortunately, this is the last apartment on the list of visits. David and Louise leave Paris tomorrow. Has my mission failed? I check my emails and see an alert. A new property has popped up today: 65 square meters on Ile Saint Louis where miracles may still occur.

“Too tight” I'm already thinking, as I call the seller's agent to inquire.

“The first scheduled visit is at 17:00 today. If you can make it by 16:15 I can let you in before.”

It's now 15:45 as we hit the road running.

“It's true, you should at least see what it's like on Ile Saint Louis. There is so little property available there,” I explain, not expecting much more from the excursion.

We scurry across the Pont Marie, which happens to be where we started the day. The seller's agent is out on the street, eyeing her watch. I can't say she is delighted to see us. Her scheduled visit at 17:00 is supposedly very promising... an Italian buyer who was almost ready to sign over the phone. We walk up the 17th-century wooden staircase to the 5th floor. Miraculously, there actually is an elevator...for two. We make it to the top. More stairs. We make it to the top again, where everything seems to stop.

We have walked into a painting, where everything has its place. Our eyes are all drawn to the same focal point: wide glass sliding doors open the living room onto the terrace in a single-room continuity. The terrace, big enough to seat six, is framed by two flanks of zinc roof that cover the bedrooms, each with a window looking over the terrace. The entire view from the terrace is onto a classical Hôtel Particulier: at its base a large elegant door opening into a private garden, and at its top, slate-colored shingles and a steep roof with spiked chimneys. Four floors high, six windows wide, it is a perfectly-centered view on splendid symmetry.

All of us instinctively count several seconds of silence as we admire this unexpected gem. I had felt something similar as a kid when I climbed tall trees. Suddenly I would find myself above all the branches, in my own world away from all the commotion, swaying in the breeze. I notice Louise is also feeling something (no doubt nothing to do with trees). David is feeling something as well, no doubt having to do with Louise.

¹ French vernacular referring to the new social class called bourgeois-bohème, an artsy version of the American yuppie.

We break out to discover all of the nooks and crannies of this rooftop charmer. David is grinning like a boy as he discovers the odd configurations that make use of all possible space. I am amazed as I check all required criteria off the list. Once we have seen it all, we gather in the living room and take a seat. David and I are looking out the south-side windows, offering a view over the zinc roofs and orange chimney tops of the Island. Louise is looking wistfully out toward the terrace.

“This place really has it all: the river and the rooftops” I comment with a smile.

“And for such little space, it feels so spacious!” David notes.

“It’s the vaulted ceiling that makes it so, as well as the terrace” I suggest.

It is so quiet that I can hear the seller’s agent’s watch ticking. I can also hear Louise’s heart beating, and that is exactly what I want to hear. All of this was for her--the multidimensional her. David’s mother had lived in Paris many years before, to research and write a book. Now she was gone, but the idea of this Paris homecoming would please her still.

Louise deserves it too. She gave up a 20 year chunk of her brilliant academic career to raise the family. It’s one of those astonishing things women do to keep the world afloat. Every village in France has its monument to the men who died in war, but nowhere are the mothers and wives recognized who gave them life.

No doubt that is why all eyes are on her as we sit together waiting for a verdict to fall. She’s keenly intelligent but not the expressive type, so we need to read the signs. Once I sense a softening in her face--a light from memories gone and of things to come--I feel the time has come to plead the case. A wave of nostalgic lyricism comes over me.

“There was a time when I spent a honeymoon night at the *Hôtel Jeu de Paume* just next door, you know. There was a time when I played my violin at the tip of the island as the lovers strolled by and by. There were times of sipping champagne by the Seine at dusk, sucking Berthillon sorbet as it drips down the cone on balmy afternoons. There was a time when I came to the island to greet the dawn, every single day. Now it is your turn. You cannot regret this choice. You will be happy in this place, and so will every person who sets foot here. I’d say it’s enchanted. Not just the apartment, but the island. It’s not just Paris, it’s Ile Saint Louis, sanctified by the two arms of the Seine that hold it dear and cleanse its banks. I am overjoyed for you, and so grateful to be a part of this.”

Louise seems quietly pleased at my discourse, while David is pulling out his pen to sign. Behold, the blessed feeling of something meant to be.

The Return of a King

When a client confers upon me the honor of searching out his dream home in Paris, the adventure begins with a conversation. Sometimes it is simple enough: don't they all just love to spend time in Paris, some on the left bank, others on the right? Aren't they all searching for Parisian character with a view? In some cases, the conversation is like the *attaque* in wine tasting: the complexity of the wine --and the person-- will unfold over time. Maybe even over centuries.

In 2014, a European anti-money laundering directive appeared, requiring all estate agents to know their client by collecting sufficient ID and other relevant information. Since this time, you must declare that you know your client, when in fact you know nothing of any significance. What can a few million euros tell you about a person, other than his status in a monopoly game? Of what royal substance is the actor when he steps off the stage? Are you dealing with a king of old or an emperor in new clothes?

My mission has now been accomplished with this enigmatic client who holds a French name but hails from a foreign land. What remains is the enigma. He invites me to visit his Paris masterpiece for a champagne toast. Nothing in this home has been left to chance; it is a remarkably deliberate creation. I notice in particular the darkwood, finely-chiseled desk looking out over a courtyard of chestnut trees in the dying of the light. I have never seen a desk quite like this one, with ivory inlays into a wood that appears incandescent like an extra old cognac.

"Your desk is rare and carefully sought out, I have no doubt."

"Macassar Ebony" he confirms, supplementing its latin origin "Diospyros celebica--fruit of the gods."

With his arms resting upon this opulence, I imagine him a commander of the free world in our age where freedom has become a masquerade. Maybe our free world is now but a small kingdom, maybe only a parcel. Royalty is the claim we hold on any domain, however incipient.

I am certain he is a king in the center of his being.

It is a common but erroneous belief that opulence leads to decadence, because the source of human depravity lies within, not without. The natural world teems in abundance, and whoever should reign must do so with a mindset of plenty.

He invites me afterward to the restaurant *Le Violon d'Ingres* because he knows I have a thing for violins. To celebrate the new apartment, we begin with champagne. There are very few wines whose price can be expressed as a percentage of a Paris apartment. The 164th Edition of Krug is one of them. The Grande Cuvée is the sun around which all other Krug vintages revolve. I tell him it has been 12 years since I last tasted a Krug champagne, and that I am immensely honored. I am not accustomed to such honor, in fact, and feel slight discomfort at this display of unprecedented largesse.

One cannot choose such a champagne arbitrarily, but I do not yet understand the reason for his choice. He explains that it has been made from over a hundred wines, some dating back to 1990, and over 10 vintages, blending Pinot noir, chardonnay, and Pinot Meunier. It then matured

eight years in the Krug cellar. We toast to his new Paris apartment, but there is more to be said about the champagne than anything else just now. We are mesmerized by the bouquet. He suggests apples, peach, and brioche, balanced by complex earth notes. I seem more sensitive to the floral notes, and wonder if there is not an incipient smokiness. Silently sipping, we then concur that on the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, tightly focused, with a superbly refined mousse. The finish is zesty, complex, and exceptionally long. There are special words reserved for such experiences, and the one that comes to my mind is exquisite.

The life of a grand champagne models our own, when lived consciously; it is an evolution from base thoughts to more subtle sentiments. Set before me is a bottle of Krug and a soul on his singular journey. The dinner will offer me a few more clues to the enigma.

Over a year ago, I had found his future apartment in a stately building offering two elevators, one of which, originally intended for the domestics, descended into the cellar from the kitchen's back door. I was amused that he took notice of this detail: "how convenient for my wine!" Only later did I learn of his honorary membership in the Commanderie de Bordeaux; that he owned and curated one of the finest and most extensive wine cellars in the world; that a Médoc château also bore his name. What do you think would lead a man to travel from his far-away land, searching out the most exquisite French and other European wines over thirty years? Only blood can tell.

A secret is shared between wine and blood, and once you have wine in your blood it will not leave you. In terrible bloodshed, and with mortal regret, you may become severed from the vine--your homeland--but someday you will return to it.

Such describes the gripping intensity of the 17th-century Huguenot exile. Every drop of blood in their veins was French. They worked its soil and cultivated her (France's) vines. Their children played beneath her roofs and their deceased lay buried in her cemeteries. They were racially, linguistically, and culturally *français de pure souche*. But something non-genetic had contaminated them, altering ever so slightly their belief about that one thing that matters more than all the rest. That one thing, beyond all knowing, that demanded absolute and unquestionable faith, was called the Church, the ultimate banner for bloodshed.

And so thousands of Huguenots--the lucky ones at least--fled their homeland, la France cruelle, to populate distant shores. Those who remained would have to sacrifice their life or their conscience. It is one of the most tragic episodes in the history of France, but also a crucible in the quest for liberté. We must not forget freedom's fragile nature, as clouds of deep division threaten us with darkness once again.

Over three hundred years later, I appeared on the scene and took my cue to herald the homecoming of a Huguenot. A lion of largesse, an architect of great ambitions and a patron of all things exquisite, there can be no doubt: he belongs to the fraternity of the French. His return is like that of a king, and Krug is a king's champagne. In his cellar where 80 000 bottles sleep, I like to imagine each an exiled soul, its memory seeking release, its virtues calling to be named and acclaimed.

The God Particle

If every soul has its own quest, Anton's was the most abstract---mind-boggling in fact. Why was a renowned particle physicist searching for an apartment in Paris? It was not for me to ask. Our conversations were matter-of-fact. String theory was for me about music; for him it was the underlying nature of reality. Somehow, by tugging a loose thread, I found a subject--or a subjective experience--where our minds could meet. He was a wine connoisseur, and wanted me to know about his bottle of Château Margaux 2005.

"Ah yes", I said, "is that not where the physical and the metaphysical magically blend?"

"There is no magic," he retorted, "there is only a science of the future. Here is what we already know: 75% cabernet sauvignon, 20% merlot, 2% cabernet franc, 3% petit verdot."

This was a mathematical precision I could grasp.

Now he has his place in Paris, and a balcony with a view on space-time curvature--call it a dome. And in his hand he holds a large-bulbed *verre de dégustation* quarter-filled with a Bordeaux *premier cru*.

"Over there" he points to the dome of the Collège de France, "Einstein presented his theory of relativity in 1922. Room number 8....infinity. The minds of the French physicists at the time couldn't contain it. A new conceptual bottle would be required."

"Over there," I point in the opposite direction to the Dome of the Saint Paul church "they tell the story of Jesus who announced a new covenant between God and a spiritual body of believers that would replace the covenant with Israel. It didn't go over well either with the priests of the time."

"Religion is such a mess" I suggest.

"Physics too" he concedes.

We sit together -- a world apart -- searching the impenetrable red of our Haut-Brion where we hope to find the answer to the enigma: that elusive God particle.

Birthday and birthright

“Now I’m in Paris to stay. I shall have my champagne every day!”

Katrina smiles at this idea, landing in Paris just in time for her birthday on February 29. But there will be no birthday, because it’s one of those years. Being cheated out of a birthday every other year (and more) has made her realize that you mustn't wait on special occasions to celebrate. She’s not going to let it dampen her everescence. Champagne every day will serve to celebrate her own little apartment in the Marais. Pourquoi pas? She remembered something Napoleon had declared about champagne: that you deserve it in victory and need it in defeat. It’s an exceptionally lucky day to have been born. She is number one out of 30 million and one to visit Paris that same year.

Like Katrina, many will never leave Paris. Others will return, again and again, like a pilgrimage to the *terre exquise*. Paris, like Jerusalem, is a name that resonates through the ages. What began for many as an innocent predisposition for Paris would lead to a persistent penchant. Before they knew it, they would be entangled. It is no trifle, and for some, it will even change every aspect of their lives: their home, their mate, their work, their appearance, their diet, and their choice of wine.

Katrina has left it all far behind. There is a husband who was always dead to her, now furious in his heap of dirty laundry that he never bothered to clean himself. There are the kids for whom she labored daily until they grew wings to fly, still ravenous mouths expecting to be fed. There is the security of a large house and an entire career. There is a circle of friends who tell her she is crazy and selfish, that she will be alone for the rest of her life because she has passed that certain age.

All that was called her life she has traded for champagne, bubbling with dreams. All but herself, that is. Her undefiled self. It is the self she lost 30 years ago when she did what she thought she was supposed to do. What others expected her to do. Her critics, of which she has many, say she is running away, fleeing responsibility, breaking vows. In self-defence, they lash out at her nascent self-confidence, because they are terrified to look upon their own lives of monotonous mediocrity.

Do you think she is running away? Will Paris not be the paradise she hoped? Will her cherished chardonnay end up a chimera? The grapes of her angry and sullen groping will not make good wine; she must change her state of mind. No doubt her new life will not be but pleasure on a platter (what a bore!) But for all she has surrendered, she has regained a feeling of being acutely alive. Her speech is sincere. Her wine, Sancerre. Every dawn offers a freshness she has never before tasted. She has uncorked the bottle of her new life promising something exquisite. That is what Paris has done to her.

Daughter of Pearl

The giving of nourishment is a natural and intrinsic act for women. It starts in the womb, continues with the breasts, then moves to the table. In a male-dominant society, the perceived value of this vital function is roughly equivalent to auto mechanics, and is relegated almost entirely to women.

In French culture, this fundamentally feminine domain has been raised to such a level of art that it involves almost as many men as women. Men have become outstanding, world-class chefs,² but they do so based on the immense culinary heritage left to them by women. Indeed, they owe not only their life to women but also their art. It is feminism turned on its head: instead of women trying to play hardball in a man's world, men play an important role in a feminine world imbued with celebration, art, well-being, and gourmandise. There is nothing specifically manly or womanly about the art of cooking, but a culture that exalts cuisine is one that places greater value on the feminine. French culture is perhaps more feminine than any other in the West, and what seductive flavors are packed into its feasts!

Like all great chefs, Chantel dreamt of Paris. How happy I am to have found her a home-- or rather a chateau of a kitchen! She is reputed to be the top female chef in the world, which has led me to wonder what remaining ladder of excellence she must yet climb to be number one chef of the human kind. I also muse over what might be the attributes of a more feminine cuisine, and in fact whether a feminine style could ever be ranked number one in a world dominated by masculine preferences. Inspired by her work, here is what we might expect:

- Less austerity and greater légèreté
- Dishes born of life experience, where each tells a story,
- A holistic dining experience, with greater attention to the social interaction surrounding it.
- Finesse, that expression of the finest delicacy
- Care for sustainability, using only the finest natural ingredients in honor of the earth, and greater sensitivity to both the medicinal and gustative virtues of plants.
- Rejection of all industrially-produced meats and processed food.
- An intuitive, poetic, even mystical approach, that we might call a *réenchantement de la cuisine*, because too much magic has been taken out of our world.

All of these you will find in her most iconic dishes: *Le Jardin d'Algues* with its attention to numbers and the sacred sea, *By the Great Oak* where the truffles and woodland spirits can be found, *Mont Blanc* where the light of citron confit appears at its peak and where earth and sky meet, or *Oysters and Pearls*, an ode to Mother Nature's exquisite treasures.

I see her now as she beams from her new Paris kitchen with her bewitching smile.

² It is not that they have greater aptitude than women, but that the demands made on them are such that women seeking a more balanced life are out-competed.

With its Stradivarius of a stove, a percussion section of hanging copper pots and pans, and piccolo-like piercing knives, the world's premier She Chef takes her place on the podium for a new symphony of tastes, textures, and temperatures, hers to blend.

Decadent, delightful, delicious is what she has devised. Now with her own place in Paris, becoming la crème de la crème de la crème is only a paradigm shift away.

Lady Lalique

I have spent too much time in front of portraits of a lady, like the ones housed in Paris' Petit Palais. One day she walked right out of the canvas and said "find me the home of my dreams in Paris". Her allure and grace were of another age...art nouveau she had me know. That's what a dream home in Paris meant for her, and authentically so.

It was a Woody Allen moment, for those who know his film *Midnight in Paris*. She was so very real and absolutely sincere, this delicious personality from the past. I shall call her Lady Lalique because she reminds me of one of those exquisitely-crafted crystal vases by the same name. *Is she not the vessel of a singular soul, the bearer of a holy light?*

I had yet to learn that she curated art herself, that she had her own museum of lesser-known impressionist works. No doubt, she would want her Paris home to become a work of art. Nothing less than exquisite.

How would I ever find that? I can't say I did. Instead, I found 120 square meters of dim and dusty space where a well-pedigreed, stodgy bourgeois family appeared to be fading from grace. For heaven's sake, even the post office had been renovated in the past 30 years! Couldn't they have at least replaced the wall paper? Now, it is said that the French have a flair for design, and that is absolutely fine...at least 2% of the time. The vast majority of French homes seem appallingly deprived of it, as so many clients who have accompanied me for apartment visits can attest. A reflection of the modern French state of mind, they are sadly afflicted with the syndrome of bygone glory.

Still, French interiors have exceptional stylistic potential because they often feature inimitable architectural or decorative signatures of the past, from wooden beams to Versaille-style parquet, from elegant moldings to finely-chiseled brass doorknobs. Not to mention the rooftops I describe in my book entitled EXQUISITE. And of course, there are those French doors.

With its squeaking parquet and outmoded furnishings, the apartment had potential. There were few supporting walls to stand in imagination's way, and the building was from the right period and in the right neighborhood. Between Pont d'Alma and the Eiffel tower, art nouveau abounds. There is the iconic 29 avenue Rapp designed by Jules Lavitotey in 1901, and not too far across the Bir-Hakeim bridge, that citadel of art nouveau called Le Castel Béranger. Best of all, the apartment offered a view on the Dame de Fer who delights you with her sparkles at night! Lady of crystal, lady of iron, side by side.

But would Lady Lalique be able to imagine her dream rising out of such a forsaken flea-market of an interior? Yes, with eyes that see the beauty of what will be. Yes, with the talent and tenacity of Martine di Mattéo, *la baronne de la brocante*. Where other interior designers impose their style, Martine takes on the task of giving form to another's fantasy, however anachronistic. Who should dictate our style? Why must we bow to the tyranny of the contemporary?

After a month to acquire and a year to aspire, Lady Lalique now has a lifetime to admire. How do we feel when our home becomes a fitting expression of ourselves? When we are able to materialize, with lesser or greater means, some idea of beauty we have? Maybe we feel harmony, the way we might imagine a seed feels when it has sprouted? Or maybe creator-joy, having imagined and made manifest what did not yet exist. *We are gods when we dream, and beggars when we think.*³

After a couple of years wondering which painting that lovely lady Lalique really did step out of, it suddenly appeared to me. Yes, it was unmistakably her! The same short black hair with straight bangs, her slender silhouette, feathery dress, and the finely-chiseled red lips. And these same words that come to mind that I had written in a previous book⁴: *were it not for the way you move--such measured, liquid grace--how could I reveal the luminous secret of your soul?*

She had been painted by nobody other than another client of mine for whom I had also just found an apartment on the opposite side of town. Enigma: their first names are symmetrical, ending with the letter "i". The two have no knowledge of each other...yet. Apartment hunting for Lady Lalique was my delight, but playing the role of entremetteur of destinies intertwined is jolly well divine!

³ Hölderlin wrote this over a hundred years ago, but through what form of miracle does this thought only reach me now?

⁴ Royalty, Thy Name is Woman

Victoria's Station

It's more fun to talk about success, but more poignant to admit to failure. I was well on my way to finding her dream home--her dream life. Had I set my ambitions too high? With a name like Victoria, how could I have gone wrong? At the time, I felt so strong.

There were even auspicious signs, of sorts. There was an apartment I had visited nine years earlier, with a beautiful view on the Tour Saint Jacques and its square, rue Saint-Martin to be exact. The walls were painted in lilac pastel, and the ceilings were high. I imagined its walls as iris petals, and wondered what kind of woman would want to live there. At the time, it was rented to tourists, and several years later, before the fateful events, Victoria had stayed there too. It was a place she loved, so it clearly felt like fate when, entrusting me with her apartment search, this one suddenly came up for sale. Of course we were the first to make a full-price offer, in cash. She said she would have the funds, but just needed some time to get through her divorce settlement.

"Isn't that a major contingency? You know you'll lose your deposit if you are not able to get the funds in time?"

She replied: "this is where my heart wants to be."

I was able to negotiate a downpayment of 5% instead of 10%--a success of sorts for a start.

"Ah...divorce," I sighed "I'm expert on that!" thinking there was no way she could outdo my own drama.

"No, no, you cannot begin to imagine." she replied.

I could not begin to imagine, but over the weeks to unfold, I became privy to that oh so singular, oh so universal drama of separation. The terrifying particularity of this *huit clos* is that nobody is ever qualified to write the script. There is not one truth to tell: there is his and there is hers. The roots of the drama go back thousands of years and you never know where the story starts and you never uncover all the facts.

Victoria's body of suffering--the chapter *she* told-- began with a lightning strike that left her paralyzed for many years, and ended with another man she loved running away like a madman down the rue de Rivoli as far as her eye could see. Between the two events lay a battlefield of scandal and legal proceedings.

Meanwhile, only a month remained before the deed would need to be signed. The funds were not yet available. She tried to explain the legal imbroglio. A lawsuit with her very wealthy ex-husband was underway, and a hearing was scheduled in a couple of weeks. Her lawyers were incompetent, and the system unjust, not even allowing her to leave the country. Confiding these things to me sent her into a state that tested my professional propriety. So I told her this over a coffee at Place Dauphine, a chill in the morning air:

“Victoria, I cannot measure all the trauma that has set you in search of safety and release, but I do know that as with all things we search, we must first create them from within ourselves. Everything we need is within us. It is hard to accept, but I have come to believe that the life we have is the life we have chosen, and we do have the power to end the suffering to which we thought we were merely victims.”

She was crying now, and bothered over her melting masquera:

“But he should have protected me!”

And I said: “The victory to which you are destined is within you, but.....”

Now, the trail of a woman’s tears is a treacherous path for a man, and I said the thing I should never have said:

“...but I will help. Will you accept a deal? If you will commit to changing this belief that your ex-husband is the source of your woes, if you pledge to regain your sovereignty day by day, then I too, every day until the deed is done, will remind you that victory is near. I will support you in this. I am certain this lawsuit will work out just fine for you, and the apartment too.”

Who did I think I was, really? An estate agent turned prophet? A pocket psychologist? Well, I kept my part of the deal, but the deed was not signed and Victoria lost her money in the end. I felt that I had added one more trophy to her award-winning tragic life. I hope she has since moved on to a better station. From now on, I will take a modesty pill prior to working future miracles. I can search out a home, but I can’t always change a client’s life.

The Magic Baton

My favorite orchestra conductor is the future chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, the finest orchestra in the world. There are two paths to reach that end: one leads to Berlin, and the other requires transforming another orchestra to surpass the renown of Berlin. Regardless, my favorite orchestra conductor will succeed, because with the absolute innocence and power of a child, he is not conscious of any obstacle between his dream and its manifestation. Combining terrific talent with tremendous study, that childlike power completes his golden triad.

But I am getting ahead of myself, because in the present he has called upon me to find his home in Paris, where he has been appointed chief conductor of a French National Orchestra. In a few short weeks, he has a concert scheduled with Gauthier Capucon playing the Saint-Saëns cello concerto No 1 and Beethoven's Eroica Symphony.

If a concert can be prepared in so little time, why wouldn't I be able to wave my magic wand and make his home appear? I would rather be playing the violin in his orchestra, but here is a man in service of destiny; I figure mine must therefore be to serve him. I am not the first to reach this conclusion: his mother and his wife were there first and they are still entirely in command. What man has ever achieved anything of greatness without that feminine duo holding up the heavens on his behalf?

She is for him, and the home is for her. What home does he need, anyway? He inhabits an immaterial world contained in musical scores, and hosts his banquets of sound in the grand hall of the Paris Philharmonic. That ideal home already awaits him. It provides an acoustic environment for all sections of the orchestra to hear and be heard in equal measure. The number of cubic meters of air between the stage and every single seat has been optimized. From an aesthetic perspective, it creates a visual and spatial experience that accentuates that of the music, perhaps in the same way that a vase showcases a bouquet of flowers. So much for his home.

But she, on the other hand, surely needs a carefully selected home with which to fill her handbags, her art, and all the bouquets she will receive. She will have her domestic performance as impeccable as his public ones. She is the portrait of a lady, and also the painter of that portrait. They make a fabulous pair, worthy of each other.

For reasons that can best be described as exquisitely absurd in an intricately French way, it is excruciating to secure a lease in Paris unless you already have a history of French revenues equal to three times the amount of rent, along with the Vatican as your guarantor. That holds true for any lease. The stakes for an impeccable apartment are higher.

"Excuse me Madame" I explain to the landlord of the most suitable apartment currently on the market, "this is about Beethoven and destiny. My client is the chosen one for your apartment. When you attend the premier concert you will understand."

"Malheureusement, à défaut d'une preuve de revenus fiscalement domiciliés en France depuis un an, il sera nécessaire de mettre en place une caution bancaire équivalent à un an de loyers," she doesn't speak a word of English and her apology is lame. That's right, she's demanding 1 year of rent in escrow.

“No” I reply “he doesn’t have three French payslips. He’s been conducting orchestras around the world. There is absolutely nothing unfortunate about this situation.”

My persuasion would need to be doubled by persistence. After a score of emails, phone calls, and interviews, we ventured into the legal labyrinth that would lead us at last to those magic keys and elaborate door codes. Moving in is the last obstacle before the concert. There is no place for the moving truck to park in the street. A special permit would have been required in advance. Too late for that. *By the power of music that raises our souls, I hereby displace all vehicles blocking the way!* My favorite conductor must have his home, and the concert must go on!

Now the stage is set, and I will have one of the best seats in the house. That is my true reward. Likewise, the story I most want to tell is not the frantic apartment hunt, but the mindful preparation of the concert. This, in truth, is also my tribute. For the sublime to be heard, we must play it, again and again. My favorite orchestra conductor dedicates his life to the perfect understanding of the music, such that all parts played together breathe fresh life into existing form. Every performance must have a quality of freshness to it. The music is re-created each and every time. So it is also with the wisdom of the ages. New voices must rise up to speak it anew. From time to time (maybe more), conductors are able to transcend ego and effort, attaining that timeless moment when the music floods over everything else.⁵ That moment, even if only one, makes all the others worth it. It is the apotheosis of what began as an apartment search.

⁵ Read more about classical music in the EXQUISITE.

The Philosopher's Stones

The USA of 2019 was not a pleasant place for philosophers. A far cry from Plato's Republic. While it remained possible to speak freely without risk of imprisonment, there was nobody left to listen. Dictatorships of thought and behavior are not always state-imposed, and the tyranny of the masses can be crushing.

Reaching the final years of his tenure as a philosophy professor at a venerable New England college, Will and his wife Diotima (hereafter referred to as Lady Di) made a monumental decision to sell-out and move to France, a country to which they were both total strangers. Will delivered a final speech to the faculty and students, planting many seeds of politically-incorrect thought. Like Socrates, about whom he authored a book, he proudly welcomed his final sentence, and told me he'd be arriving with his boxes by Christmas. That left me three weeks during the most dismal period for apartment searching in France.

Will and Lady Di were probably the most flexible clients I've ever worked with, so thrilled they were at the perspective of philosophical asylum in France. In order to make their retirement income stretch farther, and to make better use of their fluency in German, we determined Strasbourg would be a better choice than Paris. They planned a quick trip to make sure of that, and fell in love with each other all over again, just as they did with Strasbourg for the first time. My mission was to find a two-bedroom apartment in that capital town, one oozing with old-world charm, and within a 20 min walk to the tallest-in-the-world cathedral.

An initial survey of the market revealed few more than three options, each oozing with attributes I would not qualify as old-world charm. Matters were complicated by having to explain to future landlords and agents that my client had just retired, spoke no French, and had no local French income or guarantor. The only thing my client really had going for him, as a reputed professor, was the philosophical/political asylum story. That usually hits a soft spot with the French.

On a certain day I thought I had gotten lucky, having landed a top-floor apartment right next to the cathedral. There were some signs of old-world charm. I noted the wooden structural beams with marks dating back to the Black Plague, and a good twenty windows slightly larger than pigeon-holes. It was remarkably spacious under the slanted roof, especially for wedging items less than a foot high. What was distasteful for my client, and intolerable for me, was the imitation wood floor that the landlord had installed. The cathedral bells were pounding overhead as Will and I inaudibly agreed over the phone that it would have to be a no-go.

Things were looking bleak, and I was starting to formulate back-up plans for a temporary place where they could stay until the springtime yielded its cherry blossoms along with a few more choices. I returned to Paris, disappointed, with only one option left on the table: an apartment outside the city center with only one real bedroom and a view on social housing.

During my return trip a new listing popped up on the internet. The location was superb, but there were few photos and their poor quality intended to discourage all but the most intrepid candidates. I contacted the agent immediately to obtain an address and schedule a visit. Google

street view displayed an elegant 19th-century stone building on Avenue de la Marseillaise. I noticed the handsome row of chestnut trees, impeccably trimmed at the level of the third floor balcony. If this apartment was anything like it said it was, it would be gone by tomorrow. There was no turning around on the train, so I hired my son, who by chance was working in Strasbourg, to replace me for a visit and video recording. I sent his video, got Will and Lady Di on Skype, and lost no time in making our decision. Don't let yourself believe that philosophy professors are always slow to action. Will and I got all the documents and transfers lined up more swiftly than any Frenchman could finish a conversation.

Two weeks later, I met the agent for a walk-through and got the keys. The apartment was not everything I hoped it would be, but in many ways it was even more. The kitchen was a disaster of design (functionally and aesthetically), the wallpaper from the 1960s made me cringe, and there was a hallway long enough to serve as a bowling alley. Still, there were authentic hardwood floors, high ceilings with moldings, tall windows letting in lots of light from different angles, pleasant views both on the street and on the tree-adorned courtyard of France's most admirable high-school (le lycée des pontonniers). The building's common areas were splendid, and I learned that the adjoining apartment had been home to the late mayor of Strasbourg. This was a stately address.

It was a crisp, clear final autumn day in Strasbourg. The Christmas market had just opened, and the glorious ginkgo trees at the Place de la République were still flaming yellow. I strolled across the nearby bridge that spans the river I'ile. Generous chrysanthemums plantations spilled over the railings, colorful like the ginger-bread facades along the river. I felt astonishment and gratitude for my favorite philosophy professor's good fortune. After all those years of pondering Socrates and Schelling, maybe he had something figured out after all.

Afterlaugh

Dear clients and friends, now that the suspense of finding your homes is over, it's time for some comic relief. That's why I now resort to this device I've called the "Afterlaugh". What I love about English (as opposed to French) is that you can invent words. So humour me with this final chapter entitled "Afterlaugh". Afterall, who made up a word like aftermath? Some malthusian economist?

I've shared with you my special relationship with France and hope that my enthusiasm will resonate with your own. We all know how much we adore French culture, and from that assurance we can step back and have some fun with it.

However glorious France may be, She (la France) also has her armpits, and I know their smell so well. There are many in the anglo world who criticize, mock, and even despise the French. More affectionately, but often with a condescending hint, so much wit has been written about understanding the French that it has become a tried and trodden genre in itself. Such light-hearted literature often feels to me like observing bonobos behind bars in a zoo. Self-absorbed, it relishes in its supposed revelation of others' odd cultural traits. For example: have you ever noticed how those bonobos don't socialize around the topic of money and don't really care how big their house is? Have you read that they have more sex on average than Americans?

If you love someone, you have to love the whole of them. There are Americans who come to France for its beauty, its croissants, and its cheap healthcare, yet gripe about its inadequacies. They hold this truth to be self-evident: that capitalism is superior to socialism (and everything else for that matter). Here goes the endless debate of one faulty system against another, as if nothing else could ever be invented, even in a country where patents are as numerous as pistols. This is not a debate I will open, having witnessed over the course of my life how confined and sterile it is. Reverting to American eloquence, I might suggest that socialism sucks because it makes everyone feel limited. Still, in spite of its insurmountable limitations, I have managed not to feel limited. Look mom, I've written five books for you and still manage to pay my mortgage!

When you love, you are never limited. Or as Babette said⁶: an artist is never poor. Is there a way to allude to those things I don't like about Her, but in a somewhat affectionate way? Certainly not using English humour! Better use French humour, contorting my face and making gymnastic gestures. Yes, she would prefer that, because somehow the ridiculous spectacle of it all would make her laugh and not feel disparaged. If the humour were subtle and incisive-- Oxford style-- it would hurt her feelings...profoundly. She--La France--really is like any ordinary beautiful woman, both aware of her seductive power yet fundamentally insecure. These things I can say, and She will forgive me and understand; the French know how much I love their culture, so much so that they love themselves even more after knowing me.

⁶ From the chapter Cuisine and Circumstances taken from my book, the EXQUISITE

As a cultural embodiment of the feminine, French culture exhibits the worst and best of it. As for the best of it, I did write an entire book called the EXQUISITE. As for the worst, of which I will say little, much can be understood through the metaphors of the overwhelming, despotic mother or the sullen wife, both needy of affection.

It's nice to feel warmth and softness, but with a hen sitting on top of you all the time, you want to break free and breathe. You want to run, half-naked in the winter, in a Paris park. Preferably at the Buttes-Chaumont, set upon the heights of Paris where the slightly more bizarre is tolerated. You want to flout the suffocating social conformity that insists, like a mother hen, that you're going to catch a cold if you don't wear a bonnet. With its historically centralized power, France really is a soft dictatorship. I am fond neither of hard nor soft dictatorships. Let me run free! I know there is enough heat in my body to warm the winter earth beneath my feet! And you will never know how good it feels as a man to trust the strength in your limbs, the swiftness in your feet, and the fire in your blood!

The sullen wife metaphor may help explain why so many French are discontent, even though their country is closer to paradise than any other on earth. Someone once said that the French really do live in paradise, but have convinced themselves it's hell. The rest of the world just doesn't consider them as important as they were during la Belle Epoque, and their government doesn't listen to their woes. And so they grumble, pout, demonstrate, and strike. Their grievances are so numerous and contradictory as to make any political resolution impossible. Foreigners commonly complain about France the way husbands complain about their wives: she's unreasonable, or illogical.

In La Douce France, the land of the temperate and sweet, the masses have become softened and dependent. They want the State to look after them, and the State draws its suffocating omnipotence from this mandate to provide for and protect its citizens. Because it is impossible to look after everyone equally, most of the French are always grumbling about unfairness and insufficiency, always blaming the government--any and every government--for their woes. One thing they swear by, dearer than life itself. It's called retirement.

For many years, I was paying so much into social security, unemployment, and retirement that I almost wished something would happen to me so that I could somehow benefit; so that I could stop slaving away to pay for that thing that would never happen to me. Bloody good health!

Well, something did eventually happen. So I wiggled my way out from under that fat hen protecting the guts out of me, and ran free like a crazed clueless little chicklet. I became an entrepreneur within a system that pouts entrepreneurs as if they had betrayed the family. Unless you are a superstar start-up, being an entrepreneur in France is a bit like being a gypsy. Good luck finding a landlord, a mortgage, or a museum discount. Fortunately, I'm a fiddler, have taken a liking to the cold, and can live off fresh oysters and apples if need be. Down to the last drop of the exquisite, I will remain free.

Gratitude

It is my pleasure to make this work available as a gift to you and hope you will receive it as such. Should I factor in the cost of all that I have received from others, it would become priceless. There is no escaping that all is a gift.

If I have in any way inspired, encouraged, or provoked your thoughts, know that any gift you chose to send back to me will also be received as such, and with my heartfelt thanks. I see this as a cycle of gratitude that benefits us all. You may [click on this link](#) if you wish to contribute, or refer to <http://carstensprotte.com> for more information.