

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Edouard Manet (1832 - 1883)

An Illustrated Letter, with a Still Life of Plums and Cherries

Watercolour, with a letter written in pen and brown ink.

Dated (by another hand) 1879 at the upper right.

200 x 121 mm. (7 7/8 x 4 3/4 in.) [image]

245 x 156 mm. (9 5/8 x 6 1/8 in.) [sheet]

In the summer and fall of 1880, Manet spent five months in the spa town of Bellevue, near Meudon on the left bank of the Seine, west of Paris. There he rented a villa at 41 route des Gardes and underwent a course of hydrotherapy treatment at the recommendation of his doctors. It was something of an enforced exile from the city and, as Juliet Wilson-Bareau has noted, 'With bad weather to prevent him working and bored away from Paris, Manet amused himself by writing to his friends, and soon took to decorating his missives with ink or watercolour sketches...the self-styled 'lonely exile' wrote letters...that are witty, tender or plaintive; he threatens or cajoles by turns, soliciting replies and visits...'

At least forty letters written by Manet from Bellevue in the summer of 1880 are known, many of which are illustrated with little still life sketches in watercolour. Most of these illustrated letters were sent to female friends of the artist - particularly Isabelle Lemonnier, who was his favourite model at this time⁵ - and only a handful of letters, including the present sheet, were addressed to men.

This letter, an invitation to lunch, was sent to Manet's friend, the trader and collector Albert Hecht (1842-1899), and is a testament to the longstanding friendship between the two men. The letter reads in full: 'Bellevue / 41 route des gardes / Mon Cher ami, je vais / beaucoup mieux – le bon air / de Bellevue m'est tres / favorable venez donc nous / demander a déjeuner un / de ces jours vous nous ferez / le plus

grand plaisir. / amities / E. Manet.' ('Bellevue, 41 route des gardes. My dear friend, I feel much better – the good air of Bellevue is very good for me, therefore do come one of these days for lunch and you will give us great pleasure. Greetings, E. Manet.')

Manet frequently depicted plums in his letters from Bellevue. Examples are in the collections of the Louvre, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon, the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam and elsewhere. In one such illustrated letter, sent to the photographer and caricaturist Nadar in August, Manet wrote 'It's plum time and I'm sending you a few from my garden', referring wittily to those drawn on the sheet itself.

As one modern scholar has written of Edouard Manet, 'The charm of a single piece of fruit is perhaps most poetically expressed in the watercolor decorations of his letters. A single Mirabelle plum, an almond, a chestnut, ideal examples of their class, appear to float on the paper, merging to just the right degree with the handwritten text, and are delights to behold...the light, fluid medium of watercolor provides a degree of transcendence that goes even beyond what Manet achieved in the oils... Individually and as a group, these letters constitute some of the most lyrical pages of nineteenth-century artistic sensibility.'

Provenance:

Sent by the artist to Albert Hecht, Paris
By descent to Hecht's daughter, Suzanne Pontremoli, Paris
Her daughter, Mme. Jean Trenel-Pontremoli, Paris
Private collection, France
Anonymous sale, London, Christie's, 6 February 2003, lot 403
Private collection.

Literature:

Denis Rouart and Daniel Wildenstein, *Edouard Manet: Catalogue raisonné. Vol.II: Pastels, aquarelles et dessins*, Lausanne and Paris, 1975, pp.210-211, no.591, illustrated full page in colour p.39; Anne Distel, 'Albert Hecht, collectionneur (1842-1899)', *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art français*, 1981 [pub. 1983], p.271; Françoise Cachin and Charles S. Moffett, ed., *Manet, exhibition catalogue*, Paris and New York, 1983, p.456, under no.196; Simon Kelly, 'Quel marché pour Manet?', in Stéphane Guégan, ed., *Manet: inventeur du Moderne*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2011, p.59 and p.68, note 29; Simon Kelly, 'What Market for Manet?', in Stéphane Guégan, ed., *Manet: The Man Who Invented Modernity*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2011, p.59 and p.68, note 29.

Artist description:

'Still life is the touchstone of the painter', Edouard Manet once remarked to the young artist Jacques-Emile Blanche. Still life subjects account for almost one-fifth of Manet's total output, and significant still life elements are to be found in many of his other works. Even with such scandalous works as the *Olympia* or *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, both painted in 1863, critics who were hostile to the paintings found time to praise the virtuosity with which Manet painted the flowers and still lives depicted within them. As the artist noted in 1875 to another colleague, 'A painter can say all he wants to with fruit or flowers or even clouds...I should like to be the Saint Francis of still life.'