

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Fleur Cowles (1908 - 2009)**

## **River Rendezvous**

Oil on board.

Signed and dated FLEUR 75 at the lower right.

Inscribed with the title River / Rendez / vous on a piece of paper pasted on the reverse.

278 x 717 mm. (10 7/8 x 28 1/4 in.)

Leopards and tigers appear in many of Fleur Cowles' paintings. As she has noted, 'I am continually asked why I paint these jungle beasts. I don't think there is anything more to it than a vivid memory I have of them as a child at zoos, but my husband has a different answer and I agree that he's partially right. He once gave me an Abyssinian cat; a most unlawful act as the 18th century national monument in which we live in London still heeds its ancient rules: no animals or children are allowed. We gave the cat away very soon but the sleek animal stayed long enough for me to absorb him and his ways in my mind's eye. He used our home as a jungle, prowling (never strolling) through and round the furniture, and never in a straight line. He would fly to the top of a high armoire in our bedroom, to stare down at me intently. Sometimes he would jump into my office wastebasket to continue to stare, a friendly beast but no house cat, he. I obviously did mentally photograph his jumps, his walk and his eyes.'

At the time of an exhibition of Cowles's paintings at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. in 1993, Richard Martin, curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, wrote of her work, 'Fleur Cowles has found a place for art within her extraordinary life. In fact, she has placed the creation of art as the center of her busy, effective life. Journalist, editor and Presidential representative, Fleur Cowles has tended her own creative garden, a proliferation of flowers enchanted by a nature rich and benevolent...[she] imbues each mushroom, flower, or fictive jungle with the properties of enchantment. We are drawn into the mystery of nature as a child might be. We may even be uncertain about scale when a friendly leopard, industrious bird, or fanciful unicorn appears amidst the petals...What Cowles does is to transform nature, turning it from perceived grace into a mysterious beauty that surpasses perception and invokes the imagination...In a tranquil and busy bower of nature, she has invented a microcosm, a little world known to us in every rational taxonomy of flower and life form, but ultimately exotic to us in elegant perfection.'

## **Artist description:**

The artist, socialite, writer, diplomat and fashion editor Fleur Cowles lived a long and fascinating life in New York, London and Sussex, and was perhaps best known as a magazine editor and publisher. She was the founder of the short-lived magazine *Flair* in 1950, known for its bold design, lavish production, keyhole covers and expensive stock. A friend of Georges Braque and Salvador Dali, Cowles was also an astute judge of younger artistic talent, championing the work of Peter Blake and Lucian Freud early in their careers. She also collected the paintings of so-called 'naïve' or untrained artists from around the world, whose work was to have a profound influence on her own art. After giving up her career as an editor at *Look* magazine following her move to England after her second marriage, Cowles began to

paint seriously in the late 1950's, encouraged and instructed by a young Italian painter, Domenico Gnoli. Painting richly colourful works that harmoniously combine wild animals (often leopards and tigers), birds and flowers in a kind of romantic dream world, Cowles had her first solo exhibition in London in 1959. She continued to exhibit her work in galleries in several cities in America, as well as in England, Italy, France, Greece, Germany, Holland and Japan, with over sixty one-man shows. Several of her paintings were used as inspiration for, and served to illustrate, a number of books by the writer and poet Robert Vavra, notably *Tiger Flower*, published in 1968.

Of her working method, Cowles has written that, 'There are probably few painters (other than the Chinese who paint their scrolls on a flat surface) who use no easel, use no palette and have no studio. The absence of all three describes in a very few words how I paint. My lap replaces the easel; the tubes of paint are in themselves my palette (I paint directly from them); my library couch in Sussex is my studio. I paint with either tubes or jars of acrylic paint gathered up by my brush as a bow would the strings of a violin. My studio is a windowed, dark-chocolate brown room where light comes inside in differing ways and amounts during the day. When the sun does give up, an angle-light is put on a little table just behind the couch at my left shoulder. Sunlight or not, this is how I continue to paint into the night except for meals...I never think about or compose a painting in advance (in my mind or on paper). I never draw. I never use a model or copy a thing. I paint what has been packed away in my computer-memory, those animals, flowers and scenes which wait for my brush to give them life.'

As the artist herself has noted, 'My paintings seem to make people happy, They represent my private world, a peaceful one that rejects the unpleasant, the ugly and the frightening, and dredges up no horrible dreams.'