

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Edouard MANET (Paris 1832 - Paris 1883)

An Illustrated Letter, with a Snail on a Leaf

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

Inscribed by the artist Bellevue /Chère Madame /N'oubliez pas la ramette / de papier anglais /amitiés / E. Manet in brown ink.

153 x 112 mm. (6 x 4 3/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES.

In the late summer and fall of 1880, Edouard 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, to help soothe his left leg, which was partially paralyzed from the effects of tertiary syphilis. 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...' As the artist wrote in one such letter, sent to Zacharie Astruc in July 1880, 'I am living like a shellfish in the sun, when there is any, and as much as possible in the open air, but when all's said and done the countryside only

has charms for those who are not obliged to stay there.'

Some 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. (The largest single group of these letters, amounting to sixteen sheets, is today in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.) Most of these illustrated letters were sent to female friends of the artist - particularly Isabelle Lemonnier, who was his favourite model at this time - and only a handful of letters were addressed to men. This illustrated letter, which shows a horizontal crease from having been folded in half to fit into an envelope, was written to an unknown woman, and asks the recipient not to forget to bring the artist a ream of English paper: 'Bellevue / Chère Madame / n'oubliez pas la ramette / de papier anglais. / amitiés / E. Manet.' ('Bellevue / Dear Madam / Do not forget the ream / of English paper / Sincerely / E. Manet').

As Ronald Pickvance has noted of this particular letter, 'One cannot be sure why Manet especially requested English paper. Presumably, it was notepaper for his letters: part of an English watermark can be seen on a letter to Mme. Guillemet. Manet made several drawings of snails, wittily capturing their multifarious shapes. One of these (now in the Art Institute of Chicago) seems related to the many decorated letters he despatched from Bellevue.' It is also possible, however, that Manet's request for English paper was for the watercolours and pastels with which he was occupying his summer away from Paris, when his impaired mobility must have prevented him from doing much painting.

This illustrated letter is unusual in its charming depiction of a snail on a leaf, rather than the more usual watercolour sketches of fruits and flowers with which Manet decorated most of the letters he sent from Bellevue in 1880. The delicate treatment of the colours of the leaf and the snail shell in this watercolour display the artist's confident use of the medium, and underscores the care which Manet took over these succinct and, at first glance, seemingly inconsequential missives to friends.

As Alain de Leiris has noted of Manet's decorated letters, 'Manet wrote these brief illustrated messages during summer periods of confinement away from the stimulating life of Paris for which he was longing...In the walled garden of his Bellevue villa, with brush in hand, he never tired of adding to his collection of vignettes the pattern of a rose, a daisy, a snail, a watering can, and many other familiar tidbits. These notations appear again, having lost nothing of their initial freshness, as the frontispiece or the tailpiece of a letter...In all cases the watercolor spots and the calligraphy complement one another decoratively on the page. Economy of means and graphic virtuosity reach a climax in these spots.'

And, as another modern scholar has written of 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.'

Exhibitions

Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, Édouard Manet 1832-1883, 1966-1967, no.187; New York, New York University, Grey Art Gallery, Show & Tell: Artists' Illustrated Letters, 1988, unnumbered; Martigny, Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Manet, 1996, no.77; Paris, Musée d'Orsay and Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, Manet: les natures mortes, 2000-2001, no.55; Paris, Musée d'Orsay and Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, Manet: The Still Life Paintings, exhibition catalogue, Paris and Baltimore, 2000-2001, unnumbered; Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago and Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, Manet and Modern Beauty, 2019-2020, no.53.

Literature:

Anne Coffin Hanson, Édouard Manet 1832-1883, exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia and Chicago, 1966-1967, pp.194-195, no.187; Alain de Leiris, The Drawings of Edouard Manet, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969, p.133, no.535, fig.397; Denis Rouart and Daniel Wildenstein, Edouard Manet: Catalogue raisonné. Vol.II: Pastels, aquarelles et dessins, Lausanne and Paris, 1975, pp.210-211, no.593; Anne Coffin Hanson, Manet and the Modern Tradition, 1977, p.73, illustrated pl.34; Françoise Cachin, Manet, lettres à Isabelle, Méry, et autres dames, Geneva, 1985, pp.94-95; Ronald Pickvance, Manet, exhibition catalogue, Martigny, 1996, pp.202-203 and p.242, no.77, illustrated in colour p.142; George L. Mauner and Henri Loyrette, Manet: les natures mortes, exhibition catalogue, Paris and Baltimore, 2000-2001, p.176, no.55, illustrated in colour p.129; George Mauner, Manet: The Still Life Paintings, exhibition catalogue, Paris and Baltimore, 2000-2001, p.178, illustrated in colour p.119, pl.55; Carol Armstrong, 'Manet's Little Nothings', in Scott Allan, Emily A. Beeny and Gloria Groom, ed., Manet and Modern Beauty: The Artist's Last Years, exhibition catalogue, Chicago and Los Angeles, 2019-2020, p.124; Allan, Beeny and Groom, op.cit., p.302, no.53, illustrated pp.112 and 235; Emily Beeny, 'Evidence of tracing in Manet's late watercolours', The Burlington Magazine, December 2019, p.1020, fig.3.

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.'