



## **Eugénie Prendergast: Market Maker**

By Warren Adelson

About twenty years ago, Eugénie Prendergast telephoned me at my office at Coe Kerr Gallery and invited me to visit her at her home in Westport, Connecticut. I had never met her and was not sure why she was calling. I really knew her only by reputation: people said she was difficult. I drove north on Merritt Parkway, followed her directions to a nondescript side street, and entered the circular driveway of a small frame house. Mrs. Prendergast greeted me at the door; her manner was imposing. She looked me in the eye, extended her hand and invited me into the L-shaped living room. The sensation I recall is shock. It was like walking into a dream. Every inch of wall space was covered with paintings by Maurice Prendergast, the brother-in-law she had never met, yet devoted her life to. It was a profusion of art: oil paintings, watercolors, drawings, monotypes, and even a mosaic panel on an easel. In the adjacent dining room were large tempera paintings by her late husband, Charles. She suggested I walk up the narrow staircase that split the entry, and I saw more walls covered with Maurice's work, all periods, sizes and media. I silently walked through those upstairs rooms, knowing it was a privilege.

When I rejoined my hostess, she invited me to have tea and cookies and talk. We spoke for quite a while, although, in truth, I mostly listened. Mrs. P. seemed to have total recall. She recounted dinner parties forty and fifty years ago, and spoke about who was there and what pictures were on the walls. She recalled the collectors, critics, art historians, and dealers. She could still remember what they wore, how they sounded, what they ate, and most definitely what she thought of them. Some were people I knew, many were long gone, but they came alive with her uncanny descriptions and wry comments. She told me about the loan show she had participated in at Knoedler Galleries in New York in 1966. From my own experience in the art world, I recalled that exhibition. It had been a gala event and a turning point in the artist's market, which has been relatively still for decades. She described the specific pictures in the show, and told me about the people at Knoedler who had been responsible for that important event.

This part of our conversation had particular resonance in that I had done a brief stint at Knoedler in 1972, and I knew the cast of characters. Eugénie spoke of Roland Balaÿ, the mercurial chairman, who had produced the first exhibition of Pablo Picasso in America in the 1930s. Roland had a great eye for pictures and impish Gallic charm that could be both irresistible and maddening. (He was my hero at Knoedler; this year he will celebrate his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.) Bill Davidson was the volatile head of the American department since the 1930s. He organized the Prendergast exhibition, with Elizabeth Clare, his assistant, who was as steady as he was quixotic. And there was Coe Kerr, the president of the company. Within two years of that show, Coe was at the “21” Club with his pal Fred Woolworth and decided to form his own gallery. Tragically, he died prematurely within a few years. (At the urging of my old friend Jack Tanzer, Fred hired me for Coe Kerr Gallery in 1974 to fill Coe’s shoes, a tall order.) Entrenched in the famous Knoedler library was Richard H. Finnegan, who had met Mrs. Prendergast in 1949 when he was 12. His French grandmother was a friend of Mrs. P.’s and had done French War Relief work with her in Westport, and Rick recalls the shock of entering that house and seeing the mélange of color and paint. (After a long career at Knoedler, Rick now assists Adelson Galleries in our research on Sargent and Cassatt.)

Knoedler was the most powerful art gallery in New York, and the 1966 Prendergast show attracted the cream of the art world. In effect it forced people to see these remarkable pictures anew and appreciate the significant role the artist had played in American art. It was a loan show with little for sale, but its impact was palpable in reawakening interest in this neglected artist. And over the following years, Mrs. Prendergast continued to promote exhibitions and cajoled dealers to sell paintings by Maurice Prendergast. She was his one-woman marketing machine.

Maurice Prendergast died on February 1, 1924. Charles was crushed by the loss of his older brother, who had been his lifelong companion, business partner, and best friend. In mourning, he traveled to Europe with some friends, and he met a young woman, Eugénie Van Kemmel, who worked at a hotel in Paris. She had left her home near Lille in the north of France to find employment in the capital city after the turmoil of World War I. They clicked instantly and married in New York in May 1925. Charles saw life with renewed vigor and flourished in this

supportive and loving relationship. He took up the cause of promoting the work of his brother, whose estate was his to manage. Kraushaar Galleries mounted a memorial exhibition for Maurice in 1925, and they became Charles's dealer as well, since his own production as a painter had blossomed in the past decade. Juliana Force, the director of the Whitney Museum, became a close friend of Charles and Eugénie's, and she held the museum's first retrospective for Maurice in 1934. Lillie P. Bliss collected Maurice's work and adored Charles's, and Abby Adrich Rockefeller bought Maurice's painting for the Museum of Modern Art, but collected Charles's work for herself. Along with Juliana Force, Mrs. Rockefeller had become deeply involved in American folk art, and Charles's aesthetic fit perfectly into her evolving interests. She later founded her own folk art museum in Williamsburg, Virginia and at the beginning of the Depression she commissioned Charles to paint a six-foot panel on the theme of performing arts for International House, New York. In 1935, at age 72, Charles had his first one-man exhibition at Kraushaar Galleries. In a review of the exhibition, Lewis Mumford purred, "each of these pictures is a fresh glimpse of Heaven." Although not ranked among the avant-garde nor considered famous, he was highly regarded as a treasured figure on the American art scene. Charles died August 20, 1948, at the age of 85. He left his widow with a large collection of art that included his own work as well as his brother's. She chose to care for it with the same concern and intensity that she had felt for her husband.

In the post-war period, paintings by Prendergast had little market value. Turn-of-the-century American art had few enthusiasts in the 1940s and 50s. There were a handful of American art historians, but their primary focus was eighteenth-century portraits and nineteenth-century landscape and genre paintings. The American Impressionists and realists were nearly buried in the backlash of disdain for all things Victorian. World War I had wiped out a generation, and its aftermath created an antipathy for the "pretty" painterly pictures that recorded and an idealized lifestyle of beautiful people. The brutality of the war turned people against gentle images of ladies in white dresses amid shining country landscapes. The modernists of Europe and their American counterparts dominated art in the decades following World War I, and by the 1950s, Hassam was nearly forgotten, Chase a dim memory, Cassatt considered French, and Sargent labeled a facile recorder of the Edwardian elite. (In college during the early 1960s, my professor at Boston University, William Jewell, told me Sargent was talented, but superficial, and

Professor Jewell had trained as a Boston school painter himself.) The artistic battles and victories of the Ten and the derision and successes of the Eight were known to a very few, Abstract Expressionism ruled the day.

Eugénie Prendergast had another vision. She took the mantle of stewardship of Maurice Prendergast that Charles had carried so loyally and made it her own. She believed the glory that belonged to Maurice in the early decades of the twentieth century should be restored. The American public ought to learn about the high esteem critics and collectors had held for the unique talent in the years before World War I. She promoted exhibitions, coaxed collectors, and pushed dealers. These were great works of art and the world must appreciate them. She participated in the stunning Prendergast exhibition in 1960 at the Museum of Fine Art, Boston, which honored the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the artist's birth. The exhibition traveled to Hartford, New York (the Whitney Museum), San Francisco, and Cleveland. In 1976, Eugénie was there for the important Prendergast exhibition organized by the University of Maryland Art Gallery, with subsequent venues in Austin, Des Moines, Columbus, and Ithaca. And then in 1990, she supported the retrospective organized by the Williams College Museum of Art that opened at the Whitney and traveled back to Williamstown, Massachusetts, before moving on to Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Washington DC (The Phillips Collection). All the while, she supported educational work in smaller universities, and in 1983, she instituted the catalogue raisonné project with the Williams College Museum of Art (which later received the bulk of her estate).

Eugénie has heard about the work we were doing on John Singer Sargent, and asked me about the catalogue raisonné. I explained that it was a project we had just begun, and it promised to be a huge amount of work, and was going to take a while to produce. (This was an understatement the magnitude of which I know only now.) And she told me of her desire to sponsor a similar volume for her brother-in-law and her husband, believing it would make an important contribution to art historical scholarship. She intended to fund the catalogue by the sales of paintings in her collection, and she wanted me to sell them if we could reach an understanding. She also told me that she planned to give away a large group of Maurice Prendergast's paintings to small museums and universities all over America so he would be represented in as many

public institutions as possible. I was to appraise them as she executed her plans. Then, she pointed to a brilliant beach scene, a watercolor, in the living room. She suggested a huge price, a record in fact - \$300,000- and she explained this is there we would begin. I told her that I would love to work with her, and that I knew her plan would have great meaning in the future. I knew she was committed to its merit and felt there was no doubt that she would see it through. This was the beginning of a remarkable friendship that lasted until her death in 1994 at the age of 100.

Over the years that followed, Eugénie Prendergast was not “difficult.” She was direct. She was also thoughtful and kind. She invariably meant what she said and was impatient with anyone who did not respond in a like manner. She was only difficult if you were not on track. I had grown up with such a woman, Beaze Adelson. She too spoke her mind. In fact, I often thought there was little filter between thought and word with Beaze. She could be formidable, but you always knew where you stood. Always, I used to say (privately) that I understood Mrs. P. and knew how to deal with her because she was like shopkeeper – you kept the accounts straight and there was no problem. What I never said was that she was just like one particular Brookline shopkeeper, my mother. The success I had with Mrs. P. was all about Beaze. Working with Eugénie was familiar, it was easy, and it became a joy.

I left Coe Kerr Gallery in 1990 and established Adelson Galleries in October of that year in the Mark Hotel. Knowing I needed a strong opening show, Mrs. P. sent me straight upstairs to the storage room and told me to take “a bunch of things” for my Inaugural exhibition. That room on the second floor remains a crystal memory, like a glorious childhood fantasy. It was a small dormered space that was always locked. The key hung on a nail in the adjacent bathroom. When you walked through the door, there were picture racks on the left wall to hold frames and framed works, oils and watercolors. On the right was a wide metal print cabinet with ten drawers filled with watercolors, arranged in an order I never quite understood. And in the corner near a window was an old wooden trunk. It was about two-by-three feet with a bowed lid. It contained a great stack of Maurice’s oil on panel paintings; there were dozens of the artist’s panels leaning together. From this treasure room I took my pick of eight oils and watercolors for my exhibition and showed them to Eugénie. “Great,” she said.

In February 1991, Eugénie invited me to Westport for a little gathering, a celebration. The catalogue raisonné had been published, and she was very pleased. Her long-time friend and attorney John Boyd was there. I had worked with John throughout my years with Eugénie, and he had become my friend as well. Nancy Mowll-Mathews, who had so carefully seen the catalogue project and 1990 retrospective through to completion, was there too, along with others from Williams. By this time, Eugénie had become less ambulatory, but was as bright as ever. She told me to go upstairs. “Pick out your favorite,” she said. I brought down a watercolor of Boston harbor, my hometown (29). She said, “You take that, it’s my thanks to you.” I was speechless.

As Mrs. P.’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday approached my wife Jan and I set up the “Eugénie Prendergast Exhibitions of America Art Fund” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to sponsor curatorially-driven exhibitions form its own collection. Although she was bedridden, Eugénie’s mind was still sharp, and she was well enough to enjoy this news. The first exhibition held in her name and curated by Barbara Weinberg was perfect: it featured the works of Thomas Eakins, with special attention given to Susan Eakins, the wife of the artist, who played a dominant role in bringing her husband’s paintings to the public eye after his death. It was an especially appropriate tribute to Mrs. P. over the years, Jan and I have created similar endowments I her name at other institutions. The mandate was simple: to support exhibitions of American art that Eugénie would like. To our great satisfaction, we feel it has worked that way. I was not with her for her centennial celebration on August 23, 1994, but I called from a pay phone from a country fair in upstate New York to say happy birthday. It was a bad connection, but I wished her well and she did the same. Soon after, she was gone. She was a great friend, and a woman with remarkable vision. She is not forgotten.

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