

### Parisian Clubs, the Second Empire and a Mystery Painting



The Hotel Perrinet de Jars/the Interallied Club, view from the gardens

Almost exactly a year ago, I became a member of the *British Luncheon* in Paris, a lunch club that meets once a month at the *Cercle de l'Union Interallié*. “*Cercle*” is the French word for a private members club: when you mention the *Cercle Interallié* to a Parisian, their eyes will begin to shine. It’s an incredibly grand and beautiful place, steeped in history. It’s housed in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century *Hôtel Perrinet de Jars* right next to the British Embassy, two doors down from the Matignon Palace. The building had belonged to a Duke, then to the Rothschilds, who stored their art collection there. During World War I, Henri de Rothschild turned over *hôtel* to the French government for its use during the conflict as a club for officers of the Allied Forces, and that was the beginning of the *Cercle* that it is now. Our *British Luncheon* has a WW1 connection, too – it was founded in 1916 and at the time, consisted of members of the Ambassador’s Advisory Committee on Exemptions from National Service.



A dining room at the Interallied Club

Today, it is a club that has for the sole mission of having people meet for a good lunch, once a month. It’s very relaxing. there is no networking, and you never know who you might be sitting next to, nor what your conversation might be about.

Spending time at the Interallied Club, with its beautiful gardens and panelled dining rooms, is a privilege.

When I was there the other week, my friend Sïan said to me: "do you know there is *another* club on the top floor?! William wandered in there by accident. It's men only ... they play billiards and things!"

I stored this snippet of information away, unaware that I would come across it again in some art research just a few days later.



A mystery painting

In Versailles, I had bought a painting with a perplexing signature. There was no misreading it: the artist had carefully written his name in block letters: G DE ST MAURICE.



G DE St MAURICE 1880

My problem was that no artist of that name seemed to exist!

For an art dealer, this is a cause for headache. While an unsigned painting may be attributed to someone of note, a painting by an individual who left no trace is hard to defend. Logic has it that, someone made no imprint on the world, surely that was for a reason.

And yet, the picture was painted with effortless, confident loose brushstrokes and effective, sensitive use of colour. I had no doubt that it was the work of a confirmed artist.

It was presented in its original frame, from which it had clearly never been detached. Since starting to learn it this autumn, I have come to look closely at gilding, and this particular leaf gold frame was a work of art in itself. Ironically, it was easier to glean information about the gilder, who had printed his name on the back of the frame, than about the

mysterious painter of the picture. As referenced in the archives of the Musée d'Orsay, Edouard Buquet (1841-1890) had been a dealer in ceramics in Beauvais and a gilder of wooden objects in Nancy.



Stencilled mark of the gilder Edmond Buquet on the verso of the frame

This only intensified my desire to uncover the painting's author. Surely, a frame of this caliber would never have been commissioned for a mediocre work.

I took to Google. I searched for "de Saint Maurice + famille" and discovered there were three ancient aristocratic French families bearing that name, but found no one who might be a contender. I added every Christian name starting with G that I could think of: Georges de Saint Maurice, Gustave de Saint Maurice, Guillaume de Saint Maurice, Gilles de Saint Maurice. Nothing. Guy, Gaetan, Gérard, Ghislain, Gilbert, Geoffrey de Saint Maurice. No relevant match at all.

Two days later, a thought: Gaston. That's a very old-fashioned first name. Back in circa 2000, I used to go to a neighborhood bistro where an ancient Monsieur Gaston who was a regular monopolised the best table, day in, day out. I googled Gaston de Saint Maurice. Bingo.

You know that exciting feeling when you know you're on to something, but you still don't quite know what? My search immediately took me to the V&A website. Several hundred Islamic artifacts were catalogued as having been acquired from Gaston de Saint Maurice (1831-1905). Here is his story.

The Count Charles Gaston Esmangart de Bournonville de Saint-Maurice (his full name), loved equestrian sports. In view of the painting, that hardly came as a surprise. An antiques dealer shared with me ages ago, when I was but a rookie, that horses are notoriously difficult to paint and draw. Only people who have worked with horses manage to do it well.



detail

Gaston de Saint Maurice was a member of the Cercle de la rue Royale, which had started a gathering of a select group of friends, sharing the common trait of being sons, brothers, or nephews of members of the Jockey Club, whose young age required them to wait before being admitted. It became a club for wealthy, elegant and aristocratic gentlemen in its own right, and soon enough merged with the Jockey Club. Regular cycles of mergers and schisms highlight the fierce competition among clubs to attract the most prominent members of Parisian high society. Soon enough a merger with the equally exclusive, if less aristocratic, Agricultural Club (nicknamed “the Potato”) was on the cards. Some members resisted.



James Tissot (1836-1902) : Cercle de la Rue Royale, 1866, 175 x 281 cm, coll. Musée d'Orsay

The separatists are depicted in James Tissot's painting *Cercle de la Rue Royale* (above), which was acquired by the Musée d'Orsay in 2011 for nearly four million Euros. Tissot had been paid six thousand francs for it in 1866: the twelve sitters paid the artist five hundred each. Gaston de Saint Maurice is the fourth figure from the left, wearing a top hat. At the very left we see Charles Haas, whom Proust would use as a model for Swann in *In Search of Lost Time*. Gaston de Saint Maurice also gets a mention:

*“And yet, dear Charles Swann, whom I knew when I was still so young and you were near the grave, it is because the man you must have considered a little fool made you the hero of one of his novels that people are talking about you again, and that perhaps you will live. If in Tissot's painting of the balcony of the Cercle on the rue Royale, where you are between Galliffet, Edmond de Polignac, and Saint-Maurice, people talk so much about you, it is because they see that there are some of your traits in the character of Swann.”* (Marcel Proust, Gallimard, Pléiade edition, 1988, vol. III, part “The Prisoner,” p. 705).

The Cercle de la Rue Royale finally merged with the Potato in 1916, giving birth to the *Nouveau Cercle de L'Union*. And guess what – this is the men only club William had stumbled into, upstairs at the Interallied Club! We've come full *Cercle*.



Here is a second image of Gaston de Saint-Maurice, on his visiting card photograph by André Disderi (1819-1889). I must admit I could not get my head around this one for a while. Seriously? Gaston on a **hobby horse**, gesticulating a riding crop with one hand and clutching the reins with the other?

Well, it would appear this prop was regularly used in photographer's studios to convey equestrian interests, social status, or military affiliation without the logistical headache of bringing a real horse into the studio (no sniggering please). It was a way to display the subject's passion for equestrianism—a key marker of aristocracy and wealth—for distribution among his peers.

Gaston's enthusiasm for horses was real. At the Egyptian court, he became Grand Equerry to Khedive Isma'il Pasha and Director General of the Stables in 1868, a position he held for a decade until his return to France in 1878. While in Egypt, he developed a second passion: he became one of the first French collectors of Islamic Art.

Mamluk artifacts occupied an important place in his collection, which was exhibited in Paris during the Universal Exhibition of 1878, in a room entitled "Egypt of the Caliphs". In 1884, the South Kensington Museum in London (now the V&A ) acquired approximately 400 objects from it - and that's why they feature on the Museum's website.

Gaston de Saint Maurice also collected European Art with intelligence: old master prints, paintings, bronzes. He may have been a dandy, but he had exquisite taste. Having spent a fortune, building a palace for himself in Cairo, he may have run into financial difficulties, as, upon his return to France, he sold a fair portion of the works he owned, directly to museums and at auction. He mostly lived in Paris, but also had a property near Dieppe.

Our "Riders – the Meet" was created two years after his return from Egypt. Many mysteries remain. Where did Gaston de Saint Maurice study painting and who taught him? What happened to the other works he created? Given his social rank, it is obvious that he never sold or marketed them, as this would have been unseemly. Maybe they are stored in the attic of a manor house somewhere? Was this oil by Saint Maurice painted on the motif - near his home in Normandy, perhaps? Where, and with whom, did it spend the last hundred and twenty years?

All I know is that I enjoyed this brief delve into the Paris society of the Second Empire where, according to the memoirs of the artist Jacques-Emile Blanche:

*“At the Opera’s dance foyer, among the well-connected courtesans whose protectors formed a kind of fraternity, the attire was that of the best society, yet they were not stingy with indiscretions concerning the marital intimacy of married men. The gossip was less likely to spill over the confines of a narrow Parisian elite, the rich and morally liberated aristocracy. The Prince de Sagan, Edmond de Polignac, Saint-Maurice, the Scotsman Strachan, the Englishman Vansittart, all pillars of the Jockey Club, perpetuated the traditions of the d’Orsay, the Laffitte, the Mornys, the Lord Hamiltons, and the Hertfords, the ‘lions’ of the Boulevard des Italiens at the time of the Maison d’Or and the Café des Anglais”.*



Gaston de Saint Maurice, detail from Tissot’s painting

Warm wishes,

Tamara



Gaston de Saint Maurice (1831-1905) Riders, The Meet, oil on canvas signed and dated 1880 at the lower right, 32.5 x 46.5 cm, in its original leaf gold frame by Edmond Buquet.  
Framed size: 44 x 58 cm. £ 2200 / Eur 2495 / USD 2895

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