Pictures at an Exhibition

by Sara Houghteling



About the Book

Set in a Paris darkened by World War II, Sara Houghteling?s sweeping and sensuous debut novel tells the story of a son?s quest to recover his family?s lost masterpieces, looted by the Nazis during the occupation.

Born to an art dealer and his pianist wife, Max Berenzon is forbidden from entering the family business for reasons he cannot understand. He reluctantly attends medical school, reserving his true passion for his father?s beautiful and brilliant gallery assistant, Rose Clément. When Paris falls to the Nazis, the Berenzons flee the city and survive in hiding. They return in 1944 to find that their priceless collection has vanished: gone are the Matisses, the Picassos, and a singular Manet of mysterious importance. Madly driven to recover his father?s paintings, Max navigates a torn city of corrupt art dealers, black marketers, Résistants, and collaborators. His quest will reveal the tragic disappearance of his closest friend, the heroism of his lost love, and the truth behind a devastating family secret.

Written with tense drama and a historian?s eye for detail, Houghteling?s novel draws on the real-life stories of France?s preeminent art-dealing families and the forgotten biography of the only French woman to work as a double agent inside the Nazis? looted art stronghold. **Pictures at an Exhibition** conjures the vanished collections, the lives of the artists and their dealers, the exquisite romance, and the shattering loss of a singular era. It is a work of astonishing ambition and beauty from an immensely gifted new novelist.

Discussion Guide

1. What does Houghteling signal with her epigraph?

2. Now that you?ve finished the novel, reread the first paragraph. What does Max mean about ?the violence that would strike us later?? What does each memory signify?

3. How does Goethe?s Theory of Colors (page 5) apply to the Berenzon family itself? And to Rose?

4. Discuss the relationship between Max and Daniel. Why doesn?t Daniel want Max to inherit the gallery? Why did Daniel make Max rehearse the art of recollection?

5. How do you think Daniel intended to finish the sentence, ?Over the years I have wanted to tell you??(page 7)?

6. Reread the passage beginning on page 8, about Manet?s Almonds. What do you think of Max?s insights?

7. On page 43, Max?s mother discusses Mussorgsky?s Pictures at an Exhibition. What are the parallels between the Mussorgsky/Hartmann story and that of Max and Rose?

8. Rose says Max is ?too kind, too full of humility? (page 49), while Bertrand compares Max to Baudelaire?s flâneur (page 66). Whose assessment is more accurate?

9. Why does Rose reject Max, telling him that she does not expect to marry?

10. What are Bertrand?s two secrets?

11. Why do you think the novel jumps from 1940 to 1944?

12. ?Hope is the devil wearing a new coat? (page 86). What does the concierge mean by that? How does that belief apply throughout the novel?

13. Why does Daniel insist that Max return the Manet sketch? Is it the same reason he refuses to buy back his paintings from the Americans?

14. Discuss Daniel?s curse to the Americans on page 96, and Max?s interpretation of it.

15. On page 115, Max says, ?I could not shake the feeling that [Daniel and Rose] each wanted me to find something in my search for Father?s paintings that was different from what I in fact was seeking.? Was Max correct about this? Why, or why not?

16. Reread the conversation between Max and Chaim on page 119. What is Chaim?s role in the novel, and how would you describe his relationship with Max?

17. What is the significance of Rose?s cutting of her hair?

18. On page 144, Max describes Rose?s apartment as ?museum and mausoleum in one.? What does he mean by that? What does it say about Rose?

19. Discuss the scene in Cailleux?s gallery, in which Max learns about Micheline.

20. Why does Max go back to medical school?

21. Why does Max convince the man in the yellow shoes to buy the Rosa Bonheur in the flea market?

22. Discuss Max and Rose?s good-bye scene on pages 215?16.

23. Why does Rose buy the Manet for Max?

24. Reread and discuss the last paragraph of the novel.

25. Did you read the author?s note? Does knowing that Rose is based on a real woman change your appreciation for the novel in any way?

SUGGESTED READING

Theory of Colors by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; **The Lady of Shalott** by Alfred Lord Tennyson; **The Rape of Europa** by Lynn Nicholas; **Art as Politics in the Third Reich** by Jonathan Petropoulos; **The Lost Museum** by Hector Feliciano; **Atonement** by Ian McEwan; **The Zookeeper?s Wife** by Diane Ackerman; **The Yiddish Policemen?s Union** by Michael Chabon.

Author Bio

Sara Houghteling is a graduate of Harvard College and received her master?s in fine arts from the University of Michigan. She is the recipient of a Fulbright scholarship to Paris, first place in the Avery and Jules Hopwood Awards, and a John Steinbeck Fellowship. She lives in California, where she teaches high school English.

Critical Praise

"Exciting . . . Houghteling has immersed herself in the history of the period, and her love of these paintings shines through."

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