

## View of Vétheuil

by *Wayne Barnes (1971-2000)*

As we neared the end of two weeks of rambunctious touring in France and the Benelux countries, and just having visited Versailles and Monet's Giverny, with its lavish gardens and lily ponds, it was about time to get back to the Charles de Gaulle Airport and re-face the reality of our normal lives in America.

Cynthia is never one to take an interstate road if there is a more countrified way to get somewhere, and when traveling in old Europe, there is always such a route.

From Paris, Giverny is about 46 miles northwest of the city, while the airport is about a 60-mile drive from there, straight across to the east. We didn't want to go back through the already-encountered busy streets of Paris, so Cynthia casually asked me to take a look at the map to see if there were any cities along the way with which I was familiar and wanted to visit.

We all know many French cities, from Marseille, Nice, San-Tropez and Cannes, but there was nothing major, at least there would be nothing familiar, on the outskirts of the suburbs of Paris, and I commented this to her. But then I took a look at the Triple-A roadmap, not an online, digital, or Garmin GPS "contraption," which had been so useful for so many days, but a real, down-to-earth, piece of folded-up paper that I laid across my lap to see exactly what might be of interest on Cynthia's proposed meandering route back to the airport.

Nothing, nothing, nothing, as my eyes scanned the paper in a near-useless fashion. How could anything there stand out to me?

Then I saw the word "Vétheuil." Heck, I was not even sure how to pronounce it, but for some reason, I had seen the word before — but where?

It was a poser, and I looked around at nearby cities and villages. Nothing was even remotely familiar. It was a little



*View of Vétheuil from across the Seine*

burg on one of dozens of S-curves of the Seine, which had carved its way across France from east to west over the millennia. And then it came to me. ...

In

December 2002, a couple of paintings were stolen from a house in Naples, FL. It was the seasonal home, actually more in the appearance of a Medici palace from Florence, Italy, of Mr. and Mrs. Lee Anderson, a wealthy couple from Minneapolis. There had been forty museum-quality paintings in their home, but when three banditos, flotsam from the Cuban Mariel boatlift of 1980, skulked down the beach, trying all the doors on Gordon Drive — "Millionaire Drive," it is often called — they found one of the Anderson's doors unlocked and made their way inside.

Even these three reprobates were familiar with the names "Monet" and "Renoir" on brass plates at the bottom of the gilded frames. They wrapped the two pieces in sheets and tablecloths, and then marched them down the beach in the dead of night. In their beat-up old van, a few hundred feet away, they stashed the paintings, and took off for Hialeah, in the northern section of Miami. The Anderson family returned to their mansion that night, but it wasn't until the following



*Cynthia and Wayne Barnes across from Vétheuil*



*"City of Vétheuil, seen from the Saint Martin Island" painting by Claude Monet*

morning that the theft was realized. Both the police and their insurance company were called in.

My role, as a retired FBI Agent, was the investigator for the insurance company. You may have seen the movie, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, where, first, Faye Dunaway played this part to Steve McQueen's lead, and later, Rene Russo did the same with Pierce Brosnan. I didn't look anything like either of those actor-investigators, but I did have three decades of catching spies and healthcare cheaters under my belt.

At first, the insurance company thought this might be an "insurance scam" for the \$7 million price tag. Assuming the paintings would be a "loss," they asked the owner how he would like the check made out. I liked Mr. Anderson from the very start when, with a quizzical expression, he said, "I don't want the money. I want you to find my paintings!" So that is a good example of what an insurance scam does not look like!

Ah, I have neglected to mention that the Renoir was called, "Place de la Trinité," a location which describes several places all over France, but the other painting, the Monet, was much more specific in its title: *Vétheuil, vu de l'île Saint-Martin*. That is, the City of Vétheuil, seen from the Saint Martin Island. (The "th" in Vétheuil is just pronounced like a "t.")

It is fairly large by Monet's standards, two- by two-and-a-half feet, a landscape of billowing grass in the foreground, dotted with bright red flowers, a royal-blue river, behind, then rolling hills, with a city nestled in their folds. Standing out is a gothic church, with its tall, triangular tower extending high above the structure. Puffy clouds muffle the royal-blue sky, matched in the river with mottled reflections. It is pastoral and calming, and complete within its frame.

Of course, at the time, I had no idea what the title meant, or where it was painted, but it didn't matter, for we were, almost immediately, hot on the trail of would-be "international art thieves."

Three valuable watches had also been taken from the Anderson's bedroom, besides the paintings, and I told the insurance company it would be best to look for them. No, they told me, they were not insured, and we were only to look for the paintings. No, I responded, you will never find the paintings that way, but, "If you follow the watches, you will find the paintings." They were still against it, with their own bureaucratic misunderstanding of their paperwork, compared with the very logical nature of investigations, but that is exactly what happened.

The Miami Police Department's Cargo Theft Task Force was enlisted to become involved. Feelers were put out for high-end watches. That old cliché from the Miami Vice television show, spoken by Edward James Olmos to his flashy detectives, Crockett and Tubbs, "What's the word on the streets?" was more-or-less accurate this time, and in the very same city.

A probation officer heard from one of her parolees that he had been sitting in a restaurant in Little Havana where a group of men in a nearby booth were discussing stolen high-end watches.

An undercover detective was inserted as a "fence," who managed to meet what turned out to be our perpetrators, talked about taking a watch off their hands, and they came to an agreement. A photo of the watch provided by the burglars matched one stolen along with the paintings, so we had our perps identified for only \$3,900 in front-money.

Then, broaching the topic for what else they might have, the fence's "client" was said to be "into antique furniture and old books." "Well," they asked, "how about some old paintings?" Bingo!

An unexpected problem was that the undercover detectives were ethnic Cuban. The thieves had no inclination that they carried badges in their pockets, but they simply didn't trust other Cubans! The "fence" had described his client, an old, fat, bald, Jewish, white guy from Boca Raton, who, of course, did not exist. But the bad guys — still fearing the "Cuban issue" — wanted to meet him!

I had been coordinating and consulting with the police through all of this and thought I could help at this problematic juncture. I had a private meeting with the squad sergeant and lieutenant, telling them of my FBI past working undercover against Soviet Intelligence officers. My view was, "If you can trick a KGB Colonel, you can do most things in the field of investigations."

I am fluent in Romanian and volunteered to be a secondary purchaser of the paintings. My background would be with organized crime in the Black Sea port of Constanta, Romania — an actual hub of contraband trafficking. I would speak with the bad guys to convince them to sell me the



Massive carved doors are the main entrance to Notre-Dame de Vétheuil

paintings. Of course, the \$250,000 loaned to us by the U.S. Treasury helped in no small way, but the price for the sale was \$1,000,000. Easy enough, and the real money became “show-money,” while the other two briefcases had a few reams of printer paper for matching weight. (Unlike what movies would have you believe, a million bucks does not fit in one briefcase!)

We met in a shady motel near the airport, and I spoke Spanish with a Romanian accent. (It’s easier than it sounds. Just pretend to be Dracula speaking high-school Spanish).

We were able to convince the thieves that if they sold the paintings to the fat guy in Boca, their fingerprints and epithelial cells would remain in the U.S. for fifty years. But if they sold them to me, the paintings would be on a ship bound for Eastern Europe the next day — no muss, no fuss.

They were given a glimpse of the show-money, and a deal was struck. The paintings were verified and then lined up, end-on, toward the motel room door. Just in case bullets would fly, we didn’t want them going through the paintings.

Hands were shaken as a token of agreement, and then a SWAT team slammed into the place, taking down everyone — truly a successful operation.

It was a celebratory evening and photos were taken with virtually everyone involved and the stolen art, not unlike old black-and-white photos of “mighty hunters” and their trophies after a successful hunt on the African plains.

The paintings remained for a few days in a high-end storage facility, which almost seemed over-the-top, but their \$7 million value would soon increase. For works of fine art, two things increase their value: the death of the artist, and the theft of a painting — after it has been recovered. That is, it then has a “story,” making it a more sought-after prize. This is why tight security was used for the van transporting the paintings across the state to a grateful Mr. and Mrs. Anderson.

Surprisingly, from the theft on December 29th, it had only been until February 12, 2003 — six weeks! — to get them back in a complete and safe recovery. I know it was at least as fulfilling to me, and all those who worked on the case, as it was for the owners of the paintings, to say nothing of the enormous feeling of relief from the insurance company bureaucrats.

Then twelve-years later, sitting in a rented Fiat, with an accordion map spread across my lap, it had all come back to me.

We found the town across the river from Vétheuil, listed as “Moisson,” and put it into our GPS. If you really want to see the “back roads” of France, this is how you do it — search for the place where Claude Monet stood when he set up his easel, en plein air, out in the open, to paint a landscape, that is, neither from a photograph nor memory in a studio, as so many others did.

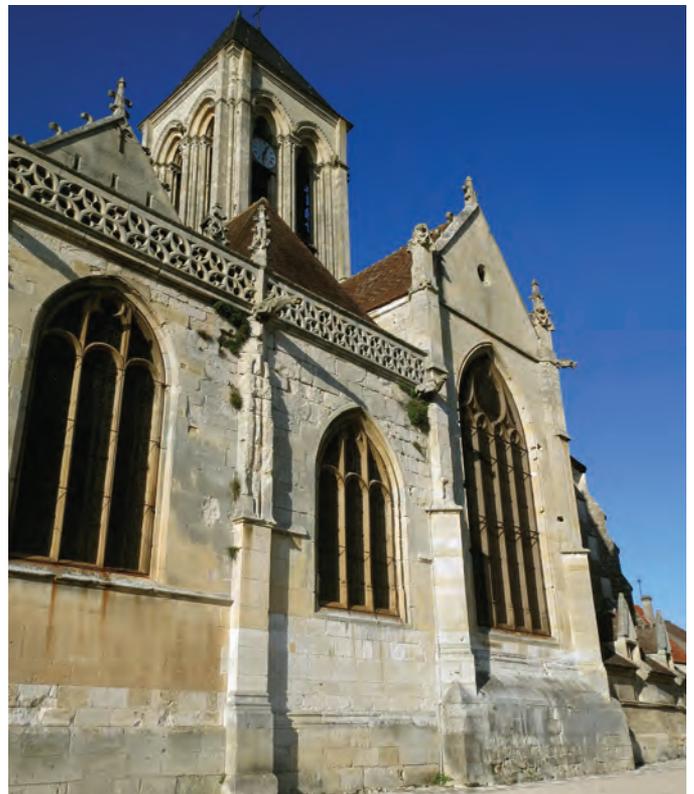
The road abutting the Seine is conveniently called “Promenade Claude Monet,” meaning others, also, knew what had gone on in that area a full 136 years before.

Beginning at the spot on the river where the view was

the same as the scene in the painting, an island begins going back toward “upstream,” which must be the Isle of St. Martin. I don’t know how Monet got out there, or why, but that seems to be where he planted his feet to paint this particular piece. And nature was good to us that day, as the cottony clouds above nearly perfectly matched the ones Monet had seen.

Having neither the time, nor a boat, to pull off this last bit of obsessive compulsiveness, to retrace Monet’s movements, exactly, the view from his namesake promenade was close enough. It made me feel that much closer to the man and the art he had created all those decades ago. For an artist to think his work will be remembered is one thing. For it to do so, for so many years, is quite another. But to have such a story of the theft and recovery of what has become such a treasure, would likely go beyond all expectations of the man who had touched his paintbrush to the canvas.

We finally left this historic scene and made the roundabout loop back across the river, and then on to the town of Vétheuil, itself. We took the wandering narrow streets, no bigger than American back-alleys — but hundreds of years older — and found the church, every bit as impressive up close as it was from the distance across the river. But today, it seems all but abandoned for want of funds to keep it up — Notre-Dame de Vétheuil. An old graveyard is across the street, giving the photographer the option of dramatic, if not eerie, photos. But right beside the church, up the hill, still remains a wide pasture, sparsely populated with horses, cows, goats and sheep — and a rooster, who didn’t care what time of day it was to make his crowing heard, or even what century.



*Three quarters view of Notre-Dame de Vétheuil*