

John and Anna Jaffe: The art lovers from Belfast who gave the Emperor's library to a nation

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Generosity is one of the rare values that withstands the ravages of time, and never fails to impress biographers. It is a pity that there is no published life history about (Joseph) John Jaffe (1843-1934) and his wife Anna Emily Gluge (1845-1942), as it would be an interesting tale to tell since theirs was a life far from ordinary.

John Jaffe was born in Germany and educated in Belfast, where his family specialised in exporting Irish linen and lace, and where his brother Sir Otto Jaffe became mayor. John Jaffe was successful in business, having had the rare privilege of being President of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce and then later elected as President of the British Chamber of Commerce of the Riviera.

John Jaffe married Anna in 1873; they moved to Europe having homes first in Monte Carlo and Neuchâtel, before living for over fifty years in their beautiful house with the prestigious address of 36 Promenade des Anglais in Nice. With his large fortune and Anna's excellent taste for purchasing artworks, they were soon known for their collection of Old Masters paintings: works of Goya, Rembrandt and Constable decorated their house containing exquisite furniture and tapestries.

Anna's father was personal physician to the King of Belgium; she received an unusually broad education, moving with ease around the art world of Europe from an early age. Her mentor and adviser was art specialist Wilhelm von Bode, who later would be (in)famous for his advice concerning collections looted by the Nazis.

The Jaffes' circle of friends included the writers Proust and Henry James, who stayed at their villa, and they were well-respected members within the international social circles of Nice. Not having any children, their generosity found a wider scope. John Jaffe contributed to several medical charities, and was founding member of the Jewish sanatorium in Cimiez, today called Maison du Jacob. The Jaffes donated an entire wing for underprivileged patients to the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital in Mont Boron, and purchased as a gift to the French nation the library of Emperor Napoleon; they thought such a gift was an excellent idea to celebrate their own diamond wedding anniversary. (King George and Queen Mary sent them a telegram on this occasion.) They also gave several important art works to the Massena Museum in Nice. They lived near this Esslingen family villa, built by the Anglo-Niçois architect Aaron Messiah, before it became a Museum.

In 1934, the elderly couple received from the Mayor of Nice, Jean Médecin, the Légion d'Honneur for their numerous charitable donations. Médecin did not hesitate to personally decorate the Jaffes, even though anti-Semitism heavily marked the era.



Jean Médecin was an extraordinary character who always behaved with great dignity, a fact now sadly overshadowed by the negative image of his son, Jacques Médecin, Mayor of Nice himself and nemesis of the writer Graham Greene. When John Jaffe died just days after receiving his decoration, Jean Médecin personally accompanied his coffin to the city limits of Nice.

Anna died in 1942; the Jaffes' art collection was confiscated soon after and sold at a Public Auction at the Hotel Savoy in 1943 – at which point the story turns much more ugly. The auctioneer added insult to injury by appraising some of the works as “copies” and selling them under value, only to then later re-appraise them as originals. It took decades for heirs to the Jaffes, their niece and nephews, to recover some of the five dozen paintings, by then in major museums and private collections all over the world. Most of them are still at unknown locations. A Turner painting – one of the many missing – sold in 2005 by Christie’s for over \$6 million, which gives an idea of the actual artistic and financial importance of the Jaffe collection.

The Jaffes today are long forgotten, but if you visit the Musée Masséna and admire the impressive painting of the Empress Josephine, wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, give a kind thought to this couple with superb taste and generous hearts, who donated it to the museum.

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