

FRENCH LEGENDS DIE HARD IN KENTUCKY

BY LESLIE TIHANY*

The political, commercial, and cultural fabric of the great Commonwealth of Kentucky is woven through with the glitter of French grandeur. This — next to Louisiana — most Francophile of our states tenaciously clings to its Gallic legacy. It has given names like Paris, Versailles, and Louisville to cities and towns; made the royal Bourbon family immortal through its whiskey; built replicas of Queen Marie Antoinette's neoclassic pleasure palace, of Napoleon Bonaparte's domed tomb; and outdid the Paris Opera by doubling that building's grand staircase in the Frankfort Capitol. The river-side metropolis Louisville reverently exhibits — alone in the world — a statue of the guillotined French King Louis XVI.

A basic Kentucky urge to stress the historical French connection may explain the survival and persistence in the state of two myths. One of the legends is centered on the portly figure of Louis Philippe, the last king to sit on the French throne (1830-1848). Official publications distributed by the Bardstown Chamber of Commerce, Talbott Tavern, and other civic organizations tell the following story:

Louis Philippe, then Duke of Orleans, together with his two younger brothers, were exiled from France during the period of the French Revolution, later coming to America. In the late autumn and early winter of 1797-98 he visited his friend and benefactor Bishop Joseph Flaget, founder of the Proto Cathedral of St. Joseph's, which stands just two blocks from the Tavern. As a token of his affection the titled Frenchman, upon returning to France (1815), sent Father Flaget the ten original canvases of old masters which today hang on the walls of the Cathedral.

It was while living in Room No. 5 [of Talbott Tavern] that Louis, or his attendants, painted the scenes which still appear on the walls of this room although somewhat dimmed.¹

Pamphlets of the Talbott Tavern speak of "the weeks spent in Room No. 5 by Prince Louis Philippe and his companions while in exile in this country around 1800 . . . [Here] they whiled away the hours with brushes and fine oil paints."²

The second lingering French myth in Bardstown is an outgrowth of the first and has to do with paintings in St. Joseph's Proto-

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¹ Talbott Tavern, Bardstown, Kentucky, *Historical Sketch* (Displayed in Room No. 5).

² *Historic Old Talbott Tavern Inn* (Bardstown, Kentucky, undated).

Cathedral. A Bardstown tourism promotion brochure sums up the legend in these words: "St. Joseph's Cathedral — first cathedral West of the Alleghenies — contains paintings by the masters, donated by Louis Phillippe, exiled King of France."³ Another Bardstown pamphlet gives details: "Nine Master Paintings by Van Br  , Murillo, Van Dyck, Van Eyck, Reubens [*sic.*] and Jacob Hast are the most interesting and most valuable treasures of St. Joseph's. These and the tabernacle and vestments, consisting of a chasuble and dalmatics, were the gifts of Pope Leo XII, Louis Phillippe, King of France, and Francis I, King of Naples."⁴ The new 1976 St. Joseph's Proto-Cathedral Tour Book omits claims made in previous cathedral publications about the royal origins of the paintings except one, which it ascribes to Francis I, King of the Two Sicilies (1825-30); the same claim is made on the painting's frame. The book mentions Louis Philippe only as a donor of "vestments and episcopal throne furnishings."⁵ Nor do the names of the Old Masters appear under the reproductions of the nine paintings as they did in previous issues of the same publication. Indeed, these pre-1976 editions of the book, together with the Chamber of Commerce literature, were so convincing that in 1952 a gang of daring and sacrilegious thieves, masterminded by a corrupt former Assistant U.S. Attorney, broke into the cathedral at night and stole the famous paintings.

Not only were the malefactors fooled but it was revealed, as a result of the great cathedral robbery of 1952, that the public had also been misled for a century about the authenticity of the paintings. At the trial of the thieves art experts testified that certain of the canvases were not the work of the alleged masters.⁶ Since the trial, additional experts have appraised the paintings, including the present writer, who uniformly recognized that the problem was one of wrong attribution. The *Cincinnati Pictorial Enquirer*, in its June 7, 1964 article on Bardstown's Old Masters, forecast eventual identification by expressing a well-founded doubt: "Art experts have never quite agreed that the works are by the masters to whom they are credited."⁷

The latest expert to pronounce on the Bardstown paintings is

³ Paul Green, *Stephen Foster Story* (Bardstown, Kentucky, undated). The phrase "Proto-Cathedral" means "first cathedral." St. Joseph's claims this title because, as the quotation states, it was the first cathedral west of the Alleghenies.

⁴ Paul Green, *The Stephen Foster Story* (Bardstown, 1978), p. 7.

⁵ *St. Joseph's Proto-Cathedral, Its History and Paintings* (Bardstown, 1976), p. 7.

⁶ Milton Esterow, *The Art Stealers* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 202-25.

⁷ *The Cincinnati Pictorial Enquirer*, June 7, 1964.

Dr. A. Bonballieu, Curator of Flemish Art in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, Belgium. Dr. Monballieu does not consider any of the St. Joseph's Cathedral canvases the work of a Flemish master. He indignantly writes:

Attribution to Van Eyck, Van Dyck or Murillo is apparently based on a deplorable lack of the most elementary familiarity with art history and is indicative of a naive faith in the authority of [persons] incompetent on the subject.⁸

This top-flight expert's opinion is supported by the absence of the Bardstown Old Masters from the official canons of the world-famous painters to whom they have been erroneously attributed. A canon is an official catalogue of the complete works of a great master accepted by experts in art history as genuine. Van Eyck, Van Dyck, Rubens, and Murillo all have canons. None of the Bardstown paintings appears in any of them.

Not only has the question of these pictures' authenticity been decided negatively by the art experts; the myth of Louis Philippe's exile in Bardstown, spent in painting, teaching French, and giving dancing lessons according to the legend, has also been demolished, posthumously, by Louis Philippe himself. The deposed king's memoirs (including a separate daily diary of his travels in America containing an extract of his American debts and their repayment) were at long last published in Paris during 1973-76.⁹ All these new publications, which should be of interest to Kentuckians even though they are myth killers, fully vindicate the late, wise Kentuckian Young E. Allison, who in a lecture before The Filson Club delivered on November 5, 1923, categorically rejected the Louis Philippe legend. Allison correctly stated at that time that the presence of the Bourbon prince in and around Bardstown for more than a few days' stay in the spring of 1797 constitutes a folk-tale without any foundation in historical fact.¹⁰

Three new insights are provided by the recently published papers of Louis Philippe. The future king was a supercilious snob who had nothing but contempt for the brave frontiersmen of Kentucky; he spent only two days in Bardstown, which he ridiculed; and he made no payments or gifts to anyone in Kentucky.

Some of Louis Philippe's diary entries during his trip to Ken-

⁸ Appraisal, from the Antwerp art expert Monballieu to author, dated February 16, 1979.

⁹ Louis-Philippe, *Mémoires* (2 vols.; Paris, Plon, 1973-74) and *Journal de Mon Voyage d'Amérique* (Paris, Flammarion, 1976).

¹⁰ Young E. Allison, *The Curious Legend of Louis Philippe in Kentucky* (Louisville: The Filson Club, 1924).

tucky deal with the inhabitants' hygienic and amatory practices in a manner reminiscent of Chaucer's "Reeve's Tale." A night spent in the house of a certain Captain Chapman (in those days Kentuckians had not yet gained their colonelcies) is recorded with almost visibly raised eyebrows.¹¹ As for the good Captain's political grievances, the prince takes aristocratic pleasure in quoting his fulminations against the federal government: "It was crushing [the inhabitants] with taxes in order to pay a heap of useless people, and it conducted their political interests unworthily."¹² There was unanimity in the whole area, Chapman unforesightedly told Louis, that "the government could not be worse than it is at the present time."¹³ Other statements of the diary are downright insulting. For example, under the date May 16, 1797 the prince remarks:

... what finally makes travel in this region unbearable, is the character of the new settlers. These are the most wretched kind of men I have ever seen. In general, this is the scum of Ireland and of the United States. This is a people uncouth, lazy, and inhospitable to the highest degree. Nothing, nothing is more disgusting than continually to see men of this sort. . . All in all, I don't believe that men like these exist in any corner of Europe.¹⁴

The diary entries for May 18-21, 1797 deserve to be quoted at some length not only to reproduce Louis Philippe's impressions of Bardstown as it was in the closing years of the 18th century, but also to establish that the prince's two-day stopover in that charming town could not have occasioned any later gift of gratitude and was not long enough for the production of the paintings now exhibited in Talbott Tavern as being the work of the prince or of his attendants. This is what the French visitor writes about Bardstown under the date May 18, 1797:

We arrived in Beardstown [*sic*] in the evening, after having descended downhill a great deal. We had some trouble finding the Bitchfork ford of the Salt River, which was very high. We arrived in Beardstown at night. We lodged at Captain [*sic*] Been's. Good people and a good tavern.

Beardstown is already a town of considerable size for Kentucky. It has, they say, nearly 150 houses. It is on a plateau surrounded by tall and thick forests. As in all the towns of America, the inhabitants are merchants, innkeepers or laborers.

We stayed two days in this town to bring our diaries up to date, to rest our horses, and to have necessary repairs made after such a test of strength.¹⁵

11 *Voyage d'Amerique*, pp. 136-37.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

During his two days in Bardstown the future king counted out his money. When he started out from Philadelphia on March 25, 1797 (with his two younger brothers and his valet Beaudoin) he had \$1,218.50 in his bags.¹⁶ On May 21 in Bardstown he had \$411.00 left, of which \$197.50 was in gold and the balance in bills of 100, 50, 20, and 10 dollars, plus change in silver.¹⁷ Nowhere in the prince's papers is there any trace of money borrowed from anybody during the two days at Captain Been's (now Talbott) Tavern. This cannot be an omission because American borrowings, as well as their repayment, are scrupulously recorded (from Gouverneur Morris, \$4,000; from Richard Gernon 1,500 piasters; from the rich New Orleans merchant Bernard de Marigny, 1,000 piasters).¹⁸ All debts, totalling 69,952 *francs* and 57 *centimes* (one dollar then being equal to 5.33 *francs*), were repaid on March 1, 1816 with interest to the foreign creditors, none of whom was from Kentucky.¹⁹ Obviously, during the two days he spent in Bardstown, the future king could not have incurred from the simple inhabitants any debt, either of money or of gratitude.

What about the Old Masters Louis Philippe did not send to St. Joseph's as a gift? What do the experts say? As the visitor walks down the cathedral's nave, he should courteously listen to the guide's well-meaning recitation of the memorized names of Van Eyck, Van Dyck, Rubens, and Murillo, and immediately eliminate as gross misattributions the two alleged Van Eycks (*Annunciation* and *Descent of the Holy Ghost*). Only total unfamiliarity with art history, as Dr. Monballieu says, could make these two crude canvases pass as the work of the hand that painted the monumental *God's Lamb* (in Ghent's St. Baaf's Cathedral) and that everlasting masterpiece of portrait painting *The Arnolfini* (in the National Gallery, London). Next the visitor should dismiss as genuine or original the three paintings (*St. Mark*, *St. Peter*, and *St. John the Baptist*) which the guide wrongly ascribes to Van Dyck (1599-1641), a giant among Flemish painters, who is perhaps best remembered for his magnificent portrait of England's King Charles I (in London). The *Flaying of St. Bartholomew*, which the guide erroneously attributes to the epoch-making Flemish Master Rubens (1577-1640), has been identified by the experts as the work of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-23.

Mattia Preti (1613-1699), a third rate Italian painter who imitated Rubens. The guide tells the visitor this painting is worth one million dollars. Kenneth Donahue, an art expert who testified at the thieves' trial, valued it at possibly \$7,500.²⁰

Having thus eliminated as wrong attributions six of the nine Old Masters, the visitor is now left with three paintings ascribed by the guide and brochures to the great Spanish artist Murillo (1618-1682), to an unknown master, and to the prominent Flemish painter Van Brée (1773-1839). All three may be described in art dealer's parlance as *kitsch*: a tasteless, inferior product of art.

The Coronation of the Blessed Virgin was not painted by Murillo; it was forged in Murillo's style in Sicily perhaps as late as the 18th century. The art expert valued it at \$1,500.²¹ To recognize it as a forged Murillo, the visitor should first look at some real Murillos and then observe the arm of the *putto* (Italian for baby angel) holding the crown over the Virgin's head. The angelic right arm is only a pink flap of flesh, lacking anatomical articulation, without a bone or a joint in it. It is the same with the whole circle of *puttos* hovering around the Madonna's central figure. Their bodies were painted to deceive the eye from a distance. The Sicilian forger was in a hurry to market his product; he had no time to worry about convincing human anatomy as the great Murillo would have done if he had painted this picture.

The cathedral guide admits ignorance concerning the identity of the master who produced the unsigned *St. Aloysius* though the canvas is displayed as a masterpiece. It isn't. From the technique and the clothing worn by the Saint's audience, the picture should be dated mid-nineteenth century. The painter was obviously a student who had not yet learned about composition. Dr. Monballieu says that the painting is "insignificant and lacking in style."²²

When the visitor arrives in the apse of the cathedral's choir, he finds himself in front of a huge altarpiece, a *Crucifixion* of vivid colors signed M. Van Brée. Now he *may* be viewing the only St. Joseph painting that bears a correct name. But the problem is not that simple. There were two Van Brée brothers: Mathieu (1773-1839) and Philippe (1786-1871), both Flemish painters though neither a Flemish master. Mathieu was a fashionable, prolific, but

²⁰ Esterow, *Art Stealers*, p. 212.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Appraisal, February 16, 1979.

mediocre portrait painter who did some nice likenesses of Napoleon Bonaparte. His younger brother Philippe studied under the French painter Girodet-Trioson of both neoclassic and romantic inspiration. Both these trends are detectable in the Bardstown *Crucifixion*. Philippe had every right to sign his paintings "Van Brée" though not "M. Van Brée), since his name *was* Van Brée. His brother's paintings, signed "M. Van Brée," were selling very well. Dr. Monballieu calls for a closer study of this painting. But whatever the outcome, neither Van Brée brother qualifies for the title "Flemish Master."

Leaving Bardstown after inspecting the cathedral paintings and the Talbott Tavern frescoes, one cannot help thinking of Louis Philippe's departure from this picturesque town nearly two hundred years ago, on May 21, 1797. On that date the prince made the following entry in his diary:

We left Beardstown [sic] and took the road to Louisville, where, as they say here, the falls of the Ohio River [may be seen]. We crossed a region which seemed to us fairly well inhabited as compared with what we had just seen. The rains of the preceding days had so swollen the Salt River that we couldn't ford it. We unloaded our horses and made them swim across, while we with the baggage made the crossing in a canoe. . . .²³

Here the prince dropped his pen because he remembered something that he had found ridiculous in Bardstown. He resumed writing:

I come back to Beardstown, having omitted an anecdote, which might convey how little the people of this region know about things.

An Irishman dressed like a buffoon rode around town, announcing a puppet show for seven o'clock in the evening. The whole town, big and small, rushed there; I believe that people came even from the outlying areas. Beaudoin [the valet], who went, says that even though the performance hall was large, it was so crowded that you couldn't breathe. Our host and hostess were there with their entire family. After returning the lady told me she was very happy that the children had gone to the show, because at least in their old age they would be able to say they had seen it.²⁴

It was perhaps these children and their playmates who in their old age told stories about the princely visit to Bardstown, which eventually grew into a legend. But how, after this long lapse of time, can we separate the wheat from the chaff in what originally was an oral tradition? How can we encapsulate the truth which it contained? Perhaps by placing it in juxtaposition with another

²³ *Voyage*, p. 142.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

famous American legend: Washington and the cherry tree. Washington was once a boy in Virginia, but he did not chop down the cherry tree. Louis Philippe was once a transient in Kentucky, but he did not donate the bogus paintings still there. Still the legends about Washington and Louis Philippe persist because they appeal to the finer side of man's nature. They satisfy his sentimental craving for the high ideal in the face of his own shortcomings, for nobility of character, for appreciation, decency, kindness, devotion, gratitude. Since these qualities are often absent from, or are abused during the daily life of generations, they have to be invented, attached to some famous figure, and with the passing of time embellished to make reality more pleasing. Parson Weems invented the cherry tree story, which lives on even though proved ahistorical. Who was the Parson Weems of the Louis Philippe myth? One of the purchasing agents for St. Joseph's Proto-Cathedral's art objects was Flemish-born Father Charles Nerynckx (1768-1864).²⁵ He must have known that the paintings he brought back from Europe were not the work of his country's great masters. He alone in Kentucky was then probably aware that the Old Masters of Bardstown were wrongly attributed to Van Eyck, Van Dyck, Rubens, Murillo, and that none of them was a gift from King of the French Louis Philippe.

25 C. P. Maes, *The Life of Rev. Charles Nerynckx* (n.p., 1880).