

# MFAH Book Club

## ***Pictures at an Exhibition***

**By Sara Houghteling**

**Fall 2010 MFAH Book Club Selection**

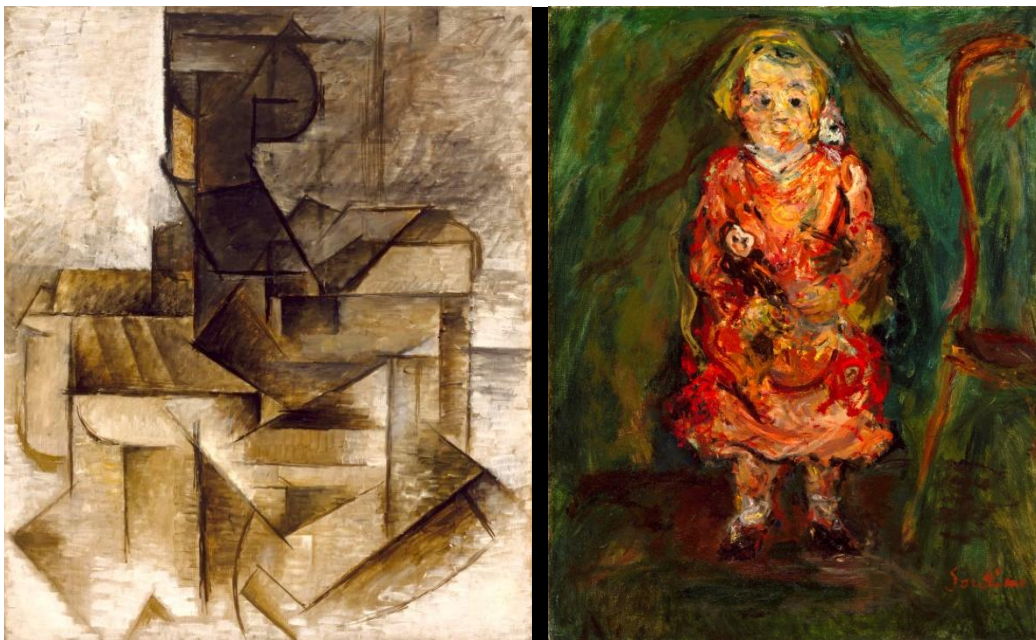
(written and adapted from various sources)

Use the information and discussion questions on the following pages to facilitate your book club's conversation!

Then visit [www.mfah.org/bookclub](http://www.mfah.org/bookclub) to request a tour for your group!

Tours feature works of art on view in the museum's European art galleries—particularly the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings in the John A. and Audrey Jones Beck Collection—that explore subjects, themes, and ideas similar to those outlined in the questions below.

To get warmed up, how might the following works of art connect to *Pictures at an Exhibition*?



Pablo Picasso, Spanish, 1881 – 1973, *The Rower*, 1910, Oil on canvas, the MFAH, Gift of Oveta Culp Hobby, Isaac and Agnes Cullen Arnold, Charles E. Marsh, Mrs. William Stamps Farish, the Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Collection, and Sarah Campbell Blaffer, all by exchange, with additional funds provided by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund © 2010 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), 81.29

Chaïm Soutine, French, born Lithuania, 1893 – 1943, *Young Girl with a Doll*, 1926-7, Oil on canvas, the MFAH, Gift of Audrey Jones Beck, © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), 98.302

Discussion Questions:

1. At the novel's beginning, Max's father references German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colors*. How does the *Theory of Colors* apply to the Berenzon family? To Rose?
2. Discuss the relationship between Max and his father, Daniel. Why doesn't Daniel want Max to inherit the family's art gallery? Why did Daniel make Max rehearse the art of the gallery's past exhibitions?
3. In Chapter Four, Max's mother discusses the piano suite "Pictures at an Exhibition" by Modest Mussorgsky (for more information on this music score, see the note at the end of this discussion guide). Based on her description, how is "Pictures at an Exhibition" a fitting title for the novel? What are the parallels between the Mussorgsky / Hartmann story and that of Max and Rose?
4. Reread the passage, beginning on p. 8, about Édouard Manet's painting, *Almonds*. What you make of Max's insights? Manet, often referred to as the "father of Impressionism" (though he never considered himself an Impressionist artist), is known for his vibrant, dramatic, and—at times—controversial paintings of nudes, café scenes, and social activities in and around Paris. Why do you think the author chose to make this painting—a quiet still life—central to this novel's story? Why did Max's father never sell it?
5. Why do you think the novel jumps from 1940 to 1944?
6. At the end of Chapter Eight, Max buys a Manet sketch from a shopkeeper, who is unaware of its significance. Why does Daniel insist that Max return it? How does his reasoning compare to his reason for refusing to buy back his paintings from the American soldiers?
7. On p. 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?
8. What is Chaim's role in the book? How would you describe his relationship with Max?
9. Max describes Rose's apartment as "museum and mausoleum in one" (p. 144). What does he mean? What does this say about Rose?
10. Discuss the scene in Cailleux's gallery, in which Max learns about Micheline. Were you surprised to learn of Micheline? Now that you've finished the novel, do any clues come to mind that foreshadowed her existence earlier in the book?
11. Were you surprised by the book's ending? Why did Max return to medical school? Why did Rose buy the Manet for Max at the auction years later?
12. If you have not already done so, be sure to read the author's note at the book's end. Does knowing that some of the novel's characters—Rose, in particular—are based on real individuals change your appreciation or understanding for the novel in any way?
13. Who would you cast in a film version of this book?

### **“Pictures at an Exhibition”:**

This novel takes its title from an 1874 piano suite by Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky. Mussorgsky wrote his “Pictures at an Exhibition” in memory of his friend Viktor Hartmann, an artist who had died unexpectedly at age 39. Mussorgsky visited an exhibition of Hartmann’s paintings that had been organized after the artist’s death by their friends. Each movement in Mussorgsky’s piece takes its title from a picture hung in the exhibition. These musical “pictures” are linked together by the well-known “Promenade” theme which Mussorgsky included to mark the time it took him to walk from painting to painting. Interludes that suggest a reflection on a work just seen or the anticipation of a painting about to be encountered are included as well. Hartmann’s paintings have since been lost; yet they live on through Mussorgsky’s music, and numerous recordings of “Pictures at an Exhibition” are available today.

### **If you liked this book, you might also like (includes fiction, non-fiction, and a film!):**

- *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* by Lynn H. Nicholas (1995)
- *The Forger* by Paul Watkins (2000)
- *Rescuing Da Vinci: Hitler and the Nazis Stole Europe's Great Art - America and Her Allies Recovered It* by Robert M. Edsel (2006)
- *The Forger's Spell: A True Story of Vermeer, Nazis, and the Greatest Art Hoax of the Twentieth Century* by Edward Dolnick (2008)
- *The Venus Fixers: The Remarkable Story of the Allied Soldiers Who Saved Italy's Art During World War II* by Ilaria Dagnini Brey (2010)

The autobiography of Rose Valland—the art curator on whom Rose Clément of *Pictures at an Exhibition* is based—was published in French as *Le front de l'art: Défense des collections françaises, 1939-1945*, in 1961.

John Frankenheimer’s 1964 film *The Train* was based loosely on Valland’s autobiography. Nominated the following year for the Academy Award for original screenplay, it starred Burt Lancaster, Paul Scofield, and Jeanne Moreau.