

François Proulx

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

On Marcel Proust's canapé

These remarks were delivered as part of a gallery conversation at the Krannert Art Museum (Champaign, IL) on October 1st, 2015, around the exhibition "Attachment" (Curators: Amy L. Powell with Allyson Purpura and Kathryn Koca Polite). kam.illinois.edu/exhibitions/past/2015fall.html

In 1891, upon paying a visit to a young male fan, who still lived with his bourgeois parents in Paris, the great aesthete and writer Oscar Wilde is said to have exclaimed, "comme c'est laid chez vous !" ("my, what an ugly home!").¹

The chair you see here (technically a *canapé*, or settee) would have been one of the pieces of furniture that elicited Wilde's cutting disapproval in that most likely apocryphal scene. Today we might not see this chair as especially ugly, since objects as they age accrue a certain historical interest, a patina of nobility if not beauty. Yet even as a historical artefact this particular chair did not enter a museum because it was aesthetically noteworthy, but because it belonged, after his parents' death, to that young fan of Wilde, who grew up to become a much-celebrated writer in his own right, Marcel Proust.

¹ This statement is placed in the mouth of the baron de Charlus in Proust's *La Prisonnière* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. dir. J.-Y. Tadié, Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1988. III:888). A 1967 biography claims it was Wilde who exclaimed it to the young Proust, but as William Carter points out (*Marcel Proust: A Life*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 126), sources for the anecdote are unreliable.



Why did Proust, who was independently wealthy and rubbed elbows with many of the most famous artists and patrons of turn-of-the-century Paris, surround himself with such ugly and outdated furniture? A short answer is that what counts in artworks and objects, for Proust, is not their materiality, and certainly not in the trendiness of their aesthetics. Proust was equally interested in conventional academic painters as in the audacious novelty of the Impressionists. And he made little difference, for example, between admiring an original painting in a museum and seeing a black and white reproduction on a postcard or in an art book.² For him, artworks and even everyday objects can be important, not when they're beautiful, but when they have something to tell us, when they trigger something within us, when they shake us from the deadening force of what he calls "habit" (*habitude*) and set in motion our thoughts, our memories, our imagination.

² On this question, see Françoise Leriche, "Proust's Eye," in *Proust and the Arts*, ed. C. McDonald and F. Proulx, Cambridge University Press, 2015. 161-178.

This is a strange philosophy to associate with furniture, since furniture is precisely what we in-habit: normally we might want our couches and chairs to be comforting, or at least comfortable. After his father died in 1903 and his mother in 1905, Proust inherited much of their furniture and decided to hold on to it, even as he moved to buildings where there was less space. Until his death in 1922 Proust lived in various apartments consisting in a sparsely furnished bedroom (where, famously, he wrote his novel in bed), along with a modest kitchen and small rooms for a housekeeper, and large unused living rooms piled high with furnishings that for a long time he refused to sell. We get a glimpse of his reasoning for this unusual living arrangement in a letter from November 1906 – a year after his mother died – where he discusses his plans to furnish the bedroom in a new apartment. Which of the three armoires he inherited should he place there? The “vaguely reddish” one from the smoking room, the one with a mirror currently relegated to a storeroom, or the black one that was in his mother’s bedroom? The first of the three, it turns out – not out of any sense of color (reddish, black, the second one isn’t even given a color) or any consideration of practicality (mirror or no mirror), but because, Proust writes, “I saw Maman every day in front of it.”³

In the same letter he writes, “I will keep all the photographs ... since I want to keep close to me my grandparents and even their own parents, whom I never knew, but whom Maman loved.” In other words, attachment functions even at one (or possibly more) degrees of remove: an object or image not directly associated with any personal memory for Proust, may still be meaningful to him if someone he loved had been attached to it.

In an article published in 1904, Proust contrasts the distracted gaze of tourists who, as they visit a chateau in Switzerland, dutifully but somewhat purposelessly gawk at furniture that belonged to a famous writer, and the meaningful, loving stare that this writer’s

³ Letter to Madame Catusse, [5 November 1906]. *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. Philip Kolb, Paris: Plon, 1980. VI:278.

grandson is able to cast on the same objects. “Whereas the foreigner who comes to visit Coppet under the guidance of Cook⁴ only sees a piece of furniture that belonged to Madame de Staël, Monsieur d’Haussonville rediscovers his grandmother’s armchair.”⁵ (Here the word “rediscovers” – *retrouve* – is crucial: the title of the final volume of Proust’s novel is of course *Le Temps retrouvé*, “Time Regained.”)

This observation leads Proust to a guiding principle about objects and their transmission: “Things should go to those who love them and know them.” That principle was followed, I would argue, when at the time of his death this chair went to Proust’s close friend Reynaldo Hahn, who then left it to his niece Clarita, who later gave it to Philp Kolb, the University of Illinois professor who edited Proust’s letters. In leaving the chair to this university, where we know and love Proust thanks to the work of Philip Kolb, his widow Dorothy Kolb honored that principle.

Ideally the chair should not be looked at as an artefact or relic; we should not be like those bored tourists who stare disinterestedly at Madame de Staël’s furniture on their guided tour through Swiss chateaus. Instead we should approach the chair as an invitation, passed on from Marcel Proust through people who knew and loved him, to reflect on our own personal attachments to certain artworks, photographs, objects, even ugly chairs, and on the ways these can reconnect us to what we have lost yet continue to know and love, and thus may regain.

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

François Proulx, « On Marcel Proust’s canapé », *Nouvelle Fribourg*, n. 2, novembre 2016.

URL: <http://www.nouvellefribourg.com/universite/on-marcel-prousts-canape/>

⁴ At the turn of the century, Thomas Cook & Sons sold guidebooks and organized tours.

⁵ “Le salon de la comtesse d’Haussonville” (*Le Figaro*, 1 April 1904), in *Contre-Sainte-Beuve*, ed. P. Clarac and Y. Sandre, Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1971. 484.