

# NICOLAS EMILE MOUCHETTE, 1838–1884 ACTING CONSUL DE FRANCE

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Nicolas Emile Mouchette was Chancelier and Acting Consul at the French Consulate in Melbourne for a relatively short period, and yet, his life is worthy of documentation.

Very little is known of his life before he emigrated to Australia in 1881.<sup>1</sup> Records have revealed that he was born in Paris in 1838, the son of Didier Mouchette, a contractor, and his wife, Elizabeth, née Fignatelli.<sup>2</sup> His occupation prior to leaving France is unknown, although the writer Oscar Comettant refers to M. Mouchette having "a good position in Paris".<sup>3</sup>

It is certain that in Paris, in 1872, he married Berthe Julie Lucie Lion, daughter of Louis Jean-Marie Lion and his wife, Anne Deguilhem Pemilhat of Forcalquier in the Département of the Basses-Alpes.<sup>4</sup> In 1878 and 1879 the couple were living in Tours, but in 1881 they had returned to Paris and resided at 6, rue Hippolyte-Lebas in the 9th *arrondissement*.<sup>5</sup> During this period, Berthe Mouchette was a pupil of Mme Schneider, who was, in turn, a pupil of the great painter Léon Cogniet.<sup>6</sup> Berthe exhibited portraits at the Paris Salon in 1878, 1879 and 1881.<sup>7</sup>

In 1881, Nicolas Emile and Berthe Mouchette, with Mme Mouchette's sister, Mlle Marie Lion, attended a talk given by "Tasma", Mrs Jessie Fraser, later Jessie Couvreur, to the Geographical Society in Paris about Australia. They were immediately enthused and decided to emigrate. Oscar Comettant recounts the episode as told to him much later by Mme Mouchette:

Madame Mouchette and her husband (she is now a widow) left Paris for Australia, with Mlle Lyon, towards the middle of 1881. One evening, for no particular reason, as they say, the three of them went to hear a talk given by Mrs Fraser (Tasma) to the Geographical Society. The subject of the talk was Australia. Mrs Fraser said so many favourable things about this country, still so unfamiliar to Europeans, and especially to the French; she showed such enthusiasm—and rightly so—for its healthy climate, its hospitality, and its institutions; she praised so highly and with such eloquence the possibilities open to

foreigners, be they workers, teachers or artists, that Monsieur Mouchette, on leaving the meeting, said, only half-seriously, to his wife: "Shall we go to Australia?" "Why not?", replied Madame Mouchette, who has an enterprising and resolute character. Mlle Lyon added: "I'd love to go." And so they had now no other thought than to leave for this Eldorado, to which they felt themselves drawn less perhaps by the attraction of making a fortune than by that irresistible appeal to the artistic imagination—to venture into the unknown, to discover a new natural landscape, to brave the perils of travelling!<sup>8</sup>

They sailed from London on 20 July 1881 on board the "S.S. Liguria", arriving in Melbourne on 2 September.<sup>9</sup> Among their fellow passengers was the great photographer, J. W. Lindt.<sup>10</sup>

They lived at 3 Nepean Terrace, Gipps Street, East Melbourne from the time of their arrival.<sup>11</sup> In March 1882, M. and Mme Mouchette and Mlle Lion exhibited entries in the Victorian Academy of Arts exhibition, with both Mme Mouchette and Mlle Lion shown in the catalogue as Associates of the Academy.<sup>12</sup> "Emile Mouchette" exhibited a painting on a porcelain plate, titled "Fayence old style".<sup>13</sup>

The next reference to M. Mouchette is contained in correspondence to the French Consul at Melbourne dated 17 April 1900, from his brother-in-law, M. Vergnaud-Mouchette of La Briquetterie near Château-Thierry in the Département of the Aisne. In this letter, M. Vergnaud-Mouchette is seeking information about his widowed sister-in-law, Berthe Mouchette, and he quotes a letter received from "M. Emile Mouchette", in which "my brother-in-law told me of his admission, in the month of April 1883, as Chancellor at the French Consulate".<sup>14</sup> This posting was short-lived, since Mouchette died on 10 October 1884 of "Acute Haemorrhage of the lungs" after an illness of six months.<sup>15</sup> He was buried in the Roman Catholic Section<sup>16</sup> of the Melbourne General Cemetery on 12 October 1884.<sup>17</sup> On the Death Certificate, his profession is listed as "Acting Fr. Consul". Oscar Comettant described Mouchette's position as "Chancelier Substitué du Consulat".<sup>18</sup>

In 1885, Berthe Mouchette and Marie Lion purchased "Oberwyl" School in Burnett Street, St Kilda, from Mme Pfund for the equivalent of 200,000 French Francs.<sup>19</sup> Later, on 6 June 1890, Berthe Mouchette founded the Australian branch of the Alliance Française in Melbourne.<sup>20</sup> She and her sister continued their lives as painters and teachers in Melbourne, and from 1892 in Adelaide, where Mlle Lion died in 1922.<sup>21</sup> Mme Mouchette retired to Breteuil-sur-Iton in Normandy, where she

died on 20 June 1928, aged 82.<sup>22</sup> Her oil paintings are represented in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria and in private collections.

*Melbourne*

Notes

1. Death Certificate of Nicolas Emile Mouchette, Victorian Births, Deaths and Marriages, 37/12253 (Date of Death: 10 Oct. 1884).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Oscar Comettant, *Au pays des kangourous et des mines d'or*, Paris, Librairie Fischbacher, 1890, p. 210. Trans. by Dennis Davison.
4. Register of Births, Hôtel de Ville, Forcalquier, Alpes de Haute-Provence.
5. *Plan de Paris*, 2nd edn, Paris, Michelin, 1982, p. 19.
6. E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs . . .*, Paris, Librairie Gründ, 1976, vol. 6, pp. 95 and 410.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 573.
8. Comettant, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
9. "S.S. Liguria", passenger list for voyage arriving Melbourne 2 September, 1881, Public Record Office, Victoria.
10. *The Argus*, 3 September 1881, p. 1: "Shipping Intelligence".
11. VAS Archives, Box 580/1C, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria.
12. Victorian Academy of Arts, Catalogue of the 12th Exhibition, March 1882, p. 5.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 14, n° 196.
14. Consular Archives, Melbourne, document 269, trans. by Dianne Reilly. Copy in ISFAR Archives, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria.
15. Death certificate of Nicolas Emile Mouchette.
16. Melbourne General Cemetery Plan, Roman Catholic Section I, Grave 51.
17. *Argus*, 11 October 1884, p. 1.
18. Comettant, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
19. *Loc. cit.*
20. Alliance Française de Melbourne, Minutes of Inaugural Meeting, Box 3554, MS 12711, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria.
21. Death Certificate of Marie Lion, N° 227491, South Australian Principal Registrar's Office (Date of Death: 3 May 1922).
22. Ville de Breteuil, Acte de Concession de Mme Berthe Mouchette, N° 117, 22 Juin 1928.