

‘POUR L’ART !’ AN ARTIST’S FAMILY

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‘mêle à ton triste sort un peu de poésie’

Émile Leysalle to Ada, 1901

The intriguing figure of my great-aunt Adélaïde Marie Amélie Hautrive (1866–1955) has fascinated me for many years. I was aware of the great lines of the poignant life story of the sister of my grandfather, Ada, as she is called in the Hautrive family, of her moves back and forth between Australia and France, of her artistic aspirations and her unusual marriage to the sculptor Émile Leysalle.¹ But it was only after meeting her son Marceau Hautrive (Marceau P. S.)² in 1973 in France and later reading the family chronicle by her grandson Alain Hautrive that the story of the French branch of my family³ started to fully unfold. Alain, Marceau’s son, first contacted me in 1994, having discovered some of the correspondence between his father and myself. He and his family subsequently welcomed me to Brussels and later, Paris, where Alain allowed me access to his archive of family letters. My training as a painter and later a conservator not only made me feel a special affinity with my great-aunt Ada

¹ Pierre Émile Leysalle (1847–1912): ‘statuaire, médailleur, graveur de l’École française, diplômé de l’École des Beaux-Arts de Paris [...] il est aussi peintre, poète et musicien’ (Hautrive 1995, 5). Leysalle’s work can be found in major art museums in Australia as well as in Europe.

² Marceau Pierre Sydney Hautrive (1899–1997), or Marceau P.S. (to distinguish him from other members of the family also called Marceau), undaunted by the early termination of his formal schooling, taught himself to type, becoming proficient in English, German and Rumanian, and had a remarkable career himself, being employed by the newly-formed League of Nations after the end of World War I.

³ The history of the Hautrives has been fully documented by Alain Patrick Hautrive, Ada’s grandson, and can be found on the web: ‘Chronique Familiale : Histoire de la Famille Hautrive’, 1995. I draw extensively on this 194-page document, supplementing my notes from before the advent of the internet.

but also provided me with an understanding of both the European milieu and the Australian sojourn of this artist in the later 19th century.

The following is a greatly abbreviated account of the earlier years; it tells the story of a beautiful, courageous and spirited woman who followed her heart. Adélaïde Hautrive and Émile Leysalle met in Australia. Their peregrinations from France to Australia and back to France trace a compelling account of passionate love and persistent bad luck.

My grandfather, Alfred Hautrive,⁴ was a merchant seaman on vessels plying between Europe and Australia in the later 19th century. Often lonely, he wrote to his family in Australia, but particularly to Ada—obviously a dearly loved older sister. She kept all these letters and I was captivated by the insights into our family. I spent many hours trying to decipher letters to and from Australia, with my inadequate schoolgirl French. Initially, I was trying to learn more of my grandfather and retrieve for my mother and her sisters what would most interest them. Alfred died when my mother was seven, and she and her younger sisters had little memory of him.

From all this family correspondence a large part of the 19th century Australian story came to life. Initially, it was Marceau's father, the sculptor Émile Leysalle, an artistic polymath, whose story emerged.

But the story of Marceau's mother, my great-aunt, Ada, continued to resonate. Her life story, with her marriage to a French artist who worked for several years in Sydney in the late 19th century, highlights the contradictions faced by so many educated, talented and spirited women of her time. She was, initially, a dutiful daughter, a multilingual young woman and a painter of some talent herself. How could she in her later life reconcile the opposing roles of muse and mother against a backdrop of persistent poverty?

Ada's father, Marceau Hautrive (Marceau E.N. or Marceau Senior),⁵ first came to Australasia in 1862 as a young man, a negotiator and wool buyer for the great textile firms of northern France and Flanders. He met his wife, Elisabeth Lowrey, in New Zealand where they remained until 1870.

⁴ Alfred Joseph Hautrive (1877–1930).

⁵ Marceau Eugène Norbert Hautrive (1840–1901), the patriarch. Marceau E.N. (or Marceau Senior) was employed by large Northern French and Belgian importers of wool and other goods, Henri Caulliez, as well as Schoch, Bruggmann & Co, amongst others. (See Hautrive 1995)

Ada was born in New Zealand in 1866, the second of nine children. Returning to Northern France for nine years, Marceau and Elizabeth had six more children.

Very early, Ada was to learn independence. By seven years of age she was already boarding at a *pensionnat* for her schooling, overseen by an aunt in Menin. Her father began the correspondence to his firstborn daughter that continued throughout his lifetime. These letters contain family news, congratulate her on her results, adjure her to attend to her lessons and in letters from both parents she was often reminded of the financial sacrifices being made to give her this excellent education. At the age of eleven, she was to experience what her father describes as ‘the most beautiful day of her life’ when she took her first communion. But her parents were not able to be present; her father writes to her to ask the Good Lord to give her all that is necessary to be a ‘wise and docile child’. Ada’s two younger sisters, Elise and Clotilde, were also boarding with her. Ada, by the age of thirteen, was attending boarding school at the *pensionnat* of the Ursuline Convent at Saint-Saulve, Valenciennes.

Marceau Senior returned to Australia in 1879, settling in Melbourne, where his wife and younger children joined him. This move back to Australia was prompted by opportunities offered by the international exhibitions held in Sydney and Melbourne at which many French companies were represented. Ada remained in France to complete her secondary schooling. Her uncle Napoleon, residing in London, then offered her the enticing opportunity of a year in an English pension, where she could immerse herself in music and dancing, drawing and painting. However, she missed her immediate family; it was decided that she should return to her parents in Melbourne. After spending a number of weeks visiting friends and relatives in Menin, Roubaix, Tourcoing, Lille and Paris, Ada finally embarked on the ‘Salazie’ departing from Marseille to Melbourne in June 1884. She was eighteen, a young European woman who had not lived with her family for many years, divided between this imagined happiness and the regret of leaving her beloved France. In her journal (4 June 1884) she elucidated her divided loyalties:

Here I am, at last, on my way to Australia. After many sighs and tears, God has at last taken pity on this orphan and exile to whom a family and shelter are to be returned...but if my heart is counting the seconds that still separate me from my dear parents, my eyes are always fixed on the sea that we already see as more than an

immense distance...beloved France, I am happy to leave you, but I leave you with regret... Ah, blessed be the day when you see me again...

(Hautrive 1995, 32)

She stayed initially in the large family home 'Boisfleury' at Kew, near Studley Park, helping with her younger siblings. She gave lessons in painting, along the Yarra River where she must have been aware of the work of the Australian impressionists, and may have visited the National Gallery in Swanston Street. By 1890 the wheel of fortune for 'Marvellous Melbourne' was turning downward; the resulting depression would be severe. Unfortunately for the family, the centre of the wool buying trade and the larger northern European firms had by now shifted to Sydney, and the entire trading system was changing.⁶ By 1891 Marceau Hautrive had set himself up to become a sole agent and importer, close to the French Bank in Queen Street. Earlier, he had also leased a farm at Eltham.

At this time of her life Ada did not want to look after her younger siblings, nor milk cows on the family property. She was certainly aware of the stirrings for women's independence generally (the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society had been formed in Melbourne in 1884). Initially unbeknown to her parents, she planned an independent life, successfully applying for a position as a governess to a French family at Burradoo, just south of Bowral in the NSW Southern Highlands. 'How *could* you, Ada?' was her father's remonstrance at this 'desertion', as it appeared to him.

Ada soon moved to Sydney. Her father's employer and friend, M. Bruggmann, was always there if she needed assistance. In 1891 she met and fell in love with a visiting Frenchman, Monsieur de Montour. He was much older than her, and not enjoying sound health; in this instance, she was, for the last time, a dutiful daughter. She obeyed her father and broke off the relationship.

But she was about to meet the man who would idolise her as his muse and intellectual equal, who would take her back to France and to whom she

⁶ The way of selling wool changed to become organised through a series of regionally-based associations of wool selling brokers and wool buyers, engaging in cartel-type behaviours by price fixing and exclusive dealing. The wool selling brokers began to exploit this monopoly power. (Merrett 2012)

would bear three children. On 24 October 1892 the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced the arrival of the French sculptor Pierre Émile Leysalle. Leysalle had left his position as Professor of Sculpture at the Geneva School of Industrial Art to seek his fortune in Australia. Bearing a letter of introduction to the Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, E.L. Montefiore, Émile was enthusiastically welcomed into French society and the wider art milieu in Sydney.

A soirée which included artists of the French colony of Sydney was held at the Cosmopolitan Club on 10 November 1892. This was reported on by both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Evening News*; apparently the star attraction of this evening was a terracotta medallion of the president of the club, Alfred Bennett, executed by the sculptor Émile Leysalle in less than an hour. Further publicity ensued; the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 9 December 1892 reported on the previous evening's soirée held at the Cosmopolitan Club, given in honour of some of the famous artists of the town: Horace Poussard and Edward Strauss, violinists, pianist Henri Kowalski and organist Auguste Wiegand, the singer Llewellyn, with a special mention of Leysalle.

No time was lost in obtaining a teaching studio at 112 Hunter Street, Sydney. An announcement early in 1893 in the *Courrier australien* elaborated: 'where he will give courses from 10 am to 11 am on Tuesdays and Thursdays for ladies, on Wednesdays and Fridays for gentlemen'. Not long after his arrival, Leysalle had been commissioned to create a significant sculpture, 'the first masterpiece' he was to show in this country. This was to be a monumental sculpture, to be unveiled by His Excellency, Lord Jersey, outgoing Governor of NSW. It was to be entitled 'Rescued from the Floods', inspired by the floods that swept through Queensland in 1890 and indeed, again in early 1893.

The life-sized plaster group of figures was to be unveiled in Wynyard Square in March 1893, as the highlight of a fête organised by the Cosmopolitan Club. All preparations for this event proceeded as planned, until the transport to Wynyard Square. Inexplicably the sculpture was shattered. There followed a commiserative letter from the Mayor of Sydney, the press cuttings detailing condolences. Maybe this unfortunate accident allowed the sponsors to extricate themselves from an agreement that in all probability had escalated alarmingly in costs, at a time of rising inflation. Notwithstanding, a concert was organised by the Cosmopolitan Club at the Sydney Town Hall, the profits enabling Émile Leysalle to make a replica intended for the Sydney Museum.

Did Ada answer Émile's advertisement for students? Her father was often in Sydney—perhaps they met at a formal occasion for the French colony. Or at the famed Paris House in Phillip Street—the meeting place for the local French community and more bohemian citizens, run by a Frenchman from Lille and his Belgian wife. Ada must have visited this establishment which was only two city blocks distant from Émile's studio in Hunter Street. Those members of the French community who also participated in the inner-city art world must have been a relatively small group, familiar to each other.

It came about that the young woman and the artist met and fell in love. Ada and Émile were married at St Patrick's Cathedral, Sydney, in February 1894, a priest from the Marist Brothers officiating. Their first child, Renée Aimée Élizabeth Émilie, was born in November of that year. Ada's father reproached her strongly for this liaison and marriage. The difference in their ages, with Émile being only seven years younger than Marceau Senior himself, and seemingly without any reliable means of support for his wife, distressed him at a time of general financial crisis in Australia. He warned her: 'no good will come of it'.

At first, things went well for the happy couple, active participants in the artistic society of the time. Ada filed it all away: the rental receipt for their home in Edgecliff; the invitation to an 'at home' at the artist W.C. Pignuit's home in Hunters Hill; an invitation from Pignuit inviting Émile to help in selecting paintings to travel to Europe; newspaper cuttings detailing the most lively soirées at the French Cosmopolitan Club. Émile exhibited a number of sculptures for the Art Society of NSW exhibitions throughout his Sydney sojourn and his work is held by some major galleries. But alas, timing is all, and Émile had chosen to arrive in Australia just as the 1890s depression was gathering strength. A painter might just survive—although the history of Australian artists at this time details the falling-away of commissions and the general exodus to Europe in the hope of better sales. But a sculptor, in such hard times?⁷

Ada's yearning for a return to Europe, and the continuance of the depression in Australia saw them board *La Ville de la Ciotat* in 1895 for

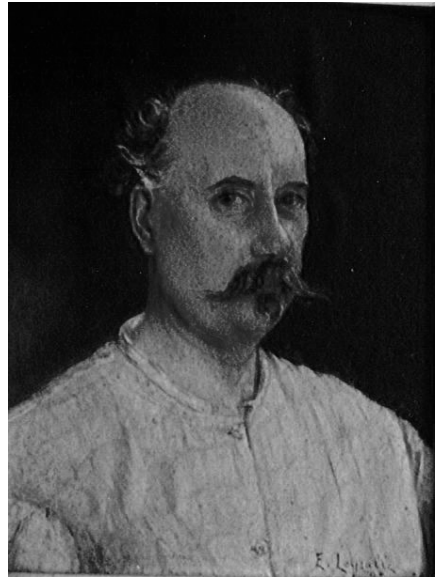
⁷ In his speech at the 1892 Art Society of NSW opening, the Minister for Public Instruction, Mr Suttor, commented that it was 'unfortunate for artists that times were so bad that would-be patrons were not in a position to buy some of the good works which adorned the walls of this room'. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 1892)

Marseille. Émile hoped his reputation would attract more remunerative commissions, initially in Rome, then Geneva.

Again, the timing was probably just too late. Carpeaux's style, which Leysalle followed, was soon to become passé. And by now there were two children for Ada to care for. Her family wrote that she should be satisfied with two; there were reproachful comments when she announced a third pregnancy. Émile chose to paint her in this decade as a Renaissance beauty, perhaps one of Henri IV's consorts, as Émile's features were likened to those of this



Adélaïde Leysalle as a sixteenth century noblewoman, oil painting by Émile Leysalle, circa 1900



Self portrait, oil painting by Émile Leysalle, circa 1888

French king. He continued to exhibit, gaining small commissions and never ceasing to follow up any hopeful prospects for sculptures or paintings, but Ada's family became increasingly exasperated by his failure to support his family financially. Her sister-in-law Agnes wrote in 1905 about the difficulties artists faced in putting food on the table for their family: 'Art is beautiful, but does it do the housework, does it feed the children? For a long time now he should have looked for something else to do and saved his art for his spare

time. But it’s easier to ask for money from those who work from morning to night.’ (Hautrive 1995, 91) Ada writes often to relatives in Paris, London and Australia asking for financial help; whatever they could manage to send was never sufficient.

While they were living in Geneva, the revelation of Émile’s first marriage—to Augustine Aglaé Flouron, in Paris, 1871—came as a terrible shock to Ada. The couple had separated before Émile’s departure for Australia, the three children from this marriage remaining with their mother. A divorce was finally granted in 1899. Nevertheless, it meant that Ada’s legal status was that of a bigamous wife. Again, her father wrote to her, imploring her to leave Émile; earlier, on 18 September 1900, he had commented about the fluctuations of their relationship: ‘One day it’s hell and the next it’s a honeymoon.’ (Hautrive 1995, 51)

Her Catholic bourgeois family was both outraged by the social position this left her in, and puzzled as to why she persisted with the relationship, but she loyally defended him and their relationship for some years, believing in the validity of their shared life and beliefs and children, writing to him in 1902: ‘it’s sad in the house without you, in spite of everything, Grumpy. We haven’t been together night and day for eight years for nothing.’ (Hautrive 1995, 70) For Ada, between her roles as a muse, but also as a mother struggling with three children, reaching the inevitable decision to separate was a bitter and protracted journey.

Émile and Ada returned to Paris, finally separating in 1906. Émile remained totally devoted to Ada and their children, and, whilst living apart, their friendship with its shared interests was maintained. Ada moved close to the Hospice Debrousse in Paris, where Émile was admitted in failing health in 1910. Émile’s later letters to her are full of insights, remonstrations and considerable anguish. He was an artist of talent, at a time when the role and status of the sculptor as artisan versus the sculptor as artist was still debated. His unremitting attempts to straddle the gap between the image of the *bon vivant* artist and the reality of gathering together enough to pay even for daily bread are touching and saddening.

Émile died in Paris in October 1912. Ada never returned to Australia, although her family in Melbourne implored her to do so, longing to look after her and her children, and keeping her piano and her paintings for her return. Her sisters and brothers wrote to her for the rest of their lives, actually sending

the money for a ticket. She chose to stay in Paris, where she was to live nearly another half century after the couple's final separation.

On that first of my several meetings with Ada's son Marceau (Marceau P.S.), he recounted a small vignette from his childhood: one morning, when he was twelve years old, he was summoned by his mother, to be told that he could no longer attend school. Instead, she had found him a job holding the reins of carriage horses. It was apparent from Marceau's delivery how much this memory still affected him. On leaving, I noticed several finely-modelled clay pipe heads in the vestibule. These were made by his mother, Marceau told me, to try and bring a little money in. Then, unexpectedly, he hesitated and added 'My father left us ... but not for another woman—pour l'Art'.⁸

Ada might have been a businesswoman as well as an artist—she seems to have filed away almost *everything* received by her over her lifetime. Letters from her fellow students, dispersed across France and Switzerland; from the Mother Superior at the Valenciennes Convent; impassioned letters from her husband as well as notes, also from him, which record his attempts to place sculptures or smaller multiple copies in Paris or London, or instruct her on the patination required for sculptures; business receipts from Deans, the still-extant Melbourne art supplier; from European foundries. That large cache of letters written from Australia and France affords us valuable insights not only into the story of an artist, his wife and their children, but also into the struggles of an extended French family in late 19th century Melbourne, as well as life in Australia seen from a French perspective. It is to be hoped that such a unique treasure will be further explored in the future.

Melbourne

References

Hautrive, Alain Patrick, 1995, 'Chronique Familiale : Histoire de la Famille Hautrive', 194 p., <http://hautrive.free.fr/poemes/chronique-hautrive.pdf>
Le Courrier australien

⁸ The 'protocole de séparation à l'amiable,' the legal deed signed by the couple, included these words: 'Because of lack of work, due unfortunately to my profession as an artist...' (See Hautrive 1995, 95)

Merrett, David, and Simon Ville, 2012, ‘Industry associations and non-competitive behaviour in Australian wool marketing: evidence from the Melbourne Woolbrokers’ Associations, 1890-1939’. *Business History*, vol. 54, 4, pp. 510–528. *The Sydney Morning Herald*