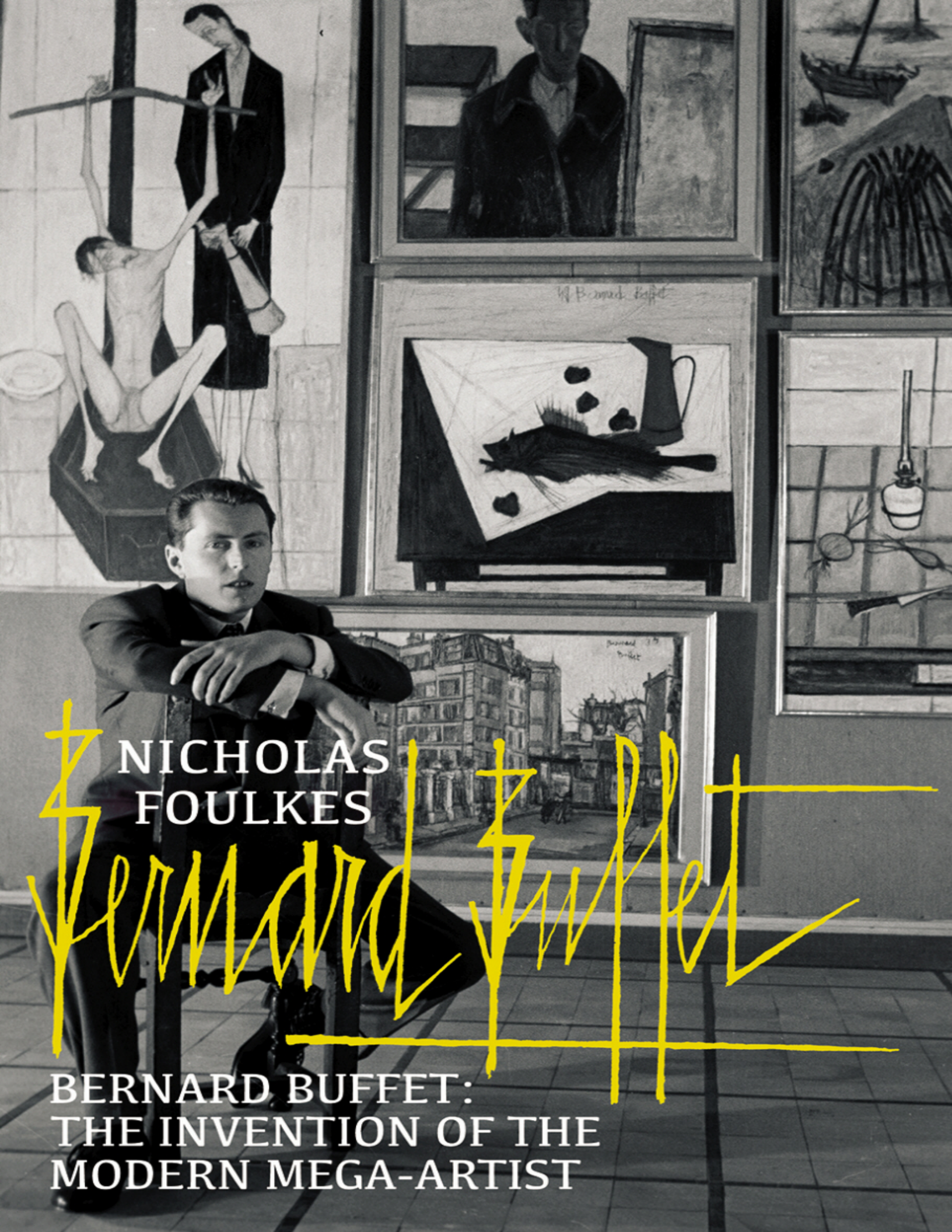

NICHOLAS FOULKES

Bernard Buffet

BERNARD BUFFET: THE INVENTION OF THE MODERN MEGA-ARTIST

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About the Book

A true tale of bisexual love affairs, betrayal, a shattered reputation, alcoholism, and drug abuse set against the tumultuous events of the Nazi Occupation of Paris, the age of existentialism in St-Germain-des-Prés, and the glamour of the Riviera in the 1950s and 1960s.

This book lays bare the tragedy behind the fall from grace of the first modern mega-artist who, even in death, remains one of the most controversial and divisive of modern painters.

About the Author

Nicholas Foulkes is the author of around twenty books. He is best known for his critically acclaimed trilogy of nineteenth-century histories: *Scandalous Society* (a biography of Count d'Orsay); *Dancing Into Battle, A Social History of the Battle of Waterloo*; and *Gentlemen and Blackguards: Gambling Mania and the Plot to Steal the Derby of 1844*. He is a columnist for *Country Life*; a contributing editor to the *FT*'s *How To Spend It* magazine, a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* and luxury editor of *British GQ*. He is the founding editor of 'Vanity Fair on Art' and he has written on the arts for a wide range of periodicals. In 2009 he was appointed to the board of the Norman Mailer Center. He is a graduate of Hertford College, Oxford and lives in London with his wife and two sons.

Bernard Buffet

The Invention of the Modern Mega-Artist

NICHOLAS FOULKES

preface
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To my wife Alexandra and our sons Max and Freddie,
who have lived with my Buffet obsession
(and many others besides)

Introduction

One afternoon around the turn of the century, I had just finished lunch and, having paid my postprandial visit to Davidoff, was strolling through St James's with a cigar when my eye was forcibly seized by a painting in a gallery window. It was a still life, not very big, a watercolour if memory serves. It showed a handgun, some books, a coffee pot, a Ricard-branded ashtray on the edge of which rested a smoking cigarette, and an antique desk lamp with a shade of pleated green fabric tilted to create a cone of light that illuminated the items, causing them to emerge from the black background. It was an effectful picture. Who was smoking the cigarette? Was it the owner of the gun? How did they relate to the pile of books? It was dramatic, and had all the more impact because of the artist's signature. Right in the middle of the composition, in an angular script that would become very familiar to me, were the two words 'Bernard Buffet'.

I fell for it immediately. It could have been the cover of a mid-century detective novel, or a moody film poster. I felt it had something of the 1950s about it, and it surprised me to learn that it had been painted in 1978. Tempted, I called a friend who knows about paintings; he told me that Bernard Buffet was a terrible artist, and that was that – a pity really, as I still think about that painting today. However, in a way, the work has remained with me as part of a personal version of André Malraux's Musée Imaginaire, remaining stubbornly in my mind, reproaching me for not buying it.

I have to thank that picture for making me aware of the work and the life of Bernard Buffet. Over the course of the

ensuing years, I would see his works in auction catalogues. The artist himself appeared in photographs of the beau monde during the 1950s and 1960s. I would spot him among the jury of the Cannes Film Festival. I would come across him loping moodily, smartly suited, cigarette dangling as if attached genetically to his lower lip, amidst giant scenery flats of his own design on stage at the opera house in Monte Carlo. Occasionally I would come across an old copy of *Paris Match* in which he would be photographed in one or other of the many castles and grand houses he would own during his life.

Clearly at one time Bernard Buffet had been a big deal, famous and, if the pictures of him looking like a movie star in slick three-piece suits or neatly turned out in a dinner jacket were anything to go by, unafraid to embrace the material pleasures that this success had afforded him.

I became intrigued.

A few years later, sitting around a dinner table with a couple of figures from the art world, I mentioned Buffet. The reaction was almost violent, an intake of breath and then a torrent of disparaging comments. By this time we were living in the age of the iPhone, and a cursory internet search turned up examples of his work. What struck me as remarkable was that the art professionals held an opinion diametrically opposed to the rest of the dinner party, laymen who found the variety of subjects treated and the accomplished manner in which they were executed immediately attractive.

I was no longer intrigued.

I was fascinated.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of the literature on this enigmatic figure is in French, so it took me some time to find out about him, but what I found was well worth the hours pondering the language of Racine and Corneille. I discovered a painter who had been proclaimed a star at the age of twenty. Along with Bardot, Sagan,

Vadim and Yves Saint Laurent, he had been one of the glittering constellation of talented youth who had found fame while still in their teens, and who had shaped French culture and the perception of France during the fifties and sixties.

The Frenchness he represented was the image of France with which I had grown up: glamorous women in haute couture; blue, silver and black cylindrical canisters of YSL Rive Gauche; Café de Flore, Brasserie Lipp, and of course Ricard ashtrays in which one stubbed out one's Gauloises or Gitanes. Back in the 1970s, France may have long since ceased to be an international power of any consequence, but when it came to food, fashion and sophistication, it was still the world leader. I am of the generation who took family holidays in the Dordogne and in Paris, the city in which Buffet grew up and which he painted throughout his life. When I took my honeymoon, it was to the chateaux of the Loire, painted in 1971 by Bernard Buffet, that we travelled. And when we conceived our first child, it was on the Côte d'Azur, of which the painter was one of the chief ornaments during the fifties and sixties, and which of course he had painted many a time.

The more I looked into Buffet's life, the more compelling I found it. Sometimes he was a ubiquitous socialite, seemingly omnipresent wherever there was a film festival or a fashion show to attend, at other times a recluse to rival Howard Hughes. Sometimes he was homosexual, at other times heterosexual. Sometimes he consumed drink and drugs insatiably; at other times he was completely ascetic. Sometimes he painted scenes of such horror and cruelty that they are hard to look at; at other times he produced landscapes of remarkable, soothing serenity. At first he was lionised by the critics, and later laughed at by them. To some he was the artist in the Rolls-Royce, and yet he had come to fame painting pictures of post-war austerity.

But the drama of his life aside, what fascinated me was the trajectory taken by his reputation. How could a man who was hailed a genius at the age of twenty, the saviour of French painting and the designated successor to Picasso, have become a national embarrassment by the time he was in his thirties? Why, whenever I mentioned his name around educated French people, was the reaction so visceral, so hostile?

While in the middle years of the twentieth century, the same man had been a phenomenon who enjoyed spectacular commercial and, at least at first, critical success.

The deeper I delved into his story, the more obsessed I became. The man was a painting machine: working unaided over the course of a career that lasted from the 1940s until the end of the century, he painted no one knows quite how many pictures, the conservative estimate being 8,000–10,000 oils and plenty of watercolours and drawings. He could polish off a vast canvas of 200 square feet in a week and finish a couple of dozen drawings in a day, all characterised by the same confident, infallible lines. There were no preparatory sketches; instead, with an almost unearthly precision, he worked directly on to the canvas.

I was fortunate enough to get to know Buffet's art dealer, Maurice Garnier, a year before his death at the beginning of 2014. Garnier was a remarkable man who had worked with the painter since the late 1940s and who from the 1970s had devoted himself solely to his work.

Their relationship was unique, and when I first crossed the threshold of Garnier's eponymous Paris gallery in the spring of 2013, it was like stepping back into the sleek, understated mid-century modernism of France under General de Gaulle. At that time the country was experiencing a period of unprecedented prosperity and when every February le Tout-Paris would gather here

amidst the clink of glasses and the susurrus of animated conversation for Buffet's annual exhibition.

It is often said that Maurice Garnier entered the art of Bernard Buffet much as he might have entered a religion, and at his gallery on the Avenue Matignon it was as if everything were being held in readiness for the return of the artist's reputation. But for Garnier, Buffet might already be forgotten, yet like the obsequies of some arcane faith, the ritual February exhibition continued for years after the painter's death.

Garnier was a memorable character, courteous, correct and incredibly strong-willed. Moreover, even though he was in his mid nineties, he was able to muster a soupçon of Gallic lady-killing charm. When I met him, he was still walking to the gallery every morning, although he feared that with his rapidly failing eyesight, this pleasure would soon be denied him. We discussed this over lunch in the Chinese restaurant once favoured by Buffet, where Garnier always ordered the same thing, so that even if he could not see it, he knew what he was eating. On that occasion I was accompanied by a colleague from *Vanity Fair*; having explained his failing eyesight, Garnier turned to my friend and said, 'But I can see well enough to tell that you are a very beautiful woman.'

I liked going to see him because he was such good company. We would talk about how he remembered seeing Édith Piaf perform before the war, and how he had met Buffet for the first time playing table tennis. On one occasion I remember him placing a plastic bag over his head to show me how Buffet had died. Another time, when we were discussing Buffet's sexual orientation, he digressed into the sexual tastes of leading men of that day, and told me how a newspaper editor of his acquaintance had only been able to have sex with prostitutes.

Talking to this remarkable survivor was like returning to the Paris of the 1940s and 1950s, when figures such as

Picasso and Cocteau, Camus and Sartre were not characters to be studied by historians, but living men with the strengths and failings that characterise all human beings.

There were times when he could be a little inflexible. I remember the occasion when his charming wife Ida appeared at the gallery with a sheaf of faxes from Bernard's wife. Naturally I was jubilant to have struck such a rich seam of primary material; however, instead of taking them off her there and then, I suggested that copies were made in case any of them got lost. This was thought to be a good idea, and in a week or so, an envelope arrived, but instead of the armful of fax paper, there were just two or three sheets. I asked where the others were and was told that they were of no interest to me. It was useless to argue.

Indeed, one of the pleasures of researching this book has been the opportunity to encounter some of the powerful characters who shaped France in those vibrant years. Pierre Bergé, Jacqueline de Ribes and Juliette Gréco are among those who through their reminiscences took me back to a time very different from our own. A time when a young, good-looking millionaire artist with a castle, a yacht and a Rolls-Royce was something new. And in an attempt to understand the painter better, travelled around France and to Japan to visit some of the places he knew in his lifetime, among them the houses he knew as a child and an old man.

I do not feel qualified to say whether Buffet was a great painter, but I believe that he was an important one. The case could be made that he is the link between Picasso and Warhol, as is the belief of one of the great collectors of our age, Bernard Arnault, who by the way got very excited when I showed him some photographs that I had taken of Buffet's truly monumental paintings, which are anything up to seven metres in length.

Through his paintings, Buffet speaks eloquently across the years and from beyond the grave about what it was like

to live in the middle of the last century. Standing in front of his masterpieces and getting to know them, becoming aware of the way in which those now dead hands, once so swift, supple and dextrous, applied the paint to the canvas, until the stylistic devices and individual brushstrokes take on the familiarity of old friends, has made him and his oeuvre more alive to me than the work of many of the most renowned artists living today. Upon leaving Buffet's exhibition of Paris landscapes and seeing the city anew through the painter's eyes, his friend Jean Cocteau confided to his diary that 'the test that a painter is a painter is when everything starts to resemble his painting'.[1] It is certainly a test that he passed with me, as I now have difficulty looking at anything – whether a flower or a snow-covered road; whether an oil lamp or an ashtray; whether the Place des Vosges or the sombrely gaudy spectacle of the corrida – without my mind's eye imagining how Bernard Buffet would have seen it.

Recently I was discussing the painter with one of the higher-profile twenty-first-century collectors of Buffet's work. After I had limned out the briefest of biographies, he asked me just how many lives this man had led, and wondered how I was going to fit them all into one book. It was a pertinent question. Faced with a life so crowded with incident, I could only answer that it was my own limitations as a writer rather than a paucity of material that would impose restrictions. Moreover, given that Buffet's oeuvre provided the artistic backdrop and iconography of his times, it is impossible to contemplate the artist without placing him in the context of his era. Thus one of the pleasures of writing this book has been the chance to become better acquainted with the remarkable years that took Europe from the rubble and ruin of total war to the bright and brash world in which we live today, through the pages of countless newspapers, artistic journals, exhibition catalogues and, of course, back numbers of *Paris Match*.

And while the two discrete periods seem separated by an almost unbridgeable gulf of history, it has astonished me to learn just how much of what we experience today can be traced back to Buffet's day: the mechanics of modern celebrity; the cult of the contemporary artist; the frenzied speculation in works of art; the art boom; the melting of the barriers between high and popular culture; and the emergence of art as a de facto branch of the entertainment and luxury goods industry.

Even though this is a relatively long book, I feel that I have managed to produce only an impressionistic sketch of Bernard Buffet rather than a fully realised portrait. Happily there are already many excellent studies of the painter and various aspects of his work, published during his lifetime and posthumously. Moreover, as I am not an art professional and lack any formal art historical training, my judgements should be viewed for what they are: subjective observations. Nevertheless, since the defining leitmotif of the arts in our current century has been the explosion in the cultural and financial value attached to contemporary art, Bernard Buffet's story seems extremely topical.

Of course nowadays, rich celebrity artists are almost as commonplace as poor, starving ones. Today the most successful artists are among the wealthiest people on earth, their work sells for millions and their faces and stories are as familiar to us as those of film stars and musicians: Tracey and her unmade bed, Damien and his pickled shark, Anish Kapoor's wax, Richard Prince's nurses and cowboys, Jeff Koons's supersize kitsch … Once upon a time, Bernard Buffet was just as famous, and the Icarus-like rise and abrupt catastrophic crash of his reputation make for a cautionary tale that today's art market, with its celebrity artists and soaring prices, might do well to heed.

Chapter 1

Death in Provence

It is said that asphyxiation brings on a state of hallucinatory intoxication – in which case, the seventy-one-year-old man who lay sprawled on the floor of his Provençal villa died happy.

Monday 4 October 1999 had begun as a day much like any other at the Domaine de la Baume, a substantial eighteenth-century manor house a few minutes from Tourtour, a tourist-brochure-perfect example of a hilltop village in the Var: all ancient stone and red-tiled roofs; houses crammed together in charming propinquity around a delightful tree-shaded square filled in summer with café tables and the babble of tourists sampling the *douceur de vivre* of *la vie Provençale*.

Behind the thick ochre walls of the old house, life was stirring. The view from its broad terrace overlooking the large estate gave the impression that morning, as it did every day, that the inhabitants of this paradisiacal property had Provence more or less to themselves. But the magic of the house and its picturesque setting had long since ceased to cast its spell over the man who awoke that morning. Waking up and getting out of bed was a painful, agonising business.

Each day the Parkinson's disease that laid siege to his nervous system robbed him of more of his independence. Breakfast with his wife of forty years, a once beautiful woman now inclining to stoutness, was a sullen affair. After that, he heaved his heavy body up the stairs to his first-

floor artist's studio. He had always felt better about life when alone with his work, surrounded by the tools of his craft and the comfortable, familiar chaos of paint-spattered furniture, canvases pinned to the wall, tabletops piled with mountains of crumpled paper and crowded with countless creased and squeezed tubes, the floor covered with balled-up rags upon which brushes had been hastily wiped. But since he had broken his wrist during the summer, even the slight reprieve offered by holding a brush in his shaking hands and moving it across the taut surface of a canvas was denied him. Throughout the morning his wife dropped in to consult him on a trivial matter or ask him some inconsequential question or other; both of them knew these were just pretexts for her to check on him.

At about midday, however, his mood lightened. The old couple took a short stroll with their dogs, listening to the chuckling fountain and enjoying the views out over the formal gardens to the pool and the dovecote just visible through the trees. The walk to the dramatic waterfall, where water poured out of the mountain and tumbled in a torrent down a cliff to fill the cold, clear pools below, was out of the question. Yet as they wandered slowly arm in arm, watching the dogs play and breathing in the autumnal air, the man seemed to take a little pleasure in life. He even plucked a rose from the bush in front of the house and laid it at the feet of the small statue of the Virgin Mary on the terrace. This light exercise seemed to have given him an appetite, and he ate lunch with relish, after which he stretched out on the sofa in the large drawing room for a short nap.

Waking shortly after three o'clock, he called his wife, who found him smiling and relaxed. He said that he was going to go into the studio for a short while, after which they would watch television together. He also said that if it was not too much bother, he would like an omelette *aux fines herbes* for dinner. His wife bustled happily off to the

kitchen to check if they had any eggs and to enjoy a coffee and a cigarette.

And then, having rested, planned the remainder of his day and chosen what he was going to eat for dinner, he went upstairs, calmly placed a plastic bag over his head, taped it tight around his neck and patiently waited the few minutes it took for death to arrive.

At four o'clock, having not heard him come down, the woman mounted the stairs and opened the studio door.

At first she thought he had fallen. But the sight of the plastic bag and the tape soon robbed her of this comforting fiction. Using the scissors with which he trimmed his beard, she cut away the bag, taking care not to injure him, to reveal a face that she later described as 'peaceful and smiling'.[1] In a twist of macabre irony, the black polythene through which she sliced was printed with two words in her late husband's distinctive angular handwriting, once described by *The Times* of London as arachnoid, and which his friend Jean Cocteau with typical figurative flamboyance had been moved to call a praying mantis script. The two words were those of his name, Bernard Buffet, repeated over and over again as if in mute funerary lamentation.

Perhaps instinctively, or maybe in real hope that he might be revived, his wife called for help and the employees on the estate came running. But she knew it was too late. Soon the machinery of death began to grind: firemen, a doctor and the police arrived quickly. And then came the press, because her husband was still a famous man in France, even though his reputation as an artist seemed irretrievable, dismissed as he had been by the art establishment as a painter of gaudy commercial junk: landscapes, polychromatic vases of flowers, and clowns – particularly clowns – reproductions of which had hung in a thousand doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms from Brittany to the Alpes-Maritimes.

Shunned by major cultural institutions, Bernard Buffet was not so much a footnote in art history as an embarrassing memory, a cultural one-night stand that the art world seemed determined to forget. The orthodox view of intellectuals in this most cerebral of nations was that his work barely warranted exhibition on the easels of street-corner tourist-trap painters, far less the consideration of being hung on the walls of a serious museum. Typical of the coverage of his death was a ten-page survey of his life in the following Saturday's *Figaro* magazine. It delicately avoided any critical appraisal of the quality of his body of work, preferring to focus on its quantity. His prodigious output of over 8,000 canvases allowed *Le Figaro* to describe him as the 'Stakhanovite of painting'.[2] Instead of talking about his work, the magazine took refuge in the past, printing page after page of black-and-white pictures of the man at his glamorous best, slim and elegant, with cigarette perpetually poised between index and middle finger; his wife with similar, seemingly genetically attached tobacco product, transformed by the mediating benevolence of archive photography from the matronly septuagenarian with the sun-spotted features who had sliced open the plastic bag with which her husband had suffocated himself, into the gamine beauty who had bewitched Saint-Germain-des-Prés during the fabulous fifties like a second Juliette Gréco.

With the exception of a rather prurient little fact box that dwelt on the erection-enhancing properties of asphyxiation, likening it to the then recently launched Viagra, and a Q&A transcribed from a television interview, it was as if Buffet had died a generation earlier.

Elsewhere in the world, he warranted short, almost perfunctory obituaries that talked of early promise betrayed by a long and productive life. 'For years, the art press had ignored his shows and the Pompidou Centre never bought a single work,'[3] observed the *Guardian*. 'As he

found himself overwhelmed with commissions, his work became more stylised and decorative, losing its original impact,'[4] wrote the *New York Times*. 'Critically scorned but commercially popular'[5] was the verdict of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Had Buffet died forty years earlier, however, he would have gone to his grave lauded as the last truly great painter produced by France, an artist whose commercial success and critical acclaim looked to some to put him on a collision course with Picasso.

Chapter 2

The Boy from Les Batignolles

The life that had ended so melodramatically on a large country estate began in the rather more pedestrian surroundings of a maternity hospital in Paris's 9th arrondissement on 10 July 1928. Bernard Buffet joined a family of three: his father managed a mirror factory and glass-cutting business; his mother looked after his older brother Claude in the family's small apartment on the second floor of a building on the Rue Mariotte.

In later years when asked about his childhood, Buffet would dismiss it almost grudgingly as neither interesting nor amusing.[1] The year before he died, he participated in a biographical film and dispatched the entirety of his early family life with a couple of dozen words. 'My parents were separated, there were money problems. You couldn't say I was privileged. I wasn't in an artistic environment, far from it,' wheezed the plump, florid-faced, snowy-haired man sitting in his country gentleman's drawing room surrounded by valuable antiques, exotic curios and the works of his own hand. 'My mother died alone, when I was young. And my father didn't bother much about me, so I was left to my own devices, and I could do whatever I pleased.'[2]

It is as if he would have us believe that he created himself much as he created his paintings, starting with a blank canvas: a semi-feral child of the city, a creature of his own invention, abandoned by his parents and living on his wits like Hugo's Gavroche. It is of course not as simple as

his bald statements would suggest; in fact the opposite is almost true.

By the time he was born, at the end of the 1920s, there was the unmistakable sense that the Buffets had rather come down in the world. His grandfathers, both from families with ties to the quiet northern French town of Le Quesnoy on the border with Belgium, were career soldiers who had served and died during the Great War. His maternal grandfather, Felix Colombe, seems to have been an unusually peaceful man for a professional soldier. A regimental librarian, he is variously described as well read, a gifted draughtsman,[3] calm, cultivated, a voracious reader and a pianist.[4] A man of fragile health, he was already fifty-five years old at the outbreak of war, when he was attached to the staff of Philippe Pétain (on which one of the junior officers was a certain Lieutenant de Gaulle). His death, like his life, was not a particularly martial one: he caught a cold while buying sheepskins in December 1914, and his weak lungs did the rest.

By contrast, Henry Buffet, a lieutenant colonel, was killed in action in October 1915, during the assault on Souin in Champagne. He thought there was nothing finer for a man than a career in the military, and had pushed his son into enrolling at the famous military academy of Saint-Cyr. By extremely good luck, Charles Buffet failed his entrance exams; most of those who passed that year would not live to see the end of the decade.

During his preparation for the military academy, Charles had travelled to the Kaiser's Germany to acquaint himself with the language and customs of the country that France confidently predicted it would invade. These studies served him well when, in August 1914, his home town was swiftly occupied by the Germans; he spent the rest of the war serving as an official translator to the *mairie* of Cambrai. It was only after the armistice that he got round to performing his military service, in a cavalry regiment. In

August 1919, his army duty complete, he went straight to Paris to seek out his childhood sweetheart Blanche Colombe, with whom he had grown up in Le Quesnoy. In November of the same year, the young couple were married at the Church of Saint-Michel-des-Batignolles.

Their married life began in circumstances that were far from luxurious. Their first cramped flat was in the eaves of the building on the Rue Mariotte, and Charles, son of Lieutenant Colonel Buffet, Légion d'Honneur and five citations, found work managing a bicycle factory. Eventually, thanks to his aunt, he was offered the managerial position at the glass and mirror works belonging to Georges Guenne, and with the birth of their first son, the Buffets moved to a slightly more spacious second-floor apartment: just big enough for a family of three, but not for the family of four that they became in the summer of 1928.

It was his employer who helped Charles out with a small second-floor flat of seventy square metres[5] at the back of a light-starved inner courtyard in the Batignolles district of Paris. Essentially still a nineteenth-century apartment, the property needed a bathroom and electricity before the family could move in.

Rising canyon-like into the grey Parisian sky, the various facades – a little art deco here, faintly neoclassical there, but essentially anonymous everywhere – that make up the inner courtyard of 29 Rue des Batignolles have a cramped pretension to grandeur that aims at impressive but settles for a bourgeois austerity, and it was here that Bernard Buffet grew up. With accommodation hard to find in post-war Paris, this set of rooms did not exactly represent the world of Bugattis, cocktails and Ruhlmann furniture of the French capital during Les Années Folles. Nevertheless, as the *New Yorker* observed in a 1950s article about Bernard: 'The Buffet apartment, on the populous Rue des Batignolles, may have seemed poor compared to what M

and Mme Buffet had been brought up to, but it certainly had no connection with hardship or poverty as known in that working-class quarter.'[6]

Les Batignolles had been a village until the Second Empire, when Napoleon III's grandiose remodelling of the city under Baron Haussmann absorbed it into the capital. By the end of Napoleon III's rule, the area had become a less notorious alternative to Montmartre for artists seeking somewhere out of the centre of Paris to work and live; Fantin-Latour's famous 1870 painting *A Studio at Les Batignolles* shows Manet at work at his easel surrounded by a group of students and admirers, including a young Renoir and a firebrand journalist called Émile Zola.

Almost 150 years after Fantin-Latour depicted this scene of artistic endeavour, Les Batignolles retains something of a village feel. Although not far from the tourist centre, it is not an area popular with visitors and remains resolutely French in character. At the end of the Rue des Batignolles, no more than five minutes' walk from number 29, is a delightful little crescent of shops and restaurants facing the charming church of Sainte Marie des Batignolles, behind which is a miniature park, the tree-lined Square des Batignolles, edged with cafés. The Square des Batignolles even has that *sine qua non* of French village life: a ground for playing pétanque and boules.

However, it was not here that little Bernard was taken to play. Instead, his mother took the two boys across town to the considerably more upmarket Parc Monceau, crossing en route the main railway lines as they converged towards their terminus, the Gare Saint-Lazare. Occasionally Claude and Bernard, who was growing into a sickly and withdrawn child, would stop and look at the trains. It could have been that Blanche was keeping up appearances and hoping that at the Parc Monceau her children would be mixing with a better class of playmate, or it could have been that she

wished to get as far away as possible from a domestic life that was far from idyllic.

Just as the Square des Batignolles conforms to the cliché of French life, so Charles Buffet conformed to the national stereotype of marital morality; as well as the family establishment in Rue des Batignolles, he kept a mistress, Marguerite Samson, an independently minded woman who had studied and become a pharmacist. Blanche's jealousy can only have been heightened by the fact that like her, Marguerite was a childhood friend of her husband, and had been known to her family as well. Protective of her children and resentful of her husband, Blanche was not happy. For much of the time, their second-floor apartment with its drab courtyard must have seemed no better than a prison, seventy square metres of misery in which the moping depression of the devoutly religious abandoned wife and mother alternated with the underlying tension between man and wife when the philandering husband returned, which he did with a rigid, metronomic regularity, splitting his time away from work scrupulously between his two households, prompting one of Buffet's biographers to say of Charles that as the 'son of a soldier he had inherited a military sense of organisation'.[7]

Combined with his frailty and shy disposition, this poisonous domestic atmosphere had made young Bernard into 'a timid, untalkative, and unsocial child, chiefly recalled for saying nothing but no. He always referred to other children as "les gens", or "people", as if he felt no youthful identification with them at all.'[8] And his sullen, uncommunicative and withdrawn demeanour accompanied him to the Jesuit school he had begun to attend, where he distinguished himself by showing an interest in and aptitude for nothing – except drawing. 'When I began to draw I was about seven or eight. I would see things in books, schoolbooks or in shop windows, and I would copy what I'd seen in the books. I think that if you really want to

do something, you do it, even if nobody gives you a basic grounding,'[9] he would later recall.

Unable to keep her husband by her, Blanche poured her affection into her sons. Binding herself ever closer to her taciturn younger boy, she nurtured his talent and interest; after church and Sunday lunch, she would often take her children to the Louvre, and the picture in front of which they spent most time was Antoine-Jean Gros's *Les Pestiférés de Jaffa*.

Commissioned by Napoleon himself, the painting depicts the young emperor-to-be visiting soldiers suffering from the bubonic plague, which tore through his army after the capture of the city of Jaffa by French forces in 1799. The blatantly propagandist melodramatic canvas shows Bonaparte touching plague victims, a powerfully symbolic act freighted with associations of royal laying-on of hands from the days of Shakespeare, when the 'royal touch' was supposed to cure scrofula, to Diana, Princess of Wales comforting the sick. The drama of the moment, the exotic splendour of the setting and the misery portrayed were compounded by the overpowering scale of the work. At over seven metres long and five metres high, the canvas was more than half the size of the Buffets' entire family home. The image burned itself into the impressionable child's mind. Later Buffet would come to revere Gros as the 'true master of Géricault and Delacroix', skilled at composition and 'without doubt the master of history painting'.[10] It was the vast compositions at which Gros excelled that he would attempt to emulate later in life, and that would prove to have such a polarising effect on his reputation.

It is tempting to imagine what was racing through the mind of the determined but frail little boy as he stood in front of that picture on so many Sunday afternoons during the 1930s. Around him Picasso, Léger, Braque and Matisse were reinventing art. History painting, once the height of

artistic ambition, had been on the slide since the days of the Impressionists, its practitioners derided as *pompiers* (after the classical helmets resembling French firemen's headgear that littered their work). Yet while the world outside the Louvre echoed with the isms of twentieth century art – cubism, futurism, Fauvism, surrealism, expressionism – that little boy decided that one day he would paint as artists had done at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Life for the young Buffet was not an unremitting round of school, church and museums, punctuated by visits to socially acceptable inner-city green spaces; Easter and Christmas were spent at his grandmother's house in Le Quesnoy, and although he lived in Paris, the emotional connection he felt to the area from which his parents came remained powerful throughout his life. Even when he was celebrated and living in splendour, the sight of his childhood haunts affected him profoundly. His wife, Annabel, would recall that, many years later, in 1959, en route to a major exhibition in the Belgian resort of Knokke-le-Zoute, he suggested in the elaborately casual manner that he 'used to disguise deeply felt emotion'[11] that he wanted to stop at Le Quesnoy to show her his grandmother's house and the nearby farm of his great-uncle where he had spent some of his childhood holidays. The memory of his reaction to the sight of the family farm remained with her till the end of her life.

> The expression on your face when we arrived at your great-uncle's farm remains unforgettable. You were upset. In the voice of a betrayed child you told me how you had dreamed of owning the farm. Your mother ought to have inherited it. You seemed inconsolable at not having been a farmer there and nowhere else. For a few seconds I knew you as a child; so vulnerable, so sensitive … heartbroken by the hypocrisy of adults, their lies, sown with an anguish that had never left you in peace since.[12]

But there were moments of happiness too, and it is from this period that his lifelong love of rural France dates. As

well as visits to grandparents, there were also seaside holidays; aged seven, he began an enduring love affair with the sea, and had his first holiday adventures with a bucket and spade on the beaches of Saint-Cast, a small port near Saint-Malo, ‘where, to his happiness, they returned in following years’.[13]

For two and a half months each year, Bernard lived a different life to the one overlooking the grey courtyard of 29 Rue des Batignolles. Photographs of the time show the two brothers in matching berets living a Gallic Arthur Ransome existence while their mother sits watching them from the shade of a beach tent characteristic of the area. Pegged into the sand at each corner, with one side transformed into a canopy supported by two poles, these little canvas shelters have a medieval jauntiness to them and are still very much in evidence on the beaches of Brittany today. It is a measure of how much this period of his childhood meant to Buffet that over the course of his long career he painted and drew hundreds of these tents as he tried repeatedly to recapture on canvas and paper, in pencil, in ink and in oils, a childhood idyll that had disappeared too early.

Bernard and his brother were on the sands of Saint-Cast in 1939 when war broke out. They were living on the first floor of a house belonging to a fisherman by the name of LeClerc. Fearing German bombardment of Paris, their mother decided that it was safer for her sons to enrol at the lycée at Dinan, a few kilometres inland. And so for the first year of the war, the young Buffet actually saw his life improve. It was almost as if his holiday had been extended by a year; freed from the oppressively devout education dispensed by the Jesuits on the Rue de Madrid in Paris, the secular instruction of the lycée must have seemed a relief.

It was also at this time that he began to develop an interest in food. Living under the same roof as a fisherman, he enjoyed superb seafood, and as well as bodily

nourishment, this Breton way of life was a ‘source of invaluable enrichment for the future painter. Lobster pots, large fillets of fish in shades of blue and brown, baskets full of glistening flat and long fish filled his memory with sufficiently numerous images for a lifetime of painting.’[14] All manner of marine life would come to feature strongly in his work. Just a couple of years after that prolonged sojourn in Brittany, he would produce his first oil paintings, among them still lifes of an accomplished precocity that would take as their subjects those opalescent fish piled atop each other, lobster and crabs filling his canvas with their subtle variations of brickish red. In those early paintings there is an almost Lucullan, gourmandising extravagance: a characteristic diametrically opposite to the style that would make his name and his fortune. These works would come from a place that was darker both literally and figuratively than the bright, joyful, sand-duned shores of pre-war Brittany.