

## Portrait in Red: A Paris Obsession

**L. John Harris**

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In his memoir *Portrait in Red*, L. John Harris pursues multiple avenues (and delightful detours) in an attempt to solve an art mystery in Paris.

Harris, who attended art school at Berkeley in the 1960s, arrived in Paris on magazine assignment, having been asked to assess the croque-monsieur. On his first day there, he stumbled upon a discarded painting of a girl with a red head covering. Recognizing the artist's skill, he took the portrait home. This painting, dated January 12, 1935, but not signed, presented several mysteries: about the girl, about the artist, and regarding whether the painting was even finished.

This account of Harris's search is digressive by design—both a record of his quest to satisfy his curiosity and a detailed account of his fixation on the painting. Humorous sketches of Harris's long-past art school “happenings” complement his quest, as do his ranging discussions of art, food, and literature, with the text making nimble shifts from topics like apple strudel to Gustav Klimt paintings.

After his initial queries failed to unlock the painting's provenance, Harris began staging events which were themselves a kind of performance art. He hosted an unveiling at his home in California—a formal “first viewing” suitable for a masterpiece. He created and disseminated “wanted” posters across Paris. Even the writing of this book became a part of the “happening.” Forays into numerology and references to Wikipedia, Facebook posts, and Pliny the Elder enliven the book further.

With photographs to illustrate its search, the memoir *Portrait in Red* is about how a stranger's trash became an inquisitive writer's treasure—a free-wheeling, fascinating dissertation on a found object with infinite worth.

SUZANNE KAMATA (November / December 2024)

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