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The mystery of a lost portrait—

The Lamont Gallery and its Rediscovered Diego Rivera

Lauren O’Neal and Olivia Knauss

A letter from Italy, which had been mailed in April 2014 and addressed to another department, did not immediately find its way to the Lamont Gallery. But the author was patient, and persistent. An email arrived at the gallery later that August: “I look forward to hearing from you...” wrote Giulia Biscontin, from the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia. The original letter requested the loan of the Diego Rivera painting, *Portrait of Irene Estrella*, from 1946. represent an essential contribution to our exhibition “that would focus on the painter Henri Rousseau and the aesthetic milieu that informed an understanding of his work.

Except, we did not have a Diego Rivera in gallery storage, at least to our knowledge. Phillips Exeter

Academy, our parent institution, *does* own a Diego Rivera portrait of alumnus Corliss Lamont, class of 1920, but surely that was not related in any way to Rousseau’s oeuvre. As a non-collecting gallery with what we fondly describe as an “inadvertent” collection, the Lamont Gallery had no full inventory of our holdings and no collections staff member who might have known anything about this mysterious portrait. “There must be a mistake, we thought.”

Something was set in motion, however. Did we—*could we*—have such a painting, a work that no one seemed to remember and that was not to be found anywhere on campus? Again, Ms. Biscontin was undeterred. She wrote once more, finally



Diego Rivera, *Irene Estrella*, 1946, Oil on wood panel, Collection Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy

reaching the gallery office. We began to poke and prod at some archival files, made cold calls, and pulled in interns, former staff members, and anyone else we could find who might be able to shed light on *Irene Estrella's* whereabouts.

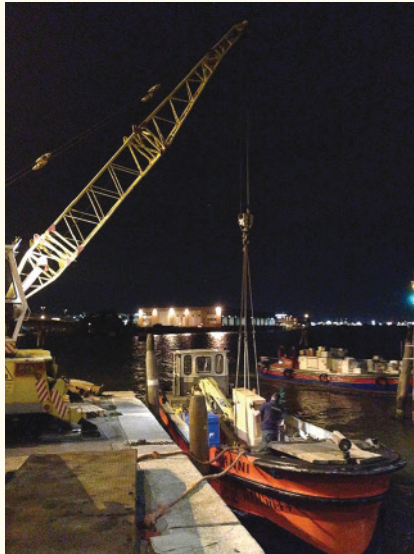
Finally: success! The Lamont Gallery *did* own Diego Rivera's *Portrait of Irene Estrella*, and it was safely in storage at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. How did it get there? Where had it been?

"We would be delighted to contribute to your exhibition" we finally replied to Ms. Biscontin. For the loan, the painting traveled by cargo plane, truck, and boat to be part of the Henri Rousseau exhibition at the Palazzo Ducale at the Piazza San Marco in the center of Venice. The last legs of the trip were especially exciting:

the painting, in a custom crate, was lifted by crane from a truck into a waiting boat. It was then transported through the infamous Venetian canals in the dark of night, to the Palazzo Ducale. The loading area was an actual dock—a mere 8' x 8' square of guard-rail free, floating wood at the Palazzo's back door.

After Venice, the painting then traveled to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris for another iteration of the Rousseau exhibition.

Irene Estrella traveled by cargo plane from Boston to Milan. On the last leg of the trip, it was loaded from a truck, *see photo at left*, by crane on to the boat to take it to the Palazzo Ducale loading dock in the Piazza San Marco, Venice.



Back at home, we remained curious: what was the painting's story? We mined archival files and online sources, and found a treasure trove hidden right beneath our noses. We discovered hand-written letters from Corliss Lamont, detailing a "top-notch" painting of a little girl surrounded by her toys and a sleepy house cat. She proudly holds a yellow block that strongly resembles a fresh stick of

butter. Captivated by the portrait, Lamont, writing from Mexico, scrawled a letter on Hotel Reforma letterhead to the Lamont Gallery director back in Exeter, N.H. The director responded with concern about the moral and political ramifications of accessioning a painting by an outright Communist. But Lamont was persuasive, and in 1954, *Portrait of Irene Estrella* arrived at Phillips Exeter Academy.



Irene Estrella on view in "Henri Rousseau: Il Candore Arcaico" at the Palazzo Ducale, Venice.

A TOP-NOTCH TIMELINE:

In order to make sense of the correspondence, the loan agreements, and miscellaneous paperwork, we designed a timeline to make sense of Irene's global whereabouts:

In **1946**, Diego Rivera paints *Irene Estrella*.

Summer of 1954: Corliss Lamont's passport is recinded as a result of his testimony in the McCarthy Trials and he cancels his research trip to the Soviet Union. He instead goes to Mexico and interviews Communist artist Diego Rivera. The two men strike up a friendship and Rivera asks to paint Corliss Lamont's portrait.

July 17, 1954: Corliss Lamont writes to Lamont Gallery Director Glen Krauss about his desire to purchase a "top-notch" portrait. Lamont recounts, "Rivera told me personally a few days ago that this is one of his best works."

October 5, 1954: After much deliberation with school leaders, Glen Krauss agrees that the school will accept the painting, despite Rivera's readmission into the Communist Party.

Christmas 1954: The painting arrives and is displayed in the gallery.

1954-1979: The painting hangs in various locations on campus, including faculty apartments.

July 1979: The Boston MFA organizes a temporary loan so that the painting can be part of the Detroit Museum of Art's 1979 traveling exhibition, "Diego Rivera: A Retrospective," organized in honor of Rivera's 100th birthday. From 1985 to 1987, *Irene Estrella* travels the globe with the exhibition (Boston-Philadelphia-Mexico City-Madrid-Berlin-London-Boston).

1998: Concerned with storage and conservation issues, the former gallery director considers selling *Irene Estrella* through an auction house, but there is not enough demand for Latin American art in at that time. *Irene Estrella* remains in the collection, although still rests in the bellows of the Boston MFA to honor the loan agreement from 1979.

2014: Ms. Biscontin begins her inquiries about Irene Estrella for the traveling Rousseau retrospective, and our adventures begin!



Lamont Gallery staff examining the condition of Irene Estrella before installation.

As the narrative unfolded, we made more discoveries. An old article in *Exonian*, the student newspaper, celebrated the gift of *Irene* to the school. We came across large-scale negatives of the painting hanging in the original gallery, next to a monumental Christmas tree, presumably cut from the woods that lie on the edge of

the campus. Gallery receipts revealed that for a mere \$8 per year, academy families could “rent” the painting for their living spaces on campus or their dormitory common rooms.

While on view in dormitories and campus buildings, *Irene Estrella* slipped into family photos and

spontaneous snapshots of school life. It remained a vivid memory and prized possession. Former and current employees talked about the painting with great affection, as though it were a family member, and not an assemblage of stretcher bars, canvas, gesso and pigments. We tracked down some of the people who interacted with *Irene Estrella*, and interviewed them in front of the painting when it was on view in the Lamont Gallery. We soon discovered how deep these emotional ties ran.

Two stories stand out the most. The first comes from a retired math teacher that had the painting in his faculty apartment shortly before it went on loan to the Boston MFA in 1979. He told us how his daughter was about the age of *Irene* when the painting hung in his apartment. The family had a cat just like the one in the Rivera painting. The teacher enjoyed the painting’s mathematical potential, and described how the technicolor set of blocks depicted in the painting could be assembled to form a perfect square. When he teacher accepted a job as a headmaster of another school, the students in the dormitory tried to pool their money to buy this one-of-a-kind Diego Rivera painting as a going away present. While the students’ efforts

were unsuccessful, the heartfelt gesture itself seemed like the best departing gift.

The second comes from a dear friend of the gallery. Mary Frances Dagostino, who while working for the Lamont Gallery in her early 20s, had vivid memories of the painting when she first saw it hanging in the gallery in 1954. When she would turn off all the lights at the end of the day, she would look at the painting and think that the little girl’s bows were horns. Needless to say, she did not dawdle as she was closing each day! It was with great joy when Dagostino was on campus when *Irene* returned for several gallery programs, and she greeted the painting like the return of a long-lost friend.

To celebrate the painting’s ‘rediscovery’ and its journey over the past few decades, and to commemorate the impact the painting had on many people who encountered it along the way, we decided to bring *Irene Estrella* back to the Lamont Gallery to share it with the wider community. The gallery serves both campus audience members as well as a sizable regional audience. It would be the first time *Irene* had been on campus in 36 years. We

were particularly struck by how the painting could generate opportunities for conversation and storytelling. We hosted pop-up exhibitions, lunchtime lectures, and numerous tours. Relatives of Corliss Lamont came to visit. People who had seen the painting on view in other cities years and years beforehand called on *Irene*. Everyone was delighted to see the painting in gallery. Each visitor's insight contributed to our understanding of the painting's history.

It's one thing to learn about a painting's facts: when it was painted, who painted it, and the context of its creation. It's an entirely different experience to learn about a history that has not been printed—a history told in ephemera and shared memories, one localized to New Hampshire, but also connected to the wider world. This “top-notch” story, abbreviated here, has reaffirmed for us the power of the arts: *Irene* provoked exchange, dialogue, and reflection. It brought old friends and new into its orbit.

The Lamont Gallery has since reloaned *Irene Estrella* to the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, where it is on display in the Art of the Americas wing. However, some aspects of the story are still

a mystery: Who is the little girl in the portrait that Diego Rivera painted so long ago? Why did he paint her? Where was the painting made? Each time we revisit the painting, something new is revealed. Perhaps someone reading this story will contribute additional insight into this magical painting, and *Irene Estrella's* adventures will continue...

The Lamont Gallery at Phillips Exeter Academy showcases dynamic exhibitions throughout the year, and our programs are free and open to the public. For more information, please visit www.exeter.edu/lamontgallery.

LAUREN O'NEAL is the director and curator of the Lamont Gallery. Previously she taught and ran arts & cultural programs at institutions such as Boston University, the Massachusetts College of Art + Design, and the Somerville Arts Council. She is a doctoral researcher at the Kuvataideakatemia at the University of the Arts Helsinki.

OLIVIA KNAUSS is currently the curator in residence at Buffalo Center for Arts and Technology. Previously, Knauss served as the former Lamont Gallery education and collections intern, and also worked at the Brooks Museum and Tops Gallery. Knauss is on her way to graduate school in museum studies.