Chapter 44 – Portrait of a Lion Hunter



Édouard Manet, undated, by Léon Augustin Lhermitte (1844-1925)

One afternoon, Eugène is at his easel, sketching a lion for a painting he will call *Le réveil du lion,* when through the window he catches sight of Manet limping towards his recently renovated studio-workshop. There is a knock at the door.

"Your housekeeper told me you might be here," says Manet, glancing around the workshop with interest. It has been a few years since he was last here, and he notices an astonishing number of his own paintings covering the walls – every one of them beautifully framed.

"So, this is your new studio! Not bad. You have good light."

"Yes, I suppose it's not bad," says Eugène, a little subdued. "It's also where I work on my inventions."

He tries to steer Manet away from the picture he is working on, but Manet, stepping painfully, makes his way to the easel and examines Eugène's attempt. "You permit me?" Without waiting for an answer, he picks up the charcoal and adds a few strokes to the drawing, then steps back and wipes his hands on his handkerchief.

"Thank you," says Eugène.

He wonders why Manet is here. In all the years they have known each other, this is only the second time he has dropped in like this.

"I've come to ask whether you would sit for me," says Manet.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I would like to paint your portrait."

"Who? Me?"

"Yes. As a lion hunter. With your lion."

Eugène is stunned and delighted.

On the appointed day, he arrives at Manet's studio looking impeccable in his best hunting clothes, with his Tyrolean hat, his gun and his lion.

Manet calls his housekeeper to bring up some cushions, which they pile on the floor and drape with the lion skin, Manet grunting with the effort of bending over.

The lumpy result is unsatisfactory, Eugène thinks uneasily. The lion looks as if it has died and lain in the sun too long and is about to explode. He tries to rearrange the cushions, but Manet is impatient.

"Leave it. We can fiddle with it later," he says gruffly. "Maybe we don't need the lion."

Eugène strikes various intrepid poses. Manet looks grumpy, as if he may already regret having suggested this. Every so often he makes an excruciating face and sucks in his breath sharply through clenched teeth. His leg seems very painful.

Eugène takes up a firing position, standing in profile. "How's this?"

"No."

He gets down on his stomach and takes up a different firing position. "What about this?"

"No."

Next, he crouches behind a potted fern. "Like this? We pretend this is the forest."

"I do the trees at the end," says Manet. "Today I'm just making studies."

No matter what Eugène suggests, Manet is dissatisfied. Finally, Manet poses him kneeling on one knee, the gun held at an unlikely angle, his finger on the trigger and his eyes looking at nothing in particular.

It is an uncomfortable and unnatural pose for a hunter.

"Shouldn't I be standing over the lion, or aiming at something?" Eugène complains.

Manet grunts.

"Like this?" Eugène tentatively raises the gun to his shoulder and cocks his head to peer down the sights.

"No! Stop! *Please*. Don't move. Just relax and do exactly as I tell you. Now, finger on the trigger."

Three hours later, Eugène, still a prisoner of the awkward pose, strains to look as proud and dignified as he can while Manet scribbles one sketch after another. He fixes his gaze on a distant horizon, as if watching for some imaginary danger. One leg has gone to sleep, and his gouty toe is sending shooting pains up his calf. The gun feels all wrong in his hands, its centre of gravity off.

His thoughts drift to the long nights in Algeria, cramped for hours in his hide with the rain dripping down his back. This is worse.

At long last, the session ends, for Manet is evidently in agony too.

"We're done for today," he says. "Can you come back tomorrow?"

"Shall I take the lion?"

"No. Leave it for now. I haven't decided about the lion."

The next day, Manet is chattier. "Tell me about your travels," he says, when Eugène is back in position. And so Eugène passes the time telling him about Algeria. He describes the scenes as though they were paintings, hoping that Manet can see them as he does.

"In the desert, the sand is the colour of a lion's back, and the sky is so blue it hurts the eyes. And then, far off, a little smudge appears on the horizon. A brownish smudge. The camels smell it first – they groan and fold their legs and turn their backs to it. Then the light

goes strange, yellow. Like old brass. The wind arrives, hot as an oven door, and the sirocco is upon you." He lowers his voice. "In a quarter of an hour, the sun is a pale disc. The sand is in your teeth, your eyes, your pockets. And the sky and the desert become exactly the same colour – a sort of yellowish grey – so that you can no longer tell where one ends and the other begins."

He pauses for effect, then becomes practical. "So, if you ever paint it, you must mix the sky and the sand from the same pot. Then, with a ruler, you draw a perfectly straight line where the horizon ought to be." He nods gravely. "And then you sort of rub it out."

Manet's charcoal stops. For a long moment he looks at Eugène over the top of his drawing board.

"Do you know," he says, "that is the most modern picture anyone has ever described to me."

Eugène beams, trying to digest what Manet has said. It sounds as if it might be a compliment.

"I longed to see the world too, when I was young," says Manet, who for once seems relaxed, almost cheerful. "Did you know I was in the navy for a while? I was just a boy. My parents, seeing that I was so desperate to travel, said to me, 'Well, in that case, you must join the navy and become an officer.'" He chuckles. "Can you imagine me as an officer!"

"Where did you go?"

"Not far, really. I sailed to Rio on a training ship – that was the extent of my adventures. And I failed the entrance examination for the naval school." Manet shakes his head and smiles ruefully. "Twice. So I had to come home.

"But a funny thing happened on board. I made a reputation for myself drawing caricatures. All the officers and instructors wanted one. Even the captain asked me for one, to give to his family." He casts his painter's eye over Eugène. "So, as far as travel and adventure goes, that was that. But I have no regrets. My world is Paris." He grins. "One mustn't always listen to one's parents."

"Exactly," says Eugène. "I very nearly became an apothecary."

"Shall I come tomorrow?" he asks when the session ends.

"No. You needn't come back. I have all the drawings I need," says Manet. "We might do another session later."

He reaches for a towel to wipe the charcoal from his hands, and looks up to find Eugène examining one of the sketches on the easel. It shows a scruffy man with thinning hair, a sagging face, a turkey neck and scraggly whiskers. Eugène has trouble recognizing it as himself, especially since he made a point of going to the barber for this sitting.

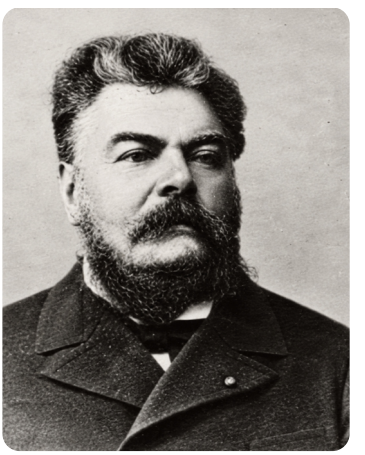
He points to the sketch. "Is that *me*? That doesn't look like me."

He removes his hat and runs his hand through his thick hair. Manet limps to the easel and whisks the sketches away.

"Get away!" he growls. "You're not supposed to see the work until it's done."

Then, seeing Eugène's stricken look, he softens. "I'm sorry I shouted. I'm very tired. My leg…"





RIGHT: PERTUISET CIRCA FROM DIRECTORY OF MUSICIANS AND ARTISTS, LEFT: SKETCH OF PERTUISET BY MANET 1880. *Art critic and publisher of the annual Salon Directory, Henri Fouquier, later commented in retrospect (in the 'XIX siècle, 31 mai 1888) that Manet had betrayed a friend when he painted the unflattering portrait of Monsieur Pertuiset the Lion Hunter.*

As Eugène heads out, Manet calls after him, "You can take your lion."

That night, in his bedroom, a perplexed Eugène holds up a mirror and examines himself from every angle. His hair, admittedly, is thinning a little, the hairline receding, yet it bears no resemblance to the meagre strands on a smooth pate that Manet has drawn. Lifting his head, he studies his square chin and jaw. Surely Manet's doughy sketches, with the sagging jowls, chubby cheeks and greasy hair, bear little resemblance to him.

Is this really how Manet sees me? he wonders.

❖

In the weeks that follow, Manet works on the lion hunter.

It gives him no joy. His leg is a torment. Some days he can stand at the easel for only an hour before the pain drives him back to his chair, and he sits glaring at the canvas as if it were to blame.

Twenty years. Twenty years of jeers and refusals, of pictures hung over doorways, of critics who could not tell a masterpiece from a bunch of asparagus. And now, at the end of it all, his most loyal patron – the man who buys his pictures when no one else will, and frames every one of them in gold – is a lion hunter who could not tell a Velázquez from a shop sign.

It is almost funny. It is a joke, really.

So he paints the joke. The cheeks redder than they are. The whiskers wilder. The hat a shade too round. The lion, which he has never seen and has no wish to see, he drags behind a tree and leaves there.

And yet. There is something about the man. Pertuiset has been mocked by *Punch*, laughed at by Jules Verne and swindled across half of South America, and still he comes up the stairs whistling, his pockets full of new schemes. He never gives up. He is Don Quixote with a double-barrelled gun.

If he can prevail, thinks Manet, *then so can I.*

He will send the lion hunter to the Salon. Alongside his portrait of Rochefort, the old Communard glaring out of the canvas, he will give the jury one picture to anger them and one to make them laugh,

and let them try to decide what to make of him. And all Paris will come to see the famous lion hunter.

He picks up his brush and makes the gun a little longer.

The jury will hang it high, of course. They always do – up near the ceiling, above the doorways, where no one can see it properly, while the best places at eye level go to the medal winners and their pretty nymphs.

Very well. He tilts the barrels a fraction lower, so that from up there, whoever stands beneath the picture and looks up will find himself staring down the muzzle of the lion hunter's gun.

Let the gentlemen of the Académie look up at that.



Portrait de Monsieur Pertuiset le Chasseur de Lions by E. Manet, 1881

Chapter 45 – The Salon



Journal La Caricature by Robida caption reads: 'Manet's portrait of Monsieur Pertuiset after shooting a bedspread'

When Eugène is finally summoned to see the picture, he is astonished at the sheer size of the canvas, propped on two easels and covered with a sheet. But when Manet pulls back the sheet, his excitement turns to disbelief and dismay. For several moments, he is at a complete loss for words.

Before him is a life-sized caricature of himself: rounded shoulders, a face the colour of a tomato, an unruly moustache. The thought crosses his mind: *I look like a grocer shooting garden rodents.* The lion is in the background – a sad, yellow, lumpish thing, half hidden, slung around the foot of a tree.

He is even more appalled to learn that Manet intends to submit the picture to the Salon, for all the world to see.

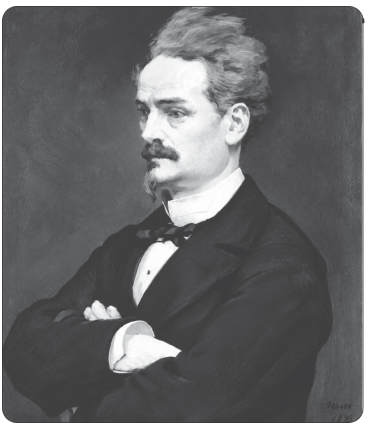
"No! Please don't!" he pleads. "You have plenty of other paintings. Much better ones. I heard you were going to submit the portrait of Rochefort. You should! It is so much better."

Eugène does not like Rochefort, who is a cynical, unpleasant man. He simply wants to prevent this huge, horrible picture of himself from being exposed to the world.

"I intend to submit Rochefort as well."

"No! Not both!" Eugène protests, for this makes matters even worse. Beside Rochefort's small, dignified portrait, the lion hunter will look all the more boorish.

"Rochefort will make them angry," says Manet. "You will make them laugh. Between the two, they will not know what to make of me." He shrugs. "And everyone wants to see the lion hunter. I don't understand your objections."



Henri de Rochefort by E. Manet, 1881

Eugène makes no pretence of being an art critic, and he does not use elaborate jargon like Bernard's friends. He simply knows what he likes and what he doesn't. And everything about this painting tells him it is the most unserious picture Manet has ever made.

He tries to put it politely, but words fail to hide his dismay. "With all respect, *cher Maître,* my objection is that I cannot imagine what you were thinking. It is an awfully silly picture. It has nothing of the air and atmosphere of Algeria, and I look ridiculous. The expression. The scarlet cheeks. That is not me. Why would you put me in such a pose? Who am I looking at? Why do I point my gun like that? And that is *not* how I wear my hat – like a round bowler, without the proper crease in the crown."

"Why, that is exactly how you wear your hat," says Manet.

For once, Eugène does not mince his words. "No! And as for that poor creature – do you call that a lion? You once told me you had no idea what a lion looks like, having never seen one. You didn't even try. Is that why you have conveniently strangled it behind a tree? It is undignified, and it is a horrible…" He struggles for the words. "I mean to say, it is an odd *composition.* And besides… besides, I don't look anything like that."

He takes his wallet from his breast pocket, pulls out his *carte de visite* with the photograph by Disdéri, and holds it up in front of Manet's face. "'*This* is what I look like. Not *that!*" he says, pointing an accusing finger at the painting.

Manet is taken aback. Never could he have imagined that Eugène would speak to him like this. He glances from the photograph to the painting and then at Eugène himself.

"I see the resemblance," he says at last, coolly. But he has the grace to blush a little.

As the winter goes on, Eugène feels less and less inclined to join Manet and Rochefort and the others at the five o'clock gatherings in the studio on the rue d'Amsterdam. They happen less often now in any case, since the master spends weeks at a time taking water cures for his leg.

"Where's good old Pertuiset?" some ask, when they begin to notice his absence.

Eugène keeps busy and tries not to think about the painting. He concentrates on his writing, his pharmaceutical inventions and the design of a handsome revolver. He has also bought himself a very good camera and taken up photography.

For Madame Bouton's birthday, he takes her to the best oculist in Paris and has her fitted with a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, which suit her admirably. She has never seen the world in such glorious detail, she tells him, and she enjoys the theatre far more now that she can see the actors' faces.

After months of gloom, crocuses and daffodils herald the arrival of spring. In Montmartre, the air smells of earth and melting snow, roasting coffee and warm bread. The café terraces come back to life, and the city fills with flower shows, street fairs and markets.

But as the days grow longer, Eugène grows more and more apprehensive, and his heart sinks when posters for the Salon appear on the kiosks. He hopes that Manet will change his mind. Manet does not change his mind.

On the opening day, Eugène does not leave the house. He spends the morning in his workshop with a gun barrel clamped in the vice and a file in his hand.

Late in the afternoon, Madame Bouton arrives at the Salon. She adjusts her new spectacles and studies the picture for a long time.

"There was a crowd in front of it the whole time I was there," she later tells Eugène. "One gentleman said, 'So that's the famous lion hunter. It's not how I imagined him.' His friend said, 'Nor I. Not at all.' And then a little man with a cane said he'd seen your photograph – the one by Disdéri – and you don't look like that."

Eugène says nothing. Then she slips her arm through his.

"How often have Théo and I had that man to dinner at my own table," she says. "We have listened to his jokes, laughed with him, made him welcome in our home." She shakes her head. "Surely the man is not well. I never thought he would make a fool of a friend."



Eugène Pertuiset by Disdéri

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Chapter 44 – Portrait of a Lion Hunter

p. 318 – Léon Augustin Lhermitte, *Édouard Manet*, undated. Source photographer: Giraudon, Private collection. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

p. 322 (left) – Édouard Manet, *Étude pour la tête du portrait de Pertuiset* (Study for the head of the portrait of Pertuiset), 1881. Pen and ink on paper, 15.4 x 12 cm. Private collection, Netherlands. Reproduced from Denis Rouart and Daniel Wildenstein, *Édouard Manet: catalogue raisonné*, vol. II, *Pastels, aquarelles et dessins* (Lausanne and Paris: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1975), no. 487, ill. p. 175. Digitized by the Wildenstein Plattner Institute: https://archive.org/details/c.-r-edouard-manet-tome-ii-wildenstein-institute. Licensed under CC BY-ND 4.0.

p. 322 (right) – Eugène Pertuiset, 1889, photograph from Eugène Pertuiset. Illustration from *Annuaire des artistes et de l'enseignement dramatique et musical: facture instrumentale*, 2e édition (Paris: E. Risacher, 167 rue Montmartre, 1899), p. XXXV archived in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) in Paris, and digitized on its free library site, Gallica. Public domain.

p. 322 – Édouard Manet, *Monsieur Pertuiset, le chasseur de lions*, 1881. Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP). Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

Chapter 45 – The Salon

p. 323 – Albert Robida, "Manet's portrait of Monsieur Pertuiset after shooting a bedspread," *La Caricature*, 1881. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

p. 324 – Édouard Manet, *Henri Rochefort*, 1881. Hamburger Kunsthalle. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

p. 326 – André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *Eugène Pertuiset's carte de visite*. between 1865 and 1867. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.