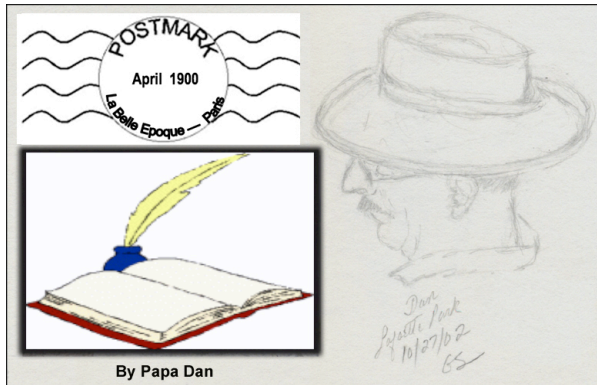


## ***La Belle Epoque: Just a Moment in Time***

By Dan Sapone



**A time of optimism, regional peace, economic prosperity, the apex of social order, and technological, scientific, and cultural innovation. I wonder what it felt like to be there, then?**

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On a slow-moving Tuesday afternoon in Carmel, California, Liam found himself wandering along Ocean Avenue staring into the front windows of the dozens of art galleries that brightened this otherwise foggy neighborhood. What was he doing there? The factual answer was that the company he worked for had sent its senior staff for a week-long conference by the sea to re-think some of its marketing strategies.

Apparently, a secondary plan was to force the group together in an unfamiliar setting to promote some personal team building. The boss wasn't satisfied with the way the group was functioning together and he figured that a week by the ocean in a relaxed setting with some good food and wine might loosen them up a bit. The schedule called for an agenda that sat them down in a conference room over breakfast and lunch to go through a list of issues. They had the rest of the day off. The hope was that they might spend the afternoons getting to know each other.

It didn't sound like a bad plan, but the underlying reason the group didn't function well together was that, at every opportunity, their conversations descended into strong and differing opinions about national news and the politics of the day. For this little company, like so many others with an international clientele, these factors had a negative effect on their business. As a result, they had developed an unhealthy dislike for one another. So, Liam found a way to escape and wander downtown to get away from the ... uh ... "heat."

Turning the corner onto Dolores Avenue, Liam found himself staring at a group of paintings in the window of one of the many neighborhood galleries. Two particular paintings had captured his attention the day before; so he returned to take a closer look. Each one was a street scene in the rain. People carrying umbrellas wound their way among horse-drawn carriages under street lamps lit early in the afternoon because of the drizzly darkness. Another painting featured a similar rain-soaked street, only the traffic consisted of turn-of-the-century automobiles. He was struck by how well the impressionist had rendered the effect of the rain on everything in the scene using oil on canvas. He found himself trying to imagine what it would have been like to walk that street at the turn of the twentieth century. A few moments later he found himself inside looking at a room full of similar images by the same artist. As a man approached him from a room in the back, Liam caught his eye and asked, "I'd love to know how he does that?"

"Sir?"

“The rain. How does he do it? I feel like I’m walking on that street and the rain is all around me. I can hear it sloshing in the street. I can almost feel the water.”

“You are very kind. I have been trying to master ‘water’ for years. I think I’ve finally gotten the hang of it. Paris around the turn of the twentieth century is my favorite time and place and she seems to look her best in the rain, don’t you think?”

“Oh, MY. YOU are the artist? An honor to meet you.” He offers his hand. “My name is Liam.”

“The pleasure is mine. My name is Edouard Cortes. [Shakes his hand.] And, yes, these are my work. If I’m not mistaken, you were in here yesterday. I appreciate your comments. And your question about the water — it turns out you can’t really paint water. Either you try to imitate how it distorts things you see through it or you try to capture things reflected in it. Otherwise, water is pretty much invisible.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, I can see that. I hadn’t really appreciated that before. I guess I hadn’t noticed. I promise not to tell anyone your secret.”

“Oh, it’s not much of a secret; but I appreciate a person willing to keep some things to themselves. You’d be amazed the kinds of things people babble about when they come in here.”

“Well, I am in a business that tries to keep some of its ideas private, ideas of a proprietary nature, if you will, so it’s not new for me.”

With a grin, “And your business is ...?”

A similar grin, “Uh ... private.”

And a wider grin, “Of course.”

“Mr. Cortes, I don’t want to intrude on your time; but I’d love to know what has attracted you to Paris at the dawn of the twentieth century. What is special about that time and place?”

“I don’t mind at all. It is one of my favorite topics.”

## **La Belle Epoque**

“La Belle Epoque, in English, “The Beautiful Era,” is recognized in Western history as the period from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. It was a period identified by its optimism, regional peace, economic prosperity, the apex of social order, and technological, scientific, and cultural innovation throughout Europe and America. At its peak during the first decade of the Twentieth Century, the arts flourished, especially in Paris, where many masterpieces of literature, music, theater, and visual art gained recognition. I am quick to point out, however, that “La Belle Epoque” was named in retrospect, when held in sharp contrast to the forces that led to the horrors of World War I. Nobody thought of it that way during that golden age. For a pair of generations, it was merely ‘the way we are’ and it was unconsciously expected to continue indefinitely.”

Edouard pointed at two of his paintings, Café de la Paix and le Théâtre — “I hope you can see those features in the faces of the people in my paintings and feel it as the rain washes the face and streets of Paris.”



[Click to view paintings by Edouard Cortes, esp. *Café de la Paix, le Teatré, Saint Denis*.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=paintings+by+edouard+cortes&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiIssSRIZXdAhVE54MKHXPDC7IQsAR6BAgDEAE&biw=1281&bih=919>

With some effort, Liam resisted the impulse to express his distaste for the current “epoque” here in the twenty-first century and compare it to the artist’s description of La Belle Epoque, not wanting to spoil the mood. Instead, “Sir, here I can see the feelings you have described in the faces of ladies walking across the intersection in their fashionable clothes, in the posture of people going about their business, and the dignified gentlemen walking toward us here. They are clearly living in a time and place that is quite unlike my own. My own visits to Paris did not do her justice, and I believe I am seeing Paris, here, in a way I have not seen her before.”

The artist did not look away from the painting as he went on, “Twilight has always seemed to me to be the best time for Paris to show her ‘Belle Visage’ during this time in her history, whether during the Winter snows of La Madeleine or the Spring rain on Des Champs Elysées.” The orange glow from the cafés and the moving splashes of sheen in the puddles of rain on the street are not fabrications, sir; and I hope you can see them.”

Liam examines them a while. “I cannot help but wonder, Mister Cortes, how an artist like yourself, living here and now, can capture Paris of La Belle Epoque, more than one hundred years ago, with such confidence. I must add it to the list of things I don’t understand. I guess I just have to accept it as a wonder.”

The artist paused a long moment to notice the emotion in the face of his guest and, tilting his head to one side as if to get a clearer view, seemed to make a decision about him. Finally, “Sir, I have been working on another, larger piece in my private studio,” pointing to a door at the back of the gallery. “I wonder if you might be interested in taking a look. Since it has some rather unusual features, of a proprietary nature, as you say, perhaps I could show it to you.”

### **A Work in Progress — More Than Meets the Eye**

Cortes escorted Liam to the back wall of the gallery. With a jangle of keys, he unlocked a door nearly hidden behind some shelves, gestured for him to enter, and closed the door behind them. The dark room came to life when the artist flipped a wall switch that lit a pair of spotlights embedded in the ceiling. The two beams illuminated a single painting that dominated the room. It was about six feet high, half again as wide, supported by a solid wood frame propped against the wall. The artist struck a pose with a grand sweeping gesture presenting a street scene in the rain. “It’s not quite finished, but I think you can get the idea — La Belle Epoque: Paris in 1900 in the rain. I haven’t settled on a name for it, but it depicts Porte Saint Denis.

Liam couldn’t quite see what was ‘unfinished’ about it, and it gave him the distinct feeling that the water on the street in the foreground was likely to splash onto the studio floor.

The imagery reminded him of the impressionism he was so fond of from the early twentieth century, not at all typical of the contemporary works he had seen elsewhere in other galleries on this street from his own decade. The street was littered with papers, and shiny blobs of water reflected the puddles the rain had deposited on the uneven streets. Horses pulled wagons —



from tiny one-person carts to larger one-horse coaches to heavy four-horse cargo wagons. Crossing the intersection in front of him was a varied collection of Parisians — wealthy ladies dressed in the latest fashions, a baker carrying a box of baguettes to his customers, and businessmen looking important in the substantial coats and prominent hats of the day. A woman was walking toward us escorting a child across the street passing a man huddling inside a thin cloth coat against a cold, wet day. The sidewalk was quite crowded, nearly everyone wore hats — some briskly hurrying to get out of the rain, others taking their time, perhaps enjoying this important Parisian neighborhood at the height of its prosperity and peace.

Liam felt privileged to be in the company of the artist and wanted very much to say something ‘well-informed’ and appropriately appreciative. “The light! I’d love to know how you are able to show me the light shining off all of these different surfaces.” Before the artist could interject with his artistic technicalities, he continued, “but, to tell the truth, your technique is not really something I can appreciate, and I wouldn’t ask you to reveal your secrets. I am more interested in the feelings I believe I see in the faces of these people. Are they aware that they are living in this great city at such a peaceful, prosperous time? Oh, and the glow from the cafés — I’m thinking of the lives that are happening inside behind those glowing windows.”

The artist seemed pleased with Liam’s assessment. “Well, sir, you’ve hit on an important idea. These people, rich and poor like, are living at a sweet time. The poor had reason to be optimistic about their future and the rich had good reason to feel self-satisfied and secure in their privileges. Most of them had no idea of the turmoil and upheaval that was going to surround them in just a few short years that would change their lives dramatically.”

“Wouldn’t it have been sweet to stand there among them, walk those streets, hear the sound of those horses, join them in those lively cafés? I’d have some questions — how does it feel to be there on the streets of Paris during that time of such calm and stability? Do they have any sense of what is to come in just a short time? Oh, my, the light you provide in this painting makes me feel like I could be there with them.”

### **A Secret**

Once again, the artist paused a long moment to examine the face of his guest and he seemed to confirm a judgement he had made about him. “Well, sir, I would like to invite you to do just that. There are “secrets” of a proprietary nature, as you say, that you must promise to keep to yourself. May I trust you to do that?”

“Well, yes, sir, you have my word — but I don’t know what I could possibly ...”

“Here, you will need to carry this,” and the artist handed him an umbrella, picked one up for himself, put his sketchbook in a plastic bag, and gestured toward the painting. “You must step over the wood frame; and be careful, the street may be slippery. You’ll have to trust me on this. Here ...” gesturing for Liam to follow him, the artist climbed over the wood frame and stepped onto the wet intersection in the foreground of the painting. Liam followed his lead and found himself standing in the crosswalk of Saint Denis. He could hear the clop of the horses strutting beside him and froze in his amazement. The artist took his arm and coaxed him across the street, over the curb, to the safety of the sidewalk. Before Liam could express his astonishment, Edouard asked him, “Do you speak any French?”

“Well, ... uh ... a little. I recall some from a year of college French, but ...”



“That should be sufficient, we won’t be here long. The most important thing is to observe the faces and body language of the people around you. I think you will see the answers there to some of your questions.”

It was all so much to take in. Liam noticed the flowers on the corner, the woman he remembered from the painting crossing the street, the baker with his box of baguettes, and a waiter staring at the passersby from inside the café on the corner. The sign in the window said “Ouvrir.” Edouard opened the door and they walked into a warm, orange-lit café with tables set for lunch. The waiter who had been watching from the window ushered them to a table looking out on the sidewalk. He greeted them, “Bienvenue, Messieurs,” and handed them menus.

“We should order something.” Liam opened his mouth to answer, but closed it again, not quite knowing what to say. The artist spoke to the waiter, “Soup a l’oignon, un sauvignon de Bourgogne, pour deux, s’il vous plait.” And to Liam, “a little French onion soup and a white burgundy, OK?”

“Sure. Uh ... “

“I know, it’s a bit much all at once. Just watch the faces and tell me what you see.”

Trying not to stare, Liam noticed two couples at the table beside them, as the waiter brought the wine and the soup. On the other side, a table with four well-dressed gentlemen who looked to be earnestly discussing business. Hats, scarves, and coats hanging on a rack beside each table. Liam and Edouard spent some time with their soup, before Edouard said, “Take your time. You wanted to know about these people. Study them. When you’ve finished your wine, we can talk about what you see.”

So, they ate their soup, drank the wine. Liam watched, thinking it over — another glass of Bourgogne. The couples came and went, replaced by two elderly ladies who had patisseries and tea. The businessmen lingered over cognac and seemed to have abandoned their business discussion and drifted to lighter topics.

Liam and Edouard spent a long afternoon watching, thinking it over, trying to take it all in. As the afternoon turned to twilight. Edouard took out his sketchbook and drew the lamppost outside the window. The rain had stopped. Finally, he paid the bill — “It’s time for us to go.” — and they walked out into the gathering dusk. “We need to find our way back and step back into our own time. But first, what did you learn?”

### **What Is There to Learn?**

“Well, from what I could make out of their conversations, here was no politics, no economics, no troubled commentary. Faces were serious at times but nothing made them frown. Nobody seemed surprised at what they saw around them. I saw faces of people enjoying each other, not a care in the world.”

“And the ‘proper’ gentlemen?”

“Confident. Sure of themselves. On top of their game.”

“That’s a lot to derive from four hours of eavesdropping.”





“That’s true; but I’m comparing it to what I’ve experienced of four hours of my own time. What I hear consistently is disappointment, shock that things could have drifted so far wrong, surprise at what passes for ‘normal’; violence in the news every day, worry about an uncertain future — and the tense expressions on faces who have grown accustomed to all of that. I didn’t hear that here, didn’t see that.”

“Is it possible that you were looking for that result? Did you simply fulfill an expectation?”

“Sure. That’s possible. What do you think?”

The artist thought about it a while. “Well, it’s certain that most did not expect the hard times that were approaching. What you’ve described is surely a list of the differences between their time and yours. That much is well documented. I had hoped that my paintings would convey those conditions.”

Liam: “Can we bring some of it back with us?”

Edouard: After some thought ... “Certainly not by merely stepping back out of my painting. You are the only one in this scene who could make such a difference — when you return.”

Returning to the rainy intersection, they stepped out of the painting, back into the studio. After standing silently for a moment, they exchanged pleasantries and thanks. Liam walked out of the gallery, giving the paintings a last glance and said “I hope to return.” He turned back to the corner of Dolores Avenue and was gone.

## **Returning on Friday**

Friday at 2:00 pm, his week-long conference finally concluded — and with ... well ... moderate success — Liam hurried back down Ocean Avenue, turned at Dolores, and entered the gallery hoping to see Edouard Cortes once more before returning home. Today, however, as he walked past the paintings of Café de la Paix and Le Théâtre just as they were on Wednesday, a younger, taller gentleman greeted Liam warmly. “Welcome. You are our first visitor since our remodeling project. It took longer to reopen than I had hoped; but we’re back now. Thanks for your patience.” He had a nametag reading “Alain Miller, Gallery Manager.”

“Sir, it is pleasure to be back again. I had the pleasure earlier in the week to meet Mr. Cortes,” pointing at his painting. “I have to return home today and I had hoped to say goodbye and wish him well. Is he here?”

“Well, Sir, we are indeed privileged to have two of Edouard Cortes’ originals here in our gallery. There are not many on the West Coast. I think I understand your feelings — spending time with his masterwork must surely give one the feeling of meeting him in person.”

“No, Mister Miler, I spoke to him here in your gallery and back there in his ... uh ...” Gesturing at the back wall, Liam was shocked to notice that the door in back wall of the room was not there where he remembered it.

The manager, with a grin — “Well, sir, I share your interest, surely; but Mr. Cortes has never been here in the U.S. He passed away in 1969 in Lagny-sur-Marne, in France, where he spent his entire life.”

For Liam, there were no words.

