

Art lover's guide to Proust

by **Jacoba Charles**

There are 300 references to paintings in Marcel Proust's seven-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time*, and Eric Karpeles knows them all.

"I don't think there's anything missing," Karpeles said about the amount of detail in his recently published book, *Paintings in Proust*. He was barefoot on the deck of his home in Bolinas, sipping coffee on a Monday morning. "I wanted to err on the side of having more rather than less."

The project began as simple curiosity, melding his loves of art and of the daunting French novel. As he re-read the series for

the fifth time, Karpeles began to slip scraps of paper between the pages at every reference to a painting.

"It's such a rich tapestry of ideas, images and philosophy. I have a lifetime of experience with this book, and there were references that I still couldn't come up with," said Karpeles, a sturdy man with an easy smile. "At some point, I realized, 'This is a book.'"

The result is a colorful and densely compact companion guide to Proust's work. Every page offers a passage from *In Search of Lost Time* that includes mention of a

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painting, as well as Karpeles' introduction to where you are in the plot. On the opposite page is a high-quality color reproduction of the piece.

On Page 156, for example, Karpeles describes the book's narrator in a drawing room full of people who don't share his admiration for an Elstir, certain fictional artist. Below this context is the translated passage from Proust.

'A masterpiece?' cried M. de Norpois with a surprised and reproachful air. 'It makes no pretence of even being a picture, it's merely a sketch.' (He was right.) 'If you label a clever little thing of that sort "masterpiece," what will you say about Hebert's Virgin or Dagnan-Bouveret?'

On the facing page are Hebert's gilt-edged, dark-eyed Madonna and infant. Flip forward to another introduction, another passage and a demure bowl of roses. Flip backward and see a luminous tangle of grapes, butterflies and geraniums. And so on.

Designed as a reference tool as well as a visual treat, a list of artists in the back includes minor references that the publisher opted not to print. There one can learn that only a single reference was made to Hebert in Proust's entire novel, whereas Sandro Botticelli was mentioned seven times—six of which are illustrated in Karpeles' book.

It's a spectacularly sweeping introduction to art history, as well as to Proust. Dip into it as an unseasoned reader and you get

a taste of the novel without the intimidation; dip into it as a scholar and even obscure details become vivid.

"It breaks the book down to digestible, readable portions," Karpeles said. "A 4,000 page novel is hugely intimidating to most people, and they won't approach it because it's too big or too daunting."

Though Karpeles speaks reluctantly about his accomplishments, compiling this book is just the latest in a lifetime of daunting undertakings.

As a child growing up on the fringes of New York City, he had an early facility with drawing and painting. His parents enrolled him in a program at the Art Student's League. From age eleven on, he spent his weekend mornings painting and his afternoons exploring the museums of Manhattan.

Despite his attraction to art, Karpeles described reading as his "salvation." At 17, a teacher introduced him to Proust—and he was immediately hooked. "I knew from the beginning that you could live in that world. And I guess that's what I was looking for: an alternative universe."

In college, Karpeles veered away from his familiar practice of art and pursued the life of a classical scholar. It seemed, to him, more challenging. He went to Haverford College and then to Oxford, where he studied ancient Greek for a year. But ultimately art drew him back.

"It was in London that I finally decided to be a painter," Karpeles said, smiling. "It was one painting. A Cezanne landscape. That was my moment."

From then on, he embraced painting as his life's work. A painting fellowship took him to France for two years in his early 20s,



Eric Karpeles of Bolinas is a Proust scholar and a painter. Photo by J. Charles.

where he lived in Cassis and Paris, and read Proust in French for the first time.

Karpeles returned to spend a restless half-decade in Manhattan before settling on a farm in the rural rolling hills of Pennsylvania in 1984. There he built a barn-like painting studio, where he worked for the next two decades.

All of Karpeles' canvases are large, but his accomplishments include two monumental room-sized works: the Sanctuary Project, designed to be a supportive space for people touched by AIDS, led the Rockefeller to commission a nondenominational Chapel of Hope and Remembrance. Both are meditative swashes of color that speak of galaxies, clouds or even the textures of pavement, lichen, skin.

To stand in front of one of Karpeles'

canvases in the austere Bolinas studio where he now works is to confront a wall of color and emotion—dense and yet also full of light. It can take him over a year to finish a single painting, and the process of time and thought is visible in each one's carefully balanced and refined chaos—an observation that makes Karpeles think of Proust.

"For him, art became a bulwark against the ravages of time," Karpeles said. "Paintings held time, and the world moved around them."

*Karpeles will give a talk on his book—accompanied by slides and an actor reading passages from *In Search of Lost Time*—at 7:30 p.m. at the Dance Palace. Contact Point Reyes Books 663.1542 for details.*