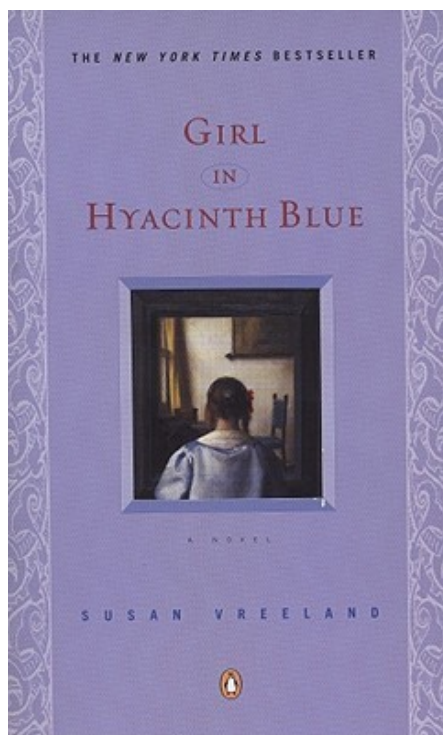




Girl in Hyacinth Blue

Susan Vreeland

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A professor invites a colleague from the art department to his home to view a painting he has kept secret for decades in Susan Vreeland's powerful historical novel, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. The professor swears it's a Vermeer -- but why exactly has he kept it hidden so long? The reasons unfold in a gripping sequence of stories that trace ownership of the work back to Amsterdam during World War II and still further to the moment of the painting's inception.

Girl in Hyacinth Blue Details

Date : Published October 1st 2000 by Penguin Books (first published 1999)

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Author : Susan Vreeland

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From Reader Review Girl in Hyacinth Blue for online ebook

Adriane Devries says

The Girl in Hyacinth Blue, by Susan Vreeland, was a well-written, thought provoking and inspiring book; but to tell you the truth, I probably would not have finished it if it weren't for the fact that I was in a book club that keeps me accountable. It's the perfect example of why I'm in this book club in the first place: to keep me reading things that challenge me a bit, rather than always the easy, thrilling Dan Brown or JK Rowling types.

I liked Girl in Hyacinth Blue, not only because it portrays the impact of a single piece of forgotten art in the lives of dramatically different people over several centuries; but also for its treatment of the figure in the painting itself: the "girl in hyacinth blue" was the daughter of the Dutch painter Vermeer, and she wondered what people would feel when they looked on her father's painting, reflecting to herself that "they will never know me." You can hear her struggling with the question of her worth as a woman, a mere daughter of a then-struggling artist who never himself had time to notice his daughter, except when he studied her academically for her portrait.

I feel affinity for this girl because the very element that drew admiration and other passionate feelings for the painting was her expression of deep longing. This longing is a recurring theme in my own art and writing, as it is in so much of the art that is already out there. My question, like hers, and like Vermeer's no doubt was, has always been, Does the world need another painting? Another novel? Another voice like mine? Might someone out there be moved by my outpouring of my own unfinished heart?

Vreeland's novel attempts to prove that life would be unlivable without the inspiration and beauty of art. And as not everyone appreciates even a Vermeer painting, its worth centuries later is undeniable; so also each work of art, each individual life like mine, has a purpose that will impact generations to come, even if "they will never know me."

Susan Vreeland says

This entry will be out of the ordinary. I wrote GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE, and somehow it appeared in the wrong place on Goodreads. I can't seem to remove it, so I might as well supply a review.

NEW YORK TIMES

December 19, 1999

Picture This: A novel of a haunting painting and its effect on a succession of owners over three centuries.

Girl in Hyacinth Blue, by Susan Vreeland

by Katy Emck

Susan Vreeland's second novel, "Girl in Hyacinth Blue," may be a book about a painting, but it is never content with surfaces. Tracing the influence of one extraordinary picture on a succession of human lives, it touches gently yet thoughtfully on such weighty topics as the immortality of a great artwork and the ways in which art can be used for various ends. In the course of her explorations, Vreeland covers a lot of time and space: "Girl in Hyacinth Blue" begins in present-day America and ends in the 17th century Netherlands, scrolling backward as each chapter accounts for the painting's role in the life of one of its owners.

Among other things, Vreeland has given us an art detective story, since the early chapters suggest that this marvelous painting--a portrait of a young girl whose face seems to be filled with dreams and longings--may be a lost Vermeer. When we first encounter it, the picture is hidden from view, its possession the dark secret

of a lonely mathematician whose father looted it from a Dutch Jewish family that he then sent to die in a concentration camp. Horrified by his father's crimes, he worships the painting with obsessional fervor, fearing that if anyone sees it, the secret of its provenance will come to light. But, as is the way with such things, he also feels compelled to show off his trophy.

The chapter that displays the mathematician's solitary, guilt-filled pleasure is followed by another that provides a lively view of the close-knit Jewish family from whom the painting was stolen--and particularly of the young daughter who identifies with its subject, a girl just about her own age. This sequence establishes the pattern for the book's structure: each chapter stands on its own, a marvel of economy, yet also builds on the knowledge the reader has already gained.

Vreeland is especially good at conveying the tensions that arise among her characters but go largely unspoken. She is also adept at capturing the differing sensibilities of various historical periods, working unobtrusively and successfully avoiding a contrived "period" feel. In the process, she provides her own nicely sketched gallery of portraits: a frivolous Frenchwoman marooned in a loveless marriage in the 19th-century Netherlands; an 18th-century farmer's wife hungering for beauty in the midst of the flat Dutch countryside; and an Enlightenment scientist who embarks on an affair with a superstitious serving girl. In all these episodes, the painting is pivotal, both in a practical and a spiritual sense. The aristocratic Frenchwoman hates all things Dutch except the girl in the painting because she recognizes in her a sense of hope that she herself has lost. The farmer's wife loves the same girl because she symbolizes a serene loveliness that is unattainable for people who labor in the fields. In the end, each woman is forced to sell the painting so that each, in her own very different way, can survive. But for each of them, the possession of "Girl in Hyacinth Blue" leads to profound changes.

This conflict of the spiritual and the practical comes to dominate the final chapters of the novel in which the exigencies of the painter's life are movingly brought to the fore. Like many of its predecessors, the penultimate chapter is filled with a sense of tenderness, of gratitude for the gift of life--a mood that doesn't cloy because it is accompanied by a clear evocation of the daily stresses of loving and living. But the crowning chapter is the final one, which introduces the girl in the picture and provides a glimpse of what is actually going on behind those dreamy eyes.

Throughout "Girl in Hyacinth Blue," Vreeland strikes a pleasant balance between the timeless world of the painting as a work of art and the finite worlds of its possessors and admirers--not to mention the world of its subject and its creator. Intelligent, searching and unusual, the novel is filled with luminous moments; like the painting it describes so well, it has a way of lingering in the reader's mind.

Katy Emck is a freelance reviewer based in London.

Deborah Ideiosepius says

A very nicely written series of stories revolving around the central theme of a painting.

If this rating lacks the warmth nay even ecstasy of some other reviews I saw before acquiring it, this is due to a couple of factors that I, the reader brought to it rather than any inherent insufficiency of the book itself:

The first thing that rather set me back was that it is *very much* individual stories. Not interconnected stories even and certainly not 'a novel' as represented. As a fast reader, I find story collections a bit of a trial because they are over so fast. In this story collection we trace the painting of The Girl In Hyacinth blue back through time. It is a nice touch that we go back to the beginning from the modern age instead of the other way, as most narratives would choose. It is also exquisitely researched, loved the historic detail and the artistically influenced scene descriptions.

We start as a modern day teacher shows his secret Vermeer to a fellow art teacher. He will not say where he got it (since he is shielding his dead father, a Nazi) but describes the history of Vermeer and the artistic qualities of the painting in great detail. The story was good, despite the fact that I didn't care for the characters and did not feel they resonated as real people. Still a good story.

We then go back to the Nazi era and the family who owned it. Also a good story, but it was a jump from the previous characters and while well written, I never really bonded to any of the people in it because it was too short for me to do so.

After that, we start jumping further and further back, I feel that the further the stories got from the modern day, the more detail and research went into them and the more I liked them, the last two are interconnected with the artist and his daughter, showing the origin of the painting from two different perspectives. Now, while I did, very much, enjoy these earlier stories I was acutely frustrated by the lack of dates. I could date 'modern day' and WWII at the beginning, I could date Vermeer at the end, all the middle was a blur. This was outright annoying, I don't know Dutch history anywhere near enough to know when floods happened, and the French conquered it? Maybe? Was that what the story of the twittering French chick was all about?

The lack of dates annoyed me. Several of the characters (while adequate vehicles for the story) were rudimentary and impossible to bond with. And short stories! Do not sell me short stories claiming they are a novel. It is false advertising.

Rachael says

I really enjoyed this book. I've owned it for seven or eight years now, and I reread it every six months or so. It's a beautifully written series of brief chapter-sized vignettes recounting the history of a Vermeer painting, as told (in reverse chronological order) by all the people who have possessed the painting. The final stor(ies) are told by the painting's model, Vermeer's daughter. Each chapter also deals with the decision of each character to give up the painting for various reasons.

Couple reading this with *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which is also about a Vermeer painting. It's an interesting pair.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

I like the way this author writes. This is one of those books where an object is the main character, rather than a person. In this case, the object is a (fictional) Vermeer painting of a girl sitting and looking out the window with her sewing in her lap.

There are eight interconnected stories that follow the painting back through history to its various owners and how they came to own or sell the painting. Eventually it works back to Vermeer's creation of the painting. My only complaint is that I wish some of the stories would have had more depth. A couple of them end just as you're getting attached to the characters and interested in what will happen next.

I especially liked the story *From the Personal Papers of Adriaan Kuypers*. Sad,(I cried at the end of it), but well told and a little more fleshed out than some of the others.

I think it says something for the author that by the end of the book I felt like I could actually see the painting

with all its colors and light play.

Hayes says

I liked this gentle story very much. We follow an imaginary painting back in time. We first see it hanging on the wall in a Math teacher's house. The teacher is enigmatic and strange, and his story reveals the shady nature of the "acquisition" of this painting by his father in Amsterdam. And we don't know: is it, or is it not by the Master Jan Vermeer?

We are taken slowly back in time, until we arrive at the moment that the painting was created, first in the mind of the artist and then on canvas. The backwards structure reminded me of *People of the Book* (my review [here](#)), but I preferred this book, which was written almost ten years earlier.

The painting itself, or perhaps its *anima*, is the narrator of the story and witnesses the horrors of the Second World War, a flood in 17th Century Holland, the childhood of the girl who posed for the portrait. I loved the descriptions of life in The Hague in the 18th Century, Delft in the 17th Century. I was left feeling that this was a perfectly true story and I cared very much about all of the characters and about the painting.

And of course I adore Vermeer. I grew up down the street from the Metropolitan Museum in New York. How could I not like Vermeer? [This one](#) is my favorite. It's not at all the subject of the *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (the imaginary painting, I mean), but I thought of it immediately when I started reading.

Film to see again: [All the Vermeers in New York](#) by Jan Jost.

Sun says

This is one of the better novels inspired by the paintings of Vermeer. I say that because I've recently read 4 of them:

Tracey Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* was undoubtedly the best of them, with a solid plotline, populated by recognisable characters and was sophisticated enough to involve thematic imagery.

This is followed by Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. The writing is good in this but the book is not so much a novel but a series of short stories that are linked by one Vermeer painting, a fictional provenance. The characters and their stories are compelling.

There is a big quality gap before we come to Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever*. The plot is actually quite original with an unpredictable twist. Sadly the characters insipid and unlikeable, not to mention unbelievable. Read only if you must.

Katharine Weber's *The Music Lesson* is undoubtedly the worst. Half the book is spent moping around the Irish countryside. Nothing happens and the author is unfortunately not talented enough to make nothing work (unlike say, James Kellner who does exactly that in *How Late It Was How Late*). The main character is shallow and pathetic. This made it difficult to be convinced about her motives when it comes to the theft of a Vermeer. No matter how much you love Vermeer (or reading), don't waste your time on this one.

I have more detailed reviews under each of these books.

I wonder if there are any more Vermeer-related novels out there. It's a good thing painters are still judged by their paintings.

Lisa says

Girl in Hyacinth Blue tells the story of a painting by the Dutch painter Vermeer, as it passes from one owner to another. Interestingly, the story is told in reverse chronological order, beginning with the math teacher who, at present time, hides the painting in his home, to the girl in the painting and her wishes to become an artist herself. I thought the book kept getting better and better as it travels back in history to reveal the effects the painting had on each owner. They all find some connection between it and their own lives, though the reasons for the connections vary drastically. However, the act of giving up the painting is difficult for all; they struggle with it but know that selling/giving away the painting must be done out of necessity.

Katie says

Reading this made me remember how I love reading books about art. This novel tells the story of a painting thought to be a lost Vermeer in 8 stories going backward in time from the present through its various owners back to the story of the painter and the subject. I loved the structure and each story.

Jaksen says

Excellent book...

I picked this little book up at a 'nature' site on Cape Cod, a location where there are gardens and flowers for sale, and a little house where home-made jams and jellies are made. I visit every year and buy hand-made bars of soap, visit the bees in the bee hive, maybe buy a funny fake snake or two. This year they had a few used books for sale and the title of this book...I couldn't resist!

It's the story of a painting, and its 'provenance' back through time. Who owned it, when and how they came to buy/procure/obtain/steal it. How the owners felt about it - how the painting made them feel, along with some 'back story,' often evocative, sometimes tragic, about those owners.

This is a richly imaginative, uniquely told story and I sat and read it through a day and a half. In a rocking chair in the sun, then the breeze, in the near-perfect climate (for this time of year) of Cape Cod. I could almost feel this girl - in the painting, supposedly by Dutch artist, Vermeer - as she gazes off, just thinking...

Just thinking. Just existing. No greater meaning sometime than saying merely that, just being.

Enjoyed it thoroughly.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I recently read Girl with a Pearl Earring because I'm going to go see it at the High Museum in Atlanta, and another GoodReads friend turned me on to this book. Most of the chapters of this book were previously published individually, all telling bits of a story of another Vermeer painting. I loved how there was so much mystery to the painting, so many stories surrounding it, even if they were fiction, still an enjoyable read. Her descriptions of the landscape are also very vivid.

Little bits I marked:

"Now it became clear to her what made her love the girl in the painting. It was her quietness.... But that didn't mean that the girl didn't want anything, like Mother said about her. Her face told her she probably wanted something so deep or so remote that she never dared breathe it but was thinking about it there by the window. And not only wanted. She was capable of doing some great wild loving thing."

"Love builds itself unconsciously, out of the momentous ordinary."

Laura says

Just arrived from Italy, kindly sent by Hayes, through BM.

This book is a collection of 8 short stories describing the story of Vermeer, the famous 17th century Dutch painter. A splendid and delightful book.

1. Love enough
2. Night different from all other nights
3. Adagia
4. Hyacinth blues

Girl in Hyacinth Blue

5. Morningshine --
6. From the personal papers of Adriaan Kuypers --
7. Still life --

The Little Street

The View of Delft

Girl Reading a Letter by an open window

The Milkmaid

Christ in the House of Mary and Martha

8. Magdalena looking.

Some interesting links about Vermeer:

Johannes Vermeer - The Art, Paintings and Life of Jan Vermeer "Van Delft"

Johannes Vermeer's influence and inspiration

Essential Vermeer

Johannes Vermeer, a review by Mark Haden

Kate Forsyth says

One of my all-time favourite books by one of my all-time favourite authors, GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE tells the story of a painting in a series of interlinked vignettes moving backwards in time.

The first is set in contemporary times, telling the story of a middle-aged man who has in his possession an extraordinary painting of a young girl which he believes is a lost Vermeer. He cannot prove it, however, for the painting has no provenance. And he cannot show it to any specialists, because the painting was, he believes, stolen by his father from a Jewish family in the Second World War.

The next vignette is told from the point of view of a young Jewish girl in Amsterdam, bewildered as her world is destroyed around her by the invasion of the Nazis. Backwards in time each story goes, connected only by the silent presence of the painting, until we reach the 17th century and the story of the girl who sat as the model for the painting.

Each story is told with a marvellous economy of style, giving us just enough to understand what has happened before the scene shifts to the next point of view, yet the overall effect is almost unbearably moving. A wonderful book.

Duane says

Art lovers will probably enjoy this book. Historical fiction, art and art history, good writing, combined for a good read. I've read several of her books and this may be my favorite. I would compare it to Tracy Chevalier's Girl with a Pearl Earring.

Sanja_Sanjatica says

4.5 Half a point less for interrupting some of my favorite storylines just when I got into them. Still, a

wonderful story of an imaginary painting, but actually a story about humanity, art and different perspectives. A great idea and an interesting style. Really made me think ponder about art and human obsession with beauty and inconsistency of life.

[Shai] The Bibliophage says

I bought this book around 2008 to 2010. I just stored it in my box of books and never even bother to read it. Then I found this while I was sorting box recently. I never expected that I was deeply engrossed in the stories most especially Morningshine, From the Personal Papers of Adriaan Kuypers and Still Life. This is one of those books that is a page-turner and you'll still definitely love to read after several years have passed.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"She thought of all the people in all the paintings she had seen that day, not just Father's, in all the paintings of the world, in fact. Their eyes, the particular turn of a head, their loneliness or suffering or grief was borrowed by an artist to be seen by other people throughout the years who would never see them face to face. People who would be that close to her, she thought, a matter of a few arms' lengths, looking, looking, and they would never know her."

Johannes Vermeer self-portrait cropped from his painting The Procuress (1656).

Johannes Vermeer or Van Der Meer was a 17th century Dutch painter who had a modestly successful career. He would have been more successful, made more money, enjoyed a certain level of comfort if only...

he would paint faster.

He did not paint until the mood struck him, commissions were bothersome, rarely of interest. His life was about light and how to capture that light perfectly for all eternity in the pigment of his paint. I've had the pleasure of meeting a few of his paintings in museums across Europe. Every time I'm struck by each and every poetic brush stroke he made to the luminosity of natural light seemingly only to be able to be perceived by the eye of Vermeer in the city of Delft.

He traded paintings for food, for shoes for his children, for debts that accumulated as he pondered the subject for his next painting.

The Concert by Vermeer...absconded with.

There are sixty-six potential Vermeer's in the world, but only thirty-four are universally recognized as accredited Johannes Vermeer paintings. In 1990 *The Concert* was stolen from a museum in Boston and has never been recovered. Valued in the neighborhood of \$200,000,000 it is the most valuable unrecovered painting in history. We can hope that it landed in the hands of a collector, who is selfishly hoarding it hopefully in a climate controlled environment. Someday the collector will die and the painting will reemerge.

We can hope.

The Astronomer was seized by the Nazis in 1940 from the de Rothschild's family. It was returned to the family after the war, but was given to the French government in payment for back taxes in 1983. It now hangs in the Louvre. On the back of the painting there is a black ink Swastika.

This brings me to the subject of this book. Susan Vreeland begins by introducing us to Cornelius Engelbrecht who has decided to reveal after many years of hiding the existence of the painting, a Vermeer, to his friend and art lover Richard.

It can't be...it can't be a Vermeer.

There are numerous problems in regards to this painting. Provenance, that all important paperwork establishing authenticity, has been lost or separated from the work. The other major problem is how Cornelius's father obtained possession of the work. Germany, 1940s, opportunities abounded for artwork and other precious things of value to fall into the hands of the less than scrupulous. There are still families trying to get back artwork that was confiscated by the Germans or stolen by opportunists and sold to collectors/museums all over the world.

"Look. Look at her eye. Like a Pearl."

The Girl in Hyacinth Blue painted by Jonathan Janson

So what is this painting? It is of Magdalena Vermeer, daughter of the painter. The one most like him. The one with sewing shoved into her hands when her fingers ached for the brushes.

"She loved him, loved what he did with that hand, and even, she suspected, loved what he loved, though they had never spoken of it. When that thought lifted her face to his, she saw his cheeks grow softer, as if he noticed her in the house for the first time."

It was hard for anyone to get his attention, especially a young girl who was loved most when not disruptive to his brooding thoughts.

Vreeland begins the book with Cornelius and then steadily takes us back in time with the painting. The people that swirl around the painting are brought to life and the influence of having something so beautiful gracing their lives shows the greedy need we all have to possess something so alluring. One of my favorite stories is of a poor family trying to save their farm from a flood and in the midst of this conflict a baby is laid in their boat along with the painting with instructions to sell the artwork to feed the baby. The painting becomes a source of tension between the husband and wife. The wife doing anything she can to keep it. The husband, thinking of the winters to come, knows the money from selling it will allow him to expand his breeding stock which will better insure the family's long term survival. The wife becomes rebellious, but her mother sets her straight.

"Work is love made plain, whether man's or woman's work, and you're a fool if you can't recognize it. The child's the blessing, Saskia, not the painting."

When she does finally sell the painting I could feel the pain of the loss as acutely as does Saskia. There is nothing she will ever be able to buy for the rest of her life that will replace the vibrancy of a Vermeer painting. She does leave her mark on the painting because she names it and she passes that name to the buyer.

Morningshine.

In the later chapters we even meet Vermeer as he struggles with creditors and subjects for art that will inspire him to lift his brush. We meet the mutinous Magdalena as she struggles against the forces trying to make her learn the skills that will make her a valuable housewife. How can you mend when you must create? In the final chapter we see her meeting her painting once again. She borrows every scrap of money she can to try and buy it when it comes up for auction, but paintings like that aren't supposed to be owned by normal people, not even a person who has the blood of the painter cycling through her own heart.

It is always so ironic to think of painters giving away paintings for a loaf of bread and a few decades/centuries later those same works of art becoming worth inconceivable amounts of money.

The book gets better and better as we walk back through history with Vreeland. The later chapters are stellar, poignant, and captivating. They lift the book from a three star to a four star. The author put me in the same room as Vermeer, so much so I could almost see the light the way he saw it.

Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window by Vermeer.

Sheri says

I was not impressed. This is simply a collection of short stories that are all sort of connected by this painting. Occasionally the stories are linked (the last guy is guilty over his Nazi father's theft of the painting from a Jewish family and the 2nd owner gets it along with a baby whose origins are explained in the next story), but more often than not the current story protagonist simply got the painting at an auction. The idea is cute (how things travel down through time without their history attached) and of course there are many lost works of art throughout time. However, the execution was less than fabulous. It just read like some short stories set in or near Amsterdam.

That said, there were a few good quotes and some themes. The most noteworthy was the importance of enjoying the moment (rather than worrying about the future) and discovering the value of love:

"When you reduced even a fledging love affair to its essentials--I loved her, she maybe loved me, I was foolish, I suffered--it became vacuous and trite, meaningless to anyone else. In the end, it's only the moments that we have, the kiss on the palm, the joint wonder at the furrowed texture of a fir trunk or at the infinitude of grains of sand in a dune. Only the moments."

"All this imagining of the past seemed to be a squandering of the present. A flood of now washed over him, like water breaking through a dike and he welcomed it.

"He lived so badly, it seemed, because he always came into the moment encumbered."

"she did not yet know that lives end abruptly, that much of living is repetition and separation"

I was also annoyed that the last chapter was from the daughter's (subject's) point of view. This was sort of an extraneous chapter; I felt like Vreeland should have picked one (either Vermeer or the daughter) for the last chapter. Instead, she wrote the ending from Vermeer's perspective and then tacked on a feminist chapter at the end. This just read as an extra short story and an attempt to appeal to modern readers with a feminist perspective.

Overall it was just sort of "meh".

Carol says

Great read! Vreeland writes several short stories of a lost Vermeer painting and the people whose lives it touched. The stories are told from the present to long ago, back in time. This lost painting is a portrait of a young woman looking out a window, lost in thought, brilliantly clothed in hyacinth blues. The stories contain exquisite visual descriptions of his artwork and the everyday lives of ordinary women. I loved how Vreeland described color and how his paintings contained the "dust of crushed pearls." I also like how a glimpse into each family's lives makes them real and endearing to us.

Book Concierge says

A previously "undiscovered" Vermeer is revealed and the author traces its ownership back in time to its origination. Each owner (or custodian) has a slightly different reason for wanting to keep the painting, and different reasons for letting it go. Each time it changes hands, the owner is pained to part with it. And still, for everyone it represents longing and wishes unfulfilled.
