

THE GENIUS LIST



Christopher Forbes —Publisher

Photo by Christopher Forbes

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Christopher Forbes is a publisher based in New Jersey. As the grandson of Bertie Charles Forbes, founder of *Forbes Magazine*, Forbes has continued his family's legacy at the magazine. In 1972, Forbes joined the advertising sales staff of *Forbes*. In 1977, he became a Director of Forbes Inc.; in 1979, Vice President and Associate Publisher. In January 1989, he was named Vice Chairman. In November 2011, he was promoted to the rank of Officier of the Legion of Honor and named a Chevalier in December 2003. On August 16, 2019, Mr. Forbes was elevated to the rank of Commander.

While an art history major at Princeton University, Forbes became the curator of The Forbes Collection, acquiring the largest North American collection of English 19th-century paintings. Forbes has organized many exhibitions and written several books, articles, and catalogues devoted to Victorian art and Fabergé. He has served on the boards of a number of museums both in the U.S. and abroad. He is currently Chairman of the American Friends of the Louvre and on the Advisory Board of the Princeton University Art Museum. He is also a board member of the Ellis Island/Statue of Liberty Foundation, the National Jewelry Institute and the Faberge Museum in St. Petersburg.

TGL: How was your childhood?

CF: I still live on the same property that I was brought home to when my parents had me delivered a little over 70 years ago. My daughter grew up here and now my grandchildren have grown up here. When my parents were expecting a third child, they bought this property in New Jersey, so I've lived in New Jersey at the same address for all of my life. When I was 14, I was sent to a Swiss boarding school for a year; my father believed everybody should speak a second language. I ended up in Lausanne and learned how to speak French. I even managed to shed my New Jersey accent and my Vaudois accent.

TGL: How was your European experience?

CF: I was thrilled to spend a whole school year in Europe. My father organized a weekend in Paris at the end of my stay in Lausanne, and I never looked back. I fell in love with Paris and with France. A few years later, my father bought a historic château in Normandy. Being the only one who spoke French, all of a sudden at the age of 19, Château de Balleroy was my baby.

Balleroy is the earliest surviving work of the architect Francois Mansart. It has the earliest surviving mansard roof. There was nothing there when this château was built. They laid out a village at the same time, so it was one of the first essays in urban planning post-Roman Empire.

TGL: After studying in Europe, you came back to the United States to study at Princeton University. What did you study?

CF: At Princeton, I became fascinated with 19th century British art. I also fell in love with 19th century history and became intrigued with Napoleon III. Actually, I started being interested in Napoleon in 6th grade. We were studying the American Civil War and at one point the textbook said Napoleon was sympathetic to the South. I said, "No, excuse me, Napoleon died in 1821. What's wrong here?" And the teacher explained to me, no, his nephew managed to get himself elected President of France and then elected Emperor.

TGL: What was your major?

CF: After one term of Economics 101, I persuaded my father to allow me to major in art history. He said, "Some of what you learn at university will be useful and some of it won't, so you should do what you enjoy." But then he also said, "I don't know how many careers there are for art historians, so we're starting a corporate art collection, and I'm going to make you its curator," He paid me a salary so I could pay for my tuition and there would be a benefit to majoring in art history.

My father bought a Monet *Water Lilies* and a Renoir. I told him that for the same price as the Monet, we could have the best collection of English 19th century paintings in North America. He said, "All right, you're on," and gave me a budget, which was the same as the price of the Monet. My senior thesis was a catalog and an exhibition of the collection. Princeton and my father realized I wasn't stupid when the Metropolitan Museum of Art asked if they could have the exhibition before Princeton had it.

TGL: Was the Met your first exhibition?

CF: Yes. There weren't many people who knew much about English 19th century painting in those days, but it was becoming more interesting and popular. This was also when I began working full-time for my father's magazine. I was in the advertising department, and I had a big reception for some of our biggest clients at the Met to see the exhibition that I'd put together. Combining business and pleasure was something my father always did well, I'm glad he set this precedent.

TGL: Were you more attracted to the media world or the art world?

CF: I loved the art of selling advertising, because it paid for the paintings. I was always on the business side rather than the journalism side. English

teachers assured me all along that writing was never going to be something that I should hang my hat on. Even though I couldn't write much, if you showed me three paintings by an artist, I could identify the works. At Princeton, I would always get the slides correct on my exams, so they never really bothered to read my essays. They figured "Oh, he must have a good eye."

TGL: Did you continue to work with Forbes' art collection after graduating?

CF: After I graduated we hired a professional curator who was far more qualified than me, but she reported to me. We had a wonderful working relationship for over 30 years. When it came time to prioritize our assets, I like to joke that the return on investment from Victorian paintings or Fabergé, of which my father was also a great collector, was a lot better than some of the other investments we all made over the years.

TGL: Did you continue collecting Fabergé yourself?

CF: No. I still have the first cigarette case my father bought for our mother before he began collecting seriously. Most of the collection, including his nine Imperial Easter eggs, was bought by a Russian businessman who's created a museum in St. Petersburg. He very sweetly invited me to serve on his board, so I get to see the former children once in a while. My father would have liked the idea that it wasn't the Russian government, it was a Russian capitalist that brought these treasures back to a palace in St. Petersburg.

TGL: How many years did you sell advertising at Forbes?

CF: I still haven't retired. After 50-something years, I still meet clients and keep up some business relationships.

TGL: You often travel to China, do you have clients there?

CF: Years ago, our family decided that we should start doing some estate planning. We found a group of investors based in Hong Kong who acquired the majority interest in *Forbes*. My oldest brother and I still stick around, and we go to Asia to meet with some of our clients because family businesses are still important in Asia. It's fun to talk to some of these incredible Asian entrepreneurs about their efforts to create a family enterprise. I'm very grateful for my grandfather, who arrived in the United States in 1904, and 13 years later he started his own magazine. Now the magazine is a small part of the media business, but it's still there and the brand has survived and thrived.

TGL: You are the Chairman of the American Friends of the Louvre. How did you create this relationship with the Louvre?

CF: I met a young woman who was working with the then director of the Louvre, Henri Loyrette when he decided to create the American Friends in 2003. We rented a bus for us and eight other friends to spend a weekend at the château. On our way back, she and Mr. Loyrette asked if they could speak with me at the back of the bus. They said, "We've thought of the perfect person to be the head of this new American Friends of the Louvre." I said, "That's wonderful," and then I realized they were staring at me too long. I thought, why not? How exciting to be involved with one of the world's greatest museums, and if I can help make a difference, what a privilege that is. Seventeen years later, it's still an enormous privilege. The smartest thing I did was to persuade Sue Devine to become the first Executive Director. It's easy to be chairman if you have an executive director who's brilliant.

TGL: What is the American Friends of the Louvre's purpose?

CF: Les Amis du Louvre is well established and does an incredible job, so in the beginning there was a little trepidation that the American Friends of the Louvre would take all of their American names. Les Amis has almost 7,000 American members. I said, "No, we're going to do this differently." We want to be complementary, not competitive. Being very small and having a limited staff, we can target individuals and institutions and make a much bigger difference than trying to compete with all the benefits Les Amis offers.

Most organizations want to talk about how many members they have, but we have less than 100 members. Les Amis services somebody who wants to be engaged with the Louvre and goes there every year, whereas American Friends of the Louvre focuses on our Chairman's Circle, the International Council, our active young patrons group and other membership categories. Engaging fewer people who pay a very high sum annually has enabled us to further different projects for the Louvre and have a compatible group who like meeting with each other.

TGL: What is your vision for the American Friends of the Louvre?

CF: The American Friends helps in accepting and facilitating the gifting of works of art and contributions to the endowment. Our treasurer was active in the formation of the endowment, because up until 15 years ago, museums in France didn't have endowments like they do in America.

With the advent of Louvre Abu Dhabi, all of a sudden there was a large sum of cash that, rather than spending it right away, should be invested. This

required getting a law passed and changing the whole mindset. We have had five major gifts to the endowment, either for specific programs or just to help a museum that's a global cultural resource.

TGL: Why do you think life connected you to the Louvre and not to another museum?

CF: First of all, I'm francophone. I am involved with some American museums, but I don't think I could afford to pay my three grandchildren's school fees and be on an advisory committee for the Metropolitan Museum. To be involved at this level with one of the greatest museums in the world as Chairman of the American Friends of the Louvre was a happy no-brainer.

TGL: You created a great collection of Napoleon III that you sold at Osenat a few years ago.

CF: For Osenat, the largest collection of Napoleon III memorabilia was a big sale. Osenat published three fabulous catalogs and did a brilliant job. It was one of the first times that a collection had come from the United States to be sold in France, rather than being taken out of France to be sold in the United States.

TGL: When did you start collecting objects and paintings?

CF: The Christmas of 1966, I persuaded my father to give me a letter written by Napoleon III to a fellow sovereign congratulating him on something. It wasn't a particularly important letter but it was signed by Napoleon III and by Count Walewski. I thought it was wonderful, having both signatures on the same thing. Later that summer my father bought me a portrait by Jean-Hippolyte Flandrin of Napoleon III and one of his students. Things mushroomed from there and by the time it came time we sold it, there were 800 lots and 2,000 items.

TGL: Why were you fascinated by Napoleon III?

CF: The fact that he was almost dismissed by history, I found irresistible. He reigned in France longer than his illustrious uncle. I upset a lot of people in the catalog when I said I thought he behaved more heroically when he surrendered with his troops rather than fleeing the battlefield. Napoleon III was captured at Sedan, whereas his uncle slipped off from the field of Waterloo.

Napoleon III was also involved with creating modern France in terms of the development of the railroad, the advent of department stores, the rebuilding

of Paris, and all the great big ports in France. He created a modern industrial France.

The Third Republic was lucky it had Victor Hugo the same way the Tudors had Shakespeare; the Tudors to trash the reputation of Richard III and the Third Republic to trash the reputation of Napoleon III. It is amazing to see his uncle idolized and he's a footnote in history, and yet modern France arguably owes as much to him as it does to his uncle.

TGL: Are you still interested in Napoleon III?

CF: Intellectually, yes, but collection-wise, no. I still have a few things that I forgot to send to France, the most prominent of which is a lovely portrait of the emperor by my daughter that she gave me when she was eight years old, so I still treasure that.

TGL: What are you interested in right now?

CF: Doing the best I can for the Louvre. I was also worried during the pandemic that since I used to travel so much, my wife would not put up with me 24/7. After 14 months of seeing me almost every day, it still works, so I'm enormously relieved.

TGL: Have you stopped collecting art?

CF: I still succumb to temptation once in a while. Sir Edwin Landseer is one of my favorite artists. I was very happy when I got this pair of paintings, one is called *Prosperity* and the other called *Adversity*. In *Prosperity*, his horse looks fabulous. The groom is holding it, and her ladyship is about to come out and get on her side saddle. *Adversity* shows the same horse, but he is a taxi cab horse, a hackney horse, in London. A rat is munching on a rose next to him, the poor thing has fallen in life. The British love these moralizing pictures.

I'm happy a few of these acquisitions have ended up in the Louvre. I recently persuaded a friend to give a very important American painting to the Louvre. He said, "I'll give the Louvre my painting if you give them another painting." So his very important painting and my less important one are now in the collections of the Louvre.

TGL: What do you think the Louvre should do to attract more Americans?

CF: Actually, the Louvre is an American magnet. It's a place every American feels they have to go to and one of the reasons why one 10th of Les Amis members are Americans. Jean-Luc Martinez has been very good at making

access to the Louvre more intelligent because the lines were getting so big. The Louvre had become so popular, that managing the popularity became the question. When Beyoncé featured it in her music video, tens of millions of people experienced the Louvre and wanted to go there. So it's not a question of more, but better.

Now the challenge is more about making sure that it's a wonderful experience. We've been involved with the effort to make the labels in both English and French, not just for Americans or Brits, but because English is the second language of almost every other foreign visitor. That's another project that Jean-Luc Martinez was instrumental in promoting, so I'm happy that we were able to help.

TGL: Are you still on the Board of the Princeton museum?

CF: Yes. They are about to embark on building a new museum with a very exciting architect: David Adjaye. He just did the African American Museum in Washington DC. The decision was made to have the museum in the center of the campus rather than creating a bigger facility further away and to keep the department of Art and Archeology as part of the building. It will be open to the public, but it will also be where teaching goes on. The director has done an absolutely brilliant job and I can't wait. If I live long enough, it'll be four more years until the opening and I want to be there. It's a wonderful, small university art museum. My first course at Princeton determined my desire to become much more involved with art history.

TGL: Are you still involved with art history?

CF: I'm an art enthusiast and amateur, but I certainly would not be able to make any claims to real scholarship. I love researching the provenance of a painting, because I am part of a continuum of ownership and the art will outlive us all. It's a privilege to say this and to be a part of the chain.

TGL: How do you feel about the relationship between France and America?

CF: Ironically when Henri Loyrette persuaded me to say yes to becoming chairman, relations between France and the United States were a bit tense. There was even talk of calling French fries, freedom fries. Art is a wonderful bridge. To use the things we share rather than the things we disagree about as a way of bringing us together, seemed to be a wonderful opportunity and a privilege to be able to be a part of.

Our château in Normandy has always been open to the public, and I was very proud when Ambassador Pamela Harriman went for the 50th anniversary of D-Day, and our most recent ambassador was there for the 75th anniversary of D-Day. Having a venue to welcome Americans into one of the most historic locations of our deep relationship has been a real privilege. Speaking of which, I have found a new steward for this lovely château because my siblings and I haven't been able to give it TLC we should have the past few years. A good friend who's been coming there for 15 years recently acquired it and is already working on putting a new roof on it for the second time in its history. Ownership comes with some obligations, and I feel good about being able to find another steward to take on this incredibly important masterpiece of French architecture.

TGL: Who would you like to have dinner with that you don't already know?

CF: Well Isabelle Le Normand, I only know you through this interview, so I hope one day we will have dinner together.

TGL: What advice would you like to give to The Genius List's readers?

CF: I always take to heart the line my father put on the small plaque where his ashes are in the chapel in Colorado: "While alive, he lived." He reminded us that this isn't a dress rehearsal and always encouraged us to do what we wanted to do. As far as we know, you don't get a second chance.

As a young person it was very nice to hear him say that. He inherited his job from his father, and without him, I wouldn't have had the wonderful life I've had. Some people find an inheritance weighs them down too much, but once a reporter asked him, "Don't you feel guilty having had so much?" And he turned around and said, "If you've been as lucky as I have in this incredible lottery of life, you don't deserve it. But not to appreciate what you've been given, that's a sin." I've been very lucky and I can assure you, I'm very appreciative.
