

# The Treasures in Penn's Basement

*To pay for a new professorship, the dental school wants to sell parts of a unique art and jewelry collection*

A remarkable collection of jewelry, art, and Second Empire bric-a-brac, packed away by the University of Pennsylvania and forgotten for two decades, may soon be auctioned off to raise money for advanced dental studies, if the dean of the dental school has his way. Penn already runs the largest academic dental research program in the nation. The sale of some of the jewels and paintings would endow a \$2 million professorship.

The catch is that Thomas W. Evans, a 19th-century dentist who collected the treasure, left explicit instructions for its disposal. Evans, a friend of Napoleon III, wrote that he wanted his things displayed in a museum—if not in Philadelphia, then at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. Lawyers for Penn and the Smithsonian believe they can dispense with this aspect of Evans' will. However, the Smithsonian may seek a token contribution before it steps out of the picture.

The Smithsonian was uninterested in the collection at first, according to one of its attorneys, but in recent weeks has changed its mind. Now it is considering whether it might not be duty-bound to accept a small part of it. As one Penn official said, there have been intimations this might amount to "just a couple of Manets," a reference to the most valuable paintings in the lot, two still lifes by the French Impressionist, Edouard Manet. (Evans' mistress in Paris was a good friend of Manet and of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé.) But Walter Cohen, dean of the dental school, makes it clear that the Manets will not be given away if he can help it. The entire matter will come before the Orphans' Court in Philadelphia for an open hearing in early May.

The world has paid little heed to Evans' instructions since his death in 1897. Neither the Smithsonian nor Penn intends to display his jewels, for example. And a close reading of the will reveals that Evans never meant to give his fortune to the University of Pennsylvania; it just ended up there.

The history of this unusual collection begins in 1847, when Evans was recruited to be the assistant of a distinguished American dentist in Paris, C. Starr Brewster. Evans had attended the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia and

later won a prize for his demonstration of a new method of filling teeth with gold. The notice won him the job in Paris.

One day when Brewster was sick, Evans responded to a summons from the head of the Second Empire, Napoleon III. By all accounts, Evans was a skilled technician who also had great personal charm and understood how to minister to the special sensitivities of kings and queens. Within a short time he became the most sought-after dentist in Europe. By the end of his career, he had as clients every European royal family except the Hapsburgs. Evans was especially close to the French rulers. Eugénie,



Thomas W. Evans

the empress, was his patient before she was Napoleon's wife. According to one account, she was introduced to her husband by a courtier who met her in Evans' office.

It was Evans' custom not to send bills to the royals he treated. Appreciative of this delicatessen, they showered him with gifts: a gold snuffbox and rugs from the Sultan of Turkey; a silver Russian tankard from Czar Nicholas; an engraved card case from the Russian Empress Alexandra; a painting by the Queen of Sweden; and silver from the royal families of Belgium, Holland, Germany, and England. His collection also includes elaborately carved oriental jade; marble statuary; three large gold and silver necklaces with scores of diamonds; similar bracelets; pearl and diamond earrings, brooches, rings, and pendants;

more than 130 paintings; a valuable Bible collection; and many other precious knick-knacks.

Evans' fortune derived not so much from his practice as from speculation on real estate. As a confidant of Napoleon, he was present in the 1850's when the plans for renovating Paris were reviewed at the emperor's palace. Evans rushed out to buy up fields lying in the path of the proposed Avenue l'Imperatrice and later sold the property for many times its value.

Evans also made some noteworthy medical innovations. He invented a form of vulcanized rubber as a substitute for the bonelike materials then in use as settings for false teeth. He made the discovery, it later turned out, shortly before Charles Goodyear patented vulcanized rubber for tires. When Goodyear sought him out in Paris, Evans would not cooperate, as one biographer wrote, because he "was opposed in principle to any patents within the domain of professional science."

Evans helped persuade skeptical surgeons in Europe of the anesthetic values of nitrous oxide. He was among the founders of the International Red Cross and he advanced the development of the ambulance and the field hospital. He is credited with comforting, if not saving, the life of the German emperor when the emperor's own surgeon seemed at a loss in dealing with a disease-damaged trachea. Evans took over a jeweler's shop and hammered some silver coins into a cannula, which was inserted in the emperor's throat. Evans' most famous act was to hide the Empress Eugénie in his carriage and rescue her from the angry mobs that rose up in Paris when Napoleon III was taken prisoner during the Franco-Prussian War. He settled her safely in London.

Evans died childless several months after his wife's death in 1897. The exact value of his estate is not known but was probably \$4 to \$7 million at that time. He left some bequests to friends and relatives, but nothing to his closest relative in Paris, a nephew and former assistant, John Doyle Evans. They had had a falling-out after the nephew made himself the Marquis d'Oyley (his adaptation of Doyle). He left his uncle and set up shop on his own, taking many of the uncle's

Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Dental Library

clients and using the name Evans as a professional trademark.

Evans provided in his will that the bulk of his fortune would go to an entity not yet created, to be known as the Thomas W. Evans Museum and Dental Institute. It was to be built on the site of Evans' original home at 40th and Spruce Streets in Philadelphia. In the museum, Evans commanded, "shall be placed all objects of art, pictures, paintings, statuary, jewelry, and all objects presented to me by royalties, all books, manuscripts" et cetera. They were to be cataloged and "placed in an absolutely extra fire-proof room and positively burglar-proof, even at an extra cost, and there they are to remain as long as the Museum exists." As for the educational part of the Institute, he wrote, "I desire it to be conducted in a way similar in regime as such institution[s] of learning are conducted in Philadelphia, and not inferior to any already established." Although he was well acquainted with the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine (founded in 1878), Evans did not mention it. As a final thought, he added that, if the art, jewelry, and manuscripts "are not placed and kept in the Thomas W. Evans Museum and Dental Institute in Philadelphia for any reason whatsoever, I desire the same to be placed and kept in the Smithsonian Institute at Washington DC. . . ."

The heirs, including the Marquis D'Oyley, contested the will. It became mired in litigation for the next 10 years. Only after the city of Philadelphia organized a rescue party of distinguished elders was the stalemate broken. Philadelphia, Paris, and the heirs made a tripartite agreement in which at least one-third of the estate went to the French government, about \$1 million went to the heirs, and about \$1.7 million went to Philadelphia.

A group of trustees for the Evans Museum had been created in 1898. They decided that with Philadelphia's share of the money, it would be "impossible," secretary Henry Rainey wrote, to carry out Evans' wishes without affiliating with another dental school. After due deliberation, the University of Pennsylvania was chosen as the best of four candidates. A gothic stone building went up at 40th and Spruce Streets; the Evans collection was installed; and the clinics opened in 1915. The Penn dental school has been one of the world's leaders ever since.

There were no dramatic changes, as far as the museum was concerned, until the late 1950's, when the University was running short of space. To make room

for yet another clinic, the jewels, paintings, and furniture were packed up and hustled off to a warehouse and bank vault. The carriage in which Eugénie escaped was sent to a horse barn at the University's veterinary campus, where it still sits. The giant security door was removed from the museum and the ornate marble room was covered over with Formica and plywood and filled with dental chairs.

Ever since then, the Evans collection has remained in storage, essentially unseen. The University does not have pho-

### **The Escape**

*H. Durpray's rendition of Empress Eugénie's secret departure from Paris in 1870. Mobs rioted through the city after her husband was captured by the Prussians. She hid in Evans' house until dusk. He whisked her away to Deauville in his carriage, then across the Channel to England.*



Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Dental Library

tographs of it. The last good inventory appears to have been taken in the 1930's. A few paintings have been kept out, some in the president's house, two Corots in the dean's office, some in the library, and others scattered throughout the Evans building at 40th and Spruce Streets.

Cohen, who became dean in 1972, takes partial credit for rescuing the Manet's from the warehouse. He also claims responsibility for shifting the bulk of the collection from damp quarters downtown to the basement of a science building on campus. But he thinks Evans would be better remembered if his collection were used to support the school's work.

For several years Cohen has been eager to sell some of the baubles and artworks and use the cash to endow an Evans professorship, a senior position to be filled by an innovative leader in clinical dentistry. Cohen, due to retire from the deanship this autumn, was asked if he might fill the role. He replied that the decision was not his to make. The dental school is in the midst of a major reorganization begun by Cohen. It will reduce the number of students to one-half the 1978 level and increase the clinical teaching demands on the staff, with an emphasis

on preventive and periodontal care. Cohen believes that future dentists will have to focus more on these areas, which only take up 3 percent of dentists' time now. The change is necessary because the profession's mainstay—filling cavities—may soon become an obsolete skill. It may be possible to eliminate tooth decay with antibacterial and chemical treatments.

Last October the University formally proposed to sell some of the Evans collection to raise funds for the professorship. Twenty years ago, the Smithsonian

concurred in the decision to pack the goods off to a warehouse, and it seemed likely to go along with the new proposal. Then, in a meeting this spring, an attorney for the Smithsonian indicated that, while his museum was not interested in taking on the whole collection, it might like to pluck out a couple of the best pieces. Recently, the Smithsonian's jewel collection was the subject of a four-part investigative article in *The Washington Post*, an in-depth analysis of the way donors' wishes were honored. A grand jury is investigating. Thus, the museum may be a bit more punctilious than usual about securing its entitlements. Officials at Penn were surprised by the change of position, particularly since the school has already given the Smithsonian its large and unique collection of early dental instruments.

Dean Cohen is widely supported in his plan for raising money through a sale of Evans' treasures, particularly since he has decided that nothing of historical significance will be let go. In his view, it is not an ethical but a legal issue. As he says, "We think we are enlarging upon Evans' original intention." It is "more meaningful to have an Evans professorship than to have a group of rings sit in a vault."—ELIOT MARSHALL