

# AN OBJECT OF BEAUTY

Reading Group Notes



## In Brief

Lacey Yeager had pizzazz. Even at the age of twenty, when she entered a room, your eyes followed her. And when she left – normal life seemed a little bit more flat than before.

She had the ability to direct her attention exclusively at you, to become absorbed by you, as if to say, ‘You are much more complicated and interesting than I ever supposed.’ She always got her way.

Lacey’s life seemed to run parallel with Daniel Franks’, meeting and bouncing apart over the years, but steady friends none the less. Daniel became a writer covering the art market, and Lacey decided to work within the art market. As she pointed out, ‘I don’t go in and apply for a job. I go in and *get* a job.’ So Lacey found herself in the bins at Sotheby’s. She spent her days in the dim basement cataloguing and measuring nineteenth-century paintings. Her fancy clothes were wasted in the gloom but she learned. A year studying painting after painting taught her how to distinguish.

But while she only had a walk-on role in Sotheby’s, she had a starring role in the East Village bars – during the day she was in the uptown art world,

but in the evenings she shone her light on the contemporary art scene.

One Tuesday, Lacey decided to treat herself to the Sotheby's lunchroom. With the odd combination of uptown prices and Formica tables, staff mingled. She recognised the head of European Paintings sitting with an obvious client – a client whose eyes constantly returned to an ever more slowly eating Lacey. Eventually, after they had paid their bill, they walked over to her table. The client introduced himself as Patrice Claire, a French collector. Asked if she had attended an auction yet, Lacey said she wasn't sure if she was allowed. And so she found herself attending the European sale two days later.

The experience changed her. She began to look at art differently. Could she make money – real money – from art? She began to process the seemingly endless stream of pictures that passed through her hands in terms of value. There were extensive auction records in Sotheby's library, and she became an efficient computer of values. She had crossed the line: she had converted objects of beauty into objects of value.

On a day when Daniel stopped by Sotheby's for lunch with Lacey, she showed him a picture of her grandmother. She had previously told him that she was related to the arts, and this was how. Her grandmother had posed for the artist Maxfield Parrish, and the print of the picture he had given her hung in her 92-year-old grandmother's house to that day. She had looked up the value of the print – not

much, just a couple of hundred dollars, but Lacey still dreamed it was her in the picture, lying naked in the beautiful forest, facing the twilight.

The years passed and the art world boomed, taking Lacey with it. She prospered as the market desperately searched for the next big thing, and she moved from Sotheby's to her own gallery. But the bubble couldn't grow for ever, could it? And an action from Lacey's past would inevitably come back to haunt her, pulling along Daniel, who still seemed somehow tied to Lacey's destiny.

## The Story Behind *An Object of Beauty*

The art world has always fascinated me and I've been involved in it since my early twenties. I make a distinction between the art world and the paintings themselves. Art itself is about aesthetics, what the art means, while the art world revolves around much more – trade, finance, fakery, theft – yet always with these objects of beauty at its core.

Through art, people get to talk about important things; it's a microcosm of the larger world. And it attracts interesting, flamboyant people. My main character Lacey Yeager is alluring rather than attractive. She is the sort of woman who can light up a room. She's also bright, manipulative and dangerous, not afraid to use her charm to get what she wants. Because art is also about desire – there's a romance about the art world because our desire for beautiful objects is multi-layered. There's the intellectual, aesthetic understanding of a piece, but at the root of it there is also the idea that possessing the object can somehow fill a gap – that in owning it our life will feel more complete. Of course all collectors know that isn't true! The energy that drives the art world involves a tremendous lust for life, which is partly

what fuels Lacey's ambition when she finds herself alone with a beautiful painting for the first time.

I can remember when I was first moved by a picture – it was a small painting of a ship at sea in the moonlight. Many people would say it's a terrible painting but to me it was beautiful. I bought it for \$300 dollars in 1967 and I still own it today.

Steve Martin

## About the Author

Steve Martin is a highly successful writer, actor and performer. His film credits include *Father of the Bride*, *Parenthood*, *The Spanish Prisoner* and *Bringing Down the House*, as well as *Roxanne*, *L.A. Story* and *Bowfinger*, for which he also wrote the screenplays. He has won Emmys for his television writing and two Grammys for comedy albums. In addition to a play, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, he has written a bestselling collection of comic pieces, *Pure Drivel*, a bestselling novella, *Shopgirl*, which was made into a movie, and *The Pleasure of My Company*.

## For Discussion

- ‘Lacey was just as happy alone as with company. When she was alone, she was potential; with others she was realized.’ What does this early insight tell us about Lacey?
- ‘When Lacey began these computations, her toe crossed ground from which it is difficult to return: she started converting objects of beauty into objects of value.’ An inevitable step do you think?
- ‘Context matters.’ Does it?
- ‘But sometimes money falls like light snow on open palms, and sometimes it falls stinging and hard from ominous clouds.’ Daniel ‘considered her deserving of this newfound rootless cash’. Do you?
- ‘Lacey always managed to find her light.’ Would it have been better if she sometimes couldn’t?
- ‘In children’s literature, the clever foxes were often the bad guys, but Lacey never thought so.’ What does this tell us about Lacey?

- ‘The theory of relativity certainly applies to art: just as gravity distorts space, an important collector distorts aesthetics.’ Is this your experience?
- ‘Because he understood that anything was actually for sale at some price.’ Cynical but true?
- ‘Since the 1970s, art schools had shied away from teaching skills and concentrated on teaching thought.’ A good thing?
- ‘Good art had been defined by its endurance over time.’ Not so now? Should we return to this gauge of quality?
- ‘Somewhere, in the dark heart of the houses, it was decided that the catalogues should not just *present*, but should *promote*.’ What does this shift say about the wider world?
- ‘The lure in art collecting and its financial rewards, not counting for a moment its aesthetic, cultural and intellectual rewards, is like the trust in paper money: it makes no sense when you really think about it.’ Do you agree?

## Suggested Further Reading

*The House of Mirth*  
by Edith Wharton



*The Devil Wears Prada*  
by Lauren Weisberger



*Breakfast at Tiffany's*  
by Truman Capote



*The Great Gatsby*  
by F. Scott Fitzgerald



*Art History – The Basics*  
by Grant Pooke and Diana Newall









