

Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

Rockefeller's Campus Gets an Upgrade

SARAH BAKER

Excitement abounds at The Rockefeller University as we prepare for the grand opening of the new \$500 million Stavros Niarchos Foundation—David Rockefeller River Campus, a four-year construction project to add two acres and a new research building to Rockefeller's fourteen-acre campus. Construction began during the summer of 2015, right when I arrived at Rockefeller as a first year graduate student. Since then, I have gotten a chance to follow the progress of the new building, mainly through glimpses of the roof from my lab's conference room in the Hospital Building, whilst crossing the Queensboro bridge, or from viewing the outside of the building from the esplanade. But these piecemeal looks never gave me a real understanding of the full scale of the project. In early February, Alex Kogan, Associate Vice President of Plant Operations and Housing at Rockefeller, agreed to give the *Natural Selections* Editorial Board a tour of the building, where we got a more comprehensive idea of what a massive undertaking this project has been.

If you walk anywhere on Rockefeller's campus, it is easy to miss the massive river building completely (barring the constant construction that has been taking place for the past couple of years). In fact, the architects designed it this way in order for it to blend into the preexisting campus. Limited to the space between the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive and York Avenue between 62nd Street and 68th Street, the university had to take a highly creative approach to expand the campus. The university was able to take advantage of the air rights over the FDR that it has owned since 1973 to expand into a long horizontal structure over the highway. In the summer of 2016, nineteen modular metal structures were installed from the East River using a marine crane to lift them over the FDR onto columns that had previously been built. The FDR was closed



The *Natural Selections* Editorial Board in front of the new President's Office and Dean's Office building.



View of the new amphitheater facing Welch Hall from the green space above the research building.

nineteen nights that summer as the modules were transported on a barge from New Jersey and lifted one-by-one into place.

Over the past couple of weeks, equipment and scaffolding blocking views of the new walkways to the River Campus have been cleared, showing off the beautiful staircases and many entrances to the new building. Take one of the two new outdoor staircases between Founder's Hall and the Nurses Residence, or between Founder's Hall and Smith Hall, and you will find yourself on the top of the new Marie-Josée and

Henry R. Kravis Research Building where there are two acres of open space containing a beautiful garden with many benches, an amphitheater of seats facing inward towards Welch Hall, and a lovely unobstructed view of the East River. The garden is strikingly devoid of noise from the FDR and looks to be the perfect place to watch fireworks on the Fourth of July or to hang out on a nice day. On the south side of the green space is the new cafeteria, which will

CONTINUED TO P. 2

MEGAN ELIZABETH KELLEY | NATURAL SELECTIONS



Alex Kogan excitedly discusses the expansion of Rockefeller and the construction of the new river campus.

CONTINUED FROM P. 1

replace Weiss Café. With state-of-the-art kitchen equipment and a full glass window looking out at the river, the dining services staff are eager to move into the new space and away from the undesirable conditions in Weiss, where the kitchen is far removed from the cafeteria. There is plenty of seating in a large open room adjacent to the cafeteria and I can see this becoming a big hang-out spot on campus. On the other side of the roof, as you walk north along the river atop the Kravis Research Building, are the President's and Dean's Offices with two large conference rooms that will be available for reservation by campus members as needed.

The Kravis Research Building below aims to provide Rockefeller scientists with a cutting edge research facility, and will replace many existing labs on campus that have desperately needed an upgrade in the modern bioscience world. Spanning three New York City blocks, the building has rows and rows of benches, tissue culture rooms, and chemical hoods. By the windows sit individual desk spaces for all researchers that will ultimately be separated from the main lab spaces by a glass panel, which will allow scientists to enjoy a coffee or snack at their desk. All Head of Lab offices are exactly the same size, meaning nobody has a bigger office than anyone else. All of the lab spaces are designed to be completely flexible, making it easy to adjust where benches and equipment will be set-up and allow for a space tailored to the unique needs of each group of scientists. There are four main wings of the building, each to be shared by six labs, which include



The finishing touches are being put on the Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis Research Building, which must be prepared for the move of eighteen Rockefeller labs starting in March.

north and south wings on each of the two floors of the building. The quadrants each share a common conference room and kitchen. All faculty were offered a chance to move to the new building, and so far eighteen labs will be moving into the new space, with the first labs set to move in March. No lab was given preference to particular locations in the building, but they have tried to put labs that collaborate closely near one another. I cannot help but be envious of the labs that received corner spaces with large windows—these seem like the perfect locale for bouts of deep pondering whilst doing science.

In the middle of each floor are two common spaces where there will be plenty of seating to meet for coffee or get away from the lab. There is also another large common kitchen that will be open to all of the labs on the floor. The bottom floor also has a lactation room for breastfeeding mothers. Bathrooms have been put in in the center of each floor as well, meaning everyone working in the building will be converging in the middle of the building at least a couple of times a day. The whole design of the building is open, which the architects hope will foster more cross-talk between people from different labs. In fact, I think it is going to be difficult to distinguish where one lab ends and the other begins.

At the end of the north side of the building, in front of the President's House, will be a new large lawn that will serve as a backyard, and further, past the lawn by the 68th Street gate is a new conference center. This conference center will be open

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to Rockefeller labs and rentable by members of the public in order to generate some revenue for the university. With full glass windows facing the river, I think it will be highly desirable for meetings. It is completely separate from the rest of campus (meaning you will have to walk outside to get to it) and was designed to be sort of a retreat space to get away from the main interconnected research buildings. It will be accessible by the 68th Street turnstile, which will reopen soon, after having been closed for the past couple of years.

Campus has been under construction for four years now and I can fully say that it has been worth the wait. Although my lab is not moving to the new building, I will definitely be spending a lot of time there enjoying the gorgeous architecture, relaxing in the open space over coffee and lunch, and strolling in the lovely gardens above. The beautiful and highly innovative design of the expansion will be a refreshing addition to campus—the official opening cannot come soon enough! You can follow installed cameras with time-lapse views of the new building [here](#). ■

All photos courtesy of Megan Elizabeth Kelley. Follow her on Twitter @MeganEKelley.

Culture Corner

Pulitzer Prize-Winning Journalist Stephen Kurkjian discusses the Gardner Museum Theft and the Podcast “Last Seen”

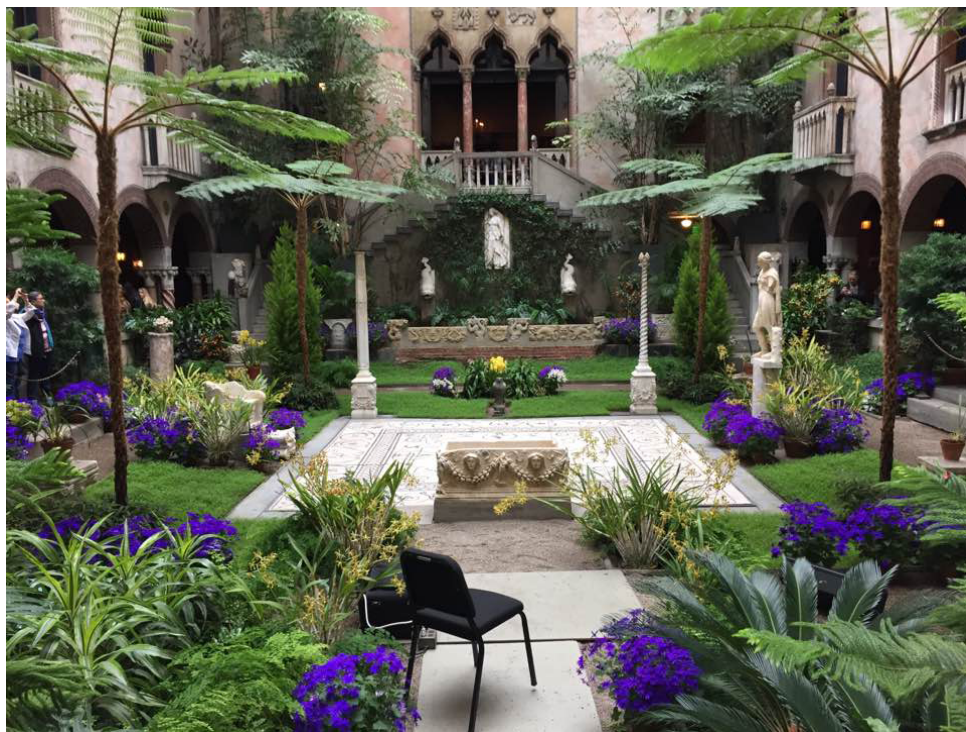
BERNIE LANGS

At 1:24 a.m. on March 18, 1990, two thieves disguised as policemen gained access to Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and made off with thirteen pieces of art, now valued at \$500 million. The stolen works included Rembrandt’s *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* and *A Lady and Gentlemen in Black*, Vermeer’s *The Concert*, and Manet’s *Chez Tortoni*. Not one piece grabbed that night has been located despite the offer of millions in reward money for any credible information leading to the recovery of the paintings.

In 2018, *The Boston Globe* and Boston’s public radio station, WBUR, teamed up to create an investigative crime podcast about the theft. “Last Seen” is a fascinating dive into how the heist was pulled off and follows up on many potential leads about where these masterpieces may now be stashed and who may have been behind the heist. “Last Seen” boasts riveting audio of interviews and discussions with many of the key players surrounding the crime. The podcast audience also listens in on conversations with mob figures made by agents wearing wires, including those made by the FBI’s longtime art-crimes investigator, Bob Wittman. The search veers off in a multitude of directions as ideas are revealed and tested, mixing intense drama with unexpected moments of emotion and humor.

I reached out to *The Boston Globe* for comments about “Last Seen” and they directed me to Stephen Kurkjian, a retired *Globe* reporter and one of the show’s co-producers and lead investigators. A three-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Mr. Kurkjian is the author of the book, *Master Thieves: The Boston Gangsters Who Pulled Off the World’s Greatest Art Heist*, which continues his investigation into the Gardner theft. After a quick chat on the phone, I emailed Mr. Kurkjian questions about “Last Seen” and his involvement in the case.

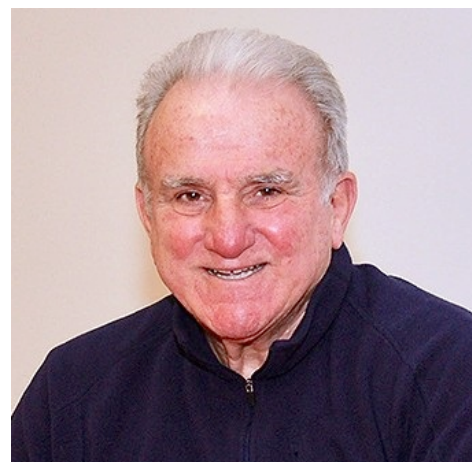
Bernie Langs: The final episode of “Last Seen” is a panel discussion with you and others who worked on the production and reporting. You discussed your personal history as a Boston native, the son of an Armenian immigrant who became a commercial artist and taught you about the value of Boston’s cultural treasures. You explain, “...this is the artwork of the ages. Everything passes. Art endures. And this is our art. Mrs. Gardner put those on the wall



Courtyard of the Gardner Museum in Boston.

for us, put them on the wall for my father.” Can you elaborate further about your obsession with recovering the art?

Stephen Kurkjian: I don’t see myself as “obsessed” by the Gardner story as much as I do doing what any investigative reporter would do—following a compelling story that has great meaning and purpose to their city. As an investigative reporter, especially one who grew up in Boston, I am drawn to stories that have “purpose” for the community. Mrs. Gardner had assembled this extraordinary collection for a transcendent reason—to motivate all Americans to be inspired by artistic achievement. She understood, having traveled the world over, that the civilizations that survived in time were not those that had the strongest military or economic might but those that valued art, be it paintings, statuary, tapestry, music, etc. While America was becoming a world power during the Industrial Revolution, she did not see us gaining an appreciation for art and she wanted to do something about it. That is why when she opened the museum she insisted that attendance be free of charge—except for a donation, if possible—and she encouraged local schools to send class after class to the museum so youngsters could be inspired by her art. On the personal side, my father, Anooshavan Kurkjian, a refu-



Stephen Kurkjian

gee from the Armenian Genocide, was one of countless art students who visited the museum daily so he could study the techniques of the artists. And though he was proud of the results of my investigative reporting in other areas, he was especially pleased when I turned my sights to the Gardner case. “You have to stir the conscience of the community for it to understand the fullness of what was lost here,” he stressed.

BL: The podcast covers how you and others follow-up each credible lead. The Bos-

BERNIE LANGS | NATURAL SELECTIONS

Photo Courtesy of Mr. Kurkjian

CONTINUED TO P. 4

ton FBI refused to speak on the record in reply to your queries. One can't help but speculate about why they repeatedly dropped the ball in this case, effectively ruining some of the undercover efforts and remaining secretive when they should have mobilized the city's residents to assist in identifying suspects. Is it possible that the FBI killed leads about the theft for nefarious or duplicitous reasons?

SK: Following this story is difficult enough and I've sought to avoid chasing conspiracy theories. That being said, it is also true that the FBI has not covered itself with glory in pursuing the case. Yes, the agents assigned to the case have done so with diligence, but my complaint is that the agency has failed to act creatively in its investigation. They have restricted other agencies, especially the Massachusetts State Police and Boston Police, from playing a leadership role on the case. That was regrettable, especially at the start of the investigation, as these other agencies would have had valuable sources and resources to put to the effort. Why? Likely because the agency didn't want to jeopardize its confidential intelligence to these other agencies in fear leaks might happen. Also, I think at the outset the FBI believed that the case would be solved quickly—either through an arrest or an exchange that gained the arts' recovery. And the FBI and U.S. attorney's office didn't want to share the glory that would come from such a recovery with any lesser agencies.

While it may not point to a conspiracy, I remain intrigued as to how the FBI could have muffed the investigation at several key points. Why not focus on [museum guard] Abath more widely and intensively at the probe's outset? More recently, why release a tape in August 2015 that seemed intent on finding the identity of a stranger who was allowed into the museum the night before the theft, and disregard the outreach of several former staffers who willingly told me that it was not a suspicious entry at all and identified him as the former security deputy director? How did the FBI misplace key forensic evidence taken from the scene of the crime that was not available decades later when officials wanted to do advanced DNA testing on the material? But my sense is that taken together these amount not to a conspiracy to impair the investigation rather than a lack of expert and strategic thinking about how to advance it.

BL: "Last Seen" grabs the audience from the very first episodes. When you tracked down the guard, Rick Abath, living in a shack in Vermont, was that an important find for



Photo Courtesy of Wikipedia

"The Storm on the Sea of Galilee" by Rembrandt, stolen in 1990 from the Gardner Museum.

you, when you discussed the suspicion that he may have been the "inside man" in the theft?

SK: I did that interview with Abath, and taped it, for a profile I was doing on him for *The Boston Globe*, not the podcast. He was willing to speak—for the first time, on the record—as he was thinking then of coming forward with a book on his involvement with the case. But I had interviewed him many times in the years before that, since 2005 in fact, when I originally found him living in Vermont. I had spent the entire day trying to find his whereabouts in that city, and when I finally found his house, a tiny cabin on a remote hillside, only the moonlight led me to his front door. Interestingly, he wouldn't let me in but agreed to an interview in a city tavern. That was an exciting interview, as for the first time I was learning details of the theft that the FBI and the museum had never made public.

Included in it was how Abath acknowl-

edged his two grievous errors in letting the thieves into the museum. He thought some kids drunk from the St. Patrick's Day celebration had jumped the iron fence behind the museum and were possibly causing damage to the Gardner's rear premises...he fell for the thieves' ruse...he feared he'd be arrested and miss the Grateful Dead concert that he had a ticket for in Hartford later that night. But he was convincing in his assertions of innocence, that he was not part of any robbery scheme, nor could he recall ever giving security secrets to any gangster-types who could have used them to pull off the heist. I have detailed other reasons that raise suspicions about Abath's actions that night in my book, *Master Thieves*, but the FBI has never had enough to arrest him for involvement in the crime.

BL: My own theory about the theft had

always been that it was financed by an eccentric collector utilizing mobsters to grab the art for his private collection. “Last Seen” destroys the wealthy villain mastermind idea making it clear that this was a well-planned theft by seasoned criminals. Can you explain why you know that this is the scenario that makes the most sense?

SK: No one “knows” anything about this robbery. No one knows for sure who did it, how they conspired to do it, or what happened to any of the art work. My thinking is all informed by hard reporting and deductive reasoning built off that reporting. If the theft had been engineered by a “Dr. No”-type criminal, an oligarch-type or arch criminal, who commissioned the robbery in hopes of gaining a beloved masterpiece, then I doubt that the thieves would have been so rough in how they treated the works they stole. Remember, all paintings were broken out of their frames, and the two large Rembrandts were cut out of their backings. I’m thinking the mastermind who may have commissioned the theft would have been very upset by such treatment. Also, with thirteen pieces being stolen, you would think that if they had been divided up, that someone would step forward or screw up so that the authorities would get a trail to a recovery.

But the feds told me in 2010 that the FBI had not had a single “proof of life sighting” of any of the thirteen pieces, which in FBI lingo means that there had not been a photo taken of the pieces showing their whereabouts since the theft or a single piece of forensic evi-

dence, which would show that a person could back up their claim that they had access to or knowledge of the whereabouts of the stolen pieces. Which leads me to the belief that the pieces were stolen as a potential “get out of jail free” card for someone already in jail or someone who was facing a prison term. In the last chapter of *Master Thieves*, I tell the tale of just such a person, a mob leader who had been jailed four months before the Gardner heist, and the person who pledged to help get him out of jail.

BL: You have won Pulitzer Prizes, worked on investigations with *The Globe* and their famous Spotlight team. You have written about everything from the clergy abuse scandal inside the Boston Archdiocese to political scandals in Washington. *Master Thieves* continues your investigation into the Gardner heist. You retired in 2007, yet here you are still trying to recover those paintings.

SK: I was a founding member of *The Boston Globe’s* investigative Spotlight Team. It was commissioned in the early 1970s to work on stories that had purpose to Boston and New England, and its three Pulitzer Prizes, 1972, 1980, and 2003, are evidence to the success of focusing on such stories. I regard the Gardner as a similar story and backed up by my personal ties to the museum via my father and my cousins, both of whom were classical pianists who often performed at the museum. Because of those ties, I have come up with an alternative approach to gaining a recovery—a full-fledged public appeal, which would be powered by social media. I remember what attention the “Ice Bucket Challenge” gained in the summer of 2014 to ALS research. I

think a similar drive should be established to bring the public attention and energies towards a recovery. Such an appeal would include outreach to all segments of society both those law-abiding and criminal. The message should be that these masterpieces were put on the museum’s walls for all Bostonians, rich and poor, and that they remain missing (hidden somewhere!) serves no purpose. My sense is that no one knows where the artwork was hidden, and the two thieves and their boss who did know the whereabouts are now dead, as the FBI confirms. But there are still people alive who know or have suspicions about who did it, and what they may have done with the artwork. But those people are unlikely to say something because to do so is breaking some mob code of “omerta,” and to bring forward such information would be considered “ratting.” The conscience of these people has to be engaged and they have to be reminded that many of history’s greatest artists, including Van Gogh and Michelangelo, came from impoverished backgrounds like they and their families. Perhaps their grandchildren could be inspired by one of those masterpieces to become an artist but they need to be back on the museum gallery’s walls. They are doing no good being hidden away. It is time that they be returned. Regrettably, neither the FBI nor the museum has seen fit to advocate for the social media campaign. ■

Please visit Mr. Kurkjian’s Web site for additional background on his fantastic career: <http://stephenkurkjian.com/>. To reach Mr. Kurkjian regarding his work on the Gardner theft, email stephenkurkjian@gmail.com.

Natural Expressions

Music

On Friday, March 1, James Browning, a postdoctoral research associate in the Krueger Laboratory, will be performing at an indie rock show under the stage name Blackwing at Gussy’s Bar in Astoria, Queens (20-14 29th Street). Blackwing will be opening for the Spanish Power Pop group, Compañía de Sueños Ilimitada. Doors are at 7 p.m. and admission is \$10. More information about the show can be found [online](#).

Daniel Gareau of the Krueger Laboratory will be playing a rock show with Doors tribute band, The Lizard Kings, on Thursday, March 7. The show will be held

downtown at The Red Lion (151 Bleeker Street) from 9:30-10:30 p.m. and admission is \$10. Check out [The Lizard Kings](#) online for more information.

On Saturday, March 9 at 7 p.m., Lance Langston of the O’Donnell Laboratory and Alison North of The Rockefeller University Bio-Imaging Resource Center will be performing “The Tudors: Music of the English Reformation” at St. Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church (552 West End Avenue) with the Central City Chorus. This event features “Mass for Five Voices” by William Byrd, as well as the music of John Tavener, John Sheppard, Christopher Tye, Thomas Tallis, Thomas Tomkins, and others. Tick-

ets and information can be found online at the [Central City Chorus](#) website.

Digital Events

This month, Bernie Langs of The Rockefeller University Development Office announces the release of the animated music video “I Am Not the One,” created by GECCOVIZION with original music by Bernie Langs. The video can be viewed on Bernie Langs’ [YouTube](#) page.

Email Megan E. Kelley at mkelley@rockefeller.edu to submit your art/music/performance/sporting/other event for next month’s “Natural Expressions” and follow @NatSelections on Twitter for more events.

Pets of Tri-I

POOJA VISWANATHAN

In the third run of this series, I interview Mocha, the rabbit who lives with Natalie Omattage (Chen Lab, The Rockefeller University). I meet this fluffy one often, as Natalie and I share an apartment. If you would like your pet(s) featured in this series, please contact me at pviswanath@mail.rockefeller.edu.

Pooja Viswanathan: Mocha, I have never met a bunny like you before. What kind of bunny are you?

Mocha: I am a Lionhead bunny. We are named for the mane of fur around our heads! Lionheads are majestic creatures (I may be biased), and we are known for our sassy personalities. Some say I take after my mom, but I'd like to think we are just strong independent women!

PV: Is there a story behind your name?

M: I was originally named Ladybug but I didn't think it suited me very well. Mom is a big coffee drinker and was inspired by my mocha brown hair!

PV: How old are you? In human years?

M: I'm seven years old—some say that's about forty-nine in human years, but I still feel pretty young and spry! I was born in 2012, coincidentally, the same year my mom began grad school! I think that's how I knew we were meant to be together.

PV: What is your first memory?

M: Sadly, one of my first memories was being abandoned in the middle of an alley during a rainstorm. I still get scared during storms to this day. Fortunately, the friendly folks at the Missouri House Rabbit Society (MO HRS) came to my rescue and gave me a warm safe place to sleep and spend time with other bunnies!

PV: Tell us about your mom. When did you first meet her?

M: My mom's name is Natalie Omattage. We met in April 2014. She had just passed her qualifying exam at Washington University in St. Louis and wanted a furrever friend. I had spent nearly two years at the MO HRS and was very picky about who I wanted to be my next family. As she walked around, we locked eyes, and the rest, as they say, is history. Below is photographic evidence of us meeting for the first time.

PV: How does your mom belong in the Tri-I community?

M: She's a postdoc in Dr. Jue Chen's lab at Rockefeller. We made the trek from the Midwest to the Big Apple in September, and haven't looked back since. I'm definitely a big city bun!

PV: Where do you live?

M: I live with my mom in her room. My cage is a large dog crate, and I also have a wooden bunny castle so I can keep watch over my territory! I'm allowed to wander around the room so long as I don't chew on Mom's belongings. I



Photos Courtesy of Natalie Omattage

like to test my luck occasionally but Mom says I'm too cute to stay mad at for too long. :)

PV: If you could live anywhere else in the world, where would you live?

M: I think I'd want to live in Sri Lanka. All of mom's family lives there, and I could see myself being a beach bun and living that tropical life!

PV: What is your favorite food?

M: Sticking to the Bugs Bunny stereotype, I really do love carrots! Although, they are high in sugar so I'm not allowed to have very much. My other favorite foods are bok choy and brussel sprouts.

PV: What is your favorite weekend activity?

M: I like to splay out in my cage and relax after a long week of nibbling on hay and play-

ing with my toys. I miss Mom a lot during the work week so I often face her direction when I'm resting. I also like lots of scratches and snuggles when she's around!

PV: Do you have a funny story to share with us?

M: My mom's partner once took care of me when she was out of town. When we are really happy we binkie, or jump in the air while twisting our body and heads in the opposite direction. It was my first time running around freely on carpet so I binkied the whole time I was staying with him! He had no clue what was happening and thought he had "broken" me and was too scared to tell my mom. When he finally told her what had happened we both had a good chuckle! ■



Life on a Roll

ELODIE PAUWELS

Jacques Cœur Palace

<https://elodiephoto.wordpress.com/>

Bourges is located in the middle of France, where Jacques Cœur was born at the end of the fourteenth century. Among other duties, he was a merchant in charge of trading goods between his country and the Levant under King Charles VII.

Although he never lived there, Cœur ordered the construction in Bourges of an avant-garde gothic-style imposing hôtel particulier (now called palace). He chose scallop shells and hearts (in French: "Saint-Jacques" and "Cœur") as heraldry, which can be seen at many places on and in the edifice. His motto "*A vaillans cuers riens impossible*" means "To a valiant heart, nothing is impossible."

Jacques Cœur's story has been novelized by a French author, Jean-Christophe Rufin, a Bourges native himself. ■

