Murdoch University

Katy Watson-Kell

Reimagining a Melbourne icon: Jules Lefebvre's Chloe

Abstract:

Created in 1875 by French artist Jules Lefebvre, the nude painting *Chloe* has been the star attraction at Melbourne's Young and Jackson Hotel for over a century. While researching my novel-in-progress Capturing Chloe, I unearthed new information which richly informs the characters in my novel. This paper will juxtapose Irish writer George Moore's memoir The End of Marie Pellegrin, and an 1876 interview with Lefebvre by art critic Lucy Hooper, to explore the identity of the model 'Marie' who allegedly sat for Chloe. I will argue that Lefebvre's muse may have been Marie Pellegrin, a beautiful card-playing rebel who not only loved the voyous of Montmartre, but was also the intimate friend of Victorine Meurent, the model for Manet's Olympia (1863). According to art historian Eunice Lipton, Meurent was a student at the Académie Julian in 1875 where Lefebvre tutored George Moore in life drawing. It was an oppressive period in Paris, particularly for the women of Montmartre who were pilloried for their pivotal role in the Paris Commune (1871). In his Lucy Hooper interview, Lefebvre claimed his model was 'in the hands of a gang of low confederates'. Could Marie have been a teenage Communard, a rifletoting petroleuse living in fear under President MacMahon's regime of 'Moral Order' following the oppression of the Commune? By challenging mythologies which neglect the political, social and artistic milieu in Paris leading up to Chloe's creation, this paper shines new light on Lefebvre's masterpiece and the multifarious life, and ultimate fate, of his young Parisian model.

Biographical note:

Katy Watson-Kell is a PhD candidate at Murdoch University in Western Australia. She is the award-winning author of two novels for young adults, *Juice* (2001) and *Mama's Trippin'* (2006) published by Fremantle Press. Her thesis-in-progress *Capturing Chloe: A Creative and Theoretical Journey* explores the historical backdrop of Jules Lefebvre's iconic painting *Chloe*, and the impact of the artwork on Australian soldiers during World War One.

Keywords:

Chloe – Jules Lefebvre – identity – representation – George Moore – Paris commune – creative writing – art history

Capturing Chloe: genesis

I first heard her name one cool September evening. It was over dinner, on a first date, at Subiaco's Witch's Cauldron restaurant. I was sharing dreams of *la vie de bohème* with Neil, a young man-about-town, who had recently returned to Perth after years in those mighty big smokes of Melbourne and London.

'It's strange,' I remember saying, between nibbles of sizzling garlic prawns, 'a model sat for my latest painting but everyone believes it's a self-portrait. My mother has a theory; she claims artists subconsciously paint themselves. The model didn't resemble me at all, so perhaps there's something in that.'

'You're studying for a Diploma in Fine Arts.' Neil seemed impressed. 'Well, I suggest you go and see *Chloe*.'

'Chloe?'

'Yes,' he said, with a smile. 'You'll find her in the saloon bar at Young and Jackson's opposite Flinders Street Railway Station in Melbourne. She's a nude,' he said, as an afterthought, 'and quite beguiling; couldn't believe my eyes when I first saw her hanging there.'

'Ah! So it's that kind of painting.'

Neil shook his head. 'No, there's nothing tasteless about her. *Chloe's* one of the finest examples of classical art you could hope to lay your eyes on, and heaven help the person who shows her disrespect. The regular drinkers at that pub would eat them for breakfast. You see, it's their duty to protect her. She's their queen and they adore her. It's a mystery, that's for sure; *Chloe* could be hanging in the Louvre but through an odd twist of fate, she fits right in with a bar-full of knockabout Aussies.'

'Well,' I said, intrigued, 'one day I hope to see her.'

Neil poured another glass of chardonnay and the conversation wandered. We were married within the year and on our honeymoon road trip 'over east' we spent a few days in Melbourne, but *Chloe* was never mentioned. Footy season was in full flight and a new job waited for Neil in Sydney.

The ensuing years passed swiftly, my marriage to Neil ultimately ended, but in a dark corner of my subconscious *Chloe* was waiting patiently, because one night, in a fitful dream, she came and asked me to tell her story.

An introduction to Lefebvre's Chloe

Chloe, the iconic nude painting, which has hung at Young and Jackson Hotel for over a century, is an enduring emblem of the close links between the Australian and French people, and a powerful symbol of femininity in a male dominated environment. Chloe's creator Jules Lefebvre grew up in Amiens (Vento 1888), the French city so bravely defended by Australian soldiers during World War One (Paterson 1934: 194). Lefebvre's artistic talents were apparent from early childhood, and at 16 years of age he received a five-year scholarship from the City of Amiens to commence his academic training in Paris. By the time he completed Chloe in 1875, Lefebvre was a

Chevalier of the Legion of Honour (Vento 1888) and a venerated professor at the Academie Julian art school in the Passages des Panoramas (eds. Weisberg & Becker 1999: 38).

Chloe made its debut as Exhibit 1298 at the 1875 Paris Salon, an annual government exhibition held at the Grand Palais des Champs-Elysees (Salon de 1875). However, contrary to time-honoured beliefs that Chloe received a gold medal at the Paris Salon (Holt 1994; Young and Jackson Hotel 2014), the painting gained no such honour; Jules Lefebvre had been awarded the maximum number of medals achievable at previous Salons, and was deemed 'out of contest' or unrivalled, and Chloe was listed 'hors concour' in the Salon catalogue (Salon de 1875: 189). Nonetheless, on its unveiling in Australia, Chloe received a Special First Degree of Merit medal at the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition (International Exhibition: Sydney NSW 1879), and again, some months later, the painting was awarded first class honours at the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition ('The pictures' 1881). Chloe was subsequently purchased by the eminent surgeon Dr Thomas Fitzgerald who, in May 1883, loaned the painting to the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) where it was displayed 'cautiously in a dim corner' (Holt 1994: 122-125). However, once the gallery commenced opening its doors on Sundays, a passionate debate erupted in the press over the French nude's display on the Sabbath. Finally, exhausted by the fracas, Fitzgerald wrote to 'the trustees of the gallery, requesting that "Chloe" may be returned to him' ('Tuesday, May 29' 1883). In her seminal essay on the 1883 NGV Sunday opening scandal, Stephanie Holt (1994) concluded:

"Chloe" was a shameless minx to some, a psychic virgin to others: a painting to be offered to an eager public to enlighten and elevate... Perhaps it is appropriate that this eruption of passions, this irresolvable conflict over such an enigmatic work... should have been so abruptly and inconclusively terminated with Fitzgerald's reclamation of the picture (134).

The 1883 NGV Sunday opening scandal 'established *Chloe* as Melbourne's *femme fatale* and... a celebrated Melbourne icon' (NGV 1995). Following Fitzgerald's death, Henry Figsby Young, a sharp-eyed hotelkeeper and art collector, acquired *Chloe* from the doctor's estate for the sum of 800 pounds ('Chloe. Bought' 1909). Recognising the exciting potential of the notorious artwork, Young installed the nude in the saloon bar of Young and Jackson Hotel, and eight decades later *Chloe* was so synonymous with the famous hotel that an amendment was applied to Historic Building No. 708 on the Victorian Heritage Register of Historic Buildings to include 'the painting "Chloe" by Jules Lefebvre' (VHR 1989).

Enigmatic Marie: the model for *Chloe*

In my novel *Capturing Chloe*, I unravel the weft of human experience embedded in Lefebvre's masterpiece to reimagine the life of a rebellious young artist's model during a perilous period in modern French history. A second narrative thread explores the emotional impact of the painting *Chloe* on 16-year-old twins Paddy and Alf Desmond once they enlist in the 39th Battalion A.I.F. in 1916, and find themselves

fighting for survival in the muddy trenches of the Somme valley during the defence of Amiens in World War One.

Since *Chloe* first captivated the collective imagination of Melburnians, sensational myths have circulated about the French model who posed for the painting. In a newspaper interview marking her milestone 100th birthday, Mrs Ethel Young, daughter-in-law of Henry Figsby Young, shared her affection for *Chloe* and the deep sympathy she felt for Lefebvre's tragic young model who 'fell in love with the artist, let him paint her, and then was jilted' (NGV 2014). Fueling this pervasive and popular myth is the erroneous claim that Lefebvre rejected Marie to marry her sister (BBC 2003; Nouveaunet 2005). However, the true identity of Lefebvre's muse has remained largely an unsolved mystery, other than a brief 'historical' account provided on the Young and Jackson Hotel website:

Chloe - A young Parisian artist's model named Marie was immortalised by Jules Joseph Lefebvre as *Chloe*. Little is known of her, except she was approximately 19 years of age at the time of painting. Roughly two years later, Marie, after throwing a party for friends, boiled a soup of poisonous matches – drank the concoction and died. The reason for her suicide is thought to be unrequited love (2014, 'History of... Chloe', para. 3).

Research during the conceptual stages of *Capturing Chloe* focussed on developing an authentic persona for Lefebvre's model Marie, while recreating the political, social and artistic minefield that was Paris during the mid-1870s. My first mission was to establish the veracity, or otherwise, of Young and Jackson Hotel's vignette about *Chloe's* model's identity, and the hapless fate which befell her. I found the kernel of this sad story in a youthful memoir by Irish writer George Moore (1886), where he reminisces about an evening spent in Paris with his friend Lewis Welden Hawkins¹ and a beautiful artist's model named Marie:

She was Lefebvre's *Chloe*; so everyone sees her now. Her end was a tragic one. She invited her friends to dinner, and with the few pence that remained she bought some boxes of matches, boiled them, and drank the water. No one knew why; some said it was love (123).

Additional clues on the identity of 'Lefebvre's *Chloe*' appear in an 1876 article written by American journalist Lucy Hamilton Hooper. In 1874, following a sudden decline in her personal fortunes, Hooper relocated to Paris where she wrote columns on society, art and culture for revered American journals (Willard & Livermore 2005: 403-404). In her first paper on the Paris Salon of 1875, she sang the praises of Lefebvre's *Chloe* describing it as 'one of the loveliest nude figures in the exhibition' (Hooper 1875a), and in a second critique wrote of her 'relief to turn... to the exquisitely pure and charming "Chloe" of Lefebvre' (Hooper 1875b) after viewing the colossal painting *En Avant* by Betsellere (1875), a grotesque military tableau depicting the incumbent French president Patrice MacMahon astride a wild-eyed rearing steed, brandishing his sword in victory over slain and brutalised warriors (1875b). Hooper's passion for Lefebvre's oeuvre eventually led her to his studio where she 'paused in admiration before the original sketch of... Chloe' (1876: 220). Writing in her *From Abroad* column for the *Appletons' Journal*, Hooper prefaced her

praise for the *Chloe* study with a meditation on the anonymity of artist's models, and her curiosity about the lived experiences and final destinies of those 'from whose living beauty the artist has won the charm of his picture?' (1876: 220). She went on to recount intimate details Lefebvre had shared about the model who sat for *Chloe*, details which mirror certain elements found in George Moore's youthful memoir:

She sat to me during the entire winter, and in the spring I quitted Paris to travel through Holland and Belgium. On my return I found that the poor young creature was dead... the poor child poisoned herself by washing phosphorus from friction matches, and then swallowing the decoction (Lefebvre, quoted in Hooper: 220).

However, unlike George Moore's account, Lefebvre made no suggestion of unrequited love as the rumoured cause of his model's death. Rather, his theory on the trigger for her suicide raises more questions than it answers:

She was a girl of more refinement and elevation of sentiment than is usually to be found among persons of her position, and, being in the hands of a gang of low confederates, they had attempted to force her into a way of life from which her soul revolted (Lefebvre, quoted in Hooper: 220).

Lefebvre's assertion that his model was 'in the hands of a gang of low confederates' is noteworthy – the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines a confederate as 'a person confederated with another or others; an ally; a conspirator, an accomplice' (2007, vol. 1: 485). The political climate in Paris during the mid-1870s was tense, to say the least. The city was still recovering from France's crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, and the slaughter of an estimated 25,000 of its citizens as a consequence of the Versailles government's brutal oppression of the Paris Commune during *semaine senglante* in May 1871 (Eichner 2004: 35). Cultural historian Bertrand Taithe (2001) states:

In the Versailles usage, the Communards were compared with confederates, the term *federates* being actually used by the Communards themselves to refer to their decentralist political project... (21).

In the winter of 1874-75, the period when *Chloe* was being created, the French Third Republic was led by President Patrice MacMahon, an avowed monarchist. A former head of the Versailles Army, MacMahon upheld a repressive regime of 'Moral Order' over the French population, meting out dire consequences for suspected Communards and women deemed as 'too emancipated' (Sowerwine 2001: 29-30). It was a perilous period for the working-class citizens of Montmartre, particularly women who had taken up arms at Place Blanche, and other barricades, when Marshal MacMahon ordered the Versailles troops to storm the city gates in May 1871. Radical women were portrayed in the press as lethal petroleuses, or petrol carriers, not only in France but throughout the Western world, bearing the brunt of the blame for destructive acts perpetrated by government troops during the repression of the Commune (Eichner 2004; Gullickson 1996). Describing the complex motives which gave rise to the women's radicalization, Carolyn Eichner (2004) states:

Fired by working women's action, the insurrection developed as a ripe environment for the emergence and elaboration of multiple feminist socialisms. Communardes entered the fight to challenge and change the institutions and power relations that oppressed them (1).

Lefebvre's description of his model as 'a girl of more refinement... than is usually to be found among persons of her position' (Lefebvre, cited in Hooper 1876: 220) implies the young woman was proletarian. Furthermore, at the 1874 Paris Salon, Lefebvre was criticised in the press for exhibiting a portrait of the Prince Imperial (nephew of the former French Emperor Napoleon III), betraying the artist's imperialist sympathies and by default, his opposition to the emerging egalitarianism of the Third French Republic (Proth 1875: 20-21). Bearing in mind Lefebvre's elitist predilection and access to the upper echelons of French society, consorting with a woman suspected of criminal links, in this case his model for *Chloe*, would not only be abhorrent but acutely dangerous under MacMahon's regime of Moral Order. This realisation led me to question whether Lefebvre intentionally distanced himself from his 'confederate' model when he quit Paris on completion of *Chloe*, and why, when he returned some months later, he may have revealed her tragic story to Lucy Hooper to attribute the blame for her suicide to the 'gang of low confederates' (1876: 220).

In another of George Moore's reminiscences, *Memoirs of my Dead Life*, he tells the story of a young artist's model Marie Pellegrin, who was found dead after a card party with her friends had ended badly. Moore described Marie as 'this refined girl... who might have sat to Raphael for a Virgin' (1906: 26) and he was surprised to discover she was a working class girl from Montmartre:

This delicate woman that I had felt could not be of the Montmartre kin was the daughter of a concierge on the Boulevard Exterieur. She had run away from home at fifteen, had danced at the Elysee Montmartre (27).

Moore's portrayal of Marie Pellegrin echoes Jules Lefebvre's depiction of his model's 'refinement and elevation of sentiment' given in the Lucy Hooper interview. Not only this, Moore wrote that Marie was the intimate friend of Victorine Meurent, or *La Glue*, the model who sat for Edouard Manet's infamous painting *Olympia* (1906: 30-31). In 1875, the year *Chloe* was completed, both Moore and Meurent were students at the Academie Julian where Jules Lefebvre tutored in life drawing. While researching the life of Victorine Meurent, American art historian Eunice Lipton (1991) discovered a rare unpublished manuscript by Manet's biographer Adolphe Tabarant. In Tabarant's manuscript he describes an intimate scene he once observed between Victorine Meurent and Marie Pellegrin:

She swore, she made Victorine swear, that they would never separate again... She moved in with Victorine... there was never any peace among the women, who embraced and pulled out each other's hair at the same time... (Tabarant, quoted in Lipton: 151).

According to Moore, a prince once paid Marie a small fortune to travel with him to Russia. But missing her friends and old life terribly, she soon deserted her royal lover and returned to the Quartier Breda. Clearly infatuated by the young beauty, Moore was concerned about the potential consequences of Marie's chaotic lifestyle: her gambling habits, her love of absinthe and the 'gentle-eyed' *vouyous* or thugs of Montmartre,² not to mention the rough women she chose to associate with: 'If she

lived, Marie would one day be selling fried potatoes on the streets. And this decadence – was it her fault?' (1906: 40).

It seems implausible that rebellious Marie would permit anyone, as Lefebvre suggested, to 'force her into a life from which her soul revolted' (Hooper 1876: 220). She appears, by Moore's accounts, to have been an active participant in her own life, a girl willing to take daring risks but when circumstances changed, or were not to her liking, she was prepared to reconsider her options and return to her beloved Montmartre. Lefebvre, according to Hooper, held his model for *Chloe* in high regard; therefore, it may have been hard for him to accept she was a willing collaborator in her dangerous lifestyle. No, far easier to blame her death on the 'low gang of confederates' (1876: 220) she was known to spend her nights with: card-playing viragos of dubious morals who frequented the Rat Mort café (Choquette 2001: 152), the 'unnatural' women who, in the conservative artist's imagination, may have 'represented' the *petroleuses*, or female incendiaries, who gave birth to the Paris Commune on the butte of Montmartre.

Moore's perennial affection for Marie is clearly evident in his memoir:

Marie Pellegrin is enshrined in my memory like a miniature in a case... I was her friend and watched by her deathbed. Am I not her natural historian? (1906: 47-48).

The friendship between George Moore and Marie Pellegrin blossomed in 1875, while Moore was Lefebvre's student at the Academie Julian in Paris (Campbell 1995: 163). This scenario poses an intriguing possibility. Was it Moore who shared the news of Marie's death with Lefebvre, on his return from Holland and Belgium? In theory, if this was the case, Moore would likely have concealed Marie's hard living ways to protect her 'refined' reputation, while deriding the 'low gang' (Hooper 1876: 220) of female friends he witnessed stealing from her on her death bed (Moore 1906: 38-39).

In her seminal feminist text *The Second Sex*, French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (2009) wrote:

One is not born, but rather becomes woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine (283).

De Beauvoir's theory provides valuable context when considering the myriad myths and representations assigned to the model for *Chloe*: innocent ingénue, scarlet temptress, rejected lover, and 'reluctant' gang member (Hooper 1876), to name a few. When considering the inevitable spaces and impugners which often complicate representations, Jen Webb (2009) states:

...something utterly central to representation is social identity, and that beyond its logics, its techniques and its history is the story of how it is used to make social reality (131).

Webb's theory lends support to de Beauvoir's contention that an 'identity' or 'representation' is assigned to a woman as a consequence of societal expectations, a

notion which appears to be borne out in the case of *Chloe*, and the ever-shifting representations of its model's identity.

In the fictional 'characterisation' I am creating for Marie in my novel, I try to 'capture' the enigmatic qualities conveyed by the model when she was immortalised in Lefebvre's masterpiece. George Moore's memoirs richly inform this work, as it now appears possible, based on my research, that the Irish writer's friend 'Marie Pellegrin' was the model who sat for *Chloe*. According to an official French death record I recently discovered, a woman named Marie Eugenie Pellegrin died on the 23rd July, 1875 at Pré-Saint-Gervais in Paris (Décès Banlieue Parisienne 1873-1882). This significant find may prove crucial in solving the mystery of the model for *Chloe's* identity. Furthermore, if details the artist shared with Hooper (1876) were authentic, there is an even darker ending to her story:

She was taken to the hospital, where she died in a few hours; and as her unnatural relatives refused to claim the body, it was handed over to the doctors of the establishment for dissection (Lefebvre, quoted in Hooper: 220).

Marie Pellegrin ended her life when Lefebvre was travelling in Belgium and Holland, and he expressed profound regret at his ill-timed absence: 'Had I but been in Paris... I could have saved her from that last indignity, at least' (Hooper 1876: 220). His account of Marie's final 'indignity' affected me profoundly. I kept imagining her exquisite corpse prostrate on the dissection table, a volt of vulture-like students butchering her with bloodied scalpels (McCullough 2011: 116-117). Surely this was a story too gruesome to reveal; Lefebvre's beautiful model for *Chloe* dismembered, because no one loved her enough to claim her. But I took some comfort in the knowledge that the artist's story was anecdotal. Perhaps he was misinformed, or the victim of idle gossip? Bearing in mind, after all, he wasn't in Paris when the tragedy happened.

On that day of grisly discoveries, I remember pausing by a window to watch a squadron of spiralling pelicans – their languid circling was hypnotic, I felt envious of their wildness. The word 'pelican' took shape in my mind: pelican – Pellegrin – lovely limpid words, one avian, the other humankind, and somehow evoking a similar essence. But then, in the midst of my reverie, an illusory bolt shot through the clouds dispersing the dream-like pelicans; a peregrine falcon, the world's fastest creature, descending in full stoop towards its target. I closed my eyes, what was this chimera trying to show me. Pelican and peregrine – words that morphed so naturally into Pellegrin – was Lefebvre's *Chloe* stretching her wings? Telling me her story was far from over? That rebellious girl with the 'blue-black hair lying close about her head like feathers' (Moore 1906: 24) was poking the ribs of my imagination, reminding me of a curious question that still remained unanswered.

An archival newspaper article titled 'Australian Artists Association Summer Exhibition' (1887), mentions a painting named *Chloe*. However, the article does not refer to Lefebvre's *Chloe*, as I initially assumed would be the case, but to a portrait by James Clarke Waite, one of Australia's most revered nineteenth century artists:

Mr. J. C. Waite sends in... a half-length figure entitled "Chloe," which is stated to be a portrait of the young lady who sat to M. Lefebvre as a model for the picture of the

same name. It is a charming head and face, with the roundness, freshness, and bloom of youth in the countenance, and a look of innocence and simplicity, which is not always associated with the female models of Parisian artists (14).

In his opening address for the exhibition, the association's secretary, Mr. Ashton, stated the works 'on these walls have mostly been done during the last six months' ('Australian Artists' 1887: 14). Was Waite's *Chloe* portrait one of these recent works? And if the artist's claim was true and his model was Lefebvre's *Chloe*, could Marie have been living in Australia during the 1880s? Within the limitations of this paper, it is not possible to explore this intriguing dilemma. However, in terms of my creative practice and development of Marie's character, questions such as these are making her peregrine wings grow stronger, strong enough to lift her from the horror of that cold dissection table, and over the waves to another life at Young and Jackson Hotel in Melbourne.

Endnotes

¹ In *Confessions of a Young Man*, Moore employed the pseudonym 'Marshall' to denote the symbolist artist Lewis Weldon Hawkins (LWH). Hawkins was Moore's closest friend in Paris, and in the period when he shared an evening with LWH and the model Marie, Moore's biographer claims Marie was Hawkins' new lover: *see* Frazier, A 2000, *George Moore 1852-1933*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 29-33 & 489, note 213.

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² Moore uses the pseudonym 'Octave Barre' for Lewis Welden Hawkins in *The End of Marie Pellegrin*. While describing Marie Pellegrin's character to George Moore, Octave Barre shares a telling vignette about the beautiful artist's model who had captured the young Irishman's imagination: 'Sa jupe avait des trous, Elle aimait des voyous, Ils ont de yeux si doux' - 'Her skirt had holes, She loved thugs, They have gentle eyes' - Moore, GM 1906, 'The end of Marie Pellegrin', *Memoirs of my Dead Life*, London: William Heinemann, 28.

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