

Footsteps

# A Year in Paris That Transformed Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis

As a college student, Jacqueline Bouvier spent her junior year in Paris, and the city became one of the greatest influences in her life.



Jacqueline Bouvier, third from left, on the deck of the SS De Grasse, which set sail from New York to France with students from Smith College's study-abroad program. She called her college year in Paris her "happiest year." Credit Getty Images

**By Ann Mah**  
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In August 1949, a 20-year-old Jacqueline Bouvier arrived in France and began a year that would change her life. Before her marriages to Jack and Aristotle, before the glamour and the tragedy, before she lived in the White House or worked at a publishing house, she was a college student boarding a ship to spend her junior year abroad in Paris.

With her French name and heritage (one-eighth French from her father's side), she was already predisposed to admiring France. But the academic year of 1949 to 1950 cemented her passion, allowing her to absorb the country's language and culture — and she would seek inspiration and intellectual refuge in these outlets for the rest of her life.

From the genteel 16th arrondissement where she resided with a host family, to the narrow streets of the Latin Quarter where she attended university classes, Jacqueline's time in battered postwar Paris would inspire an unabashed intellectual flowering.

“Paris was the perfect incubator for her myriad talents. Her style, her razor-sharp wit, her ways of imagining, were honed there,” said Alice Kaplan, the John M. Musser chair in French literature at Yale University, and the author of *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis*, which takes a thorough look at Jacqueline's transformative Paris experience. “Whether she was turning to Proust and Saint Simon as a guide to the hornet's nest of Washington politics, or shaping a symbolic wardrobe as first lady, France was always her compass.”



As a college student, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis lived in this majestic seven-story building on Avenue Mozart with a host family — a discreet plaque on an exterior wall boasts of the building's illustrious former tenant. Credit Joann Pai for The New York Times

I recently set out to retrace Jacqueline’s days in Paris as an exchange student 70 years ago, seeking a glimpse of the period she later called “the high point in my life, my happiest and most carefree year.”

Her sojourn began on the SS De Grasse, setting sail from New York to Le Havre with the Smith College Junior Year in Paris, part of a group of 35 young women. Because her college, Vassar, lacked a study-abroad program, Jacqueline applied to Smith’s.

Smith’s was the oldest American study-abroad program in Paris — begun in 1925, paused during World War II, and resumed in 1947 — Smith required its students to pledge that they would speak only French at all times.

Upon arrival, Jacqueline first polished her language skills at a six-week immersion course in Grenoble, before beginning her studies in Paris. “I have an absolute mania now about learning to speak French perfectly,” she wrote in a letter to her stepbrother, Yusha Auchincloss. Her coursework focused mainly on art history and literature, and her classes took her to the Sorbonne, the Louvre museum’s École du Louvre, the prestigious Institut d’Études Politiques (known as Sciences Po), and the Parisian center of American study abroad, Reid Hall.

In the heart of Montparnasse, Reid Hall has welcomed American students since the 1920s. Today the sprawling structure is part of the Columbia Global Centers, an ambitious educational network in nine cities around the globe; it also houses the study abroad programs of more than a dozen American and British colleges and universities. I found Smith’s offices up a lopsided wooden staircase, the warren of narrow rooms and worn terra-cotta tile floors hinting at the building’s origins as an 18th-century porcelain factory.



Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis often left Paris for weekends at the Château de Courances, the grand country estate of the aristocratic de Ganay family, about 40 miles from Paris. Credit Joann Pai for The New York Times

“A lot has changed, but some things haven’t,” Marie-Madeleine Charlier, the associate director of Smith in Paris, told me in her office. As in Jacqueline’s day, students still live with host families; they still honor a language pledge — I saw it posted prominently above the Smith office door, signed by all

20 students of the 2018 to 2019 academic year — they still lounge in Reid Hall’s spacious courtyard on sunny days; they still discuss politics, architecture and theater in small group seminars. There remains, as well, one eternal similarity: “Every student goes through an identity change,” said Mehammed Mack, the program’s faculty director.

Like the decades of students before and after her, Jacqueline, too, experienced a transformation. Reflecting on her academic year in Paris, she wrote in 1951: “I learned not to be ashamed of a real hunger for knowledge, something I had always tried to hide.”



By The New York Times

In 1949, World War II still cast a shadow over France. Heat and hot water were scarce; baths were limited to once a week. Everyone, including Jacqueline, had a ration card for coffee and sugar. Postwar housing shortages meant most Smith students lived in a spartan dormitory at Reid Hall, but Jacqueline’s mother, Janet Auchincloss, used her social connections to secure more comfortable lodging for her daughter.

In the slightly stuffy 16th arrondissement on the western edge of the city, I stood across from 78 Avenue Mozart gazing at the majestic seven-story building adorned with glazed bricks of sea foam green and embellished with Art Nouveau flourishes. Jacqueline lived here with a host family — a discreet plaque on an exterior wall boasts of the building’s illustrious former tenant — sharing a rambling, bourgeois apartment with seven other people.

Jacqueline’s host mother, the aristocratic Comtesse Guyot de Renty, had suffered greatly during the war. As members of the Resistance, she and her husband had been deported to Germany in 1944; the Comte de Renty died in a slave labor camp, while his wife spent the duration of the war at Ravensbrück, a German women’s concentration camp. After the war, the Comtesse de Renty found herself in reduced circumstances, and “being from a bourgeois family, she decided to take in students,” said Claude du Granrut, one of de Renty’s daughters, who lived with Jacqueline that year. (The household also included du Granrut’s sister, her sister’s young son, and two other Smith students.) “The apartment was large and pleasant,” Mrs. du Granrut told me as we sipped tiny cups of coffee in her sunny living room. “But there was only one bathroom. And no heat! It didn’t work. Jacqueline put on gloves to study. I remember her always being covered up.”



A room at the Château de Courances, the country estate of the aristocratic de Ganay family and a weekend destination for Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Credit Joann Pai for The New York Times

Jacqueline and Mrs. du Granrut forged a lifelong friendship that year — both born in 1929, both university students on the Left Bank. “She was part of our family,” Mrs. du Granrut said. “My mother was very fond of her — and she loved to go with my mother because my mother couldn’t speak a word of English.”

The Comtesse de Renty took Jacqueline to museums, in particular the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, which is housed in a 19th-century wing of the Louvre building on the Rue de Rivoli. Here, they viewed collections of Sèvres porcelain and French furniture and discussed the characteristics of each era — lessons in the history of French design and decorative arts that may have proved useful years later. “When I visited the White House, I saw every room had its own style,” Mrs. du Granrut said. “Some pieces were purchased, some were borrowed, but she had the flair of combining them to create a small collection.”

A short walk from Mrs. du Granrut’s apartment, I entered the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and stepped into a labyrinth of rooms displaying objets d’art that spanned several centuries. Beyond the magnificent marquetry and carved furniture, I noticed a gallery devoted to the Empire period of Napoléon Bonaparte. Later, I discovered that Jacqueline decorated the Red Room at the White House with elements of this same classic French style, and she spoke eloquently about it in her 1962 television special, “A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy.”



In letters home, Jacqueline as a college student in Paris wrote of going to the Ritz and “being swanky.” The Ritz Bar features Art Deco décor and a menu of modern cocktails. Credit Joann Pai for The New York Times

Although Jacqueline “enjoyed being in a French home,” said Mrs. du Granrut, nevertheless “she left on the weekends.” Her destination was often the Château de Courances, the grand country estate of the aristocratic de Ganay family, about 40 miles from Paris. Jacqueline had met Paul de Ganay through society connections of her stepfamily (her stepfather, Hugh Auchincloss, was a Washington financier), and she enjoyed horseback riding on their grounds. “She rode very, very well. She loved it,” Mrs. du Granrut said.

Today, the Château de Courances and its manicured 185-acre park are open about seven months of the year, limited to weekends and holidays. Its stables were destroyed by a fire in 1978. But horseback riding in Paris seemed a quintessential Jackie experience, and so I contacted Horse in the City Paris, a private horse-riding guide, for a morning trot in the Bois de Boulogne. With several stables and two racing tracks, the park, west of Paris and just outside the city limits, has long been a popular spot for equestrians — and, according to at least one of her biographies, Jacqueline rode here, too.

My guide, Baptiste Auclair, met me in the park with a picnic of coffee and croissants, and two horses tucked into a trailer. A licensed riding instructor, he soon had me mounted and trotting, even though I had never been on a horse before. We ambled along the park’s wooded trails, passing artificial lakes and streams, the sun casting dappled shadows through the trees. On long unbroken stretches of alleys, Auclair urged the horses into a gallop and — even as I clutched the mane of my steed with a petrified death grip — I thrilled to the sense of speed and power, the rush of wind against my face, the intensity of the exercise.

When she wasn’t studying, Jacqueline wrote of behaving “like the maid on her day out, putting on a fur coat and going to the middle of town and being swanky, at the Ritz.” Lacking a fur, I got out my nicest handbag and met a friend at the Ritz Hotel for a cocktail. Reopened in 2016 after nearly four years of renovation, the opulent hotel, in the city center at the Place Vendôme, now has four separate bars; we chose the eponymous Ritz Bar because it existed during Jacqueline’s student days. Resplendent with Art Deco trimmings, the bar felt swanky indeed, and if the menu of experimental cocktails seemed slightly out of place, I stayed true to the era by sipping an icy martini.

Feeling merry after the strong drink, I took a stroll to celebrate being in Paris. A few blocks from the Ritz, I passed the Westin Paris-Vendôme, a massive Beaux-Arts structure that was once the Hôtel Continental and opened in 1878 as the most luxurious hotel in Paris. In 1951, Jacqueline stayed here briefly with her sister, Lee Bouvier, while on a summer tour of Europe. The pair recorded their high-spirited adventures in a tongue-in-cheek illustrated scrapbook that was eventually published in 1974 under the title, *One Special Summer*.



The gardens of the Château de Courances, the country estate where Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis often spent weekends. Credit Joann Pai for The New York Times

Jacqueline's next trip to Paris — the state visit of June 1961, in which President John F. Kennedy, five months into his term, declared himself the man who accompanied his wife to Paris — was a public declaration of her Francophilia. French newspapers celebrated the first lady's style and French fluency, her keen interest in French culture. "She prefers the 'intellectual' films of our avant-garde directors," wrote the weekly, *Paris Match*. The three-day visit swept through some of the grandest spaces in Paris: reception rooms at the Hôtel de Ville, the hall of mirrors at Versailles, the presidential Élysée Palace. But despite the glamour and ceremony, Jacqueline still remembered old friends like the de Rentys, the de Ganays, and Jeanne Saleil (the former Smith in Paris director), inviting them to events.

Paris continued to call to Jacqueline after her 1968 marriage to the Greek shipping magnate, Aristotle Onassis. (No stranger to the City of Light, he owned an imposing apartment at 88 Avenue Foch in the 16th arrondissement, and even had his own preferred table at the restaurant Maxim's, an Art Nouveau landmark.) At this point, however, her desire for privacy had grown intense. In the ensuing years of

their marriage and after Onassis's death in 1975, we can only guess at her French life from bread crumb clues — such as the books she published as an editor at Doubleday in New York. The final one, *Paris After the Liberation*, by Antony Beevor and Artemis Cooper, included the period of Jacqueline's student days.

On my final day, I wondered how Jacqueline would visit today's Paris. If, like me, she found herself with a free evening, how would she spend it? A public lecture, in French, with three young writers, held at Reid Hall — her old student stamping grounds — seemed like the type of event she would have enjoyed, with its focus on contemporary French literature.

The Grande Salle at Reid Hall was packed with a mixed Franco-American crowd when I arrived a few minutes before the lecture. I squeezed into a seat near the back and listened as the writers Tash Aw, Édouard Louis, and Caroline Nguyen presented a panel discussion called “Tout sur nos mères” (All about our mothers), debating social class and mobility, cultural identity, sexuality and the influence of family. It was a Friday night and the audience was rapt, with many taking notes. I thought back to something Claude du Granrut had told me: “We showed Jacqueline things no one else could have shown her. Above all, we showed her the French way of life, the intellectual life, the artistic life, the charm of France.”

As I strolled home along the Boulevard du Montparnasse, the remnants of a super moon glowing against the sky, the cafes overflowed onto the sidewalk, with patrons outside smoking, drinking and filling the mild night with their chatter. My mind felt alive with the talk I'd just heard. “When you are bourgeois, you live life in two places,” Mr. Louis, the French author, had said. “There's the life of the body — to eat, drink, have sex. And then there's the life of the mind. For my family, there was only the life of the body. But don't we have the right to exist on two levels?”



Le Select, a classic Montparnasse cafe, saw a steady stream of college students when Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis studied in Paris, as it does today. Credit Joann Pai for The New York Times



## IF YOU GO

The terrasse of Le Select has round marble tables, rattan chairs and great people watching. Hemingway drank at this classic Montparnasse cafe, as did Fitzgerald, Picasso — and also, a steady stream of college students during Jackie's era.

The Left Bank bistro Roger la Grenouille was “one of Jacqueline's favorites,” said Claude du Granrut. Open since 1930, the narrow dining room has preserved its old-fashioned charm, and its menu of classics is well-prepared.

Horse in the City Paris offers guided horse-riding tours for riders of all experience levels at several Paris locations, including the Bois de Boulogne and the grounds of the Château de Versailles.

In letters home, Jacqueline wrote of going to the Ritz and “being swanky.” Glittering after a recent renovation, the Ritz Bar features Art Deco décor and a menu of modern cocktails. Across the hall, the Bar Hemingway evokes the postwar era, with paneled walls, Chesterfield banquettes, white-jacketed waiters and the memorabilia of its namesake regular.

At Reid Hall, the Columbia Global Centers and the Columbia Institute of Ideas and Imagination offer a full calendar of lectures and seminars, open to the public.

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Ann Mah, the author of the novel, *The Lost Vintage*,” divides her time between Paris and Wash. D.C., where she is based.

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