

A Conversation about the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art

Summary written by Katharine Fields



Meg Ventrudo presents Jacques Marchais and her children.

On May 21, 2014, the Neighborhood Preservation Center hosted a lecture on Jacques Marchais, founder of the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art in Staten Island, NY. Meg Ventrudo, Executive Director of the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art, entertained the audience with tales of a unique woman as well as an explanation of the museum and its purpose. Tenzing Chatdotsang, a member of the museum's board, was also in attendance and shared his thoughts on the importance of this unique museum and some of its current capital needs.

Jacques Marchais Coblentz was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1887. Disappointed she was not a son, Jacques' father gave her what

is typically a boy's name. Abandoned by her father at the age of four, her mother put her on stage as a child elocutionist with the stage name Edna Coblentz. This is when Jacques' passion for acting began and at the age of sixteen she moved to Boston to appear in a play, thus beginning her acting career. It is here where she met her first husband and they eloped that same year. She had three children, two daughters and one son, who were raised by their paternal grandparents until their teens. In 1917-18, Jacques moved to New York to continue her acting career and made friends with some of the more interesting characters at the time, including Ruth St. Denis, famed dancer and Martha Graham's teacher. It is also in New York that Jacques met her second husband, Harry Klauber. Harry, a wealthy businessman from owning chemical factories in Brooklyn, would become Jacques' silent partner in many of her future endeavors.

In 1921, wanting to own a farm within commuting distance to Manhattan, Jacques and Harry moved to a Dutch farmhouse in Staten Island. It is at the farmhouse that Jacques began to purchase the surrounding property and build terraced gardens, all of which would later become part of her vision. In 1938 Jacques opened a gallery, the Jacques Marchais Gallery of Art of Tibet and India, on Madison Avenue in Manhattan. It is here that she began to grow the collection that would eventually belong to the Museum of Tibetan Art, selling mostly Indian pieces and keeping the Tibetan pieces for herself while she continued to foster her vision for her own museum.

Jacques Marchais had always planned to open her museum to share her extensive collection with the public in a contextual setting. While never having visited Tibet, she had an understanding and intuition of the culture and spirituality found in Tibet, Nepal, India and Mongolia. Through her research and friendships, Jacques designed a complex to resemble a Tibetan Monastery consisting of a library, museum, gardens and meditation cells. Jacques hired Joe Primiano, a local mason, to build the complex that resembles the Potola at Lhasa, the historic seat of the Dalai Lama. Together, they would go around Staten Island on Sunday afternoon's gathering boulders and other local fieldstone, which the entire complex is constructed of. Once the complex was completed, it became the first Himalayan architecture to be built in the United States and the first museum in the world devoted to caring for Tibetan art.

Jacques Marchais was a unique and passionate woman, ahead of her time in many ways. From the beginning, she had a vision of what she would build and always intended for the property and her collection to be available to the public. Having lived through the depression and both World Wars, Jacques had witnessed suffering and cruelty first hand and



The Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art, Staten Island, NY

wanted to provide a sanctuary, an escape, for those who were troubled or struggling. The opening of the museum was a grand affair that was written about in LIFE Magazine. Unfortunately, in 1948, Jacques passed away mere months after the museum opened. After her death, the museum was run by her dear friend and neighbor Helen A. Watkins. Ms. Watkins worked to keep the museum lively and open until her death in 1971, taking care of the grounds and the collection her friend had worked her life to create.

The Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art fosters a sense of place for all who visit. The complex holds a grand collection, consisting of both spiritual and cultural materials such as statues, textiles, jewelry, furniture and horse

trappings. The museum is currently in the process of reconstructing an altar that was featured in Jacques' gallery, as well as installing more pieces from their collection. The buildings and grounds are on both the New York State Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

A major capital challenge for the museum is water damage to the retaining wall, caused by the drainage routes on the street above the museum. The retaining wall permits the museum complex to be built into the hillside, setting it apart from the rest of world.

The Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art is open Wednesday through Sunday, 1:00-5:00 PM. Currently, pieces from the collection can be seen at the Rubin Museum of Art in their Gateway to Himalayan Art and Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room Exhibition, which will be on view through January 6, 2016.