



1915 World War I

In 1915 Eugénie funded a military hospital for officers in her Farnborough Hill home as well as hospitals in France. The French Government objected to wounded French officers staying at Farnborough given it was owned by the Empress, so the hospital mainly housed wounded Belgians. It is not known if *La Lecture de la Bible* remained in the house at this time but one imagines that it might have offered some solace for the wounded if it did.

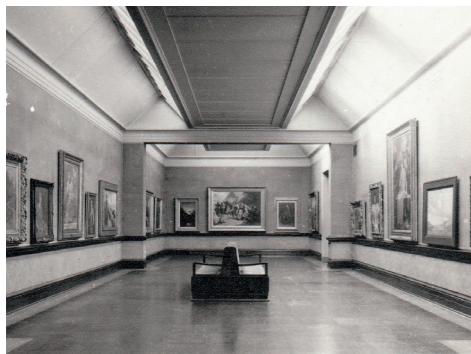
Photographer unknown *Empress Eugénie visiting wounded soldiers at Farnborough Hill 1914*



1920-30: Tripping to the bottom of the world

The Empress died in England in 1920 and the heirs to her estate auctioned off much of her art collection at Christies, where *La Lecture de la Bible* was sold for the bargain basement price of just 16 guineas. The painting was brought to New Zealand in 1925 by Sydney art dealer William Wadham who exhibited it at the Auckland Society of Arts in April 1925. It remained unsold and was next shown at the *New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition* in Dunedin over the summer of 1925-6.

Photographer unknown *The New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition main entrance and grand court, Dunedin, 1925-6. Photograph*



1932: Robert McDougall Art Gallery

La Lecture de la Bible finally found a new home when it was purchased by Christchurch philanthropist Robert McDougall. McDougall presented the work to the city in 1930, intending it to hang in pride of place in the city's new art gallery, which he had also funded. When the Robert McDougall Art Gallery opened in 1932 *La Lecture de la Bible* proved itself to be a firm favourite, and it has continued to delight visitors for the past eighty-five years.

Photographer unknown *Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1932. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives*

Peter Vangioni

Cover:
Henriette Browne
La Lecture de la Bible (detail) 1857
Oil on canvas
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu,
presented by R. E. McDougall, 1930

**CHRISTCHURCH
ART GALLERY
TE PUNA O
WAIWHETU**



Take a closer look
at Henriette Browne's
La Lecture de la Bible

Exhibition copy. Please do not remove

Often touted as the first work to enter Christchurch Art Gallery's collection, Henriette Browne's *La Lecture de la Bible* has a fascinating history that includes Parisian high society, revolution and restitution, before it made its way halfway round the world and eventually became part of the Gallery's collection.



1850s–60s: Aristocratic Paris

La Lecture de la Bible was owned by the Empress Eugénie, who had married Emperor Napoléon III of France in 1853. The couple were at the centre of Parisian aristocratic life during the 1850s and 1860s (a period known as the Second French Empire). Eugénie in particular was renowned for her tastes in fashion, culture and the arts. This was a period of great change in Paris, with Napoléon III's greatest legacy being the remodelling of Paris through the demolition of great swathes of the old medieval city to make way for modern buildings, wide streets and parks.

Franz Xaver Winterhalter *Empress Eugénie* (detail) 1854. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA



1857: The Paris Salon

La Lecture de la Bible (also known as *Les Puritaines*) was first exhibited by Henriette Browne at the Paris Salon, the famous annual showcase of French art, in 1857 where it was purchased by Empress Eugénie. The pious subject of the painting would have appealed to the Empress, who was a devout Catholic. Eugénie also worked to encourage equality for women, including providing greater access to education. *La Lecture de la Bible* was hung in Eugénie's apartment in the couple's lavishly decorated Parisian residence, Tuileries Palace.

After A. Provost *Salon of painting and sculpture of 1857, the main room in the Palais de l'Industrie gallery, Paris, 1857*. Engraving. Musee de la Ville de Paris, Musee Carnavalet, Paris, France / Bridgeman Images



1870: Eugénie makes her escape

On 2 September 1870 France suffered a disastrous and humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Forced to surrender to Otto von Bismark, Napoléon III was taken into captivity. The following day, crowds gathered outside the gates of Tuileries Palace baying for blood and Eugénie was forced to slip incognito onto the streets of Paris. She appealed to her dentist, the American Dr Thomas Evans, to help her flee the country. Evans accompanied Eugénie across the French countryside to Trouville-Sur-Mer, near Le Havre, where he found her safe passage to England.

Henri Louis Dupray *Départ incognito (Incognito Departure of Empress Eugénie)* 1884. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Art Collection, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



1871: Life in exile

Eugénie settled in Chislehurst, Kent where she rented a house and was eventually joined by her husband after his release by the Prussians in March 1871. Their beloved Tuileries had been looted and razed to the ground by the Third Republic and lay in ruins in Paris. The couple's effects however, including *La Lecture de la Bible*, had been rescued by the French Government and placed in storage. Napoléon III died in 1873 and Eugénie spent the following four decades negotiating the restitution of their personal property.

Bruno Braquehais *Tuileries Palace; Main Hall, and Place du Carrousel* 1871. Photograph. Courtesy of the National Library of Brazil via World Digital Library



1881: Getting back on her feet

In 1881 Eugénie purchased a grand manor house, Farnborough Hill, in Hampshire. In these lavish surroundings she brought together all of her possessions from France including *La Lecture de la Bible*, which can be seen here hanging in the library. At Farnborough Hill Eugénie entertained members of Britain's high society. She was close friends with Queen Victoria, and godmother to her grand-daughter Victoria Eugénie.

Leon Mniszech *Library of Empress Eugénie, Farnborough Hill*. Photograph. Réunion des Musée Nationaux Art Resource