

# FAVORITE

## THOMAS P. FARLEY

"Mister Manners" on *The Today Show*; *Founder of What Manners Most*



*The Love Letter*  
**ALBERT EDELFELT (1854–1905)**  
 1879, oil on canvas, 18 x 15 in.  
 Location unknown

Thomas Farley's favorite work of art is one he didn't particularly care for at first sight. "Its appeal is not the technique or the colors, but rather the mystery surrounding it," he explains, referring to *The Love Letter* — painted by the Finnish artist Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905) — which had long been in his family's possession. "Who was this elegantly dressed 19th-century woman, what message is contained in the letter she is reading, and how did my grandfather's family come to acquire this work?"

These were the matters that intrigued Farley when the painting suddenly came to light in a basement that had recently been flooded. In 1997, when he carried the work, wrapped in brown kraft paper, to Sotheby's, where it was to be put up for sale, Farley was already beginning to be aware that this image might continue to haunt him.

"This is not a painting I grew up with, or that had an influence on me as a child, or that I had the benefit of knowing intimately after it was discovered in my grandfather's basement behind soot-covered glass," says Farley, who is seen by millions on NBC's *The Today Show* as the dashing Mister Manners, the voice and vision of proper etiquette and behavior. Although the painting had been in the Farley family for some nine decades, few people had seen it in a long time.

After the flood, Farley's father showed it to Sotheby's and Christie's, both of which were excited by this previously unknown painting by one of Finland's most famous artists. The back of its stretcher bore the figure 200 (perhaps dollars) and the date 1905, coincidentally the year Edelfelt died. When it included the picture in its October 1997 auction, Sotheby's estimated it would go for \$30,000–\$50,000. "But it was off the podium in seconds," Farley recalls. "It failed to meet its reserve, despite being a beautiful work Edelfelt experts hadn't known existed."

Months later, however, Sotheby's re-approached Farley Senior, saying it had found a buyer. "My father held firm to the original reserve, whereupon it went to an unknown collector, and we have



no idea where it is now." Farley is still on a personal quest to learn whether "it hangs somewhere in Houston or Helsinki."

While admiring a transparency of the painting that his family kept, Farley expresses skepticism about the title *The Love Letter*, which he thinks Sotheby's chose as a marketing device. "I seriously question whether she's looking at a love letter or a letter from a friend, or if she's just re-reading a letter she's about to post," Farley ruminates. "It doesn't seem as if she's looking at a letter through the eyes of a lover."

As he ponders the narrative, Farley also wonders about the identity of the woman depicted. "I so badly want to know who she was. Did she sit for him for this portrait? Did the work remain in Edelfelt's possession for those 25 years, and if so, why?"

With a decided ambition, though acted out politely given his role as a national ambassador for good manners, Farley continues his hunt for the truth. "This painting has not been seen for decades. She's a beautiful woman who had been hidden away, but now that an image of her is appearing in this magazine, she will have her widest audience ever."