



Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon Museum and Archives

## **Sveva Caetani: A Fairy Tale Life**

**Okanagan History Vignette**



Family portrait of Sveva and her parents, Ofelia and Leone, 1921.  
Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon Museum and Archives

## Sveva Caetani: A Fairy Tale Life

Sveva Caetani (pronounced SVAY-va kay-TAN-ee), an artist and teacher in Vernon, lived an extraordinary life. In fact, her life was like a fairy tale, full of both delight and horror. As a young child, Sveva and her family fled Italy in 1921. They made a new life for themselves in Canada. Sveva was pampered by her rich and glamorous parents, and she lived like a princess. But at the age of 18, when her loving father Leone died, she became a prisoner in her own home. For 25 years, she lived as if she were under a spell. This spell was cast by her own lonely mother, Ofelia. When Ofelia died, Sveva was left out of her will, and suddenly she was penniless. She quickly had to find a job in order to support herself. Sveva became a teacher, and she taught school until her retirement. She also began to paint. At the end of her life, she had created a series of 56 large paintings she called *Recapitulation*. They were a summary of her unusual and troubled life. Sveva's life was indeed a fairy tale. She went from being a beloved only child to an imprisoned daughter to a well-liked teacher and respected artist. But where did Sveva's story begin?

## Sveva: Once Upon a Time

Sveva Caetani was born in Rome in 1917. The Caetani family was a noble and powerful Italian family with a long history. Their records show that two Caetani ancestors were popes, one in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and one at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Other family members were scientists, scholars, statesmen, writers, and artists. Sveva was three years old when she moved to Vernon with her father, mother, and a few servants. She lived a sheltered life where she was cared for by doting parents.



Sveva, 1921

Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon Museum and Archives

Sveva lived like a princess who was kept isolated in a fairy tale castle. She was given little opportunity to make friends with other children. In Italy, aristocratic families kept to themselves. Sveva's parents lived like that in Vernon, too. She had many expensive dolls to play with, but no friends. Sveva did not attend the local school. She was educated at home by a series of governesses who came from England. She was free to travel with her parents on their many trips to Rome, France, and England to look after business and to visit friends and relatives. While in Monte Carlo in 1929, Sveva began to take painting and drawing lessons. Her father, Leone, wanted Sveva to experience life through reading, writing, painting, and travelling as he had done. They shared a love of history and literature. Sveva adored her father, and she was heartbroken when he died. Her privileged childhood had come to an end.

### **Leone: The Handsome Prince**

Sveva's father, Leone Caetani, Duke of Sermoneta and Prince of Teano, was born in Rome in 1869. The Caetani family was very wealthy and owned a great deal of land. As the son, Leone was obliged to look after the family estates. This would be his job for life. When young, Leone travelled a great deal. He was well educated and knew many languages. He wrote a 12-volume history of the Arab world that

Sveva proudly said was considered the best ever written. Leone was also involved in politics. He was a member of a reform party that wanted to improve the life of the workers and the peasants. Mussolini, who would be elected Premier of Italy in 1922, believed in using military force to keep citizens under control. Leone did not support Mussolini's harsh policies, and he decided to leave Rome. He wanted to be free of his old life and make a new one. He wanted to live where there was equality among people. He did not like the class differences that ruled their lives in Rome.

Sveva said that her father had an adventurous spirit. He believed that people had more freedom in Canada, so he decided to move his family to British Columbia when they left Italy. Thirty years before, in 1890, Leone and an Italian friend had come to BC on a hunting trip. The two men spent several months in the Kootenays hunting grizzly bears. Leone was impressed by the scenic beauty and the simple lifestyle he saw there. When he was ready to move to Canada, he asked friends in England where the best place was to live in BC. They told him the Okanagan Valley. He chose the town of Vernon by randomly pointing his finger at a map of the Valley!

Leone bought tickets for himself, his young daughter Sveva, Sveva's mother Ofelia, and Ofelia's companion Miss Juul,

(pronounced Yule). Leone asked a real estate agent to meet them at the train station in Vernon. Leone wanted to look at any large house that was for sale. He also asked for a delivery wagon to carry the 30 pieces of luggage Ofelia brought with her. Ofelia approved of the third house they looked at. Leone bought the house on the spot for \$7,000 cash. This big house on Pleasant Valley Road would be home to Sveva for the rest of her life.

Leone became a gentleman farmer in the Okanagan. Gentleman farmers always had another source of income, since farming was a



Sveva and Leone, 1923  
Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon  
Museum and Archives

hobby for them. Leone had money from his investments in Italy. Before he left Rome, Leone sold off most of his share of the Caetani property. He put his money into stocks. In Vernon, he bought an orchard and looked after it himself. He learned how to log trees, and he chopped all the firewood to heat their house.

Leone enjoyed his new life of



Ofelia, Leone, and Sveva, 1927

Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon  
Museum and Archives

manual labour. It was so different from the aristocratic world he was used to in Rome. Sveva wrote about her father many years afterward. She lovingly recalled how he liked to wear work clothes, drive a small truck, use tools, and walk downtown to get the mail. However, there came a tragic change in the lives of Leone and his family. First Leone lost most of his money in the stock market crash of 1929. This put an end to trips to Europe and governesses for Sveva.

Then he developed cancer. He died on Christmas Day in 1935 when he was just 66 years old.

### **Ofelia: The Moth in a Bottle**

Leone Caetani had two families. In 1901 he married Vittoria Colonna. The Colonna family had been long-time enemies of the Caetani family. Leone and Vittoria's marriage was arranged. It was a way to join these two powerful families together. It was a loveless



marriage. However, divorce was not an option at that time in a Catholic country like Italy. Years later Leone met Ofelia Fabiani. They had a daughter, Sveva. Ofelia was a slim, beautiful woman who was much younger than Leone. As the daughter of a wealthy family, Ofelia was used to living a glamorous life in Paris and Rome. She enjoyed going to



Ofelia Fabiani, 1929

Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon Museum and Archives

the theatre and opera, and she bought her clothes at fashionable stores. Not surprisingly, she felt out of place when she moved to the small farming community of Vernon. It was Leone's decision to leave Italy. As head

of the household, his wishes were obeyed. Leone felt life was safer for Sveva in Canada. But Ofelia would have been lonely. She was exiled from the life she was used to in Italy. She was a shy woman, and she



### **Their World**

Sveva painted this picture of her parents. "The love of two people for each other places them in a world of their own, a planet apart."

Photo courtesy of Heidi Thompson, c. Vernon Art Gallery

made very few friends in Vernon. She could speak French, but not English, so she kept to herself. In a poem, Sveva referred to her mother as “a great moth self-caught in a bottle.” When Leone died, Ofelia was devastated. She never left the Pleasant Valley Road house again.

Not only would Ofelia refuse to leave the house, but she forbid Sveva to do so either. Without Leone to cling to, Ofelia tried to hold on to her daughter. Ofelia complained of heart problems, and she told her daughter, “If you leave me, I shall die.” Sveva obeyed her. She was afraid to do anything that might hurt her mother. She was also afraid of losing her mother’s love. For three years, Sveva did not step outside the house. Ofelia insisted that Sveva even share her bedroom although Sveva later moved her bed into the hallway. Ofelia was afraid of being left alone. She was afraid Sveva might want to get married or have a career and then move away. A fence was built around the yard, and visitors were turned away. Letters to Sveva from friends were kept from her. There was only Miss Juul, Ofelia’s long-time companion, and her mother for company.

Sveva spent her lonely days reading and housecleaning. Ofelia became obsessed with cleanliness. Every day, Sveva washed and ironed the sheets, and she scrubbed the floors. Ofelia even had the curtains, carpets, and lamp shades removed so that there would be

fewer places for dust and dirt to hide. In her spare time, Sveva was not allowed to write or paint. Reading became her link to the outside world, and crates of books were shipped from England. Eventually, when Sveva was close to a nervous breakdown, she was allowed out into the garden. Then, after 16 year of being confined to the property, she was allowed to go into town to do business such as banking. But Miss Juul always went with her, and Sveva had to telephone her mother every half hour. For 25 years, Sveva lived like Rapunzel, trapped in her own tower.

### **Sveva: Living Happily Ever After**

Ofelia died in 1960 when she was 64 years old. Finally, Sveva was free of her obligation to her mother. Sveva was 43, and she felt that her life was just beginning. In her will, Ofelia left the last of her possessions, a house in Italy, to the Catholic Church. There was little Caetani money left for Sveva. This meant that Sveva had to find a job and earn a living for the first time in her life. Luckily, Sveva's father had already left the house to her. However, she needed money to pay for its upkeep. She needed money to support herself and the elderly Miss Juul. Like a spring flower blooming after a long winter, Sveva blossomed in the community. She learned to drive, she joined local clubs, she made many new friends, and she started to teach school.



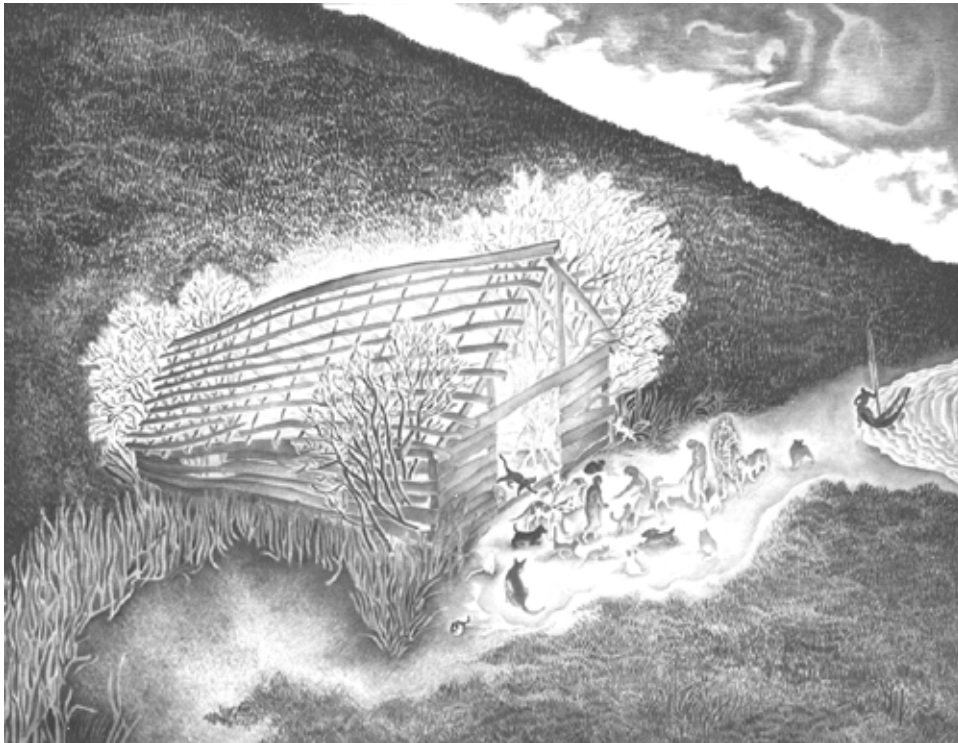
### **Rendezvous with the Horses of the Imagination**

This painting includes a panorama of architecture taken from around the world. The horses are madly galloping towards Sveva who is the tiny figure at the top.

Photo courtesy of Heidi Thompson, c. Vernon Art Gallery

Although she lacked proper teaching qualifications, Sveva was offered a job at St. James Catholic School, an elementary school in Vernon. In 1970, she went to the University of Victoria for two years to get a secondary school teaching certificate. Sveva did not have enough money to pay her university fees, so a group of friends loaned her the money that she needed. She returned to Vernon and taught art and social studies at Charles Bloom High School in Lumby for the next eleven years. Sveva loved children, and she was described as a born teacher. Sveva never married or had children of her own, but she found joy in her students, her friends, and her art.

Sveva took up painting again when she was in her 50s. She had painted as a child and a young woman. However, her mother had discouraged her artistic talents. Ofelia even destroyed some of Sveva's paintings. An art teacher at the University of Victoria urged Sveva to start painting once more. In 1975 Sveva began planning her largest project. This would be a series of watercolours she called *Recapitulation*. She wanted to show the journey of her life in a series of paintings. Perhaps painting these pictures also helped Sveva come to grips with painful memories of her father's death, her mother's solitude, and her own confinement.



### **Inn of Shelter**

This painting illustrates a feeling of friendship. The figures include Sveva and her parents, Miss Juul, and “the most loved of the dogs and cats that have been so important to my life.” The barn used to stand north of Armstrong, and it is “aglow with the warmth and kindness all gentle forms of love accord us.”

Friendship is shelter, kind and accepting,  
and beautiful, as was this abandoned barn...  
All beauty is shelter, as is endurance, and  
long experience, and a gentle old age.

Photo courtesy of Heidi Thompson c. Vernon Art Gallery

Sveva began painting the *Recapitulation* pictures in 1978. When she finished the series in 1989, there were 56 paintings, some of them six feet tall. The pictures have a dream-like quality, and many are bold and colourful. She used more than fifteen coats of paint to create glowing colours. Sveva dedicated herself to this project. She painted for two or three hours every morning before she left for school. After supper, she painted late into the night. Some paintings took several months to complete. Near the end, she was working from a wheelchair because she had arthritis, first in her knees and then in her hands. When she could no longer hold a brush, she wrote poems and explanations for each picture. The *Recapitulation* series made Sveva famous in the Canadian art world. The series was exhibited in many Canadian cities. The pictures are now part of the collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts in Edmonton. The Foundation looks after the paintings and sends them to art galleries around the country for shows.

Near the end of her life, Sveva was concerned about her 100-year old house on Pleasant Valley Road. It was a very important place for her. Although she had lived like a prisoner there, it was also the studio where she did her painting and where she lived with her beloved father and mother. She decided to donate the house to the city of Vernon to be



run by the Vernon Art Gallery. It has now been turned into the Caetani Cultural Centre, and it is home to many art groups in the area, like the spinners, weavers, and potters.

In 1993, Heidi Thompson, a Vernon photographer, suggested that Sveva's *Recapitulation* series be published in a book. For ten years, Heidi had been photographing Sveva's paintings as they were completed. Sveva agreed to the project. However, she did not live to see the book finished. *Recapitulation: A Journey by Sveva Caetani* was published in 1995. Sveva died in April, 1994. She was 76. She was buried beside her father, her mother, and Miss Juul in the Caetani family plot in Vernon. It is fitting that Sveva Caetani could play the fairy godmother at the end of her own exceptional life. She gave to others those things she valued most: her love and respect to the memory of her parents, her knowledge and support to her students and friends, her vivid paintings to the people of Canada, and her cherished home to the city of Vernon.



Sveva Caetani, 1982  
Photo courtesy of Heidi Thompson

## Glossary

ancestor	forefather; person from whom you are directly descended
aristocratic	upper class; considered superior because of birth, intelligence, culture, or wealth
confinement	kept indoors; kept within limits
devastated	crushed; overwhelmed with distress
doting	being very fond of
equality	all people possessing the same privileges and rights
exiled	long absence from one's country or home
governess	woman employed in home to teach children
obligation	duty; promise by which one is bound
panorama	view of a wide area
privileged	having advantages; benefits enjoyed by the rich
Rapunzel	woman in a fairy tale who was locked in a tower by a witch
recapitulation	to sum up; to tell the main parts of the story
solitude	being alone
watercolours	paintings using paints made from colouring material mixed with water rather than oil