



Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Portrait Lawsuit Pits Hamptons Gallery Owner Against Grey Gardens Relative

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by Pat Rogers

A relative of the Beale family of Grey Gardens fame has filed suit in Federal District Court against Hamptons gallery owner Terry Wallace, alleging that he possesses a stolen painting depicting a young Jackie Onassis that rightly belongs to the Beale Family, having been burglarized from the infamous East Hampton home sometime in the sixties, [according to *The New York Times*](#).

Filed February 8, 2018 in Central Islip, NY by Bouvier Beale Jr., a cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and executor of the Beale Estate for “Little Edie,” the suit alleges Wallace possesses a stolen painting and has refused to clarify providence by identify the painting’s seller, setting the grounds for the lawsuit to decide ownership. Wallace has stated he purchased the portrait in the late 1980s from a “very reputable” art and antiques dealer, [according to *Newsday*](#), but declines any further specificity.

New York State law requires dealers involved in disputes over paintings and other artworks to prove they acquired the work through legal means, explained Megan Noh, an attorney representing plaintiff Bouvier Beale Jr., the nephew of “Little Edie” Beale and the executor of her estate, [reported *Newsday*](#).

Wallace claims he has a clear title and will reveal the identity of the seller in court as part of his defense, [according to *The New York Times*](#). Wallace told *Newsday* and *The New York Times* that he wouldn’t risk his decades-long reputation as a gallerist by selling a stolen painting, the pair of newspapers reported. He also contends there is no proof the painting was ever owned by “Little Edie” as the passing of the painting between family members might be more of a family lore rather than a legal transaction, according to [Town and Country](#).

The portrait at the center of the controversy depicts a 19-year-old Jacqueline Lee Bouvier painted in the 1950s by portrait artist Irwin Hoffman, according to *Newsday*. It was commissioned by Jackie’s father, John Vernou Bouvier III, a successful stockbroker known as Black Jack. He allegedly gave the painting to his sister, “Big Edie,” before his death in 1957.



Portrait of a young Jacqueline Lee Bouvier by Irwin Hoffman, circa 1950s. Courtesy of Wallace Gallery

Amid the disarray of the later lives of the Beales, the painting was lost from their Grey Garden home for decades, reported both newspapers. The Beale Family's belief that the artwork was stolen from the home arose over time and is currently stoked by an article published in *Hamptons* magazine in 1998 that described the painting as having "disappeared from Grey Gardens" and reported that the Wallace Gallery had purchased the painting from a "John Doe" dealer recently," according to *Newsday*. Bouvier Beale's wife, Eva, said that saw the painting in 2004 at the gallery but no further action was taken beyond a conversation on the origins of the sale with Wallace, according to *Newsday*.

In 2016, Bouvier and Eva Beale began to believe the painting was stolen after they discovered a copy of the *Hamptons* magazine article while archiving Little Edie's records, according to the lawsuit as [reported by Newsday](#). They claim the theft was never reported to the police because of a contentious relationship with local authorities arising from the poor condition of their home, the lawsuit claims.

The value of the painting may also be a matter of contention. Wallace has claimed that it's not "very valuable" but declined to publicly disclose its asking price or estimated value. The lawsuit claims it exceeds \$75,000, meeting the threshold necessary to bring a federal suit, according to *The New York Times*. Noh noted that memorabilia connected with the Kennedys is known to drive prices beyond their intrinsic value, according to the *New York Times* article.

Wallace Gallery in East Hampton, NY is known for its historical art program and especially for historic nautical and landscape paintings. Wallace has an established reputation for discovering paintings and little known (or even unknown) oeuvres of painters who may previously be overlooked by history. A formal naval officer, Wallace has conducted extensive research into painters of the past working on the North Fork and South Fork of Eastern Long Island.

Terry Wallace authored the 2006 book [Caroline M. Bell and the Peconic Bay Impressionists](#), that accompanied shows at the Wallace Gallery and the Suffolk County Historical Society in 2006 and 2007 (published by M.T. Fine Arts, Inc. and Wallace Gallery). He also authored the 2010 book [Helen M. Kroeger and Otto J. Kurth: The Anchorage Studio and Peconic Bay Impressionism](#) (published by M.T. Fine Arts, Inc.). His research was cited in the 2008 book, *A Shared Aesthetic: Artists of the North Fork* (written by Geoffrey K. Fleming and Sara Evans and published by Southold Historical Society & Hudson Hills Press).

In 2017, around 40 paintings from his collection was exhibited at the [East Hampton Historical Society](#) (EHHS) in the exhibition "Caught on Canvas: Eastern Long Island Landscapes from the Wallace Collection, 1850-1935," presented at Clinton Academy, one of the buildings that make up the museum buildings for the EHHS.

Grey Gardens was popularized in the 1975 documentary that contrasted the socialite life previously enjoyed by the pair of women who were both named Edith Beale—the eccentric aunt and cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis who were mother and daughter—with the squalor of Grey Gardens, a 14-room house in East Hampton, NY that they shared with cats, drop-in raccoons and the decaying

remains of their lives.

In 2006, the film [inspired a musical](#) which premiered Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizon from February 10 to April 30, 2016. A revised version opened on Broadway on November 2, 2006 at the Walter Kerr Theater and ran through June 2007. Bay Street Theater in The Hamptons staged the musical for a three-week run in August 2015. The documentary also spawned a 2009 HBO movie starring Jessica Lange and Drew Barrymore.

Recently, the Beales life at Grey Gardens inspired Hamptons photographer Mary Ellen Bartley to create a series of photographs with books from the Beale collection as central figures. The images take the form of still life and were made while she was an artist-in-residency at the home while it was pending its eventual sale. The series continues her work with book spines and pages as both inspiration and subject. [Mary Ellen Bartley's](#) photography series, "Reading Grey Gardens" was exhibited at [The Drawing Room](#) gallery in East Hampton, NY from September 8 to October 15, 2017. Click [here](#) to see artwork images.

Grey Gardens left the Beale family when it was purchased in 1977, two years after "Big Edie's" death, by Ben Bradlee, the executive editor of The Washington Post, and Sally Quinn, the journalist and author. The house was recently sold with a preceeding [Estate Sale held in November 2017](#) that offered the chance to purchase objects from the Beale's life, drawing people both near and far to wait in line to examine the possibilities for purchase and to be part of the final chapter of the house's exotic history. The house sold for \$15.5 million with the new owner not yet disclosed, [according to Curbed](#).

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