Born in 1936, Christiane Pflug was the daughter of Regine Schütt, a Berlin fashion designer who was involved with anti-Nazi groups in the early 1930s. Born out of wedlock and distanced from her father’s family, Christiane was a shy and introverted child and her formative years were not happy ones. Many of the insecurities she experienced as an adult can be traced to being raised by a single parent in wartime Germany. With the outbreak of war Regine joined the Red Cross as a publicist and from the summer of 1940, Christiane lived with various family members and friends outside Berlin to avoid the bombings. None of these arrangements proved to be suitable, long-term solutions and in 1941 Christiane was sent to the Tyrol to live with Frau Petzold, an authoritarian and unsympathetic and very religious foster mother. Christiane remained under Frau Petzold’s care until 1949. Recalling the isolation and loneliness she felt during her childhood, Christiane wrote:
I grew up in a world of adults. I had to be quiet, in a large house, and this restricted most other activities. With books, paper and crayon one could always create one’s own world, which also defied intrusion by any unwanted people.iii

In 1949, Christiane was finally reunited with her mother who was then living in Frankfurt. Here, she made regular visits to the Städelisches Museum and made ink drawings of the views from their apartment window, beginning a life-long interest in framed landscapes. At the age of fifteen, Christiane convinced her mother to allow her to leave school and she apprenticed for a brief time with a couturière in Berlin before moving to Paris in 1953 to study fashion design.

In 1954, Christiane met her future husband, Michael Pflug, a medical student and artist from Potsdam and Wuppertal. Michael’s father had lost his teaching post in Potsdam when the Nazis came to power in 1933 and Michael had spent three months in a Russian prison camp at the end of the war. His primary interest and ambition was to be an artist but after withdrawing from the Hamburg art school after only one term he decided to study medicine, first in Germany then, with little knowledge of French, in Paris, close to what he defined as the world of art. Through Michael’s encouragement Christiane turned to painting, her first works being gouaches and temperas of landscapes and historical buildings around Paris. Painted in situ, these early works focused on the massive architectural forms, eliminating superfluous details. One work from this period, Palais de Justice, Paris, 1954 (28148) is in the National Gallery=s collection as is Christiane’s first oil, Room in Normandy, painted in May 1954 (donated to the National Gallery by Michael Pflug in 2003).

Christiane’s education was provided by Michael and by contacts with his friends the artists Vieira da Silva and Arpad Szenes whose collection of folk art, Portuguese ceramics and clay Amazon sculptures she greatly admired. On frequent visits to museums she was particularly attracted to ancient Egyptian and quattrocento art and the paintings of Henri le Douanier Rousseau and Maurice Utrillo.iv All are characterized by simplicity of form, a quiet monumentality and a certain naïveté that would find expression in Christiane’s own paintings.

Michael and Christiane’s relationship continued after Christiane returned to Germany and, finding herself pregnant and Michael planning to go to Tunis to do his internship at the Hôpital Ernest Conseil, they married in Munich in August 1956.v Christiane joined Michael in Tunis in Novembervi and their daughter Esther was born the following April.vii In Tunis Christiane was able to obtain a room in the home of the Mestaouis family as a studio. Writing to her mother, now living in Downsview near Toronto, Christiane described the house.

We have found an old Arabic house which is only half inhabited. The people are very kind and they let me paint in the empty rooms. So I’m going there every morning, that’s when the light is best, and paint still lifes. There are very beautiful things here, a small teapot, and old copper coffee grinder, and old pewter tea set, many terra cotta things.viii
Christiane’s letters to her mother document the development of her painting during this period. The objects in the Mestaouis house and others became the motifs for the still lifes she painted over the next year though in February 1957 she painted her first Tunisian interior, a study of Zobaida Mestaouis’ room: “a small interior with a yellow armchair, a small table with a blue teapot, a brass clock and a bottle and a red pimento. The whole thing is seen through a green doorframe and in front it the wall is very bright with a niche in which some bottles are standing. The floor is made of black and white tiles.”

The stepped doorframe creates the impression of a mirrored image. In June Christiane began painting in egg tempera with dammar resin on canvas following a recipe published by Max Doerner. 

Michael transferred to the Charles Nicolle Hospital in August and the following month he left to do his locum in Tatahouine in the South near the Libyan border. The new Tunis residence supplied by the hospital was closer to Christiane’s studio allowing her to work there all day with or without the baby. Michael’s mother arrived for a visit in October and the Mestaouais decorated Christiane’s studio for her with carpets on the wall, a kalim and the yellow armchair and table from Zobaida’s room. This new arrangement became the subject of Christiane’s painting begun the following March, “an interior with two carpets on the wall, a bed with a striped woolen blanket and two bouquets of flowers and a yellow armchair. Perhaps I can finish it, it would be nice with the other still lifes, because it is more colourful.”

The painting was included in Michael and Christiane’s exhibition at the Alliance Française in Tunis in March. “My large interior was finished in time. The newspapers have written a bit about it, the German ambassador came too and several people from the Embassy, otherwise Doctors and a few Tunisian painters. Real understanding, however, was only possible with a few people, the reason here is that during the last few years many Europeans have already left [due to political problems following Tunisian independence in 1956] and those who stayed here have other worries. The timing was not favourable but we couldn’t see that a year ago and outside of the frames it didn’t cost us anything, besides the time and the effort. We simply put narrow wooden lathing around the oils, painted them black or grey and they are a little raised above the surface of the painting…. The last interior is … much more colourful with the red brown wall carpets, the colourful striped woolen blanket, the pink tiled floor and the cerulean blue door. All of that is painted in tempera with a certain medium.”

Painting would stop when the Pflugs’ second daughter, Ursula, was born 1 April 1958.

After months of ill health, financial worries and endless negotiations to get visas, with Michael absent on another locum to earn the necessary money, Christiane and the two babies left Tunis for Munich in September and arrived in Toronto the following February. It would be more than a year later before Michael was finally able to join his family.

Christiane Pflug’s Tunisian paintings show a remarkable advance in structure and colour from her Parisian works. In Paris she had focused on buildings and the industrial suburbs. Most of her Tunisian works are still lifes reminiscent of Giorgio Morandi though there is a greater naïveté to Pflug’s work. With special reference to Tunisian Interior, Mary
Allodi has described the Tunisian paintings as “among the most beautiful she ever produced.”xxx This painting is especially rich in colour with its bright blue door feeding into the room with a yellow chair, striped blanket, and white flowers. The space is confined but there is a serene joy in the work, resultant from her pleasure at being able to paint in her own studio. As Christine Conley has written, “Pflug’s first still-lifes in Tunis (1956-58) evince a fascination with the isolation of objects and their containment…In Still-Life with Clock Face and Tiles (1957) … the corner dissolves in the light so that the wall envelops the scene rather than marking a solid boundary. This effect is repeated in the warmth and serenity of Tunisian Interior (1958) where the effusive light has an expansive effect, softening the rectilinear surfaces of the room…. These enveloping or containing spaces shape a mise-en-scène in which objects present themselves as if in a dream. Strangeness does not evoke anxiety but a passive attentiveness that is the condition of the dreaming subject.”xxi

Christiane Pflug’s paintings fall into distinct groupings that relate to her surroundingsxxii first the Parisian paintings, then the Tunis works, then groups that relate to her three residences in Toronto, Yonge Street, Woodlawn Avenue and Birch Avenue.

Please cite in the following manner:

Charles C. Hill, Acquisition Proposal for Christiane Pflug’s Tunisian Interior, accession #41994, Curatorial File, National Gallery of Canada.

---

4 Davis, op. cit., p. 51.
5 Letters from Christiane Schüt to her mother Regine Faust, Downsview, Ontario, 24 July 1956, 1 August 1956, 14 August 1956, 10 September 1956, (letters 58, 59, 62, 64) typescripts of translations, copies in NGC Library.
7 Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 6 April 1957 (letter 91); typescript of translation, copy in NGC Library.
8 Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 2 December 1956 (letter 72); typescript of translation, copy in NGC Library, quoted in Davis, op. cit., p. 102
9 Letters from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 18 February 1957 (letter 85) and 1 March 1957 (letter 86) and 6 March 1957 (letter 87); typescripts of translations, copies in NGC Library. The oil painting (80.0 x 64.8 cm) is reproduced in black and white in Davis, op. cit., p.187 and in a colour photocopy on the back cover of volume 3 of the typescripts of the translated letters.
11 Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 10 September 1957 (letter 106); typescript of translation, copy in NGC Library.
xii Letters from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 4 August 1957 (letter 102) and 5 August 1957 (letter 103); typescripts of translations, copies in NGC Library.

xiii Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 18 October 1957 (letter 108); typescript of translation, copy in NGC Library.

xiv Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 5 March 1958 (letter 119); typescript of translation, copy in NGC Library.

xv Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 17 March 1958 (letter 121) and 22 March 1958 (letter 122) and 3 April 1958 (letter 123); typescripts of translations, copies in NGC Library.

xvi Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 3 April 1958 (letter 123); typescript of translation, copy in NGC Library.

xvii Letters from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 3 April 1958 (letter 123) and n.d. [May], 1958 (letter 126); typescripts of translations, copies in NGC Library.

xviii Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 12 September 1958 (letter 139); typescript of translation, copy in NGC Library.

xix Davis, op. cit., p. 146.


xxii Letter from Christiane Pflug to Regine Faust, 17 March 1958 (letter 121); typescript of translation, copy in NGC Library.