Collecting impressionism (Rouen, 25-26 Jun 20)

Rouen, H2o auditorium, Jun 25–26, 2020
Deadline: Oct 31, 2019

Félicie Faizand de Maupeou

An international symposium organised by the Paris Nanterre University Foundation in partnership with the Labex "Les Passés dans le Présent" , and the University of Rouen Normandy, with support from the Contrat Normandie-Paris Île-de-France: destination impressionnisme

The neologism "collector" was coined during the nineteenth century. Strictly speaking, it refers to anyone owning, buying accumulating objects: in short, collecting them. This concrete description covers the variety of profiles and of ways of collecting that arose during this period, and has the benefit of being free from the connotations attached to the formerly used terms of "amateur" or "connoisseur", which are strongly associated with the notions of taste, erudition, artistic or intellectual commitment. Although they are not above economic and social concerns, collectors of Impressionism have often been involved in this movement: depending on when they started their collection, they contributed to its emergence, helped strengthen its place in the art world, or promoted it on an international level. This specific category of enthusiastically involved collectors, who, without necessarily ignoring other artistic interests, played a part in the history of Impressionism, is to be the focus of this symposium.

Even though a considerable amount of research has been devoted to a few key figures among art collectors, the main challenge of this symposium will be to go beyond the monographic approach and to favor a more comprehensive one, based on transversal analyses, comparative studies, and in-depth problematization. The subject of collectors and their collections will be addressed in connection with their time and its political, social and economic context. The objective is to clarify the role played by collectors in the development and popularization of Impressionism from the beginning of the movement until the middle of the 20th century. Far from being isolated, collectors belong to a network of both private and institutional actors, whose connections to one another, and their place in the modern art world's wider network, will have to be uncovered. Whether one chooses to approach this topic by focusing on the object, on the collection or on the collector, this contextualization also means taking into account the territorial component. Comparing different levels of localization –from the regional to the international– will allow us to organize more clearly, facts, people and objects.

In order to expand on this, several avenues of research are available.

Shaping the collection
Collectors build their collection either from an inherited core, or around a particular idea, or even by simply allowing themselves to be guided by happenstance and chance encounters. The collec-

tion then comes into the objects' life, thereby altering its course. At a time of generalized collecting, the decision of some collectors to favor Impressionism raises the question of their motivations. Do these motivations have to do with the collectors' socio-economical profiles? Their personal history? Their gender? And what about where they live? Does the way one collects art depend on whether one comes from Normandy, Paris, America or Russia; do collectors apprehend the act of collecting the same way if they have met impressionist painters and if they were born after these artists have passed away? Beyond aesthetics, the collector's selection is sometimes influenced more subtly, by medium, format, subject, or even by a specific artist.
How a collection is assembled also raises very practical questions, such as the amount of money spent, the way the art was acquired –at an auction, directly from the artist, or through an art dealer– which intermediaries were involved, what literature was read to help with the art selection… Some only surround themselves with works that are easy to obtain, when others are ready to travel to expand their collection.

Working on and showcasing the collection
What characterizes a collection is that it's never completed. Its life, made of purchases, resales, exchanges and gifts, is often very intense and mobilizes an entire network of artists, art dealers, experts and friends (collectors or not). It also requires the capacity for very concrete material management having to do with the storage, conservation and/or restoration of the artwork. More obvious, but often with no clear answer, is the question of the visibility of the collection. Can one easily see it? And if so, in what kind of place, under what conditions and for which public is it displayed? This topic – the display and showing of a collection– leads to two other subjects, that exert a pervading influence at the time of Impressionism: interior design and artwork installation. Publications meant to help collectors in their endeavors also appear during this period.
Simultaneously, parallel to the development of collection-oriented practices, scientific knowledge in the field increases and deepens significantly. Written by collectors themselves or by intermediaries - critics, art dealers, historians – many publications around and about collections are released in an effort to organize and structure the information they have as well as to inventory the artwork. This evolution echoes specialization in art history, as the appearance of the first catalogues raisonnés illustrates. This early scientific research sometimes brings indirectly to light new aspects of collections, they for example point out the many forgeries that were circulating at the time. This ambition to document and popularize collections becomes achievable through the advancement of photography which allows for more reproductions and thus facilitates the iconographic diffusion of artwork.

Studying Impressionism through its collections
Mediation efforts and increasing visibility of collections emphasize the role said collections played in the diffusion of the movement during the artists' life or even during the first half of the 20th century. How did these collections influence the way Impressionism was perceived? What impact have they had on the public's taste and on artistic practices both? On the international scale, at a time when nationalism rages, the expansion of Impressionism, originally considered a French movement, was often slowed as it competed with the will to support and develop a national art.
It will therefore be useful, whenever possible, to study the collector's position. Does he deliberately choose to support the movement, to defend it almost militantly? During this process, does he put himself in the spotlight or does he let his collection take center stage? And what means does

he use for this endeavor?

Future of the collections
Whether a collection finds itself sold, donated, lost or looted, whether it retains its integrity or is scattered, it is almost always confronted with its disappearance. This often occurs after its owner's passing, but it can also happen during his lifetime. Some collectors see in the art they own a true purpose, and this often sheds new light on their motivations and on their conception of the collection. The collecting frenzy ran parallel to the museum boom; and as museums offered collections a rather obvious destination, they facilitated the development of collections. Studying the relations between private collections and public institutions as well as between collectors and cultural officials will therefore surely prove profitable.
While some, work to shape their collection as a meaningful whole able to stand on its own, and regard donating it as a way to preserve its integrity; others, on the contrary, focus more on the value of each separate piece and prefer to see their collection featured in auctions. If the trajectory of the collection ends at that point, that of each object goes on, sometimes allowing us to retrace its steps all the way to the beginning and to so reconstruct its family tree. Other times, collections are dispersed more violently, as is the case with lost or looted collections. If tracking these is more difficult, it proves especially fascinating as they are often less well-known.

These research suggestions are neither comprehensive nor exclusive and the scientific committee, though it will be particularly attentive to problematization efforts, will examine every proposal with a keen interest. The objective is not so much to sketch a portrait of the collector persona (unless it allows us to uncover an unknown or little-known personality), it is to study in a comparative, transversal and problematized way their relationship to Impressionism.

Research grants
As part of the preparation for this conference, research grants are offered. They are intended to fund work that is to be realized in Norman and/or Parisian territories and/or in the Ile-de-France and that aims to uncover little-known sources, collections or collectors.
Those who hope to benefit from these grants are to send, in addition to their communication proposal, a motivated research project detailing which collections and resources they plan to study.

All proposals (for communications and grant applications) are to be sent at collectionner.limpressionnisme@gmail.com before October 31, 2019.
Proposals for communications will be no more than 1 page long and will be accompanied by a short bio-bibliography.

Preparatory Workshop
A preparatory workshop for this symposium on the theme Collectionism: Approaches, Methods and Tools will be take place in Paris Nanterre University on October 3rd, 2019. Its purpose is to provide useful elements to help the attendees prepare themselves for the conference. It will therefore take stock of the knowledge on the subject with a presentation of its historiography, an overview of current research. It will also introduce tools –particularly digital ones– developed by researchers and cultural institutions to study of these collections.

Reference:

CFP: Collecting impressionism (Rouen, 25-26 Jun 20). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 23, 2019 (accessed Nov 21,

2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/20463>.