

# The Role of the Emerging Art Market in the Spread of Impressionism in Europe

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## ABSTRACT

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*At the time of the birth of Impressionism, the official Salon exhibitions provided the sole opportunity to make a reputation, to attract the attention of critics and purchasers. The efforts of the Impressionists, however, were always met with refusal, thus forcing them to organize independent exhibitions. These were a new forum providing regular appearance and sale facilities. For instance, between 1874 and 1886, eight exhibitions generated considerable interest from visitors and the press. Collaterally with the impressionist movement emerged a new type of art dealers who established personal, contracted contacts with the artists and this way taking an active role in determining the new market conditions.*

*The most prominent of these was Paul Durand-Ruel, who along with other art dealers, became the principal animators of the art impressionists' careers. They were also credited for dispersing impressionist paintings in Europe and America at the turn of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. But Ruel and other art dealers suggested subjects to the artists, and tried to lead them towards certain stylistic modifications to promote better reception and marketability. The question therefore remains: How and to what extent did this interlace with the art market influence the stylistic, methodical, and formalistic changes that befell the history of Impressionist painting?*

Keywords: *art impressionism, art market, European art, art tracking.*

Apart from the revolution of the painting technique, the appearance of the impressionists marked the starting point of the historical changes which reformed the institution system of the 19th century. At the start of the movement, the exhibitions hosted by the prestigious Salon des Artistes Français in Paris afforded the only opportunity for aspiring artists to attain fame and attract the attention of critics and buyers. Until the mid-1880s, the Salon functioned as a well-established framework for a large group of

artists and provided a means for them to achieve publicity by accepting their work, awarding occasional prizes and state stipends, and even offering the prospect of museum acquisitions. It soon became apparent, however, that the impressionists almost invariably experienced rejection, and, when accepted for exhibition, their paintings were often unfavourably placed in the topmost row of pictures put on display. Frequent refusals compelled the group of impressionists to begin organizing their own exhibitions, independently of the official, government-sponsored Salon. These regular exhibitions also served to establish their popularity and encourage potential buyers. Impressionism as an artistic movement did not originate from a predefined artistic program; instead, it stemmed from a desire to gain independence from the traditional institutional bounds and subsequently led to the formation of a group whose members carried out their activities within an organizational structure of their own. This structure helped to ensure that the group's radical theories of painting could be put into practice. The eight private exhibitions organized between 1874 and 1886 drew a substantial audience and received significant press coverage. Several renowned critics became allies of the movement, including Zola, Théodore Duret, and Jules Castagnary.

Art dealers and collectors initially responded with little interest in the exhibitions of the impressionists. Middle-class art collectors, the main group of potential buyers, were passionate about purchasing the works of painters of the Barbizon School, and they understandably recoiled from the scandals surrounding the impressionists. Of all the art dealers active at the time the modern art form was taking root, Paul Durand-Ruel deserves special recognition. It was Daubigny who introduced Monet and Pissarro to him in London in 1871, and, upon returning to Paris, he became the foremost supporter of the impressionists. His dynamism and commercial inventiveness led the way for a new breed of art dealer. Durand-Ruel began to purchase the works of neglected artists, organized exhibitions for them and published albums of reproductions. At the same time, he managed to establish a circle of potential buyers, his own clientele, around himself. On the grand boulevards and south of the Montmartre, a host of new galleries sprang up. Under Durand-Ruel's leadership, an entire network of art dealers was established.

*Emerging Art Market in the Spread of Impressionism in Europe*

Introduced as a novelty, solo exhibitions were aimed at promoting individual artists and their work.<sup>1</sup> Durand-Ruel carried on regular correspondence with the artists, and his letters give evidence of the influence he tried to exert upon them: he made thematic proposals and tried to convince them of the necessity of certain stylistic changes in order to boost the acceptance of their works and to attract more buyers. “As a result, the kind of works the Impressionists were painting after 1870 were modest in scale, often more carefully finished and less obviously sketchy than those that had attracted adverse reviews from the critics, and, unlike the large works intended to attract attention at the Salon, suitable for the new bourgeois apartments.”<sup>2</sup> The widening of the selection of subjects experienced in the 1880s was likewise inseparable from the perspective of sales opportunities and the stabilization of market conditions.

Art dealers who had a personal and contractual relationship with the artists took a prominent part in creating the new market environment that was to replace the Salon. As supporters of the new art form and as organizers of the first solo exhibitions, these art dealers became key players in the art scene. The changes they brought about made it possible for the artists to secure aesthetic and financial independence from academic institutions. This, however, naturally did not imply the artists’ financial freedom.

The year 1891 proved to be a turning point in art collection and in the history of the impressionist movement as well: the subsequent solo exhibitions (for example, of Monet’s *Haystacks* and the *Rouen Cathedral* series) at last cemented the group’s reputation. Impressionism was the new art form of a new social range. The subjects of the works are closer to the artistic tastes of middle-class audiences and patrons. Following the initial shock the new, hasty style produced, impressionism was becoming an increasingly exciting and fashionable form of art. Trade in works of art hereafter have been tied to special tastes, movements, and persons. The new art market proved aesthetically flexible enough to keep track of the diverse artistic styles that were unfolding.

At the turn of the century, other prominent art collectors appeared on the art scene: Theo van Gogh and Ambroise Vollard. Vollard began to purchase the works of young painters such as Van Gogh and Gauguin. On Pissarro’s advice, he got acquainted

with Cézanne, who arranged to have one hundred and fifty paintings sent to him. The Cézanne exhibition in the autumn of 1895 displayed the painter's works to the public for the first time in nearly twenty years. The exhibition stunned the audience and the new generation of painters. In the following decades dominated by the avant-garde, Vollard remained a fanatic collector of works that represented new artistic styles. Other prominent art collectors of the period included Alexandre Bernheim-Jeune and his sons. By purchasing the painters' works and providing *début* opportunities in their renowned exhibition hall, they ensured a livelihood not only for the impressionists and for the new generation of neo-impressionists but also for the likes of Bonnard, Vuillard, and Matisse. During the 1870s, art collectors were supporting themselves from the sale of paintings by the Barbizon painters in order to meet the expense of featuring the works of the impressionists. Some years later the new collectors were able to draw funds from selling the paintings of impressionists, so that they could take the risk of exhibiting works that were of a more experimental kind.

By the turn of the century, almost every representative of the impressionist movement attained some degree of fame. Their participation at the World's Fair of 1900 cemented their reputation on an international scale. While Durand-Ruel assembled a collection of thousands of impressionist works in only a few years, museums in France did not purchase a single piece between 1870 and 1895, and even between 1896 and 1922, there were less than a hundred acquisitions.<sup>3</sup> The first impressionist collections scattered after the collectors' death or, in some lucky cases, the works were transferred to the Louvre and later to the Musée d'Orsay. The private collections of Duret and Vollard bequeathed to the city of Paris were housed at the Musée du Petit-Palais. Critics and writers sympathetic to the impressionist painters were often enthusiastic art buyers themselves. Whenever they could afford it, the painters also readily bought each other's pictures. Caillebotte donated his collection of sixty-seven paintings to the state in 1894. With the assistance of this bequest, virtually everybody had their work displayed at the Musée du Luxembourg, the museum of contemporary art of that time. Before his South Sea voyage, Gauguin left nearly fifty paintings (mostly by Cézanne) in his wife's care, who sold the works upon her return to Copenhagen to cover the expenses of her husband's travels. This sale greatly impacted the development of Danish impressionism.

*Emerging Art Market in the Spread of Impressionism in Europe*

Durand-Ruel also had a key role in promoting impressionism on an international level. From 1896 until his death, he sold nearly a hundred paintings directly to various museums, and about thirty pieces made their way to the United States and Canada. He organized international exhibitions, established trade relationships with foreigners, primarily with Paul Cassirer from Berlin. He maintained especially close business ties with the German gallery owner, and gave him regular advice, as in the following letter: “We have always considered museum curators to be very special clients, and we are always willing to sell to them at a very small profit, and sometimes even at cost. That way we hope to create new clients among museum goers; museums are our best advertisement.”<sup>24</sup> From the end of the 1890s, German collectors and museums played a ground-breaking role in the dissemination of Impressionism in Europe. The first museum acquisition on the Continent was due in large part to the efforts of Hugo von Tschudi, director of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. In 1896, he acquired for the museum Manet’s *In the Conservatory*, along with ten other impressionist paintings, from Durand-Ruel. It was because of his support of the French – who were in Germany considered enemies – that Tschudi came into severe conflict with the Kaiser and the local artists, so much so that he was forced to resign from his position in 1908. He resumed his activities at the Staatliche Galerien in Munich.

The Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh was the first museum in the United States to buy an impressionist work from Durand-Ruel, namely, Sisley’s *Village on the Banks of the Marne* in 1899. Hungary became involved during the first years of the 20th century, with purchases made on behalf of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. Scandinavia was to follow suit shortly afterwards. In Great Britain, serious art collection began only in the 1920s, at the initiative of Samuel Courtauld. The surge of prices on the art market after 1900 was also due to Swiss and Russian collectors joining their German counterparts in the art trade. In Russia, the rich holdings of impressionist works presently housed at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg and at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow are based on the former collections of Ivan Morozov and Sergei Shchukin.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest began acquiring modern French works of art even before the inauguration of the museum building in 1906. Staying in Paris for the world exposition in 1900, Gábor Térey, curator of the institutional predecessor of

the museum, took notice of the works of Auguste Rodin. He visited Rodin in his studio and personally discussed the purchase of the bronze cast of *Sirens*<sup>5</sup> and commissioned the artist to prepare a marble version of *Eternal Spring*<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1) for the Museum of Fine Arts still under construction. Since Rodin's works were just catching on in popularity not just in Europe but also in America and Japan, it was just the right moment to undertake negotiations. Apart from these two sculptures, a third bronze portrait<sup>7</sup> was also purchased, along with two additional plaster casts<sup>8</sup> received as gifts.

In the years following its opening, the museum continued to take steps in order to purchase more items of modern French art, directly from French art dealers. Three of the works bought in 1907 [Daubigny's *Landscape near Villerville*<sup>9</sup>, Pissarro's *Pont-Neuf*<sup>10</sup> (Figure 2), and Sisley's *On the Banks of the Loing*] were acquired by the museum from Durand-Ruel's possession, while Gauguin's *Winter Landscape*<sup>11</sup> was from Charles Hessèle and Boudin's painting entitled *Portrieux*<sup>12</sup> was from the Galerie le Peletier. Sisley's painting was later exchanged with the Berlin art dealer Kurt Walter Bachstitz for Manet's *Lady with a Fan*<sup>13</sup> (Figure 3). In 1912, the museum obtained Monet's *Plum Trees in Blossom*<sup>14</sup> (Figure 4) from the Galerie Arnot in Vienna, with Paul Cassirer's assistance. The picture had previously passed through the hands of two of the most influential art dealers in Paris, Bernheim-Jeune and Durand-Ruel. The following year, the museum managed to supplement its collection with Gauguin's *Black Pigs*<sup>15</sup> (Figure 5), Toulouse-Lautrec's *These Ladies*<sup>16</sup> (Figure 6), Monet's *Entrance to the Port of Trouville*<sup>17</sup>, Cézanne's *The Buffet*<sup>18</sup> (Figure 7), and Pissarro's early *La Varenne de Saint Hilaire*<sup>19</sup>. The acquisition of modern French works continued in the 1930s with Puvis de Chavannes's *The Magdalene*<sup>20</sup> (from Durand-Ruel's former collection), Bonnard's *Grandmother with her Grandchild* and *Breakfast at Grand-Lemps*<sup>21</sup> (the latter had been purchased from the artist by Bernheim-Jeune), and Denis's *Mother and Child*<sup>22</sup>. The list was topped in 1945 with the purchase of Monet's *Three Fishing Boats*<sup>23</sup> and Renoir's *Portrait of a Girl*<sup>24</sup> (Figure 8).

The history of the impressionist movement is thoroughly intertwined with the process of gaining independence from the authority of traditional state-run institutions. These changes led to the formation of a system of modern artistic organizations. A basic element of this process was that the art movements and trading in art works were becoming interlinked at previously unseen levels.<sup>25</sup>

*Emerging Art Market in the Spread of Impressionism in Europe*

Recent findings on the subject of impressionism have called attention to several important and previously barely considered aspects. The outcome of this research was manifest at several highly acclaimed exhibitions over the past two decades.<sup>26</sup> While delving into the careers of selected artists (Monet or Renoir), it became clear in greater detail how the artists' individual (financial) careers were transformed by their personal and business associations with Paul Durand-Ruel, Ernest Hoschedé, and the Charpentiers. The results of the recent researches, however, raise the necessity of reconsidering subsequent aspects of these relationships and issues that played a crucial role in the shaping of the movement. In my view, the most vital question has remained unanswered or was only just touched upon: In what specific ways did art market connections influence the stylistic, technical, and formal changes throughout the history of Impressionism? A further study could contribute to a fuller understanding of the history of the movement by examining from a general perspective the various influences the new system of art trading exerted upon the Impressionist aesthetic.

Toth



Figure 1. Auguste Rodin, *Eternal Spring*, 1900, marble, 75x81x44 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



Figure 2. Camille Pissarro, *The Pont-Neuf*, oil on canvas, 55x46,5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.





Figure 3. Edouard Manet, *Lady with a Fan*, 1862, oil on canvas, 90x113 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



Figure 4. Claude Monet, *Plum Trees in Blossom*, 1879, oil on canvas, 64.3x81cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



Figure 5. Paul Gauguin, *The Black Pigs*, 1891, oil on canvas, 91x72 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



Figure 6. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *These Ladies*, 1893-1895, oil on cardboard, 61 x 81 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



Figure 7. Paul Cézanne, *The Buffet*, 1877, oil on canvas, 65,5 x 81 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



Figure 8. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Portrait of a Girl*, c. 1892, oil on canvas, 56,5x47 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>In 1883, Durand-Ruel organized solo exhibitions for Boudin, Monet, Pissarro, Renoir and Sisley.

<sup>2</sup>Anne Dumas, Introduction, In: *Impressionism: Paintings Collected by European Museums*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Seattle Art Museum, Denver Art Museum, 1999, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Caroline Durand-Ruel Godfroy, Durand-Ruel's Influence on the Impressionist Collections of European Museums, In: *Impressionism: Paintings Collected by European Museums*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Seattle Art Museum, Denver Art Museum, 1999, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Durand-Ruel to Paul Cassirer, on January 5th, 1910. Godfroy, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>Auguste Rodin, *Sirens*, 1888, bronze, 43x42x32 cm, Inv.no. 1891.

<sup>6</sup>Auguste Rodin, *Eternal Spring*, 1900, marble, 75x81x44 cm, Inv.no. 3394.

<sup>7</sup>Auguste Rodin, *Jean-Paul Laurens*, 1881, bronze, 57,5x39x32 cm, Inv.no. 1985.

<sup>8</sup>Auguste Rodin, *The Bronze Age*, 1900, painted plaster, 181,5x66x51 cm, Inv.no. 1987; Alexandre Falguière, painted plaster, 42,5x24x26,5 cm, Inv.no. 1988.

<sup>9</sup>Charles-François Daubigny, *Landscape near Villerville*, 1873, oil on canvas, 99x169 cm, Inv.no. 203.B.

<sup>10</sup>Camille Pissarro, *The Pont-Neuf*, oil on canvas, 55x46,5 cm, Inv.no. 205.B.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Gauguin, *Winter Landscape*, 1879, oil on canvas, 60x81 cm, Inv.no. 204.B.

<sup>12</sup>Eugène Boudin, *Portrieux*, 1874, oil on canvas, 54,5x89,5 cm, Inv.no. 202.B.

<sup>13</sup>Edouard Manet, *Lady with a Fan*, 1862, oil on canvas, 90x113 cm, Inv.no. 368.B.

<sup>14</sup>Claude Monet, *Plum Trees in Blossom*, 1879, oil on canvas, 64,3x81 cm, Inv.no. 266.B.

<sup>15</sup>Paul Gauguin, *The Black Pigs*, 1891, oil on canvas, 91x72 cm, Inv.no. 355.B.

<sup>16</sup>Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *These Ladies*, 1893-1895, oil on cardboard, 61x81 cm, Inv.no. 356.B.

*Emerging Art Market in the Spread of Impressionism in Europe*

<sup>17</sup>Claude Monet, *Entrance to the Port of Trouville*, 1870, oil on canvas, 54x65,7 cm, Inv.no. 367.B.

<sup>18</sup>Paul Cézanne, *The Buffet*, 1877, oil on canvas, 65,5x81 cm, Inv.no. 371.B. Presented by Ferenc Hatvany (Budapest) in 1917.

<sup>19</sup>Camille Pissarro, *La Varenne de Saint Hilaire*, 1863, oil on canvas, 49,6x74 cm, Inv.no. 377.B. Presented by Ferenc Hatvany (Budapest) in 1918.

<sup>20</sup>Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The Magdalene*, 1897, oil on canvas, 116,5x89,5 cm, Inv.no. 389.B.

<sup>21</sup>Pierre Bonnard, *Grandmother with her Grandchild*, 1894, oil on board, 33x42 cm, Inv.no. 406.B; *Breakfast at Grand-Lemps*, 1899, oil on canvas, 53,5x61 cm, Inv.no. 400.B.

<sup>22</sup>Maurice Denis, *Mother and Child*, 1895, oil on canvas, 81x65 cm, Inv.no. 401.B. Presented by wife of Adolf Kohner (Budapest) in 1934.

<sup>23</sup>Claude Monet, *Three Fishing Boats*, 1886, oil on canvas, 73x92,5 cm, Inv.no. 436.B.

<sup>24</sup>Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Portrait of a Girl*, c. 1892, oil on canvas, 56,5x47 cm, Inv.no. 435.B.

<sup>25</sup>This is very poignantly illustrated by Monet and Durand-Ruel's relationship and the artist's intimate ties with the Hoschedé family. See: Charles Stuckey, *Love, Money, and Monet's Débâcle Paintings of 1880*, in: *Monet at Vétheuil. The Turning Point* (cat.), The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1998.

<sup>26</sup>Charles S. Moffett, *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886* (cat.), The Fine Arts Museums, San Francisco, 1986; Anne Distel, *Impressionism: The First Collectors*, New York, 1990; Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, Princeton, 1994; *The New Painting* (ed. Ruth Berson, cat.), The Fine Arts Museums, San Francisco, 1996; *Impressionism: Paintings Collected by European Museums*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Seattle Art Museum, Denver Art Museum, 1999.

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