

My Madness has been Wisdom: Paul Durand-Ruel, Impressionism and the Beginnings of the Modern Art Market

Background notes

Dr Richard Stemp — 9 September 2020



Pierre-August Renoir, *Paul Durand-Ruel*, 1910.
Private Collection.

Towards the end of his life, Paul Durand-Ruel (1831-1922) was able to look back and say, 'At last the Impressionist masters triumphed... My madness had been wisdom. To think that, had I passed away at 60, I would have died debt-ridden and bankrupt, surrounded by a wealth of underrated treasures'. Financial success – and a vindication of his personal taste – was a long time coming, despite the fact that he was born into the world of commerce, and the world of art.

His grandparents had bought the stock of a stationery shop to provide for his mother, Marie Ruel, and the shop was managed by Jean Durand. These two went into business together, fell in love, and married. Durand decided to sell artist's materials as well as other stationery supplies, and occasionally accepted finished works of art as payment. From this simple transaction his role as an art dealer evolved. Paul Durand-Ruel's bedroom was hung with works considered too 'modern' to sell, but initially this did not inspire him: the financial hardship that his parents endured as a result of the Revolution of 1848 persuaded the boy that the life of an art dealer was not for him. He enrolled at a military academy, only to have a change of heart in 1855 when visiting the Universal Exhibition in Paris: at the age of 24 he fell in love with modern art, and especially with the room of works by Eugène Delacroix. Between 1868 and 1883 he would purchase more than 60 works by the master, including *The Death of Sardanapalus*, which he bought in 1873 for 96,000 Francs, a sale record for the artist, outbidding the French State. He used the painting – and the publicity caused by its sale – to promote the artist's work, exhibiting it in both London and Vienna, and to become the leading dealer in the artist's work.



Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

In 1865 he succeeded his father as the head of the gallery, and as well as selling Old Master Paintings, he specialized in the works of the Barbizon School, which he always referred to as 'the beautiful school of 1830', a group of landscape artists including Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Théodore Rousseau and Jean-François Millet. Like Durand-Ruel, they had been influenced by Delacroix. He bought 225 works by Corot between 1866 and 1873, seeking to build up a monopoly over the artist's work, thus enabling him to control the prices: this was a strategy he would later continue to use with the Impressionists. He also aimed to represent all aspects of the artist's output – other dealers had tended to focus on one strand of Corot's work. In 1867 he purchased 91 works from Rousseau, mainly plein-air sketches. This was another far-sighted strategy: although they were not well known, the landscape sketches were evidence of the artist's direct involvement with nature, and thus suited the growing interest in artists' biographies. In 1870 Durand-Ruel organised an innovative public programme, including a lecture series on French landscape painting, which took place in a room surrounded by Rousseau's work, all of which was for sale.

He wanted to provide Millet with an annual 'salary' in return for exclusive access to his paintings, an offer which the artist refused. Nevertheless, Durand-Ruel continued to support Millet financially in times of need. In 1871 the artist wrote, 'It's impossible for me to imagine how we could have survived if Durand-Ruel had not asked for paintings. He proved our



Charles-François Daubigny, *St Paul's from the Surrey Side*, 1871-3.
National Gallery, London.



Claude Monet, *The Thames below Westminster*, about 1871.
National Gallery, London.

With the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 Durand-Ruel took his business to London, where one of his artists, Charles-François Daubigny, introduced him to Claude Monet. The rest, as they say, is art history. The London gallery operated until 1875, in parallel with another, in Brussels, which was open from 1871-75. There were never any 'contracts' with the artists, nor do any stock books for London survive – nevertheless, it is known that, as well as having his own gallery, Durand-Ruel organised other exhibitions, including the French section of the International Exhibition held in South Kensington in 1871, at which Monet's *Meditation* was shown. However, Durand-Ruel did not buy this painting himself until 1873. When they returned to Paris, Monet and Pissarro (who had also been in London) are said to have introduced Durand-Ruel to Sisley, Renoir and Degas – although there are no official records of this. It was in 1872 that he also started to buy paintings from Berthe Morisot and Eva Gonzales.

On his return to Paris he faced tragedy, with the death of his wife. A widower at 40 with five children, he never remarried, but devoted more time to art and to the artists themselves. In 1872 he gambled on Manet, buying 25 of his paintings. One of his aims was to create value, as, at the time, there were few buyers for these works. He was himself financed by a number of backers, allowing him to purchase works, and to enable the production of the art he loved: from 1873 he began paying the future Impressionists a monthly sum against their works. He played little part in what has become known as the first Impressionist Exhibition of 1874, apart from lending two landscapes by Pissarro, but this may have been because he was suffering financially. His support of the new school of painting led him to be vilified, and people refused to buy from him. He was reduced to selling off his stock of Barbizon paintings – through brokers – in order to stay afloat. He purchased little in the late 1870s, and although the second 'Impressionist' exhibition of 1876 was held in his Gallery, the artists were hiring the space. He was not able to get credit at the bank until 1880, at which point he started to purchase the Impressionists once more – only to face ruin a second time when the bank supporting him collapsed in 1882.

Salvation came from the States – he took 300 works to exhibit there in 1885, with the assistance of Mary Cassatt, the only American to exhibit with the Impressionists. She introduced him to some childhood friends, the Havemeyers, who, as well as becoming avid collectors of Manet and the Impressionists, also bought paintings by El Greco and Goya. The Impressionist exhibition in New York in 1886 was a success – so much so that he organised a second the following year and opened a gallery in the city in 1888. It was only at this point that his investment in the artists, which had started back in the early 1870s, began to pay off. Cassatt herself did not regularly exhibit or sell her works to Durand-Ruel until the 1890s, when he organised monographic exhibitions of her paintings in Paris and New York.



Cassatt Mary , *The Child's Bath*, 1893.
The Art Institute, Chicago.

Durand-Ruel's strategies were entirely original. He insisted on exclusivity as the artists' dealer, and also favoured monographic exhibitions: up until this point, galleries had tended to hold group shows. Five monographic exhibitions took place, one each month, between February and June 1883. These shows were often retrospectives, rather than focussing solely on new work, with the implication that if the artists had a past, they would also have a future. As he said to Monet in March, 1883:

You have been successful among people of taste. The number of those who understand you is growing day by day. Your reputation among the masses will come on its own; that day will arrive and it is not far away. As far as I am concerned, you should not worry. I never get downhearted and even if I had a thousand of your pictures that hadn't sold I would not change my opinion.

He also included illustrations of the contemporary artists' work in his publications of reproductions of works in his own collection, called the *Recueil d'estampes* ('Collection of Prints'). These featured paintings by Goya, David, Delacroix and Courbet, thus placing the young artists in the context of older masters. As well as acting as their dealer, he often provided moral support for many of his artists, and this was reciprocated. A couple of the artists acted as witnesses to his children's marriages, and one of his sons became godfather to Renoir's son Jean. He collected their works himself, commissioning many for his own apartment, which was eventually opened to the public – a brilliant marketing ploy as it allowed people to see what it would be like to live with modern art. His sons took over the family business after his death in 1922, and during a lunch with Joseph Durand-Ruel in the family dining room in 1923, Duncan and Marjorie Phillips were particularly struck by Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, which they bought six months later. It is now one of the key works of the Phillips Collection in Washington.



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1880-1
(Washington DC, The Phillips Collection)

In 1905 he organised the largest exhibition of Impressionist paintings that London has ever seen, including 315 works, 196 of which came from his own personal collection – one of them being the Renoir now in the Phillips Collection. The exhibition was seen by over 11,000 people, ‘a larger number than had visited any two exhibitions in the same galleries for many years past’, according to the *Sunday Times*. Relatively few paintings were sold, as it happens, but nevertheless, Impressionism was finally on the map in England. Even so, the trustees of the National Gallery were still wary about acquiring works by the artists who, elsewhere, were no longer seen as young mavericks.

Between 1870 and his death in 1922 Durand-Ruel staged over 200 exhibitions in Paris and almost 130 in New York. The New York Gallery continued in business until 1949, and, although the *Maison Durand-Ruel* is still active, since 1974 it has concentrated on managing the Impressionist archives.

Further reading:

Everything written above is drawn from the catalogue *Inventing Impressionism: Paul Durand-Ruel and the Modern Art Market*, edited by Sylvie Patry and published by the National Gallery Company to coincide with the eponymous exhibition in 2015.

I would also recommend Robert L Herbert’s *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society*, which provides a thorough exploration of the way in which Impressionism moved hand in hand with developments in contemporary life and culture. John Rewald’s *The History of Impressionism* may have been published back in 1973, but if you can get hold of it, it is still the best introduction to the evolution of the movement.

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