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Classic French Modern

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Art Without History symposium, Oskar Reinhart Collection
«Am Römerholz», Winterthur, Switzerland, September 2012
Before being asked to participate in this symposium I had not seriously considered the significance of either what I will be calling ‘classic French modern’ nor of the group of art collectors who acquired this art. I did not, in fact, see either as a definable group. I have not been alone in this. I coined the phrase ‘classic French modern’ just to be able to describe a view of 19th-century French art that was strongly prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s, a view that has, I will argue, largely disappeared under the progression of ‘isms’ that makes up most recent historical narratives of late 19th- and 20th-century art. What is most important about these collectors and the art they collected is how they helped to define the canon of great 19th-century art, and to posit that canon as something predominately French in character. Significantly, this work was carried out primarily by individuals who were not French nationals.

Collectors of Classic French Modern

- Oskar Reinhart, b. 1885
- Chester Dale, b. 1883
- Samuel Courtauld, b. 1876
- Duncan Phillips, b. 1886
- Sterling Clark, b. 1877
- Stephen C. Clark, b. 1882
- Emil Bührle, 1890
In order to excavate this hidden history of the canonization of 19th-century art, I conducted a simple aggregation of the activities of a few men who collected ‘classic French modern’. They were contemporaries, representing multiple nationalities, yet none of them were French. The Swiss Oskar Reinhart, the Americans Chester Dale, Sterling and Stephen Clark, and Duncan Phillips, and the Englishman Samuel Courtauld were born between 1876 and 1886; only the Swiss collector Emil Bührle, who was slightly younger, was born outside this ten-year span. For the purpose of this talk what primarily unites these collectors is their ambition during the 1920s and 1930s to collect art by a limited number of the same 19th-century French artists stretching from Delacroix and Corot to the Postimpressionists. In particular, all of my collectors of ‘classic French modern’, except Sterling Clark, were enthusiastic admirers of both Cézanne and Renoir.
In analyzing their collections I will be painting with a broad brush. I do not know whether any of these men knew the others, nor do I care. I’m not interested in whether they bought from the same dealers, although I believe that they often did. I will not even attempt to explain why they came to value 19th-century French art so highly. What interests me is the fact that they did, and that what they did has largely become invisible to us. And I will go further to claim that these historically almost invisible collections of ‘classic French modern’ have exerted a profound influence over our perceptions of 19th-century art.

Another claim I will make is that in the 1920s, at the time when these collections of ‘classic French modern’ began to be formed, a choice had to be made when valuing modern art that no longer exists today: that is, to opt either for tradition or for avant-gardism. It was a matter, for example, of choosing to consider Paul Cézanne either as the greatest 19th-century heir to a long tradition of great Western painters, or to see the artist as the father of modern art, as Henri Matisse famously described him. ‘Classic French modern’ was the choice of tradition in which Cézanne was placed alongside Poussin and Rembrandt, rather than with Matisse and Picasso.

Paul Cézanne, The Card Players, c. 1890-92 Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia and Albert Barnes, b. 1872
In looking for patterns of collecting I excluded important collectors active during the interwar years who significantly deviated from the norm set by the other collectors of ‘classic French modern.’ For example, Albert Barnes, who otherwise belongs to this generation of collectors, obsessively collected a few artists in very large numbers, most notably Cézanne and Renoir, and he bought far more adventurous 20th-century artists than was typical for this generation of collectors, as for example his acquisition of this great, early Matisse, *Le Bonheur de vivre*.

![Henri Matisse, Le Bonheur de vivre, 1905-06, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia](image)

Some of the collectors of ‘classic French modern’ did buy works by major Parisian artists who emerged after 1900, such as an occasional Bonnard or Vuillard, or perhaps an early Picasso or works in Picasso’s neoclassical style from the early 1920s. Sometimes they even bought works by School of Paris artists such as
Amedeo Modigliani. Rarely, however, did they collect the more extreme forms of modern art that appeared after 1910: Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, and so on.

Like Barnes, however, all the collectors I have identified began to acquire ‘classic French modern’ art immediately following World War I and they continued to do so until at least the early 1930s, when the global disaster of the Depression caused most of them to scale back their acquisitions. After the Second World War, if they were still collecting, what they purchased tended to change; ‘classic French modern’ was no longer the primary focus of their collecting activities (with the notable exception of Bührle). Old masters, artists belonging to local national schools of art, and sometimes more contemporary artists became increasingly the targets of their collecting interests. What this means is that the collecting of ‘classic French modern’ is strongly defined as a generational taste belonging primarily to the 1920s and 30s.

During the interwar years, not only were the majority of their collections devoted to 19th-century French painting, the artists who were collected were equally well defined. Academicians and Salon artists were largely absent or marginalized. A few 18th-century French painters, in particular Chardin, were acquired, but neither Rococo nor Neoclassical painters have important places in their collections. What their collections all possess are exceptional examples of Corot, Delacroix, Daumier, and Courbet. And they exhibit even more exceptional examples of the major Post-Impressionists: Cézanne, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, van Gogh, sometimes Seurat, and a few others. The Impressionists are there too, of course, especially Manet and for some, Renoir, but the fame of these collections
tends to rest more on the artists whose great works were done in the 1880s and later.

Monet curiously is often less well represented in these collections than one might have reason to expect. The comparative lack of interest in Monet’s paintings is indicative of a basic shared assumption about what constituted great 19th-century French art, one based on temperament, from which Monet was subtly if not excluded, than at least marginalized.
The collectors of ‘classic French modern’ acquired their paintings and sculptures with a special eye to the quality of their acquisitions. Notably most of these men shared their collections with posterity through the form of the house museum, that is to say, a museum embodying almost exclusively what appear to be the personal tastes of the collector. Only Stephen Clark intentionally dispersed his collection, but he did so as major gifts to three major museums: the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven. To collect consistently museum-quality works of art speaks both to the ambitions of these collectors and to the perceived historical value of what they chose to collect, especially in regard to what for many were still daring choices, the Postimpressionist artists within ‘classic French modern.’

Because of who and when they bought, these collectors have a different, less well-defined status in the history of modern art than do collectors like the
Americans Gertrude and Leo Stein, or the Frenchman, Jacques Doucet. Collectors like the Steins were able to buy directly from the artists, or, if not from the artists, from dealers who represented the artists. Their fame had to do with their early recognition and support of as yet mostly unrecognized artists. Reinhart, Courtauld, and our other collectors of ‘classic French modern’ rarely met the artists whose work they purchased; even the dealers from whom they bought mostly acquired their stock through intermediaries, not from the artists. As such, they did little to promote contemporary art and artists. Their collections exerted influence in a very different, subtler, possibly more profound, way than that of the Steins. And unlike the Steins and Doucet, their collections remained intact.
The generational remove of these collectors from the artists they acquired only partly explains why so many individual studies of these collectors have overlooked common patterns of acquisition or the larger implications of their collecting habits. There are at least two other factors that have contributed to obscuring the collective significance of these men and their collections. The first has to do with the nature of art historical narratives regarding 19th- and 20th-century modern art, the ‘modern’ in my phrase ‘classic French modern’. By this I am referring to a transnational, developmental history of artistic innovation, one that moves inexorably forward through time, a process within which the ‘modern’ or the ‘contemporary’ is constantly being reinvented from one generation to the next. Interestingly the Tate Modern education department early in this century chose to graphically illustrate this narrative in the entrance gallery of their museum (it has since been removed).

Narratives of this type often begin with Manet and the Impressionists, although Delacroix, Corot, Daumier, and Courbet are often present as precursors. Canonical artists figure prominently in such histories, but they are obviously dominated by “isms”, which, as you can see, is graphically illustrated in the Tate timeline. Before the 1920s Western art history had conventionally been organized according to nationality, or region, or city, as well as by schools and period styles. The new narratives of modern art, by contrast, proceeded without explicit regard to nationality from the Impressionists and Postimpressionists to the Nabis, the Fauves, the Cubists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and on further to post-World War II art,
right down to the present day. And, of course, these narratives were and remain profoundly exclusionary; there is only space for a handful of artists and “isms”.

Such historical narratives sweep Cézanne and the other ‘classic French moderns’ into the enormous creative energy of the post-1900 avant-gardes, where they are given the status of precursors to what seemed in, say, 1912, to be the inevitable, non-reversible forward progress of successive avant-garde ‘movements.’ This perception of modern artistic development continues to be expressed in institutional form when one visits the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Tate Modern in London, where the galleries open with Cézanne and other Postimpressionists and close with contemporary art. Textual surveys of modern art tend to do the same, usually opening with Manet or Courbet and ending in the
present. Since around the middle of the 20th century 'classic French modern' has been enfolded into this teleological narrative of modern art.

Another force at work that has diminished our awareness of the significance of 'classic French modern' and its collectors has to do with how 'natural' these collections subsequently appear to us. I mean the assumption that the artworks in these collections are 'naturally' of such high quality that their being pursued by our collectors is something self-evident. We stand in front of a great Cézanne, and find it hard to imagine a perspective that would not, naturally, see such a work of art as universally great. It is extremely difficult to see our judgment in fact as something that has been culturally produced over time. In effect, the naturalizing of these
collectors’ choices may be expressed by the word ‘classic,’ the key term in ‘classic French modern.’

By ‘classic’ I mean a specific variant of the English definition of the word: something ‘judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding of its kind.’ In English ‘classic’ is often confused with ‘classicism’. ‘Classic’ like ‘classicism’ implies a transcendent tradition—the idea that there are standards of value that transcend historical and geographical location. But ‘classicism’ is a tradition firmly linked to the Italian Renaissance, and then, further back, to Greco-Roman antiquity. One can identify with classicism specific sets of rules: the privileging of the nude body, the privileging of line over color, and so on.
What I am proposing, if we take the perspective of the 1920s and to think of ‘classic’ art as I believe men like Reinhart understood it, is that such art must transcend all national schools, while explicitly rejecting the Latin tradition. What was ‘classic’ in the 1920s was far from being limited to academic-informed values; it possessed new rules, ones that could privilege, for example, color over line, or still life over figure painting, or rough painterly brushwork over closed forms and smooth surfaces, as classicism would never do.

There was a curious paradox at the heart of the collecting of ‘classic French modern.’ Its collectors no doubt believed that art possessed universal qualities. Yet the artists of ‘classic French modern’ fundamentally undermined the notion of permanent standards of value by which to judge all art. The Postimpressionists
especially led the way in thinking of artistic quality as something relative. To become ‘classic’ therefore was not a condition of obeying established rules, but could only be understood after the passage of a considerable period of time—such as the distance between the 1880s and the 1920s—from which perspective one could determine which artists had most revised the rules upon which current art was based.

The ‘classic French modern’ artists rarely employed symbolic language, and they generally avoided narrative conventions. They used color increasingly independent of nature, as an expressive device. In Cézanne’s case (and those who followed him) the artist sacrificed a visual logic based on a Renaissance perspectival system in favor of a logic that was much more strictly pictorial. Cézanne was foremost concerned with what would make a good painting, not what would effectively mirror reality. In other words collectively the artists of ‘classic French modern’ developed new standards by which to judge art simply by redefining what a good painting was. As a young English critic put it in 1923, “One can assert that the person who cannot perceive the beauties of Cézanne has never properly seen the beauties of the Old Masters.”¹

The remaining term in my phrase ‘classic French modern’—French—is oddly the most ambiguous of the three, partly because not all ‘classic French moderns’ were in fact French nationals, like van Gogh, and partly because those later artists who most identified with ‘classic French modern’ during the 1920s, the School of Paris, were overwhelmingly not French; they were primarily Eastern European Jews. So, ‘classic French modern’ is at once very French, since that’s what most of
the artists were, and at the same time curiously transnational, because it is not the fact of their French-ness, as representatives of a national school of art, that became their defining feature, but rather their ‘classic’ modernity. It is not unimportant that they were mostly French artists. But what is of greater significance is how their French identity became submerged, for those who looked backward, in a universalizing argument about transcendent quality in art. For those who looked forward, their French identity was equally submerged under a transnational argument about the French moderns’ multinational progeny: the European avant-gardes.

I want to spend the remainder of my talk sketching out a general context for the collecting of ‘classic French modern’ by looking at how the ‘classic French moderns’ came to be canonized in the 1920s and at the role contemporary Parisian
art played in developing our collectors’ shared perception of the ‘classic French moderns’.

The passing of the last great representatives of the ‘classic French moderns’ in the early post-war years—Degas in 1917, Renoir in 1919, and Monet in 1926—stimulated the process of canonization. Degas’ death not only inspired renewed interest in his art, the auction of his private collection in 1918 also brought many important works by the artist and his friends into the market. Renoir’s death, coming as it did after the war, occasioned an even larger outpouring of literature on the artist, including his dealer Ambroise Vollard’s influential monograph, resulting in a wave of enthusiasm for Renoir’s work and especially his later paintings.

Significantly, the least resonant death of the three was that of Monet’s. Most of the
collectors of ‘classic French modern’ did not prize Monet to the degree they did Cézanne. In part this was because Monet only rarely painted the human figure, and in part because his reputation was that of an dispassionate observer of nature. In the culture that fostered 'classic French modern' Monet was too much the scientist and theoretician. What the German art historian Julius Meier-Graefe characterized as Monet's ruthless objectivity led him to describe the artist as a 'barbarian of painting', who lacked the 'temperament' that he and many of his contemporaries found in the other great contributors to 'classic French modern.

The passing of the last ‘classic French moderns’ also coincided with the radical historical revision of their position vis-à-vis their Salon contemporaries. It is true that the basic reputations of the ‘classic French moderns’ were already well established prior to the First World War. Meier-Graefe, for example, had published influential appreciations of all the major artists belonging to these three generations of French painters. In fact, the French artists Meier-Graefe featured in his history of modern art published in 1904 were consistently the same artists our collectors acquired during the 1920s and 1930s: Daumier, Delacroix, Corot, Courbet, Manet, and so on, just as his marginalization of Monet is reflected to a surprising degree in these later collections.

What was new in the 1920s was the relative position of the “classic French moderns” vis-à-vis their Salon contemporaries. The reputations of the great French Salon artists had gradually declined from the 1880s forward. A famous story has Cézanne, on the admittance of some of his pictures as part of the Caillebotte Bequest to the Luxembourg Museum proclaiming, “At last, I shit on Bouguereau.” But art
institutions are always slow to change, and the historical process by which Cézanne triumphed over Bouguereau took many years to unfold. In fact, until the First World War the old Paris Salon, its current members and past paragons, were still being given serious treatment inside the Paris art establishment, and in the journals, newspapers, and galleries that covered contemporary art. For example, Léonce Bénédite, the chief curator of the Luxembourg museum, published in 1910 a survey of 19th-century French painting that, while acknowledging the significance of the ‘classic French moderns’, devoted much more space to the great Salon artists. Bouguereau was still shitting on Cézanne.²

After the war the situation had changed dramatically. Art historians like Elie Faure treated the ‘classic French moderns’ as the uncontested representatives of the
best of French art. In Faure’s 1921 history of 19th-French painting only Puvis de Chavannes and Eugène Carrière among Salon celebrities appeared in his narrative.³ Faure also argued that all French painting in the first twenty years of the 20th century developed out of the paintings of Cézanne and Renoir.⁴

The passing of the last Impressionists had the additional effect of reinforcing the perception that ‘classic French modern’ was no longer representative of what constituted ‘contemporary art’. We must recognize that the ‘contemporary’ presented a very different face in the 1920s than our modern view of the interwar era: ours is dominated by Dada and Surrealism, by the various forms of non-objective art, and by the critical realism of ‘new objectivity’ painting and photography, that is, by the continued manifestations of the pre-war avant-gardes.
Yet collectors like Courtauld or Reinhart, from the perspective of the interwar years, must have viewed such avant-gardist manifestations, insofar as they were aware of them, simply incomprehensible as art. Imagine them comparing Cézanne to Arp from the perspective of the Twenties! Instead they were prepared to see contemporary art as something very different from avant-garde art, and, on the whole, something they probably considered generally inferior to the art of ‘classic French modern’.

We can take the post-Cubist André Derain as representative of contemporary art for these men during the interwar years. Derain had become a symbolic alternative to Picasso and the avant-gardist activities perceived to have developed from cubism. Since Derain turned away from cubism as early as 1910, his art was
perceived as a bulwark of tradition against the forces of innovation. This thematic began to take shape during the war, even as the Ecole de Paris took shape. For example, the great critic Guillaume Apollinaire in his 1916 preface for Derain’s solo exhibition at Paul Guillaume’s gallery described the artist as a passionate student of the great old masters and as such, Derain “went beyond the most audacious experiments of contemporary art in order to rediscover the simplicity and freshness of the first principles of art...”5 Years later Derain himself argued that the cult of originality—by which he certainly meant to refer to the European avant-gardes—was a relatively recent historical invention. He argued that even if the outward forms of art change, they possess an inner, universal consistency and he deplored the idea that artists would cultivate a private language open only to a few. Derain quoted favorably a Chinese philosopher who once said: “I do not innovate. I transmit.”6

Amedeo Modigliani
Portrait of Chaim Soutine, 1917
Chester Dale Collection,
National Gallery, Washington, D.C.
And indeed, in the 1920s the best contemporary Parisian artists were transmitters rather than innovators. They consisted primarily of foreign, mostly Jewish, artists like Modigliani, Pascin, Soutine and others who came to be called the ‘School of Paris’. And, in contrast to the pre-war avant-gardes, they consistently looked backward, self-consciously rejecting the radical experimentalism of the immediate prewar years.

They took as models for their art the ‘classic French moderns’, in particular, Cézanne, Degas, van Gogh, and Toulouse-Lautrec (and, importantly, never Monet). And they, or at least the owners of their pictures, were rewarded for their choice, since the prices for Modiglianis and Soutines in the twenties rivaled those of Cézanne’s. Not surprisingly, some of our collectors bought Ecole de Paris artists and
the later Derain, albeit not in the quantity or significance of their 19th-century French purchases.

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<th>School of Paris</th>
<th>School of France</th>
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<td>(some of the foreign artists identified with the School)</td>
<td>(excluding the major French moderns such as Matisse, Braque, and Leger )</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amedeo Modigliani</td>
<td>André Derain</td>
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<td>Pablo Picasso (in neoclassical guise)</td>
<td>André Beaudin</td>
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<td>Chaim Soutine</td>
<td>Maurice Dufresne</td>
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<td>Tsuguharu Foujita</td>
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The predominance of these successful foreign artists in Paris reinforced the growing view that the great days of French art had passed. In the numerous books and articles that appeared during this period debating the merits of the School of Paris versus their French-born contemporaries, the more hysterical of these attributed the death of French painting to this ‘foreign invasion’. Yet many of the native French artists who were identified in the mid-1920s as belonging to the “Ecole de France” were even more artistically conservative than the Ecole de Paris artists, or they were artists whose best work already lay far behind them, or who
were weak followers of cubism. Compared to the great ‘classic French modern’ artists, they must have seemed to our collectors as extraordinary weak.

In this way, the mediocrity of the native contemporary French art, along with the current prestige of the School of Paris artists, created a situation in which the forward trajectory of the pre-war avant-gardes, so enthusiastically promoted before the war, could now be perceived as misguided experimentation, one that misunderstood the traditions supported by ‘classic French modern’ artists. And from this perspective what this experimentation resulted in were largely negligible art and artists.

The School of Paris artists have paid and continue to pay an art historical price for being transmitters rather than innovators. They are frequently excluded from histories of 20th-century art. Yet many have also remained extremely popular with the larger public for art. Like the ‘classic French moderns’ the ‘School of Paris’ artists came to be defined as individual temperaments rather than as participants in collective innovation. Like the ‘classic French moderns’ the School of Paris artists are perceived to be a group of individuals, not individuals subordinated to an aesthetically coherent group.

The formal and thematic innovations of Matisse, Picasso and the greater hosts of the European avant-gardes, were never acceptable to Meier-Graefe or to Courtauld, nor to the other collectors of ‘classic French modern’ because they represented the dominance of mechanics over personality, of ideas over the passionate engagement with the medium of paint. With the passage of time, this
sense of the adhesion to tradition at the expense of whatever was contemporary in art slowly ebbed away. What was, in the 1920s and 1930s, a conscious choice about what constituted art in an on-going tradition of great artists gradually, but not entirely, subsided under the narratives that stressed artistic innovation and radical change. Nonetheless, the fact of the paintings themselves, their capacity to be both modern and old, endures in the house museums of these great interwar collectors of ‘classic French modern’ and covertly, in the histories of 19th-century art.

1 Jan Gordon, Modern French Painters (London: John Lane, 1923), 32.

2 Léonce Bénédite, Great Painters of the XIXth Century and Their Paintings (London: Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1910).


