

Visitor information

If pictures could speak ... Impressionist masterpieces tell their story

Museum Langmatt,
8th September to
8th December 2019

The collection's current exhibition presents selected French Impressionist masterpieces and their stories, incorporating hitherto unseen archive materials. The Museum Langmatt archives were opened up in 2018; they offer new possibilities for this approach. A surprising amount is known about the circumstances under which the pictures were acquired. We have contracts of sale, letters, postcards, and historical photographs relating to the artworks. These documents give a vivid picture of how the Brown family assembled their astonishing collection, and under what circumstances. At the beginning of the 20th century, Sidney and Jenny Brown were principally interested in the large-format, dark-toned landscape paintings of the Munich School. However, the couple's enthusiasm soon shifted to the airy, light-filled works of the French Impressionists. Their subsequent collecting of these paintings can be regarded as a pioneering achievement. At that time, the Impressionists had yet to be recognised by a wider public. This exhibition sheds light on where, when, and with whom the Browns acquired their outstanding paintings, and on how they were exhibited and received at the time.

Corridor:

Paris, Paris! The beginnings of the collection

In 1853, the Emperor Napoleon III commissioned the new prefect of Paris, George Eugène Baron Haussmann, to turn Paris, with its narrow and close streets, into a modern capital city. The subsequent 17 years saw the most major rebuilding in the whole history of Paris: almost three-quarters of the city's buildings were demolished, rebuilt, or massively changed. What had previously been a cluttered cityscape with twisting streets and alleys gave way to a uniform design dominated by monumental boulevards, plazas, and buildings. Tens of thousands of gas lanterns turned Paris into a "city of lights". This new city aesthetic and the bustle of the city attracted the attention of painters like Degas, Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro. These artists created a number of paintings that depicted the populous streets, the public

gardens, the well-filled market halls, the illuminated shop windows, the numerous cafes, and the elegant evening gatherings. Camille Pissarro's *Boulevard Montmartre* is one such painting, attesting to the interest that the city held. The painter turned to depicting Paris streets at a late stage in his artistic career, but this also meant that he was able to portray them with great intensity. For instance, he painted a view of the Boulevard Montmartre around 14 times between February and April 1897, depicting it in different weather conditions and at different times of day.

Sidney and Jenny Brown also loved this vibrant city. They visited Paris on their honeymoon trip in 1896. This journey laid the foundation for the unique Impressionist collection that can still be admired in Museum Langmatt today: at the gallery of the famous art dealer Georges Bernheim, the couple purchased the painting *Washerwomen* by Eugène Boudin. Boudin was one of the first painters to work in the open air. He is considered a precursor of Impressionism. Although he studied in Paris from the 1850s onwards, he was repeatedly drawn back to his homeland of Normandy. Here, he found his favoured subject matter – in the fashionable beach at Trouville, but also in the everyday life of the Normandy population, as we see in *Washerwomen*. From 1904, the Browns would visit Paris every spring and autumn, "to see good, true painting". They began to collect Impressionist art with a passion from 1908, and in consequence met many artists, collectors, and art dealers. Numerous postcards and letters attest to their enthusiasm for the glittering city on the Seine.

Room 1 and Veranda:

Art advisors, trading partners, friends — Montag, Viau, and Vollard

The young Winterthur painter Carl Montag was especially influential in encouraging the Browns' interest in contemporary French artists and their contacts with major collectors and art dealers. Montag went to Paris in 1903, full of talent and hope, to study the new painting style for inspiration. His brother-in-law, the Zurich dentist Dr. Theodor Frick, provided a connection to his fellow dentist in Paris, George Viau, who was at the time already a friend of many Impressionists and who had assembled an impressive private collection at this early stage. This dentist and art appreciator, who would sometimes work on canvases himself, would subsequently introduce Montag to the world of the Impressionists.

The portrait by Paul-César Helleu presented in Room 1 shows Viau standing in front of the selection of artworks from his collection. To the left, behind Viau's head, is a portrait of a woman by Degas, seen and copied by Montag whilst visiting the collector. Later, in June 1915, he gave his copy to Jenny Brown, which explains the dedication on the rear side. Carl Montag was so impressed by

the Impressionist artworks that he had seen in Paris that he immediately started to persuade friends and acquaintances in Switzerland of the quality of these paintings. At the time, the new French school of painting was largely unknown in the German-speaking world. Thus, Montag's enthusiasm was clearly met with incomprehension. Montag, however, who had found his calling as "Ambassadeur de l'art français", continued undeterred, renewing his efforts to inform and arranging exhibitions of Impressionist artworks. Montag even put his own art second to this task of communication. It is in large part due to his efforts that the next few years saw attitudes to this new art form shift among Swiss collectors and museums.

In 1907, when George Viau sold much of his Impressionist collection, Montag took an active role, drawing Sidney and Jenny Brown's attention to the sell-off. One of the first Viau collection pictures to come to Baden was the portrait of Paul Meunier, painted circa 1877. Further acquisitions followed over the next few years. The Browns became friends of Viau, visiting him in Paris. In token of this friendship, Viau gave the Browns a copy of Monet's famous cathedral, created by himself. He also gave them a print of the previously-mentioned engraving by Helleu, with a personal dedication. Highlights among the artworks acquired from Viau include Claude Monet's *Ice Floes*, Mary Cassatt's child portrait, a still life of fruit by Henri Fantin-Latour, and *Picking Peas* by Camille Pissarro. Fortunately, a letter survives relating to this last artwork, written by the artist to Viau and incorporating a splendid sketch. A letter of the 10th of November 1909 from Jenny Brown to Carl Montag shows the importance that the Browns attached to the painting of the three women picking peas:

We are delighted that you have succeeded in acquiring this magnificent picture for us. Our greatest concern is that the good Herr Viau must have been most reluctant to part with it, and might regret making our acquaintance [...]. We wish to express our sincerest thanks to you, our good Herr Montag. Thanks to your offices, we have seen and acquired so many beautiful things, but we have as yet been able to do so little for you in order to show our sincere friendship and gratitude.

Aside from the private collector George Viau, it was the industrious art dealer Ambroise Vollard who sold numerous artworks to the Browns — primarily works by Renoir and Cézanne. The Veranda is dedicated to him and to a small selection of the works acquired from him. In 1893, Ambroise Vollard opened his gallery in the Rue Laffitte in Paris. Astonishingly, artists were among his most important clients prior to the turn of the century. Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Camille Pissarro bought or exchanged their artworks through his business, and also discussed new, trailblazing ideas in

painting there. Vollard later wrote an account of his remarkable encounters with the artists and his work in his book "Souvenirs d'un marchand de tableaux". Encouragement from his artist friends caused Vollard to include older or deceased artists, such as Gauguin, van Gogh, or Cézanne, in his programme. Vollard's advocacy contributed significantly to making the work of these artists known to a wider international audience. In addition to his promotion of the aforementioned artists, Vollard was also known as a publisher of modern artist graphics and other artist-designed books. The Browns purchased over 20 pictures from Vollard, and also bought a number of his publications. John Alfred Brown gives a vivid account of his parents' encounter with Vollard:

It was a pure coincidence that my parents, during a stroll in Paris in 1908, passed by the then rather small Vollard gallery and were fascinated by a portrait by an artist unknown to them that appeared in its display, and, after longer consideration, decided to enter the gallery and to ask the price. Vollard was in the process of showing a number of works by Cézanne to the great Moscow collector Ivan Morosov. They watched this presentation with great interest. At that moment, the large still life was being shown. The Russian said that it should be bought today, and that he himself had a similar picture and did not want it. It was there that the final conversion to French art took place. My father's immediate decision to purchase the large still life (with the peaches) was also due to the Russian's emphatic affirmation [...]. There was, however, great consternation when this unusual still life arrived in Baden.

The still life that he refers to is considered to be the first Cézanne painting to enter Swiss ownership. It is an unusual composition, with dark and heavy colour tones. Further purchases from Vollard followed (although, as a number of letters to Carl Montag show, the Browns were plainly not always at ease with the art dealer's manner. The pragmatically-minded Montag, however, was able to appease the couple by pointing out to them that it was the artwork that was truly important, and that Vollard "in spite of all his knowing-best" was the best Cézanne dealer. This argument appears to have persuaded them, and, up until 1939, numerous further magnificent artworks by the major South French painter found their way into the Langmatt collection.

Rooms 2 and 3:

Travelling masterpieces: On the reception of the Sidney and Jenny Brown collection

For the Browns, collecting Impressionist paintings was purely a labour of love. They were not concerned with prestige, or with returns on their investments. On the contrary: at the time, modern French painting was still unknown to the wider public – or highly controversial – and many of the artists did not receive recognition until

a long time afterwards. Thus, the Browns were cautious in displaying their newly purchased pictures – even to their friends. Carl Montag was the one who most frequently persuaded them to abandon their reserve, ensuring that the trove of pictures at Baden were made accessible to the public on select occasions.

The Browns' pictures were presented to a larger audience in 1913, in Stuttgart. In that year, under King Wilhelm II, the Württemberg city received a new art exhibition building. On the *Schlossplatz* — the "most beautiful square in Stuttgart" — in the heart of the city centre and in immediate proximity to the main station, a "worthy home" for art was built. To inaugurate the building, an "exhibition of German art with an international significance" was assembled, running from May to October. It featured around 785 exhibits from the fields of painting, graphics, and sculpture. Carl Montag, who was involved in organising the exhibition, succeeded in persuading the Browns to loan a number of their paintings. This was how the three wonderful still lives by Paul Gauguin, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Victor Vignon, as well as Camille Pissarro's shaggy chestnut trees (on display in Room 2) set out on their journey to the German royal city.

Three years later, the Browns' pictures travelled again. This time, they did not cross the border, but only moved a little further to the east, to Winterthur. A further new and splendid museum was opened in this industrial city in January 1916. In addition to rooms for the civic library and natural history collection, this building housed rooms for the art collection and the temporary exhibition of the Winterthur art association. Following the opening exhibition in January, which was concerned with 19th-century Swiss painting, a larger exhibition of French painting was planned for autumn. Once again, Carl Montag was the driving force behind the exhibition; he subsequently contacted the major Paris art dealers in order to receive works by younger artists working in the Impressionist tradition. At the same time, Richard Bühler, president of the art association, wrote to a number of Swiss private collectors — including the Brown family — to request artwork loans. The Browns' correspondence with the president shows that, whilst they were initially hesitant, they ultimately made a number of pictures available for the exhibition. In addition to the image of a silent woman reading by Pierre-Auguste Renoir that is also presented in Room 2 and the previously mentioned still life pictures by Renoir and Gauguin, Paul Cézanne's atmospheric image of the landscape near Pontoise was sent to Winterthur. This painting had once been among Ambroise Vollard's stock, and arrived in the Browns' possession via the Galerie Bernheim.

The exhibition opened on the 19th of October 1916, with a small accompanying catalogue. The foreword was

written by the Paris art critic Théodore Duret, who had written his "Histoire des peintres impressionnistes" in 1878. The exhibition was exceptionally popular and well-attended; three new print runs of the catalogue had to be produced within two weeks. Ambroise Vollard, who has already been mentioned a number of times, also made an appearance in Winterthur: in front of a large and exceptionally interested audience, he delivered a humorous "Causerie" on the subject of Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

Room 3 is dedicated to this. A further significant exhibition of modern French painting was held in 1938 in Paris, in the Galerie de la Gazette des Beaux-Arts.

With the assistance of the Kunsthaus Zürich, the famed specialist journal "Gazette des Beaux-Arts" organised the exhibition "La peinture française du XIX^e siècle en Suisse" as an homage to French-Swiss friendship. The organising committee included Carl Montag and John A. Brown, the second-oldest son of Sidney and Jenny Brown. Four years previously, he had received a post as an "attaché" (an unpaid assistant). In this capacity, he assisted Carl Montag with a number of exhibition projects in Switzerland and in France.

The Paris exhibition was praised in the newspapers and celebrated as a success. However, various incidents overshadowed the exhibition preparations and the exhibition itself: when Hitler marched into Austria in March 1938, a number of private collectors were concerned about their pictures. Transport to Paris was therefore delayed, leading to a delay in the exhibition's opening. A number of those loaning artworks expressed displeasure that they had not been informed of these changes in a timely manner. Additionally, the Browns experienced a terrible loss during this exhibition: a picture by Honoré Daumier that they had provided – a portrait of a clown or *pierrrot* – was stolen! John A. Brown informed his mother of this incident in a letter of the 25th of July:

Dearest Mother, I am very sorry to have to send you this bad news, and I prefer to do it by letter. The Daumier has been stolen at the exhibition. We are all very upset, that such a monstrous thing could happen and that it is one of your pictures that disappeared, knowing your and father's sincere love for your pictures. [...] The police and Lloyd's have at once started their researches. Over 300 photos have been sent all over Europe. A "Finderlohn" [finder's reward] of 30,000 frs. has been set out by the insurance. They believe the thief is a professional, as the cord was cut with a razor.

Jenny and Sidney Brown were deeply affected, but later assured the director of the gallery that the event would have no negative consequences for future art exhibitions. The other loaned artworks returned to the Langmatt in early August 1938, where they were received by

the Browns with great joy – and presumably some relief – and were restored to their usual places. The Daurier painting later came to light, leading to legal proceedings which plainly were not decided in the Browns' favour. Today, the picture apparently resides in a private collection in England.

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