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Jan Dirk Baetens

exhibition review of

*Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme*

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*Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme*  
Musée du Luxembourg, Paris  
October 9, 2014–February 8, 2015

*Inventing Impressionism*  
The National Gallery, London  
March 4–May 31, 2015

*Discovering the Impressionists: Paul Durand-Ruel and the New Painting*  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia  
June 24–September 13, 2015

Catalogue:  
*Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme.*  
Edited by Sylvie Patry.  
Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.  
240 pp., 255 color illus.; bibliography; index  
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Paul Durand-Ruel (1831–1922) is arguably the most famous art dealer in art history and certainly one of the very few that has made it into art historical textbooks. In addition to this, he was the subject of an exhibition entitled *Paul Durand Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme* held in the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris. The exhibition subsequently travelled to the National Gallery in London and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia, but this review is only concerned with the Paris show.

A mere handful of art dealers has preceded Durand-Ruel as the subject of exhibitions, most recently Theo van Gogh (1999–2000), Goupil (2000–2001), Ambroise Vollard (2006–2007) and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (2013–2014). It is not a coincidence that all these dealers, with the exception of the Goupil publishing company, are known as firm and dedicated defenders of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century avant-garde art. This made it possible to sing their praise as visionary and more or less disinterested supporters of modern art. The same is true for Durand-Ruel, who is best known for his efforts to promote the young impressionists. “Sans Durand, nous serions morts de faim, nous tous, les impressionistes” [Without Durand, all of us impressionists would have died of hunger] is the opening quotation from Claude Monet on the exhibition catalogue’s back cover. Accordingly, the exhibition unequivocally celebrates Durand-Ruel’s heroic role as the impressionist’s greatest champion, who stubbornly went against the current and changed the history of art forever. The curators of the show, in their jointly authored introduction to the catalogue, admit that the tone of much that has been written in the past about Durand-Ruel is hagiographic, and that the dealer himself contributed much to the construction of this myth. Nevertheless, the exhibition itself adopts the same hagiographic tone and leaves hardly any room for nuance, let alone criticism of the typically triumphant narratives woven around the dealer’s legacy, even if most of the essays in the catalogue are much more balanced in their views.

The exhibition galleries at the Musée du Luxembourg are not the most commodious, but an intelligent use of the space available resulted in an elegant and airy presentation of a fairly large number of objects, mainly impressionist paintings, of course. The exhibition was subdivided into six themes that were —with the exception of the first one—chronologically defined. The first space introduced the visitor to the person of Durand-Ruel and his family. Eye-catchers here were Pierre-Auguste Renoir's portraits of the Durand-Ruel family and a number of works by Renoir and Monet that belonged to Durand-Ruel's personal collection, including the door panels painted by Monet for the dealer's apartment in the rue de Rome (figs. 1, 2). Photographs of the apartment further illustrated the incredible private collection he brought together. The next room was dedicated to Durand-Ruel's dealings with what he called "the beautiful school of 1830," which included, for him, Barbizon painters like Théodore Rousseau and Jules Dupré, as well as Eugène Delacroix, Jean-François Millet, and, remarkably, even Gustave Courbet (fig. 3). Here, the visitor was presented with a number of works by these artists, bought and sold at one time or another by Durand-Ruel. A copy of the *Revue internationale de l'art et de la curiosité*, founded in 1869 and financed by the dealer, and a number of prints after works in his stock from his *Recueil d'estampes gravées à l'eau-forte*, published from 1873 onwards, also illustrate the publishing strategies used by Durand-Ruel to promote his artists and his stock. This sets the stage for an introduction to Durand-Ruel's ground-breaking promotion of the next generation of avant-garde artists, the impressionists.



Fig. 1, Installation view of the first space in the exhibition *Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme* at the Musée du Luxembourg. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Installation view of the first space in the exhibition *Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme* at the Musée du Luxembourg. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 3, Installation view of the second space in the exhibition *Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme* at the Musée du Luxembourg. [\[larger image\]](#)

The next four rooms were, indeed, devoted to the exhibition's central theme: Durand-Ruel's efforts for, and transactions with, the impressionists and their circle. The third room related his first encounters with some of the impressionists in 1870–71 while in London and with Edouard Manet, when he bought a group of twenty-one paintings from him in 1872 (fig. 4). There was also a partial facsimile of Durand-Ruel's stock-books, which the visitor could leaf through in order to discover for him- or herself some of the dealer's major purchases from these artists. The fourth space in the exhibition dealt with Durand-Ruel's role in the impressionist exhibitions of the 1870s, especially the 1876 show organized in his gallery, and brought together a group of works on view at that occasion. The fifth space further pursued the theme of exhibitions and focused on the solo shows organized by Durand-Ruel for some of the artists in his stable (fig. 5). On view were paintings that were part of these exhibitions and some of the exhibition catalogues published by Durand-Ruel for the occasion. The last space, finally, was devoted to the international consecration of the impressionists, brought about by Durand-Ruel's shrewd business tactics in New York, Berlin, Paris, and London (figs. 6, 7). It thus celebrated the final "apothéose de l'impressionisme" [apotheosis of impressionism], the effects of which can still be seen in the present, as this exhibition itself neatly illustrates.

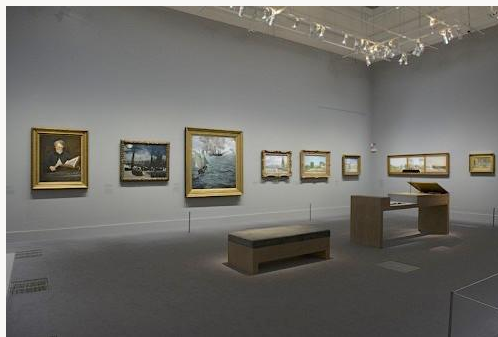


Fig. 4, Installation view of the third space in the exhibition *Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme* at the Musée du Luxembourg. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Installation view of the fifth space in the exhibition *Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme* at the Musée du Luxembourg. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation view of the last space in the exhibition *Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme* at the Musée du Luxembourg. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 7, Installation view of the last space in the exhibition *Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme* at the Musée du Luxembourg. [\[larger image\]](#)

For most of the public, the main attraction of the Durand-Ruel show was probably that it provided an excellent opportunity to see a large number of high quality works by the impressionists and their circle, which is indeed a merit in itself. The organizers may have been aiming, at least in part, for an impressionist blockbuster show, and this ambition may have informed their choice to focus solely on Durand-Ruel's dealings with the impressionists and

the so-called “school of 1830”. The title of the exhibition, “Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme” [Paul Durand-Ruel, The Gamble of Impressionism], in any event certainly emphasizes the attention paid to impressionism, and the leaflet that accompanied the exhibition in Paris added another subtitle to it: “Manet, Monet, Renoir...,” presumably to make sure that no one would miss the point (fig. 8).



Fig. 8, Leaflet *Paul Durand-Ruel. Le pari de l'impressionisme. Manet, Monet, Renoir...* Photograph by the author.

[\[larger image\]](#)

It comes, then, not as such a big surprise that Durand-Ruel himself was not as prominently present in the exhibition as one would expect. Although the first room focused on Durand-Ruel and his family life, the photographs, publications, letters, and other writings that referred to the dealer were clearly secondary to the impressive line-up of impressionist and other masterworks on the walls around them in the other exhibition spaces.

An exhibition that aims for a large audience will, obviously, avoid questioning its own subject or point of departure. As a result, the exhibition unambiguously fêted the unique vision and genius of Durand-Ruel in very much the same way as the allegedly matchless brilliance of the impressionists is often lauded, at least in popular art historical literature. This is, beyond doubt, the reason why the exhibition elegantly omitted virtually all references to Durand-Ruel's dealings with less vanguard or unambiguously *arrière-garde* artists such as Auguste Toulmouche or William-Adolphe Bouguereau, even if the catalogue admits that less than half of the approximately 12,000 paintings bought and sold by the dealer in the course of his career were in fact made by the impressionists and their allies. Nowhere was the distorted image that results from this bias more obvious than in the facsimile of a number of pages of the Durand-Ruel stock-books: the pages of the partial facsimile all contained the names of artists like Manet and Monet, but the presence on these pages of a number of lesser gods, and especially the lacunae in the page numbers (which went from 33–34 to 39–40, 99–100, 107–108, and so on) made it very clear that the selection of pages was made on a very prejudiced basis, allowing little room, if any, for a balanced and nuanced image of Durand-Ruel's business operations.

It may very well be that the lack of space at the Luxembourg made it impossible to present a larger selection of works and, accordingly, a more complex picture of Durand-Ruel's business



schemes. However, precisely the inclusion of a small selection of other, non-impressionist works, the so-called “beautiful school of 1830,” betrayed the one-sided narrative constructed by the exhibition. Virtually all of the painters presented here, from Delacroix to Rousseau and Courbet, fit neatly in the canonical vanguard history of nineteenth-century French art. Accordingly, the exhibition stressed that, in these artists, Durand-Ruel recognized the same courageous fight against artistic prejudices as the one fought by the impressionists. The exhibition strategically omitted to add, however, that, by the time Durand-Ruel turned his attention to the school of 1830, a painter like Delacroix was hardly unrecognized, the rural scenes by Millet were extremely popular, and the female portraits, still lifes, and landscapes by Courbet were already successful and highly marketable. The catalogue asserts that the exhibition’s partial approach is justified because it aspired to show “. . . what distinguishes [Durand-Ruel’s] activities, his vision and his taste” (22). It would perhaps be fairer to claim that the exhibition itself made a highly selective distinction in Durand-Ruel’s activities, vision and taste in order to make the dealer look as bold and innovative as the painters with whom his name became associated.

It would be interesting to know what Pierre Bourdieu would have to say about an exhibition like this and its laudatory celebration of a commercial agent like Durand-Ruel as an almost disinterested champion of avant-garde art. It is not exactly that the commercial side of Durand-Ruel’s activities was repressed in the show: some of the texts in the exhibition address the “business side of the dealer’s business,” and quite a lot of information was given about purchase and sales prices of the works of art on exhibit. Nevertheless, the balance between Durand-Ruel as a brave advocate for unsaleable vanguard art and Durand-Ruel as a shrewd businessman is an uneasy one. Emphasis was sometimes given to the comparatively high prices paid by the dealer to the impressionists, and at other times, to the high prices obtained by him when selling their works to his clientele. Obviously, Monet and his friends benefitted from both these things, but that hardly makes Durand-Ruel a Maecenas.

The beautifully illustrated exhibition catalogue adds a lot of new material and insights to our knowledge of the French and international art market of the final decades of the nineteenth century, and to the role played by Durand-Ruel in particular. After an introduction to the exhibition by the curators of the show, Sylvie Patry, Anne Robbins, Christopher Riopelle, Joseph J. Rishel, and Jennifer A. Thompson, it is left to Paul-Louis Durand-Ruel and Flavie Durand-Ruel, descendants of the dealer and managers of his archives, to give a general account of their ancestor’s life and business operations. In the next section, Simon Kelly examines Durand-Ruel’s dealings with the “school of 1830”, followed by John Zarobell, who investigates in his contribution what business strategies the dealer developed in order to market the modern French art of the impressionists and their allies. Sylvie Patry studies the impact of five solo exhibitions organized by Durand-Ruel on the historical and commercial construction of French modernism, and Anne Distel discusses the early French collectors of impressionism. The three next chapters are devoted to Durand-Ruel’s conquest of other countries: Jennifer A. Thompson writes about his dealings in America, Dorothee Hansen about his business relationships with German buyers and agents, and Anne Robbins with respect to the London art market. Finally, Joseph J. Rishel goes into Durand-Ruel’s more uneasy contacts with the next generation of (post-impressionist) vanguard artists.

The catalogue gives a much more nuanced account of Durand-Ruel's career than does the exhibition. Nevertheless, even here the risk of hyperbole and hagiography sometimes lurks around the corner, especially perhaps in the chapter written by Durand-Ruel's descendants. Certainly not all of the seven business strategies that they attribute to their ancestor were as new and unique as they claim, and the justification of Durand-Ruel's conservative politics and dogmatic Catholicism in a time of anticlerical republicanism in France as evidence that here, too, Durand-Ruel refused to follow dominant ideas and fought for his personal convictions seems contrived at its best, and silly at its worst.

The catalogue section itself lists all works on view and provides a number of small-scale biographies of these works, often with wonderfully interesting information on provenance, collectors, networks, and prices. Yet the best section is perhaps the chronology at the end of the catalogue. Not only does it provide an excellent summary of Durand-Ruel's most important exploits, but it also makes clear that there is still plenty of room for much more research on the subject. Maybe at some point in the future this will lead to another kind of exhibition on the nineteenth-century art market, untainted by the disease of monographic heroism that haunts the history of art, and modern art in particular.

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## Illustrations

*All photographs courtesy of Didier Plowy for RMN-Grand Palais, Paris 2014, unless otherwise noted.*



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