LONGING AND BELONGING: FRENCH IMPRESSIONISM AND JEWISH PATRONAGE

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Financial Times journalist Rebecca Rose quoted Melanie Clore on the sale of Impressionists at Sotheby’s in London on June 2006:

The Impressionist and modern art field is still a growth area and new money is being funneled directly into it… Artists like van Gogh, Monet, Cézanne, Matisse, Degas, Modigliani and Chagall are considered the ‘blue-chip brigade’, which command the highest prices and biggest international interest. Equally, the blue chip brigade is owned, sold and bought by only a handful of the world’s wealthiest buyers and collectors that form an exclusive club of some 20 patrons worldwide.¹

Melanie Clore is the [Jewish, by co-incidence] Deputy Chairman of Sotheby’s Europe Division and the Chairman of the Impressionist and Modern art market worldwide and thus one of the most knowledgeable voices on the subject. Clore’s assessment of twenty Impressionist clients worldwide is most surprising when compared to the number of early Jewish patrons in Republican France and Imperial Germany. What is remarkable is that a small circle of Jewish patrons were visionaries as far back as a century ago and that the Impressionists circle has not widened since its early patronage around 1900.

Why did a ‘small exclusive club’—to use Clore’s terminology—of some twenty-two German Jews collect French avant-garde Art at a time when most European collectors shunned it? Why did a circle of German Jewish patrons “collect against the grain” at a time when the majority of German Jews wanted to assimilate and integrate into majority society? However, their enthusiasm for French Impressionism resulted in the astonishing fact that of all French modernist art collectors in Wilhelmine Germany, 85% were Germans Jews. In the present paper, I wish to argue that the “Longing” and the wish for “Belonging” of the cosmopolitan German Jewish haute-bourgeoisie, particularly avant-garde art patrons, was created in the space of the

“other”—more in tune with contemporary artists, writers and cosmopolitan liberals, rather than the agenda of conservative Wilhelmine citizens or their institutions. One could easily underestimate the historical significance of such a small Jewish elite, but they were indeed pioneers of a cross-national and multi-cultural global project, long before this concept was considered viable and even commendable. More surprising still is the fact that to this day, the size of the Impressionist circle worldwide has not changed since its embrace by a small circle of Jewish patrons in Republican France and, ironically, particularly in Wilhelmine Germany.

Republican France

Paris and Impressionist Artists

By the 1870s a small group of frustrated artists had broken away from the French traditional Salon system and set up their first Independent Exhibitions in 1874. They rejected nineteenth-century traditional subjects and increasingly chose themes of the everyday life of the bourgeoisie, and most revolutionary of all, many of them began to paint outdoors in a new impressionistic style. In due course, their art was dubbed “la nouvelle peinture” and recognized as the iconography of modern life.

One of the independent artists, Claude Monet, exhibited two harbor scenes in the first ‘Independent Exhibition’, one painting entitled *Impression, Sunrise 1873*; the art critic Louis Leroy reviewed the exhibition and henceforth the circle of these artists was referred to mockingly as the “Impressionists.” Eventually the “Impressionist” group would also include Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir, Mary Cassatt, and Berthe Morisot; their followers were loosely termed post-Impressionists and included Alfred Sisley, Georges Seurat, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and, later, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and the Nabis artists Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, and the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Édouard Manet was often been perceived as the leading figure of the new movement, although he never actually exhibited at the Independent Exhibitions, but instead chose to show his work at the alternative venue, the *Salon des Refusés*. On the occasion that he was accepted at the Salon, his paintings caused a scandal as much for their subject matter as their modernist interpretation. Vin-