

AMBROISE VOLLARD

BY ALEXANDER WATT



AMBROISE VOLLARD (AUGUST 1937)

THE death of Monsieur Ambroise Vollard has robbed the art world of one of its most legendary figures. "What will become of his fabulous collection?" everybody asked. Many of the dealers were in a panic lest his hundreds of Cézannes and Renoirs be sold by auction and so flood the market. It is most unlikely, however, that a public sale of even the smallest part of his collection will take place. On the contrary, the Petit Palais, it seems, will receive a handsome donation.

Vollard died about the age of 75, the victim of a motor accident. He was born on the French island of La Réunion, off the coast of Africa. At an early age he had already shown a mania for collecting. In his well-known "Souvenirs d'un Marchand de Tableaux" he relates how, at the age of four, he collected pebbles and, later, pieces of broken china. His father intended him to take up law, but the young Creole preferred the medical profession. So he went to study at Montpellier where, however, he devoted most of his time to collecting drawings and engravings. Then he came to Paris, and one day purchased a Forain sketch from one of the old print-sellers along the quais. His enthusiasm grew. He bought etchings by Rops and Steinlen. Finally he opened a small shop in the Rue Laffitte, the street of picture dealers which corresponded to the Rue La Boétie of to-day, and entered into competition with the Bernheims, Tempelaere, Diot and Durand-Ruel. It was here that he amassed his fabulous collection.

At first he committed many errors of judgment. There is no doubt that he owed a great deal to Pissarro, who introduced him to the Impressionists and for a long time counselled him in his purchases. Pissarro's first

meeting with Vollard occurred one day when he went to his shop and found him about to have Cézanne thrown out. The master of Aix had come to offer him a parcel of twenty canvases for about one hundred francs! At that time it was not so much his perception of the intrinsic value of a work of art that influenced him to buy as his instinct for what would sell. He did good business with the *peintres à la mode*, but hesitated (that was in 1890) to buy Cézannes from Père Tanguy for one hundred francs for a large canvas. But Pissarro's advice slowly had effect. At the Tanguy sale he bought up five Cézanne canvases for nine hundred francs. He was complimented on his daring purchase, especially when he admitted that he could only pay three hundred francs on account for them.

It was soon after this that he set off one day to visit Cézanne at Aix. For the sum of two thousand francs he brought away a whole cartload of paintings. And, as he was leaving the house, Cézanne ran after him with two or three extra canvases under his arm saying that he had forgotten the remainder that were hidden behind the door! Vollard always had great difficulty in locating Cézanne when he was in Paris, for he was continually moving studio without leaving any address. So it was with great difficulty that he found him one day to ask him the loan of one hundred and fifty canvases for his first exhibition. He exhibited these on flimsy stretchers at two sous the metre. They were referred to by the critics as "*la cauchemardante vision de ces atrocités à l'huile dépassant aujourd'hui la mesure des fumisteries légalement permises.*"

Vollard's own statement that he owed much of his



PORTRAIT OF VOLLARD

By CÉZANNE

success as a picture dealer to his unusual propensity for sleep is true enough. He would doze in the arm-chair at his small establishment in the Rue Laffitte and pay little attention to callers. Would-be purchasers, surprised at his seeming indifference to do any business, would offer high prices for pictures that he, apparently, was not over-anxious to part with. As for the artists themselves, Cézanne, Gauguin, Renoir, Van Gogh, Monet, etc., they would creep in and quietly deposit a roll of canvases. Thus it was that, for several years, Vollard, dozing in his arm-chair, took no account of his stock. He awoke one day to find his shop and cellar stacked with masterpieces. On one occasion a client came in and asked if he had any Vlamincks for sale. Vollard replied sleepily that he did not think so, but requested him to step downstairs with his old servant and have a look round. There they came across a dusty parcel of some twenty canvases which Vollard had not even troubled to undo since the day Vlaminck had left them there a number of years previously.

This habit of sleeping used to distress Cézanne when he was painting Vollard's portrait, so he intentionally made him sit on a rickety old chair set on a broken-down throne. Nevertheless he would often fall asleep and crash to the floor. Cézanne would then angrily demand that he keep absolutely still. "An apple does not move," he would exclaim. Cézanne's perseverance is well exemplified in this portrait for, after the one hundred and fifteenth sitting, he declared that he was not dissatisfied with the effect of the shirt-front!

Vollard's reputation grew rapidly. He became famous for the dinners he used to give in the cellar (a very damp cellar) of his shop. These were regularly attended by Renoir, Cézanne, Degas, Forain, Odilon Redon, etc. Other than artists were rarely invited. All Vollard's closest friends were artists. He never spoke kindly of fellow dealers or even collectors. From the Rue Laffitte he moved to the Grands Boulevards, where he held his first exhibition of sixty paintings by Van Gogh. The highest price asked for these masterpieces was five hundred francs. But as time went on he took less interest in dealing and more in collecting.

My first formal meeting with Vollard took place a few years ago at his house in the Rue Martignac. The wealthiest amateur in the world could not then persuade Vollard to sell if he just did not feel in the mood for business. If he did decide to part with one of his hundreds of Cézannes, the collector was given very little choice and told to hand over cash on the spot. It was with the greatest difficulty that anyone could get inside his front door. He was always "absent," and hardly ever consented to receive anyone who was not an artist friend. The day I called with Galanis I found countless canvases and statues by Renoir lining the walls of the hall. Upstairs, one was shown into a small square room, the walls of which were hung with unknown masterpieces by Renoir and Cézanne. Vollard would then produce one or two canvases from a neighbouring room. The door of that room and many others in this treasure house never remained unlocked. The place was like a prison (for the visitor was either locked in or locked out) and he the gaoler with his great bunch of keys. Nobody knew the exact worth of his collection. Raoul Dufy, who knew him intimately, told me that he could not guess how many hundred paintings by Renoir, Cézanne, Degas,

Monet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Rouault, etc., he possessed. Vollard would sometimes invite his privileged visitors to inspect "the gallery" before taking their leave. During the six years that he lived in the Rue Martignac the adjoining gallery was never once opened to the public. The roll shutters remained closed, yet the walls were hung with forty odd paintings and pastels by Degas of the finest quality. No more than three of these had ever been lent to public exhibitions. That reminds me of the story of how Vollard is said to have woken one night with a feeling of anxiety. He leant out and reached under the bed and drew forth a couple of Renoir canvases which, he perceived, had mushrooms growing on them!

But, if there is mystery concerning the number of paintings by the Impressionists that form the nucleus of his vast collection, what, it is wondered, can his Rouault canvases total? During the past few years Rouault had worked "under contract" for Vollard. That is why important works by this great modern master are so rare. What a magnificent exhibition, what a sensation it would cause if a selection of Vollard's Rouaults were to be shown to the public! Vollard certainly made no mistake towards the end of his life by speculating in the work of this genius. Can we hope that the inheritors of this mysterious collection will organize such an exhibition?

Rouault was the artist Vollard preferred for illustrating the de luxe books that he edited with such care. This was his greatest enjoyment. Many consider him the foremost editor of the XXth century. His library in the Rue Martignac was a sort of printing laboratory. Here he would devote most of his time selecting the typography and, especially, the paper for his *ouvrages*, which always had to be most carefully analysed. The easiest way for a stranger to win Vollard's confidence was to show a keen interest and appreciation of his publications. Indeed, many found this the only key that would unlock those secret rooms where the countless masterpieces were stored. Bibliophiles must be well acquainted with Maupassant's "Contes," with monotypes by Degas; Baudelaire's "Fleurs de Mal," with water-colours by Rodin; "Parallèlement" and "Daphnis," illustrated by Bonnard; "Les Fêtes Galantes," illustrated by Laprade; "Les Follastries," illustrated by Maillol; La Fontaine's "Contes," illustrated by Derain; and "La Cirque," illustrated by Rouault. These are outstanding among his magnificent publications. I had almost forgotten to mention his own authoritative works, his "Renoir," "Cézanne" and "Degas." Vollard was always telling stories or passing witty and caustic remarks. That is the style in which he wrote these biographies.

Vollard had a strange, silent, impenetrable character. Untidy and rather clumsy in appearance he was, however, clear and methodical in thought and action. He was inclined to be miserly, but did not hesitate to spend a fortune on editing his books. He had a remarkable memory. Seemingly inattentive he would take careful note of what was being said around him. The anecdotes in his "Degas" prove this. He was very intelligent, and knew exactly what he wanted. His instinct greatly guided him: he had a flair for picture dealing, like a "*chien de chasse*," as Dufy told me. The almost brutish, bored, aloof mannerism was a mask hiding the quick, observant, intelligent mind of one of the most artful dealers and successful collectors in the world of painting.

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By EDOUARD MANET

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