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Monsieur Pellerin's collection: a footnote to 'Cézanne'

by *Karen Wilkin*

Among the most memorable paintings in the Museum of Modern Art's great Matisse retrospective in 1992, an exhibition full of memorable paintings, was a solemn frontal image of a bearded man seated tensely erect, hands clasped in front of him. Painted in 1916 to 1917, the period of some of Matisse's most compelling portraits, it was striking even in the company of the Beaubourg's fetching vision of the actress Greta Prozor, seated in an armchair, and the Guggenheim's stiffly upright *Italian Woman*, that strange picture in which the swooping plane of the background threatens to engulf the figure. The portrait of the bearded man was pared down to essentials: a rigid full-face figure against a dark ground, as hieratic as a Byzantine pantocrator, as implacable as an Egyptian statue. Matisse described the curve of his model's smooth, bald skull and high cheekbones with an authorative circle that irresistibly recalled both the conceptualized drawing of icons and the solar disk poised on the brow of some Egyptian deities. Color was as deceptively simple as the composition: dull blacks and earthy flesh tones, accented by the grayed whites of a neat beard, generous shirt cuffs, and a tidy collar. The man's black suit, punctuated only by the discreet flicker of a red Légion d'Honneur rosette in the lapel, all but merged with an expanse of black wall, but the elegant, sculptural head was framed and dramatized by a schematically rendered portion of a painting hanging behind him.

That the portrait was severely beautiful, inventive, and powerful, was no surprise in a Matisse of the period; neither was the way it pulsed between harsh, large-scale gesture and delicate touch, between reference and abstraction. More unexpected was the double characterization of the sitter as emblematic of an entire class of affluent men and as a particular, vivid individual; despite the picture's stylization, a distinct personality, not simply a generic magnate circa World War I, was conjured up by Matisse's economical drawing and pared-down modeling. You'd recognize this lean, immaculately tailored, forceful man anywhere. Who was he? Auguste Pellerin, a manufacturer and collector, the label said.

In the version of the Matisse show seen in Paris, this portrait was joined by a more overtly pleasant, more naturalistic incarnation, a good, but not great painting in which the same alert,

frontal figure, placed slightly farther away from the viewer, was embedded in a seductively colored setting full of anecdotal renderings of books, objets d'art, and the accoutrements of an executive desk. The protagonist appeared no less elegant, but younger, more relaxed. This picture, I discovered, was Matisse's first effort at painting Pellerin and had been rejected by the sitter. Such rejection was not unheard of; when Matisse accepted a portrait commission, he customarily gave his sitters the right to refuse the finished picture, without paying, so that he would not be inhibited by their desires, and they sometimes took him up on the offer. What was surprising was that the fierce portrait with the black ground *was* accepted by Pellerin. (The collector is supposed to have later decided that he had been wrong about the first picture and to have tried to acquire both at a discounted price; Matisse refused and ultimately received full payment— double the original fee—for the two canvases.) That the preferred second picture was infinitely more rigorous than the first —more firmly structured and more abstract —suggested that Pellerin was no ordinary collector.

He wasn't. Born in Paris in 1852, Pellerin's fortune came from the manufacture of margarine—of all things—in France, Germany, England, and the Scandinavian countries; his relations with Scandinavia were so close that he served as consul general for Norway in Paris from 1906 until his death in 1929. Pellerin's collection apparently began conventionally enough, as befitted a wealthy entrepreneur of his generation, with porcelain, crystal and glass objects, and paintings by such eminently respectable figures as Henner and Corot. But he soon sold his initial acquisitions, including his Corots, to buy Impressionist works. He wasn't alone, of course. Other progressive collectors, admittedly few of them French, were doing more or less the same thing about that time. Think of the exemplary collections put together by the Havemeyers or the Potter Palmers in the U.S. or even by Pellerin's exceptional compatriot, Count Isaac de Camondo, in France. What sets Pellerin apart from his contemporaries is his evolving taste for the difficult picture, a taste that led him not only to acquire paintings and drawings by such artists as Renoir, Degas, Monet, Pissarro, Berthe Morisot, Sisley, and Manet well before 1900, but to acquire a surprising number of surprising pictures.

Pellerin seems to have been particularly interested in Impressionist figure paintings, rather than the ravishing landscapes that attracted many of his fellow enthusiasts. His Renoirs, for example, included *Bather with a Terrier* (1870, Museu de Arte de São Paulo), a voluptuous standing nude, oddly flanked by a pollarded willow and a partly glimpsed, fully dressed female companion located in a space best described as ambiguous. (The picture was most recently seen in New York in the Metropolitan's *Origins of Impressionism*). Another of Pellerin's Renoirs, *Portrait of Rapha* (1871, private collection), or at least its lower portion, is the painting visible behind his head in both of the Matisse portraits. (Just how Matisse dissected and compressed elements of the Renoir in his pictures, especially the second, is a subject for another article.) In many ways *Portrait of Rapha* is a typical Impressionist picture of the period. The full length, fully clad female figure holding a Japanese fan has close relatives in the work of Manet, Monet, and even Whistler. But in many ways, too, *Rapha* is an atypical Renoir; paint handling in the portrait is unusually dense and

vigorous, while the whole composition of pleated cream-colored dress, birdcage, potted plants, and trellised wallpaper seems curiously angular, unstable, in comparison to Renoir's more harmonious, rhythmically structured works of the period.

Pellerin's Sisley, a view of flood waters, now in the Musée d'Orsay, while good, was fairly predictable, but his Manets were astonishing. In addition to a large number of bold, slashing figure drawings (and a couple of lovingly observed studies of cats) Pellerin owned *Luncheon in the Studio* (1868, Bayerische Staats-gemäldesammlungen, Munich), that enigmatic conflation of bourgeois dining room and studio set-up that serves as background for a portrait of Léon Leenhoff, Manet's son (or stepson, depending on whose version you believe). It's an urgent, confrontational picture; everything presses forward, particularly the velvety black jacket on the adolescent boy, who leans against the table covered with the remnants of a meal, his back to an older man still seated there. (Both, inexplicably, in terms of the implied narrative, are wearing hats.) The boy's relaxed attitude, however, is completely subverted by the way the edge of the canvas cuts him off at the knees. It's irresistible, of course, to think about *Luncheon in the Studio* in relation to Matisse's portrait of the collector who owned it; the restrained black-grey-cream palette of Manet's picture—along with the play of opaque, black jacket and pale face and linen, not to mention the frontal, demanding quality of the composition—oddly anticipates Matisse's second portrait of Pellerin. Is that why he preferred it to the more apparently likable first version?

Pellerin also owned a group of Manet's paintings of women, including the tautly composed, voluptuous *Nana* (1877, Kunsthalle, Hamburg), a reprisal of the theme of the courtesan that the painter first explored in *Olympia*. Submitted to the Salon of 1877 and rejected, *Nana* is based on Zola's famous character, not, it turns out, as she appears in the eponymous novel, which had not yet been written, but as she figures in an earlier story. *Nana* must have made an interesting companion to Pellerin's Renoirs. Together, the three large-scale pictures of standing women made a piquant trio: Manet's young Nana in her underwear, powdering herself under the watchful gaze of her "protector"; Renoir's nude bather, her worldly origins signaled by her discarded clothing and fashionable little dog; and his Rapha, elegantly clad, but hardly innocent, a caged bird contemplating a cage full of little birds. (Rapha was the mistress of Edmond Maître—the man playing the piano in Bazille's well-known painting of his friends in his studio. Even if Pellerin didn't know specifically who she was, like any sophisticated man of his generation he could have easily deciphered the implications of Renoir's portrait.)

What is perhaps most impressive, even in the context of this impressive selection, Pellerin owned yet another extraordinary picture of a young woman, Manet's last masterpiece, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881–82, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London). A good deal has been written about the picture's sociological subtext, about the brilliant demimondaines who frequented the Folies, the most fashionable café-concert of the period, about the availability of the serving girls at such spectacles, and about the implied transaction, beyond the purchase of a drink, enacted by Manet's barmaid and her customer, the man whom we see only reflected in the mirror behind her. No

doubt it is all true, but what makes the work a key painting in the history of Impressionism and of modernism itself is not its subject matter. The picture's dislocated, deliberately irrational reflections and disorienting structure suggest that Manet's chief concern was not to comment on the social mores of late nineteenth-century Paris, but to probe the mysteries of perception itself, not by rendering faithfully what was to be seen, but by making the viewer ponder the nature of seeing. Did Pellerin acquire the work because of its nominal subject—a handsome young woman of a particular class, gloriously painted, in an evocative setting that included some dazzling still-life passages—or did he acquire it because of its visual rigor?

There's no simple or definitive answer, of course. Many of the works in Pellerin's collection suggest that he was anything but immune to highly charged, suggestive subjects, but there's also ample evidence that he responded to material and formal resonance more than he did engaging narrative. His Manets, for example, also included that disjunctive urban panorama, *The Universal Exposition of 1867* (1867, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo), a view from the broad terrace punctuated with not quite related groups of agile figures. The most persuasive proof lies in the evolution of the collection. Pellerin eventually disposed of most of his Impressionist pictures, admittedly for a very handsome sum. The Manets alone, sold in 1910 to a triumverate of important dealers, Bernheim-Jeune, Cassirer, and Durand-Ruel, are supposed to have brought one million francs. Some Impressionist works remained in the collection, of course. As the Matisse portraits attest, Pellerin still owned at least one of his Renoirs as late as 1917. What did the margarine manufacturer substitute for his carefully assembled collection of extraordinary Impressionist pictures? Toward the end of his life, he acquired works by more "modern" artists—Vuillard, Maurice Denis, and Matisse; in addition to the two Matisse portraits, he acquired *The Three Sisters* (1917, Musée de l'Orangerie), a deceptively casual, lushly arabesque composition of a trio of elegantly dressed young women. But Pellerin's real motive for selling his Manets and related works was to concentrate almost exclusively on the art of that grittiest and most uningratiating of painters, Cézanne. The margarine tycoon became the greatest collector of Cézanne's paintings in France, amassing more than ninety works spanning the artist's entire career.

Pellerin bought his first Cézannes from Vollard, the renowned dealer who organized the artist's first one-man exhibition in 1895. In 1903, Pellerin bought six of the nine Cézannes in the sale of Zola's collection and the following year, another seven paintings, through the auspices of the distinguished firm of Bernheim-Jeune. By 1912, Pellerin had acquired twenty-nine more works by Cézanne, and he continued to enlarge his holdings, with pictures from various periods, until 1925 when he bought his last painting by the artist, *Large Pine and Red Earth* (1890–95, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg). Many of Pellerin's pictures had distinguished provenances. In addition to the group that had belonged to Cézanne's boyhood friend Zola, there were others from such perceptive collectors as the celebrated Dr. Gachet—Cézanne's friend, as well as Van Gogh's—Gauguin, and Pissarro. What is perhaps more impressive, Pellerin was the first owner of a great number of the Cézannes he selected.

In his memoirs, Vollard plays tribute to Pellerin's prescience. The dealer recounts that when he first exhibited some of Cézanne's nudes, in that pioneering one-man show of 1895, even "those most interested in the exhibition" urged him to take them out of the window of his gallery, declaring that the public was not yet ready for them. Reluctantly, Vollard turned the nudes to the wall: "… but one visitor, turning the paintings around, discovered *Leda and the Swan* and bought it on the spot. And so the first nude to be sold during the exhibition was acquired by M. Auguste Pellerin." Unlike Renoir's *Bather with a Terrier*, there's nothing conventionally lovely or seductive about Cézanne's *Leda*, neither in figure type, drawing, or paint handling, so there is nothing ambiguous about Pellerin's response to the picture, as there might have been to his more overtly appealing Renoirs and Manets, their formal excellence notwithstanding. *Leda* came to have company, however, in Pellerin's collection, which eventually included two versions of *Bathsheba*, a nameless reclining nude, a standing nude known as *La Toilette* (c. 1878), now in the Barnes Collection, and more than half a dozen of the small groups of bathers— among other related images. Clearly Pellerin chose them for different reasons than he had chosen Renoir's *Bather with a Terrier*, incontrovertible proof of his changing taste.

The importance of Pellerin's great collection was recognized early on. In the celebrated Cézanne retrospective mounted at the 1907 Salon d'Automne to commemorate the painter's death the previous year—an exhibition that arguably changed the course of modernism by offering a potent example to a younger generation that included Picasso, Braque, and Matisse—almost half of the fifty-seven works exhibited were identified as coming from the Pellerin collection. Roger Fry was one of Pellerin's greatest admirers and included him among the Honorary Committee of the pivotal exhibition, *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, that he organized at the Grafton Galleries in the winter of 1910 to 1911. Fry's seminal book on Cézanne, published in 1927, grew out of an unrealized plan to publish "a complete series of reproductions of all the Cézannes in M. Pellerin's collection" with an accompanying text by Fry. Of the fifty-five works illustrated in his book, Fry listed thirty-six belonging to Pellerin and discussed many of them in detail. They included the tense *Still Life with Soup Tureen* (1877, Musée d'Orsay), with its decisive thrust to one side of the canvas, and its robust basket of fruit, angled, like the tureen itself, oddly away from the viewer, along with the celebrated *Still Life with a Basket* (1888–90, Musée d'Orsay), with its restless shifting of scale and relentless warping of space.

Fry was quite right when he wrote, in the introduction to his book, that knowing Pellerin's collection was essential to an understanding of Cézanne's development. The catalogue of works reads like a curator's wish list for an ideal exhibition. Among the portraits there were five of the painter's Uncle Dominique, including the Musée d'Orsay's gesticulating *Uncle Dominique as a Lawyer* and the Metropolitan's *Man with a Cotton Cap*—the one with the blue "bonnet" and yellow jacket—both from 1866. There was the portrait of the artist's father reading a newspaper in a flowered armchair (c. 1866, National Gallery, Washington) and the haunting *Achille Emperaire* (1869–70, Musée d'Orsay), with his noble head and undersized body, a very different presence in

the same chair. (Pellerin even owned the thickly painted little still life that appears on the wall behind Cézanne's father.) The collection also included the Metropolitan's marvelous *Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Armchair* (1893–95), a picture that both sums up everything Cézanne was capable of as a portrait painter and points to most of Matisse. The figure of the artist's wife, in her red dress built of broad patches of paint, tilts under the pressure of the painter's unrelenting gaze; only the opposed swoop of a familiar tapestry drape and the vertical plane of the fireplace keep her upright and centered. In addition, the collection included two other portrait masterpieces, both now in the Musée d'Orsay, *Woman with a Coffeepot* (1895) and *Portrait of Gustave Geffroy* (1895–96)—the one in which the seated critic is jammed between the tipped plane of a desk strewn with open books and a wall of packed bookcases, an important work in the evolution of Cubism and perhaps another precedent for Matisse's portrait. Pellerin owned several of Cézanne's self-portraits as well, including the peculiarly bulky one, chin tucked in, with a ground of cream and rose spots (c. 1875, private collection) that is one of the standouts in the current Cézanne retrospective.[1]

The presence of such works should alert us to what really distinguished Pellerin's collection—not its comprehensiveness, but its excellence and, moreover, its excellence of a particular kind. Pellerin owned a good many of Cézanne's most ambitious, most achieved pictures from all periods throughout his career: the great *Card Players* (1890–92), for example, now in the Barnes Collection, the familiar *Still Life with Onions* (1890–94, Musée d'Orsay), with its ravishing harmony of rose, mauve, and blue-grey, and an important 1890 *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Musée d'Orsay)—the one with the big pine tree on the left and a broad, geometric wall that emphatically underscores the bulk of the mountain. Pellerin owned, too, Cézanne's most ambitious late painting: the unstable, pulsing *Large Bathers* (1904–06) now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, arguably the culmination of Cézanne's life-long quest "to do Poussin over from nature." But in addition to these exemplary "signature" works, Pellerin owned large numbers of quirky, downright eccentric pictures, particularly from Cézanne's early years, paintings that still possess the capacity to startle, even to disturb, almost a century after the artist's death.

Picture after picture among Pellerin's Cézannes stamps itself out for its edginess, its uncomfortable space, its intensity. Not only did the collector respond enthusiastically to the early portraits with their aggressive drawing and loaded, almost brutal surfaces, but he seems to have had a boundless appetite for the most passionate, even the most forbidding of the early pictures: the slightly clumsy interiors and genre scenes, the supercharged allegories, the unnerving scenes of violence and sexual ambiguity. The number of Cézanne's unlovable, tough early works in Pellerin's collection cannot be explained simply by his manifest desire to own representative, high quality works from all stages of the painter's evolution. Pellerin must have responded to their mystery and their heat. Not only did he own two versions of the steamy *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1870, E. G. Bührle Foundation, Zurich, and 1875–77, Musée d'Orsay), and both versions of the slightly kinky *Afternoon in Naples* (1875–77, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and private collection), but he owned, as well, a group of early pictures that are arguably the most

compelling and enigmatic of this compelling and enigmatic series: the Italianate Delacroix-inspired fantasy, *The Orgy* (1867–72); the brutal bedroom scene, *A Modern Olympia* (1869–70), both still in private collections; and the disquieting *Idyll* (1870, Musée d'Orsay), a version of *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in which the clothed male figures studiously ignore the women. Pellerin owned, too, the superb *Battle of Love* (1880, private collection), which once belonged to Pissarro, a scene of classical ambitions, rhythmic stroking, and thinly disguised strangeness (what *is* that black dog doing to the couple on the right?). As I said, he was no ordinary collector.

Ultimately, of course, it is impossible to know why Pellerin acquired what he did when he did, but it's intriguing to speculate from the evidence of the collection about the unifying links that determined his choices. It would be fascinating to reassemble the works once selected by this exacting eye, this highly individual taste. The Metropolitan did that not long ago for the Havemeyers, admittedly major benefactors of the museum. Perhaps the Musée d'Orsay could be persuaded to organize a proper homage to M. Pellerin. That's a show the critic in me would love to see and the curator would love to work on.

Notes

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1. Karen Wilkin's review of "Cézanne" appeared in our December 1995 issue. The show, which began at the Grand Palais, Paris (September 30, 1995–January 7, 1996), has moved to the Tate Gallery, London (February 8–April 8, 1996) and will continue on to the Philadelphia Museum of Art (May 30–August 18, 1996). Go back to the text.

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