



A Painting That Tells Modern Art's Story

The Cézanne masterpiece sold last month for \$616,000 exemplifies its soaring prestige.

By ALINE B. SAARINEN

ABOUT sixty-five years ago, in a studio in Aix-en-Provence, a lithe, young Italian boy with long, brown hair, delicate features and a troubled, wistful face, a boy named Michelangelo Di Rosa, posed for a strange, shy, rather misanthropic painter called Paul Cézanne.

Last month, before a glittering international audience that jammed Sotheby's auction galleries in London's West End, one of the four oil portraits which Cézanne painted of this youth was sold—in a fraction over two minutes' bidding—for \$616,000.

What is the story of this painting from the time it was created to the night of Oct. 15, 1958, when—as Lot Six from the collection of the late Jakob Goldschmidt—it brought the highest price ever paid for a painting sold at auction, and more than doubled the previous record auction price for a single postimpressionist painting? And what does its history reveal about the status of modern art and art-collecting?

* * *

THE studio in Aix where the young Di Rosa posed, sometime between 1890 and 1895, was rather sparsely furnished. Aside from the tools of the painter's trade, some apples in varying stages of decay, some artificial fruit and flowers, a table and a few simple chairs, the most notable objects were photographs and engravings of work by such artists as Poussin, Delacroix and Rubens and, near a window, a piece of thick drapery material.

It was against this drapery that the boy posed, wearing a white shirt, olive-brown trousers, a blue tie, blue belt, and a red waistcoat. All together, he posed for two water-colors, three three-quarters oils and an oil portrait of his head and shoulders; the water-colors and the fourth oil—one of relatively inferior quality, now in the Barnes collection—need not concern us here. It could not have been an easy assignment. The bald, bearded artist with the small, piercing eyes worked extremely slowly, and made his models hold uncomfortable poses for hours.

Although at this time Monet, Renoir and others of the impressionist group were beginning to have a certain reputation, Paul Cézanne was hardly known to the Paris public. Living in what a contemporary critic called "savage isolation, reappearing, then disappearing suddenly," he had exhibited only two canvases in Paris—in official exhibitions in 1882 and 1889—since 1877. A few painters and collectors owned his works, and his bold search for rugged form was beginning to exert a powerful influence on the younger artists; but the only place in Paris where his canvases could be seen

was in the shop of the color merchant, Père Tanguy. It was there in 1892 that Ambroise Vollard, the ambitious young dealer, first encountered Cézanne's paintings. After Tanguy's death, at the sale of his collection in 1894, Vollard bought several Cézanne paintings for prices between nine and forty-three dollars.

A YEAR later, pressed to do so by Pissarro and several other painters, Vollard persuaded the elusive and stubborn Cézanne to let him hold a one-man show in his gallery on the Rue Lafitte. Cézanne sent 150 paintings for the exhibition that opened in November, 1895. Most of the press and public jeered (one man even took his wife to the show as a punishment for a peccadillo). But a few of the critics recognized the painter's genius; artists poured into the gallery; several men who were to become important collectors—such as Nissim de Camondo and Auguste Pellerin—came, too; and there were a few sales, including, ironically, one to a blind man.

Among the paintings on exhibition was "Boy in a Red Vest"—a version that showed the boy seated, facing right, supporting his head on his left hand. The critic Gustave Geffroy, in his review in *La Vie Artistique*, wrote that this painting would stand comparison with the greatest figure pieces in the history of painting.

Neither of the two other versions was shown. One, in which Di Rosa sat slumped in a chair, facing left, passed—whether by gift from Cézanne or by purchase is not known—into the hands of Cézanne's ardent admirer, Claude Monet. The other, in which he stands in the classical model's pose and wears his wide-brimmed hat—the picture that has just been sold at Sotheby's—was also to go to a painter. He was an Italian named Egisto Fabbri, who is remembered today for his collecting rather than his painting.

IT is not quite certain when Fabbri bought this picture from Vollard. We know that by 1899 Fabbri owned sixteen Cézannes, for he said so in a humble letter he wrote to the artist that year, remarking that he understood "their aristocratic and austere beauty" and begging to meet Cézanne. It could very well be that the "Boy in a Red Vest" was one of the sixteen. If it was, and Fabbri purchased it between 1895 and 1899, he probably paid somewhere between \$150 and \$340 for it—for in 1895, when two Cézannes entered the Luxembourg Museum as part of the Caillebotte bequest, the museum's curator appraised them at an average of \$150, and in the Chocquet sale of 1899 the average Cézanne price was \$340.

If, on the other hand, Fabbri bought it between (Continued on Page 76)



THE GOLDSCHMIDT VERSION—This is the Cézanne sold at the Goldschmidt collection auction last month for a record \$616,000. Its new owner is Paul Mellon. Its first, Egisto Fabbri, paid \$340 or less for it about the turn of the century.

THE BUEHRLE VERSION—One of the three masterpieces Cézanne painted in the early Nineties, with a young Italian boy as a model. In 1947, its last purchaser, Emile Buehrle, paid a then record price of \$150,000 in a private transaction.



THE ROCKEFELLER VERSION—First possessed by the painter Claude Monet, it has, like the others, been in a number of collections. In 1956, the David Rockefellers bought it for the Museum of Modern Art, reputedly for a "bargain" \$180,000.

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1900 and 1906, he must have paid around \$1,000 for it. After Cézanne's death in 1906, prices rose considerably. John Rewald reports that in 1908, when the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune bought the landscape now in the London National Gallery, the price of \$2,400 set a record.

At any rate, Fabbri had the picture by 1910, when he lent it for an exhibition in Paris. It usually hung with Fabbri's many other Cézannes in his Montmartre studio, but when the Big Berthas started booming in World War I the paintings were sent outside the city for safekeeping. After the war they were moved to Fabbri's house in Italy.

THE "Boy" came back to Paris in 1929 for a brief visit, when the French art dealer, Paul Rosenberg, bought the Fabbri collection. Cézanne prices had meanwhile been going up rapidly. In 1922, when the art dealer Dirkan Kelekian sold his modern paintings at auction, a Cézanne landscape went for \$12,000, which was pretty much the prevailing price. (At the same sale, Miss Lillie Bliss paid \$21,000 for a Cézanne "Still Life With Apples"—now in New York's Museum of Modern Art—but, the ways of the art world being what they are, Kelekian himself bid that particular picture up because he knew that another well-heeled collector, Dr. Albert C. Barnes, was also after it.) By 1929, \$20,000 to \$30,000 were usual prices for important Cézannes, and Paris gossip has it that Rosenberg probably paid such an amount for the "Boy" in that year.

If so, he made a handsome profit. He sold the painting to Jakob Goldschmidt, a German banker who served on the executive boards of ninety-nine industrial concerns and who became one of the anti-Semitic Dr. Goebbels' favorite targets, being called "Public Enemy No. 1." In Germany, pensive, melancholy Michelangelo di Rosa hung in the company of Manet, Renoir and Van Gogh canvases, in a sumptuous setting of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chinese porcelains and eighteenth-century silver. His price of admission was about \$60,000.

BUT the painting was not to remain there long. When Hitler came to power, Goldschmidt fled Germany. Though his major bank had gone into bankruptcy, his art collection was a tangible asset that traveled with him to various European capitals. In 1936, the "Boy" made his first trans-Atlantic journey. Goldschmidt had sold his Chinese porcelains at a London auction, but took his paintings to New York.

What happened to the two

other faces of Michelangelo Di Rosa? Paul Rosenberg, in 1931, bought the one in which the boy is slumped in a chair, facing left, from Monet's son. About five years later he sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Chester Beatty in London.

The version that hung in the 1895 show at Ambroise Vollard's gallery—showing the boy with his head on his hand—had been bought early in the Nineteen Hundreds by Marzell de Nemes, a Hungarian dealer-amateur. In 1916, de Nemes sold it to Dr. J. F. Reber, a Swiss who lived in Lausanne. Dr. Reber's enjoyment of the "Boy" and other pleasant aspects of life was somewhat shaken after World War II when he was accused of being a Nazi collaborator. After he was

before his death, Goldschmidt even lent the "Boy in a Red Vest" to a spectacular show in Paris at the Musée de l'Orangerie. Called "From David to Toulouse-Lautrec: Masterpieces from American Collections," it represented the cream of American holdings and startled the French into belated awareness of the vast number of masterpieces in American hands.

IN 1956, Paul Rosenberg, who had again come into possession of the version of the "Boy" owned by the Chester Beattys, sold this painting to the David Rockefellers (for the Museum of Modern Art) at an alleged \$180,000. Considering, on the one hand, that Buehrle paid \$150,000 in 1947 and, on the other, the recent



COSTLIEST PAINTING—Raphael's "Alba Madonna," now in the National Gallery, brought the top price ever paid for a painting, \$1,166,400

cleared, in 1947, he sold the painting to Emile Buehrle, a Swiss munitions maker, who had apparently done rather well during the hostilities, because he paid the then record price of \$150,000 for the Cézanne. This picture is still in his family's hands.

THE huge price, arrived at in private, unpublicized sale, did little to influence the market. Cézanne prices in general were not yet nearly that high. In fact, in 1952, at the Cognac sale in Paris, when a Cézanne still life with fourteen apples was sold for \$82,500—approximately \$6,000 per apple—the art world gasped. That price *did* affect the market.

All this while, Jakob Goldschmidt, a citizen of the United States since 1944, was enjoying his postimpressionist paintings and lending them generously and almost annually to exhibitions. As a major work, his "Boy" was frequently requested for loan shows. In June of 1955, a few months

\$616,000 price, the Rockefellers got what today appears to have been a bargain.

For, by now, prices of postimpressionist paintings were skyrocketing, and the squillionaire Greek shipowners were boosting them along. In 1957, two of these gentlemen, Basil Goulandris and Stavros Niarchos, competing against each other at the sale of the late Mrs. Margaret Biddle's collection in Paris, bid a Gauguin still life up to an unprecedented \$297,000—until last month the highest price ever paid for a postimpressionist painting (and nearing the two previous record auction prices for Old Masters: \$375,000 for a Piero della Francesca and \$360,000 for a Gainsborough).

Though no single bid reached the Gauguin summit in the sale of the Georges Lucey collection in New York in November, 1957, dozens of United States price records for various French artists were toppled. A painting by Edouard Vuillard, for in-

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stance, appraised at \$25,000, rocketed to a world-record Vuillard price of \$70,000, and a Renoir landscape, which many critics feel is not quite in the masterpiece category, went under the hammer at \$200,000.

Everyone knew that the Goldschmidt sale of Oct. 15 would attract exceedingly high bids. The seven paintings auctioned are by the artists most sought-after today. All are well-known, much reproduced and of top quality. The trade guessed, for instance, that the Van Gogh landscape would bring between \$350,000 and \$375,000 (it went under the hammer at \$369,000). The Renoir "La Pensée" was pegged at \$200,000 (it went for \$201,000), and a Manet street scene and figure piece were expected to bring about \$300,000 and \$250,000, respectively (they were sold for \$316,000 and \$249,000).

S SCUTTLEBUTT on Bond Street and Fifty-seventh Street had it that the Cézanne would surely bring the highest price, since today Cézanne is respected as the greatest of the postimpressionists. Modern taste particularly admires the way in which he brought his monumental, almost architectural forms, his planes and color into masterfully constructed unity. And the painting in question belongs to a vigorous and powerful period. The guesses on its price ranged from about \$350,000 to \$425,000, with some tipsters even mentioning \$450,000.

Tension was high at Sotheby's on the night of the sale. Movie and television cameras whirred under glaring lights as 1,100 modishly dressed, ticket-holding members of a fashionable, international audience sat on gilt chairs or stood crushed against the tapestried walls.

As Michelangelo Di Rosa stood languidly before this audience, with his troubled eyes and delicate, thin mouth, the bidding quickly became a contest between two New York art dealers. One was Georges Keller of New York's Carstairs Gallery, a suave man who looks and speaks rather like Charles Boyer; the other was Roland Balay of Knoedler's, a short, moon-faced man. (They were, interestingly enough, once business partners.) The man for whom Keller was bidding was not present. Balay's client was. He was a lean, dapper man, with an El Greco face, the shipowner Stavros Niarchos.

BIDDING, indicated to the hawk-eyed auction personnel by unobtrusive gestures, rose by £5,000 leaps. The final bid of \$616,000 was, of course, astonishingly out of line with even the other very high prices of the sale.

Keller's client was Paul Mellon, son of the late Andrew Mellon, founder and

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great patron of the National Gallery in Washington (and incidentally, through his foundation, purchaser of the most expensive single painting, in or outside an auction, on record: Raphael's "Alba Madonna" for \$1,168,400).

Noisy art world gossip was that Mellon—not realizing he would be facing the extravagant competition of Niarchos—had given Keller the directive of an "unlimited bid." Mr. Mellon denies this emphatically. "I had a top price," he said, "but my wife and I wanted this picture very much, so it was a high one. Naturally, I wish we had gotten it for less but we are happy to have it."

Gossips also debated whether the Cézanne (and the two Manets Mr. Mellon also bought) were slated for museums in Washington, Pittsburgh or New Haven. Mr. Mellon declared, rather refreshingly for these days, that he and his wife bought these pictures for their own enjoyment.

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WHAT has happened to make a picture that could have been bought for about \$340 shortly after it was painted bring \$616,000 some sixty-five years later?

The answer is complex. The interest in impressionist and postimpressionist painting in America, starting with a few collectors around 1913, kept gaining momentum throughout the Twenties, Thirties and Forties. This was logical. The supply of available Old Masters was dwindling, and their prices were very high. French "moderns" were plentiful—expensive enough to be trustworthy, familiar enough to be acceptable. With the depression, as the rich moved from spacious mansions to small town houses or apartments with smaller rooms, lower ceilings and light plaster walls instead of dark, paneled ones, these paintings—right in scale, gay in hue, presenting a joyous, reassuring bourgeois world and charming to look at in Louis XV gold frames—seemed appropriate and desirable.

AFTER the war, more and more people made more and more money and art-collecting became a more and more popular activity. Not only was it a sign of cultural and social prestige, it had another cogent attraction. S. N. Behrman has quoted Duveen's explanation to a client that a picture is the only expensive purchase that requires no upkeep. With domestic help growing scarce and expensive, such toys as yachts, mansions and stables were less and less manageable. Art became a desirable luxury item. Moreover, tax laws—which allow deduction for a painting bought for a museum, though the purchaser may enjoy it on his own walls during his lifetime—made spending money on art an at-

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tractively sound financial activity.

Once the impressionists and postimpressionists became *comme il faut*, and as their prices rose to points of ever higher respectability, they attracted—in the booming Forties and Fifties—a new host of collectors in South America and Europe, as well as America. They are so easily recognizable, these Van Goghs and Gauguins, these Renoirs and Cézannes, and their prices are so well publicized that they have unimpeachable “prestige value.” It has been estimated that about 80 per cent of those who spend over \$1,000 a year for art spend it in this field. Such rigidly standardized taste in the upper brackets is, of course, a trenchant reflection of the Age of Conformity.

WHETHER these are sound investments is an interesting and speculative question. Basically there is no real scarcity of impressionist and postimpressionist paintings in private hands. If there were a depression tomorrow, hundreds of them would flood the market. What has, on the whole, proved true over the years, however, is that the few masterworks of an artist maintain their value through fat times and lean. They even survive the tides of taste, though lesser works tumble quickly to dreary lows. Great pictures, in the long run, are never “too expensive.”

The prices of the Goldschmidt sale will, of course, affect the market and set new levels for works of French impressionist and postimpressionist painting.

A bad result of such prices as the \$369,000 for the Van Gogh and the \$616,000 for the Cézanne is that this kind of inflation works a frightful hardship on museums with fixed incomes. For prices of Old Masters are also affected. Private owners with, say, a baroque figure piece, a Fragonard, a Flemish primitive or whatever are emboldened to increase their asking prices to bring them into line with the bidding for the “moderns” at the Goldschmidt sale. Museums, which have difficulty in finding private donors of the less-fashionable Old Master pictures, will suffer badly in such a market.

THE potentially good effect of the astronomic Goldschmidt prices is, on the other hand, that many collectors will be forced to seek new fields. This tendency can be noted already in the rising prices of Fauve paintings and even of Cubist ones. (Two years ago a Cubist painting of a girl with a mandolin was bought for \$98,000.) Some collectors may even dare to forage in the field of living art—remembering that when Egisto Fabbri bought the “Boy in a Red Vest,” Cézanne was a contemporary artist and that the painting most likely cost him no more than \$340.

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