

COURTAULD INSTITUTE

The Manton Centre for British Art

Early Reception of Impressionism in Britain, 1870-1917

A One-Day Conference, Vernon Square Campus, LT2

Friday 12 Dec 2025, 10.00–18.00



This conference will explore the development in Britain of the taste for French Impressionism between 1870, when Paul Durand-Ruel established his Bond Street gallery, and 1917, when the National Gallery in London accepted the Sir Hugh Lane Bequest.

Despite Durand-Ruel's early support of Monet and his contemporaries, Impressionism's acceptance by the public in Britain was cautious and slow, hampered as much by limited access to the works as by the hostility of the market and the absence of a pertinent vocabulary by which it could be mediated by British critics. For much of the period in question their work was misunderstood, considered sketch-like and inconsequential.

In the period leading up to the First World War, few collectors were interested in buying Impressionist art. The exceptions were artists such as Walter Sickert and John Singer Sargent, and a group of 'new rich' industrialists who had made their fortunes through commerce. In the 1880s and 1890s, the only British dealers to exhibit and sell impressionist art in the UK were David Croal Thomson in London and Alexander Reid in Glasgow. Although this period was marked by a number of pioneering exhibitions, it was not until after the First World War that the market for Impressionism was firmly established.

This conference will present new research by leading scholars of Impressionism and of the history of collecting. It will examine the pioneering contribution of key artists and art dealers, as well as the relative reluctance on the part of collectors to appreciate the Impressionist agenda. Speakers will also examine the presentation of Impressionist and relatively more modern works in British galleries between 1870 and 1917.

The conference is organised and chaired by Professor Frances Fowle, Dr. Natalia Murray, MaryAnne Stevens and Professor Steve Edwards, Manton Professor of British Art and Director of the Manton Centre for British Art, The Courtauld..

Programme

10.00–10.15

Welcome. Introductory remarks

10.15–11.15

Session 1: Collecting Impressionism and its reception in Britain before 1917

Chair: Natalia Murray

Overview of the early collecting of Impressionism: the European context

MaryAnne Stevens

Significant collections of Impressionist art were made in Europe during the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing upon important research, the paper examines the pattern of collecting in countries such as France, Belgium, Germany and the Nordic countries. It will identify the agents for a growing awareness of, and enthusiasm for Impressionist art, from dealers, exhibitions and farsighted museum directors and Artists Associations to the enlightened private collectors and the recognition and appreciative support of fellow artists. It is hoped that this will set the context within which to understand the particular character of the early collecting of Impressionism in Britain.

Durand-Ruel and his British collectors

Flavie Durand-Ruel

Paul Durand-Ruel established his London gallery, at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, and organized exhibitions showing pictures by artists from the Barbizon School to Impressionists such as Monet and Pissarro, who had also sought refuge in London. Durand-Ruel struggled to convince British collectors to buy their pictures and was only successful with a few of them, such as Constantin Ionides, John Waterloo Wilson, Louis Huth, Peter Coats, Walter Sickert and Hugh Lane, among others. He organised exhibitions in London in the 1870s, at Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell in 1883, and a major exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1905.

11.15–11.45

Coffee Break

11.45–13.30

Session 2: Early Collectors

Chair: Tom Stammers

Louis Huth (1821-1905): An Important Early British Collector of Degas

Dr Andrew Watson

This paper focuses on Degas's *The Dance Foyer* (1872, Musée d'Orsay), which the English collector, Louis Huth, acquired in December 1872, shortly after it had been exhibited at Paul Durand-Ruel's fifth exhibition of the Society of French Artists in London. This established Huth as the first British collector to purchase a work by Degas. Drawing on recent research, and previously unpublished materials, the circumstances surrounding Huth's purchase and his ownership of the painting, which lasted until 1892, will be presented more fully than has hitherto been possible. It will be shown that Huth evinced a liberal approach to collecting, and that his taste is better understood in relation to other pioneering collectors of French art in the early 1860s and 1870s, especially those with familial or commercial ties to Europe. The talk will conclude by considering the circumstances that led to *The Dance Foyer* leaving Huth's collection and returning to France in 1892.

Captain Henry Hill: an unexpected collector of French Modern Art

Dr Natalia Murray, Courtauld Institute

Captain Hill was a military tailor who started collecting British and French modern art when he was in his fifties, and by the time of his death in 1882 owned a grand total of 728 paintings and drawings plus 20 sculptures.

Perhaps most notably half the paintings Hill owned were by contemporary French and European artists. Hill bought his first work by Degas in 1874 from the Durand-Ruel gallery in New Bond Street, and shortly purchased six more paintings by Degas from the same gallery after the management had transferred to Charles Deschamps. At the time it was the largest private collection of Degas not only in England but in Europe. Hill was the first British collector to buy a painting by Monet, most certainly directly from Durand-Ruel in Paris. He also owned 98 works by the less known artist Marie Cazin, who exhibited at the Durand-Ruel gallery in New Bond Street with some critical acclaim. This paper will discuss the significance of Hill's collection and his contribution to the dissemination of the taste for French Impressionism in Britain.

A Contradictory Collector: Sir Peter Coats's Impressionist pictures in context

Professor Frances Fowle

In 1885 the Scottish thread manufacturer and philanthropist Sir Peter Coats (1808-1890) bought three works by Edgar Degas and three by Camille Pissarro from Paul Durand-Ruel in Paris. Previously his tastes had been extremely conservative, focusing on contemporary genre painting, biblical and mythological subjects (especially by Sir Joseph Noel Paton) and landscapes by artists such as Horatio McCulloch. This paper examines Coats's extraordinary purchase, and his wider collecting practice, in the context of his background as an entrepreneurial industrialist, with extensive business and social networks – and as a family man with strong religious beliefs and a philanthropic mindset. How contradictory were these different aspects of Sir Peter Coats's life and character, and do they throw any light on his surprising foray into Impressionism at the age of 76?

13.30–14.45

Lunch Break

Provided for speakers and organisers only

14.45–15.45

Session 3: Artist Collectors

Chair: MaryAnne Stevens

John Singer Sargent: Impressionist Painter and Collector?

Elaine Kilmurray

This paper will consider the works by Édouard Manet and Claude Monet acquired by Sargent in the 1880s and early 1890s. It will look at these paintings in the context of works painted by Sargent's contemporaries which were in the artist's collection to see what they reveal about his tastes and artistic relationships and the character of the art scene of the time. It will trace what we know about Sargent's role in influencing collectors to buy works by Manet and Monet and conclude with an assessment of Sargent's role in the public subscription organised to buy Manet's *Olympia* (1863) to ensure its place in the French national collection.

Walter Sickert: collector and critic

Dr Tom Stammers, Courtauld Institute

15.45–16.15

Coffee Break

16.15–17.15

Session 4: Collectors and Legacy

Chair: Frances Fowle

Hugh Lane: "He must always be doing for Ireland"

Chris Riopelle

Unique among collectors, Hugh Lane's aim was to establish a pioneering and public museum of modern art. His hopes for a Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin under the aegis of the Celtic Revival were only partially met. His (tactical?) relations with the National Gallery, London, tested entrenched British resistance to Continental modernism, pre-Courtauld Fund. When he went down on the Lusitania in 1915 the fate of his famous '39 pictures' became the subject of a century-long dispute between the two cities Lane called home. This paper looks again at the most controversial of all UK modern art collections in the light of new (primarily Irish) research.

'The highest ideals in art': Impressionism in south Wales, 1913-1914

Anne Pritchard

The inaugural Loan Exhibition of Paintings at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, 1913, was also the debut for Gwendoline and Margaret Davies's pioneering collection; considered the Welsh cornerstone in the history of Impressionism in Britain.

Whereas the aim was to 'direct the highest ideals in art', the failure to include Welsh artists was symptomatic of a failing national artistic identity. In response, the subsequent exhibition of Modern Painters and Sculptors of Welsh Birth or Extraction, showed the nation's strongest artists. This paper reappraises the exhibitions, in tandem, providing broader context to evaluate the reception of Impressionism in south Wales.

17.15–17.30

Final Words

17.30–19.00

Drinks Reception

Speaker Biographies

Frances Fowle is Emeritus Professor of Nineteenth-Century Art at the University of Edinburgh. She previously held a Personal Chair in Art History and was Senior Curator of French Art at the National Galleries of Scotland for over twenty years. Her specialism is collecting and the art market and she has curated numerous international exhibitions on Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art. Her publications include *Impressionism and Scotland* (2008), *Van Gogh's Twin: the Scottish Art Dealer Alexander Reid* (2010), *Globalizing Impressionism: Reception, Translation and Transnationalism* (with Clark, 2020), *French Paintings 1500-1900*, NGS (with Clarke, 2022) and *The Art Market and the Museum* (with Cleary, 2025).

Natalia Murray is a lecturer in modern art and curating at the Courtauld Institute of Art and a senior curator. She specializes in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russian and Western European art and is the curator of the Royal Academy's major exhibition *Revolution. Russian Art 1917-1932* (2017). Natalia is currently working on several new exhibition projects in the US and in Europe. She has published widely: her most recent book, *Two Women Patrons of the Russian Avant-Garde. Nadezhda Dobychina and Klavdia Mikhailova*, was published in 2021 and was dedicated to the first gallerists in Russia. Her current research is dedicated to early collectors of French Impressionism in England.

MaryAnne Stevens, erstwhile Director of Academic Affairs at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, is a scholar, independent curator, lecturer and consultant. She specializes in 18th-, 19th- and early 20th- century art, with particular reference to British, French and Nordic art in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. She has taught and published extensively in these areas, and curated many exhibitions, covering Nordic art and French Impressionist, Symbolist and early Modern Art. Her most recent exhibition was 'After Impressionism: Inventing Modern Art', was presented at the National Gallery, London in 2023.

Christopher Riopelle is The Neil Westreich Curator of Post 1800 Paintings at the National Gallery. He has held curatorial positions at the J. Paul Getty Museum, CA, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Among exhibitions co-curated in London are *Renoir Landscapes 1865-1883* (2007); *Inventing Impressionism: Paul Durand-Ruel and the Modern Art Market* (2015); *Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art* (2016); *Australia's Impressionists* (2016) and with MaryAnne Stevens *After Impressionism* (2023). Forthcoming in 2026 is *Renoir and Love*, a collaboration of the National Gallery with Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Andrew Watson, associate lecturer with the Open University, is a specialist in nineteenth-century art, with an emphasis on collecting. He has written extensively on British collectors of French painting, including a book on the remarkable Scottish collector James Duncan of Benmore (1834–1905) and articles for the Société des Amis du Musée National Eugène Delacroix, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Journal, and Burlington Magazine. In his most recent Burlington article he definitively established the early history of Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*. Andrew has written seven entries for Charles Sebag Montefiore's forthcoming (2027) *Dictionary of British Art Collectors: 1600–1939*.

Flavie Durand-Ruel devotes herself to studying the fascinating life of her ancestor Paul Durand-Ruel (1831–1922), a visionary and innovative art dealer. At the Durand-Ruel Archives in Paris, she published, with her uncle, her ancestor's Memoirs (Flammarion, 2014 & 2024). Since 2018, as FDR Fine Arts Director in Brussels, she researches provenance of pictures, published *Tribute to Impressionism: Paul Durand-Ruel, dealer and friend of the Impressionists* (2024) and works on the catalogue raisonné of Albert André. She participates in exhibitions and conferences, and studies the correspondence of Claude Monet, and Mary Cassatt to be published in 2026.

Tom Stammers is Reader in Art and Cultural History at the Courtauld Institute, and co-leader of the new MA in Art and Business. His first book, *The Purchase of the Past: Cultures of Collecting in Post-Revolutionary Paris, c.1790-1890* (Cambridge, 2020) won the RHS Gladstone Prize. He was co-investigator on the major AHRC project 'Jewish Country Houses: Objects, Networks, People' (2019-2024). Tom has published widely on French art, the history of collecting, the art market, museums and heritage politics, and contributes regularly to publications including *Apollo* and the *London Review of Books*.

Elaine Kilmurray is an independent scholar. She was Research Director of the John Singer Sargent catalogue raisonné and co-author, with Richard Ormond, of the nine published volumes of the catalogue (Yale University Press 1998-2016). She has co-curated exhibitions of Sargent's work in London, the United States and Italy, most recently 'Sargent and Spain' (2022), and has written and lectured internationally on the artist and related subjects. She is interested in Sargent's interaction with Impressionism and in his artistic relationship with Claude Monet.

Anne Pritchard was Senior Curator at Amgueddfa Cymru, overseeing Historic Art and the renowned Davies Collection of Impressionist art. In addition to the redisplay of those galleries (2010), her exhibitions included *France and Britain: Art for a New Age 1817-1917* (Japan, 2017-2018), and partnering with Tate to take Stott's *Le Passeur to west Wales* (2018). Specializing in French art of the long nineteenth century, and particularly its relationship with national identities, her publications have included articles on the landscapes of Sisley, Monet, and Harpignies. After a sabbatical in the USA, she recently joined the National Galleries of Scotland.

Notes