



The Middle Years: Chester Dale

According to his *New Yorker* profile,

Chester Dale was “the only man in the world who has had his portrait painted, *seriatim*, by Robert Reid, George Bellows, Jean Lurçat, Diego Rivera, Miguel Covarrubias and Salvador Dalí.” To say this proved his insatiable interest in art or self is to sell him short. He had the stamina of a fireman as suited the honorary member of a Manhattan firehouse; the metaphorical punch of a middleweight fighter as he had boxed professionally; the nerve of a Wall Street runner, which was his first job; the luck of a gambler who kept playing the odds and hitting jackpots. He also had the drive, wealth and eyes to buy an unparalleled collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. Eyes in the plural? Yes, his own and those of a wife Maud, a lady of exceptional learning about art and of unusually discriminating taste.

Chester Dale, once a runner on Wall Street, watches others run at his bidding. He enjoys his well-earned wealth to the hilt, makes the pursuit of art a contest, thrives on collecting, and serves the Gallery generously.

Dale “met life head-on and enjoyed it hugely,” wrote art critic Aline B. Louchheim (later Saarinen). “I know of no other collector who delights in his paintings with such gusto or who: “speaks

George Bellows' portraits of Chester Dale and his wife do not come easily. When Bellows finishes two of Maud, Chester writes "I didn't know which one I liked best," and not wanting a stranger to own a portrait of his wife, he buys both! Because Maud deems Bellows a great colorist, for Chester's portrait she insists that he wear "a tweed golf coat with lots of red in it and a kind of muffler draped around my shoulders with more color... to tell you the truth I thought it was kind of stupid." Nevertheless, "When George finished it he told me he considered it the finest portrait he had ever done."

George Bellows,
Maud Dale, 1919
Chester Dale Collection

George Bellows,
Chester Dale, 1922
Chester Dale Collection



of them with so little egocentricity and so much hearty pleasure." Further, and great names aside, she found that he possessed a great collection worthy of that title, a coherent gathering of pictures that reflected the collector's informed taste and sensitive perception.

The homogeneity of the pictures... is that they are the kind of modern paintings visibly connected with tradition; paintings in which emotion is gentle rather than violent; beautifully painted pictures, radiant rather than opulent. It is a well-tempered collection.

Yet Chesterdale (as he was called by wives, friends and victims alike) was himself not well-tempered at all. In fact, he was a terror. "I've had a few lunches with him. He catches my arm," Dalí complained, "and the next day it's blue, so violent is his touch." John Walker got chronic bursitis from taking his phone calls—long calls daily on a special line—during a particularly trying years-long period. He terrorized Walker and even Paul Mellon in an original manner: with the very real threat that he might recall his loans of numerous and fabulous pictures at any moment. So long as he lived, nearly all of the Gallery's vaunted Chester Dale Collection was only on



loan. Further these rich and varied treasures had come to the Gallery from the Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art whose directors had come to believe that they had been loaned to them forever.

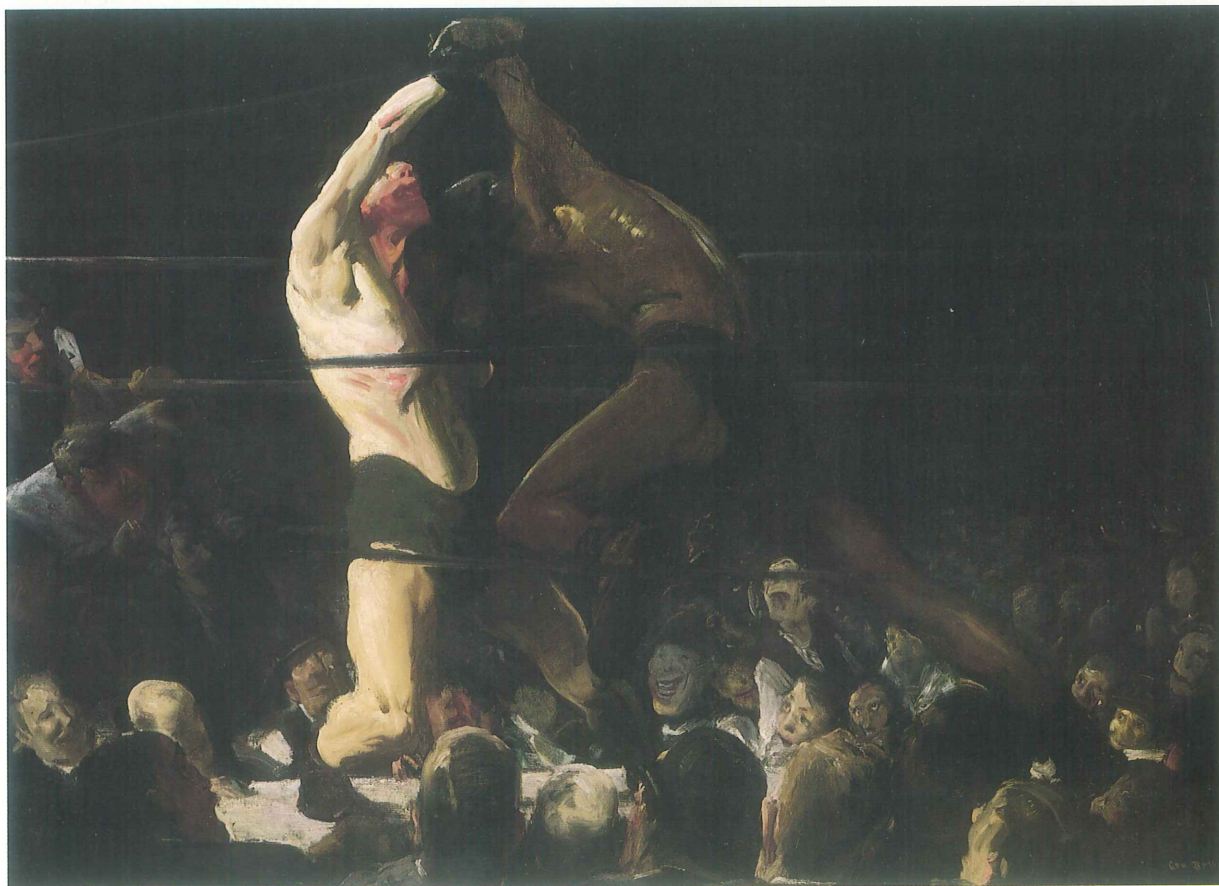
Lending a few early American portraits to the Gallery for the opening, the next year Dale provided a superb assortment of 126 nineteenth-century French pictures that might simply have made the Gallery his devoted beneficiary. Trouble was, this particular assortment of works by Matisse, Picasso and the like were only loans—as they had been loans in Philadelphia and Chicago. When Dale pulled his art from those distinguished museums, which had built their modern collections around his, he left rooms of bare walls in his wake. That was Dale's way, though needless to say both museums felt very much abused.

Were there mitigating circumstances, or is there a kinder light to shed on this? Finley's version of what happened vis-à-vis Chicago is sublime and characteristic in its understatement: "He decided he would like to see his paintings under one roof and proposed to me that he bring the Chicago loans to the National Gallery.

He explained to his Chicago friends why he was transferring his paintings to Washington and went ahead and did so, with the result that one can see French paintings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Washington as in few places in the world.” Period, paragraph. John Walker’s published recollection is perhaps more candid: “In fairness . . . it must be stressed that he had made no [binding or legal] commitment to either institution, nor had he promised that his pictures would remain in Washington It has been said that Chester was unable to distinguish between the words ‘gift’ and ‘loan,’ that he used these terms interchangeably, that like Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland* words meant what he wanted them to mean.” But Dale had been elected to the boards of the Philadelphia and Chicago museums (the Museum of Modern Art as well) on the strength of his loans and the hope of his eventual gifts. Likewise, in February 1941 he became an “honorary officer” with the title of Associate Vice President of the Gallery, then succeeded Joseph Widener as a full board

member upon the latter’s death in 1943, and became President of the Board in 1956. But he had never foresworn his penchant for barging like a bull to get his way and usually—not always—he got it.

Paul Mellon remembers visiting Dale in his Plaza Hotel apartment to discuss a pressing item on the Gallery’s agenda. As usual in submitting to Dale-proof hospitality, the Board Member was plied with multiple martinis, then with wine, then with champagne after dinner when Mrs. Dale retired and her husband got down to serious business. In the course of that conversation, Dale produced a copy of his will and proceeded to read Mellon salient passages in order to make the point that the Gallery might not after all be the final repository of his collection. Mind you, his possessions included: Manet’s *Old Musician*, Mary Cassatt’s *Boating Party*, Renoir’s *A Girl with a Watering Can*, Corot’s *Agostina*, Van Gogh’s *La Mousmé*, Gauguin’s *Self-Portrait*, Toulouse-Lautrec’s *Rue des Moulins*, Degas’ *Four Dancers*, Monet’s *Palazzo da Mula*, Rousseau’s



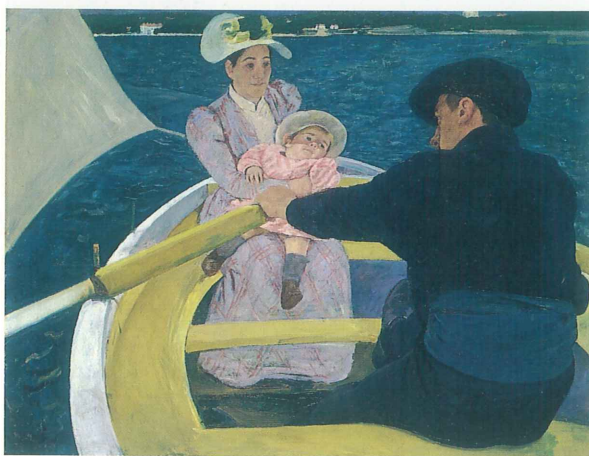
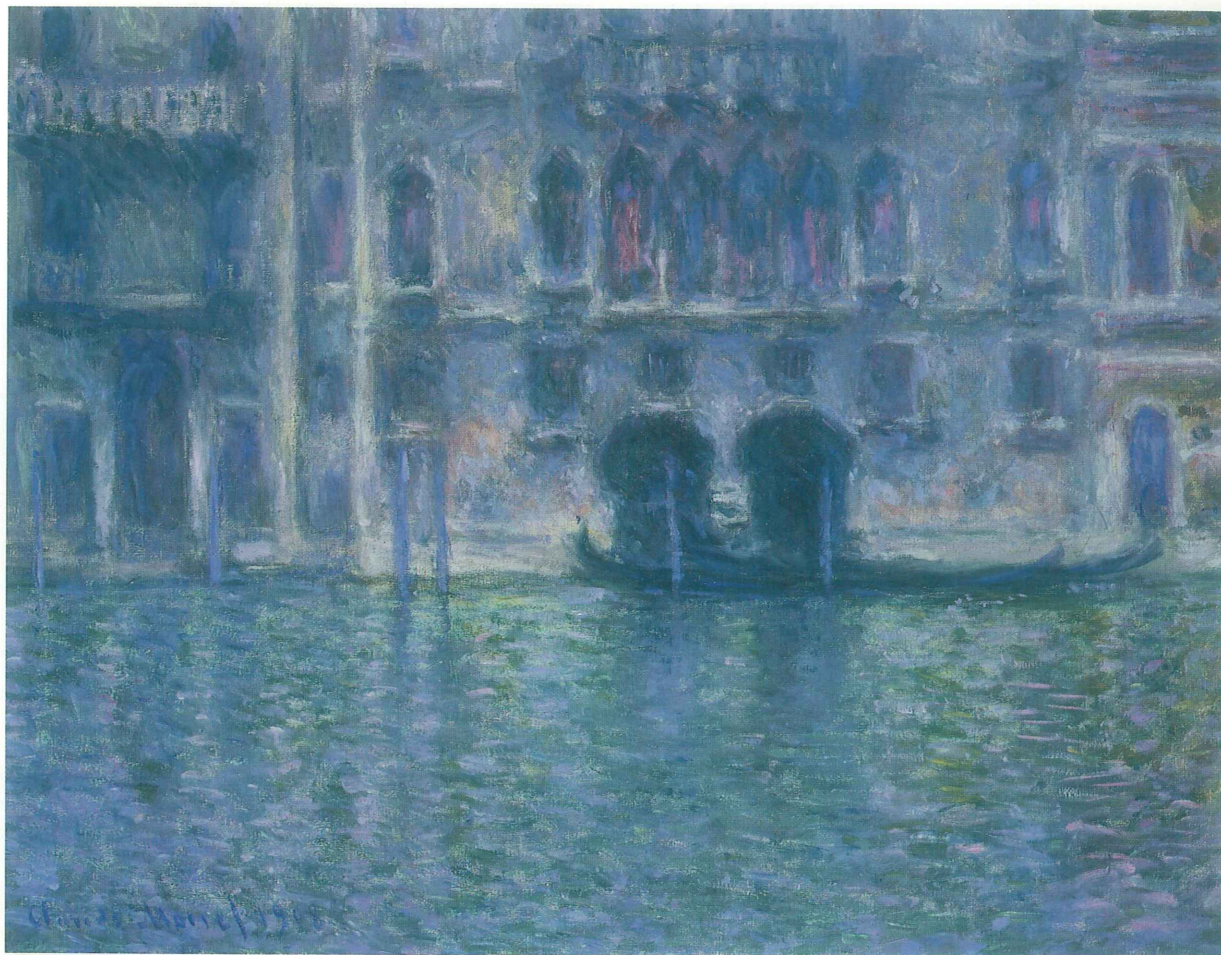
Both boxers, Dale and Bellows become friends. The collector writes: “From the things I saw in his studio, he seems to be painting in a different manner than most of the others, furthermore they seem to have more of a wallop than paintings of other fellows.”

George Bellows, *Both Members of This Club*, 1909
Chester Dale Collection

Maud encourages Chester to collect French art “with ancestors”—and with cousins, lovers, offspring, et al. Thus Monet’s impressionist vision of nighttime Venice wins a place in their collection as does the work of American expatriate Mary Cassatt who joins the impressionist cause.

Claude Monet, *Palazzo da Mula, Venice*, 1908
Chester Dale Collection

Mary Cassatt, *The Boating Party*, 1893/1894
Chester Dale Collection



Equatorial Jungle, Modigliani’s Chaim Soutine, Picasso’s Family of Saltimbanques, Bellows’ Both Members of This Club, to say nothing of other important works by the above and major pictures by Géricault, David, Ingres, Delacroix, Millet, Daumier, Boudin, Morisot, Pissarro, Fantin-Latour and many, many more.

The reason for Dale’s lubricious twisting of Mellon’s arm was simple enough: Chesterdale

wanted to name Huntington Cairns the next director of the National Gallery of Art. But he hadn’t reckoned with David Finley nor with his heir apparent John Walker. Putting off that tempest for now, the question remains, how did Chester Dale get that way?

He was born the day after Christmas in 1883 to a cultured family on Madison Avenue. His father, a British-born scholar, sent the boy off to a military academy. That was enough formal education for Dale, who dropped out, preferring to go to work on Wall Street at the age of fifteen. He started out as a messenger delivering securities at five dollars a week. If he remembered it rightly in an unpublished stream-of-consciousness memoir that John Walker quoted, the job lasted only a week. It was too much work for too little reward. Going to the next job interview, he asked a telegraph messenger for directions, was called a “hick” for his pains and “took a swing at him” for his. In his youth Dale was a street fight-

er, too. The next job was easier on the feet, but at the same wage, and he wised up: Money was not made running other men's errands, though for the moment he had to settle for an office boy's slot. In an investment house that specialized in railroads, he studied the boss and realized that he more-or-less bought securities to resell at the highest markup he could get "without being too much of a robber." Dale thought that if he studied the real values of the stocks he could do better:

"I heard of White and Kemble's *Atlas and Digest of Railroads* with these maps [that] showed you the position of the various mortgages... all in concrete form. Well, I got so intensely interested in all that I couldn't even sleep nights." He learned the financial structure of all the railroads—what bonds they had issued, what they earned and what they were worth as negotiables. Before long, "I would make a boast that you can't name a railroad mortgage in the U.S. that I didn't know." One afternoon he saw "Mr. Harriman walking rather jauntily into Morgan and Co., wearing his specs and looking all serious and all of a sudden it occurred to me that there were five million Erie notes coming due in the

morning.... Mr. Harriman came out and looked to me as he had a kind of smile, a little bit like the cat that swallowed the canary. I said that smart guy beat Morgan and Hill and got the Erie." On the basis of reading Harriman's inscrutable look, the feisty wage-earner bought into the Erie himself. "Imagine me buying half a million notes. Supposing they'd gone off a couple of points... I'd have been washed up on Wall Street." But they didn't and he wasn't.

He opened the bond department in a new firm, became a partner and continued combining his knowledge of railroads with gutsy instinct. When two Canadian strangers appeared from an unknown place called Calgary ("sounded to me more like a cemetery than a town") Dale took in stride the fact that one man carried a brace of pistols in his belt. These cowboys had come to sell \$750,000 in school bonds, and once Dale ascertained that Calgary was a boom town, he took their business—and then the business of towns like Moose Jaw, Medicine Hat and others, before Wall Street competitors realized there was money to be made in Western Canada municipals.

From there he went on to public utility



Another American inspired by study abroad, William Merritt Chase borrows impressionist colors and a French love of pure esthetics. He returns home to become an influential teacher and luminous painter.

William Merritt Chase,
A Friendly Call, 1895
Chester Dale Collection

Dale buys some superlative French pictures. Four Dancers is Degas' last major painting, his largest picture of dancers and perhaps his most ambitious study of human motion. Renoir's Girl with a Watering Can, loaned soon after the opening, quickly becomes the Gallery's most popular painting.

Edgar Degas,
Four Dancers, c. 1899
Chester Dale Collection

Auguste Renoir, *A Girl with a Watering Can*, 1876
Chester Dale Collection



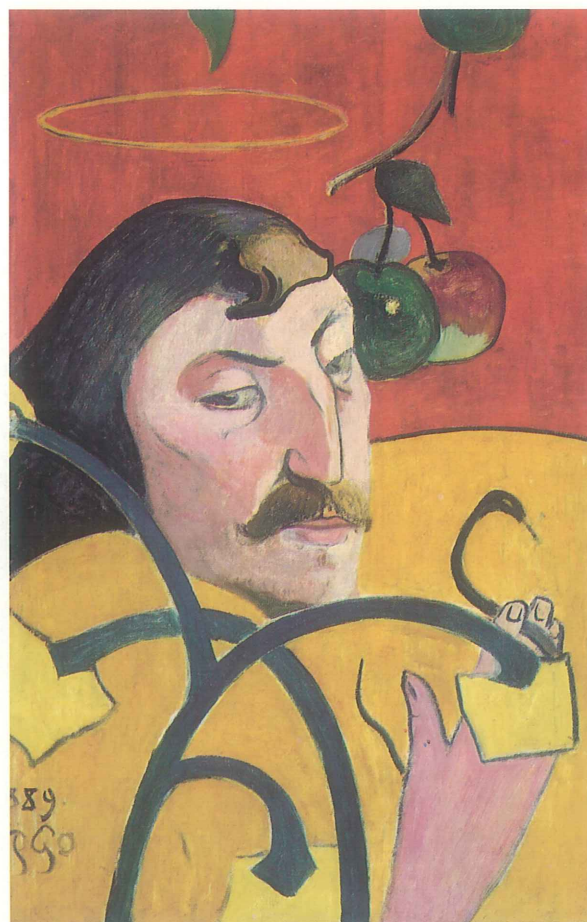
holding companies and so forth, making millions and “retiring” from other people’s employ at thirty-five, thereafter minding his personal affairs from a Wall Street office and managing financial matters for friends, whom he never forgot. John Walker reported that when the crash came, Dale held onto large blocks of one stock until friends who had followed his advice in buying it could bail out—though the waiting cost him \$25 million. Worth \$60 million before the 1929 crash, he escaped with less than \$10 million. But, Walker continued, pictures he had bought for \$2 million were appraised at \$50 million when his estate was settled. If he had not recovered his entire paper fortune over the next thirty years, he had spent many millions in the interim while living as lavishly as possible and having a great deal of fun. “I was lousy in math at school, but this was making money and tak-

ing me places,” Dale told *New Yorker* writer Geoffrey T. Hellman in 1958. “I was on the roof of the old Madison Square Garden when Stanford White was shot. Did you know that the first grapefruit in New York was served at the Astor, and the first avocado with French dressing at the Knickerbocker Hotel? It was the game! It was the fight! It was a challenge! All my life it’s been a challenge, just as my collecting pictures is a challenge.”

At the age of twenty-seven he married Maud Murray, a woman some years his senior, some inches taller, and head and shoulders above him in her knowledge of art (being an accomplished painter and art historian). “Mrs. Dale then began to lead me around to the various galleries about town,” Dale recounted in another unpublished memoir. “By this time I really got myself hopped up about this art business, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I naturally began to ask questions of my tutor.” In short order “Mrs. Dale and I had acquired the very bad and expensive habit of attending the picture sales in the New York auction rooms.” They bought American modern works by Gilbert Stuart, Sully, Whistler, Morse, Chase, Ryder, then others including George Luks, Robert Henri and Arthur B. Davies.

Dale made many friends in diverse circles: cartoonist Rube Goldberg, sportswriter Grantland Rice, painters René Pène du Bois and George Bellows whose paintings, the budding patron thought, “have a lot more of a wallop.” Bellows painted two portraits of Maud, and when Dale couldn’t decide between them—“Naturally I didn’t want somebody else to have a portrait of my wife”—he bought them both, the only portraits of women Bellows ever did on commission, Dale noted proudly.

I believe it was just about this time that Mrs. Dale said “If you are going to buy pictures like this and be a collector we had better talk over the situation a little more thoroughly and decide exactly what we will do.... I didn’t realize you really wanted to start a collection.”... Then I got the lecture about the French School particularly nineteenth century, what



Another landmark picture is the devilish self-portrait that Gauguin painted on a cupboard door as part of a country inn’s decor—possibly as part of the rent.

Paul Gauguin,
Self-Portrait, 1889
Chester Dale Collection

great painters they were, what they had done. She began to talk to me about Renoir, Manet, Monet, Sisley, Courbet. I asked her why she had not mentioned this before and was told “I didn’t know you were so interested in art.”... She said, “Chester Dale, let us have some thing definite, I would suggest that you collect French art for the last 150 years with ancestors.” I said what do you mean “ancestors”? What she meant was that Renoir was a great artist and came by way of and through Rubens, and Boucher. If you stop to think it over, you must understand it, Rubens had the color, Boucher, too, had all the flesh tints. I said what do we do about Cézanne, and she said, “Chester Dale, he came through Tintoretto and Greco.” Then she tried to explain to me how Cézanne broke up form, and I wanted to know why he did it....

With Maud’s advice he began buying wisely. “This picture business was really getting under my skin, I found that when I was downtown getting the wherewithal to buy pictures, my mind

was on pictures. Perhaps all that was a good timing because you could not buy pictures with hay and I wanted more pictures.” Frequenting Paris in the early 1920s, he bought presciently, but discovered that the art market there was as much a free-for-all as Wall Street in the wild and woolly decades before regulation. Anything went—if you could get away with it.

Not speaking French, he engaged a dealer to bid on a pair of Toulouse-Lautrecs for him at an auction. The paintings went for less than his

limit, and he assumed they were his, when he realized that the dealer, in cahoots with an associate, had bought the better picture of the pair and for less than he offered. “He was furious,” John Walker recounted, “and Chester’s anger could be monumental. He threatened a lawsuit, hurled a few anathemas, and the terrified dealer delivered both pictures.” Unwilling to remain an outsider, Dale bought stock in the Galerie Georges Petit, the French government’s quasi-official art agent—enough stock to claim a seat



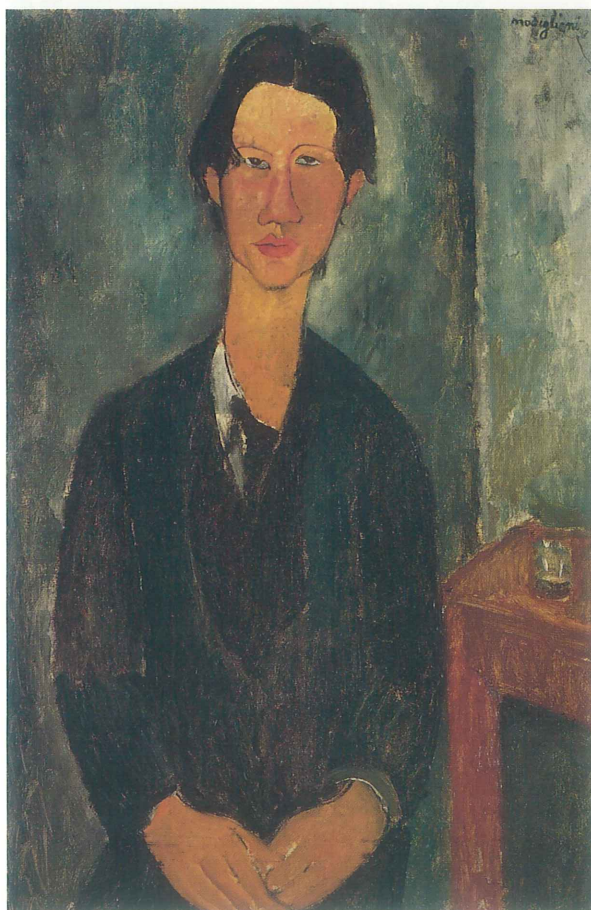
Rousseau, a self-taught artist, is part of the painters’ “circle of Paris”—as Dale becomes part of the art buyers’ circle in France.

Henri Rousseau,
The Equatorial Jungle, 1909
Chester Dale Collection



Amedeo Modigliani comes to Paris, like Mary Cassatt and like his subject below, Russian painter Chaime Soutine. Dale does some of his best collecting in the 1920s right after Modigliani's death, and is drawn to the Italian's singular portraits—which fill a wall of his New York apartment before they come to the Gallery.

Amedeo Modigliani, *Chaime Soutine*, 1917
Chester Dale Collection

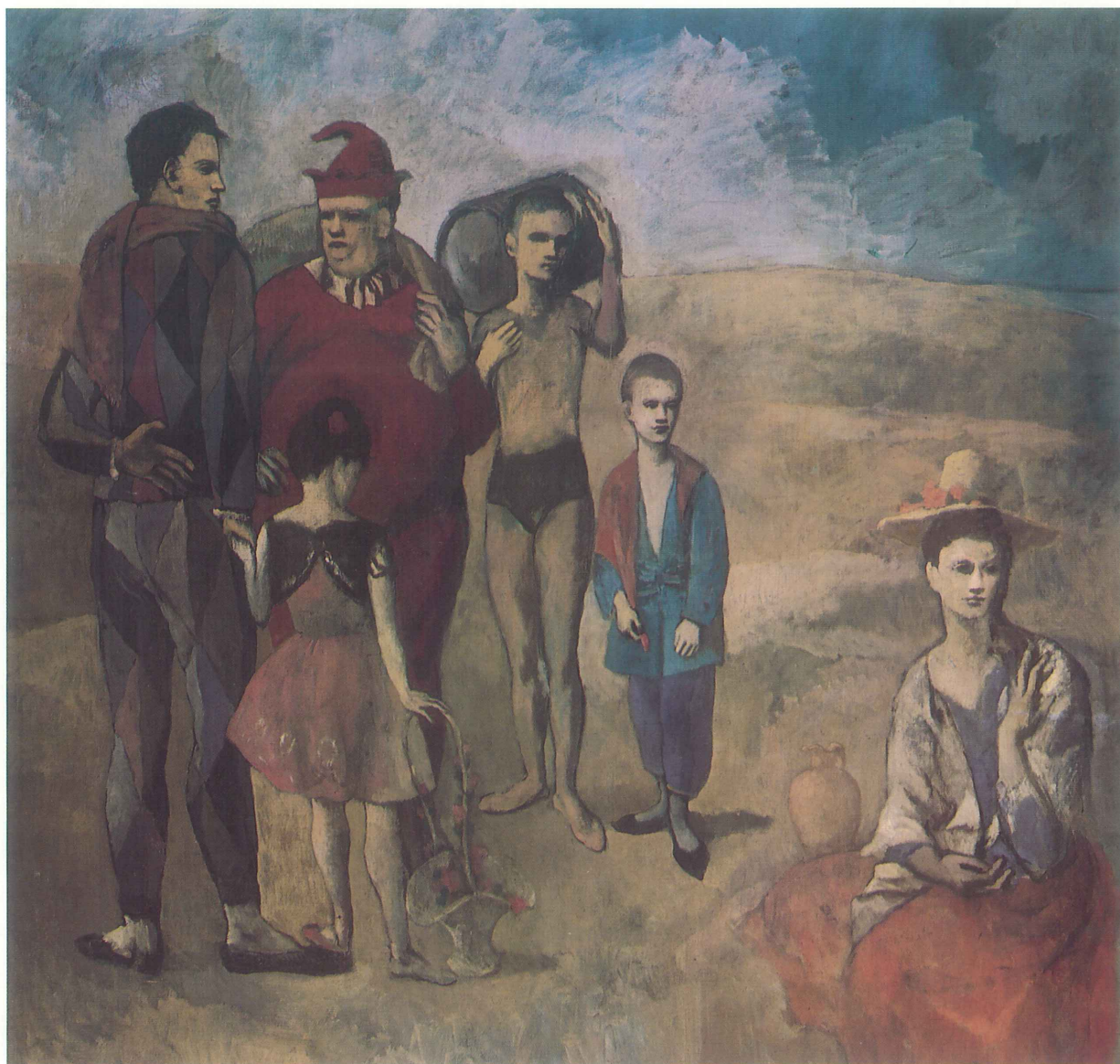


on the board, and membership in what he called the French “Skindicate.” Now he might “persuade the boys not to bid up against me on what I wanted.” The second memoir reveals many of the French dealers’ tricks, which Dale appreciated as only an old stock trader might. Much of it simply boiled down to insider trading. Dealers would agree in advance on which one would win the bidding on choice works offered at Hotel Drouet auctions. Or they would pool their resources to beat outsiders.

Sometimes Dale played the game, as when he hit on the novel idea (in those pre-electronic times) of borrowing a New York bank’s transatlantic teletype to make his bid, which then had to be delivered by messenger to the auction in progress. Evidently feeling the rich American’s breath on their necks even at that distance, dealers backed off, and Dale acquired Cézanne’s portrait of his son. Sometimes he didn’t play the game. When Courbet’s *Portrait of a Young Girl* was on the block, lesser dealers deferred to an *eminence grise* who was apparently supposed to

Family of Saltimbanques, Picasso's first picture to fetch 10,000 francs, covers a huge canvas—too big for a struggling artist to waste—and conceals two other pictures. Circus Family and Two Acrobats were lost until Gallery scholars rediscover them (via x-ray) under this haunting troupe: The harlequin is Picasso himself; the fat jester his friend, poet Guillaume Apollinaire; the seated woman, his mistress Fernande Olivier. Most poignantly, the little girl is an orphan whom the barren Olivier adopted briefly, then returned to the orphanage over Picasso's objections.

Pablo Picasso, *Family of Saltimbanques*, 1905
Chester Dale Collection



win the prize. When Dale kept bidding, “the auctioneer and the whole gallery started to laugh and . . . my competitor stood up and positively flounced out.”

Dale was always bold as brass. Shaming a dealer into showing a treasure he was holding for another client, Dale decided he had to have *Madame Michel-Lévy*, Manet's pastel and oil portrait. Told that the other collector had an option on it until the next noon, Dale invited the dealer to lunch next day. Containing himself until nearly 2 P.M., he said the option must have lapsed. Still the dealer didn't want to offend the other buyer: “He said this was a very important client, Dr. Albert Barnes, to which I replied so am I.” Dale got the portrait, then called on the sitter,

by now a septuagenarian who proudly showed off a footstool upholstered with material from the dress she wore in the picture.

After Maud saw Corot's *Agostina* in a home where they were dinner guests, Dale instructed his agent to offer a serious sum for it. The dealer said that one did not visit a house and offer to buy a picture. Dale replied, “When you snap out of this . . . this nonsense, let me know whether you will or will not make the bid.’ He admitted it was a substantial sum . . . and didn't see that it would do any harm to try.” Dale said that the offer was good until 6 P.M.—not ten after. Again he got the picture.

In the early 1930s, Dale made a transatlantic offer on a Manet that Maud had recommended

two years before. “What people wanted in those days was money; the demand for it was infinitely greater than for pictures. . . . Although the Depression was not any more useful to me than to any one else, I still wasn’t broke and I was in the midst of making a collection,” which *The Old Musician* would enhance mightily. Again, a dealer told him that making an offer on a picture not known to be for sale was gauche. Again Dale made a substantial offer, which was accepted before the short deadline passed. When it reached New York the picture proved too big to get into his apartment, so he loaned it to the Metropolitan. Picasso’s *Saltimbanques* was too big, too, so he had it delivered to a 57th Street gallery—by crane through a window—in order to get a look at it.

Individual works aside, Dale’s collection grew so large that he bought a townhouse on 79th Street to hold his art, while continuing to live in a hotel nearby. Dale lived all over the East Side of Manhattan, in apartments downtown

and hotels uptown, in the Hotel Carlyle for years, finally at the Plaza. When art critic Aline Louchheim visited in 1952, she found “dozens of fine paintings completely masking the walls of the hotel apartment. Hung one above another, over doors, and even on a mirror, they leave ‘no room even for a postage stamp.’” With a similar kind of concentration, he cultivated—stimulated or agitated might be the better word—a multitude of friends. These ranged from esthetes like John Walker to a Customs officer named Frank McCarthy who “saved him from double dealings on the docks.” Having been burned out of two homes by fires, he courted firemen, getting an honorary badge from one fire house and dropping anything to attend a fire—in tails if need be and even if it meant then commandeering a fire truck to get to a dinner party.

Dale’s neglected memoir shows that he had some tact too, as when he blurted out to Diego Rivera that his friend was wasting time on portraits of statesmen and such: “Then I stopped



Edouard Manet,
Madame Michel-Lévy, 1882
Chester Dale Collection



Dale puts off buying Manet’s The Old Musician for two years after Maud tells him it is a world-class picture. After he buys Manet’s Madame Michel-Lévy he takes tea with the sitter, by then an old woman.

Edouard Manet,
The Old Musician, 1862
Chester Dale Collection

After Salvador Dalí paints a Crucifixion, Dale virtually dares him to take Christ's Last Supper as a subject. The surrealist agrees, paints a tour de force, and grandly attends the picture's installation when Dale presents it to the Gallery. Later, Dalí paints Dale (with Coco).

Salvador Dalí, *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*, 1955
Chester Dale Collection

Salvador Dalí,
Chester Dale, 1958
Chester Dale Collection



short, and thought I may probably have stepped over a bit, but I was so in earnest that I had not considered how strongly I spoke. I hoped I hadn't made him mad." Rivera forgave him, and to prove it painted his portrait. Josef Stransky, formerly the conductor of the New York Philharmonic and then a Wildenstein dealer, owned Picasso's *Gourmet*. Dale offered to buy it during a dinner party in Stransky's home: "I'll pay you a hell of a price, then you can buy from your

firm something you may like better.’ He laughed, wasn’t a bit offended,” though Dale himself was taken aback that he had “uttered a thing like that.” He had to wait until Stransky died to buy the Picasso from his estate.

He also inspired some pictures in a manner of speaking. When Dale saw Dalí’s *Crucifixion*, he was so entranced that he bought it—for the Metropolitan. Then, brooding about the painting over breakfast with Maud, he had the brainstorm that Dalí might paint a scene barely reinterpreted since Leonardo: *The Last Supper*. Dalí took to the idea, and though Dale was pleased to say he had not commissioned the work, he got first look. He didn’t need a second. “Dale is very intuitive, very quick, very decisive,” the flamboyant surrealist said. “Most collectors seek advice and wait; he falls in love with a picture and then he takes it. He is a passionate man for this kind of thing, and a passionate man in general.”

In this case, Dale bought the enormous canvas and gave it to the National Gallery with great éclat. Dalí himself came for the unveiling, and the huge visionary canvas began a sort of migration through the building. Since then the work has hung in several places where it is often the only canvas in sight—usually in lonely and overwhelming splendor. The trouble was—and is—that at the Gallery it had no “ancestors,” to use Maud’s term.

Chester Dale lies in a cemetery in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, with his parents and first wife. The small family plot is reportedly overgrown with weeds; perpetual care was something he reserved for art. “I have little or no family, and why should I save and scrimp, accumulate eight or ten dollars, when by concentration, a little exploration and having an awful lot of fun I may be able to contribute something.... It’s very little that any one individual can do and if by any possible chance you have an opportunity to do something for posterity, with everything we have taken from this world I intend to try to do it.”

The *New Yorker* profile noted that Dale’s collection “is not just the backbone,’ John

Walker... has said, ‘it’s the whole rib structure of the modern French school here. The quality is fantastically high.’... The Gallery’s president [Dale], who is childless, knows that art, judiciously handled is a more likely vehicle of fame than common stocks, or even public-utility bonds. If his rib structure in the National Gallery settles down there permanently, his name, like the names of Mellon, Kress and Widener... may well be a household word, at least in households of culture and refinement, a hundred years from now.” That was only a third of a century ago, but the point was well taken. ❧

A glossy magazine declares that Dale, “who has no family, considers every one of his paintings his children” —as Le Gourmet might attest.

Pablo Picasso,
Le Gourmet, 1901
Chester Dale Collection

