

EXHIBITION 18 March – 14 September 2015

Collectionism and Modernity

Two Case Studies: The Im Obersteg and Rudolf Staechelin Collections



It was not the work of artists, critics and curators alone that made the development of modern and contemporary art possible. Another factor related to both economic and social concerns intervened as a catalyst in the process. This was art collecting.

This exhibition brings together two leading collections of early modernist art that now form part of the holdings of the Kunstmuseum Basel (Basel, Switzerland), the Im Obersteg Collection and the Rudolf Staechelin Collection, offering an opportunity to enjoy works by the most reputed early modernist masters, the vast majority of which have never before been seen in Spain. It is moreover a chance to explore the phenomenon of collecting, with a focus on its centrality to the formation of modern art.

Private collections of early modernism have traditionally been studied and exhibited with an emphasis on the contemplation of the works on display, neglecting the economic, social and political implications inherent to the activity of collecting in a context like that of Europe in the first decades of the 20th century. Nevertheless, collecting is above all discursive, and may be studied as such. A collection of whatever kind is made up not only of the works it contains but also of the narratives it successfully generates. It was in this sense that Walter Benjamin regarded the collector in his *Arcades Project*, viewing the act of collecting as related to the desire to understand and organize the world as a cosmos: “Perhaps in this way it is possible to concretize the secret motive that underlies collecting: the fight against dispersion. The great collector is perturbed from the outset by the dispersion and chaos that subsume everything in the world.”

Cover image

Pablo Picasso, *Buveuse d'absinthe* (The Absinthe Drinker), 1901
Im Obersteg Foundation, permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel



Ferdinand Hodler
*Le Mont-Blanc aux
 nuages roses* (The
 Mont-Blanc with Pink
 Clouds), 1918
 Rudolf Staechelin
 Collection

Art collecting in the early modernist period

The logic of collecting in the modernist era is intimately connected with that of the liberal bourgeoisie, and with its perception and reading of history and the world, a cosmovision that would shape a whole epoch in the West. Throughout contemporary history, artworks have thus been produced not only as objects for enjoyment and knowledge, but also as goods for exchange and symbols of social status. The phenomenon of bourgeois collecting grew constantly during the 20th century while at the same time distancing itself from its remote origins in the context of the European aristocracy. The history of private collecting in the early modernist period displays certain characteristics that are common to different countries, such as a buoyant economic situation benefiting a liberal bourgeoisie, the development of public cultural institutions offering support to modern art, the participation of art historians and critics with an interest in these new developments, and the growth of a national and international art

market which feeds off this incipient interest while at the same time increasing it.

In the most prosperous cities of the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany, these conditions facilitated the growth of collections that pioneered the “change of taste” towards the modern. In their turn, these collections contributed to the development of modernism as a mass phenomenon.

Switzerland, which saw the birth of the Im Obersteg Collection and the Rudolf Staechelin Collection, formed part of the group of countries whose industrial elites stood at the forefront of modern collecting. Nevertheless, the Swiss context presents certain peculiarities. In the early 20th century, Switzerland was a relatively young country whose linguistic and geographical fragmentation made it difficult to forge a single differentiated culture at a time when nationalisms were on the rise in the rest of Europe. Although located in the sphere of political and cultural influence of several powers (France, Germany and Italy), it fell

predominantly under the political, economic and cultural sway of Germany until well into the 20th century. The shift towards a pre-eminently French “modernism” therefore had implications that transcended the purely artistic, a fact underlined by the debates which arose around this question. On one side lay an ultra-nationalist discourse that identified culture with territory, while on the other stood the defense of a new artistic internationalism. In short, the new cultural orientation towards modernism meant a generational and political change that was to leave a profound mark on Swiss cultural history.

Despite this identification of “the modern” with French culture, it was not the French-speaking region of the country that first experienced the change. It was in the German-speaking cantons, and specifically the cities of Basel and Zurich, that the first collectors of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works emerged, and where the first exhibitions of contemporary art originating in France were held. In the time that elapsed between the first of these exhibitions, held in Zurich in 1897, and the start of the First World War, the so-called “change in taste” took place. This was a process whereby a manifest preference for the “new” made itself increasingly evident, as demonstrated by two exhibitions held concurrently and dedicated respectively to contemporary French and German art. The first had twenty thousand visitors and the second about ten thousand.

Germany’s power made itself felt in various aspects of Swiss life during these early years of the 20th century, including a lasting military influence that was to be reflected in widespread fears of a German invasion during World War Two. In this way, the reorientation of Swiss cultural tastes became the symptom of a desire for independence latent in some of the country’s most influential personalities, leading collectors among them. This search for a cultural identity also materialized in the



Vincent van Gogh
Tête de femme (Head of a Woman), 1887
Rudolf Staechelin Collection

interest shown by Swiss collectors for local artists. One of the patterns common to these collections is therefore that of beginning with acquisitions of works by Swiss artists, and later opening up to works by foreigners, fundamentally French. The cases of two Swiss artists, Ferdinand Hodler and Cuno Amiet, are paradigmatic in that after pursuing part of their careers in Paris, they became cult artists both in Switzerland and internationally. In such a context, the collector Hedy Hahnloser affirmed that “the renewal of our [Swiss] art came, like in most countries, from Paris.”

The Swiss collectors of the time played an active role in the development of the country’s artistic and cultural institutions. From very early on, numerous collectors formed part of the committees that took decisions on the acquisition of artworks, exhibition programs and other public events in their cities, using their

personal contacts to secure loans and purchases on terms that were advantageous for museums. Since it was they who had opened up the international art market in Switzerland, these institutions benefited from their previous work and accumulated experience. Such a combination of public commitment with a strong sense of private interest is still appreciable today, and has indeed become one of the hallmarks of the country's cultural industries. This sense of public responsibility allowed many collections to join the holdings of the country's public museums in ways ranging from gifts and donations to sales or long-term loans.

Two private collections in a public museum

The Im Obersteg Collection and the Rudolf Staechelin Collection were formed in the early 20th century in Basel, a city on the banks of the Rhine that borders on both France and Germany. The two collections have several points in common, though each also denotes the specific taste of its initiator. They were started by members of liberal bourgeois families that would subsequently acquire some importance in their country's history. Multifarious and internationalist in their interests, Karl Im Obersteg and Rudolf Staechelin were friends who both formed part of the Basel Arts Committee. They saw clearly how they wanted their collections to develop, and they made swift progress, taking charge of them personally with decisiveness and keen intuition. In both cases, they applied personal criteria that have been borne out by time.

Although they initially acquired work by modern Swiss artists, their collections were later joined by pieces by world-renowned artists like Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh and Marc Chagall. One striking case which illustrates the relationship between the two collectors, as well as their different criteria, is that of Picasso's *Seated Harlequin* (1923).



Emil Nolde

Homme et femme (femme à la pelisse)

(Gentleman and Lady [Lady with a Fur]), 1918

Im Obersteg Foundation, permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel

Initially bought by Im Obersteg, it came to belong to both collections, since he sold it to his friend Staechelin, using the capital he obtained to buy another work more to his taste. The work became famous in 1967 when the people of Basel acted in defense of their artistic heritage to prevent its private sale, organizing a fundraising campaign to permit its acquisition by the city's museum just as the Staechelin family was planning to sell it. The news reached Picasso himself, who was so impressed by this unprecedented civic gesture that he donated four more works to the city.

The Im Obersteg Collection and the Rudolf Staechelin Collection have enriched the public artistic heritage of Basel since they joined the holdings of the Kunstmuseum Basel, where they complement the institution's rich collections and can be viewed by all the people of the city.



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① **Wassily Kandinsky**
Étude de Murnau - Paysage avec église
 (Study of Murnau - Landscape with Church), 1909

Im Obersteg Foundation,
 permanent loan to the
 Kunstmuseum Basel

② **Pablo Picasso**
Femme dans la loge (Woman in the Loge), 1901

Im Obersteg Foundation,
 permanent loan to the
 Kunstmuseum Basel

③ **Alexej von Jawlensky**
Autoportrait
 (Self-Portrait), 1911

Im Obersteg Foundation,
 permanent loan to the
 Kunstmuseum Basel

④ **Chaïm Soutine**
L'enfant au jouet
 (Child with a Toy),
 ca. 1919

Im Obersteg Foundation,
 permanent loan to the
 Kunstmuseum Basel

⑤ **Marc Chagall**
Le Juif en noir et blanc
 (Jew in Black and White), 1914

Im Obersteg Foundation,
 permanent loan to the
 Kunstmuseum Basel

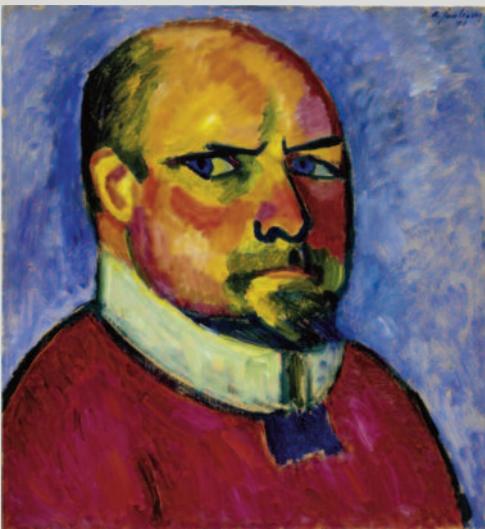
The Im Obersteg Collection

Karl Im Obersteg was born in Basel in 1883 to a family of entrepreneurs involved principally with the transport sector. His father built up a solid business which was successfully carried on by his son. Like many other wealthy families of the time, the Im Obersteg family put together a classic collection of historic engravings, furniture, books and other pieces.

In taking his first steps as a collector, Karl Im Obersteg distanced himself from the nature of the family collection and turned instead towards modern art. In 1916 he acquired his first work by a contemporary Swiss artist, Cuno Amiet, who remained a close friend, and with whom he kept up an exchange of interests and advice that was to mark the development of the collection. It was Amiet who put him in touch in 1918 with the resident community of artists in Ascona, where Im Obersteg had gone to recover from the after-effects of a severe bout of influenza. Ascona was to prove a watershed in his life. This small village in Italian-speaking Switzerland, on the shores of Lake Maggiore, was a place of rest and recreation for the upper classes, and also a haven for a group of exiled Russian artists. Among them was Alexej von Jawlensky, whose use of color had an extraordinary influence on Im Obersteg, becoming the basis for his vision of art and, largely, for the configuration of his collection, in which the Russian painter is the best represented artist.



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Karl Im Obersteg also acquired works by Ferdinand Hodler, one of the most renowned Swiss artists of the day along with Cuno Amiet. In so doing he followed the same path as many of the pioneers of Swiss collecting, influenced like him by the exhibitions organized by the dynamic cultural institutions of Basel. Nevertheless, his collection was formed in accordance with very personal criteria related more to his enjoyment of the works than to their market value, as can be seen from the abundant correspondence between the collector and the artists.

Karl Im Obersteg purchased groups of works with the idea that they should form dialogues with one another, while he sold or exchanged those which did not work well within the meticulous arrangement he prepared for his and his family's private enjoyment. Color is one of the salient features of the Im Obersteg Collection, but so too is an Expressionist tendency in both the forms and the subjects, which often represent underprivileged or socially marginalized figures. As an expert, he was also interested in masterpieces by the best artists of the time, such as Picasso, Cézanne, Modigliani or Soutine, and he dealt directly with Paul Guillaume, the Paris representative of many of these artists. Even the selected works by these acknowledged masters had to fit perfectly within the guidelines established by his previous acquisitions. If they did not, he solved the problem by immediately putting the work up for sale, as he did with Picasso's *Seated Harlequin*, mentioned above.

After the impact caused by the 1933 retrospective exhibition on Marc Chagall in Basel, he tried to obtain certain works by the artist for his collection. At the end of three years of searching and negotiating, he came into the possession of one of them by exchanging another previously acquired work by Chagall with the artist himself. After further acquisitions, the Im Obersteg Collection was to owe much of its international reputation to its set of works by Chagall.

During the Second World War, no new works were added to the Im Obersteg Collection. When the war was over, it was augmented with complementary works by the various artists who had interested him in previous years. However, the acquisition of other pieces tending towards abstraction indicates a change of attitude from his initial lack of interest in this current of contemporary art, probably under the influence of the late work of Jawlensky, who died in 1941. In the last years of the collector's life, his son Jürg collaborated actively in developing the family's legacy, and it was he who inherited the collection upon Karl Im Obersteg's death in 1969.



①

The Rudolf Staechelin Collection

Rudolf Staechelin was born in 1881 to a family of developers and financiers who came to wield considerable influence in the city in the span of two generations. He was educated with a view to entering his father's business, and so the origins of his interest in art are not known beyond the fact that he belonged to a new sector of the bourgeoisie that was trying to earn itself a philanthropic reputation through the acquisition of artworks.

The Rudolf Staechelin Collection began in Geneva in 1914, when Staechelin, in emulation of other industrial entrepreneurs of his generation, acquired a set of works by contemporary Swiss artists. Basel's awakening to modern art through major exhibitions of contemporary French artists encouraged the formation of a "new taste" and stimulated investment on the part of this group of young collectors. The acquisitions for the collection therefore bore a direct relation to the exhibitions held in those years: the one dedicated to French Impressionism at the Kunsthalle in Basel (1912), the show on the French masters from Courbet to Signac (1913), the exhibitions of the drawings of Picasso (1914) and the work of Ferdinand Hodler (1917), and the one devoted to French and Swiss painters (1915). The documentation related to Staechelin's transactions have been preserved, and this documentary corpus allows the collector's movements to be

① Paul Cézanne
Verre et pommes
(Glass and Apples),
1879-1882
Rudolf Staechelin Collection

studied with precision. According to these documents, his most important acquisitions of French art took place between 1917 and 1918, with the assistance of influential galleries and dealers from all over Europe, and especially France, Germany and Switzerland. To cite one example, it was at the Maison Moos gallery in Geneva that he acquired his first important group of French works, among them *Nafea faa ipoipo* by Paul Gauguin, *Paysage avec deux figures* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and *Nature morte: Les harengs saurs* by Vincent van Gogh.

The galleries were well aware of Staechelin's conditions, one of his rules being to buy only paintings executed during an artist's "mature" or "classical" period. He was praised for his clear and direct taste, since he would not accept works unless they had a balanced composition and were clearly representative of their artists' careers. Indeed, although he owned various works by his favorite artists, such as Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso, he never attempted to acquire examples of all the different periods of each one. The collection thus maintains a restrained and homogeneous air, since it expressly excludes certain manifestations of modern art such as cubism or abstraction. In applying this criterion, Staechelin's intention was that the works in his collection should be worthy of acquisition by a museum, since one of his goals was its public display.

In 1920, Staechelin showed his collection at the Kunsthalle in Basel at the request of Wilhelm Barth, who was institutionally responsible for the diffusion of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art in the city. The show was arranged in four sections that ran across the whole collection: French 19th century masters (34 works), modern French painters (7 works), Swiss painters (47 works), and contemporary German painters (27 works).

From then on, various gestures confirmed Staechelin's vocation for public service, and his desire to turn his private collection into a larger foundation. The public display of his collection of Asian art was followed by the purchase of a mansion for the permanent exhibition of the rest of the collection. This was the origin of the Staechelin Foundation, created to ensure the protection of the accumulated patrimony. In 1945, the collector attended his last meeting of the board of trustees of his foundation, at which it was concluded that no further acquisitions were possible. After his death, the Foundation began to organize an exhibition of his collection in conjunction with the Kunstmuseum Basel, the institution Staechelin had collaborated with throughout his life. The show opened in 1956.

② **Edouard Manet**
Tête de femme (Head of a Woman), 1870
Rudolf Staechelin Collection

③ **Paul Gauguin**
Nafea faa ipoipo
[When are you Getting Married?], 1892
Rudolf Staechelin Collection

④ **Ferdinand Hodler**
La malade (The Sick), 1914 (d. 1915)
Rudolf Staechelin Collection

⑤ **Pierre-Auguste Renoir**
Gabrielle, ca. 1910
Rudolf Staechelin Collection



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List of works

Im Obersteg Foundation, permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel

Cuno AMIET

Nu agenouillé sur fond jaune
(Kneeling Nude on Yellow Background), 1913
Oil on canvas, 91.5 x 97.5 cm

Cuno AMIET

Bouquet d'œillets (Bouquet of Carnations), 1916
Oil on canvas, 60 x 55 cm

Paul CÉZANNE

Baigneur assis au bord de l'eau
(Bather Sitting near the Water), ca. 1876
Oil on canvas, 29 x 21 cm

Marc CHAGALL

Autoportrait (Self-Portrait), 1914
Oil on cardboard laid down on canvas, 50.5 x 38 cm

Marc CHAGALL

Le Juif en vert (Jew in Green), 1914
Oil on cardboard laid down on fiberboard,
100.5 x 81.5 cm

Marc CHAGALL

Le Juif en rouge (Jew in Red), 1914
Oil on cardboard laid down on canvas, 101 x 81 cm

Marc CHAGALL

Le Juif en noir et blanc (Jew in Black and White), 1914
Oil on cardboard laid down on canvas, 101 x 80 cm

André DERAIN

Nature morte au broc (Still Life with Jar), 1912
Oil on wood, 70 x 54 cm

Ferdinand HODLER

Portrait de Régina Morgeron
(Portrait of Régina Morgeron), 1911
Oil on canvas, 48 x 38 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

La mère de l'artiste (The Artist's Mother), 1890
Oil on canvas laid down on cardboard, 24 x 18 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Le village de Murnau (The Village of Murnau), 1908
Oil on cardboard, 49 x 53.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Enfant (Child), ca. 1909
Oil and tempera on cardboard, 53.5 x 50 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Autoportrait (Self-Portrait), 1911
Oil on linen-finish cardboard, 54 x 51 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Au Baltique (At the Baltic Sea), 1911
Oil on cardboard, 50 x 54 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Boucles châtaines (Brown Curls), 1913
Oil on cardboard, 53.5 x 49.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Nature morte (Still Life), 1915
Oil on linen-finish paper laid down on cardboard,
51.5 x 36.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Variation large (Large Variation), 1915
Oil on linen-finish paper laid down on cardboard,
52 x 37.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Tête mystique: Tête de jeune fille (en face)
(Mystical Head: Head of a Girl [Frontal]), 1918
Oil on cardboard, 40 x 30 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Tête abstraite: noir-jaune-pourpre
(Abstract Head: Black-Yellow-Purple), ca. 1922
Oil on linen-finish paper laid down on cardboard,
36 x 27.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Tête abstraite: mystère (Abstract Head: Mysterium), 1925
Oil on linen-finish paper laid down on cardboard,
42.5 x 32.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Tête abstraite: or et rose
(Abstract Head: Gold and Pink), 1931
Oil on cardboard, 42.5 x 32.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Méditation N. 33 (Meditation No. 33), 1935
Oil on linen-finish paper laid down on cardboard
20.5 x 13.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Méditation N. 57 (Meditation No. 57), 1935
Oil on linen-finish paper laid down on cardboard, 17 x 12.5 cm

Alexej von JAWLENSKY

Méditation N. 133 (Meditation No. 133), 1935
 Oil on linen-finish paper laid down on cardboard,
 18 x 13.5 cm

Wassily KANDINSKY

Étude de Murnau – Paysage avec église
 (Study of Murnau – Landscape with Church), 1909
 Oil on cardboard, 33 x 45 cm

Amedeo MODIGLIANI

Portrait de Madame Dorival
 (Portrait of Madame Dorival), ca. 1916
 Oil on canvas, 61 x 38 cm

Emil NOLDE

Homme et femme (femme à la pelisse)
 (Gentleman and Lady [Lady with a Fur]), 1918
 Oil on canvas, 78 x 65 cm

Pablo PICASSO

Buveuse d'absinthe (The Absinthe Drinker), 1901
 Oil on canvas, 81 x 60 cm (front)

Femme dans la loge (Woman in the Loge), 1901
 Oil on canvas, 81 x 60 cm (back)

Pablo PICASSO

Nu couché (Reclining Nude), 1934
 Oil on canvas, 33 x 55 cm

Odilon REDON

La sirène (Siren), ca. 1900
 Oil on fiberboard, 27 x 22 cm

Georges ROUAULT

Ouvrière (Worker), 1911
 Gouache and chalk on paper laid down on cardboard,
 72.5 x 62 cm

Georges ROUAULT

Paysage (à la voile rouge)
 (Landscape [with Red Sail]), 1939
 Oil on paper laid down on gauze, 50 x 84 cm

Chaïm SOUTINE

L'enfant au jouet (Child with a Toy), ca. 1919
 Oil on canvas, 81 x 64.5 cm

Chaïm SOUTINE

Nature morte au violon, pain et poisson
 (Still Life with Violin, Bread and Fish), ca. 1922
 Oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm

Chaïm SOUTINE

Le faisan mort (Dead Pheasant), ca. 1926-27
 Oil on canvas, 52 x 72 cm

Chaïm SOUTINE

L'enfant de chœur (The Choir Boy), ca. 1927
 Oil on canvas, 77.5 x 39 cm

Chaïm SOUTINE

La cuisinière en tablier bleu
 (Cook in Blue Apron), ca. 1930
 Oil on canvas, 128 x 50.5 cm

Chaïm SOUTINE

La jeune Anglaise (Young English Woman), ca. 1934
 Oil on wood, 56 x 34 cm

Maurice UTRILLO

L'église Saint-Séverin à Paris
 (The Church Saint-Séverin, Paris), 1925
 Oil on canvas, 65 x 92 cm

Suzanne VALADON

La grenouille (The Frog), 1910
 Pastel and oil on paper laid down on cardboard,
 58.5 x 49.5 cm

Suzanne VALADON

Panier d'œufs de cane (Basket with Duck Eggs), 1931
 Oil on canvas, 38.5 x 46 cm

Maurice de VLAMINCK

L'inondation (The Inundation), 1910
 Oil on canvas, 60 x 81 cm

Maurice de VLAMINCK

Côte de mer (Seacoast), ca. 1932
 Oil on canvas, 66 x 81 cm

List of works

Rudolf Staechelin Collection

Paul CÉZANNE

La maison du docteur Gachet à Auvers
(The House of Dr. Gachet in Auvers), 1873
Oil on canvas, 56 x 47 cm

Paul CÉZANNE

Verre et pommes (Glass and Apples), 1879-1882
Oil on canvas, 31.5 x 40 cm

Paul GAUGUIN

Paysage au toit rouge (Landscape with Red Roof), 1885
Oil on canvas, 81.5 x 66 cm

Paul GAUGUIN

Nafea faa ipoipo (Quand te maries-tu?)
(Nafea faa ipoipo [When are you Getting Married?]), 1892
Oil on canvas, 101.5 x 77.5 cm

Ferdinand HODLER

La malade (The Sick), 1914 (d. 1915)
Oil on canvas, 35 x 27 cm

Ferdinand HODLER

La malade (The Sick), 1914
Oil on canvas 43 x 33 cm

Ferdinand HODLER

La morte (The Dead Woman), 1915
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm

Ferdinand HODLER

Le Mont-Blanc aux nuages roses
(The Mont-Blanc with Pink Clouds), 1918
Oil on canvas, 60 x 85 cm

Edouard MANET

Tête de femme (Head of a Woman), 1870
Oil on canvas, 56.5 x 46.5 cm

Claude MONET

Temps calme, Fécamp (Windless, Fécamp), 1881
Oil on canvas, 60 x 73.5 cm

Pablo PICASSO

Arlequin au loup (Harlequin with Mask), 1918
Oil on wood, 116 x 89 cm

Camille PISSARRO

La carrière, Pontoise (Quarry, Pontoise), ca. 1874
Oil on canvas, 58 x 72.5 cm

Camille PISSARRO

Le sentier du village (The Path of the Village), 1875
Oil on canvas, 39 x 55.5 cm

Camille PISSARRO

Vue de la Seine, prise du terre-plein du Pont-Neuf
(The Seine Seen from the Terrace of the Pont-Neuf), 1901
Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 55.5 cm

Pierre-Auguste RENOIR

Gabrielle, ca. 1910
Oil on canvas, 40.5 x 32.5 cm

Vincent van GOGH

Nature morte: Les harengs saurs
(Still Life: Red Herrings), 1886
Oil on canvas, 21.5 x 42 cm

Vincent van GOGH

Tête de femme (Head of a Woman), 1887
Oil on canvas, 40.5 x 32.5 cm

Vincent van GOGH

Le jardin de Daubigny (Daubigny's Garden), 1890
Oil on canvas, 56 x 101.5 cm

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