

PATEK PHILIPPE

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE

VOLUME III NUMBER 5



The modern city, one of Depeaux's constant interests, is portrayed in Camille Pissarro's *The port of Rouen, Saint-Sever*. Painted in 1896, during the artist's second stay in the Norman capital, this very fine picture is typical of his urban scenes. Looking down from his hotel window, he conveys the activity of the port busy with barges and tugs. On the opposite side we can make out the Saint-Sever district, its docks, and the smoke curling from its factory chimneys

THE COLLIER'S TREASURE

Industrialist François Depeaux was a busy man. Not content with running a successful colliery, he was also an inventor. However, it is his eye for art that sets him apart as a remarkable collector. Marc-Henri Tellier rediscovers this little-known but ardent patron of the arts





“Tonight, a big dinner at the coal man’s house...” This was how, in a letter written on February 12, 1892, the painter Claude Monet informed his wife, Alice, of his invitation to the home of François Depeaux. The “coal man” was, in fact, a leading industrialist, who had been born into a wealthy family on July 13, 1853 in Bois-Guillaume, a charming village near Rouen. At the age of 27 he had taken over the family coal business and developed it considerably, including acquiring a Welsh anthracite mine in Abercrave, near Swansea.

There was nothing in Depeaux’s background to indicate a nascent passion for art. And yet, in 1890, he began building up one of the most important collections of the day, comprising nearly six hundred paintings by over one hundred artists, most of them impressionist masters and painters from the School of Rouen. The name, *Ecole de Rouen*, had been coined by the art critic of *Le Figaro*, Arsène Alexandre, at the request of Depeaux, first appearing in Alexandre’s article about an exhibition by Joseph Delattre (1858-1912), the leader of this school, at the Durand-Ruel gallery in Paris, in December 1902.

An energetic businessman, Depeaux pursued a number of different interests with élan. As a coal entrepreneur, he aimed to control the entire process, from mining to final delivery to his clients’ door. This meant shipping anthracite to Rouen, to be broken up in his factory by machines that he had himself invented and patented, both in France and the United Kingdom. He also had a passion for boats, sailing his yacht, *Dame Blanche*, in numerous races and inviting guests such as Monet, Alfred Sisley, and Albert Lebourg on board to enjoy the views of the Seine. In 1902 he even created a yacht harbor in Rouen. Another of his initiatives was the foundation of two public baths in the city in 1897 and 1902. Intended primarily for the coal workers, these aids to personal hygiene (in an age when plumbing was a luxury) were open to anyone for a modest sum.

In addition to Depeaux’s social concerns, he was, of course, a patron of education and the arts. In 1902, he cofounded the Collège de Normandie, located near Rouen at Mont-Cauvaire. Inspired by the British public school system, this institution was designed to offer a more rounded education, with sporting, manual, and artistic activities complementing traditional intellectual subjects. Depeaux was also Sisley’s patron during the last years of the painter’s life. It was thanks to him that the impressionist was able to sojourn in Wales in 1897

and concentrate on seascapes. Sisley was undoubtedly Depeaux’s favorite (he owned more than 60 of his works); on the artist’s death in 1899, Depeaux organized a sale on behalf of Sisley’s children. He was also an active supporter of the painter Robert-Antoine Pinchon (1886-1943), overseeing the budding artist’s career and organizing exhibitions in Rouen and Paris.

Around 1900, after 20 years of marriage, François and his wife, Eugénie Depeaux, separated, leading to the sale of their possessions. The first sale was held on April 25, 1901, at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris, under the aegis of the auctioneer Maître Paul Chevallier. There were 65 paintings, including 16 Sisleys, as well as works by Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Loiseau, Moret, Pissarro, Lebourg, and Renoir, as well as the Rouen painters Delattre and Charles Fréchon. The buyers included the gallerists Durand-Ruel and Georges Petit, the collector Georges Viau, and the art historian Julius Meier-Graefe: the quality of the works had clearly attracted the interest of some renowned connoisseurs.

Once the divorce had gone through in early 1906, a judicial sale was inevitable. It was held on May 31 and June 1, 1906, at Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, with Maître Fernand Lair-Dubreuil wielding the hammer. The catalog presented 245 paintings, including no less than 46 Sisleys and 15 Monets. Depeaux remarried in 1909 and continued to buy paintings, although mainly artists from the Rouen school. For the inauguration of the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea in 1911, he donated six works by painters from that school, and three years later organized an exhibition there with the Rouen artists.

On November 13, 1909, Depeaux made a speech at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, having just donated 53 works from his collection: “I believe that every man, when he is able, owes part of the fruit of his work to the places where he was born, lived, and made his way in life.” He died on October 11, 1920, in one of his seven homes, in Lescure, just outside Rouen. Four sales of his estate were organized in 1921, in Paris, Le Havre, and Rouen, involving around three hundred paintings. But soon, Depeaux’s name was forgotten. Today, many of the works he had in his care grace the walls of the world’s museums, but too few people know about this enlightened patron and fascinating humanist. ♦

Translated by Charles Penwarden

More information is available in Marc-Henri Tellier’s book, *François Depeaux (1853-1920): le charbonnier et les impressionnistes*

This sublime seascape at dusk was painted by Claude Monet in 1886 on Belle-Ile. As he continued with this series, Monet took up the theme of the sea crashing against the rocks on this rugged island off the Breton coast. In his 1909 speech at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, François Depeaux said that impressionism had taught him “to see nature better – nature, that great, admirable consoler”



Claude Monet





Left: water is a significant theme of Depeaux's collection and is present in all its forms, from the seafront and coasts to inland waterways both natural (rivers) and manmade (canals). In this 1870 masterpiece by Alfred Sisley, *Barges on the Saint-Martin canal*, the bargemen are busy on the narrow quay edged with tall trees, unloading their cargo of coal along a footbridge from boats moored side by side. The painter had just adopted the principles of impressionism, to which he had been introduced by Monet. It is interesting to note that the first owner of this painting was none other than Edouard Manet

Below: Albert Lebourg, who was thought of as a role model by the painters of the School of Rouen, participated in the fourth and fifth Paris Impressionist Exhibitions in 1879 and 1880. In this

masterpiece from 1895, *The banks of the Seine at Herblay, in snow, effect of the winter sun*, the artist demonstrates his mastery of the difficult art of depicting snow, which calls for a true lightness of touch

