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STREAMLINE

In the Attic of Europe

Assembling a Collection in France

BY CAROLE PINTO



My inspiration for this article came after one too many strangers exclaimed, upon learning that I am an art dealer, “I’d love to buy art, but I can’t afford it!” I have, in fact, spent many years showing my clients that one need not be rich to build a top-quality art collection. Most important is to choose a field that reflects your tastes, then develop a discriminating eye by examining pertinent works by both well- and lesser-known artists in museums, commercial galleries, and publications. Buying the finest quality available should be your goal, and the best work of a lesser-known artist should always take precedence over a mediocre example made by a star. In bull markets, everything moves upward in price, but in bear markets, only the best works retain their value.

For more than 20 years I was privileged to live in Paris, where I spent a great deal of time studying the collections of major art museums and galleries. France, of course, is a country where the arts have always been considered an integral part of life. Many French people have grown up in homes adorned with art passed down through their families, and thus have developed an appreciation of aesthetics and beauty almost organically. There has always been a demand among the French middle classes for medium-priced, high-quality paintings – just one reason France is often called “the attic of Europe.”

The best paintings I have purchased there are by late 19th- and early 20th-century *petits maîtres* (little masters) whose works hang in museums across France, yet who are surprisingly unfamiliar abroad. These artists’ choices of palette, style, and subject matter reflect the fascinating cross-currents of this period. Most aspiring French artists pursued rigorous study in the academies, where they mastered draftsmanship and other technical skills, copied from prototypes in the Musée du Louvre, and often ventured to Italy to absorb the legacy of classicism and the Renaissance. This grand tradition drew new force not only from the innovations in visual perception championed by the Impressionists, but also from the influx of foreign artists who came to study and work in Paris. The early 20th century was especially lively in this regard, due in part to the migration of artists escaping persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia.

My own search for paintings in France has taken me to auction houses, antique shops, galleries, flea markets, and *brocantes* (local art fairs), where I have found small gems at affordable prices.

My criteria are simple: first, I must experience that “wow” reaction. Then I look for a balance of assured technique and fresh interpretation of the subject. (Even a scene of flowers in a vase can evoke a “wow” if handled with originality.) The picture must also be in very good condition, and, of course, the price must be right.

Fortunately, I have succeeded in assembling an eclectic inventory of works by European artists whose names are slowly becoming more familiar abroad, and whose market values will surely grow over time. Here are just a few pictures that illustrate what happens when you are willing to prioritize high quality over brand names. Other examples by the artists shown here can be found in public collections throughout France, including the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, Maison de Victor Hugo, and the Musées des Beaux-Arts of Dijon, Limoges, and Lyon.

For me — as a collector, dealer, and advisor — true satisfaction lies in encountering such talents, and then in watching their prices rise. For those of us eager to surround ourselves with art that nourishes the soul, and also to ignore what “everyone else” is doing, rest assured there is an abundance of suitable artworks waiting to be found. ■

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All images are from the author’s collection.

In 1894, Jules-Marie-Auguste Leroux won the *Prix de Rome*, which allowed him to study at the French Academy in Rome on a government stipend. He spent the rest of his career interpreting the female figure in a sensual and highly lyrical way. Available for less than \$45,000, *Nu* is a wonderful study inspired by Ingres’s famous *Le Bain Turc* (1862, Musée du Louvre). The palpability of this model’s porcelain-like skin is enhanced by soft pinkish hues, which are echoed in her headband and the cushion on which she sits. The delicate pose highlights her curvaceous form, and her setting in what seems to be a bourgeois salon takes her out of the realm of the ideal into everyday life.

JULES-MARIE-AUGUSTE LEROUX (1871-1954)

Nu (Nude)

c. 1905-10, OIL ON CANVAS, 21 X 17 1/2 IN.

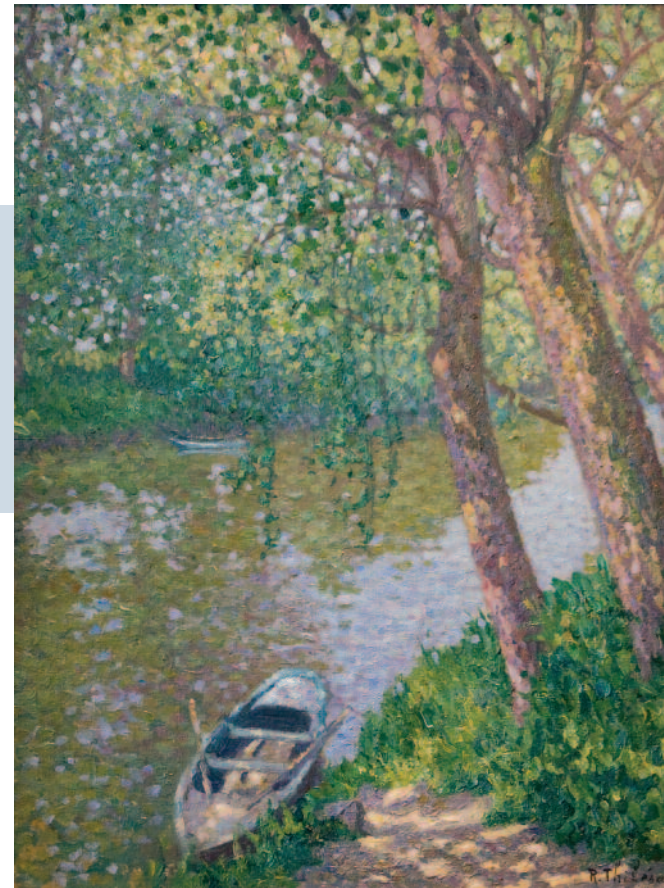


PAUL THOMAS (1868-1910)
BORD DE SEINE (EDGE OF THE SEINE)
 c. 1890, OIL ON CANVAS, 18 1/2 X 24 IN.

An early death cut short the career of Paul Thomas, but not before he won commissions to decorate the chic Parisian restaurant *Le Procope* and a ceiling at the Sorbonne. Available for less than \$40,000, *Bord de Seine* shows his love of the countryside, where translucent water reflects nature's lush colors, as well as the sunlit village in the distance. The insertion of just a few figures adds life to this tranquility, and Thomas's rapid brushstrokes, applied diagonally across the canvas, create a remarkably dynamic surface.

A frequent exhibitor at major Paris galleries and in Switzerland, Holland, Japan, and the U.S., Raymond Thibesart enjoyed considerable success during his long career. Available for less than \$40,000, *Barques sur la Seine* reflects the influence of his teachers, the Post-Impressionist Henri Martin and the Venezuelan Impressionist Émile Boggio. This intimate composition conveys Thibesart's delight in simple pleasures.

RAYMOND THIBESART (1874-1968)
BARQUES SUR LA SEINE (ROWBOATS ON THE SEINE)
 1908, OIL ON CANVAS, 25 X 19 IN.



JEAN PESKÉ (1870-1949)
DANS UN SOUS-BOIS (IN A WOOD)
 c. 1915-20, OIL ON CANVAS, 15 X 22 IN.

Jean Peské was a Pole who studied at the academies in Kiev and Odessa before moving to Paris in 1891 to enroll at the renowned Académie Julian. He owes his reputation to the Fauvist paintings he produced while working in the south of France alongside Matisse, Derain, and Vlaminck in the 1900s. Peské also became friendly with Toulouse-Lautrec and Pissarro, who taught him to make prints, and Sérusier, who introduced him to the intense palette favored at the art colony of Pont-Aven in Brittany. In *Dans un Sous-Bois* (available for less than \$20,000), Peské applies bold, saturated hues in thick arabesque strokes that endow his composition with both emotion and a strong rhythmic energy.

FRANÇOIS CHARLES BAUDE (1880-1953)
RACCOMODEURS DE FILETS SUR LE PORT DE ST-RAPHAEL
(SAILORS MENDING NETS IN THE PORT OF ST. RAPHAEL)
c. 1920, OIL ON CANVAS, 16 x 13 IN

Baude studied in Paris at the Académie Julian and École des Beaux-Arts, then exhibited throughout Europe. His paintings are luminous and bold in color, and the interplay of shadow and light adds movement and depth to his port scenes and landscapes. In *Raccomodeurs de filets sur le port de St-Raphael*, which is available for less than \$20,000, bright sunshine and blue sky contrast with the dappled shadows cast by trees offering welcome respite from the midday heat.



JULES RENÉ HERVÉ (1887-1981)
LES BOUQUINISTES (THE BOOKSELLERS)
c. 1925-30, OIL ON CANVAS, 10 x 8 1/2 IN.

The atmospheric Parisian scenes of Jules René Hervé record the beauty of the capital he never tired of observing with his keen eye. In *Les Bouquinistes* (available for less than \$15,000), he captures the essence of a fleeting moment with a lush palette and the juxtaposition of brilliant sunlight and deep shadow.

JACQUES DESPIERRE (1912-1995)
VUE AÉRIENNE DE CATHÉDRALES (AERIAL VIEW OF CATHEDRALS)
c. 1950, INK AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 13 1/2 x 15 1/2 IN.

The talent of Jacques Despierre propelled him to a professorship at Paris's École des Arts Decoratifs and membership in both the Académie des Beaux-Arts and the Légion d'Honneur. He belonged to the school of "Reconstructive Realists," who employed techniques derived from Cubism yet never slipped into abstraction. In *Vue Aérienne de Cathédrales* (available for under \$10,000), Despierre offers a luminous bird's-eye view of a city, using diverse colors in an intricate, linear pattern.

