

PAUL LOUIS DURAND-RUEL ORAL HISTORY

Interviewer: Elizabeth Gorayeb	Interviewee: Paul Louis Durand-Ruel	Date of interview: April 7th, 2021
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ELIZABETH GORAYEB: Hello, I'm Elizabeth Gorayeb and I'm here with Paul Louis Durand-Ruel. It's April 7th, 2021, and we're recording an oral history for the Wildenstein Plattner Institute's Pierre-Auguste Renoir oral history series. Paul Louis, do I have your permission to record this interview?

PAUL LOUIS DURAND-RUEL: Of course. [coughs]

EG: Great. Okay. Well, I'd like to start with an introduction. So, could you please tell us who you are and your relation to Renoir?

PDR: Well, my -- I am a great-grandson of Paul Durand-Ruel, who was the main dealer for Renoir. And he was a personal friend of Renoir, and, you know -- Paul Durand-Ruel and his sons were very -- very close with Renoir. Georges Durand-Ruel was godfather of Jean Renoir. And -- [pauses] we have the full correspondence between Renoir and the Durand-Ruels, and you can see through it that they were really close friends during all their life.

EG: So, your family -- were the dealers of Renoir, as well as the other Impressionist artists working in Renoir's circle. Can you talk to me a little bit about your interest in Renoir, specifically. Among all of the Impressionists, what about Renoir was particularly appealing to you, as a child?

PDR: As a child?

EG: Yes.

PDR: [laughs] Well, you know, I've always been -- had the luck of living with paintings by Impressionists around me. And I think that Renoir -- you can see its -- what we call *joie de vivre*. It's happy with life and it's always [pauses] --

EG: I have another question that I'd love to ask. When you would visit your grandfather's apartment and look at the art collection that he had, were there any works that particularly impressed you? What was it like to be amongst those paintings?

PDR: First thing, I know that I am old but my great-grandfather died 99 years ago, and so I never had the opportunity of visiting his apartment. [laughs] And my grandfather died before my birth, and so -- the apartment that I saw was my father's and all the other members of the family. And of course, there were paintings by Renoir and the other Impressionists there, and I've been always -- for me, it was normal to live with Impressionist paintings on the wall.

EG: Your family, of course, has an amazing archive that documents the history of Impressionist art and the artists who worked with the Durand-Ruel Gallery. Could you talk about where the archive is stored and how the archive has been maintained over the last century?

PDR: Well, the Durand-Ruel Gallery -- Durand was active as a gallery until 1975. In 1975, my father retired, but continued

his work as an expert and kept the premises of the gallery, except for the showrooms that were no longer necessary. And we still have the archives in the predecessor of the gallery, the former gallery, I would say. So, it's easy for us to work with them.

EG: So, the gallery ceased functioning as a selling gallery in 1975, right? And it became the archive, and its primary purpose is to maintain the archive. Is that correct?

PDR: That's our purpose.

EG: And is the archive open to the public? How do people access the archive?

PDR: No, they are not open to the public. We're not organized for that. It would be too difficult. The archives, it's quite a number of documents of different kinds. There are stockbooks, accounting books, catalogues, letters, bills. Many, many other types of documents. We have now part of it that is digitized and can be accessed. But no, to have information from the archives, you have to ask us. And we try to answer as well as we can. And I will say that we have questions nearly every day.

EG: Who is contacting you? Is it mostly art historians? Is it the art market?

PDR: I would say it's mostly -- it's auction houses and art historians. Museums, of course, museums. And art historians.

EG: Do you have particular strengths in your archives? For example, is Renoir a dominant component of the archival material?

PDR: Uh, the Impressionist painters is certainly -- with Renoir that we have the greatest number of documents.

EG: And so, this is the reason why your archives are so important for the work on the catalogue raisonné.

PDR: Of course, yes.

EG: And how long have you been working on the catalogue raisonné with the Renoir Committee?

PDR: I think Guy Wildenstein asked me to join the committee, I think it was in 2002. In fact, just tell -- my personal life was not in art. It was in banking. And I mean, I retired from banking in 1999, and then, I took charge of the archives.

EG: So, did you study art history in school?

PDR: No, no. I studied -- [laughs] I studied engineering. [laughter] And I worked in banking. But, you know, I've always lived among art, and read everything that was interesting. So, a fairly good knowledge of Impressionists.

EG: The Galerie Durand-Ruel Archives are maintained by other members of your family, as well as yourself. Can you tell us a bit about who is working at the Durand-Ruel archive?

PDR: My niece, Flavie Durand-Ruel, she's my brother's daughter, who's working full-time at the archive. And then, I have occasional help from my daughter, Claire, who's working in art. But for her own account, but she is of course involved in what happens in the gallery.

EG: Mm-hm. And also, your sister Caroline, is that correct?

PDR: My sister Caroline, yes, of course. She's working, and she's just publishing now the digital catalogue raisonné of the painter Maxime Maufra. And -- a very important and interesting document.

EG: So, the Maufra catalogue raisonné will be digital. That's interesting. Has your family been interested in other digital projects with the Durand-Ruel archive?

PDR: No, we are not involved in other projects.

EG: How do you feel about the Renoir catalogue raisonné being a digital publication?

PDR: Well, [sighs] of course, there are pro and cons about digital and printed -- of course, a printed catalogue is much more nicer to consult, to look at. But of course, it's very expensive. And the great advantage of a digital catalogue is that it can be updated continuously.

EG: That's right, that's right. And with the Renoir catalogue raisonné of still lives, can you tell us approximately how many still lives will be included?

PDR: Well, I think at present, about seven hundred still lives. And a great number of them went through Durand-Ruel.

EG: And you've seen many of these at the committee as well.

PDR: Of course. I think we're all -- I've been attending, I think, all the meetings of the committee since I remember. And so, I've seen all the paintings that went -- were shown at the committee. Of course, in the catalogue, there will be paintings that will never be seen by the committee, because they are in museums and -- but of course, well, that doesn't mean that I have not seen them.

EG: Right, of course.

PDR: I think that paintings that have not been seen by the committee and that will be in the catalogue have all the -- nothing, nobody can object to their presence in the catalogue.

EG: Mm-hm. So, can you tell me about your family's involvement with the other Impressionists? I know that Claire works on Pissarro. Have other members in your family found their niche with another artist? You have Caroline with Maufra, Claire with Pissarro, you with Renoir. Is there anyone else in your family who's working on an Impressionist artist?

PDR: Well, it doesn't mean that we are working only -- each one on one artist. The questions we have to receive at the archives, about all the artists and other artists that Paul Durand-Ruel followed, because -- let's say, before the Impressionists, he was a major factor in the emergence of the Barbizon School of artists. So, I would say, certainly, I know more about Renoir

than about the other Impressionist painters, but I still [laughs] have a -- I think a fairly good knowledge of the other painters.

EG: In the Durand-Ruel archives, you mentioned that it's comprised of stockbooks and correspondence, et cetera. Are there other documents in this archive that would be surprising to us? For example, I know we found a passport of an artist in the Wildenstein Institute archives. Are there any such interesting documents in the Durand-Ruel archive that relate to Renoir?

PDR: Well -- I'm sorry, what did you find in the Wildenstein Archives?

EG: A passport. A passport, yes.

PDR: No, I don't think we have -- I think we have only the documents that directly relate to the artist. Well, I will mention something that -- very interesting in our archives. So, Durand-Ruel had the gallery in Paris, of course, until 1975. But they had the gallery in New York between 1897 and 1950. And there was always a Durand-Ruel in Paris and one in New York. For six months, and then they shifted one to the other. And nearly every day, they wrote letters, explaining what was happening. And these letters are an extraordinary mine of information about what was happening in the art market during this period.

EG: Well, I know that you were involved in the exhibition of Durand-Ruel as the foremost dealer of the Impressionists, the exhibition that was held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art several years ago. Have there been other opportunities where you've spoken about Durand-Ruel? Have there been other

exhibitions that have specifically focused on Durand-Ruel as an important dealer?

PDR: Uh, no. I don't think there -- well, there have been several exhibitions, but I don't think since that last exhibition there have been others. But there is one exhibition that will open this year, if [laughs] the health situation doesn't get worse. It will open in the summer about the painters that Paul Durand-Ruel defended after the Impressionists, like Gustave Loiseau or Moret or Maufra or Albert Andre or d'Espagnat. In English, and it will be held in a year, near Paris, during the second half of this year.

EG: Have you ever been interested in writing, and in writing about your family and about any of the artists that your family dealt with?

PDR: Well, I've written several short articles, but no, I'm not -- and of course, one of the first things that was involved when I became interested in the archives, it was to make a new publication of the memoirs of Paul Durand-Ruel. And it was published about ten years ago, with my niece, Flavie. And we made a very big amount of work from notes and comments and -- so, I think it's a very interesting document for the history of the Impressionists.

EG: Do you think that the work that Durand-Ruel did in the nineteenth century to promote the Impressionist artists is given enough credit today? Do you think that people realize the impact that Durand-Ruel had on these artists? Who are of course -- they're famous in their own right, but do you feel that people could know a little bit more about Durand-Ruel as a --

PDR: Well, I think that -- I would say, when I'm in the United States, I would say that the name Durand-Ruel seems to be much better known than in France. I think people now know that Durand-Ruel was acting with the Impressionists. I think that what's not yet quite well-known is that it was by far the first dealer who was involved with them.

EG: Well, Durand-Ruel was certainly responsible for bringing Impressionism to the United States.

PDR: Yes.

EG: Some of the first exhibitions of Monet, for example, were in the United States. And I know that the name Durand-Ruel, among the early American collectors, is very important. Do you have a lot of American art historians consulting your archives about American collectors from the early part of the twentieth century?

PDR: Oh yes, certainly. I would say that even in the last month, we had very interesting questions about an American art collector -- so, quite frequently.

EG: Another important part of archival research for art historians, of course, is provenance during the Second World War. And I know that you're consulted quite frequently about the whereabouts of paintings during the Second World War. Could you talk a bit about the gallery's activity during the war, and also its relationship with the New York branch? Did they send paintings to New York for safekeeping during the war? What was happening during that period?

PDR: Well, during that period, of course, because of the -- in the late 1930s, when the international situation became difficult, Durand-Ruel sent many of its paintings to the United States. It seemed it would be safer there. During the war and the German occupation, my father and my uncle were in charge of the gallery. Took a very low profile, and didn't show Impressionist paintings, only paintings by the later artists. And [pauses] they tried to -- to help some of the Jewish clients, who had collections that were threatened. So, they never had problems with the German authorities, but they were not at all involved, I would say, in the artistic life during this period. They kept a very low profile.

EG: So, the paintings were sent to the United States for safekeeping, and then did they return, back to Paris? Or were they sold in the United States?

PDR: Of course, some were sold and some were brought back.

EG: And what -- I know you talked about the gallery in New York. Are the archives of the gallery in New York with you now in Paris?

PDR: Yes, they are.

EG: And who was running the gallery in New York? Was it a member of your family?

PDR: Well, as I told you, there was always -- well, Paul Durand-Ruel had two sons. He had three sons and one died rather young. His two sons, Joseph and Georges, and they spent each one

six months in Paris, six months in New York. And then, Georges had no children, but Joseph had two sons, Pierre and Charles. Charles was my father. And so, Pierre and Charles were also each one six months in New York, six months in Paris. So there was always in New York a Durand-Ruel in each of the galleries. During the war, of course, they were not -- there was an American director for the gallery.

EG: I see. And you lived in New York for a brief time, is that correct?

PDR: Excuse me?

EG: You lived in New York, is that right?

PDR: Not during the war.

EG: No, no, of course not.

PDR: Yes, I lived in New York later, when I was a banker.

EG: Is there anything else that we haven't discussed that you'd like to speak about?

PDR: No, but I'm ready to answer other questions if you have.

PASCAL PERRIN: Did you ask for the -- same question about the choice of painter and paintings for Paul Louis? Considering your tastes in art?

EG: Yes, certainly, we can talk about that. Are you interested in -- in addition to Renoir, who are some of the other artists that you're interested in?

PDR: Well, [laughs] obviously, I'm interested in all the Impressionists. [laughs] And well, I'm following artistic life. You know, I have some painters that I like, some that I don't.

EG: Are there artists that you think are working today that are inspired by the Impressionists? Are there particular contemporary artists that you see very strong connections to Impressionist painting?

PDR: Not really. I think that -- I would say that present taste in art is for large and flashy works. [laughter] And Impressionists, I think it's much more subtle for the present era.

EG: Well, certainly Monet did some large and flashy works later in his life. [laughter] Among all of the Impressionists, who do you think -- who is your favorite? Is it Renoir, since you're working on the committee?

PDR: No, uh -- [laughter] Renoir has something that maybe the others don't have -- he was also a painter of persons, and I think that among -- to paint human flesh, I think Renoir is the best that there ever was. Maybe before, you know, there was Titian. But I think that -- well not [unclear], Renoir was the other. But of course, and I think he was a very great landscape painter also, especially during the Impressionist period in the 1880s.

EG: When you are at the committees and you're seeing Renoir pictures, oftentimes, you're presented with works that are not by Renoir, but people think they are by Renoir. Can you talk a bit about what it is in Renoir's paintings that cannot be imitated? Is it the rendering of the flesh? Is it the quality of the light? What is it that makes a Renoir a Renoir, that people who are trying to fake his work aren't able to do?

PDR: Well, first I would say something. I think Renoir is a genius at painting, but not all paintings by Renoir are necessarily good. I think he did some very bad paintings; not all, I think Monet also did some very bad paintings. Painters like Pissarro or Sisley who are much more regular. But very difficult to -- when I look at the painting that it's not by Renoir, I think there's something -- well, of course, many of them, anybody could say at the first glance that it's not a Renoir. But some of them, it's more difficult. But you look at them and something appears that says it's not; it's not real; that's not it.

EG: So, Sophie talked a bit about how Renoir burned many of his drawings. That was very surprising. Some of the works that you're seeing today, do you feel that Renoir maybe wouldn't have liked the fact that they're being sold on the market, because maybe he didn't intend for them to be representative of his oeuvre?

PDR: I'm sorry, [laughs] I cannot answer that. I'm not Renoir. [laughter] But I think -- well, he painted them. So maybe -- well, I will tell you something. I think it would have been good for Renoir; not for the Renoir family. [laughs] I think it would

have been good for Renoir if his studio had burned after his death. [laughter]

EG: Well, so maybe now is a good time when we can invite Sophie back on camera. Let me thank Paul Louis. Paul Louis, thank you very much for participating in this interview.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

EG: I'd like to pick up on this theme of Renoir's studio burning to the ground. [laughs] So, Sophie, how do you feel about that?

SOPHIE RENOIR: Well, I have to say that I kind of agree with -- yeah. I have to admit, it's very true. It's very true. But I wanted to say that without Durand-Ruel, my great-grandfather and none of those Impressionist artists would have been famous and would have been known, and even would have -- might be -- couldn't have existed the way we know them now. Because this guy was really an art-lover, and he helped them so much. For me, he was the greatest *marchand d'art* [art dealer] that ever has been, you know. Because he felt immediately the talent and the -- what they were going to become. Very important person, really, for them.

EG: When did the both of you meet? Can you talk about that? When did you meet each other?

SR: Uh, we met in the committee.

PDR: Yes.

SR: [laughter] We met in the committee. Thank you very much, again. [laughter] Thank you again. Yeah, thank you, Paul. You know, Paul Louis is a wonderful person when you work with him. Because he knows and he has this eye and immediately, every time we see a new painting --

PDR: She's too nice. [laughter]

SR: No, no, it's true. I mean, his experience, you know, and his eye. Every time when I don't know and I have a doubt, I always look at him and wait for his advice.

EG: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

SR: Very much, because he knows.

EG: So, do you think that the both of you have a mission to champion the legacies of your -- of your great-great-grandfathers? Do you feel that this is something that is important to carry on into the future? Certainly, you're doing this on the committee, but do you find that you need to speak about the legacy and the importance of your ancestors because this is something that is being threatened today? There's so much information out there; there's a lot of information about contemporary artists. Do you feel that it is something that is urgent for you to continue to promote the legacies of these important people in history, or do you think that they'll live on, you know, without this championing and without this promotion?

PDR: Well, I think it is our duty to work for the better knowledge and the better appreciation of the work of this master.

SR: Yeah, I agree. Same. [laughter] Yeah, no, that's good, huh? We get along together very well. [laughs] We don't fight, nothing.

PDR: Not yet. [laughter]

EG: So, maybe you can tell me a bit about your experience on the committee. What has been -- some of the most surprising things that you've seen? Certainly, you've seen amazing work, but have you seen anything that has been shocking to you?

SR: Shocking in what way?

EG: Well, I guess in any way. Either shocking in the fact that you never thought that Renoir could paint in such a manner, or shocking in the sense that you're seeing something that's being presented to you as a Renoir and it's so obviously not, yet people really want to believe that it is. I mean, what have -- have there been moments where you're just like, Oh my gosh, this is incredible, both good and bad?

SR: Yeah, we did have that. Once or twice. It happens that they brought us a painting, like, remember this one? Huge like this, a woman, absolutely hideous. Horrifying. And you know, everybody started to laugh, and that was it. Because there's no way it could have been a Renoir. And those poor persons, they were insisting, saying, "No, but I'm sure it is a Renoir, I'm sure." And they say, "Well, they can't be sure." But we are not. We are

definitely not -- we are positive that it's not. No, no, we had a lot of fun with this one. But I know some -- it's like, twice a year, we have the chance to see beauties.

PDR: Yes.

SR: *Deux ou trois fois par an* [Two or three times a year].

PDR: Well, maybe --

SR: More? Four times?

PDR: Four times a year.

SR: Four times. That's -- four times. Four times a year, we see beautiful, beautiful paintings.

EG: Can you think of any one in particular over the last few years that has really just blown you away? You've thought, Oh my gosh, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to see this work that's been hidden away for many, many years. Have there been any like that?

SR: *Alors là moi je dirais* -- [So here I would say]

PDR: Oh --

SR: Two committees --

PDR: The last committee, there were two landscapes --

SR: Yes.

PDR: -- which were --

SR: Beautiful.

PDR: -- absolutely extraordinary.

SR: Yeah. Yes. But it's always like, when you see those paintings so close, you know, you can turn them, see the back of the frame. And we're so lucky, you know. It's already a marvelous thing, but when we have this kind of landscape, we can watch them from close and go on the side and moving from left to right, up to down, to see it in details. And you're right, it was like, the last one. And we have two portraits of family. Two portraits, two family portraits also. Like three committees back.

EG: So, if you have -- looking at these works in person, I'm sure you also see works by Renoir that have been horribly restored. Either there's a lot of varnish on them or the canvas has been lined and it's flattened -- is there something that you would like to tell collectors of Renoir's work not to do? For example, don't exhibit it in a velvet frame. Something like that. You know, you see a lot of really poor choices. So, what are some of the things you'd like to tell these collectors?

PDR: Well, I think collectors should avoid trying to clean the paintings too much. Many Impressionist paintings, not only by Renoir, have been damaged by excessive --

SR: Bleach.

PDR: -- cleaning.

SR: Yeah, sometimes the frame is -- sometimes people think that to secure a painting, the last time, you remember, we had this awful one which -- the painting was nice, I mean, but the frame and behind, it was like a safe. It was with woods and metal, and it was absolutely ugly, and the painting was so tense that it almost was like [makes clashing sound]. We were afraid, you know, that it would be damaged. I would ask the collectors to get advice from professionals, and especially, from us. I mean, us, the committee, or the Institute. Because you have a masterpiece in your hands, sometimes. Sometimes it's just a pretty painting. And there's no way you can ruin it. I mean, that's a sin.

PDR: Well, usually, we see the painting at the committee without the frame. Only sometimes, what we have that -- a couple of problems, somebody who has a very small painting by Renoir, but so that it can be shown in a huge frame like that. [laughter]

SR: Yeah, that's funny.

EG: Can I ask -- it's important to see the committees outside of the frame, too, because you're looking for the Durand-Ruel numbers on the backs of some of these pictures, and labels.

PDR: Yes, yes.

SR: Labels of all kinds and all the travel they've done, you know, everywhere they've been exposed. They have been shown.

PDR: Yes, well, it's always interesting to see the labels, the original labels, and the frame. But you know, a very important museum in the United States -- I will not name it -- but some years ago, they changed all the stretchers of the paintings and destroyed [pauses] the old stretchers with the labels and descriptions.

SR: That's awful.

EG: So, collectors should not be re-stretching their canvasses and throwing away their stretchers.

SR: No, no. It's like an old book, you know. And if you throw away the cover, even if it's -- when it's very old. It's very interesting, but if you change and make it new, look like old, it's awful, and it's the same. You know, and the painting is very interesting on the painting, but on the back, it's very interesting also.

PDR: But we also have several cases of original stretchers that have been used on other paintings.

EG: Right. Hm.

SR: It's like a scientific -- scientific research. You know, it's always -- and you have a group of people here who make all the work before we see the paintings. And it's so full of information, it's wonderful. You know, you have pages and pages of information and all the -- where the painting was, to whom it was, where it has -- the exhibition where, whom bought it, sold it, bought it, sold it, very interesting. We learn a lot, huh?

EG: Is there anything that you'd like me to -- well, you could also ask each other. Are there any topics that we haven't covered?

SR: No, I think we're fine.

PDR: Yes.

SR: No, we agree, yeah, most of the time, except when he says that Auguste didn't make every painting beautiful. But to be honest, I have to admit that he's right.

PDR: [laughs]

SR: I mean, it's true. You know, that's what's funny. What is funny in this committee, you have several persons that are descendants from people -- from this time. It's really -- I like that very much, because it's like a *passage de relais* [handover], how do you say that? You know, it's -- my great-grandfather, his great-grandfather, and others like this. And it's wonderful. I think from up there, if they see us, they must be pleased, because we take care of all of this, you know, together.

PDR: I think it's important.

SR: Yes, very.

EG: I know that at some committees in France, particularly the ones that are governed by the *droit moral*, will destroy a work if it's not by the artist, if it's presented to them and it turns out to be fake. We don't destroy works, but --

SR: No.

EG: No.

SR: No.

EG: What do you think should happen when you see a fake or you see a work that is not right and you keep on seeing it. What do you think?

PDR: I think we are -- well, maybe we would like it to disappear, but it is not our --

EG: Right.

PDR: -- not for us to do that.

EG: Right, right.

PDR: We do not include it in the catalogue. But we cannot go any further.

SR: But it's already a good thing. I mean, if it's not in the catalogue, it means something.

EG: Right.

SR: You know, it's a reference. The catalogue is made for that, I guess. I mean, it's obvious. If it's not in the catalogue, then -- it might be a problem. People will know.

EG: And that's one of the reasons it's important to have these catalogue raisonnés available, so people can see.

SR: Of course.

EG: There are a lot of catalogue raisonné projects that are ongoing and you don't see the catalogue raisonné, and people still wonder whether a work will be included or not. So, hopefully with the Renoir catalogue raisonné of still lives coming out later in the year, we'll solve that problem and people can see what's included and what is not included. And they'll have the opportunity to submit if a work isn't included, so that you both and the rest of the committee can have a look.

SR: I've heard that some -- some catalogues are not even right. Because sometimes, they forget some paintings or sometimes they make double, the same paintings with different titles. Which is a -- it happens. Mistakes happen.

EG: We're all human, that's right.

SR: Right.

PDR: Oh, yes. Oh yes. [laughter]

SR: He agrees.

EG: Alright, that's all the questions that I have for you both. So, thank you very much for participating in this oral history project.

SR: Thank you.

PDR: Thank you.

SR: Welcome.

PDR: We are very happy.

EG: Thank you. And thank you, Josie.

SR: Very happy and proud.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]