

Catalogues deluxe from the Galerie Georges Petit



NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
11 MAY - 26 AUGUST 2005



Catalogues de luxe from the Galerie Georges Petit

"Gommeux" (pretentious) and "très chic" were words Émile Zola used to characterize the art impresario Georges Petit, while the painter Jacques-Émile Blanche referred to his "crafty opportunism." Born in Paris in 1856, the son and grandson of art dealers, Petit expanded the family business on several fronts. His finest hour was probably in the 1880s, when he cultivated the Impressionists, rivalling the better-known dealer Durand-Ruel and taking advantage of the loosened grip of the official Salon on exhibiting art in Paris. His celebrated pairing of Monet and Rodin in an 1889 exhibition assisted the careers of both artists, even if the event was not without tensions. Rodin was apparently heard to exclaim: "I don't give a damn about Monet, I don't give a damn about anyone, I only care about myself!" The catalogue is a modest affair, belying its art-historical significance (14). In the 1890s there were retrospectives of Pissarro, Renoir, and Sisley, but Petit remained commercially eclectic. Conservative artists such as Meissonier (10) or Rosa Bonheur – whose studio sale catalogue (5, 6) is printed in both French and English – sold handsomely to visiting Americans; according to Zola, Petit would lie in wait for them to cross the Atlantic every May. Zola was not always polite about Petit's stock, which Jacques-Émile Blanche memorably described as "vague, cosmopolitan Whistlerism, toned-down Realism, and Impressionism." He might have added Symbolism to the list: Gustave Moreau was featured at the Galerie Georges Petit in 1906.

In addition to art dealing, Petit made his elegant showroom in the rue de Sèze (11) the setting for elaborately staged auction sales, accompanied by lavishly illustrated catalogues. While his earlier catalogues used photographs (10) or etchings (1) for the purpose of illustration, in 1881 Petit added to the business a printing and publishing house to exploit the latest processes, for example photogravure (9). The publication of high-quality monochrome engravings after contemporary artists and some old masters became a sideline (3). Colour processes were adopted for exceptional catalogues such as the Beurdeley drawings (4), though an outside printer was used for one, a Canadian exhibition catalogue illustrated with colour half-tones (13). Doubtless the wealthy widow of the artist William Blair Bruce (b. Hamilton, Ontario, 1859, d. Sweden, 1906) subsidized the project. In these and other ways, Petit raised the production values of his catalogues to the level of rare books. For example, the Library's copy of the Doria sale catalogue (2) is number 439 of the limited edition of 1200 copies on laid paper; other copies even carry the printed name of a specific collector, who might thus be flattered into paying attention to the sale. (In New York, Thomas Kirby of the American Art Galleries was learning to play a similar game.) After 1907, the running of the Galerie Georges Petit became less extravagant, though one of the most notable sales ever to take place there was the 1918 Degas studio sale (12). When Georges Petit died in 1921, his collection was auctioned by the Gallery. The sale was crowded by buyers expecting to snap up treasures from the Barbizon school, with which the business had been associated in Petit's youth. Instead, the gems were Impressionist, notably one of Monet's 1903 series of views of the Thames in London and several Sisleys (8).

Most of Petit's catalogues follow a standard design, with occasional variations. Catalogues of sales of 18th-century art, which enjoyed a great vogue at the end of the 19th century, might have a false title page using an engraved design recycled from a catalogue of the 18th century, when Parisian art auction catalogues reached a peak of refinement: the 1899 Mühlbacher catalogue is one example, using a 1757 decorative border originally designed by the engraver Pierre-Philippe Choffard (1730–1809) (7). Aside from their aesthetic and historical appeal, these catalogues are collected for their importance in provenance research. For example, lot 223 in Georges Petit's auction catalogue of the collection of Baron Achille Seillière in May 1890 (15), a late 15th-century polychrome sculpture of the Virgin and Child, is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, ascribed to the Italian "Master of the Marble Madonnas."

Jonathan Franklin

COVER: Colophon from *Catalogues des tableaux par Rosa Bonheur* (5)

OPPOSITE: Edmond Ramus (after Peter Paul Rubens), *Têtes de Nègres*. No. 30 in *Catalogue des tableaux anciens et modernes composant la collection de M. B. Narischkine*... (1)

Checklist

- 1 Catalogue des tableaux anciens et modernes composant la collection de M. B. Narischkine
Date of sale: 5 April 1883
Galerie Georges Petit, 1883
Text by L. Roger-Milès
- 2 Collection de M. le comte Armand Doria. Catalogue de tableaux modernes.
Date of sale: 4-5 May 1899
Galerie Georges Petit, 1899
Text by L. Roger-Milès
- 3 Catalogue des publications de Georges Petit.
Galerie Georges Petit, 1898
- 4 Catalogue des dessins, aquarelles, gouaches des écoles française et anglaise du XVIII^e siècle . . . miniatures . . . composant la collection de M. A. Beurdeley
Date of sale: 13-15 March 1905
Galerie Georges Petit, 1905
- 5 Catalogues des tableaux par Rosa Bonheur.
Date of sale: 30 May-2 June 1900
Galerie Georges Petit, 1900
Text by L. Roger-Milès
- 6 Catalogue des aquarelles, dessins, gravures, par Rosa Bonheur, et des tableaux, aquarelles, bronzes, gravures composant la collection particulière de Rosa Bonheur.
Date of sale: 5-8 June 1900
Galerie Georges Petit, 1900
- 7 Catalogue des tableaux, dessins, gouaches, aquarelles, pastels de l'école française du XVIII^e siècle . . . miniatures . . . composant la collection de M. G. Mühlbacher.
Date of sale: 15-18 May 1899
Galerie Georges Petit, 1899
- 8 Catalogue des tableaux modernes, aquarelles, pastels, dessins . . . objets d'art & d'ameublement . . . sièges et meubles . . . composant la collection Georges Petit.
Date of sale: 4-5 March 1921
Galerie Georges Petit, 1921
- 9 Collection H. V.[ever]. Catalogue de tableaux modernes de premier ordre, pastels, aquarelles, dessins . . . sculptures.
Date of sale: 1-2 February 1897
Galerie Georges Petit, 1897
- 10 Exposition Meissonier.
Date of exhibition: 24 May-24 July 1884
Galerie Georges Petit, 1884
- 11 La nouvelle salle d'exposition de M. Georges Petit, 8 rue de Sèze.
Engraving by Yves & Barret
La vie parisienne, vol. 20, no. 8,
25 February 1882, p. 119
- 12 Catalogues des tableaux, pastels et dessins par Edgar Degas et provenant de son atelier.
Date of sale: 6-8 May 1918
Galerie Georges Petit, 1918
- 13 Exposition rétrospective de l'oeuvre de W. Blair Bruce.
Date of exhibition: 11-26 May 1907
Galerie Georges Petit, 1907
Text by Alphonse Siché
- 14 Claude Monet, A. Rodin.
Galerie Georges Petit, 1889
Texts by Octave Mirbeau and Gustave Geffroy
- 15 Catalogue des objets d'art de haute curiosité et de riche ameublement provenant de l'importante collection de feu M. le Baron Achille Seillière.
Galerie Georges Petit, 1890
Text by Jules Mannheim

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES EXHIBITION NO. 20



ISSN 1481-2061

© National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2005



National Gallery
of Canada

Musée des beaux-arts
du Canada

PRINTED IN CANADA

380 Sussex Drive, P.O. Box 427, Station A
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 9N4

Canada