

# VAN GOGH MONET DEGAS

## AND THEIR TIMES

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The Mellon Collection of French Art  
from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts





While its primary focus is on Impressionism, this exhibition contains examples of French art created throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, featuring styles ranging from Romanticism to Cubism. Among the highlights are works by seminal figures, including Edgar Degas, Eugène Delacroix, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, and Vincent van Gogh. But the exhibition is more than an overview of art-historical achievement: it celebrates the connoisseurship of one of the great collecting couples of the twentieth century, Paul and Rachel “Bunny” Lambert Mellon. In addition to acquiring canonical works by modern masters, the Mellons had an eye for their more intimate creations. Mr. Mellon wrote, “My own feeling is that size has nothing to do with the quality and importance of a work of art, just as a preliminary drawing or sketches in oil or pastel often have an immediacy and an emotional appeal far greater than the final canvas.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul Mellon was the son of industrialist, banker, and politician Andrew Mellon, himself a distinguished art collector who was instrumental in the creation of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 1937. Over the years, Paul Mellon donated more than a thousand works from his father’s collection and his own to the National Gallery. A graduate both of Yale College and the University of Cambridge in England, he had a keen interest in British art. In 1966, he established the Yale Center for British Art, to which he gave a vast trove of artworks and rare books. For her part, Bunny Mellon was both an art aficionado and a devoted Francophile. After their marriage, the Mellons began to acquire French artworks. While many were given or bequeathed to the National Gallery, the Mellons donated selections from the French collection to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, along with major gifts of British and American art.



Fig. 1

The exhibition begins with examples of French equestrian art, including horse portraits by Delacroix and Théodore Géricault and race scenes by Degas. Mr. Mellon loved horses, and the fact that Géricault had been to England to study the works of George Stubbs, one of Mr. Mellon’s favorite animal painters, may have played a part in his growing interest in French art (fig. 1).

The next section is devoted to human figures and portraits.

Here, paintings and sculptures by Gustave Courbet, Degas, Berthe Morisot, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and others demonstrate the collectors’ abiding interest in the personality of the



Fig. 2





Fig. 3

individual being portrayed. Mr. Mellon wrote: “Perhaps it is the sitter’s character, air of intelligence, or hint of humor. Would I *like* her or him?”<sup>2</sup> The people in these images are not in formal poses but relaxing in their homes, gardens, or social settings. In one of the most endearing of these works, *Young Woman Watering a Shrub* (fig. 2), Berthe Morisot shows her sister tending to plants at their family home. With its loose brushwork and light palette, the painting reinforces the casual pleasures of domestic life, while reminding viewers that for women artists of the time, home and family were still considered the most suitable subjects.

The next three galleries take us from portrayals of people to Impressionist and Post-Impressionist landscapes. In them, the play of natural light is captured in energetic brushstrokes, conveying the spontaneity of the artists’ responses. The landscapes begin with views of Paris, a city much loved and frequented over the years by Mr. and Mrs. Mellon, where the people in their social milieu shared their interests in horses, fashion, and art. Atmospheric paintings by Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Utrillo, and Van Gogh show an urban environment clothed in transient light and quiet beauty.

The Impressionist touch, immediate and variable, has a special capacity for depicting water, with its surface character ranging from smooth undulation to crashing energy. Paintings in the section titled “Water” include Gustave Caillebotte’s *Man Docking His Skiff* (fig. 3), which shows the artist’s skill in capturing dappled light and shadow and his preference for strong diagonals and unexpected cropping.

The largest grouping in the exhibition includes paintings of the French countryside. Claude Monet’s *Field of Poppies, Giverny* (fig. 4), with its band of dazzling red flowers separating foreground from background, epitomizes the flattened tapestry-like surface associated with classic



Fig. 4

Impressionism. Smaller paintings by Georges Seurat, Kees van Dongen (cover), and Van Gogh transform the rural landscape into orchestrations of atmosphere, energy, and pure light.

Placed among works that convey the Mellons' personal sensibility are examples of French Impressionism that were acquired by the Virginia Museum through dedicated funds or from other donors, including two landscapes by Monet, a portrait by Renoir, and Degas's famous *Little Dancer* (ca. 1880; cast after 1922). The inclusion of these works helps underscore the Mellons' strategy for determining the most suitable recipients for their gifts. In the words of Mr. Mellon, "I look at the museums, consider what they need, and then try to be fair."<sup>3</sup>

The importance of a collection given to an institution is measured not just in the number of works it contains, but their capacity to fill gaps in that museum's holdings. In this exhibition, the most stylistically distinct of the paintings given by the Mellons are in the final section, "The Transformation of the Ordinary." Here, large paintings by Henri Rousseau and Picasso move beyond the intimate sensibility that marks many of the works in the collection, instead indicating bold directions that modern art would take in the twentieth century. The most recent of these is *The Chinese Chest of Drawers* (fig. 5), a Cubist still life by Picasso that typifies the avant-garde's willingness to break down preconceived notions and stylistic boundaries in pursuit of new expressions.



Fig. 5

Notwithstanding this suggestion of an art-historical trajectory, the exhibition is perhaps most notable as a summary of the collectors' intuition, connoisseurship, and creativity. Above all, it communicates their deep pleasure at having lived with these works for many years and even greater delight in giving them to the people of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Mark Scala, chief curator

## Notes

1. Paul Mellon, *Reflections in a Silver Spoon: A Memoir*, with John Baskett (New York: Morrow, 1992), 271–72.
2. Mellon, *Reflections*, 294.
3. Quoted in Paul Richard, "Mellon Gives 93 Art Works," *Washington Post*, January 28, 1983.

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**COVER:** Kees van Dongen (Dutch, 1877–1968). *Haystacks*, ca. 1904–5. Oil on canvas, 19 5/8 x 25 1/2 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 2014.204. **Fig. 1:** Jean-Louis-André-Théodore Géricault (French, 1791–1824). *Mounted Jockey*, ca. 1821–22. Oil on canvas, 14 1/2 x 18 1/4 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 85.497. **Fig. 2:** Berthe Morisot (French, 1841–1895). *Young Woman Watering a Shrub*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 12 1/2 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 83.40. **Fig. 3:** Gustave Caillebotte (French, 1848–1894). *A Man Docking His Skiff*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36 1/2 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 83.13. **Fig. 4:** Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926). *Field of Poppies, Giverny*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 28 3/4 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 85.499. **Fig. 5:** Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *The Chinese Chest of Drawers*, 1953. Oil on panel, 58 x 45 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 83.43. © 2019 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. All images © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

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