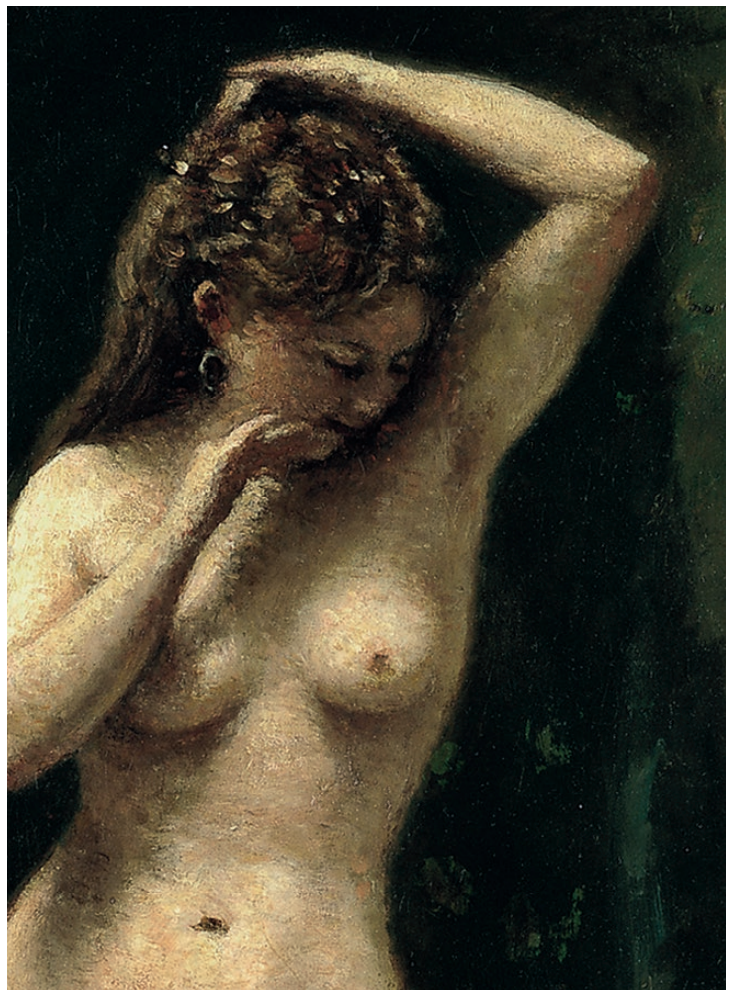


The Secret Life of Corot's *Diana bathing*

Clara Marcellán



Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
Diana bathing (The Fountain), about 1869–70
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
Diana bathing (The Fountain),
about 1869–70
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection
on loan at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid

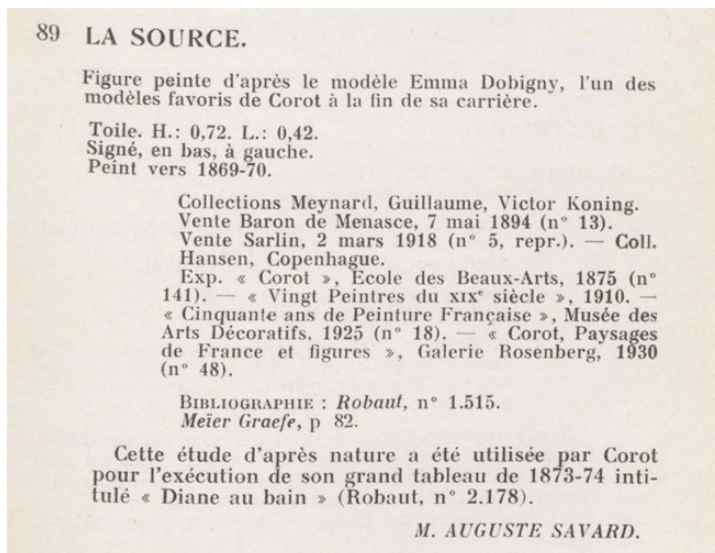
[\[+ info\]](#)



During the autumn of 2018, Camille Corot's *Diana bathing* [fig. 1] took part in the *Corot: Women* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. It is standard procedure for museums to request background information on the past owners, exhibition history and bibliography of the works they borrow for temporary shows. This information helps the curator and the people in charge of the project to fully document the ideas and argument presented. As on other occasions when we loan works, we took the opportunity to review and update the information on this painting, which is shown at the end of the article with the changes marked in red. The in-depth study carried out, which also contextualised

fig. 2

Entry in the Corot exhibition catalogue (L'Orangerie, 1936)



the picture with the many Corot paintings of the same genre brought together for the show, allowed the organisers and us to piece together and complete its exhibition history and the list of private collections to which it has belonged.¹

Until this recent study we only had record of two exhibitions in which *Diana bathing* had been included before 1999, the year it joined the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection: the posthumous Corot exhibition that took place in 1875, and the group show *Vingt Peintres du XIXe siècle* held at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris in 1910. Reading through the main monographs on the artist, and aided by digitisation and search engines, we discovered that the painting appeared in the catalogue of *Corot*, a monographic exhibition staged at L'Orangerie in Paris in 1936.² Not only was it listed among the works included in the show, but the catalogue entry [fig. 2] provided details of exhibitions and former owners that did not match the information we had. Unravelling the data, we have managed to reconstruct twenty years of exhibitions and changes of ownership that reflect the intense life of this painting between the final months of the First World War and the start of the Second.

¹

We are grateful to Mary Morton, head of French paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, who curated the *Corot: Women* exhibition, for exchanging information on this work.

²

Corot. Paris, Musée de l'Orangerie, 1936.

'Coll. Hansen, Copenhagen'

The first piece of information that caught our attention in the entry in the catalogue of the Corot exhibition of 1936 was this reference in the list of past owners of *La Source*, the other title by which the work is known: 'Coll. Hansen, Copenhagen'. Wilhelm Hansen (1868–1936) was a well-known Danish businessman and councillor of state whose collection is the origin of the Ordrupgaard Museum in Charlottenburg, near Copenhagen, which is famous for the nineteenth-century French paintings it houses.

The provenance listed Hansen between Louis Sarlin, whose collection was sold at auction in 1918, and Auguste Savard, the owner of *La Source* at the time of the 1936 exhibition. On consulting the catalogue of the sale of Sarlin's collection [fig. 3], we found that the entry accompanying the digitised file held by the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (INHA) included the following note:³

fig. 3
Illustration and entry for Corot's
Diana bathing in the catalogue
of the sale of the Sarlin collection,
1918



3
<https://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/collection/item/26895-redirection>
<http://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/idurl/1/26895> (accessed 29 November 2019)

fig. 4

Wilhelm Hansen in one of the rooms housing the collection of French paintings at Ordrupgaard at the opening of his gallery in 1918



The auction did not take place, the entire collection was sold to the Danish collector and businessman Wilhelm Hansen (1868–1936), founder of the Ordrupgaard Museum. The collector Herman Heilbuth (1861–1945) is also commonly cited as the buyer; Hansen, Heilbuth and the art dealers Viggo Winkel and Peter Magnussen teamed up to acquire complete collections from 1916 to 1918.

The next step was to contact the Ordrupgaard Museum to find out if this work had belonged to Hansen's collection at some point [fig. 4]. But there was no trace of *Diana bathing* in its archives.⁴ As the INHA's note indicated, at the start of 1918, Hansen, Herman Heilbuth and the Winkel & Magnussen gallery set up a consortium for buying and selling nineteenth-century French art. Hansen and Heilbuth kept some of the pieces for themselves; otherwise the works were stored and subsequently sold. The consortium in turn established the Foreningen Fransk Kunst (French Art Association), whose purpose was to acquire and disseminate nineteenth-century French art in the Scandinavian countries. As Rasmus Kjarboe has studied,⁵ it is highly likely that Heilbuth put up the money – three million francs – required to purchase the Sarlin collection. If *Diana bathing* was not mentioned in the archives of the Hansen collection, was the information in the catalogue

4

We are grateful to Sara Hatla Krogsgaard, curator at the Ordrupgaard Museum, for checking the institution's archives.

5

Rasmus Kjarboe, *Collecting the Modern*, unpublished doctoral thesis, 2016, p. 348.

of the Paris exhibition of 1936 erroneous? Could the work perhaps have been owned by Herman Heilbuth or the Winkel & Magnussen gallery? The fact that the familiar face who appeared in the press in connection with this and other purchases was Wilhelm Hansen could explain why he may have been identified as the owner.

Over the course of seven months, the consortium acquired prestigious collections of nineteenth-century French painting, such as that of Isidore Montaignac in December 1917⁶ (233 works) and that of Georges Viau in February 1918 (between 207 and 215 works). As with the Sarlin collection, they also purchased Max Flersheim's entire collection of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish paintings (80 works) in March 1918 and successfully bid for important portions of the collections of Alphonse Kahn, and for lots in the posthumous sale of Edgar Degas's collection (25 paintings, as well as prints) in March and May 1918. The substantial financial transactions these purchases entailed – 7 million francs – caused the value of the Danish crown to fall by 4 percent against the franc. But the impact they had on public opinion and the perception of French art was even more significant.

6

The sale was scheduled for 3–4 December 1917, but was called off on the day. See Le Wattman: 'Nos echos...' In *L'Intransigeant*, 4 December 1917, p. 2.

The culture war

Europe had been at war for more than three years when these major sales took place. The armistice marking the end of the First World War was not signed until 11 November 1918. Denmark, like other European countries such as Spain and Switzerland, had remained neutral throughout the war, growing wealthy and becoming a stage for the propagandistic struggle waged between the two sides. In 1917 Barcelona hosted an exhibition of more than 1,400 pieces of French art directly involving representatives of the annual Paris salons (except for that of the independents), which had ground to a halt during the war, and representatives of the French administration in Barcelona. Madrid followed suit in 1917 with one on French fashion, and in May 1918 hosted a show similar to that of Barcelona but on a smaller scale, featuring some 200 works. The proceeds from the sales at the Barcelona exhibition were considered satisfactory (78,798 francs). Compared to the price paid by Hansen and Heilbut for the Sarlin collection alone – three million francs – this sum almost pales into insignificance.

The French press reported on these operations, often from the perspective of national identity and cultural superiority, which were heightened by the war. Regarding the Montaignac sale, a note published in *L'Intransigeant*⁷ the day after it was cancelled referred to the dearth of patronage in France, which was not worthy of the great artists the country had produced, and to how Scandinavian gallery owners had purchased the entire collection for a million francs, under suspicion of acting as intermediaries for German collectors. The latter were accused of buying modern French painting before the war, which French academicians perceived as an attempt at ridiculing French art. Another article on the major sales, published in *Le Figaro* on 1 March 1918, described Wilhelm Hansen as 'a second Jacobsen'⁸ and a defender of modern French painting, recognising the importance of these purchases for the French economy: 'let's not discourage our true friends from loving us!'⁹

The art critic Arsène Alexandre¹⁰ also regarded foreign purchases positively. For one thing, they were beneficial to France because they brought money into the country. And for another, they enhanced the presence of French art on the international market – a cheaper and more effective means

⁷
Ibid., p. 2.

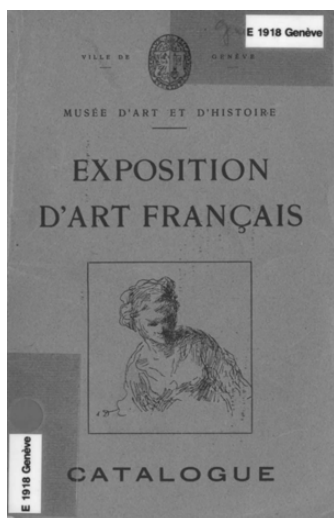
⁸
The collection of French sculpture owned by another Dane, Carl Jacobsen, is the origin of the Ny Glyptotek in Copenhagen. His son Helge Jacobsen developed an interest in modern French painting following his father's death in 1914, but, as Helge points out in a letter to Aster Moeller on 20 May 1918, it was impossible to compete with Heilbut and Hansen and he centred his efforts on completing the Ny Glyptotek's collection of ancient sculpture.

⁹
Valemont, 'Les grandes ventes. Un seconde Jacobsen'. In *Le Figaro*, 1 March 1918, p. 4.

¹⁰
Arsène Alexandre: 'Offensive et Défensive de nos Collections'. In *La Renaissance de l'art français et des industries de luxe*, April 1918, pp. 1-2.

fig. 5

Cover of the catalogue of the exhibition of French art in Geneva, 1918



of promotion than other propagandistic strategies. Ultimately, many of these collections lived on as museums of French art in foreign countries, following the known precedent of Jacobsen and the Glyptotek in Copenhagen. Alexandre did, however, develop the theory that the people who were buying were doing so for Germany, which was purportedly attempting to gain power on the art market in order to speculate after the war. This interpretation is nonetheless still positive from a patriotic viewpoint: French art proved to be far more valuable than its German counterpart.

As reported by Rasmus Kjarboe,¹¹ in 1918 Hansen and his consortium offered to lend a few of the works they had acquired not long before in Paris for the exhibition on French art staged by the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva [fig. 5] in collaboration with the French ministry of foreign affairs.¹² This enabled them to ship new additions to their collection reasonably safely across a continent that was still at war. It was there that Hansen probably first saw *Diana bathing*, which is referred to in the list of works on view as number 13, with the title *La Source*, though neither its dimensions nor its owner are specified.

Writing to his wife from Geneva in June 1918, Hansen proudly mentions that there are only four lenders to this exhibition of French art:

[...] the exhibition is so French-French that it is an undiluted joy to see it, not least since it actually consists only of masterpieces, and you see, it is not unpleasant to know (and to be told) that there are just four exhibitors: Musée de Luxembourg, Collection Hansen, Collection Heilbuth and Collection Beurdeley.¹³

11

See Kjarboe 2016, p. 367.

12

Exposition d'art Français, Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'histoire, May–June 1918.

13

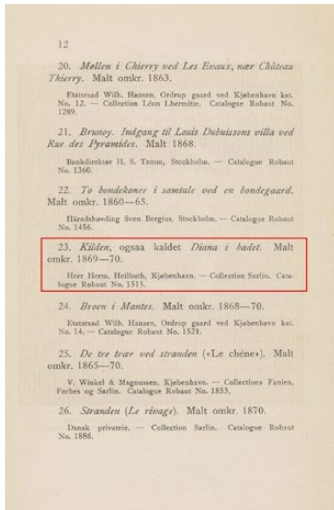
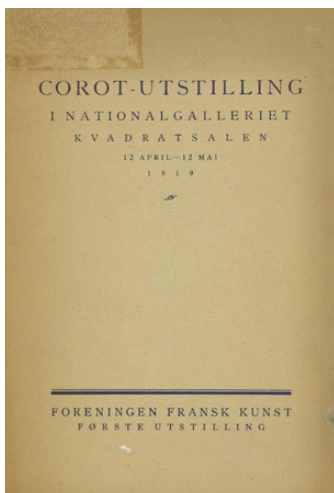
Cited from Kjarboe 2016, p. 369.

14

Corot. Copenhagen, Foreningen Fransk Kunst, 1918.

It is clear from this letter that the works acquired by the consortium had already been shared out between Hansen and his partner Herman Heilbuth, and that they were both acknowledged as independent lenders. After the show ended in Geneva in mid-June, *Diana bathing* arrived in Copenhagen in time to be included in a monographic exhibition on Corot in October organised by the Foreningen Fransk Kunst, which, as stated earlier, had been established by Wilhelm Hansen and Herman Heilbuth. The catalogue¹⁴ listed it as number 33 with

figs. 6 and 7
Title page and entry in the catalogue
of the Corot exhibition (Kristiania,
1919) and article on the show in
Nationen



the title *La Source*. Luckily for us, the name of the lender was also provided: 'H. Heilbut'. This is the first reference that expressly links *Diana bathing* to Heilbut's collection and leads us to doubt whether the work ever belonged to Wilhelm Hansen. The show (and this painting) continued their tour of northern Europe and we find it being featured in the version that the Foreningen Fransk Kunst staged at the Nationalgalleriet in Kristiania (now Oslo) in April and May, listed as number 23 and entitled *The Fountain*, also called *Diana bathing* [fig. 6], again with Heilbut as the lender. An article in the Norwegian newspaper *Nationen* stressed the loans made by Hansen and Heilbut, and the importance of Corot's paintings of figures, as appreciation for these works – represented in the exhibition – executed by an artist traditionally only hailed as a landscapist had grown in recent years [fig. 7]. Why did Heilbut's name not remain linked to the work if, as these catalogues prove, *Diana bathing* belonged to his collection?

Herman Heilbuth

fig. 8

Lars Peter Elfelt and Lars Peter Petersen:
Herman Heilbuth (1931)



Unlike Hansen, his partner Herman Heilbuth [fig. 8] did not leave a mark on art history. Who was this bold investor whose purchases rocked the French art market around 1918? The *Dansk Biografisk Lexikon* (Danish biographical dictionary) devotes only two sentences to his collecting side:¹⁵

Heilbuth was a member of the governing board of the Foreningen Fransk Kunst from 1918 to 1922. His interest in art led to his significant involvement in the purchase of a very valuable collection of painting, which he had to sell at a great loss after the Landmandsbank went bankrupt.

According to this book, the most salient aspects of his life are related to the various companies he ran in the financial and industrial sector and his commitment to radical left-wing Danish politics. With respect to his career, his relationship with the Landmandsbank – the largest bank in Scandinavia, with whose management and board he first became involved in 1914 – played a key role in his art collecting. His privileged status enabled him to take out the loans with which he paid for his much-talked-about acquisitions on the French art market.

¹⁵

Chr. R. Jansen, J. Hassing Jørgensen:
H. Heilbuth i Dansk Biografisk
Leksikon, 3rd ed., Gyldendal 1979–84.
Accessed 29 November 2019 at
[http://denstoredanske.dk/index.
php?sideId=291016](http://denstoredanske.dk/index.php?sideId=291016)

The Landmandsbank went bankrupt around 1922, partly as a result of funding risky operations during the First World War. Art was the best investment for people who had become rich during the war because it offered the highest capital gains. Heilbuth, as a member of the board of directors, was considered responsible, and as the holder of many loans that had to be paid back hastily, he found his personal fortune seriously depleted. As the abovementioned biography states, he sold his art collection in order to meet the payments – not in a public sale, however, but by directly offering works to gallery owners and collectors in the United States and Europe, and it is therefore difficult to reconstruct his collection today. A few of these pieces passed to the bank, as shown by the provenance of a drawing by Ingres in the Fogg Art Museum.¹⁶ Hansen faced the same difficulties as Heilbuth, since he was also on the bank's board of directors and had taken out loans. But whereas Hansen rebuilt his collection after the crisis¹⁷ and continued at the helm of the Foreningen Fransk Kunst,¹⁸ the French Art Association they had established together, Heilbuth never completely recovered and withdrew from cultural life. The outcome of his artistic adventure was very different to that envisaged in the will he made in 1922, which refers to his plans to establish a small museum housing his collection near Ordrupgaard, and to complement the visit to his partner's collection.¹⁹

16

<https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/299795?position=33>

17

Between 1923 and 1924 Hansen purchased ten works that had belonged to Heilbuth.

18

In 1928 he organised an exhibition of works from the Louvre and in 1930 another on Rodin, both in Copenhagen.

19

Kjaerboe 2016, p. 402.

20

Cinquante Ans de Peinture Française.
Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1925.

21

Exposition d'œuvres de Corot.
Paysages de France et Figures.
Paris, Paul Rosenberg, 1930

The secret life of *Diana bathing*

The information provided by the catalogue of the Corot exhibition (1936) suggested a new owner, Hansen, whom we subsequently ruled out after documenting that *Diana bathing* passed through the collection of Herman Heilbuth, whose name we have added to the list of owners. The other references of which we had no previous record were two exhibitions of 1925²⁰ and 1930,²¹ in which *Diana bathing* was also displayed. The catalogues of both shows refer to it as belonging to the collection of Auguste Savard (1861–1943?). There is therefore only a three-year period – between 1922, when Heilbuth was forced to sell his collection, and 1925, by which time the work was listed as the property of Auguste Savard – in which the painting's location is not known for certain.

Following the exhibition of 1936, we find no further references to the work until 1988, when it reappeared on the market, as part of the sale of Gisèle Rueff-Béghin's collection. The list of owners of the work published by Sotheby's in this connection featured, in chronological order, Meynard, M. Guillaume, Victor König, Baron de Menasce, Louis Sarlin, Boucheron and finally, from 1945 onwards, Gisèle Rueff-Béghin. At the 1999 sale, where Carmen Thyssen acquired *Diana bathing*, Savard's name was added to the list between Boucheron and Rueff-Béghin. We have now added Herman Heilbuth too, but the research into its provenance remains open. ●

Diana bathing's* record updated**Provenance**

- Meynard collection
- M. Guillaume, 1875
- Victor Köning, 1890
- Baron de Ménasce, 1894
- Sale of the collection of Baron de Ménasce. Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 7 May 1894, lot 13
- Louis Sarlin, 1903
- Posthumous sale of the *Collection Louis Sarlin*, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 2 March 1918, lot 5
- Herman Heilbuth, 1918
- Boucheron?
- Auguste Savard, Paris, by 1925
- Gisèle Rueff-Béghin, from 1945
- *Impressionist and Modern Paintings and Drawings From the Collection of the Late Gisèle Rueff-Béghin*. Sotheby's, London, 29 November 1988, lot 3
- Private collection
- *19th Century European Paintings, including The Italian Sale*, Sotheby's, London, 1 December 1999, lot 101
- Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection on loan to the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Exhibitions

- 1875
Corot, Paris, Ecole des Beaux-Arts, n. 141. (as: 'Jeune fille au bord de l'eau'; owner: 'M. Guillaume').
- 1909
Salon d'Automne, Exposition Rétrospective Les 'Figures' de Corot. Paris, Grand Palais, no. 18
- 1910
Vingt Peintres du XIXe siècle, Paris, Galerie Georges Petit.
- 1918
Exposition d'art français. Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire, no. 13 ?
- 1918
Corot, Copenhagen (Foreningen Fransk Kunst), no. 33 (owner 'Hr. Herm. Heilbuth')
- 1919
Corot, Kristiania (Oslo), Nasjonalgalleriet, no. 23 (owner 'Herr Herm. Heilbuth')
- 1925
Cinquante Ans de Peinture Française. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, no. 18 (owner 'M. Savard')
- 1930
Exposition d'œuvres de Corot. Paysages de France et Figures. Paris, Paul Rosenberg, no. 48 (owner 'M. A. Savard')
- 1936
Corot. Paris, Musée de l'Orangerie, n. 89 (owner 'M. Auguste Savard')
- 2000
De Corot a Monet. Los orígenes de la pintura moderna en la Colección Carmen Thyssen Bornemisza, Valencia, Museo del Siglo XIX, p. 16, plate p.17.

*In red, information added following the study