

Introduction

In the short-lived supplement “Feuilles volantes,” published in 1927–28 by the recently founded Parisian avant-garde journal *Cahiers d’art*, its editor, the art critic Christian Zervos, and his collaborator, Tériade (born Efstratios Eleftheriadis), both Greek in origin, interviewed a significant number of modern-art dealers, drawing favorable portraits of them and offering descriptions of their activities and cultural endeavors. The interviewees were Etienne Bignou, Alfred Flechtheim, Paul Guillaume, Jos Hessel, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Léonce Rosenberg, Paul Rosenberg, and Berthe Weill. Zervos or Tériade in turn presented these dealers as modern, cultivated bourgeois entrepreneurs and emphasized their role in scouting artistic talents and directing the public’s taste.¹ Supporting yet-to-be-appreciated *art vivant* (art by living artists) was a mission that Léonce Rosenberg (fig. 1) pursued with distinctive tenacity through L’Effort Moderne, a gallery and publishing house founded in 1918 and located in Paris on rue de la Baume. “A man of high performance, he has always preferred struggle to easy success, and one could even say that in the art trade he is only interested in the hardest defense,” Tériade notes.² While some of the other interviewed dealers, most notably his younger brother Paul Rosenberg, acknowledged that they saw themselves primarily as businessmen whose role was to ensure that artistic appreciation would translate into sizeable financial gain, Léonce claimed that his choices were based on aesthetic criteria and were moved by the sense of achievement he felt in bringing recognition and critical acclaim to artists who were still not discovered.

Describing the gallery as the unexpected and idiosyncratic combination of a “provincial-looking” exhibition space, “the most modern abstraction” it



Fig. 1 Léonce Rosenberg.
Photograph from “Feuilles
volantes,” *Cahiers d’art*,
supplement no. 6 (1927).
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.

showcased, and its quiet street in the heart of Paris’s eighth arrondissement, Tériade goes on to offer a glimpse of Rosenberg as the prototype of the modern man—exuding “sportiness, activeness, and faith in the machine”—all demonstrations of male prowess. Tériade effectively captures Rosenberg’s nervousness and contradiction, crucial aspects of his character, and sees his participation in the art trade as an outlet for his excess energy. Not named until later in the interview is the ultimate challenge that Rosenberg took on: the promotion of Cubism, a kind of art whose triumph became the goal of his adventure with contemporary art, started during the First World War, when he shouldered “the destiny of the entire Cubist movement” and conceived *L’Effort Moderne*—preserving his anonymity in its name (unlike how most of the other dealers operated), in line with the collective aspirations he had for his venture.³

Rosenberg’s *L’Effort Moderne*, whose militaristic ethos was directly born out of the experience of the Great War, imbricated political ideology with the art business and stood out as the first attempt to create a movement from a

rather heterogeneous group of artists. Indeed, Rosenberg's role in the history of Cubism began when, after the outbreak of the war—his interest in *art vivant* having grown in the period leading up to the war—he seized the opportunity offered by the forced exile of his closest competitor, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. As a German citizen, Kahnweiler was declared an enemy alien, his gallery and collection sequestered by the French state and subsequently sold at auction in 1921–23. Rosenberg tried to fill the resulting gap in the fledgling market for modernist art by organizing an impressive series of monthly solo exhibitions, from November 1918 to June 1919, devoted to the work of the leading Cubist artists: Henri Laurens, Jean Metzinger, Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Gino Severini, and Pablo Picasso, anticipated in March 1918 by a solo show of Auguste Herbin. Buying virtually anything that could be labeled “Cubist” at a moment when many artists were starting to shift toward figuration in the context of the postwar “return to order,” he proposed a vision of the Cubist movement radically distinct from Kahnweiler's.

In this book I seek to show how Rosenberg extended the definitional parameters of “Cubism,” making it a flexible conceptual tool, a sort of umbrella term to describe what he saw as the most promising expressions of a kind of contemporary artistic research in which artists like Joseph Csáky, Herbin, Metzinger, Diego Rivera, Severini, and Georges Valmier were treated equally to Picasso or Braque. This open-ended definition of “Cubism” on the one hand risked making it too generic to offer an effective interpretive framework, but on the other it allowed him to adapt it easily to a rapidly evolving artistic landscape, the striking stylistic fluctuations many of these artists went through during the late 1910s and the 1920s.⁴ This tension, which mirrors Rosenberg's own struggle to understand *art vivant*, is palpable in the important illustrated periodical he published between 1924 and 1927, the *Bulletin de l'Effort moderne*, which avoided a clear editorial line despite being conceived as the mouthpiece of his gallery.

Many crucial threads that define the history of interwar modernism—including the development of artists' careers and competing avant-garde movements, and the exponential growth of the art market and international networks of artistic and commercial exchange—come together around L'Effort Moderne in unexpected and sometimes incoherent or paradoxical ways, complicating accepted narratives. Indeed, the role of the market and dealers in establishing canons is still not acknowledged and discussed enough. By analyzing Rosenberg's contributions to the history of art, this book reflects on the constructed, artificial nature of artistic movements and of the interpretive paradigms adopted by subsequent historiography. It proposes that the movements can be understood

only by constantly shifting between the careers of individual artists and the bigger picture. Far from being a purely scholarly construction, the canon that still dominates the historiography of Cubism substantially reflects the endeavors of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, whose selective promotion of Picasso and Braque through his gallery since the years before the First World War and with influential publications afterward, such as his groundbreaking *Rise of Cubism* (*Der Weg zum Kubismus*, 1920), paved the way for a severe reduction in the scope of Cubism and widespread adoption of the “analytic-synthetic” theoretical framework.⁵ Indeed, by 1913 Kahnweiler had signed exclusive contracts with Braque, Picasso, Gris, and Léger, among others, but never intended to promote Cubism as a whole. Despite the remarkably different methodologies scholars have adopted since then, histories of Cubism have tended to focus on the very same narrow canon of artists and agents in which the “essential” Cubists are identified with the artists supported by Kahnweiler, while the other members of the Cubist group at large are seen as derivative and dismissively labeled as “salon” Cubists.⁶ Emphasizing how deep Kahnweiler’s influence has been, this latter definition exists only because his contracts forbade his artists to submit their work to public exhibitions.

My initial interest in Rosenberg developed not only out of a desire to unravel the definition and chronological framework of Cubism as an avant-garde movement but also from an awareness of a general lack of scholarly recognition of Rosenberg’s role in the history of art. The foundational and still essential scholarship of Christian Derouet, which benefited initially from its author’s direct knowledge of the dealer’s family and privileged access to L’Effort Moderne’s archive, has concentrated on isolated episodes without integrating these into a coherent narrative or exploring the artists’ perspectives as well as the dealer’s.⁷ Launched in the midst of the war—a period, for obvious and justifiable reasons, treated as something detached from any linear narrative of modern art for its exceptional and tragic character⁸—L’Effort Moderne’s activities stretched beyond the late 1910s, covering the entire following decade. Rosenberg’s case shows how in fact the war did not bring artistic life to a complete halt and how the dealer could ensure, with his economic and intellectual support, a certain degree of continuity. The artists’ evolution toward the figurative, better known as the return to order, can be seen, in a sense, as progress rather than an about-face. Rosenberg’s Cubism ended up blending abstraction and figuration somewhat awkwardly, in a way that, had it been successful, might have offered an alternative to Surrealism.

When Tériade noticed that the “most modern abstraction” reigned at L’Effort Moderne, he made an important observation. Indeed, I argue that Rosenberg

identified Cubism with a fundamentally geometric visual vocabulary, increasingly detached from the representation of existing objects and pursuing the revelation of some essence behind the surface of phenomena, in line with the dealer's Platonic understanding of it. It is not coincidental that Piet Mondrian's nonobjective canvases came to be exhibited at *L'Effort Moderne* in 1921, followed in 1923 by an exhibition of radical projects by the architects of the Dutch group *De Stijl*. Seemingly anticipating Alfred Barr's well-known sequential relationship between Cubism and abstract art, Rosenberg's expansive vision of the movement adds to it another layer of meaning, in contrast with Kahnweiler's adamant understanding of it as realism. Within the French avant-garde, abstraction was viewed with suspicion, if not open hostility, as it was perceived for a long time as something foreign, with xenophobic associations with Germany. The anxieties surrounding a possible departure from realism in art were exorcised through its devaluation as decoration. As a result, no major nonobjective art movement was initiated or took root in France, and even in the early 1930s, a period that saw the birth and development of important related experiences, abstraction was still perceived as an international phenomenon rather than French. The resistance encountered by Rosenberg's Platonic Cubism, vacuum-packed in the theories the dealer outlined in his writings, led to his eventual failure, or rather to a visible change of artistic direction for the gallery. This failure tells the story of abstraction's inability to connect with the French avant-garde, while revealing Rosenberg's unprecedented vision of modernism.⁹

The parable of *L'Effort Moderne* is ultimately that of a commercial fiasco not entirely due to the dealer's lack of business acumen, a fiasco that becomes painfully evident by comparison with the huge success encountered by Léonce's brother Paul and his gallery at 21 rue La Boétie. The distinguished American collector John Quinn, replying to Léonce regarding the settlement for purchase of some artworks in late 1920, points to the conflicting interests of the two brothers early on: "I suggest, therefore, that in cabling hereafter you prefix the name 'Léonce' to the name 'Rosenberg,' so that I may know that it is from you."¹⁰ After attracting Picasso and other artists from Léonce's stable with the promise of increased market success, Paul became one of the key players in the international art market from the 1920s onward, overshadowing his brother. The way in which Paul's life has been presented to the larger public, especially through the high profile of the biography by his niece Anne Sinclair, illuminates how Paul stands in the way of Léonce's broader recognition.¹¹ Léonce's uncompromising promotion of avant-garde art, expressed in a significant body of publications but unsupported by trade in more lucrative commodities such as nineteenth-century painting, which was the driving force behind the prosperity

of his brother's business, led him by the early 1920s to an unsustainable financial situation, which never substantially improved.

Paul's success contributed to the neglect Léonce has suffered, a neglect evident in the wake of recent exhibitions and scholarship that have explored the endeavors of dealers.¹² While studies on the art market have gained increasing prominence in recent years, those focusing on 1910s and '20s still give far from a complete picture. It is telling that Malcolm Gee's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Dealers, Critics, and Collectors of Modern Painting: Aspects of the Parisian Art Market Between 1910 and 1930," completed in 1978, remains *the* reference work.¹³ Gee was among the first to focus on how modernist works of art were consumed—exchanged, interpreted, and appreciated—shifting the attention from the artists, the producers, to three other major kinds of agents: dealers, critics, and collectors. Although Gee provides an unprecedented and still fundamental map of the Paris art world and discusses Léonce Rosenberg at length, no archival material on L'Effort Moderne was available when he was working on his dissertation, and therefore his analysis relies mainly on secondary sources. Rosenberg's relationship with Picasso is also discussed in Michael C. Fitzgerald's 1995 groundbreaking contribution to the study of the modernist art market, *Making Modernism: Picasso and the Creation of the Market for Twentieth-Century Art*. With a focus on Picasso, Fitzgerald provides a model for an approach to the study of an artist's career as intertwined with the market, identified as an aspect that could no longer be ignored.

Even though it focuses on an art dealer, this book has not been conceived specifically as a contribution to the field of art-market studies. Recent trends in this field have involved prominent use of data and statistical analysis. In my work I discuss prices to a limited extent and do not engage in the description of trends and statistics. This is due not only to the unfortunate disappearance of Léonce Rosenberg's stock book and therefore of a complete set of data but also to a methodological choice. While still concerned with the issue of value and the creation of value for artworks, my book deals with economic history only in a limited way. My analysis is broadly situated in the framework of the sociology of art and anthropology. The way in which I discuss the role of economic agents in the formation of artistic canons would not be possible without Pierre Bourdieu's foundational analysis of the field of cultural production and the functioning of the market of symbolic goods.¹⁴ My understanding of Rosenberg's contradictory character and the struggle between his more intellectual support of Cubism through his writings and the desire to attain commercial success has benefited from studies that have addressed the paradoxical logic of the "valuable invaluable," or the translation of different kinds of capital into one another,

unmistakably born out of Bourdieu's discussion of cultural capital and taste.¹⁵ Rosenberg's attempt to make Cubism a brand, using the groundbreaking potential of an avant-garde movement as the driving force to propel a commercial venture forward, as well as his effort to shape the Cubist aesthetic for target audiences and markets, needs to be problematized from today's perspective. The way the market is viewed more critically in studies on the contemporary period has affected the way I have looked at the past and reflected on the role dealers can play as patrons and intellectuals, as much as commercial intermediaries, and the impact they can have on the work of the artists they represent.¹⁶

While discussing commercial strategies, clients, and sales, I give more prominence in my work to the networks of exchange they originate, which acquired during the 1920s a transnational and even global scale. From the late nineteenth century onward, the pursuit of new markets abroad gained increasing importance, first in the activities of dealers of old and modern masters. As new important international collectors focusing on the avant-garde emerged, this expanded dimension of the market became crucial for contemporary-art dealers as well. In this book I seek to unravel Rosenberg's network for the promotion of living artists not only in foreign European countries such as England, the Netherlands, and Italy but also in North and South America, questioning the idea of Paris as the "center" of exchanges with more "peripheral" locales. Rosenberg's impure, all-embracing Cubism, rather than Kahnweiler's, acquires a fundamental function as a common visual vocabulary connoted as avant-garde, available for appropriation and adaptation by artists all around the world. Rosenberg's role in the dissemination of this language has yet to be fully understood. From this perspective his *Bulletin*, like many other art journals of the 1920s, not only played a determinant role in the construction and diffusion of the aesthetic and ideological discourse about modern art but also constituted a focal point for various networks within the art world.

Rosenberg's internationalism can be viewed as an expression of cosmopolitanism, a concept I understand in pragmatic terms as the ideal behind his pursuit of global networks of commercial and artistic exchange aimed at creating an infrastructure for broader cultural transmission. While I have benefited considerably from cosmopolitanism studies in acquiring a deeper awareness of the theoretical complexities behind this notion, my discussion of it remains historically grounded. Paris as the cosmopolitan metropolis par excellence, with its multicultural and diverse artistic community, which came to be referred to as the *École de Paris* by 1925, was the site of Rosenberg's activities, which were inevitably shaped by it. Rosenberg's first and foremost effort consisted in an attempt to detach Cubism from German associations during the First World

War and its aftermath, while promoting an international and diverse group of artists and navigating his position as a French *Israélite* in the years after the Dreyfus affair. Cosmopolitanism in this context can be seen in reaction to a discriminatory view of Jewish individuals as rootless and lacking loyalty to the nation that welcomed them. The son of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe, Rosenberg, who was not born a French citizen, fought against this stance with his own version of patriotism, offering as an antidote his idea of Cubism's place within the French artistic tradition. Thus, at the core of his cosmopolitan attitude lay an unresolved tension between the local and the universal, between chauvinism and worldliness, between being French and being Jewish, which surfaces repeatedly throughout the book.

Inserting my work into this intellectual framework, my methodology is historical and points the way to a different, nonlinear narrative of modernism in the interwar years through the history of Rosenberg's gallery. My research has been fundamentally archive based. Léonce Rosenberg's archive, which is now ordered in forty-nine boxes of documents of various types among the holdings of the Bibliothèque Kandinsky at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and available to scholars, is remarkably rich in its size and completeness in comparison to those of other major dealers of his time, such as Paul Guillaume or Kahnweiler, whose archives are lost or inaccessible. The archive is mostly made up of correspondence exchanged between the director of L'Effort Moderne and artists, critics, and collectors that during his lifetime were, more or less consistently, involved with Rosenberg. However, it also includes a considerable number of photographic albums that, to some extent, make up for the lack of the stock book and help considerably to identify works that were traded by Rosenberg. It is against the backdrop of all this material and firsthand archival research that my project developed. The correspondence, which remains unpublished for the most part, has been the starting point of my attempt to reconstruct Rosenberg's personality, the history of his gallery, and his relations with some of the artists he promoted. Despite the problems that working with correspondence brings—to what extent is information trustworthy even when it is confidential, and how can a dealer's personal agenda be separated from information treated as facts?—it proved fundamental in understanding more about Rosenberg's life and personality and helped to reveal a more complex figure than a bottom-line businessman.

While still keeping an overall chronological structure, following the life of Léonce Rosenberg from the beginnings of his career to his death, the chapters of this book have a thematic focus and therefore offer a diachronic analysis of certain key issues: Rosenberg's idea of Cubism in his theories and writings;

how it translated into practice, the kinds of works he sold; L'Effort Moderne's position in the Parisian art market; the dealer's involvement in international networks of exchange; his vision of modernism by the end of the 1920s, as expressed in the decoration of his apartment; the gradual dissolution of L'Effort Moderne during the Great Depression and the Second World War. Rosenberg did not start his career as a contemporary-art dealer. In chapter 1, in order to unravel Rosenberg's "conversion" to the avant-garde and his conception of Cubism, I examine his intellectual formation, cultural interests, and commercial training, offering an essential biographical account of the dealer's upbringing. Dealing was rooted in the Rosenberg family, as Léonce's father had a modern-art gallery, which Léonce and Paul inherited. In 1910 Léonce started his own business, focusing on the *Haute époque* (i.e., art from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, with no geographical boundaries). Léonce's attitude as a scholar and connoisseur, nurtured by a remarkable influence of esotericism and the occult, provides insight into his formalist, encyclopedic approach to art. Moving from these premises and reconstructing the events that led to the foundation of L'Effort Moderne during the First World War, I thoroughly discuss how Rosenberg framed Cubism as an open category while proposing a Platonic reading of it in his publications, including his two pamphlets *Cubisme et tradition* (1920) and *Cubisme et empirisme* (1921).

Chapter 2 examines through visual material the Cubist aesthetic that Rosenberg was promoting and provides an extensive account of the activities of L'Effort Moderne after its launch in 1918–19. Focusing on the early 1920s, in this chapter I describe certain distinguishing features of postwar Cubism and how Rosenberg's artistic direction started to change. Given that "the notion of a colourless Cubism with its unconditional concentration on form has stubbornly persisted," I counterargue that color played a new and prominent role in the abstracted, geometric style developed by many of the artists exhibited at L'Effort Moderne in those years, such as Herbin and Mondrian.¹⁷ Rosenberg's enterprise and personal taste in 1921–22 reflect a complex and contradictory moment when modernist artists were pursuing seemingly divergent avenues of visual research. On the one hand, Rosenberg encouraged artists like Herbin, Severini, and Metzinger to use a more readable and figurative style in their paintings. The case of Severini, whose treatise *Du cubisme au classicisme* was supposed to be published by Rosenberg, offers a framework for understanding the continuity between Cubism and postwar classicism and Rosenberg's role in this transition. On the other hand, the abstract side of Rosenberg's taste gradually shifted toward a potential and positive interaction between modern art and modern living through the design of objects and spaces. The idea that

Cubism should go beyond the bidimensional surface of the canvas and occupy the third dimension, both as sculpture and as architecture, inspired a foundational exhibition of architectural models by the architects of De Stijl in 1923.

In chapter 3, I discuss Rosenberg's understanding of the role of a dealer, his commercial strategies, and his ideas on the art market more broadly. I examine how he made his abstract Cubism the house style of L'Effort Moderne, a sort of brand, and launched it through a fully articulated promotional plan, which involved extensive use of exhibitions, events, publications, and exclusive-rights contracts. Rosenberg's strategies changed over time according to his financial resources and general economic trends to include many artists beyond the initial stable. L'Effort Moderne's position in the Parisian art market acquires context through comparison with some of Rosenberg's main competitors—namely, Kahnweiler, Guillaume, and his brother Paul. I also focus on the role of the Parisian auction house Hôtel Drouot in the circulation of *art vivant*, which increased significantly after Rosenberg's involvement in the sales of the collections of Kahnweiler and Wilhelm Uhde in 1921–23, both collections sequestered by the French state after the outbreak of World War I. The role of art dealers in public sales changed significantly during the 1920s as they manipulated the market more actively through strategies I describe by way of an examination of Rosenberg's relationship with the artist Giorgio de Chirico in the second half of the 1920s.

In chapter 4, I unravel Rosenberg's cosmopolitan conception of Cubism and how this translated into his activities as a dealer, seeking new markets abroad. Focusing first on the attacks on Cubism as a German type of art in the years around the war, I show how Rosenberg tried to inscribe the movement within a French tradition to promote a distinctly international and diverse group of artists. His identity as an assimilated Jew made him particularly sensitive to issues of nationalism and xenophobia on the one hand and inclusivity and openness on the other. His networking efforts abroad, often supported and facilitated by artists themselves, led to substantial connections to the Netherlands, England, and Italy. Rosenberg's network acquired a truly global scope during the 1920s. To demonstrate this, I examine Rosenberg's relationships with non-European artists and collectors, especially from Latin America. By focusing on his promotion of the Mexicans Diego Rivera and Ángel Zárraga, the Argentinean Emilio Pettoruti, the Brazilian Tarsila do Amaral, and the Ecuadorian Manuel Rendón, I argue that Rosenberg played an important role in overcoming the French audience's expectations of exoticism from the art of the Latin Americans, as well as in disseminating the Cubist visual idiom on a global scale. For many of these artists Rosenberg's more accessible Cubism represented the foundation

of a modernist visual vocabulary and a starting point for their own artistic research.

By the end of the 1920s, multiple avenues of artistic research had opened up, and Surrealism had gained prominence as the main avant-garde movement in France. Despite his unquestioned prominence as promoter of Cubism, Rosenberg was not indifferent to the most recent artistic developments, in a lasting commitment to *art vivant* that I explore in chapter 5. A major project launched by Rosenberg in 1928–29 offers a unique snapshot of modernism in Paris at that time. The dealer rented a new and larger apartment in Paris and invested much energy in designing its decoration, commissioning a dozen artists—including de Chirico, Max Ernst, Herbin, Léger, Metzinger, Francis Picabia, Rendón, Alberto Savinio, Severini, Valmier, and Jean Viollier—to realize decorative ensembles, assigning a room to each. A unique and fully realized example of twentieth-century patronage, the result demonstrated how modern art and modern ways of living could complement each other. This modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk*, however, would be short-lived, and in fact the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which hit France around 1931, heavily affected Rosenberg's business. L'Effort Moderne struggled to survive, and its activities were significantly reduced, but the full extent of Rosenberg's endeavors before World War II, which I treat briefly in the epilogue, has yet to be assessed. While expressing marked interest in experiments around abstract art such as those of the association Abstraction-Création, at a moment when Cubism was being institutionalized on a transatlantic scale, Rosenberg made an effort to be included in the narratives of modernism being written, but eventually his role was overshadowed by Kahnweiler's. Rosenberg passed away in 1947, shortly after the Second World War. This book concludes with a reconstruction of his life in Paris under the German occupation and his experience of those dark years for the Jewish population, recounted through his own voice in letters to artists and family.