Georges de Bellio (1826—1894): Doctor, Friend, and Patron of the Impressionist Painters

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Georges de Bellio was born Gheorghe Bellu in Bucharest, Romania, on February 20, 1828, into an affluent aristocratic family with a history of philanthropy. One of his relatives donated land to the city of Bucharest for a cemetery in which many notable people were buried; other relatives donated buildings to the Romanian Academy cultural forum.

The family name originated from the city of Pella in the region of Macedonia. In 1851, Bellu moved to Paris, France, to study medicine. His name was changed to Georges de Bellio, which is easier to pronounce in French than his given Romanian name.

Although De Bellio never graduated from medical school, he set himself up as a homeopathic health care practitioner in Paris. His practice was financially successful, and he began to collect fine art, especially from painters of the Impressionist school, who were not yet well known when de Bellio started accumulating their works in the 1850s.

He formed friendships with young emerging artists including Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, and Auguste Renoir. De Bellio offered the artists medical advice gratis or at reduced cost and frequently purchased paintings when they needed money, sometimes paying in advance for works that were not yet finished. De Bellio bought the iconic 1874 Monet painting that gave its name to the Impressionist movement: "Impression, Soleil Levant" (Impression, Sunrise).

On January 26, 1894, de Bellio died suddenly at his home in the 9th arrondissement of Paris. By the time of his death, the Impressionist artists were well established. In 1940, his collection was donated by his daughter—Vctorine Donop de Monchy—to the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris (founded in 1934). The paintings she donated remain on permanent display and form the core of the museum’s collections, where they are accompanied by other Impressionist works, including a portrait of Victorine by Renoir. De Bellio’s nephew—Alexandru Bellu (1850—1921)—became a prominent landscape photographer in Romania.

Although virtually forgotten in the country of his birth for more than a century after his death, in 2003, the Romanian postal service dedicated a stamp (Scott #4568) to de Bellio in their “Cultural Anniversaries” series. The de Bellio stamp is based on a 19th-century photograph. The 2003 Cultural Anniversaries series also commemorated composer Hector Berlioz, sculptor Ion Irimescu, and painter Vincent Van Gogh.

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