

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267



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\$400

**Biography of
Bouguereau's
*Nymphs and Satyr***

The painting was shown at the 1873 Salon with the title *Nymphs and Satyr* and a quotation from the first century Latin poet Publius Statius, "Conscious of his shaggy hide and from childhood untaught to swim, he dares not trust himself to deep waters."² Statius is describing the predicament of Pan, who is cheated of his quarry, the nymph Phoebe, when she takes refuge in a lake. At no point in the poem is the god dragged into the water, and it seems possible that Bouguereau invented this humorous revenge; he shows us a light-hearted ambush in which the unfortunate non-swimmer is literally danced into the stream. There is no escape for him, since reinforcements — more nymphs — have been summoned from the woods behind.

Bouguereau himself thought highly of the painting. To judge from the many sketches he made for it, he was deeply concerned with the lively movement of the central group and how the figures could work together almost like the wheels of a watch. Writing to its first owner, a leading New York collector, John Wolfe, the artist claimed that it would be a principal attraction of his future exhibitions.

When the painting was first exhibited, in 1873, reactions to it were mixed. While one critic claimed that the artist "had depicted a rather risky subject with charm and delicacy,"³ another found the picture highly skilled but somewhat superficial:

*A glossy, creamy, waxy painting where one guesses at all kinds of ingenuities, where one finds the art of composition, well-ordered groups, motion, wit, and great suppleness of drawing, but which is cold in essence, empty and leaving but a faint impression on the mind.*⁴

But Bouguereau had a considerable following at this time in America, and the painting was promptly bought by John Wolfe. It spent most of the first ten years of its life hanging with three equally large pictures by Bouguereau's academic contemporaries: Pierre Cot's *Springtime* (which showed a couple "in the most dangerous and inflammable of the teens" on a swing), Léon Bonnat's *Fellab Women and Child*, and Hans Makart's *Fellab Woman at Well*. As one visitor remarked:

There is hardly a private house in America which contains a corner looking so much like a nook in a European museum as the portion of Mr. Wolfe's residence dedicated to his larger specimens. They hang, well crowded up, from the ceiling down — the

*great draperies of canvas on which the eye makes out contours and attitudes of life-size figures. . . . The huge, gilded frames rise to the cornice-like pilasters, rubbing their fretted edges or parting with their external mouldings to bury themselves in a reserved space. The effect is like that of some corner of the Luxembourg Gallery.*⁵

Even in this company, the Bouguereau apparently stood out,

*the whole combination of life and spirit being so striking that the eye, in high good-humour, is ready to bear witness that the skins of the people are really palpitating and compressible in this case.*⁶

After this distinguished private ownership, the *Nymphs* spent the next twenty years in full public view, hanging opposite the bar in the Hoffman House at Broadway and 25th Street. The painting had been acquired at the sale of Wolfe's pictures in 1882 by Edward S. Stokes, one of the owners of the hotel. Stokes had earlier served four rather comfortable years in Sing-Sing for shooting the notorious speculator Jim Fisk, his rival in love, and as a result of this fortuitous connection the Bouguereau acquired an aura of scandal, which has never been wholly dispelled.⁷

Several prints of the elegantly appointed bar survive, one of them including such notables as Grover Cleveland and William F. Cody, and it is clear that the *Nymphs* had become a major landmark by the 1890s. The painting was hung with some splendor beneath a red velvet canopy, lit by a crystal chandelier, and reflected in the large mirror over the bar. In one color lithograph, a box of Hoffman House cigars lies open on a nearby table, and Bouguereau's nymphs appear on the inside label. From such surroundings they migrated to silver matchbox covers, plates, urns and even bathroom tiles.⁸ A caricature by E. A. Filleau shows the painting hanging not in the bar but in an art gallery, surveyed by a gentleman of the road. "I've travelled the world over and tramped every spot on the map," says Weary Walker, "but I'm damned if I can locate that brook." The shady brook, the beautiful nymphs, the satyr's amusing predicament must have provided a potent visual image of the 1880s and 1890s to many visitors to the Hoffman House. It was in this ambience that Robert Sterling Clark, living in New York and recently graduated from Yale's Sheffield Scientific School, first saw the picture.



W. A. Bouguereau, (French, 1825-1905), *Cartoon for Nymphs and Satyr, vine charcoal on paper, private collection.*

After Stokes's death in 1901 his paintings were sold; neither Clark nor any other admirers of the picture were to see the *Nymphs* again for more than a quarter century. Reputedly bought by a gentleman whose family found them an embarrassment, the nymphs were quickly consigned to storage — as the artist's reputation was shortly to be.

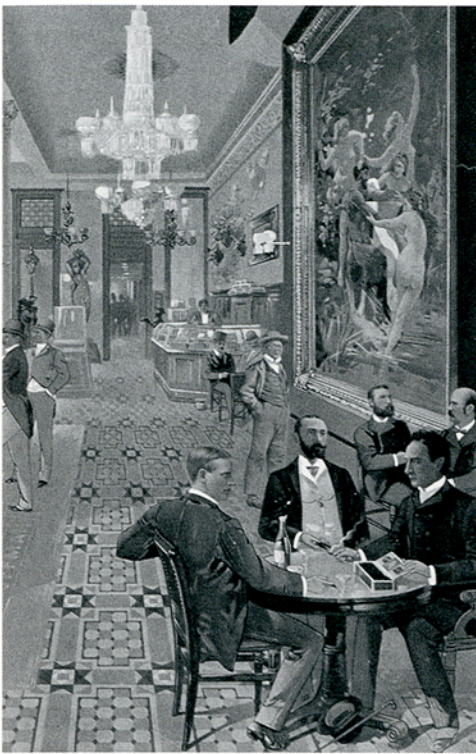
The picture's brief re-emergence into the limelight in the early 1940s is amusingly documented in Robert Sterling Clark's diaries. He remembered the painting well from its Hoffman House days when he encountered it again in 1934 in Manhattan Storage while inspecting their wine cellars. It was not until 1942, however, when the owner died, that Clark had a chance to purchase the picture. Already quite familiar with Bouguereau's work, Clark had bought one of his drawings in 1922 and a painting, *Seated Nude*, in 1939. Initially he was discouraged by the sheer size of the *Nymphs*: "It really is a fine picture . . . marvellous nudes . . . I only wish I had the study for it, because it is about 10 ft. x 8 ft. It ought to be in a good museum or some other public building." At one time, Clark had the notion of buying it and giving it to Bouguereau's home town of La Rochelle.

Herbert Elfers, Clark's contact and friend at the Durand-Ruel Galleries, persuaded the heirs of the late owner to let him sell the *Nymphs* without revealing its source. Elfers first had the idea of selling the painting to Billy Rose, the owner of the Gay Nineties cabaret where, in Clark's words, "it would reconstitute more or less the old Hoffman House atmosphere." By this time Clark was much enamored of the picture and instructed Elfers to make an offer, reassuring the family that "it would go to a private collector . . . and it would probably be left to a French museum."

On June 5, 1942, the Bouguereau was bought by Clark, and he was already contemplating the "highly amusing prospect" of exhibiting it. His first choice was Parke Bernet (for a Red Cross Benefit), but Elfers was anxious to show it at Durand-Ruel's. The critic Frank Crowninshield (who also remembered the picture in the Hoffman House) was to write an article for *Vogue* launching the *Nymphs* once again as a symbol both of the Gay Nineties and of "the happy and joyous spirit of the Second Empire."⁹ Turned down by the Red Cross — who Clark suggested had reservations about so much unclad beauty — the painting was gladly accepted by the Free French Relief Committee for a benefit exhibition.



Edward Stokes, 1872, *carte-de-visite*, courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, New York City.



Hoffman House Interior, chromolithograph, collection of the Library of Congress.

On January 11, 1943, in the midst of the Second World War, the *Nymphs* appeared once again before the public at the Durand-Ruel Galleries on 57th Street. As one reporter put it, "Nymphs, Satyr Rally to Fighting French."¹⁰ They were shown in solitary splendor, in front of reddish-brown curtains borrowed from Wildenstein's, and they attracted a good deal of attention in the press. It was scarcely surprising that they received a special welcome from the habitués — now forty years older — of the Hoffman House. A Mr. Willet remarked to Herbert Elfers that the picture made him "feel like twenty," and another admirer wrote a poem for the nymphs which admirably encapsulated their history and their continuing attraction.

*To Bouguereau's
"Nymphs and Satyr"*

*I drank a toast to you when I was young,
And now I'm old, I'll drink to you again;
Once you were Gotham's pride, admired of men,
When o'er the bar, your glorious canvas hung.
You merry nymphs, of beauty unsurpassed,*



W. T. Robinson (*American*, born 1852), *Still Life*, 1905, oil on canvas, photo courtesy Kenneth M. Newman, *The Old Print Shop*, New York.

*Banished for years by strange decree unjust,
Out of the darkness and the gathering dust,
Lovely as ever, you've returned at last!
And you, ob faun, the Naiads drag you still
Down to their pool with gleeful merriment,
They drag you down, against your struggling will,
The half-man in you fearing their intent;
I pity you, as over you they gloat,
Yet in your place, who wouldn't be a goat?*

Brian Penaleton

Robert Sterling Clark greatly relished the whole affair, the more so, perhaps, because he chose to remain anonymous throughout it and never even attended the opening. Speculations as to the picture's new owner, offers from other collectors to Durand-Ruel — even some interest from museums — entertained him highly. When the show was over, the painting disappeared once again into storage, though it was later fitted (with some difficulty) into Clark's New York apartment, where he enjoyed its effect on startled visitors.

The final — and lasting — appearance of the nymphs took place in the summer of 1959, when they were unveiled in Williamstown, an appropriately arcadian spot for their retirement. Mr. Clark had died three years before, but once again

they were celebrated in the press ("The Naked Truth behind Clark's Nymphs"), having by this time acquired quite a mythology of their own.¹¹ In 1984 they travelled to Montreal and Hartford to receive a measure of art-historical respectability through their inclusion in a major Bouguereau exhibition.¹² The painting *Nymphs and Satyr* continues to delight, amaze, and sometimes annoy visitors to the Clark, and also to inspire poetry, good stories, and occasionally (without permission of the Institute) the popular arts.¹³

David S. Brooke

Notes

1. For extensive information about the painting, its provenance, exhibitions and bibliography, see the catalogue entry in *William Bouguereau*, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1984, no. 51, pp.182-191.
2. J. H. Mozley, trans., *Stattius*, New York, 1928, vol. 1. pp. 110-111. From the *Silvae*, the poem is entitled "The Tree of Atedius Melior."
3. Ludovic Baschet, *Catalogue illustré des oeuvres de W. Bouguereau*, Paris, 1885, p.48 (review by Charles Garnier).
4. Georges Lafenestre, "Salon de 1873," in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, series 2, vol. 7 (1873), p. 492.

5. Edward Strahan (Earl Shinn), *The Art Treasures of America*, Philadelphia, 1879, vol. II (1880), pp. 53-54.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 54. About the time he acquired the *Nymphs* in 1873, John Wolfe was commissioned by his cousin Catherine Lorillard Wolfe (1828-87) to assemble a gallery of paintings for her Madison Avenue house. Her entire collection was bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1887; it included the Bonnat which John Wolfe had once owned and which had hung with the Bouguereau.
7. For a contemporary report of the Stokes/Fisk affair, see *Harper's Weekly*, January 20, 1872, pp. 49-50; January 27, 1872, pp. 84-85.
8. The tiles were installed in a bathroom of the John Brown House in Providence, Rhode Island, shortly after 1901.
9. Frank Crowninshield, "Bouguereau's Historic 'Nymphs and Satyr'" in *Vogue*, January 15, 1943, pp. 34-35, 86.
10. *Bouguereau's Famous and Long-Lost "Nymphs and Satyr" exhibited for the benefit of the Fighting French Relief Committee*, Durand-Ruel Galleries, January 11-30, 1943.
11. "Berkshire newsmen in search of local nuggets hit a pay lode (sic) when the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown unveiled its most spectacular nude in a July 30 preview." *Berkshire Eagle*, August 8, 1959.

12. See note 1 above.

13. The picture appears in fiction, somewhat before its time, in Louis Auchincloss's novel of the Civil War, *Watchfires*, written in 1982.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Robert Rainwater of the New York Public Library and to Wendy Shadwell of the New York Historical Society for their assistance in locating related material. I am also very grateful to M. Vincens Bouguereau for permission to reproduce the large cartoon.

Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr*, one of the more celebrated paintings at the Clark Art Institute, has always enjoyed considerable popular appeal.

This is probably due less to the rather decorous naughtiness of the subject matter and the glossy finish of the painting than to the sense of gaiety and arcadian delight which the nymphs have evoked in many of their admirers. This brief biography traces the unusually colorful life of the picture, from its first appearance at the Paris Salon of 1873 to its triumphant acquisition by Robert Sterling Clark in New York almost seventy years later.¹