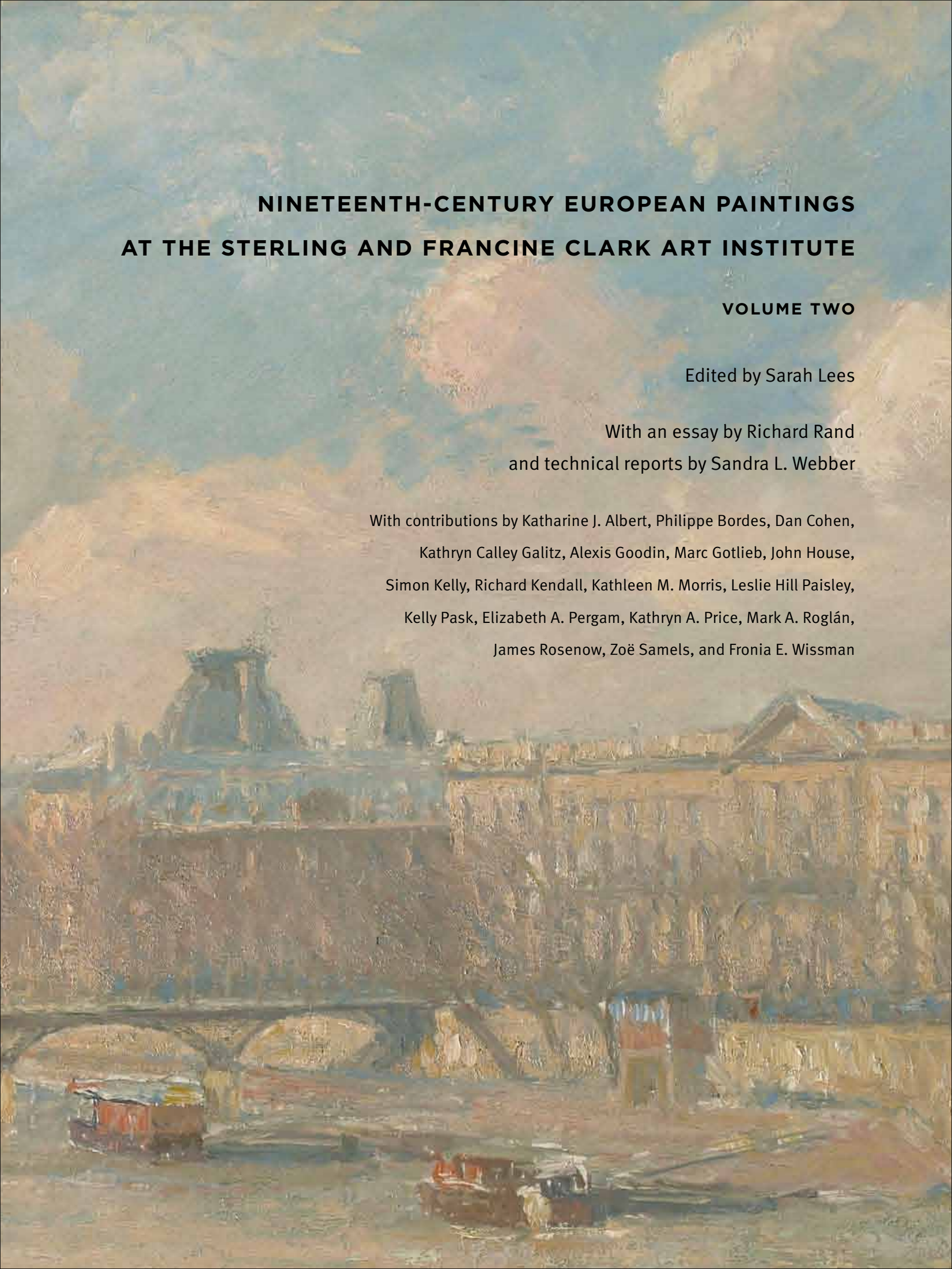

NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE

VOLUME TWO

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen, Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House, Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley, Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán, James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 60 cm
Lower left: Claude Monet 74
1955.529

Painted at Argenteuil within a few months of the first Impressionist exhibition, *The Geese* exemplifies many of the qualities that attracted and appalled Monet's early critics.[1] He had settled in the town in 1871 and soon began creating scenes of the river Seine and its surrounding pastures that were often boldly composed and brilliantly lit. Monet was visited in Argenteuil by colleagues such as Sisley, Pissarro, Renoir, and Manet, who worked by his side from local motifs and helped to initiate plans for an "Anonymous Society of painters, sculptors and printmakers." When their inaugural exhibition opened in Paris in April 1874, he showed a range of urban and rural paintings from the previous five or six years, including the now celebrated Argenteuil canvas, *Poppies* (1873; Musée d'Orsay, Paris).[2] Several reviewers singled out the vivid realism of these submissions: "It's a photograph, with

color, movement and light," one noted approvingly of Monet's large *Boulevard des Capucines*.[3] Responding to the smaller study that gave the movement its name, *Impression, Sunrise* (Musée Marmottan, Paris),[4] another writer was more doubtful, identifying "a certain naïvété" and suspecting "the childish hand of a schoolboy who is applying colors for the first time."[5] More scathingly still, a visitor described these pictures as "hideous daubs" that resembled cheap wallpaper, or as surfaces covered with random licks of paint and "palette scrapings."[6]

The Geese is dated 1874 but did not appear in this historic display, its late summer or autumnal hues suggesting that it was completed toward the end of the same year.[7] The extreme brightness of the palette, however, is consistent with the "luminous" and "multi-colored" effects admired in Monet's recently exhibited pictures, just as its encrusted surface would have confirmed the critics' suspicion of his technical skill.[8] Yet in certain crucial respects the Clark painting stands apart from Monet's production at this date. It is almost alone as a rustic subject on an upright canvas, a format he largely reserved for intimate images of friends and family in gardens or in other domestic contexts.[9] Also uncharacteristic is the absence of a visible horizon line or clear perspective structure: in *The Geese*, unruly foliage obscures the sky and ill-defined masses and planes mask the spatial recession from pond to whitewashed cottage. The amorphousness of the scene, which approaches incoherence toward center right, remains distinct from the great majority of landscapes completed at Argenteuil, dominated as they are by the broad sweep of the river Seine or the airiness of works such as *Poppies*.

Monet's motivation in breaking the pattern of his current output to paint *The Geese* is a matter of speculation. Paul Tucker has argued that it was one of a number of "retardataire, Barbizon-like" pictures made at this moment, reverting to traditional countryside motifs at the expense of such modern alternatives as bridges and pleasure craft, the railway, or the town of Argenteuil itself.[10] The Clark view certainly recalls a number of paintings by Corot and his peers, notably in its informal alley of trees, the screened rustic cottage, and the watery foreground, while the sunny farmstead and cheerful geese come close to picture-book cliché.[11] But this thematic conservatism is firmly countered by the work's radical handling. Even by the standards of Monet's remarkable river canvases of this same year, *The Geese* is exceptionally high-keyed and daringly improvised in its touch. Lacking the geometric underpinning of works such as the 1874 *Bridge at Argenteuil* (fig. 265.1) and depending on nervous, multidirectional strokes of ocher, deep pink, orange, and lime green, the Clark composition almost succumbs to an enveloping sensuousness. A more inclusive account of *The Geese* might present it as transitional and exploratory, allowing Monet to fuse adjacent genres and carry some of his most radical techniques to new extremes. The sheer profusion of colors and textures seen at relatively close quarters—reflections, shimmering leaves, branches, shadows, whitewashed walls, terra-cotta tiles—and the artist's struggle to find palpable equivalents for them in paint are arguably its most significant achievements.

A secondary insight into the subject of *The Geese* may be suggested by the circumstances of its first sale. The picture was bought in November 1874 by Jean-Baptiste Faure, the renowned baritone who had amassed a major collection of Barbizon works during the previous decade. In 1873, Faure experienced a change of heart, divesting himself of paintings by Corot, Daubigny, Diaz, Millet, Rousseau, and Troyon, and turning enthusiastically to the art of the Impressionist circle. He eventually acquired more than sixty Monets—among them *Poppies*, *Bridge at Argenteuil*, and a version of *The Boulevard des Capucines*—and became one of the artist's leading supporters during this period.[12] *The Geese* may have been seen as an intermediate work, its composition rooted in the landscapes of the previous generation but its facture unequivocally novel. Where the tree-lined path recalls Corot and the distant vignette of cottage life echoes the narratives of Millet, the statement of these features in the language of "palette scrapings" put Faure in the vanguard of contemporary collecting.

As in most of the works by Monet at the Clark, the improvised appearance of *The Geese* conceals a more complex technical story (see Technical Report). Pinholes in the visible corners of the canvas may conceivably indicate that it was first painted unstretched, a possibility endorsed by drawn lines that approximate the picture's final boundaries. Infrared examination of the sky at top left shows an anomalous roof-like form surviving from an earlier draft, considerably larger than the roof on the cottage seen today. Though the lost subject is impossible to identify, it may correspond to certain extant, contemporary paintings of similar buildings, one of which has a high tiled roof and a pond or stream with white waterfowl in the fore-

ground.[13] There is evidence that a new putty-colored ground was applied during this transition, obliterating the initial design. Even in the completed scene, a number of strokes of paint were laid over already dry passages that may have resulted from an earlier session at the site, with the central mother and child evidently added as a final touch to this area. RK

PROVENANCE The artist, sold to Faure, Nov. 1874, as *Les Oies*; Jean-Baptiste Faure, Paris (from 1874); Auguste Pellerin, Paris (in 1899); [Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, in 1899]; [Foinard, Paris, in 1899]; [Durand-Ruel, Paris, sold to Behrend, 1912]; Mme. Behrend, Paris (from 1912); Allston Burr, Boston (d. 1949); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 9 June 1949, as *Les Canards*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1949–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, no. 118, pl. 35, as *Les Canards*; New York 1976, no. 18, ill., as *Les Oies dans le ruisseau*; Williamstown 1985c, no cat.; Basel 2002, pp. 24, 246, no.1, ill., as *Les Oies dans le ruisseau*; Montgomery and others 2005–7, no cat.

REFERENCES Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 85, ill.; Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 1, p. 262, no. 347, ill., as *Les oies dans le ruisseau*; Ikegami 1978, no. 5-202; Tucker 1979, p. 199, fig. 139; Tucker 1982, p. 113, fig. 84; Kern et al. 1996, pp. 88–89, ill.; Wildenstein 1996, vol. 2, p. 144, no. 347, ill., as *Geese in the Brook*; Rand 2001a, pp. 16–17, fig. 3; Cahill 2005, p. 64, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a very fine-weight linen (28 threads/cm), glue-lined to a coarse linen (13–17 threads/cm). The top edge is slightly out of square, revealing the wavy edge of the artist-applied upper ground layer. This evidence, together with pinholes in all four corners and paint strokes onto the tacking margins, strongly suggests that the painting was done pinned to a board. The original tacking margins remain, and the five-member stretcher is probably the original. There are minor draws in the corners caused by the stretcher design. The lining was done sometime after the top fold-over edge became brittle and began to tear. Traction cracks are visible in the thickly painted details, and drying cracks appear scattered in the roofs, figures, and elsewhere. Some thick lower paint colors are oozing up through the traction cracks. In 1985, the painting was cleaned of grime and at least two very yellow varnish layers. Under low magnification, cracks in the older varnish residues can be detected, especially in the trees to the left and right. There is very little retouching, aside from minor amounts on the edges.

The ground is a combination of commercial layers, which extend onto the tacking margins, and an artist-applied layer, which extends only to a rough charcoal line along the perimeter of the image. This line is visible on all but the left edge of the painting, and all ground layers are pale gray in tone. Monet may have applied this second layer to give more tooth to the ground or to hide the early stages of a lower image; using the infrared camera, the form of a long roof with a central gable is visible above the final building. Some paint changes around the birds are also visible in infrared, and under low magnification, there are charcoal outlines at the top of the roof of the final building, though no other lines were detected in the image. The ground layer is mostly hidden below paint, except for a few areas of the sky and the edges. The paint layer is applied in a direct manner, with no glazing, and uses thick, slightly dry, paste-consistency strokes in a wet-into-wet technique. Small brushes, 0.3 to 0.6 cm wide, were employed throughout, except for a few wider strokes in the sky.

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1. Formerly known as *The Duck Pond*, this work appears to show the domesticated white goose with a red-orange bill that is common in Europe to this day. This is acknowledged in the earlier title of the picture, *Les oies dans le ruisseau*; see Wildenstein 1974–91, p. 262, no. 347.
2. W 274.
3. Drumont 1874, p. 2: "C'est une photographie avec la couleur, le movement et la lumière." It is unclear whether the *Boulevard des Capucines* Monet exhibited was W 292 or 293.
4. W 263.
5. Montifaud 1874: "une certaine naïveté," "la main enfantine d'un écolier qui étale pour la première fois."
6. Leroy 1874: "hideux croûtons!"; Chesneau 1874: "râclures de palette."
7. The date was added over apparently dry paint and in a different color from that used in the signature, but it has been widely viewed as authentic.
8. Montifaud 1874: "Ses notes chantent dans un fond clair et lumineux"; Prouvaire 1874: "Quant au *Boulevard des Italiens*, il est si tumultueux, si multicolore."
9. See for example W 255, 282–83, 287, 365–66.
10. Tucker 1979, p. 199.
11. All the components of *The Geese*, including the distant mother and child figures, and even the nearby poultry, can be found in mainly vertical landscapes by Corot from the 1860s and 1870s; see, for example, R 1290–91, 1293, 1297–98, 1370–74, 1413, 1415, 1419, 1984, 2007, 2088. A closely comparable motif in the work of Millet can be found in the pastel *House with a Well at Gruchy* (c. 1863; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).
12. Monet refers to sales of two other pictures to Faure in a letter written to Édouard Manet on 27 May 1874; see Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 1, p. 429, letter 78. For Faure as a collector, see Distel 1990, pp. 74–93.
13. Similar structures appear in W 248, 277, and 310; the work referred to is W 289, where a large tiled roof also appears.