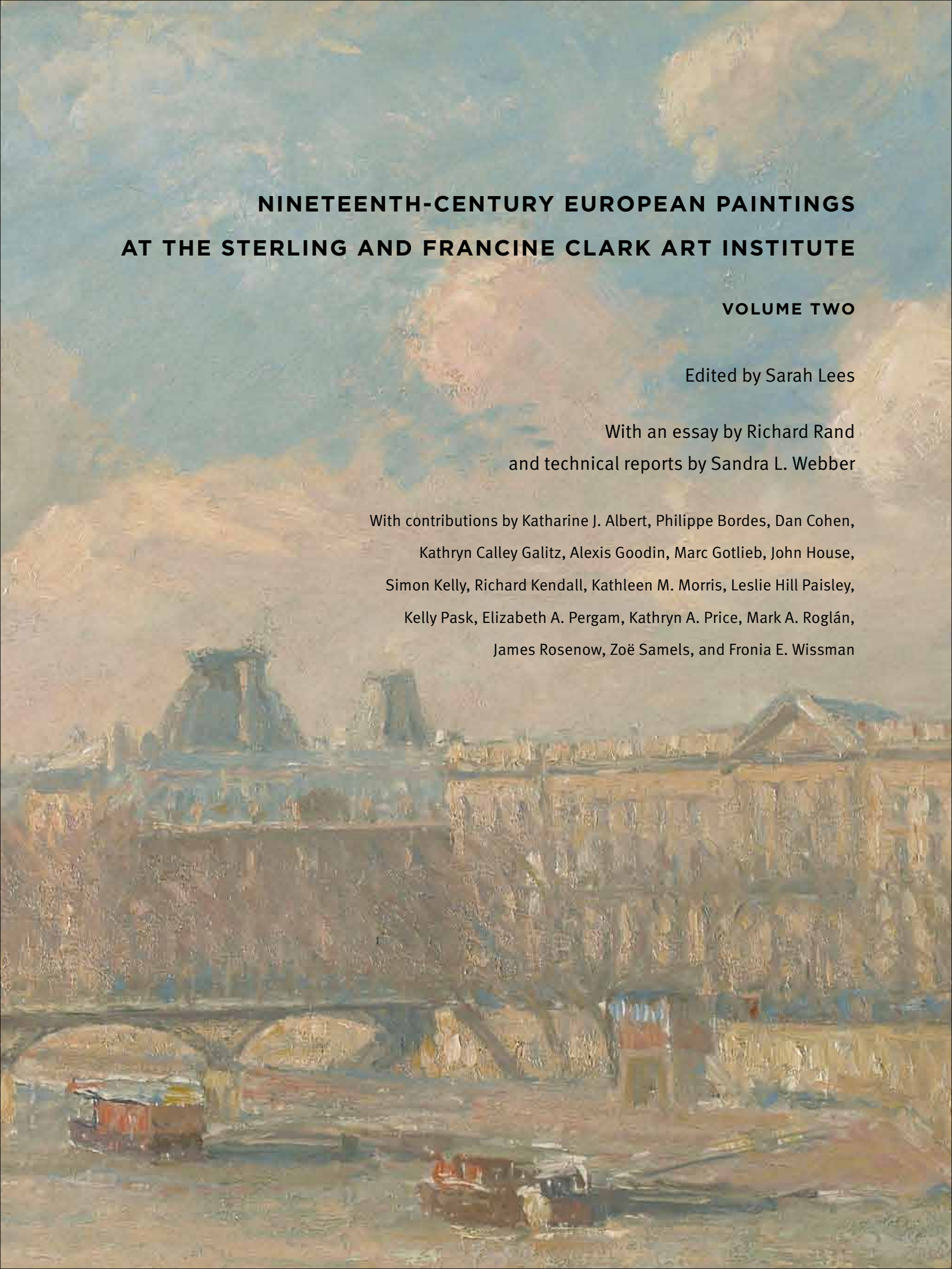

NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE

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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Jean-François Millet

French, 1814–1875

217 | Woman Spinning (The Spinning Wheel)

c. 1855–60

Oil on panel, 39.1 x 29.5 cm
Lower right: J. F. Millet
1955.531

Like *Peasant Girl Returning from the Well* (cat. 219), *Woman Spinning* is a paean to the quiet, constant physical labor done by the women of Barbizon, the cluster of houses southeast of Paris to which Jean-François Millet moved his family in 1849. The painting's small dimensions belie the importance of the woman's work and its cultural and personal associations. Dating to about 1855–60,[1] *Woman Spinning* forms part of Millet's series of single figures, both male and female, absorbed in such tasks as coopering, cutting wood, making lye, and churning butter. The interiors in which these activities are set (and the enclosing stone walls of *Peasant Girl Returning from the Well* put it into this category) concentrate attention on the figure and his or her dedication to the task at hand. The sense of single-minded intensity is expressed through additional pictorial means. Placed close to the picture plane, the figures are relatively large, dominating the space in which they work. Millet's simple outlines give the workers power and dignity; they are emblems of industry.[2]

This particular painting has its genesis in a drawing Millet did of his sister Émilie in the spring of 1853 (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal), which was translated into an oil painting dated to 1854 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). There, the woman wears the cap characteristic of Normandy—loose fitting, with a soft fold of fabric at the crown and the back falling to cover the neck—and sits at a wheel spinning flax. A similarly precise drawing preceded the Clark's painting (Art Gallery of New South Wales). The woman in the Clark painting has been transformed into an inhabitant of Barbizon by the change in headgear to the *marmotte*, a kerchief tied close to the head.

In her catalogue of the unparalleled collection of paintings, drawings, and pastels by Millet at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Alexandra R. Murphy identifies a spinning wheel of this size as one used to spin flax.[3] Characteristic of the flax process is the distaff onto which the long, stringy flax fibers are bound. The related painting in Boston shows the wheel in use, with the distaff in its working, upright position. The spinner in Williamstown enjoys the advantage of a Saxony wheel with a treadle; the wheel shown in the Boston painting has none. Millet points out the more advanced technology by highlighting the hem to make sure the treadle is not lost in the brown shadows. Oddly, though, some of the spokes of the wheel itself look slightly blurred, as if the wheel is in motion. That cannot be the case since the distaff is not in its proper place. The task was but an intermediate stage in the amazingly labor-intensive process of producing linen fabric. Since the best fiber is the longest fiber, plants are harvested by being pulled up by the roots. After the plants have dried for a few weeks, the stalks are retted, or partially rotted, to break down their outer bark. Seeds are removed (rippled), and the stalks are broken, or crushed, with a breaker, a wooden blade on a frame. The flax is then skutched, to remove the parts of the plant not to be spun. Hackling (or heckling) is a multistep process done with increasingly fine combs to remove the last of the bits of straw and unwanted fibers and to separate coarser and finer flax for different uses.[4]

Millet's woman is probably spinning a thick yarn for weaving homespun, a strong, serviceable fabric that was made into the type of clothing she wears. Millet was much interested in the qualities of this fabric. He thought that a shirt worn "for an uncomfortably long time . . . should simplify its fold and take the form of the body, . . . the garment [became], as it were, a part of the body, and [expressed], as he [Millet] has said, even more than the nude, the larger and simpler forms of nature."[5] So important were these fabrics, both in the life of Barbizon and in the worldview of the artist, that he dedicated a significant portion of his output to documenting the production of textiles, beginning with the shearing of the sheep or harvesting the flax, the carding of the wool and flax, the spinning of wool and flax, sewing, and the knitting of stockings. In addition to the spinning of the flax, he documented the pulling (harvesting) of flax, the breaking of flax (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore), and the carding of flax.[6] Millet included three of these activities—the pulling, breaking, and spinning of flax—in drawings he made in 1852 for ten "Labors of the Field" that were reproduced in woodcuts by Adrien Lavieille in the journal *L'Illustration*.[7] Millet was also peculiarly sensitive to the colors of the fabrics he depicted in his paintings.

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Edward Wheelwright, the American artist who lived in Barbizon from October 1855 through June of the following year, described "what Millet called his museum: a collection of rags and bits of cloth, of different colors, faded and weather-stained, . . . affording shades of color more exquisite than any dyer could produce. Millet made great use of these in his painting, taking from them suggestions of color which he said he could have got in no other way."[8] For Millet, then, the rough appearance of homespun had to be softened by use to be acceptable in his art, the paler colors of worn fabric functioning as a symbol of times past.

Alfred Sensier pointed to a different evocation of the past, taking a longer view. "I am however forced to say," Sensier confides, "because it is true, that there is in *Woman Spinning* something that awakes in the spirit a memory of the Dutch school. It is first of all the transparence of the interior light, the silence of the

hot but friendly colors; it is also this execution where the touch is concealed and that is supple and velvety as in certain paintings by Terburg [Gerard Ter Borch] and by some masters of his group."[9] Sensier stressed painterly correspondences across the centuries, yet he could also have pointed to the shared interest in domestic tasks and the concomitant centrality of a female figure.[10] The motif of a woman spinning was the very essence of domesticity, and depictions of the endless nature of the work involved in homemaking went back to the medieval trope of Eve spinning, the female equivalent of Adam's tilling the soil. Millet's spinners, like the Dutch examples, embody, in Wheelwright's words, "Seriousness, earnestness, freedom from passion and excitement, order, sobriety, industry, contentment with one's lot, a modest self-respect, the love of parents and children, of husband and wife, good-will toward men and piety toward God."[11]

A recent cleaning has revealed the tape around the distaff to be a glossy-seeming purple. This color was admired in 1900: "One note of strong color, the ribbon about the distaff, suffices to save all the sober harmonies of the picture from becoming monotonous."[12] The distaff marks out a strong horizontal in the middle of the painting. Together with the verticals of chairs and cupboard, it locks the woman in place. The purple tape is jolting in conjunction with the coral bodice, whose color harmonizes with the gold neck cloth. It seems likely that the coral originally was not so vibrant. The writer in 1900 who described the purple tape as the "one note of strong color" characterized the bodice as "faded red." A cleaning before the one in 2007 apparently removed Millet's choice of color. FEW

PROVENANCE Henri Hecht, Paris (by 1876); [Georges Petit, Paris, c. 1880], Benoît-Constant Coquelin, Paris (by 1890); [Durand-Ruel, Paris, sold to Hill, 1891, as *Woman Spinning*]; James J. Hill, Saint Paul, Minnesota (1891–d. 1916); Mary T. Hill, Saint Paul, Minnesota, his wife, by descent (1916–d. 1921); James Norman Hill, Saint Paul, Minnesota, her son, by descent (from 1921); sale, Plaza Art Galleries, New York, 16 Nov. 1939, no. 66, as *The Spinner*, sold to Acquavella; [Acquavella Galleries, New York, from 1939]; Edwin Thanhouser, Great Neck, New York (until 1945, his sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 13 Dec. 1945, no. 34, ill., as *La Fileuse*, sold to Knoedler); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 7 Jan. 1946]; Robert Sterling Clark (1946–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Paris 1889b, p. 53, no. 519, as *Fileuse*; Williamstown 1956a, no. 114, pl. 31; Williamstown 1959b, ill.; Saint Paul 1991, pp. 79, 92, no. 20, pl. 12.

REFERENCES Piédagnel 1876, ill. opp. p. 52 (print after the painting); Darcel 1881, ill. opp. p. 30; Sensier 1881, p. 322, ill. opp. p. 320, as *Femme au rouet* (English ed., p. 198, as *Spinning-woman*); Mollett 1890, p. 116, ill. opp. p. 25; Roger-Milès 1895b, pl. 6; Cartwright 1896, pp. 319, 365; *Masters in Art* 1900–1909, vol. 1, pt. 8, p. 34, pl. 7; Holme 1902, pl. M39; Tomson 1903, ill. opp. p. 34; Marcel 1904, p. 70, ill. p. 65; Moreau-Nélaton 1921, vol. 2, p. 123, fig. 178; Gsell 1928, pl. 17; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 82, ill.; Chu 1974, pp. 38–39, fig. 53; Williamstown–San Francisco 2011–12, p. 135, fig. 89.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a fairly flat oak panel, 0.6 cm thick, with the grain running vertically. There are chamfers 2.2 cm wide on all four back edges and many old labels on the reverse. Frame abrasion on the upper and lower edges extends 1.6 cm into the image. The painting was cleaned in 2007 of extensive oil-based retouching that had darkened substantially. The old varnish had also become fogged and brittle, forming its own crack network. Damages under the earlier repaint were found to be less substantial than had been suspected. New varnish was applied and old solvent abrasion was more lightly inpainted. The signature was not cleaned as it had already been overcleaned and then strengthened.

The cream-colored ground is a thin layer, allowing the panel grain to be visible throughout. With magnification, underdrawing outlines for the bodice, the proper left hand, and the spinning wheel are visible, and an infrared photograph taken during treatment shows a complete underdrawing, probably in charcoal or graphite. The paint handling is quite thin, especially in the dark passages and details. The signature may be done in brown ink, which has suffered from cleanings and possibly fading.

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1. Sensier 1881, p. 198 (French ed., p. 321), declines to assign a date; Moreau-Nélaton 1921, vol. 2, fig. 178, dates it to c. 1855.
2. With their clear outlines, anonymity, and focus on a specific activity, these figures recall those in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century emblem books, thereby inserting the nineteenth-century images into a venerable and long-standing tradition.
3. Boston and others 1984–85, p. 74n2. Pace Sensier 1881 (French ed., p. 321), who says the woman is spinning wool. The identification was corroborated thanks to Sheila Beardslee Bosworth's help in directing me to the website for the West Virginia Association of Museums, www.museumsofwv.org/kids/pioneers_clothing.html (accessed 27 June 2005). There, the article by Dr. Richard S. Hartley, "The Life of Early Pioneers: Clothing," neatly distinguishes between a wheel for spinning wool and one for spinning flax. A wheel for spinning wool is much larger, sometimes standing as much as five feet high.
4. Many thanks to Kristen Lundquist, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute Library, for steering me to Munro 1982.

See also http://www.nidderdale.org/History/Textile%20Industry/Flax/Processing%20Flax.htm (accessed 9 Aug. 2005).

5. Eaton 1896, p. 190.
6. Tokyo–Kyōto–Yamanashi 1991, p. 214, no. 19, a painting set in Normandy, to judge from the woman's cap.
7. "Les Travaux des champs," *L'Illustration* 21, no. 519 (7 Feb. 1853), p. 93. Lavieille published the prints, printed on India paper, in 1855. These were republished in 1881 in London and New York. Lebrun 1887, p. 59. See Tokyo–Kyōto–Yamanashi 1991, pp. 171–72 for illustrations of all ten Labors.
8. Wheelwright 1876, p. 261.
9. Sensier 1881 (French ed., p. 322; author's translation): "Je suis pourtant forcé de dire . . . qu'il y a dans la *Femme au rouet* quelque chose qui éveille dans l'espirit le souvenir de l'école hollandaise. C'est d'abord la transparence de la lumière intérieure, le silence des colorations chaleureuses, mais amicales; c'est aussi cette exécution où la touche se dissimule et qui est souple et veloutée comme dans certains tableaux de Terburg et de quelques maîtres de son groupe."
10. See, for a discussion of the Dutch examples, Franits 1993, especially the many illustrations of women spinning throughout and pp. 71–76.
11. Wheelwright 1876, p. 275.
12. *Masters in Art* 1900–1909, vol. 1, pt. 8, p. 34.

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218 | **The Knitting Lesson** c. 1860

Oil on panel, 41.5 x 32 cm
Lower right: J. F. Millet
1955.533

Women in Barbizon were continuously busy. Sitting down was not an opportunity to rest but to mend, sew, spin, or knit, that is, to make or patch the clothes worn by the entire family. Edward Wheelwright, an American artist who spent nine months in Barbizon in the mid-1850s, visited the Millet household one evening and reported the simple scene of domesticity he found: "There was a lamp on the table, at which Millet was reading as I entered, while his brother Pierre was engaged in drawing. Opposite sat Madame Millet with her sewing, and beside her, with her knitting in her hand, the maid of all work who had answered my knock."[1] Because knitting was done both inside, as shown here, and outside, as can be seen in the many paintings, drawings, pastels, and prints of shepherdesses with needles in hand, the activity has come to be associated with peasant life. It is therefore no surprise that Millet's oeuvre includes many depictions of women and girls with their knitting.

A mother, or perhaps an older sister, has put down her mending to help a young girl—who has looped the blue yarn carefully over her right index finger—navigate the intricacies of making a sock. The room is floored with tiles and roofed with beams. Diamond-paned leaded glass in the window sheds a softened pattern on the window embrasure, and the capacious cupboard hanging on the back wall displays spoons on the door, while a jug and a pile of neatly folded laundry punctuate the top of a chest below. The picture of domesticity is completed by the white cat washing itself.

The motif of a young woman helping a girl knit a stocking attracted Millet throughout the 1850s. Several paintings and related compositional drawings attest to the artist's repeated exploration of the theme. A painting of the same subject at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (c. 1854) was preceded by a black chalk drawing highlighted with white (1853; private collection, Japan).[2] The Clark's painting, too, is associated with a black conté crayon drawing (Frick Art and Historical Center, Pittsburgh), and another painting in Boston, dated later, about 1860, also is closely related.[3] Details in the surroundings differ among the paintings and drawings. For instance, the cupboard with spoon rack on the back wall and the floor cupboard with linen, pitcher, and white cat at its base appear in the Clark's painting and the Boston painting of about 1860 but not in the Pittsburgh drawing, which features the same floor cupboard but with open shelves above. The diamond-patterned leaded glass in the Clark's version reappears, not in another knitting picture, but in other interiors, such as the etching *Woman Sewing beside a Window* (1855–56)[4] and the pastel *Morning Toilette* (c. 1860–62; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), in which a curtained bed fills the back wall. All these items were doubtless part of the furnishings of the Millet household, yet it is clear that, in the artist's mind, they were fluid, mobile, to be used when wanted.

Alexandra Murphy notes the recurrence of the theme of education in Millet's work, specifically that of a mother (or perhaps older sister; the relation of the figures in the Clark's painting is unclear) passing on skills to a daughter.[5] Murphy's mention of Saint Anne teaching the Virgin to read is particularly helpful, for it introduces the rich tradition of religious painting. The