



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

VOLUME ONE

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,
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TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a coarsely woven linen (9 threads/cm), with the tacking margins removed, glued to a finer weight linen (16–19 threads/cm). The slightly warped stretcher may be a replacement. This structural treatment may date between 1913 and 1919, when the picture was cleaned by dealer George Petit. There are very small, unexplained circular cracks with center islands in the dress area. These might be the result of irregular glue dispersion in the ground layers, which could have caused localized shrinkage of the paint. The painting has been cleaned several times. Old damages include a dent in the lower right corner, a five-inch vertical tear or crease with a scratch, and a small puncture in the upper left sky. There are age cracks throughout the surface, some opening sideways like traction cracks. Retouched traction cracks exist in several dark passages, with especially wide cracks in the umbrella. In ultraviolet light, scattered old varnish residues can be seen in paint interstices. The painting was cleaned of grime in 2005 and varnished. Color adjustments were made in small retouched areas of the sky.

The thick cream-colored ground masks the coarsely textured canvas. Some of the lower ground layers may be glue-based, rather than oil-based. Distortions in the threads along the edges suggest the canvas was stretched and primed by the artist. In magnification and infrared reflectography, deposits of charcoal may be seen at the edges of the costume, while graphite may be the medium seen on the collar, several strong lines in the face, and in other drawn lines around the figure. There appears to be a thin brown sketch layer below the final colors, which is visible at the edges of forms. The skirt at the left side originally extended further into the landscape, and the proper left sleeve near the elbow was also adjusted inward by the artist. The paint technique is thin and fluid, with no impastos. Washes of color near the signature area look water-based and may be brown or ocher ink, which has aged and darkened more than the underlying oil colors. The signature itself may also have been executed in ink.

1. Brunet 1977.

2. After the picture entered the Clark, it was known as

- Mademoiselle du Puyparlier*. Captain Auguste Faulte de Puyparlier was a friend of Abel Osmond, Corot's great friend (see Wissman 2007) and later of Corot himself. Perhaps this connection is the source of the confusion.
3. Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 114.
 4. For the portraits by Reynolds, see Mannings 2000, nos. 205, 942, 380, and 1398.
 5. Also suggested by Pomarède in Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 114; and, following him, Gérard de Wallens, in Wallens 1996, pp. 74–75, where *Louise Harduin* is compared with Ingres's *Caroline Rivière* (Musée du Louvre, Paris) on p. 75, which, after being exhibited at the Salon of 1806, remained in the family until it was bequeathed to the state in 1870.
 6. Robaut 1905, vol. 1, p. 23.
 7. See the letters from Corot to Osmond published by Étienne Moreau-Nélaton as “Le Roman de Corot,” in Moreau-Nélaton 1924, vol. 2, pp. 125–63; and Wissman 2007.
 8. Robaut 1905, vol. 1, p. 20, reproduced in Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, p. 6, fig. 2.
 9. “Cochin, Denys (-Pierre-Augustin-Marie), Baron,” *Grove Art Online* (accessed 17 Nov. 2006). http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/To18355?q=Denys+Cochin&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.
 10. Oxford–Edinburgh–Troyes 1990–91, pp. 57, 75, 104.

86 | Young Woman in a Pink Skirt c. 1845–50

Oil on canvas, 47.8 x 39.3 cm
1955.541

Corot painted the human figure throughout his career. Figures animate his landscapes, whether anonymous travelers on a road or identifiable figures in history paintings, such as Dante and Virgil or Saint Jerome. He painted portraits of family members and friends, male models dressed as monks, reclining and standing female nudes, and a series of women posing in the artist's studio, allegories of art and the painter's inspiration. For Corot, then, the human figure, and particularly the female human figure, was a continuing locus of painterly activity.

Young Woman in a Pink Skirt is one of Corot's more enigmatic depictions. A young woman, seated in front of a loosely suggested landscape of grays and browns, stares out of the picture from heavily lidded eyes, but not at the viewer. The lassitude implied by her slouching shoulders is echoed in her slightly parted lips; she looks almost as if she is in a trance. One viewer found



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the model's expression "haggard," "made more terrible by her empty blind eyes."¹ Clear light coming from the left highlights the right side of the model's face, the bright white of the loose blouse, and the vivid pink of the skirt; the brightness renders the somber gaze all the more unfathomable.

The troubling gaze, the "empty blind eyes," can be explained by the fact that the eyes have been altered, as have many other areas of the composition (see Technical Report). The condition of the eyes is particularly discomfiting because at present, with no pupils, they are glassy and opaque. This unfocused gaze combined with the loose blouse that shows most of the model's right breast makes her seem drugged

or perhaps not in her right mind. This is not the effect the artist intended.

More likely, the picture is an essay in conveying a melancholic or, at the least, a meditative mood. Probably painted in the late 1840s, *Young Woman in a Pink Skirt* forms part of a cluster of paintings Corot made beginning in 1839 of single figures that evince a melancholic mood. From the painting commonly called *Rebecca at the Well* (1839; Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena) through an unlocated depiction of a woman holding her left hand to her chin of about 1845–50,² Corot explored variations on the theme. Sadness pervades them all. In *Young Woman in a Pink Skirt*, "the sense of sadness is all the more convincing

because the picture incorporates none of the conventional gestures [of melancholia], such as a hand to the forehead, that signify thought.”³

Corot’s contemporaries were quick to identify in his landscapes a strain of melancholy. In 1839 Théophile Thoré wrote of Corot’s submissions to the Salon: “M. Corot is an austere, meditative man who sees nature as being the same. He needed no lessons for this. Quite naturally he produces calm, sad paintings, full of thought and lofty in character.”⁴ Some writers linked Corot’s melancholy (even though more often than not, this mood was described as one of poetry) to the same emotion evoked by the great seventeenth-century Dutch landscapist Jacob van Ruisdael. The critic Arsène Houssaye, when giving Corot a copy of his book on Leonardo da Vinci, inscribed it “To the Ruisdael of our age.”⁵ Early in the century, Jean-Joseph Taillasson described Ruisdael’s paintings in terms that would later be applied to Corot’s: “One cannot find in the paintings of other artists of his country a poetry as moving as that which he puts into his own; he inspires a sweet melancholy; this comes, no doubt, from the sensitivity of his soul.”⁶ Corot’s very person likewise was seen, at least by some, to be other than the genial, hail-fellow-well-met he appeared to be. Théophile Silvestre, in his groundbreaking *Histoire des artistes vivants*, reported on Corot’s underlying personality:⁷ “I nonetheless believe that Corot sometimes exaggerates even to himself the cheerfulness of his character, while I see the melancholy so often present in his work and the expression of sadness that occasionally takes possession of his features.”⁸ Melancholy and sadness recur throughout Corot’s oeuvre, and *Young Woman in a Pink Skirt*, despite its unfortunately compromised physical condition, is an early and haunting example. FEW

PROVENANCE The artist (until 1872, donated to sale, Drouot, Paris, 5 Feb. 1872, no. 25, as *Jeune femme*);⁹ Jules Paton (by 1880–83, his sale, 24 Apr. 1883, no. 50, as *La Méditation*); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 4 Dec. 1919]; Robert Sterling Clark (1919–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, no. 95, pl. 12; Williamstown 1959b, ill.; New York 1967, no. 7; Williamstown 1981a, no cat.; Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97, pp. 177–78, no. 73, ill. (French ed., pp. 230–31, no. 73, ill.)

REFERENCES Robaut 1905, vol. 2, pp. 142–43, no. 394, ill., as *Jeune fille aux cheveux blonds frisés*; Bernheim de Villers

1930, no. 63, ill. (drawing after the painting); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 21, ill.; Morse 1979, pp. 60, 68, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a fine-weave linen (28 threads/cm), glue-lined to a coarser fabric (19 threads/cm). Old lifted paint in the skirt, just to the left of the sitter’s hands, may explain the lining. The stretcher, which may be a replacement, is torqued forward in the top right corner. The painting may have been treated in 1930 by Chapuis and Coince. Some impastos are flattened, and there is an old gouge in the flesh near the sitter’s hairline. There are long, branched cracks, notably in the proper left arm, skirt area, and proper left side of the face, as well as scattered cracks in the white bodice. An odd oval patch of paint has been mechanically excised from the sitter’s proper left arm, leaving diamond-shaped cross-hatched marks. The upper paint added to the arms is wrinkled, and some pale pink strokes in the skirt appear to have crawled and resisted attachment to the lower surface. The painting was cleaned in 1981.

There are several areas of commercially applied whitish ground and what appears to be a reddish imprimatura layer visible below the background, flesh, and skirt colors, with perhaps a gray tone under other layers. The X-radiograph shows the ground is very thin, and could be a glue- rather than an oil-based application. There may be some charcoal underdrawing. The background was painted over the edges of the costume. The surface is very complex when viewed in all wavelengths of light. In infrared reflectography, the sitter’s proper right eye has two pupils, the lower one turned and looking over her shoulder, as is the proper left eye. The latest cleaning uncovered the earlier eyes, leaving them looking infocused. The proper right shoulder and bodice were shifted inward about 0.6 cm as seen in infrared light. The radiograph shows that the position of the proper left sleeve crease was once further to the right, and the bodice had a slightly fuller outline. The left forearm also may have been repositioned slightly. The considerable reworking in oil paint could be later alterations by the artist, possibly made as many as twenty years later. At least two periods of reworking on the face, arms, bodice, background, and lower edge are most striking in ultraviolet light. The face is particularly complex, with numerous layers. There is pitting in the thin passages, indicating that solvent damage occurred at some time. The various changes may be a combination of artist reworking and an early restoration.

1. Melikian 2000b, p. 7.

2. R 417. Among others can be counted *Young Woman with Flowers in Her Lap* (Österreichische Galerie im Belvedere, Vienna; R 381), *Seated Monk* (R 388), *Woman Crowned with Flowers, Reading* (1845; Musée du Louvre, Paris [R 389]), *Young Woman Reading* (R 393), *Meditation* (R 387), and *Peasant Woman with White Blouse and Yellow Headscarf* (R 414).



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87 | Meadow with Willows, Montlhéry 1860s

Oil on canvas, 35.3 x 22.3 cm

Lower left: COROT

1955.689

If *Barnyard Scene* and *Marsh at Bove, near Amiens* (cats. 92, 93) can readily be seen as forgeries in Corot's style, the case for *Meadow with Willows, Montlhéry* is not so easily made. At one time taken away from Corot's oeuvre by the Clark and attributed to a follower, the painting—or one very like it—appears in Alfred Robaut's catalogue of the artist's works as no. 1300. Whenever Robaut could obtain a photograph of a catalogued work, he used it in these early twentieth-century volumes. When a photograph was not available, he made a careful drawing of the painting in question, and he did so in 1889, when he visited the owner of what would be his no. 1300, Philippe Gille. In the catalogue raisonné, Robaut noted that Corot had given the little painting to Vivier. It is not known when Gille acquired the work. Given Corot's well-known love of music and the theater, it is tempting to identify Vivier as Eugène Vivier (1817–1900), a celebrated performer of the French horn, and Gille as the art and music critic and librettist.¹ Corot often gave away small pictures as tokens of affection or as thank-you gifts.

Troubling is the poor quality of the picture. Its current surface is a mixture of abrasions and retouchings, with the result that the dark-light contrasts are far too strong. The figural elements—the woman seated on the ground at left and the two cows in the meadow at right—are more perfunctory than is usually the case, even with the most casually drawn of Corot's figures.

How to reconcile the provenance given by Robaut, who rarely if ever made a mistake in his attributions, and the present sorry state of the picture? The harsh treatment the painting has received, as recorded in the Technical Report, has significantly altered the appearance of the work. It is, in short, impossible to know what it looked like when Corot gave it to Vivier, probably sometime in the 1860s. The ghost of the tower at the left may be the hundred-foot dungeon of the thirteenth-century castle at Montlhéry, where Corot visited his friend Madame Castaignet in August 1859.² Rather than assigning this painting to a follower of Corot, it seems more judicious to admit its ruinous state of preservation and retain it as no. 1300 in Robaut's catalogue. FEW

3. Michael Pantazzi, in *Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97*, p. 178.
4. Translated and quoted in *Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97*, p. 180.
5. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes et de la Photographie, Yb3 949 III.
6. Taillason 1807, p. 49; quoted in *The Hague–Cambridge 1981–82*, p. 69.
7. Hannoosh 2006.
8. Silvestre 1857, p. 99, “Je crois néanmoins, et à son avantage, que Corot s'exagère parfois à lui-même la gaieté de son caractère, lorsque je vois la mélancolie si souvent présente dans ses ouvrages et l'accent de tristesse que par intervalles prennent ses traits”; translation partially taken from *Paris–Ottawa–New York 1996–97*, p. 152.
9. This sale took place in order to raise funds for the care of the painter Auguste Anastasi, who went blind in 1870.