



**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,  
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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,  
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Details:

TITLE PAGE: Camille Pissarro, *The Louvre from the Pont Neuf* (cat. 253)

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PRECEDING PAGE 474: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Onions* (cat. 280)

PAGES 890–91: Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Women of Amphis* (cat. 3)

paint, although there may be a painted blue sketch outlining the figure. The paint is applied in a thick paste consistency with thin scumbles throughout the picture. The white fabric was painted after the figure. There is also an impasto pentimento through and extending past the proper right hand, as if the white cloth originally extended past the fingers. A strong series of diagonal impastos below the visible paint layer in the upper left quadrant, which are unrelated to the final image, underwent color changes from green to pink, then dark blue, before the final pale blue. An X-radiograph of this area shows the lower brushwork, but provides no resolution as an image. There are both red and green paint layers lying below the model's hair at the right side, where much of the background seems to have been reworked over a darker green color, and yellow-orange colors lie below the lower right area. Either Renoir considerably altered the background design or he reused a previously painted canvas. The inscription in the upper right corner was lowered by 1.3 cm; this appears to be the artist's handiwork.

1. Julie Manet diary entry for 19 Sept. 1895, in Manet 1979, p. 66.
2. Ibid.
3. White 1969, p. 340; Callen 1978, p. 74.
4. Blanche 1921, p. 37; cf. Blanche 1931, p. 73, and Vollard 1938, p. 203.
5. Blanche 1949, p. 435; "souviens-toi de Paul Berard, Deudon, Charles Ephrussi, quand je rapportais à Wargemont ma baigneuse de Capri! Ce qu'ils craignaient que je ne fasse plus des *Nini!*"
6. Ibid: "Raphaël rompt avec les écoles de son temps, se voue à l'Antiquité, la grandeur, la beauté éternelle."
7. Pierre-August Renoir to Paul Durand-Ruel, 21 Nov. 1881, in Venturi 1939, vol. 1, pp. 116–17: "simplicité et . . . grandeur."
8. Pierre-Auguste Renoir to Madame Charpentier, 1882, in White 1969, p. 350: "Raphael qui ne travaillait pas dehors avait cependant étudié le soleil car ses fresques en sont pleines. Ainsi à force de voir le dehors j'ai fini par ne plus voir que les grandes harmonies sans plus me préoccuper des petits détails qui éteignent le soleil au lieu de l'enflammer."
9. Vollard 1938, p. 203.
10. See Vollard 1938, p. 140.
11. Claretie 1881a; reprinted in Berson 1996, vol. 1, p. 335: "fleurette de ruisseau"; "museau vicieux."
12. Julie Manet diary entry for 19 Sept. 1865, in Manet 1979.
13. According to Ambroise Vollard, he sold it to Vever (Vollard 1938, p. 203); while Julius Meier-Graefe states he gave it as a gift (Meier-Graefe 1911, p. 112).
14. For details, see London–Paris–Boston 1985–86, p. 234.
15. RSC Diary, 29 Mar. 1926.
16. In Brussels 2000, p. 128, there is an installation photograph of Brussels 1904, showing a painting that may be the Clark's *Blonde Bather*. Although the photograph

is not clear, it seems that there is a line of cliffs at the model's eye level, which would suggest that the painting shown is the second version of the composition, now in the Pinacoteca Gianni e Marella Agnelli, Turin, and not the Clark's picture.

17. An installation photograph of the 1904 Salon d'Automne (The Barnes Foundation Archives, Merion) shows this painting.
18. Meier-Graefe 1929 lists the Clark picture incorrectly as in the Stang Collection, Oslo.
19. Venturi 1950a lists the Clark picture incorrectly as in the collection of Sir Kenneth Clark.

## 280 | Onions 1881

Oil on canvas, 39.1 x 60.6 cm

Lower left: Renoir. Naples. 81.

1955.588

In contrast to the elaboration of flower pieces from the same period, such as *Peonies* (cat. 274), *Onions* presents a deliberately relaxed and informal image. It was painted during Renoir's stay in Naples late in 1881; by inscribing it "Naples," he highlighted the link between the location and the picture's form and imagery, implicitly contrasting its informality with the artifice of Parisian culture, since it was in Paris that the painting was intended to be seen.



Fig. 280.1. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Fruits of the Midi*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 50.7 x 65.3 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1176



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Onions and heads of garlic are arranged loosely across a tabletop, placed on and off a crumpled white cloth with a red and blue border. Their seemingly casual placement and simple setting heighten the sense that they belong to a modest, relaxed southern way of life. The picture's treatment may also reflect a personal sense of relief; for the past three years Renoir had been dependent on the patronage of wealthy collectors, but early in 1881 the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel had begun to buy his paintings on a regular basis, enabling him to travel as his own master on an extended Italian tour.

The rhythms of the whole composition are dynamic and animated. The rhyming shapes of the onions and garlic, set at different angles, create an ebullient effect, complemented by the brushwork and the overall tonality of the canvas. The warm reds, yellows, and pinks on the onions are set against the softer, cooler hues in the background; fluent, cursive brushstrokes give a vivid sense of their three-dimensional form while at the same time contributing to the overall liveliness of the paint surface. Despite its informality, the composition is carefully structured, with the sharp

band of the cloth border on the left acting as a counterpoise to the weight of the principal group of onions.

The brushstrokes run in varied directions on the tabletop and cloth, but on the background wall they follow a roughly diagonal direction, from upper left to lower right; their comparative regularity acts to set off and emphasize the rounded forms of the onions. It was around this date that Renoir began regularly to use sequences of parallel brushstrokes such as this to structure his canvases, particularly, as here, in the background. Comparable strokes appear in *The Bay of Naples, Evening* (cat. 281), painted at much the same time, but there is no trace of such regularity in *Venice, the Doge's Palace* (cat. 278), painted earlier in his Italian trip. In some ways this handling is comparable to the more systematic parallel strokes that Paul Cézanne was using in these years, but Renoir seems to have used them more to create pattern and texture in his backgrounds, rather than as a means of modeling form with color, as Cézanne did.

*Onions* closely resembles Renoir's *Fruits of the Midi* (fig. 280.1), also dated "81," a canvas that is larger and somewhat more formally arranged, but

very similar in its handling. It seems very likely that these were the two still-life paintings that Renoir mentioned in a letter to Charles Deudon, sent from Naples in December 1881: "In a few days, I am going to send [to Durand-Ruel] one or two still-lives; one of them is good."<sup>1</sup> We have no way of knowing which one he favored.

The composition of these two canvases may be compared to Monet's recent still-life paintings, such as *Still Life with Apples and Grapes* of 1880 (The Art Institute of Chicago), in which the fruit is spread across a wide table in seemingly casual disorder. The deliberate informality of Renoir's and Monet's paintings of fruit is quite unlike the far more tautly structured still lifes that Cézanne was executing in these years; two years later, in Renoir's *Apples in a Dish* (cat. 284), it was Cézanne's example that was paramount.

This was the canvas titled *Onions* that Durand-Ruel bought from Renoir in May 1882 and was in turn included in his one-artist show mounted by the dealer in April 1883. After Sterling Clark bought the canvas from Durand-Ruel in 1922, he reiterated on many occasions that it was his favorite among his collection of Renoir's works and that he used it as a yardstick for judging other pictures.<sup>2</sup> JH

**PROVENANCE** The artist, sold to Durand-Ruel, Paris, 22 May 1882; possibly Madeleine and Charles Haviland, Limoges; Dr. Jacques Soubies, sold to Durand-Ruel, 29 Dec. 1921; [Durand-Ruel, Paris, sold to Clark, 6 Apr. 1922]; Robert Sterling Clark (1922–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Probably Paris 1883a, no. 29; New York 1940b, no. 19, ill.; New York 1946–47, no. 9, ill.; Williamstown 1956b, no. 150, pl. 15; New York 1967, no. 38; London–Paris–Boston 1985–86, pp. 86, 106, no. 62, ill. (French ed., pp. 204–5, no. 61, ill.) (exhibited in Boston only); Paris 1988, pp. 272–73, no. 103, ill., as *Nature morte: oignons*; Williamstown 1988c, no cat.; Williamstown 1996–97, pp. 13, 28, 80, 91, 93, ill.; Washington–Boston 2001–2, pp. 122–23, 217, pl. 50; Williamstown–Dallas–Paris 2003–4, not in cat. (exhibited in Dallas only); Montgomery and others 2005–7, no cat.; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, pp. 81, 262, fig. 193; Madrid 2010–11, pp. 94, 96–98, 114, no. 20, ill.

**REFERENCES** Meier-Graefe 1929, p. 152, fig. 132; Faison 1958, pp. 173–74, fig. 14; Beard 1960, p. 159, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 120, ill.; Ashbery 1967, p. 47; White 1969, pp. 339, 342, 346, no. 19, fig. 25; Fezzi 1972, p. 108, no. 451, ill. (French ed., p. 106, no. 430, ill.); Spaeth 1975, p. 197; Callen 1978, p. 73, fig. 55; Brooks 1981, pp. 68–69, no. 30, ill.; Faison 1982, p. 321, fig. 256; Wernick 1984, pp. 122–23, 130, ill.; White 1984, pp. 116, 118,

ill.; Nagoya–Hiroshima–Nara 1988–89, p. 231; Bade 1989, pp. 106–7, 142, ill.; Monneret 1989, p. 153, fig. 12; Updike 1989, pp. 83–84, ill.; Romberg 1991, pp. 37–38; De Vries-Evans 1992, p. 175; Jeromack 1996, pp. 84, 87, ill.; Kern et al. 1996, pp. 100–101, ill.; Ivinski 1997, p. 534, pl. VI; Todd 1997, p. 167; Rome 1999, p. 73; Néret 2001, p. 146, ill.; Thompson 2001, pp. 23, 80, ill.; Tokyo–Nagoya 2001, pp. 39, 225, 238, fig. 25; Cahill 2005, p. 38, ill.; Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, pp. 146–47, no. 58, ill.; Distel 2009, pp. 205–7, fig. 188. Wissman 2009, pp. 7–9, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The original canvas is a fine-weave linen (22–24 threads/cm) with a more coarsely woven (16 threads/inch) linen and glue lining. The five-member pine stretcher is probably original, although the off-square canvas edges and pinholes in the corners suggest that the picture was executed while pinned flat to a board. The present lining, which retains the artist's tacking margins, probably dates to 1933. There are small diagonal drying cracks in the lower left corner, with age cracks more widespread in the upper half of the image. A few old lifted cracks near the center crossbar were locally consolidated in 1985. Across the entire surface is a strong weave-interference pattern, which stems from the more pronounced twisted warp threads of the lining fabric. Several isolated impastos are moated, and the pure bright red strokes are melted from the heat used in the lining process. The ultraviolet light fluorescence is uneven and more dense in the background, due either to local glazing or to a partial cleaning of the lower half of the image. Oil paint retouching done to square up the left edge, together with several spots along the top and bottom edges, may have been applied by the artist after the picture was attached to the stretcher. Grime deposited in the valleys of the impastos suggests that the picture may have been varnished after it had accumulated some surface dirt. An upper layer of grime was removed from the varnish in 1985, when a decision was taken not to remove the coating due to the probable presence of solvent-sensitive yellow glazes.

The ground layer is a thin grayish white, which could be either artist-applied or commercial in origin. The off-square ground application around the perimeter helps confirm that the picture was prepared and painted off the stretcher. While no underdrawing media was detected, there may be a thin blue paint sketch, which can be seen outlining a few onions. The paint is primarily a stiff paste consistency applied wet-into-wet. Most colors in the palette contain admixtures of white, except for unmixed touches of bright red, some dark blue, and what appear to be local glazes.

1. The name and address of the inn are given in Renoir's letter from Naples to Charles Deudon, in Schneider 1945, p. 97.
2. See RSC Diary, 14 March 1941.