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

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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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22 | **Crossing the Street** 1873–75

Oil on panel, 46.2 x 37.8 cm
Lower left: Boldini 73 / 75
1955.650

In early 1872, just a few months after he arrived in Paris, Boldini moved into a studio at 11, place Pigalle in Montmartre, a building—and a neighborhood—filled with other artists. About a year or two later, he began to paint the streetscape just outside his door. Two of the earliest of these paintings are ambitious, multifigured compositions showing people, carriages, omnibuses, and dogs all crisscrossing the broad expanse of a city square. *Place Pigalle* (c. 1874; location unknown) depicts the view directly in front of Boldini's studio, looking north across the end of the rue Duperré toward the buildings that line the boulevard de Clichy.[1] *Place Clichy* (private collection), also painted in 1874, shows a similar scene at an intersection just to the west of the place Pigalle, in an even more wide-angle view. The Clark's *Crossing the Street* clearly relates to these large compositions, though it condenses their multiple vignettes of pedestrians and vehicles down to a single, closely linked group

of figures on a much smaller scale. The clearest comparison is to the central figures in *Place Pigalle*, one of whom is a young woman carrying a bouquet of flowers wrapped in paper who lifts the hem of her skirt to reveal a glimpse of white petticoat. This is essentially the same woman as the primary figure in *Crossing the Street*; similarly, a small black dog appears next to her in both works, while the foreground woman carrying baguettes in *Place Pigalle* relates somewhat less closely to the woman with her back turned in *Crossing the Street*, although she is similarly attired in simple work clothes with a white, frilled cap.

These similarities suggest that Boldini repeated and reconfigured certain elements of the cityscape in each work, probably twice employing his favorite model, Berthe, for example, as the woman with the bouquet. The critic Jules Claretie, in fact, described *Crossing the Street* as depicting "a corner of the Place Pigalle," although nothing visible in the painting identifies it explicitly, nor do the shop signs on the building and awning in the background reappear in the larger *Place Pigalle*.[2] While the links between the various city scenes are clear, the date of execution of *Crossing the Street* is not. The painting appears to bear two different dates, one immediately following the signature that seems to read "73," and the other slightly below the signature, more clearly reading "75." If Boldini did begin work on this panel in 1873, it would have been one of his first treatments of the cityscape theme, and would presumably have inspired the larger-scale, more complex scenes of 1874. It is not clear why he would have set aside and then revisited the painting two years later, perhaps after keeping it in his studio as a reference for the larger works, although as Sandy Webber has observed (see Technical Report), the reworking around the edges of the panel and around the signature suggests that he may have done just that, presumably adding the second date after this revision.

The first mention of the painting, in Jules Claretie's comments of 1876, supplies a considerable amount of information. In a review of the Salon of that year, Claretie discussed the appeal of the Parisian cityscape for foreign artists, and referred to two paintings by "Baldini" that he had seen in the gallery of the dealer Alexis Febvre, identifying one of them only as showing the Place Pigalle. His description, however, clearly refers to the Clark painting, of "a dandy leaning out the window of his carriage, watching a passing *cocotte* who hitches up her skirt and holds a bouquet."[3] Notable, first, is that Boldini chose to exhibit his work with a private dealer, rather than submitting it to the official Salon. Indeed, Claretie's misspelling of the artist's name was probably a consequence of Boldini's limited public exposure for much of the 1870s, since showing with dealers, as he did, might assure a steadier income, but could not result in the wide recognition that success at the Salon would produce. Further, the appearance of *Crossing the Street* in Febvre's display, presumably in late 1875 or early 1876, judging by the critic's retrospective remarks, may further support the idea that Boldini had finished it not long before—that is, he did not consider it a completed work until the later date inscribed on its surface.

It is also significant that Claretie identified the dandy as the subject of the painting, or more precisely, the man's gaze, rather than the much larger-scale young woman, as might be expected. It is her availability to being looked at unawares, by the viewer of the painting as well as by the dandy, that in fact constitutes the theme of the work. She is unaccompanied and far more elegantly dressed than the other woman in the scene, who is more clearly occupied with work of some sort. Claretie carried the implications of the young woman's situation to their logical end, concluding that she was a "cocotte" or courtesan. There may, however, be considerably more ambiguity in Boldini's portrayal. This uncertainty is underscored by the small size of *Crossing the Street*, which gives it a very different dynamic from that of the larger cityscapes. Rather than presenting a comprehensive panoramic overview that depicts the city as crowded and busy yet easily understood, *Crossing the Street* shows only a fragment of the urban fabric. This is evident particularly in the cropping of the carriage at the left, whose driver holds the reins of a horse that is entirely beyond the frame. In addition, each of the primary figures looks in a different direction, underscoring their lack of connection.

While this type of composition might evoke anxieties associated with the fast-paced, alienating modern city, Boldini instead presents the scene in a lighthearted manner, his relatively detailed brushwork recalling the paintings of Ernest Meissonier (1815–1891) or Mariano Fortuny (1838–1874), and encouraging the viewer to appreciate the attractions both of the paint handling and of the pretty Parisienne it delineates, from the ruffles of the woman's emerald green dress to the subtle reflection of the pink flowers on her cheek. *Crossing the Street*, then, combines compositional methods that Boldini was probably absorbing

from French avant-garde artists including Edgar Degas and Gustave Caillebotte—who were exploring the form and dynamics of the cityscape at just this time—with his own more commercially viable facture and detail, in order appeal to dealers and collectors.[4] SL

PROVENANCE [Alexis Febvre, Paris, in 1876]; [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 31 Dec. 1925]; Robert Sterling Clark (1925–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS New York 1939a, no. 18, ill., as *Dans la rue Chauveau-Lagarde*; Williamstown–Hartford 1974, pp. 29–30, no. 10, ill., as *In the Rue Chauveau Lagarde*; Williamstown 1982a, no. 2, ill.; Williamstown 1982d, pp. 67, 71, no. 3, ill.; Ferrara–Williamstown 2009–10, pp. 38–39, 41, 42, 43, 106, 109, 203, no. 15, ill.

REFERENCES Claretie 1876b, p. 3; Breuning 1939, p. 35, ill.; Brooks 1981, pp. 72–73, no. 32, ill.; Steele 1985, p. 209, ill.; *Antiques* 1997, pp. 528–29, ill.; Doria 2000, vol. 1, no. 47, ill.; Hunter 2000, p. 401, ill.; Dini and Dini 2002, vol. 1, pp. 161, 259, pl. 33, vol. 3, pp. 137–38, no. 232, ill.; Panconi 2002, p. 151, ill.; Cahill 2005, p. 64, ill.; Copenhagen 2006–7, p. 176, 180, fig. 148; Montecatini Terme 2008, p. 50, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a lightweight (0.8 cm thick), light-colored wood, possibly mahogany, with wide, shallow chamfers along the back edges. The panel is not quite square. The plane is flat, the grain runs vertically, and the reverse has been stained dark brown. Four red wax seals on the reverse each have the initials "S.B." The paint layer has age and traction cracks scattered throughout. Oozing of lower colors up through the cracks can be seen in several places, suggesting that color changes were made quickly while the lower layers were still wet. There is some solvent abrasion where thin dark strokes pass over thick brushwork. The picture was last cleaned in 1974 by Roland Cunningham Jr. in Hartford, Connecticut. Extensive secondary paint on the edges, covering the traction cracks on the awning and partially obscuring sections of the signature, suggests reworking by the artist, rather than a restoration. Natural resin residues can be seen on the carriage and the window behind it. The surface reflectance of the present synthetic resin varnish is somewhat dry, with gloss only on the thicker paint strokes.

There appears to be either no ground layer or only a slight wash of pale paint. The light-colored wood has been stained from bleeding of some of the finely ground colors. There is no detectable underdrawing or paint sketch. The paint is of paste consistency and was applied wet-into-wet, with additional drier color applications. Although the principal figure was painted first and the scene executed around her, the right female figure appears to have been added over the street colors. The brushes used were quite small in size, ranging up to 0.6 cm in width, at the largest.

1. See Ferrara–Williamstown 2009–10, pp. 36–37, 107, fig. 39, for a discussion and an illustration of *Place Pigalle*.
2. Jules Claretie, in his review of the annual Salon in 1876, recalled that "a painting by M. Baldini [*sic*] (of Ferrara), the *Place Clichy*, was on view for a long time at Févre [*sic*], on the rue Saint-Georges. . . . M. Baldini also showed a corner of the *Place Pigalle* there" ("Un tableau de M. Baldini [de Ferrare], la *Place Clichy*, fut longtemps exposé chez Févre, rue Saint-Georges. . . . M. Baldini exposait aussi là un coin de la *Place Pigalle*"). Claretie 1876b, p. 3. This reference suggests that the present painting may have been exhibited with the title *Place Pigalle* or otherwise identified as such. An identification of the location as the rue Chauveau Lagarde in the 8th arrondissement, proposed in 1939, has since been discounted.
3. Ibid.: "un gommeux regardant en se penchant à la portière d'un fiacre une *cocotte* qui passait, retroussant sa jupe et tenant à la main un bouquet."
4. For more on Boldini's characteristic combination of avant-garde and commercial approaches in his cityscapes of this period, see Ferrara–Williamstown 2009–10, pp. 36–42.

23 | **Washerwomen** 1874

Oil on panel, 13.7 x 20 cm
Lower left: Boldini / 74
1955.653

In addition to producing carefully painted studio compositions for art dealers and collectors in the early 1870s, Boldini also began not long after his arrival in France to travel to the suburbs of Paris to paint landscapes. These were often made in a very different style from his highly detailed interior scenes, inspired in part by the practices of the Macchiaioli, the group of Italian artists who advocated non-academic, plein-air painting with whom Boldini had associated prior to his move, and in part by French landscape artists. Such French models included earlier practitioners who had themselves inspired the Macchiaioli, as well as the emerging Impressionist group. Boldini's choice of a riverbank location for *Washerwomen*, presumably along the Seine—where artists like Monet and Renoir regularly worked—may have been prompted largely by these sorts of French precedents and practices. The work is painted quite broadly, using thick strokes of color to indicate the grassy foreground and the trees