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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34 | **Seated Nude** 1884

Oil on canvas, 116.5 x 89.8 cm
Upper right: W-BOVGVEREAV-1884
1955.659

Many paintings of female nudes show the figures in contrived, even improbable positions to display the female body to frankly titillating effect. *Seated Nude*, by contrast, acknowledges that women can think by depicting a young woman engrossed in her thoughts while sitting at the edge of a pool of water at the base of a cliff or cave. Unself-consciously clasping her legs, she is sufficient unto herself; she does not need to be looked at to be complete. This seemingly straightforward picture of a bather is made enigmatic, however, by the swath of dark blue drapery falling to the ground from her head. Usually in pictures of bathers, drapery is shown on the ground to protect delicate flesh from hard sand or rock. That this nude pointedly does not sit on the blue fabric complicates the interpretation of the painting.

As an assiduous student of the classical tradition, promulgated by the state-sponsored École des Beaux-Arts, Bouguereau had drawn and painted the nude human figure since he was young. The human figure was considered the carrier of the noblest truths and meaning in art, the epitome of natural creation. Bouguereau frequently chose subjects that allowed him to showcase his mastery of the form, in mythological scenes, such as the *Birth of Venus* (1879; Musée d'Orsay, Paris) or *The Education of Bacchus* (1884; private collection), in personifications of Love or Evening, or in religious subjects, such as *The Flagellation* (1880; Musée de La Rochelle) or *First Mourning*, showing Adam and Eve grieving over the dead body of Abel (1888; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires).[1] With bathers, though, the nudity is frank and unencumbered by literary narrative or allusions. Here the emphasis is solely on the juxtaposition of hard rock, water, and soft flesh and the artist's skill in rendering these different textures convincingly.

Bouguereau found infinite inspiration in the human figure. In a lecture given at the Institut de France in 1885, he explained the basis of his art: "Antiquity reveals what an inexhaustible source of variegated inspiration nature is. With a relatively restricted number of elements—a head, a bust, arms, a torso, legs, a stomach—how many masterpieces have been made! Then why seek out other things to paint or sculpt?"[2] He drew constantly, always referring to nature, to inform his art. Much of the charm and credibility of Bouguereau's paintings can be attributed to his keen draftsmanship. Bodies, faces, hands, and feet—the latter two notoriously difficult to get right—are rendered with breathtaking assurance. Contemporaries of the artist were quick to note his facility. Carroll Beckwith, writing in 1890, was an admirer: "In most of his pictures I am impressed by the great beauty of drawing—above all, in the extremities. The hands and feet are marvels of grace and proportion."[3] It is said that the idea for *Seated Nude* originated when the scheme for a horizontal painting of a seated bather was abandoned. From one discarded composition came two works, the Clark's *Seated Nude* and the much larger, vertical *Bathers* (1884; The Art Institute of Chicago).[4] The painting in Chicago is compositionally and coloristically more complex—two figures instead of one, one standing, the other seated, one silhouetted against light sky, the other against dark rock. The shared genesis of the two works may account for the same model being used for the seated figure in each.

Another possible source for *Seated Nude* could be a picture that became an icon of contemporary French painting almost as soon as it was exhibited: Hippolyte Flandrin's (1809–1864) *Nude Youth Seated on a Rock* of 1835–36 (Musée du Louvre, Paris). Shown in the Exposition Universelle of 1855, it was caricatured that year by Bertall in the *Journal pour Rire* and copied in a sketchbook by Edgar Degas, also in 1855. Perhaps more important for its fame was its broadcast in a print.[5] Flandrin's youth sits on a green drapery on a rock overlooking the sea, his forehead resting on his drawn-up knees. The long curve of his back, from the crown of his head down to his buttocks, is offset by the angularity of thighs, shins, and arms. Bouguereau's seated nude presents much the same contrast of curved back and angled legs—even more complex in her case in that her lower legs are crossed. The abstraction of Flandrin's painting is softened in Bouguereau's, not only by the change from male to female body but also in the breaking of the circle of head to knee. Bouguereau's nude is made human because we can see her face, lost in thought.

In almost all paintings of bathers by Bouguereau, drapery is to be sat on, not to cover the head.[6] There seems to be no specific meaning that can be attached to its unusual usage here. It connotes modesty and

lends the nude an air of mystery. The blue hue of the cloth is an odd choice; its color marks it and by extension the bather as interlopers in this rocky setting. The figure may be meticulously copied from nature, but this woman is not integral with her environs. If nothing more can be said about it, the blue drapery, unsettlingly suggestive of the color traditionally worn by the Virgin Mary, announces *Seated Nude* as concocted and artificial. It makes us look again at Bouguereau's skill as a painter. FEW

PROVENANCE The artist, sold to Boussod, Valadon, 15 Nov. 1884; [Boussod, Valadon, Paris, sold to Olry, 27 May 1885]; probably Jacques Olry, Paris, from 1885;[7] [Galerie Lorenceau, Paris, sold to Clark, 29 May 1938]; Robert Sterling Clark (1938–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1959b, ill.; Williamstown 1985b, no cat.; Montreal 1990, p. 199, ill.; London 1997, pp. 90, 157, no. 58, pl. 107.

REFERENCES Vachon 1900, p. 155; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 5, ill.; Harding 1979, p. 6, ill.; Zeiger 1995, ill. on cover; Wissman 1996, pp. 84, 86, pl. 54; Cahill 2005, p. 56, ill.; Nehamas 2007, p. 25, fig. 15; Bartoli 2010, vol. 2, pp. 225–26, no. 1884.08, pl. 175.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a very finely woven linen (22 threads/cm). The picture remained unlined until 1978 when it was wax-resin lined to lightweight linen, to hold down severe and extensive cupped cracks, crossbar stretcher creases, and flaking. A series of concentric crack networks mar the surface, some formed from handling the picture by its crossbars. A thick layer of yellowed varnish was removed from the painting in 1978, and there had been at least one previous cleaning and revarnishing. At that time the original six-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher was replaced with a five-member redwood ICA spring tension design, with a single horizontal metal crossbar. Due to returned cupping, the picture was relined in 1996 by removing the wax lining and mounting the painting to a thin rigid sheet of G-10 (resin-embedded fiberglass) using the adhesive Beva 371. A lightweight polyester gauze was used as a release interleaf fabric. A layer of linen was attached to the stretcher for extra support before the mounted painting was restretched using the original tacking margins. Due to solvent sensitivity of the blacks and browns, some original varnish was left on the background passages. This is visible in ultraviolet light, where the cleaning was stopped in squared-off edges around the figure. The paint layer is in quite good condition, with a retouched old scratch or gouge in the shadow to the right of the figure's thigh and very minor retouches in the background above the figure's head. The right edge may have reworking by the artist. The cupping is still slightly visible, but the paint appears to be stable.

There are two ground layers, the lower being a commercially applied gray layer extending onto the tacking margins. The upper, artist-applied layer is pale pink, which is visible under the image, especially beneath the drapery and in a deposit along the lower edge. Light, single, underdrawing lines, possibly charcoal, on the face, neck, hands, and drapery are detectable in infrared reflectography. The paint layer follows the drawn layout very closely, with no visible alterations. The paint layer is very smooth and thinly applied in blended vehicular brushwork, with no real impastos. Scumbles were used to indicate sand and rock highlights.

1. B 1879.02, 1884.01, 1880.02, and 1888.02.
2. Vachon 1900, pp. 132–33: "L'Antiquité montre quelle source inépuisable d'inspirations variées est la nature. Avec des éléments relativement peu nombreux—une tête, un buste, des bras, un torse, des jambes, un ventre—combien il a été fait des chefs-d'oeuvre! Alors, pourquoi aller chercher autre chose à peindre ou à sculpter?"
3. Beckwith 1890, p. 262.
4. B 1884.07.
5. Paris–Lyon 1984–85, pp. 70–71.
6. For examples, see B 1879.14 and 1884.07.
7. See Goupil Stock Books, book 11, p. 117, no. 17227.

Cyprien-Eugène Boulet

French, 1877–1972

35 | Parisian Woman (La Parisienne) 1930s

Oil on canvas, 65.1 x 54.3 cm
Lower right: Cyprien. Boulet
1955.660

Throughout the course of their collecting, the Clarks were drawn to decorative pictures of appealing ladies such as this one, which Sterling Clark described as a "charming half length" when he and Francine first saw the painting at the Wildenstein Gallery in New York. The exhibition in which it appeared was devoted to contemporary French art of the most traditional sort, which Mr. Clark deemed "creditable" with "little in eccentrics."[1] The couple immediately bought the painting for a rather modest sum.

Cyprien Boulet, the painter of *Parisian Woman*, is not well known today, but he was a rather popular artist in France during the first decades of the twentieth century.[2] Boulet trained in Paris with the conservative painters Jean-Paul Laurens (1838–1921), Raphaël