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

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Nineteenth-Century European Paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute is published with the assistance of the Getty Foundation and support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Produced by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
225 South Street, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267
www.clarkart.edu

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Production by The Production Department,
Whately, Massachusetts
Printed on 135 gsm Gardapat Kiara
Color separations and printing by Trifolio, Verona

Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London
P. O. Box 209040, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-9040
www.yalebooks.com/art

Printed and bound in Italy
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.
Nineteenth-century European paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute / 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, Fronia E. Wissman.
volumes cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-935998-09-9 (clark hardcover : alk. paper) —
ISBN 978-0-300-17965-1 (yale hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Painting, European—19th century—Catalogs. 2. Painting—Massachusetts—Williamstown—Catalogs. 3. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute—Catalogs. I. Lees, Sarah, editor of compilation. II. Rand, Richard. III. Webber, Sandra L. IV. Title. V. Title: 19th-century European paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.
ND457.S74 2012
759.9409'0340747441—dc23
2012030510

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Stanislas Lépine

French, 1835–1892

188 | Moonlit River (The Banks of the Somme, Moonlight) c. 1866–70

Oil on canvas, 24.6 x 32.7 cm
Lower right: S. Lepine
1955.789

Stanislas Lépine found all the inspiration he needed in northern France. Born in Caen, he moved to Paris in 1852 and lived there the rest of his life, traveling little. Because his life is so sparsely documented (see cat. 189), his destinations can be determined only from the titles of his paintings: Cherbourg and Caen in the northern part of Normandy; the Marne River, which flows into the Seine from the east just south of Paris; and sites on the Seine a short distance from Paris, such as Argenteuil and the Grande Jatte. Robert Schmit and Manuel Schmit, the cataloguers of Lépine's work, have located this moonlit scene (along with two others)[1] on the banks of the River Somme, halfway between Paris and the Belgian border to the north.[2] In truth, however, the artist's interest was engaged, not in topography, but in the mysterious effect of moonlight.[3]

Lépine must have felt an affinity for nocturnes: he made his debut at the Salon of 1859 with a moonlit scene of the port at Caen and painted them throughout his career. Rendering moonlight convincingly is a greater challenge than painting sunlight, beginning with the simple reason that it is seen and experienced so much less often than sunlight, with the result that its different colors and its obscuring effect on objects were, of necessity, less studied. In the nineteenth century, as increasing numbers of artists painted outdoors, exploring as wide a range of meteorological and light conditions as was feasible, night scenes were encompassed in the larger project of documenting the seen world. Toward the end of his life, Camille Corot, Lépine's professed teacher,[4] painted moonlit scenes as a logical extension of his well-known preference for the liminal times of day, dawn and dusk. Charles-François Daubigny, more adventurous than Corot in his pursuit of singular atmospheric conditions, did as well. More than these examples, however, Lépine's moonlit river scene recalls similar works by the Dutchman Johan Barthold Jongkind. Jongkind's nocturnes brought into the nineteenth century the otherworldly effects of the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Aert van der Neer. See, for example, Jongkind's *Moonlight on the Seine* (1855; Gemeentemuseum, The Hague), *Rue Saint-Jacque, the Church of Saint-Séverin* (1877; Musée Carnavalet, Paris), and *Harbor by Moonlight* (1871; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

Jongkind's moonlit scenes must have appeared as a novelty in mid-century France. Artists and public alike were used to landscapes based on the Franco-Italian tradition established by Domenichino, Nicolas Poussin, and Claude Lorrain in the seventeenth century. By the nineteenth century, the clear, blond light of Italy had become the norm in landscape depictions. Rarely did French landscapists paint night scenes (with the well-known exception of the *Times of Day* series by Claude-Joseph Vernet in the eighteenth century). Charles Blanc explained in 1863 that the sentiment of melancholy, so pervasive in night scenes, was for a long time unknown to the French. "[T]he breath of the north," in the form of van der Neer's night scenes, "has brought to us [the French] these vague and romantic emotions."[5] A quotidian view gains interest at night, when the imagination is engaged. The darker colors of night in combination with the starker contrast of dark and light render forms indistinct and frustrate the desire to see and hence to know what is depicted. In the face of the inability to distinguish detail, the viewer necessarily succumbs to the poetic unspecificity of night.

Lépine could easily have met Jongkind and seen his paintings at the shop run by Pierre-Firmin Martin (1817–1891). In the early 1850s, Martin opened a secondhand store in Montmartre, the neighborhood where Lépine lived. This soon became a place to buy paintings by Corot, Jean-François Millet, Théodore Rousseau, Jules Dupré, Adolphe Félix Cals, Eugène Boudin, and Jongkind, that is, landscapes of unassuming locales painted often out of doors with visible brushwork as an index of the artist's response to the motif. It was a short step for Martin to sell the paintings by the artists who so closely followed the generation of Rousseau and Millet. After 1870, works by the artists now called the Impressionists could be bought from him as well. Martin was so closely allied with the younger artists that he served as director of the company that was legally in charge of their first group exhibition, in 1874.[6] Lépine showed three works that year with Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, and their colleagues, the only time he did so.[7]

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The people who bought paintings at Martin's shop were a mix of highly selective collectors, among them Henri Rouart, Alfred Sensier, Jean Dollfus, and Armand-François-Paul Desfriches, comte Doria (1824–1896). Doria, who bought this picture after Martin's death, added it to his collection of works, some of which he had purchased from Martin. Doria amassed almost seven hundred works by such artists as Corot (almost seventy paintings and more than twenty drawings), Millet, Rousseau, Daubigny, Honoré Daumier, Antoine-Louis Barye, Cals, Gustave Colin, and Victor-Alfred-Paul Vignon. By 1893, Lépine's *Moonlit River* was one of more than twenty paintings by the artist in Doria's collection, which also included drawings and canvases by Paul Cézanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir (ten works), Jongkind (ten paintings and almost thirty watercolors), Édouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Armand Guillaumin, Alfred Sisley, Berthe Morisot, Claude Monet, and Edgar Degas.[8]

With Lépine's devotion to Corot's example and the great likelihood that he would have seen Jongkind's work at Martin's shop, it is not surprising that he took up the moonlit scene, judging it to be a salable motif. The relatively firmly drawn trees, riverbank, and buildings bring solidity to the composition, even a chiastic structure, which counteracts the softening effect of the moonlight. Cool blues and grays, suggestive of a warm summer's night, are enlivened by creamy whites of the moon, its reflection in the water, the inexplicable reflection in the window, and the highlights outlining the horse, and by the touch of dark red in the foliage in the foreground. Northern mystery is still present, however, as edges of buildings blur, horns of animals glint, and foliage blends into a blue-gray haze. FEW

PROVENANCE [Pierre-Firmin Martin, Paris, d. 1891]; Sale, Drouot, Paris, 3 June 1893, no. 38, as *Bords de rivière*; Armand-François-Paul Desfriches, comte Doria, Paris (d. 1896, his sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 4–5 May 1899, no. 177, as *Clair de lune*); [Georges Petit, Paris]; [Galerie Lorenceau, Paris, probably sold to Clark, 16 Mar. 1938];[9] Robert Sterling Clark (1938–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Northampton–Williamstown 1976–77, p. 127, no. 85, ill.

REFERENCES Schmit and Schmit 1993, p. 237, no. 591, ill., as *Les Bords de la Somme, effet de lune*.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is an unlined, coarsely woven fabric (13–16 threads/cm) mounted on a five-member stretcher. Paper tape around the edges gives the appearance of a lining, but the support appears to be only one layer. The fabric is darkened and oxidized, and appears to be water-stained on the reverse. A draw running diagonally from the lower left to the upper right across most of the surface may be caused by the twisted stretcher, which has forced the lower left corner to turn out of plane. There are several small gouges near the signature, made when the paint was still wet, and small fills along the upper left corner edge. The painting was cleaned in 1976 by Barbara Beardsley. There are residues of the original varnish in the dark trees at the left. Some of the paler foliage and the moon fluoresce yellow in ultraviolet light, probably indicating the use of zinc white for these details. The surface has a low gloss sheen with the brushwork texture clearly readable. Generally, the condition of the paint is very good.

The ground is a thin off-white layer. Cusping around the sides of the support suggest that the artist applied the priming after the canvas was stretched. There was no evident underpainting, although there is a reddish imprimatura layer and possibly a thin black sketch for the architectural elements. The brushwork varies from thin to moderate paste consistency and was applied wet-into-wet. The pale passages of the reflection were scumbled over thin dark shadows, and the largest moon reflection was painted before the surrounding water. Paint may have been scraped away from the surface before the thickly painted moon was completed with either a yellow glaze or a yellow admixture with white. This deliberate abrasion also reveals that the sky color was changed several times using thin layers.

1. S 590 and S 592.
2. Robert Schmit to author, 18 May 2004, wrote that Lépine worked in the area of the Somme in the late 1860s.
3. Only with the Schmits' cataloguing of Lépine's oeuvre has the locale been identified. In 1893 and again in 1899, that is, not long after the artist's death, the picture was sold under the generic titles of *Bords de rivière* and *Clair de lune*.
4. Lépine listed himself as a pupil of Corot in the Salon *livrets*, first in 1866 and the last time in 1889.
5. Blanc 1861–76, vol. 10, p. 15: "le souffle du nord nous a porté ces vagues et romantiques émotions."
6. Distel 1990, pp. 40–41.
7. See Berson 1996, vol. 2, pp. 8–9.
8. Distel 1990, pp. 171–74.
9. The invoice lists it only as "1 painting by Lepine," but this probably corresponds to this picture.

189 | Montmartre, the rue Cortot c. 1872–76

Oil on canvas, 45.8 x 37.6 cm
Lower left: S. Lepine
1955.791

Stanislas Lépine first went to Paris from Caen, where he was born, in 1852 to attend the *Lycée* Chaptal. Convalescing from an illness, he decided to become a painter. Evidently self-taught (there are no records of his studying with any particular artist), he made copies in the Musée du Louvre and visited the studios of various artists. He made rapid progress. Despite his lack of formal training or a sponsor, his painting *Caen Harbor: Moonlight Effect* (location unknown) was accepted at the Salon of 1859. That same year he settled in Montmartre, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Any investigation into the life and career of Lépine is hampered by a sorry lack of documentation. This lack stands in stark contrast to the lives of his near contemporaries, the much better known Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, for example. Lépine was not the innovator that Monet and Degas were; his output concentrated on views of Paris, its parks and waterways, his hometown of Caen, and the Normandy coast, all painted in a conservative, but highly nuanced, style derived in large measure from that of Camille Corot. He enjoyed the patronage of a select group of collectors that included Comte Doria and Henri Rouart and of the dealer Pierre-Firmin Martin (see cats. 89, 186, and 188). He explored various options of marketing his paintings, among them dealers, the annual Salons—where he showed a total of thirty-seven paintings between 1859 and 1892—and public sales held at the Hôtel Drouot in the 1870s and 1880s. Despite these efforts, his works did not sell well, and he died poor, leaving his family in debt.[1]

Described this way, Lépine's career seems of little import, but his modest success and the charm of his paintings argue for a careful reassessment. This street scene in Montmartre is a case in point. The Butte Montmartre, at 129 meters (423 feet) above sea level and 102 meters (335 feet) above the Seine,[2] loomed over the city of Paris. Incorporated into the city only in 1860, it was still decidedly rural in character a decade later, as Lépine's painting shows it to be. Montmartre as a whole was so off the beaten track that it barely figures in guidebooks even a decade later.[3] Earlier in the century Georges Michel had painted the quarries