

The background of the cover is a detailed 19th-century painting of a storm at sea. The sky is filled with heavy, dark, and turbulent clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon. The sea is dark and choppy, with white-capped waves crashing against a sandy beach in the foreground. Several large sailing ships with multiple masts are visible on the horizon, some with sails partially set, struggling against the wind. The overall mood is one of intense natural power and maritime drama.

**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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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,  
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

*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.



The Getty Foundation



Produced by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute  
225 South Street, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267  
[www.clarkart.edu](http://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

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

Details:

TITLE PAGE: John Constable, *Yarmouth Jetty* (cat. 73)

OPPOSITE COPYRIGHT PAGE: Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Bathers of the Borromean Isles* (cat. 89)

PAGE VIII: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Woman Crocheting* (cat. 267)

PAGE X: Claude Monet, *Seascape, Storm* (cat. 222)

PAGE XII: Jacques-Louis David, *Comte Henri-Amédée-Mercure de Turenne-d'Aynac* (cat. 103)

PAGE XVI: William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Nymphs and Satyr* (cat. 33)

PRECEDING PAGE 2: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer* (cat. 154)



97

## Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret

French, 1852–1929

### 97 | Primavera 1914

Oil on canvas, 172.7 x 87.5 cm

Lower left: PAJ. DAGNAN-B / 1914

1955.43

A student of both Alexandre Cabanel and Jean-Léon Gérôme at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, Dagnan-Bouveret debuted at the Salon of 1875. He soon established his reputation as a painter of narrative genre scenes rendered with almost photographic detail in such works as *Wedding Party at the Photographer's Studio*, exhibited at the Salon of 1879 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon), and *An Accident*, shown in 1880 (The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore). By the 1890s, his subject matter had shifted from modern life to society portraiture and large-scale religious imagery. His election in 1900 at the age of forty-eight to the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, the bastion of the French art establishment, marked the pinnacle of his career. In the face of increasingly abstract stylistic tendencies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dagnan-Bouveret remained resolutely naturalistic in his style.<sup>1</sup>

*Primavera*, painted in 1914, was shown at the Salon of 1920, which marked the artist's first Salon since the untimely death in 1918 of his only child, Jean, a casualty of World War I. The *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* hailed the artist's submission: "As an offering for his return to the fold, from which his already glorious springtime once sprang forth, Mr. Dagnan brings a *Primavera*, youthful, redheaded, slender, and nude, who emerges, in full relief, with an exquisite gesture of her head and arms, from a green veil where the new season dawns; and in her slenderness there is all the grace of the unfinished."<sup>2</sup> At the same Salon, Dagnan-Bouveret also exhibited *Oréade* (location unknown), a partially veiled female nude in the guise of a mountain nymph, set against a backdrop of greenery.<sup>3</sup> Given its similarity in subject and composition to the *Primavera*, *Oréade* might well have served as a pendant, its voluptuous nude complementing the lithe, youthful figure personifying Spring.

Dagnan-Bouveret's work from this period depicts a range of female subjects, from allegories such as *Primavera*, to literary figures, including *Ophelia* (location unknown) and *Marguerite at the Witching Hour*

(Musée Municipal, Cognac), exhibited at the Salons of 1910 and 1912, respectively. These works, at odds with his contemporaneous religious subjects, recall the feminine imagery that flourished in fin de siècle Symbolist art.<sup>4</sup> The timeless and idealized nude of *Primavera* evokes the allegorical figures and nymphs that populate the oeuvres of such Symbolist artists as Alphonse Osbert (1857–1939) and Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer (1865–1953). At the same time, the subject of the female nude resonates in the context of mainstream contemporary art. In the Salon of 1920, on view alongside Dagnan-Bouveret's *Primavera* and *Oréade* were images of frolicking nymphs and bathers, women at their toilette, mythological goddesses, and other thinly veiled allegories.

*Primavera* was exhibited as an “unfinished study,” which the artist would never complete.<sup>5</sup> The painting's matte finish and limited tonal range suggest the appearance of a pastel. An evenly spaced grid of charcoal lines underlies the oil sketch, clearly visible in the lower right of the composition (see Technical Report). The squared composition reflects the academic practice of transferring preparatory drawings to canvas. Beginning in the 1880s, Dagnan-Bouveret also employed photographs in a similar fashion, squaring paper prints for transfer to canvas in order to achieve a greater sense of realism in his paintings.<sup>6</sup> KCG

**PROVENANCE** Muilloc, Paris; Robert Sterling Clark (after 1920–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Paris 1920a, p. 22, no. 437, as *Primavera*; Williamstown 1955, no. 43, pl. 28; Williamstown 1958b, pl. 11; Williamstown 1979b, no cat.

**REFERENCES** Bricon 1920, p. 414; Paris 1930, p. 29; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, pp. 97, 113.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is an unlined coarse-weave linen (16 x 19 threads/cm), with a colorman stamp for G. Vasseur, the successor to Hardy-Alan, Paris, on the stretcher. A piece of canvas was originally added along the bottom edge, and the reverse of the canvas was sealed with an off-white layer prior to being stretched. The uneven canvas weave, combined with the slack tension, has created longitudinal undulations on the lower right edge and a bulge on the left beyond the figure's arm. There is a depression running along the seam across the bottom of the picture and through the signature. The slightly yellowed varnish stops 2.5 cm short of all the edges, indicating that the picture was varnished in its frame. Several areas of color are applied as glazes, and there are artist's reworkings over the varnish, especially the overpaint on the breast area, now more noticeable due to the

discolored varnish surrounding it. Ultraviolet light inspection shows this reworked area may contain zinc white. There is traction crackle where the figure's proper left hand was painted over the green robe. The varnish fluorescence and surface reflectance are thin and uneven. The picture has never been treated.

The ground is a commercially pre-primed off-white layer. The artist applied an overall brown tone to the ground, visible around the picture's edges, and painted the picture prior to stretching it. There are black charcoal grid lines spaced at intervals of 6.4 cm across the canvas, fainter where they pass under the heavier drawing used for the figure. The charcoal sketch for the figure and the drapery is particularly noticeable in and around the hands, and some of the figure lines may have been reinforced during the painting phase. In infrared reflectography, adjustments between the drawing and paint layer can be seen in the width of the girl's legs and the lowered feet positions. The entire image was created using large brushes.

1. On the artist, see Jean Damp, “P. A. J. Dagnan-Bouveret, 1852–1929,” in Dagnan-Bouveret 1930, pp. 3–7.
2. Bricon 1920, p. 414: “Pour l'offrande de son retour au bercail, d'où s'échappa jadis son printemps déjà glorieux, M. Dagnan apporte une *Primavera*, juvénile, rousse, menue et nue, qui sort, toute modelée, avec un geste exquis de la tête et des bras, d'un voile vert où éclôt la saison nouvelle; et il y a dans sa gracilité toute la grâce de l'inachevé.”
3. Paris 1920a, p. 22, no. 436.
4. See Paris–Toulon–Pau 1986.
5. Paris 1920a, p. 22, no. 437: “Étude inachevée.”
6. On the artist's use of photography, see New York 2002, pp. 61–74.