



**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,
Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley,
Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,
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- See also <http://www.nidderdale.org/History/Textile%20Industry/Flax/Processing%20Flax.htm> (accessed 9 Aug. 2005).
5. Eaton 1896, p. 190.
 6. Tokyo–Kyōto–Yamanashi 1991, p. 214, no. 19, a painting set in Normandy, to judge from the woman’s cap.
 7. “Les Travaux des champs,” *L’Illustration* 21, no. 519 (7 Feb. 1853), p. 93. Lavieille published the prints, printed on India paper, in 1855. These were republished in 1881 in London and New York. Lebrun 1887, p. 59. See Tokyo–Kyōto–Yamanashi 1991, pp. 171–72 for illustrations of all ten Labors.
 8. Wheelwright 1876, p. 261.
 9. Sensier 1881 (French ed., p. 322; author’s translation): “Je suis pourtant forcé de dire . . . qu’il y a dans la *Femme au rouet* quelque chose qui éveille dans l’esprit le souvenir de l’école hollandaise. C’est d’abord la transparence de la lumière intérieure, le silence des colorations chaleureuses, mais amicales; c’est aussi cette exécution où la touche se dissimule et qui est souple et veloutée comme dans certains tableaux de Terburg et de quelques maîtres de son groupe.”
 10. See, for a discussion of the Dutch examples, Franits 1993, especially the many illustrations of women spinning throughout and pp. 71–76.
 11. Wheelwright 1876, p. 275.
 12. *Masters in Art* 1900–1909, vol. 1, pt. 8, p. 34.

218 | The Knitting Lesson c. 1860

Oil on panel, 41.5 x 32 cm
 Lower right: J. F. Millet
 1955.533

Women in Barbizon were continuously busy. Sitting down was not an opportunity to rest but to mend, sew, spin, or knit, that is, to make or patch the clothes worn by the entire family. Edward Wheelwright, an American artist who spent nine months in Barbizon in the mid-1850s, visited the Millet household one evening and reported the simple scene of domesticity he found: “There was a lamp on the table, at which Millet was reading as I entered, while his brother Pierre was engaged in drawing. Opposite sat Madame Millet with her sewing, and beside her, with her knitting in her hand, the maid of all work who had answered my knock.”¹ Because knitting was done both inside, as shown here, and outside, as can be seen in the many paintings, drawings, pastels, and prints of shepherd-

esses with needles in hand, the activity has come to be associated with peasant life. It is therefore no surprise that Millet’s oeuvre includes many depictions of women and girls with their knitting.

A mother, or perhaps an older sister, has put down her mending to help a young girl—who has looped the blue yarn carefully over her right index finger—navigate the intricacies of making a sock. The room is floored with tiles and roofed with beams. Diamond-paned leaded glass in the window sheds a softened pattern on the window embrasure, and the capacious cupboard hanging on the back wall displays spoons on the door, while a jug and a pile of neatly folded laundry punctuate the top of a chest below. The picture of domesticity is completed by the white cat washing itself.

The motif of a young woman helping a girl knit a stocking attracted Millet throughout the 1850s. Several paintings and related compositional drawings attest to the artist’s repeated exploration of the theme. A painting of the same subject at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (c. 1854) was preceded by a black chalk drawing highlighted with white (1853; private collection, Japan).² The Clark’s painting, too, is associated with a black conté crayon drawing (Frick Art and Historical Center, Pittsburgh), and another painting in Boston, dated later, about 1860, also is closely related.³ Details in the surroundings differ among the paintings and drawings. For instance, the cupboard with spoon rack on the back wall and the floor cupboard with linen, pitcher, and white cat at its base appear in the Clark’s painting and the Boston painting of about 1860 but not in the Pittsburgh drawing, which features the same floor cupboard but with open shelves above. The diamond-patterned leaded glass in the Clark’s version reappears, not in another knitting picture, but in other interiors, such as the etching *Woman Sewing beside a Window* (1855–56)⁴ and the pastel *Morning Toilette* (c. 1860–62; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), in which a curtained bed fills the back wall. All these items were doubtless part of the furnishings of the Millet household, yet it is clear that, in the artist’s mind, they were fluid, mobile, to be used when wanted.

Alexandra Murphy notes the recurrence of the theme of education in Millet’s work, specifically that of a mother (or perhaps older sister; the relation of the figures in the Clark’s painting is unclear) passing on skills to a daughter.⁵ Murphy’s mention of Saint Anne teaching the Virgin to read is particularly helpful, for it introduces the rich tradition of religious painting. The



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example of Madonna and Child groups, either from the Italian Renaissance or their later interpretations in the seventeenth century, particularly by Nicolas Poussin, one of Millet's favorite painters, informs the stable, triangular form of the figural group.

Although Millet's painting is not a religious picture, it takes its configuration from depictions of the Madonna and Child. Importantly, Millet stressed the intimate, domestic aspect of the subject, filtering the Italian Renaissance form through the precedent

of seventeenth-century Dutch genre pictures and eighteenth-century French genre scenes. The Dutch example is often evoked in discussions of Millet's interior scenes, and in this instance the earlier century is strongly felt in the leaded-glass window. The theme of maternal instruction, however, is not particularly Dutch. Murphy's mention of the eighteenth-century French painter Jean-Siméon Chardin as an intermediate source of Millet is indeed apposite, especially given the emphasis placed on education in the eigh-

teenth century.⁶ Jacques-Firmin Beauvarlet's etching and engraving *Les soins maternelles*, of about 1776, after a drawing by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, showing a mother in a rustic interior (complete with cat) with her arms around her daughter teaching her to knit is closer to Millet's conception than any Dutch painting he might have known, but his knowledge of this print is uncertain.⁷ Nonetheless, he might well have known paintings by Chardin or prints after them. Chardin was among the first—and certainly the most famous—painter to depict scenes of domestic instruction, and the theme of education runs throughout his career.

Also evocative of the eighteenth century in these paintings of a knitting lesson is the depiction of familial intimacy, a counterpoint to the physically draining labors of rural life such as hoeing or cutting wood. The artist and critic Earl Shinn, writing under the pseudonym Edward Strahan, described this painting when it formed part of the collection of William H. Vanderbilt:

*The artist has been struck with the embracing, enfolding action with which a mother will put her arms quite around the person of her little girl to guide her knitting-work, encircling the young experience completely with her own, and herself doing the knitting with the hands of the infant. Something of the kind is found in a writing-lesson, where the young fingers move embraced by a stronger hand; but Millet, always right, selects the lesson in which the guiding figure more completely broods over and encloses the helpless one.*⁸

In each of the painted versions the poses, like the details of the surroundings, are subtly different. The earliest one, in Boston, shows the woman's hands more completely "doing the knitting with the hands of the infant," the woman's chin resting on the child's head. The woman in the later painting in Boston, despite her encircling arms, is somehow not as close to the child, her right shoulder pulled back a bit. Strahan may have described the Clark's painting with the words "embracing, enfolding," and "encircling" because the woman's rounded shoulders and arms form a shape close to a circle. Soft contours, soft light, a soft cat and white linens in the background, all bespeak quiet, harmony, and peace. Wheelwright wrote that, for Millet, "the family,—a subject he has so often painted, was above all others his favorite theme."⁹ FEW

PROVENANCE William H. Vanderbilt, New York (by 1879–d. 1885); George Washington Vanderbilt, New York, his son, by descent (1885–d. 1914);¹⁰ Cornelius Vanderbilt III, New York, his nephew, by descent (1914–d. 1942);¹¹ Grace Wilson Vanderbilt, New York, his wife, by descent (1942–45, her sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 18 Apr. 1945, no. 127, ill., sold to Knoedler); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 20 Apr. 1945]; Robert Sterling Clark (1945–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, no. 116, pl. 33; Paris–London 1975–76, p. 110, no. 59, ill. (French ed., p. 125, no. 84, ill.); Williamstown 1984a, p. 65, no. 88; Williamstown–Amsterdam–Pittsburgh 1999–2000, pp. 85, 87, no. 52, ill.

REFERENCES Strahan 1879–80, vol. 3, pt. 12, pp. 105, 108; Vanderbilt 1884, p. 37, no. 66; Vanderbilt 1886, p. 22, no. 60; *Collector* 1890, p. 85; Metropolitan Museum of Art 1905, p. 209, no. 40; Peacock 1905, p. 168; Burroughs 1916, p. 202; Moreau-Nélaton 1921, vol. 2, p. 79, fig. 148; Cardiff–London 1956, p. 38, under no. 53; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 80, ill.; Wilson 1966, p. 12, ill.; Reverdy 1973, pp. 25, 130; Fermigier 1977, p. 99, ill.; Lida 1979, p. 42; Brooks 1981, pp. 42–43, no. 17, ill.; Tucker 1982, pp. 149, 151, 159, fig. 122; Boston and others 1984–85, pp. 91, 120; Murphy 1985, pp. 44, 48, fig. 2; Manoeuvre 1996, p. 27, ill.; Wissman 2003, p. 8.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a fairly flat oak panel, 1.1 cm thick with the grain running vertically. The reverse has a colorman's stamp for Luniot-Ganne. The flat central portion of the reverse is coated with gray paint, and the edges have chamfers 1.9 cm wide, which may have been cut after the reverse was coated. An old crack in the panel extends 5.7 cm down from the top edge, beginning 8.9 cm from the upper left corner. There are traction cracks on the woman's shawl and lap, and some old solvent damage on the red yarn on the floor. The painting was cleaned in 1945 in New York by De Wild, who commented that it had a coach or copal varnish applied before the 1945 sale. The age cracks still evident in the surface are confined mostly to the varnish layer. In 1982 the picture's discolored varnish was thinned due to concerns about sensitivity of the upper glazes. Some of the traction crackle and frame abrasion was inpainted at that time, as seen under ultraviolet light. The UV fluorescence of the surface is very uneven, with large areas of dense old coating still evident in the upper left and lower background areas and in the figures, especially the red bodice of the woman. In general, the paint condition looks quite good.

The off-white ground is a moderately thick preparation, which nevertheless allows the panel grain to show in some areas. The artist may have added an uneven gray ground or paint layer over a commercial priming layer. This color is visible below many thin passages done with light glazes. There are scattered deposits of charcoal at the edges of forms, possibly indicating the presence of an underdrawing, although no

lines were detected using infrared reflectography. There is a slight change in the paint along the outline of the top of the woman's head. There may be a light brown paint sketch below the final colors. The paint reveals a fairly even texture throughout, with a slightly higher buildup of paint on the figures.

1. Wheelwright 1876, p. 266.
2. For a reproduction of the drawing, see Tokyo–Kyōto–Yamanashi 1991, p. 155, no. 80.
3. Robert L. Herbert, in Paris–London 1975–76, p. 110, lists these and others, including Millet's sole submission to the Salon of 1869 (now in the Saint Louis Art Museum).
4. For a reproduction of the etching, see Delteil 1906–26, vol. 1, pl. 9, or Melot 1980, p. 228.
5. Boston and others 1984–85, p. 91.
6. See Snoep-Reitsma 1973 for a full discussion of Chardin's focus on the middle class.
7. For an illustration of the print, and many other works inspired by Chardin, see Karlsruhe 1999, p. 408 and passim.
8. Strahan 1883–84, vol. 4, p. 52.
9. Wheelwright 1876, p. 275.
10. George Washington Vanderbilt placed this and a number of other works on long-term loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1886. The works were returned to his nephew in 1919.
11. Cornelius Vanderbilt III lent the picture to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1940–41.

**219 | Peasant Girl Returning from the Well
(Paysanne venant de puiser de l'eau)**

c. 1860

Oil on panel, 26.4 x 18.5 cm; original dimensions,

25.4 x 17.3 cm

Lower right: J. F. Millet

1955.551

Jean-François Millet and Charles-Émile Jacque moved their families from Paris to Barbizon in early 1849 to escape the cholera that was widespread in the city. Although both artists settled in and found subject matter for their art in the immediate surroundings, Millet quickly became identified with the place. Seemingly not comfortable in cities, Millet lived in Barbizon for more than twenty-five years, painting, drawing, and making prints of the people, animals, and countryside he saw around him at the northwestern edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau.

What Millet saw were the necessary quotidian tasks of rural life. In this small painting, only a little more than a hand's breadth high, a girl, perhaps twelve years old, carries two full buckets of water. In Barbizon there was no communal well. Edward Wheelwright, an early American visitor to the hamlet, wrote a valuable reminiscence of the time he spent there in the mid-1850s. Wheelwright notes that there was "no common centre of village life, no village tavern even," a statement that implies there was also no village well. Wheelwright confirms this supposition when he describes the interior courtyards of the houses lining the single street of Barbizon, where, along with a dung pile, "in one corner, perhaps, would be the well, with its stone curb and oaken bucket."¹ The shovel and fork leaning against the stone wall at the right also suggest a private rather than a public space.

The girl's delicate yet generalized features, functional, shapeless clothes, and apparently arrested motion transform her into a universal figure. Millet was interested in the business of daily living, the shapes and patterns that lives and bodies assume with repeated actions. He explained another painting of a water carrier to the critic Théophile Thoré in a letter of 18 February 1862: "I have avoided (as I always do with horror) anything that can verge on the sentimental. I wanted her [a similar water carrier] to do her work good-naturedly and simply, without thinking anything about it—as if it were a part of her daily labor, the habit of her life. I wanted to show the coolness of the well, and meant that its antique form should suggest that many before her had come there to draw water."²

Further on in the same letter Millet described a sense of inevitability surrounding his figures. "I try not to have things look as if chance had brought them together, but as if they had a necessary bond between them. I want the people I represent to look as if they belonged to their station, and as if their imaginations could not conceive of their ever being anything else. People and things should always be there with an object."³ The emphasis, importantly, is on the figures and their rightful place in the world around them. For, according to the artist, "their beauty is not in their faces; it is in the expression of their figures and their appropriate action."⁴

Drawing water was a necessary part of daily life. Millet made several versions of this scene of a woman carrying water, in each case varying the age of the figure and the size of the picture. The idea had been with the artist for some years. Wheelwright remem-