



**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,
Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House,
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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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Eugène-Louis Boudin

French, 1824–1898

29 | Dunkerque 1889

Oil on canvas, 36.5 x 58.6 cm

Lower left: Dunkerque / E Boudin 89.
1955-535

Boudin established an atmospheric style and remained concerned with specifics of time and place throughout his career. His obsession with weather-based specificity is clearly demonstrated in his love of painting the sky in any condition. Camille Corot called him the “king of skies,” having created a “true history of the sky.”¹ *Dunkerque* is a good example of his concentration on this aspect of the landscape. A very Dutch-looking port scene, it was painted using very loose brushstrokes. As Boudin aged, his technique became increasingly open and more like that of the Impressionists. Here, the paint is applied in a thin and fluid manner, with various shades of gray in the clouds and smoke wafting in among them at left center. Most of the color in the picture comes from hues found in the houses: green, white, burgundy, blue, yellow, and pink. The water below has shades of brilliant turquoise.

Dunkerque (or the English Dunkirk) is situated in the north of France, and is today considered the third largest harbor in France after Le Havre and Marseille. Boudin painted here early in his career, in 1870, then later from 1888 to 1892. He particularly concentrated on working there in 1889, the year of the Clark’s picture. All the works in the Clark collection are from the same period (dating from 1889 to 1895), a phase that could be considered his most poetic. Boudin’s wife Marianne died on 23 March 1889, and the pictures that were painted soon after have a more somber tone than his lighter, earlier seascapes, perhaps in part due to his personal situation. It was said that nothing was left for him after his wife’s death “but the joy of seeing once more the great sky and the air.”² *Dunkerque*, with its gray tones, could certainly be one of these works. A friend took him to Dunkerque in July, and despite biting winds, he painted these pictures. Boudin’s sadness during this period is reflected in the following comment he made about the loss of his wife: “I find myself so lonely, so forsaken that I sometimes fear for my reason. A man who has lived thirty years in the warm atmosphere created by the care of a devoted wife, finds it pretty hard being alone, I assure you.”³ It must have been a particularly bittersweet period for Boudin since at the same time in Paris, his dealer Durand-Ruel was having a retrospective of his works.

Boudin painted fourteen pictures of water in

Dunkerque—nine others are of the city, but not of the port. All show smoke coming from buildings on the horizon, and about half have a boat in a central location in the water. All are signed, demonstrating that they were painted in the same year as the Clark's picture, 1889. Significantly, *Dunkerque* was owned for a time by Peter Arrell Brown Widener, a Philadelphia collector who donated his extensive collection to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in 1942. KAP

PROVENANCE The artist, sold to Durand-Ruel, 9 Mar. 1891; [Durand-Ruel, Paris, 1891–92, sold to Widener, 6 Feb. 1892]; Peter Arrell Brown Widener, Philadelphia (1892–1907, sold to Durand-Ruel, 27 Feb. 1907); [Durand-Ruel, New York, 1907–40, sold to Clark, 2 Dec. 1940];⁴ Robert Sterling Clark (1940–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS New York 1929a, not in cat.;⁵ Chicago 1935–36, no. 7, as *At Dunkirk*, lent by Durand-Ruel, New York; New York 1936b, no. 5; New York 1938b, no. 2; Williamstown 1956a, no. 85, pl. 2; New York 1967, no. 1.

REFERENCES Widener 1885–1900, vol. 1, no. 4; Benjamin 1937, p. 190, as *At Dunkirk*; Genauer 1938, p. 12; *Art News* 1938, p. 13; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 1, ill.; Schmit 1973, vol. 3, p. 10, no. 2568, ill., as *Dunkerque, Le port et les quais*.

TECHNICAL REPORT The original fabric support is a finely woven linen (25 threads/cm) glue-lined to a slightly coarse fabric. There is no obvious damage or condition to suggest the reason for lining. The tacking margins remain, and the five-member stretcher may be original. The lining process has created a weave impression in the surface, and the lining materials have become brittle. The discolored varnish is old and thick enough to have its own network of cracks. There are darkened bands (2.5 cm wide) up both left and right edges, possibly caused by a large frame rabbit. In ultraviolet light, there appear to be two coatings, with old varnish residues, extensive repainting, and smaller retouches below. A surface cleaning and the addition of some of the varnish may have been done in 1945 by New York restorer Charles De Wild. One or both varnishes may be covering a partial but damaging cleaning, which is hard to detect due to strong and uneven fluorescence. Visible restorations, closer to the upper surface, include some of the lettering of “Dunkerque” on the building to the left, part of the signature, and areas of the clouds. A broader early restoration is likely hidden beneath all the coating layers.

The ground, if any, is only a thin gray wash, abraded to the thread tops along the weave in many thinly painted passages, presumably the result of some solvent damage. No information was provided by an infrared light exam. At low magnification, some areas of impasto look as if they were never cleaned. While the structure of the brushwork looks

similar to the other Boudins in the collection, the paint consistency appears a bit thinner and more fluid. Hog's bristles from the artist's brushes are embedded in the paint.

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1. Sutton 1991, p. 19: “véritable histoire du ciel.”
 2. Benjamin 1937, p. 99.
 3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 190, states that this work was in a private collection, Paris, some time after 1907, and further wrote in a 1958 letter in the Clark's curatorial file that “this picture belonged to a private collection in Paris before Durand-Ruel bought it back.” Benjamin does not provide dates for this ownership, and there is no further known documentation for this history.

5. While *Dunkerque* is not included in the catalogue for this exhibition, it appears in an installation photograph reproduced in Schmit 1973, vol. 2, p. lxxix, in the upper left of the top photograph.

30 | Villefranche c. 1892

Oil on panel, 41 x 32.7 cm
Lower right: Villefranche / E. Boudin
1955-547

Like his street scene *Rue Saint-Romain, Rouen* (cat. 32), *Villefranche* is a somewhat unusual subject and composition for Boudin, unlike his more typical output of seascapes and beach scenes. These two paintings might be considered pendants if they were not dated a few years apart. Both depict streets in the old section of a city, with a similar compositional recession into space. Each has a church at its center, while townspeople mill about in the street. The tones in the Rouen picture are more muted overall, although the sky is tinged with blue and there are a few bright highlights of yellow, blue, red, and orange scattered about, mainly in the lower section. The sky in *Villefranche* reveals its location on the Mediterranean coast, with two layers of bright purplish blues acting as a complement to the yellows and oranges in the rest of the picture.

Located on the French Riviera between Nice and Monaco, the popular resort Villefranche changed its name to Villefranche-sur-Mer in 1988. Boudin began painting here during his first trip to the Midi in 1885. As he aged into his seventies in the 1890s (when both *Rue Saint-Romain, Rouen* and *Villefranche* were