NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE

VOLUME TWO

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With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

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Pierre Puvis de Chavannes

French, 1824–1898

257 | **Death and the Maidens** 1872

Oil on canvas, 146.4 x 117.2 cm
Lower right: P. Puvis de Chavannes / 1872
1955.54

From early in his career, Puvis de Chavannes drew inspiration from traditional, classicizing art for both the form and content of his work. In 1854–55 he designed his first mural-sized canvases on biblical themes representing the four seasons to decorate the dining room of his family's château, and in 1861 he exhibited two paintings depicting war (*Bellum*) and peace (*Concordia*), each 1.5 meters wide, at the Paris Salon.[1] In their size, their muted, fresco-like colors, and their allegorical themes, embodied by lightly draped and nude figures, they suggest sources ranging from Greek and Roman sculptures to Italian Renaissance frescoes to seventeenth-century French history paintings. Puvis essentially maintained this approach throughout his career, even in many smaller works. Though not mural scale, *Death and the Maidens* is a large painting of this type, depicting idealized young women frolicking in a nonspecific landscape setting with the allegorical figure of Death, accompanied by his traditional attribute of a scythe, at their feet. The woman at the far right looks slightly older than the others, and more aware of the passage of time as she contemplates what appears to be a dandelion gone to seed. Her companion, who has herself cut a bouquet of flowers that will soon fade, may have been posed by Puvis's frequent model and future wife Marie Cantacuzène, though her features, like those of the other figures, appear rather generalized in the final work.[2] Puvis intended to exhibit the painting at the Salon of 1872, but it was refused, either before or after his own withdrawal from serving on the Salon jury.[3]

The juxtaposition of young, carefree figures unaware of their mortality with a figure of death, essentially a variation on the memento mori theme, has long antecedents. The embodiment of death as a reaper with a scythe dates at least to medieval iconography, and this figure gave the painting one of the earliest of several different titles, *The Sleeping Reaper*.[4] The painting was not called *Death and the Maidens* until 1896, in an article in *L'Artiste*,[5] and this designation, while an appropriate description of the image, may also have been informed by Franz Schubert's 1817 song "Death and the Maiden" (and the later 1824 string quartet), a source that refers to the same traditional concepts as Puvis's image.[6] The painting's composition, however, is more innovative. The scene is set in a shallow space in which the ground appears to tilt upward abruptly, while the relatively large scale of the four women at the left does not conform to standard perspectival rules. This tends to emphasize the flat and decorative qualities of the canvas, echoing Puvis's many wall paintings.

The position and pose of Death, however, is perhaps most striking. As a preliminary oil sketch for this painting demonstrates (c. 1871–72; The National Gallery, London), this was the passage that was most dramatically changed from its initial conception, along with the more vibrant reds, blues, and yellows of the sketch, which were toned down to related pastel hues. In the sketch, the figure of Death reclines at full length in the foreground, his head to the left and his body and the long scythe that lies alongside it parallel to the diagonal formed by the line of women. He appears to be lying on his side, suggesting that he is at rest, if not sleeping. This in itself is unusual for the iconography of Death and youth, which more frequently involves two figures interacting directly and sometimes intimately, as in many German paintings by artists such as Hans Baldung (1484/85–1515). But Puvis's final version of Death is even more unusual. In the Clark painting, only the upper portion of the figure appears at the lower left edge, one hand drawn up across his mouth, the other extended in a relaxed manner over, rather than grasping, the scythe. This last detail more strongly suggests that he is asleep, and the section of his robe that improbably curves over his head serves to reinforce both the sense of the figure's enclosure and withdrawal inward and his separation from the brighter world of the women. Curiously, this figure might even recall, and conflate, the relaxed hand of Adam and the enveloping robe that surrounds God the Father in Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel, an image Puvis surely knew, thanks not least to his year-long stay in Italy in 1848. The possible allusion to this image representing the beginning of life would make an appropriate parallel to an embodiment of its end, though the connection is highly speculative. The change in the figure of Death, however, seems to have been only partially worked out in the numerous drawings related to the painting:

two drawings now in the Palais de Beaux-Arts, Lille, both show reclining male figures at full length, their heads to the left; another sketch, *Study of a Sleeping Man for "Death and the Maidens"* (c. 1872; Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), does show the figure from the waist up, facing right, though his arms are posed differently from those in the painting, and the model is nude.[7] The radical and seemingly last-minute change to this figure might support the idea that Puvis had a specific, pre-existing source in mind.

In addition to its traditional allegorical meaning, *Death and the Maidens* also relates to the circumstances under which it was made, little more than a year after the upheavals of the Franco-Prussian war and the radical Commune. Given the interpretive possibilities that such an allegorical image allows, this work might equally be read, as Aimée Brown Price has noted, as a statement about the heedlessness and unpreparedness of the French people for the conflicts and suffering they had just endured. The dresses of three of the maidens, painted more clearly in the blue, white, and red of the French flag in the London oil sketch than in the present work, as Price again notes, reinforce this reading.[8] Moreover, this painting bears a distinct relationship to Puvis's other submission to the Salon of 1872, *Hope* (The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore), in which broken walls and masses of cross-marked graves in the middle distance explicitly refer to the recent wars. The young, lightly robed women are similar in the two images, and the sloping landscape with rocky cliffs in the background of the present work seems reminiscent of the rolling hills and stony ruins in *Hope*. Perhaps the choice of the Salon jury to include *Hope* while refusing *Death and the Maidens* might also have been influenced by such a reading, since the more positive implications of the Baltimore painting must have been more palatable than the reminder of impending mortality implied by the Clark canvas. SL

PROVENANCE [Durand-Ruel, Paris, by 1873]; Catholina Lambert, Paterson, New Jersey (by 1894); [Scott & Fowles, New York]; [Durand-Ruel, New York, sold to Hill, 1912]; James J. Hill, Saint Paul (1912–possibly until d. 1916);[9] [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 29 Nov. 1918]; Robert Sterling Clark (1918–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS New York 1894, no. 12, as *The Mower*, lent by Catholina Lambert; London 1923, no. 42, as *Le Faucheur*; Williamstown 1955, no. 54, pl. 39; Williamstown 1958b, pl. 49; Toronto 1975, p. 62, no. 17, ill.; Paris–Ottawa 1976–77, pp. 116, 118, no. 93, ill. (French ed., pp. 118, 120, no. 92, ill.); Williamstown 1981a, no cat.; London–Munich–Hamburg 1997–98, pp. 172–73, no. 55, ill. (exhibited in London only); Venice 2002, p. 298, no. 3, ill.; Ferrara–Rome 2007, pp. 222–23, no. 72, ill.

REFERENCES Durand-Ruel 1873, vol. 1, p. 26, pl. 14, as *Faucheur endormi* (print by Boilvin after the painting); Silvestre 1887, p. 3; Riordan 1891, p. 34, ill., as *The Reaper's Sleep*; Vachon 1895, p. 158; Riotor 1896, pp. 266, 271, as *Les Jeunes filles et la mort*; Jouin 1897, p. 49; Goldberg 1901, p. 35, as *Faucheur*; Alexandre 1905, pl. 26, as *The Enchanted Garden*; Phythian 1908, p. 224, ill. opp. p. 224; Michel and Laran 1911, pp. 51–52, ill. opp. p. 52, as *Les Jeunes Filles et la Mort* (English ed., pp. 33–34, pl. 18); *Connoisseur* 1920, p. 180; Mauclair 1928, pp. 13, 116; Davies 1957, pp. 195–96; Andersen 1971, p. 248, fig. 135, as *Melancholy*; Price 1972, vol. 1, pp. 29, 81, vol. 2, pp. 415–16, no. 161; New York 1975, p. 267; Price 1977, pp. 32–33; Delevoy 1978, p. 116, ill.; Boucher 1979, p. 3; Nakayama and Takashina 1981, p. 23, ill.; Saint Paul 1991, pp. 38–39, 58, 95, fig. 28; Pittsburgh–Northampton 1992, p. 140, ill.; Amsterdam 1994, pp. 17, 144–45, fig. 33; *Dictionary of Art* 1996, vol. 25, p. 751; Petrie 1997, pp. 81–83, pl. 47; Lyon 1998, p. 84, ill.; Jiminez 2001, pp. 103–5, ill.; Amiens 2005–6, pp. 134–35; Ruck 2006, p. 127, ill. on cover; Schneider 2009, pp. 198–200, fig. 3; Price 2010, vol. 1, pp. 76, 165, vol. 2, pp. 175–76, no. 192, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The original support was probably a moderate-weight canvas of 22 threads/cm, based on tacking margin remnants. In 1930, Madame Coince cleaned the picture and performed a major structural treatment. She removed one lining and relined the painting, at least partially transferring it to a heavier linen (13 x 19 threads/cm), with two open-weave gauze interleaf layers. The seven-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher may have been reused. There is no documentation of damage occurring to the painting; thus, presumably the earliest lining was extremely difficult to remove, forcing Coince to treat her replacement lining as a transfer. It is difficult to assess the extent of transfer or the reason why areas of the original fabric are missing. Fabric losses occur in some areas of the dark green trees at the upper right, a passage that also has numerous small paint losses. When the painting was cleaned in 1983, the extent of the transfer damage was noted, including dislodged plates of paint in the upper left, now trapped below other passages. There is a vertical tear near the hem of the woman second from the right, and further losses in the lower right corner, which pass through and around the signature, with some of the letters of the name now repainted. The paint is wrinkled in the robe of the death figure and the left-most pink dress, and there are traction cracks in the blue-gray dress. There are small retouches in the flesh of most figures, considerable retouching in the shattered areas, and earlier varnish residues in the green passages. The losses in the upper left and lower right seem to be overfilled to cover the dislocated edges, scored for

texture, and retouched with oil paint. Portions of these repairs were left in place during the 1983 treatment, and re-inpainted. The present varnish has a matte finish.

The original ground appears to be a thin white layer, possibly glue-based. Black, brushed underdrawing lines, possibly ink, can be seen under low magnification in the dress of the woman second from the right, and along other areas where the paint is thinner. Red lines can also be seen delineating portions of the image. The raised hand and arm in the upper left quadrant have alterations in the position visible in the reworked paint of the mountain. There are paint color changes, visible to the unaided eye, in the pink dress of the seated woman, and the gray-blue dress of the woman whose back is to the viewer. Both dresses were originally laid in with a darker shade, then lightened by adding white and gray over the areas. The paint is applied in a thick paste consistency, using rather opaque blending, with the thickest strokes in the figures. The green foliage background was painted after and around the figures, and smaller details were applied in more vehicular consistency daubs over the broader general strokes.

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1. Although not designed for a specific location, these paintings were acclaimed at the Salon, one was purchased by the French state (Puvis donated the other), and the pair was soon thereafter assigned to the newly built museum in Amiens, where they are currently installed. See Price 2010, vol. 2, nos. 104 and 105.
2. There is a preparatory drawing for these two figures in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, in which the left-hand figure is more individualized and compares somewhat more closely to known portraits of Cantacuzène.
3. Most sources state that the refusal of the painting followed Puvis's withdrawal, including Price 2010, vol. 1, pp. 76–77. Amiens 2005–6, however, states that the refusal of his painting caused Puvis's withdrawal from the jury.
4. *Faucheur endormi*. Since this title appeared in an 1873 Durand-Ruel publication just a year after the painting was completed, it is likely to be one the artist approved.
5. Riotor 1896, pp. 266, 271.
6. That Puvis almost certainly did not intend to refer to Schubert's work is evident not only in his depiction of several maidens rather than just one, but also in their lack of interaction with Death, in contrast to the dialogue between the maiden and Death that comprises the lyrics to the song, drawn from a poem by Matthias Claudius. The song is catalogued in Deutsch 1951, p. 233, no. D.531. For the text, see Glass 1996, vol. 1, p. 295.
7. For the drawings in Lille, see Price 2010, vol. 2, pp. 175–76, figs. 192a and b. A third sketch, *Fragment du dessin faucheur*, is listed with incorrect dimensions and collection information, so it is not clear which drawing it refers to, though it may be the work in Amsterdam. Price also lists four preparatory drawings relating to the figures of the young women.
8. Price 2010, vol. 2, pp. 174–76.
9. Hill died intestate; his collection of 83 paintings was inherited by his widow and their children and divided among them. Hill's papers held at the Minnesota Historical Society do not mention this painting among works included in the division of the estate, however, suggesting that he may have sold it prior to his death. See correspondence in the curatorial files.

Henry Redmore

English, 1820–1887

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258 | Shipping off the Coast in a Stormy Sea

1874

Oil on canvas, 61 x 102.2 cm
Lower left corner: H. Redmore / 1874
Gift of the Manton Foundation in memory of Sir Edwin and Lady Manton
2007.8.92

An early acquisition of Sir Edwin Manton, this depiction of the treacherous coastline of Yorkshire shows the high level of skill achieved by Henry Redmore, an artist whose training and practice was almost exclusively centered around his native city of Hull. The combination of a clear knowledge of the details of a ship's rigging and a careful depiction of a craggy coast that shows little place for refuge, along with the inherent drama associated with the stormy sea, resulted in a type of painting that found a ready audience in an area of England that was familiar with both the perils and the profits of seafaring. Lying at the point where the River Hull flows into the Humber estuary, the port of Hull has a history dating back to the thirteenth century and the reign of Edward I. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was the third most active port in England after London and Liverpool, trading primarily with Northern European countries.

Redmore's own knowledge of the sea and ships was rooted in his early career as a marine engineer, and from that experience he most likely gained practice at technical drawing. But as his obituary in the *Hull News* noted, he had, by 1848, devoted himself to painting.[1] Even though Redmore clearly gained a loyal following—an obituary in *The Hull Arrow* described his funeral as "largely attended"[2]—very little is known of his training, his mature practice, his pupils, or