



**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,
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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206 | Méry Laurent Wearing a Small Toque 1882

Pastel on canvas, 55.3 x 34.6

Below center, right: Manet

1955.565

This rather informal portrait depicts Méry Laurent (Anne-Rose Suzanne Louviot, 1849–1900), one of Manet's favorite models in his later career. She sat for at least eight portraits, all but one of them in pastel.¹ Laurent was an actress, and had a circle of friends—some of whom may also have been her lovers—that

included the poets François Coppée and Stéphane Mallarmé, artist Henri Gervex, and Marcel Proust, who based Odette Swann in part on Laurent. She met Manet in April 1876 on a visit to his studio, which he had opened to visitors to show his two paintings that had been rejected from the Salon of that year.² Laurent is generally considered to have first posed for Manet in 1878–79, for a group of four pastels that show a partially or fully nude woman at her toilette, bathing or adjusting her garter.³ Subsequently, however, their relationship developed beyond simply that of artist and model, attaining an intimacy that, while it may or may not have been romantic, is clearly reflected in

Manet's use of the familiar "tu" in some letters to her, a form of address he rarely used for other friends.⁴ The remaining portraits not only name her as their subject but place a distinct emphasis on her elegant clothing, in which both artist and sitter clearly took pleasure. Indeed, when Laurent posed for Manet in a brown fur-trimmed coat for the painting *Autumn* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy), he is said to have exclaimed to Antonin Proust, who probably commissioned the work, "Ah! What a pelisse, my friend, a tawny brown with old-gold lining. I was stunned." The artist even asked to be given the pelisse once it became worn out, to use as a backdrop for other works.⁵

Although the present pastel is quite freely executed, details of the sitter's outfit stand out clearly, from the elaborate hat perched on her head, covered with a netting of flickering white dots, to the long fur wrap around her neck, which is punctuated by the glittering earring nestled into it at the top and the bright yellow glove at the bottom of the image. Laurent herself appears slightly blurred, as if seen through a veil, her eyes two small, dark points surrounded by soft gray strokes indicating the shadows cast by her brow and hat. In one of the other pastels, in fact, Manet depicted her face literally veiled, with her features similarly if more emphatically illegible, blurred by the semi-transparent fabric covering them.⁶ Like both these works, and in direct contrast to the group of pastels of about four years earlier, virtually all of Laurent's portraits show her in outdoor clothing, with large hats, gloves, fur wraps, or scarves. While most writers have noted both Laurent's appreciation for fashion and Manet's own fascination throughout his career with the variety, the material details, and the social functions of women's clothing, Méry Laurent's portrayals seem to be characterized by their lack of variety, their uniform depiction of as many protective, if still luxurious, layers as possible. As a point of comparison, Manet made at least seven portraits in oil and pastel of another woman, Isabelle Lemonnier, in about 1879, but while several show her in the same sorts of hats and furs that Méry Laurent wore, others depict her with open necklines or décolletage that expose considerably more. By showing Laurent first nude, then swathed to the chin in fur with her eyes partially obscured by veiling strokes of pastel some four years later, Manet seems to have reversed the usual order, in which greater intimacy might be connoted by revealing more rather than less of the figure depicted.

Perhaps some justification for this might be found in the circumstances of the artist's and model's inter-

action, for by the time Laurent began posing for him in 1878–79, Manet's illness, probably syphilis, was worsening, and would soon incapacitate him to the point that he had difficulty leaving his studio. Friends and models, therefore, had to come to him, and perhaps a sense that such visits were always temporary, and possibly briefer than he might have wished, is conveyed in his depictions of Laurent as if she had just entered or was about to leave his rooms. The progression from less to more clothed might also imply the artist's increasing respect for the sitter, and her own growing sense of self-possession and even power, although the degree to which Laurent is completely covered seems to hint at something further. Indeed, an insistent sense of absence, or at least not-quite-presence permeates *Méry Laurent Wearing a Small Toque*, both on a narrative and a formal level. For someone who is usually described as a particularly close friend and perhaps even Manet's mistress, Laurent seems rather distant in this image, even though she is looking directly outward. In a parallel manner, the way the image is composed of clearly visible, individual strokes of pastel creates a veil-like surface over the canvas, a layer of pigment that both coalesces into an image in certain areas and dissolves into nothing at its edges. In this way, both Méry Laurent's heavy clothing, at once softly tactile and protective, and the way it is depicted, seem to underscore the contradiction of her desirability and her distance, her presence and her unattainability.

Manet often kept many of his smaller works or gave them to friends, and *Méry Laurent Wearing a Small Toque* was first owned by the artist Jacques-Émile Blanche, who was himself a skilled portraitist in pastel (see cat. 16). He described his acquisition of a portrait of Laurent directly from the artist, citing details that almost certainly correspond to the present pastel, although in unexpected terms: "Manet laughed to see me carrying off a head in pastel, Méry Laurent wearing a toque of tentacles, dressed in a gray jacket trimmed with skunk, as I had arranged for my father to buy this lovely thing for me."⁷ Blanche's humorous, almost mocking, description underscores the powerful material presence of the pastel, and further highlights the informal, unconventional qualities of this work. SL

PROVENANCE The artist, probably sold to Blanche; Jacques-Émile Blanche, Paris (until at least 1912); [Georges Bernheim, Paris, before 1931]; [Joseph (Jos) Hessel, Paris, by 1932];

S.A.P.O.R., sold to Durand-Ruel, New York, 17 May 1934;⁸ [Durand-Ruel, New York, sold to Clark, 17 May 1934, as *Buste de femme, Mary Laurent*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1934–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, no. 109, pl. 26; Williamstown 1982a, no. 15, ill.; Williamstown, 2005–6b, no cat.; Williamstown 2007b, no cat.; Ferrara–Williamstown 2009–10, not in cat. (exhibited in Williamstown only).

REFERENCES Duret 1902, p. 286, no. 27, as *Méry Laurent à la Toque* (not listed in 2nd ed.; 3rd ed., p. 290, no. 27; 4th ed., p. 290, no. 27); Duret 1910, p. 268, no. 27, as *Méry Laurent in the Toque* (2nd ed., p. 250, no. 27); Blanche 1919–28, vol. 1, pp. 146–47; Tabarant 1931, pp. 498–99, no. 69; Jamot and Wildenstein 1932, p. 183, no. 539; Rewald 1947, pp. 50, 58, no. 18, fig. 18, as *The Fur Toque (Méry Laurent)*; Tabarant 1947, pp. 444–45, 548, 619, no. 524, ill.; Raoul-Duval 1961, p. 35, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 77, ill.; Orienti 1967, p. 118, no. 379 (French ed., p. 118, no. 385; English ed., p. 118, no. 379, ill.); Rouart and Wildenstein 1975, vol. 2, pp. 28–29, no. 74, ill., as *Méry Laurent à la toque*; Daix 1983, p. 294; Monnier 1984, p. 69, ill.; Martigny 1996, pp. 210, 249; Nancy 2005, p. 15.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a thin, coarsely woven canvas of approximately 26 threads per cm, stretched and tacked around a wooden strainer. There is some distortion of the fabric, which may relate to lap joints at the corners of the strainer. The portrait is executed in an unfixated, soft, powdery pastel which is weakly bound. The canvas appears to be pre-primed, probably with an oil-based primer, as the priming extends around the tacking edge. Some areas of the ground may have been abraded by the artist to provide greater tooth prior to execution of the portrait. Throughout the composition there are smudged pastel passages that are due to the artist's manipulation of the medium, possibly with a brush, the side of the pastel stick, or the fingertips. One area in the foreground shoulder of the sitter has minute dark dots of media, most likely an indication of displaced brown pastel from above. The primed canvas shows through some areas of the portrait. These areas of grayish white are most apparent at the edges and in the dark areas of the composition. The minute losses of media may be caused by movement of the fabric support due to humidity or handling, as in the shoulder of the sitter and the gray background to the left of the sitter's head. Small fractures occur in the thickly applied media and some areas of tenting. The signature in the right center appears somewhat diminished and may have been reworked by the artist. LP

1. See Martigny 1996, p. 249. The pastels in which she is explicitly named are RW vol. 2, 51–53, 72–74, 76. The oil painting she posed for is *Autumn* of 1881 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy; RW vol. 1, 393).

2. *Laundry (Le Ligne)* (The Barnes Foundation, Philadel-

phia; RW vol. 1, 237) and *The Artist* (Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo; RW vol. 1, 244).

3. The identification is given in Paris–New York 1983, pp. 432–33. The pastels are RW vol. 2, 22–25.

4. See Martigny 1996, p. 249.

5. Proust 1897, p. 311; translation from Paris–New York 1983, p. 489. Manet had already based the blue flowered background of *Autumn* on a Japanese robe belonging to Proust. See Paris–New York 1983, p. 491. For *Autumn*, see note 1.

6. RW vol. 2, 52.

7. Blanche 1919–28, vol. 1, p. 146–47: “Manet riait de me voir emporter une tête au pastel, Méry Laurent coiffée d’une toque pe [sic, for de] lophophore, vetue d’une jaquette grise garnie de skungs; comme j’avais obtenue que mon père achetât pour moi cette jolie chose.”

8. According to their records, Durand-Ruel bought this work from S.A.P.O.R. for \$14,450.00, but the seller cannot be identified further. See correspondence in the Clark's curatorial file with Caroline Godfroy of 24 Apr. and 3 May 2001.

207 | Moss Roses in a Vase 1882

Oil on canvas, 55.9 x 34.6 cm

Lower right: Manet.

1955.556

Still lifes were an important component of Manet's work, whether within larger compositions or as stand-alone images. Several paintings from 1864 present closely framed views of single vases of flowers or even just one or two stems, while in the following years Manet painted more elaborate tabletop scenes inspired by the Dutch tradition; and he included small vignettes in broader scenes ranging from *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), to several full-length portraits of friends of the 1860s, to the *Bar at the Folies Bergères* (1881–82; The Courtauld Gallery, London).¹ Late in his life, however, his deteriorating health limited his ability to paint large-scale works, and still lifes and small portraits dominated his output. The flowers were usually brought by friends, including Méry Laurent (see cat. 206), and the paintings of them often given as gifts, so the images are significant not only for their inherent beauty, but also as emblems of his friendships. *Moss Roses* belongs to this late period, one of about twenty still lifes painted between summer 1882 and March or possibly April 1883.² The Clark canvas may well have been among