



**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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Details:

TITLE PAGE: Camille Pissarro, *The Louvre from the Pont Neuf* (cat. 253)

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PRECEDING PAGE 474: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Onions* (cat. 280)

PAGES 890–91: Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Women of Amphis* (cat. 3)

**REFERENCES** Rewald 1974, p. 17, ill. (installation view of London 1905); Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, vol. 2, p. 289, no. 1139, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is an unlined moderate-weave canvas (22 threads/cm). The fabric was unevenly stretched when it was commercially primed and has wavy vertical threads down the right side. There is a water stain in the upper left quadrant of the reverse, and the back is also very grimy. The original five-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher has a horizontal crossbar, and the stretcher is stamped with the numeral “6” indicating a standard French portrait size. There are no cracks in the paint and ground layers. Under low magnification, many paint strokes are broken up into a minute pavement system of leaves of paint, with additional details applied over the reticulated areas. In some areas the reticulated paint has opened enough to expose the ground layer. During a 1992 cleaning of a thick discolored varnish and grime, the coating was reduced only over the sensitive green and dark red-brown passages. Residues in the impastos and slight solvent damage suggested that the painting had been cleaned once before, probably sometime before its 1939 purchase. Extensive retouching in the face, hair, shoulder, skirt, and background was probably applied to fill in the odd reticulation gaps, and the top edge frame abrasion was also inpainted.

The ground is an off-white commercially prepared layer. Although no underdrawing was detectable, there may be a warm brownish orange underpaint that lays in the basic shapes. A change in the drape of the bodice where it falls off the shoulder, visible in normal and reflected light, shows that the fabric was first painted slightly higher on the arm. The paint is applied quite thinly in some passages, with colors built up in glazes for such areas as the hair. The very odd, mid-level disturbed layer extends over the entire surface with many upper glazes and details painted over it. This unusual condition may be the result of some technique in which the artist deliberately reduced or softened the paint with solvent, possibly to wipe away or adjust part of the image before continuing to paint.

1. Rouart 1987, p. 186. The original French reads: “tableau de genre (genre vente)” (Rouart 1950, p. 163).
2. Information from Durand-Ruel archives. See correspondence of 24 Apr. 2001 in the Clark’s curatorial file. According to the Durand-Ruel records, the painting was consigned from the Durand-Ruel family private collection to the Durand-Ruel Gallery, New York, on 21 Nov. 1938. The gallery did not purchase the picture until 6 July 1939. The invoice for this picture, however, is dated 26 June 1939. See the Clark’s curatorial file.

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**290 | The Letter** c. 1895–1900

Oil on canvas, 64.9 x 81.1 cm

Lower right: Renoir.

1955-583

*The Letter* is one of many genre paintings by Renoir in which two female figures are depicted without clear indication of the relationship between them or clues that might lead the viewer to read the canvas in narrative terms. In genre painting of the nineteenth century, the theme of writing and receiving letters was commonly used as a means of suggesting a sentimental story and extending the inbuilt limitations of the art of painting by hinting at a time before or after the moment shown. *The Letter*, however, deploys none of the techniques generally used to achieve this. Neither gestures nor facial expressions—no details—hint at the addressee or the content of the letter; all we see is one young woman writing a letter as the other watches.

Their clothing indicates that the viewer is supposed to see them as young bourgeois women, and the lightly brushed panel decoration on the left suggests a bourgeois interior; indeed, the ability to write in itself suggested a degree of education and status. The model for the figure on the left was, in fact, not a bourgeoisie; she can be identified as Gabrielle Renard, a distant cousin of Renoir’s wife Aline, who joined the family in 1894 to help in the household. She became perhaps Renoir’s most frequent model over the next twenty years, initially clothed in genre scenes such as this, and after 1900, nude in many different settings. The numerous and diverse ways in which Renoir represented Gabrielle remind us that the roles and identities that he created for his models in his paintings cannot be viewed as evidence of the character or class of the women who posed for him.

In the 1890s, Renoir painted many canvases that included figures wearing lavish hats like that worn by the second figure, adorned with a ring of red poppies. The painter Suzanne Valadon, who modeled for Renoir in the 1880s, remembered his love of hats and how many he bought for his models to wear.<sup>1</sup> In the later 1890s, Durand-Ruel seems to have tried to persuade Renoir to stop painting girls with elaborate hats, since these had gone out of fashion; Jeanne Baudot witnessed his indignant response to the dealer’s request and his insistence that commercial concerns should not interfere with his artistic imagination.<sup>2</sup> *The Letter*



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and a number of other canvases testify to the failure of the dealer's appeal.

*The Letter* is a prime example of Renoir's abandonment during the 1890s of the characteristic "Impressionist" palette, with its use of blue to model forms and suggest shadow. The modeling here is essentially tonal, lightening and darkening the local colors to suggest the three-dimensionality of the figures and their clothing. The composition is organized in terms of contrasts of both color and tone. The reds are set against the blue-green wallpaper, which itself is enlivened by small red accents, presumably flowers; but tonal contrasts are equally important, with, it seems, pure black used in the foreground figure's hair, for the ribbons on her sleeves, and for the inkwell. It was in the late 1890s that Renoir repeatedly emphasized the vital role that black should play in the painter's palette, repudiating the principles that he and his colleagues had followed by abandoning black in the later 1870s, and citing the examples of Titian and Velázquez to justify his revised position.<sup>3</sup> JH

**PROVENANCE** The artist, sold to Durand-Ruel, Paris, 17 Dec. 1904; [Durand-Ruel, Paris and New York, 1904–37, sold to Clark, 4 Oct. 1937]; Robert Sterling Clark (1937–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** New York 1935, no. 20; Toronto 1935, no. 190, p. 42, ill., lent by Durand-Ruel; New York 1946–47, no. 2, ill.; Williamstown 1956b, no. 164, pl. 29; New York 1967, no. 45; Portland 1967–68, no. 70, ill.; Williamstown 1982b, no. 33; Tokyo–Kyōto–Kasama 1993, no. 18, p. 67, ill.; Williamstown 1996–97, pp. 15, 40–41, ill.; San Diego–El Paso 2002–3, no. 9, p. 28, ill.; Rome 2008, pp. 190–91, no. 34, ill.; Madrid 2010–11, pp. 122–23, no. 29, ill.

**REFERENCES** *Arts and Decoration* 1916, p. 79, ill.; Faison 1958, p. 174; *Emporium* 1959, p. 80, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 116, ill.; Tominaga 1969, p. 132, pl. 57; Spaeth 1975, p. 197; Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, vol. 3, pp. 212–13, no. 2073, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a moderate-weight canvas (19 threads/cm) glue-lined to a coarser canvas (12 x 16 threads/cm). The export stamp on the lining reverse seems

to confirm that the lining was done in Europe. The lining has caused a weave impression and a number of small, flattened blisters (0.3 cm) in the upper left portion of the green background. The stretcher is a replaced six-member, mortise-and-tenon design, stained dark to make it look older, and the labels appear to have been transferred from the earlier stretcher. The impastos are flattened, and there may be a small repaired three-corner tear through the gold collar and chin of the figure in white. Scattered unconnected age cracks run diagonally through a few areas, possibly from stress due to the uneven weave of the lining fabric. Age cracks appear in the white blouse, and traction cracks occur in the reds and yellows of the hat. Some areas of the paint film look melted, such as the proper right hand and lower sleeve of the woman in red. Judging from the ultraviolet light inspection, an early cleaning differentially removed varnish by color zone. In addition to the older partial layer of varnish, there is a second, more yellow layer of natural resin, applied while the picture was framed. Many areas look abraded under magnification. There seems to be thin repaint in the front yellow brim of the hat, the edges of the hair, both faces, and possibly the red dress, with earlier restorations in the green background. The surface is somewhat shiny. The signature is extremely thin and damaged, as is the entire area surrounding it.

The ground is a cool white, water-sensitive, glue-based layer. The lack of an oil-based lead white ground, combined with the thin paint in most areas, may account for the relative lack of age cracks. No underdrawing was found, although there may be dark paint lines for such details as the eyes of the woman on the right, and in the hands and edges of forms. The paint is extremely thin, extended either with resin or diluents. The canvas and ground can be easily seen in many areas of the image. The green background paint seems to run below the final strokes for the figures, suggesting it was completed before the two women were painted.

1. Coquiott 1925, pp. 96–97, 199–200.

2. Baudot 1949, p. 15.

3. See, for example, Manet 1979, pp. 191–92, 248, diary entries from 2 Oct. 1898 and 7 Aug. 1899; Baudot 1949, p. 90.

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**291 | Self-Portrait** 1899

Oil on canvas, 41.4 x 33.7 cm

Upper left: Renoir

1955.611

Although this self-portrait has generally been dated to 1897–98, it is the only painting that can plausibly be identified with the self-portrait that Julie Manet described Renoir painting at Saint-Cloud in the summer of 1899: “He is finishing a self-portrait that is very nice, but he had made himself look rather harsh and wrinkled; we insisted that he suppress some wrinkles, and now it’s more like him. ‘I think it more or less catches those calf’s eyes,’ he says.”<sup>1</sup> Colin Bailey has argued that the photographs taken of Renoir in the later 1890s show that he has “constructed the geography of his face with detachment and honesty” in the present painting.<sup>2</sup> Since these photographs show his face already deeply creased and furrowed, the picture’s original appearance may have been closer to reality.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the winter of 1898–99 he had suffered an acute rheumatic attack, prelude to the arthritis that crippled him in his last years. Immediately after completing this canvas, he left for Aix-les-Bains for treatment of his condition.<sup>4</sup>

In the present painting, the creases on the face are somewhat softened and are woven into the network of cursive patterns that runs through the whole canvas—through beard, collar, and tie, and through the arabesques, seemingly stylized flowers or leaves, of the wall decoration behind him. The color range is quite restricted. The canvas is dominated by gradations of beiges, browns, and grays with occasional warmer touches in the modeling. The jacket and necktie are deep blue, but, in sharp contrast to his work of twenty years earlier, blue is not used to model the forms or to suggest shadow. Throughout the canvas, the colors used are essentially the local colors of the objects depicted, lightened and darkened to suggest the play of light.

As in his earlier self-portrait (cat. 266), Renoir depicts himself here in respectable bourgeois clothing, with no hint of his profession. The facial expression and tone of the two canvases are, by contrast, very different. Whereas the face in the earlier picture conveys a sense of alertness and energy, here the expression is stiller and more passive, perhaps pensive and world-weary; the deep shadow on the right