



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

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REFERENCES Kooning 1956, pp. 43, 66, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 129; White 1965, p. 54; Seitz 1969, p. 34, ill.; Wilkin 1996, p. 49; Rand 2001b, p. 30, ill.; Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, vol. 2, p. 71, no. 800, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a coarse-weave linen (approximately 13 threads/cm), glue-lined to a slightly finer-linen (16 threads/cm). The tacking margins are missing, and the edge is covered with black tape. The six-member pine mortise-and-tenon stretcher may be original. The lining itself seems structurally stable, though the force used during the lining process moated and fractured some of the impasto areas, including the signature. In 1985, a wax layer and one layer of yellow-brown natural resin varnish were removed. There is a large shift in tone across the entire painting, due to the fading of a purplish red component of the palette. The remnants of this color are visible where the frame rabbet protected the edges. This red pigment may be either carmine or madder lake, both known to be light sensitive. The surface reflectance is slightly matte.

The ground is a yellowish white, commercially prepared layer thick enough to hide the coarse canvas weave in most areas. No underdrawing was found below the paint. The paste consistency paint is applied directly in a broad manner, with unblended, overlapping strokes. The sky is laid in more quickly and sparingly than the sea, using a bristle brush 1.9 cm wide. Occasional brush marks skip across the original canvas weave. Some impastos are looped and draped across adjacent brushstrokes.

1. Jacques-Émile Blanche to Dr. Émile Blanche, 20 July 1881, in Blanche 1949, p. 445: “effet de soleil couchant en dix minutes”; “gâcher de la peinture.”
2. On this in relation to Monet’s work, see House 1986a, p. 159.
3. Information from Durand-Ruel archives. See correspondence of 24 April 2001 in the Clark’s curatorial files.

274 | Peonies c. 1880

Oil on canvas, 55.3 x 65.7 cm

Lower right: Renoir.

1955-585

Renoir’s friend Georges Rivière recorded the artist’s view of the role of flower painting in his oeuvre: “Painting flowers rests my brain. I don’t feel the same tension as when I am face-to-face with a model. When I paint flowers, I place my colors and experiment with values boldly, without worrying about spoiling a canvas.”¹ Although this comment may relate more specifically to the many informal flower studies of Renoir’s later years, it seems that throughout his career it was in flower paintings that he produced many of his most ebullient effects of color and brushwork.

By Renoir’s day, the peony was a widespread and thoroughly familiar presence in the domestic gardens of France. Describing the varieties of peony that were available in the 1870s in his *Grand dictionnaire*, Pierre Larousse concluded: “Most of all, it is an ornamental plant for gardens; it produces an admirable effect there with its bright green clumps and its beautiful white, pink or crimson red petals. Its many magnificent varieties are one of the triumphs of horticulture.”²

Peonies is one of Renoir’s most sumptuous still-life compositions. The bouquet virtually fills the canvas, with the flowers just cut by left, right, and top margins. The sense of immediacy is unobtrusively enhanced by the way in which the flowers are set against the background and the table. The deep blues of the background thrust the bouquet forward, while the intense blue shadows across the white tablecloth and the deep blue vase create a luminous cool base, to offset the play of vibrant reds and greens above. Overall, the canvas is a vivid example of the way in which Renoir liked to fill his canvases to their margins, and to avoid any open or empty spaces in them.

The light source in the canvas is implicitly from the left, since the vase casts a shadow to the right, but it is hard to read the shadows in literal terms as there is no indication of what is casting them. The vase is not crisply defined; like the tabletop, it is softly brushed, acting as a foil to the thickly impastoed and dynamic handling of the bouquet. Within the bouquet itself, the contrast between the flowers and the leaves is established by both color and touch—between the lavish, fleshy forms and rich red hues of the flowers



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and the incisive, more linear strokes that describe the crisp green leaves that punctuate them.

The canvas may be compared with a still life of peonies that Renoir executed around 1878 (private collection).³ In the earlier canvas, the clusters of loosely brushed flowers are set off against a crisp rectilinear framework—perhaps the corner of a framed picture. In *Peonies*, by contrast, Renoir did not resort to an underlying armature within the picture; the complex interplay between flowers and leaves creates a coherent overall structure for the picture in relation to the rectangle of the canvas itself. A comparable fluency of execution combined with lavish color can be seen in Monet's flower pieces painted in 1880;⁴ Renoir's canvas, however, with its horizontal format filled to the margins with richly colored impasto, creates an overall effect even more fluid and ebullient than Monet's.

The rich color and blue shadows show how, by around 1880, Renoir was introducing into subjects set indoors the high-key colored palette that he had evolved in the mid-1870s to treat effects of outdoor

sunlight. There are no sharp contours in the canvas; the various objects—flowers, leaves, vase, and table—are differentiated solely by contrasts of color and texture. The variety and confidence of his informal, seemingly improvised brushwork were soon afterward to give way to a renewed concern for more traditional notions of form and drawing. JH

PROVENANCE The artist, sold to Durand-Ruel, 6 Jan. 1881; [Durand-Ruel, Paris, from 1881]; Potter Palmer, Chicago (by 1892–d. 1902); Bertha Honoré Palmer, Chicago, his wife, by descent (1902–d. 1918); [Howard Young Galleries, New York, c. 1922]; Annie Swan Coburn, Chicago (d. 1932); The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Larned Coburn Memorial Collection (1933–42); [Knoedler, New York; sold to Clark, 31 Jan. 1942]; Robert Sterling Clark (1942–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Paris 1882, no. 158; possibly New York 1886, no. 274; possibly Paris 1892b, no. 84; Chicago 1932, no. 36, as *Flowers: Peonies*; Chicago 1934, no. 231, as *Flowers: Peonies*; Williamstown 1956b, no. 141, pl. 6; New York 1967,

no. 34; New York 1977b, no. 78, ill.; Nagoya–Hiroshima–Nara 1988–89, pp. 69, 221, 231, 238, no. 17, ill.; Brisbane–Melbourne–Sydney 1994–95, frontispiece and pp. 82–83, no. 16, ill.; Williamstown 1996–97, pp. 15, 88, 90, 93, ill.; Madrid 2010–11, pp. 33, 67, 86–87, no. 16, ill.

REFERENCES La Fare 1882; Nivelles 1882; Robert 1882; Meier-Graefe 1929, p. 145, fig. 124; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 121, ill.; Fezzi 1972, p. 108, no. 448, ill. (French ed., pp. 106–7, no. 427); De Vries-Evans 1992, p. 175; Berson 1996, vol. 2, pp. 211 as no. VII-158, 232, ill.; Ivinski 1997, pp. 534–35, ill.; Whelan 1998, pp. 80–81, ill.; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, p. 98; Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, vol. 1, p. 128, no. 35, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a fairly coarse-weave linen (12 threads/cm), which was wax-resin lined in 1977 to a linen of similar weight. During treatment, the original five-member pine stretcher was replaced with a redwood four-member ICA spring-corner design. There are wandering age cracks throughout the paint and ground layers. Traction cracks, scattered throughout, are especially noticeable in the blue pigment of the table cover and the upper left background. The alizarin red glaze color is fractured, as if it contains a resinous binder. During the 1977 cleaning, some solvent sensitivity was noted in the reds and greens, and small pockets of the earlier varnish remain in impasto recesses and on the green leaves. The surface has a matte sheen due to a very thin layer of synthetic varnish.

The ground is a two-layered structure, with an artist application over a thin gray commercially applied layer, which barely covers the canvas threads. The very white upper layer was applied with a palette knife. No underdrawing was detected, although the thick paint may hide a paint sketch. The paste-consistency strokes are vigorously applied in multiple passes, creating a very thick paint buildup, four to five layers deep in many areas. The use of both wet-into-wet and wet-over-dry suggests that more than one sitting was used to complete the image. Undiluted reds and greens are layered with white, with almost no true blending except the accidental swirling together of adjacent strokes.

1. Rivière 1921, p. 81: “Cela me repose la cervelle de peindre des fleurs. Je n’y apporte pas la même tension d’esprit que lorsque je suis en face d’un modèle. Quand je peins des fleurs, je pose de tons, j’essaye des valeurs hardiment, sans souci de perdre une toile.”

2. Larousse 1866–90, vol. 12, p. 1093: “Elle est par excellence une plante d’ornement pour les jardins; elle y produit un effet admirable par ses touffes d’un vert gai, par ses belles corolles blanches, roses ou d’un rouge cramoisi. Ses nombreuses et magnifiques variétés sont un des triomphes de l’horticulture.”

3. See Tübingen 1996 p. 171, no. 44.

4. W 625, 627.

275 | A Box at the Theater (At the Concert) 1880

Oil on canvas, 99.4 x 80.7 cm

Upper left: Renoir. 80.; center left: Renoir.

1955-594

A Box at the Theater is the last of Renoir’s sequence of ambitious canvases of theater boxes, a sequence that began with *La Loge* (The Courtauld Gallery, London), exhibited in the first Impressionist group show in 1874.¹ *A Box at the Theater* was bought by Paul Durand-Ruel from his fellow dealer and close associate Dubourg in November 1880; Dubourg had presumably bought it directly from Renoir. It was first exhibited in the seventh Impressionist group show in March 1882, and remained with the Durand-Ruel company until it was sold to Sterling Clark in 1928.

This seemingly simple story conceals the complexity of the picture’s origins. According to Durand-Ruel’s son Joseph, the canvas was initially a portrait of the daughters of Edmond Turquet, then Under-Secretary of State for Fine Arts, but Turquet apparently disliked the canvas and rejected it.² This account is complicated by the infrared and X-ray photographic evidence provided by the picture itself (fig. 275.1); in its original state, the canvas included a male figure in the upper right corner, seen in profile and leaning toward the figure on the left. This may well have been an image of Turquet himself. As can be seen from Lucien Sergent’s drawing of the Turquet family of about 1876 (fig. 275.2), showing Edmond accompanied by three female figures, Turquet indeed seems to have had two daughters, who would, by 1880, have been the same age as the girls in Renoir’s canvas.

On this account, it would have been after Turquet’s rejection of the canvas that Renoir reworked it and sold it as a genre painting. Something similar happened to Renoir’s first portrait of Madame Léon Clapisson of 1882 (private collection); in this case, after it was rejected by the sitter, Renoir reworked it as a genre painting, making the face less specific in its features, and executed a second, more sober and conventional portrait.³ In the present instance, the changes were more dramatic. He removed the male figure seen in the X-ray and completely reworked the background. The X-ray shows softly and freely brushed forms across the top left corner of the picture, above and to the left of the head of the left figure, in the area that now shows a pilaster and a hanging curtain; based on this evidence, it is very possible that the painting repre-