



**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,  
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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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no. 350, ill. (French ed., p. 103, no. 341, ill.); Cleaver and Eddins 1977, p. 409, ill.; Nakayama 1979, p. 31; Nakayama 1980, p. 88, no. 61; White 1984, pp. 95–96, ill.; Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, vol. 1, p. 283, no. 241, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a fine-weave linen (25 threads/cm) with an old glue or paste lining onto a coarser weave fabric (16 x 19 threads/cm). The back of the lining, although quite grimy, also looks whitewashed, and the export stamps date the lining to before the picture left France. The six-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher may not be original, based on the repasted labels. While the lining appears to be stable, it has produced scattered unattractive blister distortions in the right half of the image, with small cracks developing along the more elevated spots. The brittle, transparent reddish purple color has its own crack pattern. The painting was cleaned in 1980 of an uneven discolored varnish and an underlying grime layer. There is old and new inpainting on the left and right edges.

The ground is comprised of two layers, the lower being a commercially applied yellowish white color. The upper thick white layer was applied by the artist with a palette knife, using a diagonal sweeping motion that has left both high sheen areas and pebbly patches. A diagonal line seen in the back of the left figure and arcing scratches in the lower half of the image are attributable to this palette-knife ground application. The underdrawing is red chalk or conté crayon, smears of which are very visible in the thinly painted lower half of the left figure and along her extended proper left foot. Surface charcoal seen in the right figures may have been transferred from another surface. The only line seen in infrared was a horizontal scribble below the hair of the left figure. The paint is applied in thin-wash to thick-paste consistency with dry-brush scumbling. Some thin passages may be overextended with diluent, and there are a few low impastos in the white details. The yellow shading on the left figure looks patchy as if some connecting color is missing, possibly due to fading in the thinnest purplish red applications, as on other Renoirs. The ultraviolet light fluorescence of the surface shows there may have been more red pigment on the surface than is now visible in normal light.

1. Blanche 1949, pp. 151–52. It is not clear whether Blanche owned this study for the final work.
2. See Wagner 1861, pp. 168–71, for the libretto and descriptions of the scenes and settings.
3. See Paris–Ottawa–San Francisco 1982–83, pp. 147–62, 275–88.
4. Blanche 1927, p. 64: “dans le genre de Fragonard.”
5. Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, pp. 285–86, vol. 1, nos. 243 and 245.

## 273 | **Sunset** 1879 or 1881

Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 61 cm

Lower right: Renoir.

1955.602

Unlike the other landscapes by Renoir in the Clark collection, *Sunset* is a rapid sketch of a dramatic light effect, rather than a depiction of a specific site; in this, it is unusual in Renoir's oeuvre. The date of *Sunset* is uncertain, although it bears some relationship, in tonality and viewpoint, to the far more highly finished canvas *Seascape* (The Art Institute of Chicago), dated 1879 and painted during Renoir's first extended stay with his patron Paul Berard near Dieppe in the summer of 1879. Nevertheless, *Sunset* may instead have been executed during one of Renoir's subsequent visits to the Normandy coast in the early 1880s. Indeed, it is very possible that this canvas is the “effect of sunset painted in ten minutes” that Jacques-Émile Blanche mentioned in a letter in July 1881; Blanche's mother saw this as merely “wasting paint.”<sup>1</sup>

*Sunset* invites comparison with Monet's celebrated *Impression, Sunrise* (Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris), whose title led to the naming of the group as Impressionists when it was exhibited at the first group exhibition in 1874. Monet's canvas was shown again at the fourth group exhibition in the spring of 1879, and it is possible that *Sunset* represents Renoir's response to the challenge that Monet's canvas posed. The two canvases, however, are different in significant ways. Though the effect is misty, Monet's *Impression* depicts an identifiable site, the port of Le Havre, while Renoir's scene betrays no clue regarding its location. All we can tell is that we are looking out from an elevated point, probably a cliff, and only the little boat gives a sense of scale and an indication of a human presence. Nor is the effect depicted as precise and specific as Monet's image of sunrise. The elevated viewpoint of this canvas and *Seascape* distinguish them from Monet's canvases of breaking waves of the early 1880s, in which the spectator is placed on the beach face-to-face with the sea; only in *The Wave* of 1882 (Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis) did Renoir engage so directly with the forces of the sea.

In Monet's canvas, the play of reflections in the water is closely observed; by contrast, in *Sunset*, the surface of the sea primarily acts as a foil to the light effect in the sky above. There is little attention to the





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movement of the water itself; indeed, as in other depictions of water by Renoir, the direction of some of the brushwork—here, the softly diagonal strokes in the lower part of the canvas—seems to work against a sense of the horizontality of the water surface (see also cat. 281). The sky is rapidly brushed, evidently executed wet-on-wet and very probably at a single sitting; the sea, by contrast, is more heavily worked, with superimposed layers of color, though it does not seem to have been reworked after the first layers had had time to dry. The coherence of the canvas is achieved through color—through the relationship between the boldly juxtaposed swathes of blue, orange, and cream in the sky and the same colors scattered in smaller strokes across the sea below. The boat, though small and treated only in two seemingly casual daubs of darker blue, plays a crucial role as the pivot around which the play of color of the rest of the canvas revolves.

Examination of the margins of the picture that have not been exposed to light indicates that the red pigments, probably red lakes, have faded significantly (see also cat. 264); many of the blue tones would have

been more purple in hue, and some of the whites more pink. We must imagine that originally the whole canvas would have had a stronger red and purple tinge.

Although it is so sketchily treated, Renoir signed *Sunset*, thus indicating that he saw it as a canvas that was complete in its own terms. It seems likely that its first owner was Renoir's close friend Edmond Maître, who died in 1898; the Durand-Ruel records indicate that it was purchased in 1899 from "Madame Maistre," an alternate spelling of the name that presumably indicates Maître's widow, Rapha. If Maître was its first owner, it is a fine example of the type of informal sketch that the Impressionists regarded as suitable for sale or gift to friends, but not for sale on the open market.<sup>2</sup> JH

**PROVENANCE** Madame Maistre (until 1899, sold to Durand-Ruel, Paris, 19 May 1899); [Durand-Ruel, Paris, 1899–1921, transferred to Durand-Ruel, New York, 29 Mar. 1921]; [Durand-Ruel, New York, 1921–40, sold to Salz, 20 Sept. 1940]; [Sam Salz, New York, 1940–41, sold to Durand-Ruel, New York, 23 May 1941];<sup>3</sup> [Durand-Ruel, New York, in 1941, sold to Clark, 22 Sept. 1941]; Robert Sterling Clark (1941–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Williamstown 1956b, no. 152, pl. 17; Williamstown 1988b, no cat.; Huntington–Baltimore–Memphis 1990, p. 33, no. 61, ill.; Williamstown 1996–97, pp. 81–83, 106, ill., and ill. on back cover; London–Amsterdam–Williamstown 2000–2001, p. 186, fig. 130; Chicago–Philadelphia–Amsterdam 2003–4, p. 247, pl. 116 (exhibited in Chicago and Philadelphia only); Madrid 2010–11, pp. 40–41, 74–76, no. 13, ill.

**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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup>

*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