



**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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Details:

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The white ground is probably a commercially applied layer, which tested in 1980 as having a glue-based ground. The ground is visible throughout the surface. A complete and delicate underdrawing, probably done in graphite, is visible in infrared reflectography. On close inspection, some lines are detectable in normal viewing in the thinly painted ear. There is little alteration from the drawing to the paint, except for some reworking in the sitter's proper right eye, and a change in the sweep of hair on the proper left side, whose drawing extends further into the background than the final paint. Brushes running as large as 2.5 cm in width were employed in the background, and sweetening was done in many areas using a soft clean brush to subtract and blend the colors. Some details, such as the dress buttons and the sitter's eyes, have small impastos.

1. Blanche 1933, p. 292: "C'est un portrait, il faut que la maman reconaisse sa fille." For a photograph of Thérèse that suggests that her mother might indeed have been able to recognize her, see Ottawa–Chicago–Fort Worth 1997–98, p. 39 (fig. 56); on his "prudent" treatment of the portrait of Marthe, see Duret 1924, p. 63.
2. Christian Thurneyssen to Jeanne Berggreen, 20 April 1976, in the Clark's curatorial file. Quoted in Williams-town 1996–97, p. 62.
3. RSC Diary, 27 Nov. 1945.

272 | Study for *Scene from "Tannhäuser,"* *Third Act* 1879

Oil on canvas, 54.8 x 65.7 cm
Lower left: Renoir.
1955.608

While staying with Paul Berard at Wargemont near Dieppe in 1879, Renoir was introduced to the famous psychiatric doctor Émile Blanche, whose son Jacques-Émile, born in 1861, himself became a celebrated painter. Dr. Blanche commissioned two decorative panels from Renoir for the family's house in Dieppe, depicting episodes from Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*, to be installed on a balcony where Blanche housed casts after the antique.¹ Renoir painted two pairs of canvases for the commission—the second pair apparently because the first was the wrong size. The two scenes represented were, first, Tannhäuser lying in Venus's arms, from the first scene of the opera, and, second, the moment in the third

and final scene of the third act when Tannhäuser, who has failed to gain absolution from the pope, seeks to return to Venus's realm but is restrained by his companion Wolfram. The moment depicted is when Venus welcomes his return, just before Elizabeth's prayer for Tannhäuser's return stops him in his tracks and begins the process of redemption with which the opera ends.² The Clark canvas is a preparatory study for the latter of these scenes, focusing on its primary subject—the interchange between the three figures of Tannhäuser, Wolfram, and Venus—without exploring the way in which this might be fitted into the format of the decoration, which was longer and narrower in shape.

Since 1861, when the aborted performances of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opéra precipitated Charles Baudelaire's celebrated essay on Wagner, this opera had been the focus of French debates about the composer and his music. Effectively taboo in the 1870s, after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, Wagner's music remained the focus of admiration among a significant group of art-lovers in France, including Dr. Blanche. Among Renoir's artist associates, Henri Fantin-Latour was Wagner's primary promoter. His first Wagnerian painting, *Scene from "Tannhäuser,"* shown at the 1864 Salon, and its related lithograph show the same scene from the first act that Renoir depicted in the first of the Blanche decorations. These were followed at the 1877 Salon by more subjects from Wagner, including a new version of the *Tannhäuser* lithograph.³ Renoir was not himself an enthusiast of Wagner's music, but he had many contacts in Wagnerite circles; he would presumably have been aware of Fantin's prints before starting the Blanche commission.

In his visualization of the *Tannhäuser* subjects, Renoir adopts an approach somewhat similar to that of Fantin; his compositions are woven together with animated groups of figures treated with an informality that wholly avoids the static figure groupings and tight draftsmanship of Neoclassical allegorical painting. Beyond this, Renoir's artistic models were primarily from the French eighteenth century, and especially the decorative compositions of François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard; Jacques-Émile Blanche described the decorations as being "in the Fragonard mode."⁴

In the Clark canvas, the gestures of Tannhäuser and Wolfram are rapidly sketched, evoking in an almost caricatured way the intensity of Tannhäuser's desire, but the primary focus is on the figure of Venus. Renoir had depicted a modern-day Venus in his Salon exhibit in 1870, *Bather with a Griffon* (Museu de Arte de São



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Paulo Assis Chateaubriand), showing his companion Lise Tréhot in a pose derived from the antique Knidian Venus; but here the figure is far less monumental, her pose more informal, reminiscent of some of the modern-life nude studies that he was making at that time, such as *Bather*, known as *Little Blue Nude* (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo). In the two finished canvases, the pose of the figure is somewhat more formal and artificial.⁵ It is not clear, in the Clark canvas, what the gesture of her raised arms is meant to signify—whether it is meant to suggest welcome or surprise.

The picture is painted on a thick white priming, somewhat unevenly applied with the palette knife over a commercially prepared ground. It is very likely that this second priming was added by Renoir himself; such primings occur in a number of his canvases in these years, seemingly for the first time in 1879. This priming, which is felt through the thinner areas of paint, lends luminosity to the whole composition. The figure

is softly brushed, with a light, variegated touch that suggests her form by variations of texture and color rather than through conventional modeling. Its dominantly warm hues are set off against the rich blue that suggests the starlit sky beyond; the somewhat duller color around her head may indicate that its position was modified during the execution of the painting. 卍

PROVENANCE Possibly Émile Blanche, Paris and Dieppe; Eugène Blot, Paris; [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 5 Apr. 1950]; Robert Sterling Clark (1950–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956b, no. 158, pl. 23; Williamstown 1996–97, pp. 96–99, ill; Madrid 2010–11, pp. 72–74, no. 12, ill.

REFERENCES Vollard 1918, vol. 1, p. 13, no. 49, ill.; Kooning 1956, p. 66; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 127, ill.; Daulte 1971, no. 313, ill.; Fezzi 1972, p. 104,

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.”¹

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