



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

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Oil on canvas, 64.8 x 81 cm  
 Lower left: Claude Monet 90  
 1955.616

The majority of pictures from the first three decades of Monet's career were based on conventional perspectives that led the eye from the foreground into deep space along a road or riverbank, a line of cliffs or an avenue of trees. This recession was enhanced by contrasts of light and shade, by shifts of scale, and often by the presence of a distant point of interest, all strategies that derive from the traditions of European landscape painting. Executed in 1890, *Spring in Giverny* was one of a growing number of works to offer an alternative mode of composition and visual engagement that soon had profound consequences for Monet's art. Here, the lower portion of the rectangle is dominated by an unbroken band of color, encouraging the viewer to survey the canvas from left to right, rather than into depth. Above this band, a parallel line of trees reinforces the same transverse movement, while simultaneously blocking the distance and removing a central point of focus.<sup>1</sup> Released from such expectations, one's attention wanders across the canvas surface to linger on the play of color, the sensual touches of the artist's brush, and his evocation of light and atmosphere. Pale, sun-saturated hues throughout the scene give further unity to this experience, minimizing disruption to the visual field and suggesting an intense moment of sensation.

Monet had moved to Giverny in 1883, renting a house to accommodate his own and his adoptive families, and to serve as a base for painting expeditions to Holland, the coasts of France and Italy, and the Creuse Valley in the Midi. As time passed, however, he worked more and more in his new surroundings, compensating for their lack of drama by developing a highly nuanced response to the low hills and open farmland bordering the local river, the Epte. He experimented with—and soon rejected—a number of village views, concentrating instead on the simple forms of the landscape as they appeared through the seasons. Two groups of paintings record the area under snow, while others tackled orchards in blossom, summer wheat, and the transforming effect of floods and mist. Among his early dated studies of the area was a remarkably prescient set of three canvases from 1884,

each providing a model for the horizontal interplay of farmland and trees in *Spring in Giverny*, though here with a single grainstack placed in the middle ground.<sup>2</sup> Between 1885 and 1887, such strip-like arrangements were repeated in riverbank views and lightly wooded settings, sometimes with a youthful figure from the Monet household breaking the foreground border.<sup>3</sup> Other works exploited the screening effect of rows of saplings, suppressing depth while hinting at terrain beyond in a manner similar to that of the Clark canvas. This evolving interplay between modest rural narratives and their stratified backdrop was to become a continuing saga over the coming decade, now favoring complexity of space and image, now leaning toward planar austerity.

With *Spring in Giverny*, Monet chose a format of exceptional simplicity and a tonal register of extreme brightness. Only the lines of bluish shadow at the base of the trees interrupt the general brilliance, which radiantly evokes a cloudless morning and freshly opened leaves on poplars and willows.<sup>4</sup> Unconcerned with the demands of topographical description in this almost featureless spot, Monet directed his energies to the miniscule variations of texture and hue in front of him, where a single passage of foliage might result in enmeshed flickers of pale pink and lemon yellow, crimson and acid green. His versatility is evident in the fine juxtapositions of hair-like strokes of color with lightly brushed areas, and in contrasts between dabs of wet-on-wet paint and drier crusty marks.<sup>5</sup> So light is this facture that white priming can still be seen throughout the canvas, subtly enhancing the luminosity of the whole. Only the pasture in the immediate foreground is denser, signaling both its proximity and its relative solidity.

Because Monet was resident at Giverny throughout 1890, we lack the detailed chronicle of his thoughts and actions that is preserved in the invaluable letters written home from his wider travels. What is known of this period indicates a mood far from that of *Spring in Giverny*. Much of the previous year had been occupied with exhibitions, including a major retrospective at the Georges Petit gallery, and with a long and arduous campaign—orchestrated by Monet himself—to buy Manet's *Olympia* (1863; Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and present it to the state. At times he became tired and irascible, while his art inevitably suffered: apart from the Creuse series and the inception of the *Grainstacks*, almost nothing can be traced to 1889, while 1890 was taken up with about two dozen canvases of poppy



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fields and other local views, and with the laborious continuation of the *Grainstacks*. Remarks accompanying both these series, however, provide some insight into the breadth of Monet's preoccupations at this date. Writing from the cold, rain-soaked Creuse Valley on 4 April 1889, he told Alice Hoschedé that his new pictures would be "gloomy," after mentioning in a previous letter that he had "finally entered into the spirit of this countryside."<sup>6</sup> In a famous statement about the *Grainstacks* sent the following year to the critic Gustave Geffroy, Monet told him: "I'm increasingly obsessed by the need to render what I experience," explaining his search for "'instantaneity', the 'envelope' above all, the same light spread over everything."<sup>7</sup>

Contrasted in almost every way with his somber canvases of the Midi, *Spring in Giverny* shows Monet engaging with a quite different "experience" of the material world and celebrating the "spirit" of another, more sympathetic locale. In a letter to Paul Durand-Ruel about his situation in Giverny, Monet explained that he would never find "a comparable set-up, nor such beautiful country," and by the end of 1890 he had bought the family home.<sup>8</sup> The spectacle of spring on his home territory clearly invigorated the artist, prompting the creation of an "envelope" of blond, luminous color that seems to "express"—another favorite word at this time—pure exhilaration. While being "delicate, unprovocative," in Paul Tucker's

words, the Clark composition and certain associated works also played a valuable role in defining the potential for eloquence and the necessary pictorial vocabulary for the emerging series of *Grainstacks*.<sup>9</sup> *Spring in Giverny* was acquired by Durand-Ruel within a few months of completion, though there is no record of it being shown until a mixed exhibition at his gallery in 1899. Thereafter, it appears to have remained with the dealer and his heirs until its sale to Sterling Clark in 1933. RK

**PROVENANCE** The artist, sold to Durand-Ruel, Oct. 1890; [Durand-Ruel, Paris and New York, 1890–1933, sold to Clark, 20 June 1933]; Robert Sterling Clark (1933–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Paris 1899, no. 32, as *Giverny; Printemps*; Williamstown 1956b, no. 148, pl. 13; Williamstown 1981a, no cat.; Williamstown 1985c, no cat.; Nagoya–Nara–Hiroshima 1991, no. 11, ill.; Cincinnati–Philadelphia–Atlanta 1999–2000, not in cat. (exhibited in Philadelphia only); Montgomery and others 2005–7, no cat.; Stuttgart 2006, pp. 34, 157, figs. 15, 66.

**REFERENCES** Fontainas 1899, p. 531; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 87, ill.; Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, pp. 130–31, no. 1243, ill., as *Printemps, Giverny*; Stuckey 1985, p. 188, pl. 76; Eitner 1988, vol. 1, p. 361 (rev. ed., p. 373); Love 1989, pp. 29–30, pl. 2-1; Boston–Chicago–London 1990, p. 68, fig. 35; Williamstown 1996–97, p. 23, fig. 16; Wildenstein 1996, vol. 3, p. 474, no. 1243, ill.; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, p. 77; Carrel 2010, pp. 36–37, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The original support is a moderate-weight linen (22 threads/cm), glue-lined to soft, bleached linen of the same weave. The six-member pine stretcher is a replacement probably datable with the lining to sometime before 1933. The lining fabric extends just to the fold-over edge, leaving only the original tacking margins holding the painting to the stretcher. There are three round patches of distorted fabric in the upper right quadrant, probably caused by overheating the glue during the hand-ironed lining process. The thinly applied paint and ground in these areas now has a dimpled texture, visible in reflected light. Some impastos are slightly flattened, although the paint is in quite good condition, considering the presence of numerous elevated impastos. There are fine unconnected drying cracks in the heavier paint strokes. In 1979, the painting was cleaned of grime and an extremely discolored yellow-gray varnish. The present synthetic spray coating is barely perceptible; the only gloss comes from the oil medium in the thicker paint strokes. Under magnification, small residues of the older varnish were found in the deeper paint recesses. There is no retouching.

The thin white ground follows the weave and was probably commercially applied. It is visible between paint

strokes in the sketchy tree trunks and the foreground. No underdrawing was discovered with either infrared or microscopic examination. The paint is applied wet-into-wet, but in a somewhat dry, full-bodied manner. There are brush hairs and troughs from former hairs scattered mostly in the upper portion of the image. The sky colors are blended in a zigzag pattern with large brushes running up to barely perceptible reserves of pink laid in for the tree forms. The foreground is covered with short strokes of thick paint that have left a number of frosting-like loops in the impastos. The signature was applied after the paint below had set.

1. Easily overlooked at the center of the canvas is a small, blurred white building almost hidden by the screen of trees, like the ghost of a grander structure that might once have occupied this prime compositional spot. In Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, p. 130, a resemblance to the little railway station of Giverny-Limetz is tentatively proposed, though the absence of the hill behind this location is also noted.
2. W 900–902. See also a group of works from 1885, W 991–96.
3. In addition to the pictures listed in note 2, see W 980–83, 997–99, 1059, 1080–83, 1125–39, 1146–47, and 1155–57.
4. The pinks and ochers among the foliage are typical of many such species when they first burst into leaf.
5. The canvas surface shows that Monet initially brushed in the sky around the areas occupied by branches, reworking some of the surrounding area as the foliage progressed and thus producing some mixed passages of blues, greens, and pinks in his still wet colors.
6. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 4 Apr. 1889 and 31 Mar. 1889, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, pp. 242–43, letters 937 and 932; translation from Kendall 1989, p. 130.
7. Claude Monet to Gustave Geffroy, 7 Oct. 1890, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, letter 1076; translation from Kendall 1989, p. 172.
8. Claude Monet to Paul Durand-Ruel, 27 Oct. 1890, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 3, p. 259, letter 1079: “une pareille installation ni un si beau pays.”
9. Boston–Chicago–London 1990, p. 68. The high foreground and horizontal structure were used in the majority of these works, while several feature a screen of trees in the middle distance.