



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

VOLUME ONE

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,
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25 | Return of the Fishing Boats, Étretat 1879

Oil on panel, 14 x 23.9 cm

Lower left: Boldini 79

1955.647

Return of the Fishing Boats, Étretat is one of the most remarkable of Boldini's works. Produced during a visit to the Normandy coast in 1879, it is meticulously executed on a small, verging on miniature, scale, yet it also captures a sense of the almost infinite distance of a view over water and the quality of light at the end of a cloudy day. Boldini took a wide range of approaches to landscape subjects over the course of his career, ranging from rapidly executed plein-air sketches to extremely broadly painted views, to highly finished treatments like this one, which is among the most minutely detailed works he produced. While he was in Étretat, Boldini painted a small group of works in oil that are linked by their shared size and subject matter, as well as at least one watercolor, *The Beach* (fig. 25.1), that might have served as a preparatory sketch

for three of the oil paintings.¹ *The Beach* was no doubt done on site, in front of the scene, and is composed of thin washes and quick, more opaque strokes of color that depict a broad expanse of beach in the foreground, the Falaise d'Amont, or Upstream Cliff, that distinguishes the location in the distance, and a group of boats pulled up on shore. Although a number of figures appear in the scene, occupying themselves with the boats or fishing gear, they are difficult to perceive and are clearly secondary to the landscape.

While the development from a freely executed sketch to a more finished final work is standard artistic practice, the comparative scales of the watercolor *The Beach* and *Return of the Fishing Boats* reverse the usual relation—that is, the watercolor (30.5 x 45 cm) is nearly twice as large as the oil painting (14 x 23.9 cm). Further, while several elements, including the brown-sailed boats and the overturned basket in the foreground, are repeated in the oil, Boldini in the oil shifted his perspective to encompass the more famous Falaise d'Aval, or Downstream Cliff, of Étretat in the background, and devoted as much attention to the figures as to the landscape and atmosphere.



Fig. 25.1. Giovanni Boldini, *The Beach*, c. 1879. Watercolor on paper, 30.5 x 45 cm. Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Museo Giovanni Boldini, Ferrara (inv. 1450)

Indeed, the crowd explicitly includes men and women in work clothes, children, dogs, and at least one man in a bowler hat and a woman in a ruffled skirt, bonnet, and parasol, formal clothing that identifies these figures as tourists in this resort town, or at least as non-participants in what is otherwise a work scene. Just as in cityscapes like *Crossing the Street* (cat. 22), the artist's attention is directed as much to the clothing and occupations of the figures as to their surroundings, even at this very small scale.

As he did in this case, Boldini typically chose to paint landscapes in locations that appeared regularly in the work of other artists, from Étretat to suburban towns along the Seine near Paris, rather than seeking out unknown or unusual sites. But his approach to painting such scenes was often highly individual. Here, rather than recording the waves or the effects of light on the landscape, he produced a painting with an almost photographic quality, equivalent in size and visual precision to a postcard, as if he wished to create a souvenir of his visit to the resort town. Indeed, the note of contemporaneity introduced by the well-dressed onlookers might be found in photographs or postcards of the site from the same period, but it is largely absent from nearly all other painted treatments of Étretat and its cliffs by artists such as Gustave Courbet and Claude Monet. While perhaps unusual by landscape standards, Boldini's paintings were clearly popular with collectors—one of the Étretat

beach scenes was purchased by William H. Stewart, an important patron of the artist, while this panel entered a private British collection probably before the turn of the century. SL

PROVENANCE J. J. Brown, The Woodlands, Reigate (his sale, Christie's, London, 3 Apr. 1909, no. 4, as *The Fish Auction, Etretat*, sold to Wallis & Son; [Wallis & Son, London]; Morgan Wing, Tuxedo Park, New York, sold to Knoedler, 1929; [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 30 Apr. 1929, as *Return from Fishing*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1929–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown–Hartford 1974, p. 28, no. 9, ill.; Williamstown 1982d, pp. 66, 71, no. 6; Williamstown 1988a, no cat.; Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.; Treviso 2001–2, p. 29, ill.; Ferrara–Williamstown 2009–10, pp. 8, 35–36, 131, 206, no. 45, ill.

REFERENCES Herbert 1995, pp. 81–82, 84–85, ill.; Doria 2000, vol. 1, no. 96, ill.; Dini and Dini 2002, vol. 1, pp. 169, 260, pl. 46, vol. 3, pp. 173–74, no. 303, ill.; Panconi 2002, p. 176, ill.; Edinburgh 2003, p. 27, fig. 20; Montecatini Terme 2008, p. 222.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a wood panel (0.3 cm thick), possibly a light-density mahogany, with the grain running horizontally. The reverse is painted black and has no chamfers along the edges. A 5.1-cm split running inward from the center of the left edge was repaired during a 1978 cleaning. An examination at that time noted some previous solvent damage in thin dark passages and an area of repaint in the water near the right edge. This old oil retouch was repainted to correct the color. In general, the paint is in very good condition.

There is no ground layer, and the warm pale color of the wood contributes to many areas of the image. There seems to be a charcoal underdrawing visible under low magnification in such details as the top of the mast of the center boat. The original raised position of the sail on this boat is evident using infrared reflectography, and it is somewhat visible to the unaided eye. The rigging lines associated with this raised sail position also slightly indent the wood surface. A brown ink sketch may precede the paint layer, but ink is also found in the upper paint layer, in such details as the rigging lines. The image was created in small daubs of thin to moderate paste-consistency paint.

1. In addition to the present work, the other two related paintings are DD 305 and 306.