



**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

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canvas based on either style or costume, circumstantial evidence indicates that it was likely painted in the 1930s.⁴ KP

PROVENANCE [Wildenstein, New York, sold to Clark, 14 June 1940]; Robert Sterling Clark (1940–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS New York 1940c, p. 17, no. 6, ill., as *A Parisian*.

REFERENCES None

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a good quality, coarsely woven, pre-primed linen (13 threads/cm). The painting is unlined and is sparsely tacked to an inexpensive, five-member pine strainer, with nailed, half-lapped corner joins. The canvas is held properly taut, despite the immobility of the strainer. There is minor frame abrasion along the left and right edges. There are no cracks except those along the fold-over edges. The surface sheen is primarily matte, except in areas of locally applied varnish. The coating is a thin, patchy layer, apparently applied while the picture was framed.

The ground is a commercially applied off-white layer, thin enough to allow the canvas weave to be prominent. There is no detectable underdrawing or paint sketch below the visible paint layer, although there may be a grayish layer below the flesh color. The paint was directly and quickly applied in a paste consistency, wet-into-wet, using large brushes. Wide-bristle brushstrokes are visible even in the face.

1. RSC diary, 12 May 1940, pp. 2–3.
2. Most sources still give his year of death as 1927 rather than 1972, but this seems to stem from a typographical error in some editions of Emmanuel Bénézit's *Dictionnaire des peintures, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs*, including the French edition of 1999. This was corrected in the English edition of 2006. Boulet exhibited regularly at the Paris Salons, even as late as 1951, when he showed two paintings and a pastel there.
3. New York 1947. A painting titled *Parisienne* was exhibited there, but it is unlikely to be the Clark's picture.
4. The date may be inferred from the fact that the exhibition at which it appeared in 1940 was devoted to contemporary French painting.

Jules Breton

French, 1827–1906

36 | Jeanne Calvet 1865

Oil on millboard, 22 x 19 cm

Lower right: Jules Breton / Jeanne Calvet / Douarnenez / Sardinière; upper right: 1865

1955.661

Jules Breton is well known for his depictions of French rural life, which he loved and from which he originated. He was born to a bourgeois family in a small town in the province of Artois in the far north of France, and throughout his life, was continually drawn to the simplicity of country living. Most of his early training was in Ghent, with the Belgian painter Félix de Vigne (1806–1863), whose daughter Breton eventually married. After a brief period of study in Antwerp, Breton moved to Paris in 1847 to further his training, first with Michel-Martin Drölling (1786–1851). Soon thereafter he entered the *École des Beaux-Arts* where he counted Ary Scheffer, Horace Vernet, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres as his teachers. His natural inclinations, together with the democratic tendencies brought out by the Revolution of 1848, strengthened his resolve to focus on depicting the nobility of rural life. Unlike the slightly older Jean-François Millet (cats. 217–21), whose subjects he emulated, Breton rarely showed the struggles of country life, but instead sought to highlight its dignity.

In this austere little portrait, a young woman is shown in strict profile against a plain dark green background. The woman is clothed in a simple brown blouse with a turquoise fichu at the neck, with her hair covered by a white headdress. She gazes forward, her light gray eyes focused on the distance in an expression of silent concentration. She seems serious and strong, with a simple grandeur despite her apparent rusticity. The sitter's straight nose and prominent chin and lips appealed to the artist, who referred to this type of woman as "a Gallo-Roman type, dear to Michael Angelo."¹ Indeed, the strong features of the woman coupled with the profile format bring to mind not only Michelangelo, but also figures on ancient coins or Renaissance plaquettes.

From the artist's inscription on the lower right of the painting, we know that the woman is Jeanne Calvet from the town of Douarnenez, and that she was



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a sardine processor, or *sardinière*. Douarnenez is a rugged coastal town with Celtic roots in the province of Brittany, where the economy centered on the fishing and canning of sardines, tuna, and mackerel.² The sardine industry employed both fishermen, who set up nets in the bay, then brought the fish in from the boats to the docks, and women, who processed the fish once on land. In a laborious and seemingly endless chain of events, the women of Douarnenez were responsible for the sorting, cleaning, brining, drying, cooking, canning, and ultimately the packing of sardines during the busy harvesting season each summer and autumn.

Jules Breton first traveled to Douarnenez, together with his wife and young daughter, in late August 1865 to visit a friend.³ The details of this initial trip are recorded in a series of letters to his uncle, and in one of the first he recounted the beauty of both the bay crowded with fishing boats and the women

who inhabited the town, and his desire to have the latter pose for him.⁴ He and his family became frequent summer visitors to the town, where they roomed in a comfortable hotel with a variety of artists and writers. The initial voyage of 1865 was followed by a short hiatus from Brittany in the following two years, then return trips there each year from 1868 through 1874.

In Douarnenez, Breton sketched and painted prodigiously, making some plein-air studies that were finished on the spot, and others that were later worked up back in his Parisian studio. He also visited the local women at work along the docks or in the fish-processing buildings, or at the public laundry areas along the rocky shore of the bay. Breton must have made the acquaintance of Jeanne Calvet fairly soon after his arrival, for in mid-October he wrote to his uncle about her posing for him: "I began a study of a charming young model; I shall finish that and make a small painting of it."⁵ The portrait, painted on millboard, is the second work men-

tioned and seems to have been made fairly quickly and vigorously, as it is mostly thinly painted, with scratched lines (sgraffito) along the model's shirt. Thicker paint was applied only for the traditional Breton head covering worn by the model.⁶

Jeanne Calvet must have been a favored model, as she appears in at least two major paintings by Breton. In *A Spring on the Seashore* (1866; private collection), which depicts the women of Douarnenez at a coastal laundry site, Calvet walks while holding a jug on her head. The pose, which Breton studied in several sketches, recalls classical Greco-Roman prototypes. Breton exhibited this painting at the Exposition Universelle of 1867. Calvet also appears as the most prominent woman of the multifigured painting called *The Washerwomen of the Breton Coast*, shown at the Salon of 1870.⁷ Here she rolls up her sleeve before beginning the arduous task of washing clothes along the rocky coastline in the company of other women at work. In both paintings Calvet has a monumental presence, with her limbs strong and posture erect.

The memory of Brittany, like that of his homeland in Artois, sustained Breton throughout his life. In his autobiography, first published in 1890, he recalled his spiritual connection to the people and landscape of Brittany and commented that he "felt that [he] was indeed a descendant of the Bretons," as his family name would suggest.⁸ KP

PROVENANCE The artist (d. 1906, his studio sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 2–3 June 1911, no. 165, ill., as *Étude de femme, d'après Jeanne Calvet*, sold to Schoeller); Schoeller (from 1911); Frédéric Mallet (his sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 20 May 1920, no. 14, as *Étude de femme, d'après Jeanne Calvet*); Robert Sterling Clark (until 1955); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1958a, ill.; Williamstown 1979b, no cat.; Williamstown 1981a, no cat.; Omaha–Memphis–Williamstown 1982–83, p. 78, no. 18, ill.; Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.; Arras–Quimper–Dublin 2002, pp. 143–44, 146, 242, no. 47, fig. 51 (English ed., pp. 143–44, 146, 243, no. 47, fig. 110) (exhibited in Dublin only).

REFERENCES Bourrut Lacouture 1987, p. 123n28.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a densely compacted millboard 0.3 cm. thick. It is slightly convex, with the upper and lower edges trimmed sometime after the picture's completion, shattering the edge paint and cutting through the last line of the faint inscription in the lower right corner. There is a red stencil on the reverse with "2 Muller Paris" which may be the colorman who supplied the board, and the back is

painted a dark brown in imitation of oxidized wood. Long age cracks are scattered in the center of the picture, and stress cracks run away from the left edge, probably from framing pressure. There are short, branched cracks in the green background color. In the lower right corner, what appears to be an earlier, lower signature was scraped through the paint while it was still wet, probably with a brush handle. This was blackened out with ink or paint before being re-incised through the paint after it was partially dry. In normal and ultraviolet light, this corner looks overpainted, due to this sloppily applied black layer and old varnish. While it is not possible to construct the chronology of the inscriptions, some parts may be quite late, especially the very shallow, tentative date in the upper right varnish layer. The painting was carefully cleaned in 1982, in order to preserve the incised inscriptions. There are very tiny retouches in the face and in several cracks in the upper left.

The ground is a textured, off-white, commercially applied layer that shows below many areas of thin paint. With infrared reflectography, a few underdrawing lines are barely visible in the sitter's neck, and charcoal deposits along her profile may be discernible under magnification. A thin brown paint sketch seems to follow the faint drawing, and a brown wash of paint also runs below the green background color. The paint is handled in thin to moderate paste consistency, with impastos only in the white head scarf, whose outline has been adjusted by painting the green background over one section. The sgraffito lines in and around the bodice help define the folds of fabric. Dark brush hairs in the surface suggest that the artist used smaller, soft, sable brushes to control the details. The greenish blue paint on the sitter's fichu may be the newly invented Cerulean (cobaltous stannate), which came into use around 1860.

1. From Breton's own reminiscence in his autobiography, see Breton 1890, p. 311.
2. An early discussion of the business is Smith 1901. More recent is Dubois 2004.
3. His daughter, Virginie, described the town, some of its inhabitants including Jeanne Calvet, and her father's work habits, in Demont-Breton 1929, pp. 66–71.
4. Jules Breton to Boniface Breton, 2 Sept. 1865, in Arras–Quimper–Dublin 2002, p. 139.
5. From a letter written on 16 Oct. 1865, as noted by Annette Bourrut Lacouture in Arras–Quimper–Dublin 2002, p. 171n21. The study was sold at Sotheby's, New York, 18 July 1997, no. 486, and is the same size as the present work.
6. See Technical Report.
7. Illustrated in Arras–Quimper–Dublin 2002, p. 148, fig. 116, where the painting appears as location unknown. This painting reappeared on the marketplace in 2009: Sotheby's, New York, 24 Apr. 2009, no. 85.
8. Breton 1890, p. 308.