



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

VOLUME ONE

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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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The ground layer is an off-white color, seen beneath the many scattered paint-layer traction cracks. Several small changes in the paint film are recorded with infrared reflectography, such as the outline of the proper left shoulder of the main figure. Old tack holes can be seen along the left edge, confirming the inclusion of the tacking edges in the present image dimension. The presence of an underdrawing is assumed due to scattered deposits of charcoal in the paint, although lines were not detected in infrared reflectography. The image is created in a peculiarly layered structure, which in reflected or specular light produces uneven raised areas in the light-colored, thicker brushwork. The lowest layer appears to be a glaze of warm brown underpaint. Thick opaque colors were then laid on locally for the light passages, leaving the lower layer visible to represent the shadows and folds. The thicker, light-colored applications were then covered with toned glazes to enhance the colors. The background was finished around the figure, although some details, such as the now abraded pipe, were clearly added over completed passages.

1. *L'Artiste* 1834, p. 208: "Decamps, qui, toujours aussi insouciant de la renommée aujourd'hui même, après ses triomphes du Salon dernier, que lors de ses premiers débuts, s'en va, pour plusieurs années peut-être, demander à la Sicile un refuge contre les hivers et contre les ministres qui seraient encore tentés de le poursuivre de leurs propositions de croix d'honneur."
2. *L'Artiste* 1835, p. 208: "belles études"; "Nous aimons mieux qu'il ait profité de son séjour en Italie pour en étudier les mœurs et la physionomie." For details of his travels in Italy, see Mosby 1977, vol. 2, pp. 229–30n13.
3. Clément 1886, p. 20: "ne répondit pas non plus d'une manière complète à ses aptitudes et à ses goûts."
4. Chaumelin 1861, p. 33: "ses *lazzaroni* somnolents, ses *condottieri* non moins farouches que des Arnauts, ses mendiants déguenillés." The Arnauts were inhabitants of Albania, specifically those who served as soldiers in the Turkish army during the Ottoman Empire.
5. On the influence of Robert in Decamps's work, see Mosby 1977, vol. 1, pp. 139–41, 174, 182.
6. Mosby 1977, vol. 1, p. 174.
7. Moreau 1869, p. xiv: "solidité de ton."
8. Thoré 1846, p. 98: "On peut bâtir ainsi une maison, même en peinture; mais comment appliquer ce procédé à l'air et à l'eau?"
9. Goncourt and Goncourt 1893: "ce mur blanchi et reblanchi à la chaux vive . . . les pinceaux de Decamps le truelent; ils le maçonnent, ils le crépissent. . . . Et soudain, le mur, le mur lui-même, est tout entier sur la toile."
10. Chaumelin 1861, p. 33: "un *Paysan*, assis sur un banc et fumant sa pipe avec la placidité d'un *lazzarone*."
11. RSC Diary, 9 Nov. 1940.

107 | The Poacher c. 1847

Oil on canvas, 24.1 x 18.6 cm

Lower left: DECAMPS

1955-700

Scenes of the hunt recur in Decamps's imagery, from his earliest works, which recall his "rustic apprenticeship," as he described his youth in Picardy, to those produced at the end of his career, probably inspired by his hunting expeditions in the forest of Fontainebleau.¹ His contemporaries recognized that his paintings reflected his dedication to the sport: "Decamps was himself a Nimrod too passionate and too assiduous not to understand, through his experience, the smallest details of modern hunting. It's based on his personal memories that he has presented hunters, dogs, and game."² The figure of the poacher appears in his earliest hunting scenes, described by a nineteenth-century source as "familiar landscapes animated by the figures of woodcutters, poachers, or gamekeepers."³ The Clark picture, though, belongs among Decamps's mature works, executed during his stay in the village of Chailly-en-Brière in Fontainebleau in 1846–47.

During this period, Decamps deliberately removed himself from the art scene in Paris, an expression of his disaffection with the hierarchy of the Academy, following his rejection by the jury for the Salon of 1846. Mosby describes the artist's Fontainebleau sojourn as a time of "isolation and frustration" and suggests that Decamps's preference for single-figure compositions, such as *The Poacher*, as well as another contemporaneous hunting piece, *Lying in Wait (L'Affût)* (1847; Musée du Louvre, Paris), reflects his own feeling of remoteness.⁴ This autobiographical reading, however, fails to consider the single-figure compositions that Decamps produced both before and after his self-imposed exile from Paris. The hunter in *The Poacher* first appeared silhouetted in the foreground of a lithograph from 1829, *Return from the Hunt* (fig. 107.1), whose composition Decamps repeated in a painting of the following year, *The Gamekeeper* (Musée du Périgord, Périgueux). In *The Poacher*, painted more than a decade later, Decamps narrows his focus, notably eliminating the other two hunters in the background. Decamps's images of lone hunters, as well as other solitary figures, which date from after 1844, reflect his increasing preference for simplified figural



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compositions. Another painting of a solitary poacher was included in the artist's posthumous atelier sale in 1861.⁵ Citing his portrayals of poachers, beggars, and laborers, among other lone figures, an early biographer lauded the artist's "magic paintbrush," in which "the most vulgar types take on . . . a marvelous tone, a striking relief."⁶ Perhaps his contemporaries also saw something of Decamps himself expressed in works such as *The Poacher*, as the critic Silvestre concluded his biography of the artist with the following observa-

tion: "M. Decamps seems to me a compound of artist, merchant, politician, poacher, bourgeois and soldier."⁷

The figure of the poacher dominates the composition, silhouetted against a low horizon line. Decamps apparently painted the figure first, drawing its outlines in what appears to be charcoal, before filling in the background. While impastoed touches are scattered in the foreground snow, the paint is thinly applied overall, and the canvas weave is visible, particularly in the snow-covered hillside (see Technical Report). The com-



Fig. 107.1 Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, *Return from the Hunt*, from the series *Hunting Scenes*, 1829. Lithograph, first state of two, 15.1 x 25.1 (image), 24.4 x 32.9 cm (sheet). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1926 (26.75.9)

position prefigures the solitary rural laborers painted by Jean-François Millet, who arrived in Fontainebleau in 1849. According to Millet's biographer, Decamps sought out the younger artist in order to express his admiration for his work.⁸ Despite Decamps's subsequent—and limited—contact with Millet and other artists in the region, he never became an integral part of the artistic community in Fontainebleau, and there is no evidence of significant artistic exchange.⁹ Decamps went back to Paris in 1847 but returned to Fontainebleau in 1853, where he died seven years later, following a riding accident in the forest. KCG

PROVENANCE M. T. von Feldt; [Wildenstein, New York, sold to Clark, 27 Sept. 1945, as *Le Braconnier*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1945–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1956a, pl. S-14; Williamstown 1984a, p. 41, no. 11, ill.; Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.

REFERENCES Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 32, ill.; Mosby 1977, vol. 1, p. 217, vol. 2, p. 618, no. 470, pl. 84-A.

TECHNICAL REPORT The original support is a very fine weave linen (25–31 threads/cm), which was drop-lined in 1983 onto a linen of similar weight, using the contact adhesive Beva

371. The tacking margins were retained, and the original four-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher was reused. There are small paint losses in the foreground along the left edge, 7.6 cm up from the corner. Age fissures in the gray sky are quite fine in scale and barely noticeable. The 1983 report noted abrasion to the thinly painted dark areas. The signature is abraded, with the “S” of Decamps completely missing. The picture was cleaned in 1983, and older retouchings in the pants, shoes, costume folds, and some shadows were left in place and reinforced as necessary. Newer retouches are visible in the background above the figure's proper right thigh and along the upper left edge.

The image is rather thinly painted, especially in the dark areas, allowing the canvas weave to be visible. There is also a marked diagonal pattern, perhaps in the ground application, which can be seen at low magnification. The painting is constructed with thin dark underlayers, thicker light-colored strokes, and final glaze details. Infrared reflectography seems to show underdrawing for the figure. The drawing medium appears to be charcoal, seen as a deposit of black particles sprinkled in front of the painted line of the proper right pant leg. Under magnification, there appears to be a considerable layer of black particles beneath the brushwork in the snow, perhaps indicating that the background was roughed in with charcoal. The thinly painted figure appears to have been painted first, with the background filled in around him in a dry paint application that skips across the weave. Very small brushes were used.

1. Clément 1886, p. 14: “apprentissage rustique.”
2. Chaumelin 1861, p. 28: “Decamps était lui-même un Nemrod trop passionné et trop assidu pour ne pas connaître, par expérience, les moindres particularités de la vénerie moderne. C'est d'après des souvenirs personnels qu'il a mis en scène chasseurs, chiens et gibier.”
3. Mantz 1862, p. 103: “des paysages familiers qu'animent des figures de bûcherons, de braconniers ou de gardes-chasse.”
4. Mosby 1977, vol. 1, p. 217.
5. Clément 1886, p. 90.
6. Chaumelin 1861, p. 35: “pinceau magique,” “les types les plus vulgaires prenaient . . . un accent merveilleux, un relief saisissant.”
7. Silvestre 1856, p. 179: “M. Decamps me paraît un composé d'artiste, de marchand, d'homme politique, de braconnier, de bourgeois et de soldat.”
8. Sensier 1881, pp. 137–39
9. Rouen 2000, p. 18.