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

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With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

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Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps

French, 1803–1860

104 | **Bird Hunting (La Chasse au miroir)** 1830

Oil on canvas, 34.8 x 50.8 cm
Lower center: Decamps.
1955.701

In a career spanning some three decades, Decamps emerged as one of the most popular artists of the Romantic era. He produced more than two thousand paintings, drawings, and prints, ranging from animal subjects to Orientalist and biblical themes. Although he exhibited in the Salon, beginning in 1827, his participation in such public exhibitions was sporadic; rather, his reputation was established primarily through galleries, dealers, and at auction. As the critic Théophile Thoré observed in 1846, "his paintings are everywhere" and "one cannot imagine starting a collection without a Decamps."[1] The artist enjoyed the patronage of prominent French and British collectors, including Ferdinand-Philippe, duc d'Orléans, and Richard Seymour-Conway, the 4th Marquis of Hertford (1800–1870). At the Exposition Universelle of 1855 in Paris, he was awarded a Grand Medal of Honor and accorded a retrospective exhibition, honors that he shared with Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix.

As an adolescent, Decamps experienced, in his words, "the hard life of the fields" during a three-year sojourn in a small village in Picardy, and the rural imagery that he favored as an artist suggests this "rustic apprenticeship."[2] A contemporary biographer observed of his early works, "the sites are taken from the north of France, more particularly from Picardy, which Decamps still remembers."[3] Among these works was a series of small-scale hunting scenes Decamps began in 1829, which reflect his own interest in the sport as well as the contemporary taste for sporting pictures.[4] The compositions of these works, horizontal in format, feature figures aligned in the foreground against a summarily rendered landscape background, while bands of light and dark delineate spatial recession. *Bird Hunting*, traditionally dated to 1830, as well as at least two other hunt pictures of the same period, are similar in scale and handling to the hunting scenes of the previous year.[5]

In *Bird Hunting*, the hunters lure their prey using reflected sunlight. The young peasant boy seated on

the right attracts the larks by manipulating a device known as a *miroir à alouettes* with a string; as it pivots, its mirrored surface catches the sunlight, whose reflection appears as a flash of impastoed red and white paint on the horizon line, in the direction that the hunters take aim. Decamps painted at least three versions of this subject, of varying dimensions and at different dates; the Clark painting is possibly the earliest.[6] In 1831, a Salon commentator, admiring Decamps's naturalism, recalled a work that might well be the one in the Clark collection: "Hunting larks on a misty October day, he found the subject of one of his prettiest paintings."[7] *Bird Hunting* was later cited as an illustration of this type of hunting in an entry that appeared in Pierre Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, attesting to the familiarity of Decamps's image.[8]

The composition also references earlier works of art. The pose of the seated boy on the far right derives from a background figure in Titian's *Madonna of the Rabbit* (c. 1525–30; Musée du Louvre, Paris)—a copy of which Decamps owned—while that of the kneeling game warden is a mirror image of the mother in the foreground of Raphael's Vatican fresco, *Burning of the Borgo* (1514–17), its reversed form suggesting that Decamps knew Raphael's work from an engraving.[9] Such borrowings from the Old Masters might well have manifested his desire to elevate his genre subjects to the realm of history painting. Decamps was known for such artistic borrowings; in his 1856 biography, Théophile Silvestre rebuked Decamps for this practice—"which he has done too often and too freely, perhaps."[10] Ironically, in the 1830s and 1840s, the artist's early supporters repeatedly invoked his originality in their praise of his art.[11]

The combination of thick impasto and thinly glazed layers of paint in this work characterizes Decamps's mature style. The critic Paul Mantz, describing a contemporaneous sporting picture, *Hunting Plover*, compared his technique to that of watercolor: "the manner in which the color, loaded with oil, is spread on the canvas, recalls the methods of a watercolorist."[12] In *Bird Hunting*, Decamps's handling similarly plays on the translucent effects of watercolor. His innovative oil technique contributed to the popularity of his paintings in the 1830s.

The Clark painting passed through several important nineteenth-century collections, including that of the self-styled comte de Morny, Charles-Auguste-Louis-Joseph (1811–1865), the half-brother of Napoleon III (1808–1873), who lent the work to the artist's 1855 retrospective along with two other paintings by Decamps. KCG

PROVENANCE Charles-Auguste-Louis-Joseph, duc de Morny, Paris (by 1855–d. 1865, his sale, Paris, 31 May 1865, no. 9, as *Chasse au miroir*); Khalil Bey, Paris (until Jan. 1868, his sale, Drouot, Paris, 16–18 Jan. 1868, no. 12, as *Chasseurs au miroir*); Comte de Lambertye (until Dec. 1868, his sale, Drouot, Paris, 17 Dec. 1868, no. 14, as *Le Chasseur au miroir*); [Haro, père et fils, Paris, until 1892, their sale, Galerie Sedelmeyer, Paris, 30–31 May 1892, no. 75, as *Chasse au miroir*, sold to Durand-Ruel]; [Durand-Ruel, Paris and New York, 1892–1933, sold to Clark, 20 June 1933, as *La Chasse au miroir*];[13] Robert Sterling Clark (1933–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Paris 1855, p. 294, no. 2863, as *Chasseurs au miroir*, lent by Morny; Boston 1908, no. 73, as *Le tir au miroir*, lent by Durand-Ruel; Williamstown 1956a, no. S-15, ill.; Williamstown 1959b, pl. S-15; Williamstown 1984a, p. 39, no. 4, ill. on frontispiece.

REFERENCES Larousse 1866–90, vol. 3, p. 1059; Moreau 1869, pp. 163, 181; Im-Thurn 1876, p. 31; Clément 1886, pp. 83, 88; Koller 1959, p. 231, ill.; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 30, ill.; Mosby 1977, vol. 1, pp. 71, 73, 168, vol. 2, pp. 616–17, no. 467, pl. 17B; *Dictionary of Art* 1996, vol. 8, p. 598.

TECHNICAL REPORT The coarse linen support (9 x 13 threads/cm) lost its tacking margins in an early restoration. A failing glue lining was removed in 1980 due to the recurrence of cupping and delamination between paint layers. The painting was relined with wax resin and attached to a secondary support of fiberglass fabric with a polyester mesh interleaf. There are age cracks throughout the surface, and corner stress cracks radiate out from the two upper corners. There is abrasion to the darks of this picture, and the left-hand dog, which was painted over the background, is now quite transparent. Some wrinkling of the gray paint occurs near the signature, while the inscription itself is in good condition, still protected by a layer of old fluorescing varnish. There are additional deposits of residue varnish visible in ultraviolet light along the top edge and in the sky. In ultraviolet light, inpainting is detected in several nickel-size punctures in the sky and small touches in the foreground.

The ground layer seems to be quite thick. A lower layer of blue-green paint is visible in old interlayer flake sites and traction cracks in the bottom half of the painting. It is unclear whether this is an early stage of the present image or a different image. Losses in various parts of the visible image also reveal drawn or painted lines in the lower, darker paint layer. An X-radiograph failed to find a complete image below the paint, although it did show unrelated brushstrokes near the bottom edge and in areas where lower colors were visible.

Infrared reflectography revealed some underdrawing in the figures, perhaps with thin dark paint. There are also changes in the painted position of the shoulders of the left foreground figure, as well as in the posture of the man behind him. The paint is multilayered, with light passages built up thickly between already applied dark colors. Glazes are used to tone light areas and to detail such items as costume folds.

1. Thoré 1846, p. 279: "sa peinture est, d'ailleurs, partout"; "on ne saurait commencer une collection sans un Decamps."
2. Silvestre 1856, pp. 152–53: "la dure vie des champs"; "apprentissage rustique."
3. Mantz 1862, p. 103: "Les sites sont empruntés au nord de la France, et plus particulièrement à la Picardie, dont Decamps se souvient toujours."
4. See Mosby 1977, vol. 1, pp. 65–68. He identifies at least four works in this series: *Gamekeeper with his Dogs* (Hôtel de Ville, Fontainebleau); *Duck Shooting* (New York Historical Society); *Snipe Shooting* (New York Historical Society); and *The Fox Chase* (New York Historical Society).
5. On the dating of the work, see Moreau 1869, p. 181. The other two hunt scenes are *Ferreting Hare*, 1830 (private collection) and *Deer Hunting*, c. 1830 (private collection); see London–Minneapolis–New York 2003–4, p. 174.
6. Moreau 1869, p. 176. On p. 181, Moreau dates the Clark painting, the largest of the three, to 1830; another, dated 1849, is cited on p. 176, while a third, undated work, appears on p. 179.
7. Conches 1831, p. 316: "À la chasse aux alouettes, par un temps brumeux d'octobre, il trouve le sujet de l'une de ses plus jolies peintures."
8. See "Chasseurs au miroir (Les) ou la Chasse aux alouettes," in Larousse 1866–90, vol. 3, p. 1059.
9. Mosby 1977, vol. 1, pp. 71–72.
10. Silvestre 1856, p. 167: "ce qu'il a fait trop souvent et trop librement peut-être."
11. See, for example, "Salon de 1833. Decamps," in *L'Artiste* 1833, p. 105.
12. Mantz 1862, p. 103: "la manière dont la couleur, très-chargée d'huile, est étendue sur la toile, fait songer aux procédés des aquarellistes." On Decamps's technique, see also London–Minneapolis–New York 2003–4, p. 174.
13. According to the Durand-Ruel Archives, the painting was transferred several times between the galleries in Paris and New York: it was sold from Paris to New York on 19 Apr. 1893; from New York to Paris on 25 June 1896; and from Paris to New York on 20 Aug. 1898. See correspondence of 24 Apr. 2001 in the Clark's curatorial file.

105 | **Cat, Weasel, and Rabbit** 1836

Oil on canvas, 24.1 x 34.3 cm
Lower left: DECAMPS / 1836
1955.699

One of the leading painters of the Romantic generation, Decamps essayed a variety of genres, from Orientalist subjects to landscapes and hunting scenes, but later lamented that he was reduced to painting easel pictures, never realizing his aspiration to succeed on a grander scale as a history painter.[1] This painting of 1836 reflects Decamps's self-avowed "mania for animals," which found expression in a body of paintings, drawings, and prints illustrating the *Fables* of Jean de La Fontaine (1621–1695), dating from the 1830s and 1840s at the peak of his popularity as an artist.[2] During the nineteenth century, La Fontaine's *Fables* attracted a diverse range of artists, from Carle and Horace Vernet, whose lithographs illustrated an 1818 edition of *Fables choisies de La Fontaine*, to Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), who exhibited sixty-four watercolor illustrations of the *Fables* in 1886. Drawings by J. J. Grandville (1803–1847) after La Fontaine—one hundred twenty in all—were engraved in a two-volume edition of 1838, whose enormous success led to the publication of a third volume in 1840.[3] Given the currency of La Fontaine in Decamps's lifetime, it is tempting to speculate as to which edition of the author's *Fables* was reported to be a fixture on the artist's desk.[4]

Animal subjects were not new in Decamps's art; by the mid-1830s, he had made a name for himself with his celebrated *singeries*, in which monkeys parody human behavior.[5] Grandville, in his contemporaneous illustrations after La Fontaine, similarly humanized his animal subjects. Decamps, however, presented La Fontaine's animal protagonists in appropriate outdoor settings and omitted explicitly humanizing traits. In response, contemporary commentators treated his paintings after La Fontaine as either landscapes or animal subjects, despite their narrative content. A critic wrote of Decamps's painting of "The Heron" (Book 7, Fable 5), "the figures and animals are completely minor; but these noble landscapes, truly conceived in *Poussinesque* style, are among the most severe and grandiose that have been dreamed up in our time,"[6] while an 1869 catalogue of Decamps's work listed his illustrations after La Fontaine under animal subjects.[7] The cat that hungrily eyes the unsuspecting rabbit and