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

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Alphonse de Neuville

French, 1835–1885

238 | **Champigny, 2 December 1870** c. 1875–77

Oil on panel, 23.8 x 31.9 cm
Upper right: Champigny 2 Decbre 1870; lower left: A de Neuville
1955.706

The Battle of Champigny (also known as the Battle of Villiers) unfolded between 29 November and 2 December 1870, in the final weeks of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. A division of the third Prussian army had occupied the eastern outskirts of Paris along the Marne River since earlier that fall. Launched by the French army under intense pressure from the new Government of National Defense, the offensive was designed at once to push back the Prussian lines, revitalize French morale, and liberate Paris, which had been under siege since September 1870. By the end of the day on 2 December, French troops had retreated, as severe cold and Prussian reinforcements threatened to expose them to a devastating counteroffensive. At 12,000 men, French losses outnumbered Prussians three to one, with no gain in territory. The defeat would resonate strongly in the decades following the war, thanks to a substantial visual archive encompassing popular illustration, major Salon paintings, and commemorative illustrations associated with memorial ceremonies on the anniversary of the battle. No visual record was more important in this regard than the panorama of the battle painted by de Neuville and Édouard Detaille (1848–1912) and exhibited in Paris in May 1882 to thousands of visitors.[1] De Neuville, for his part, enlisted in the *garde mobile*, was at Champigny during the conflict, and at one point crossed the terrain, but did not see action.

The panorama was disassembled in 1884 and survives only in fragments.[2] Several scenes in the panoroma were repeated as paintings, but the Clark's picture is a freestanding subject, executed independently of the panorama several years before. Indeed, the interior setting of the Clark picture would have made its incorporation into a larger panaroma all but impossible, the picture offering a view into a village garret or farmhouse. The panorama format, by and large, generally adopts a more global register, focusing at once on the accomplishments and valor of troops and developments across the theater of conflict, including direction by the high command. The Clark picture, like so many of de Neuville's easel paintings, explores more subtle affective terrain, namely the image of resistance and defeat. Indeed, the shadow of defeat hangs over all French battle painting of the fin de siècle, giving that painting new emotional and patriotic currency.

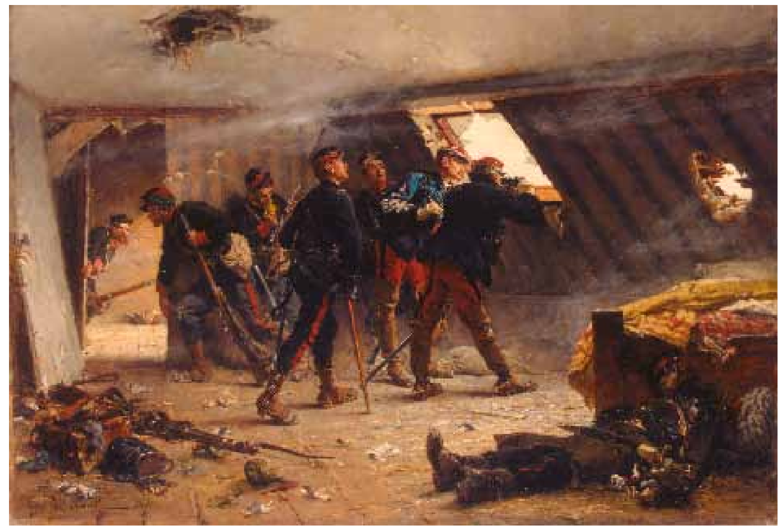


Fig. 238.1. Alphonse de Neuville, *An Episode from the Franco-Prussian War (The Garret in Champigny in November 1870)*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 51 x 74.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

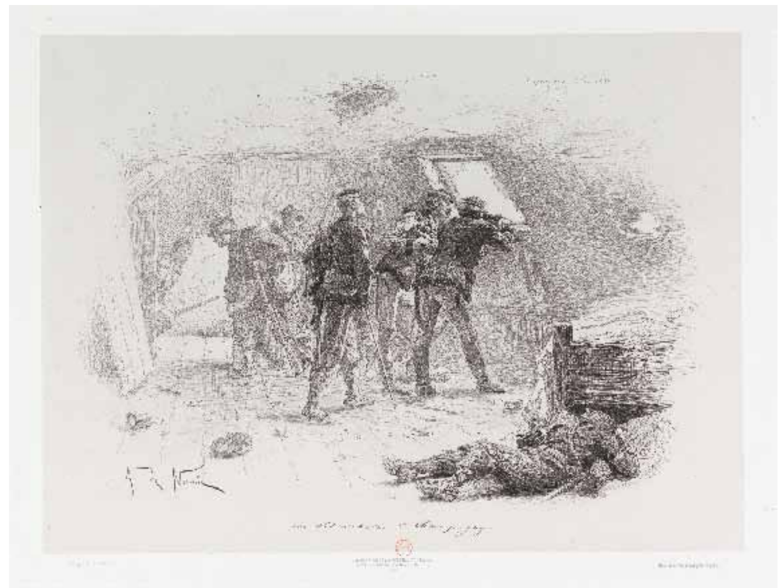
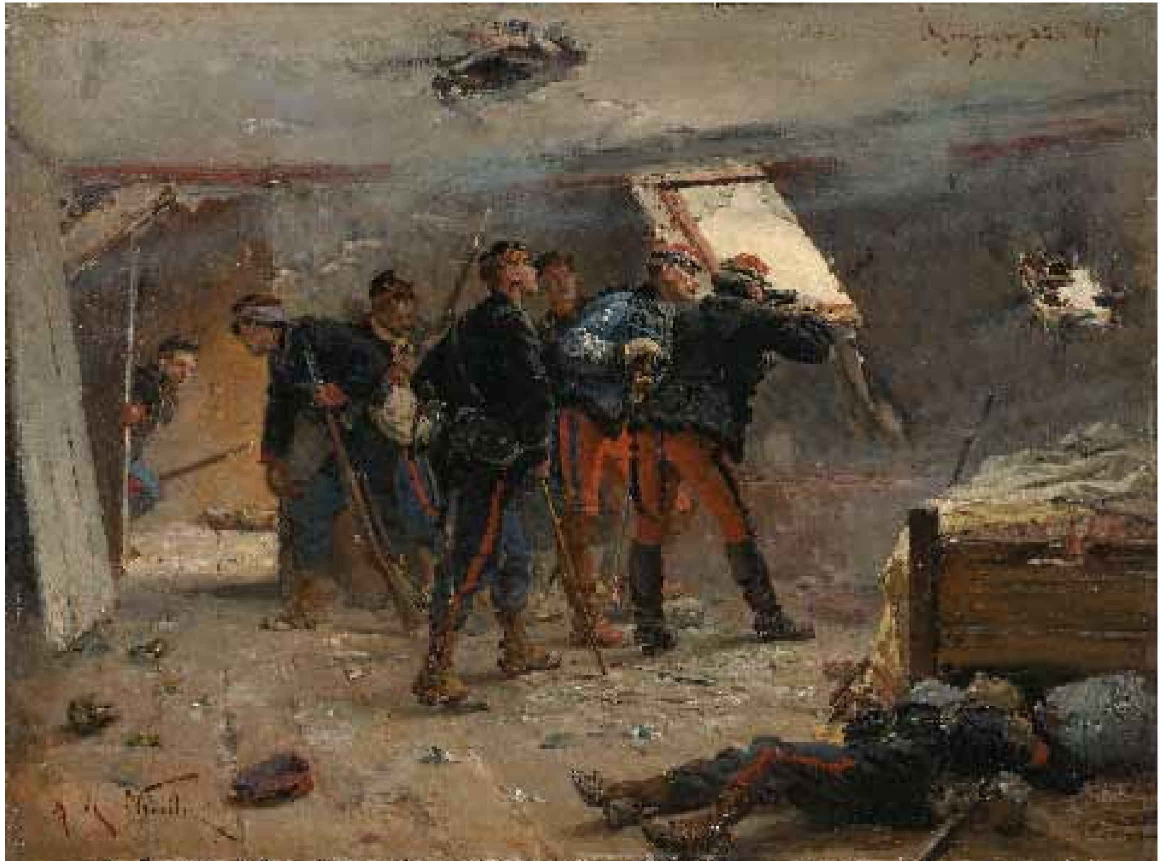


Fig. 238.2. Alphonse de Neuville, *Un Observatoire à Champigny*, 1877. Plate 13 of *Croquis militaires* [Neuville 1877]



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Measuring 23.8 x 31.9 cm, the Clark's picture has a companion—a larger work of the same subject, purchased by Alexander III and signed and dated to 1875 and now at the the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (fig. 238.1).[3] At 51 x 74.5 cm, the Hermitage version is larger than the Clark's, though in fact neither is as large as many of de Neuville's later military subjects, which would grow in scale as the artist met with greater success. Neither version was shown at the Salon, but the scene circulated widely thanks to an etched version reproduced as a photogravure included in de Neuville's *Croquis militaires*, published by Goupil in 1877 (fig. 238.2). The Clark picture may be a study for the Hermitage painting, given its smaller size and the fact that it does not possess the same measure of detail or finish. Nevertheless, such a conclusion is unlikely. The differences between the two, for example, are not insubstantial. Missing from the Clark picture is the "still life" of military equipment in the foreground left. In the Hermitage painting, the fallen soldier in the right foreground lies with his head propped up, his eyes wide open, but also certainly dead. In the Clark picture, the fallen soldier is at once less gruesome and more ambiguously posed. We see his face only from below, and he holds up his arms as if in a final shudder. As it happens, de Neuville's etching is identical to the Clark picture, which suggests the latter may have been painted either in preparation for the *Croquis militaires*, or for the marketplace as his etching circulated.

The precise site of the shed or garret in which French forces are holed up is impossible to localize, but in all likelihood de Neuville staged an episode from the French retreat. Thanks to enemy shelling, their hideout has already sustained substantial damage. The fallen soldier to the right, the absence of provisions, and the injuries sustained by other figures in the scene together cement this sense of a battle not simply underway but drawing to a close—a conclusion certified by the date inscribed by the artist himself, 2 December 1870. Note that the French soldiers do not fight or fire in support of a skirmish outside their window. This is not because they have run out of ammunition, as in the case of de Neuville's *The Last Ammunition* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), painted in 1873 and perhaps the most famous painting of the Franco-Prussian War. Hidden in the garret of a farmhouse, they are observing the progress of the battle, perhaps sending intelligence into the field or indeed plotting their retreat. All this is confirmed by the title given to the print version that de Neuville included in his *Croquis militaires*: *Un Observatoire à Champigny* (An Observation Post at Champigny). But what kind of observation post? It is tempting to imagine that the young soldier

who turns into the garret after running up the stairs is passing on information associated with their retreat. We do not sense the group is sending back observations out into the field, but rather that they have taken shelter there—yet another narrative detail designed to signal that the retreat unfolds before them.

What the soldiers observe is unknown to us, and instead we observe them, a narrative device de Neuville had previously used in *The Last Ammunition* and has repeated here with different emotional affect. We do not see the battle underway, and no information is given to us as to what role they have in the larger conflict of which they form only a tiny part. This vignette speaks to the emergence of a new pictorial aesthetic forged by de Neuville and other military painters in this era, particularly in the wake of the French defeat. Against the top-down scenes of command and control traditionally associated with military painting, emphasis here falls on the experience of the ordinary soldier. Against the classic focus on dramatic outcomes, de Neuville extracts a scene from the stream of events, at once symbolic of the whole but in no way tied to any decisive moment when the tide of the battle turned. Instead of scenes of glory, we are presented with the humble everyday. Instead of the accomplishment of leaders, heroic conduct belongs now to the ordinary soldier, regardless of outcome or success. This focus on the everyday, on the particularizing, local, and intimate perspective of the mid-rank officers and enlisted men, gave military narratives new purchase and authenticity. We see the battle through the narrow and partial experiences of those who lived them.

Many of de Neuville's narrative paintings portray moments of surprise, ambush, and resistance. But as fragments or mere episodes, those paintings do not pose the question of responsibility for strategy and tactics, or at any rate bracket those questions in favor of feeling. This episodic approach allowed artists and their audiences to invest emotionally in the conduct of the army—hence the redemptive, martyrial language so often attached to the heroes of 1870; and hence the fallen soldier in the foreground, either dead or dying, his arms extended. By focusing on the sometimes doomed efforts of the everyday solder and officer, by bringing out the poignancy of often common and shared experience, de Neuville was able to invest his painting with a sense of feeling and sincerity distinct from the victorious rhetoric traditionally attached to scenes of command and control. The war brought disaster for France, but was good for painting. MG

PROVENANCE [Neuville & Vivien, Paris, sold to Clark, 4 Mar. 1936, as *Le Grenier de Champigny: Episode de la Guerre Franco-Allemande de 1870*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1936–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1981–82, no cat.; Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.

REFERENCES Neuville 1877, pl. 13 (print after the painting), as *Un observatoire à Champigny*; Guilloux 1980, p. 19, ill.; Gildea 1994, p. 120, fig. 10.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a mahogany panel varying in thickness from 1 to 1.1 cm with chamfered reverse edges. A slight twist in the panel is pulling the upper right corner forward, and there are two old curved dents in the panel, made prior to the painting's execution. The reverse has a slight coating and numerous markings, including an inscription, date, and signature by the artist, and a large colorman's stamp for Deforges Carpentier dating to 1871–79. The largely illegible inscription in black paint in the upper left corner appears to include ". . . 1875 A de Neuville." There is a small dent near the floor of the doorway, and frame abrasion is visible in the lower left corner, with flakes of repaint missing. The painting was cleaned in Paris in 1936 by Chapuis and Coince, and the condition of the surface is quite good, despite minor cleaning abrasion in several uniforms. The coating is slightly yellowed and presents a moderate ultraviolet fluorescence. The gloss is slightly uneven across the top area.

The pre-primed ground is off-white in color. No underdrawing was detectable, although there may be a gray paint sketch prior to the final composition. There is a visible pentimento in the position of the left figure's rifle and a change in the hat position of the man checking his firearm. The painting technique is very detailed with many flicks of color applied with small brushes, wet-into-wet, in a fluid vehicular consistency. Dry scumbled paint, applied after the rest of the surface had dried, depicts smoke in the room. A dark human hair is embedded in the paint above the legs of the prone soldier. A partially legible date next to the signature, reading "187. . . ," is painted out.

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1. For the battle, its military and political background, and the larger military history of the war, see Howard 2001 and Wawro 2003.
2. For this panorama, see Robichon 2010, pp. 139–47, and Robichon 1981, pp. 259–79.
3. For the Hermitage picture, see Berezina 1983, p. 357, no. 326.