



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

VOLUME ONE

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With an essay by Richard Rand
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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source, characteristic of Dutch genre painting, defines the space of the composition and recurs in Drölling's works, including *A Peddler*. The work's intimate quality is underscored by the compositional focus on the figure of the young woman.

The canvas has the smoothly polished surface and precise handling typical of Drölling's style. There is no evidence of an ink underdrawing, as in his *Letter* (cat. 129), while traces of a graphite underdrawing, notably below the floor tiles, are barely visible (see Technical Report). The painting likely figured in the 1903 Deleuze estate sale in Paris; the description of its composition in the sale catalogue corresponds to that of the present work, which Clark acquired in 1922.⁶ KCG

PROVENANCE Probably Deleuze collection (until 1903, his sale Drouot, Paris, 12 Jan. 1903, no. 4, as *Le Messenger ou l'heureuse nouvelle*); [Knoedler, Paris, sold to Clark, 3 Feb. 1922, as *The Messenger*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1922–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown–Hartford 1974, pp. 44–45, no. 21, ill.; Williamstown 1982b, p. 26, no. 16, ill.

REFERENCES Berrall 1968, p. 63, fig. 68; Sydney–Melbourne 1980–81, p. 79.

TECHNICAL REPORT The medium-weight (16 threads/cm) linen support is glue-lined to fabric similar in weight. The original tacking margins are still in place, but the mortise-and-tenon stretcher may be a replacement. The paint film has areas of fine traction crackle scattered throughout. The cupped age cracks in the center probably developed from small old handling damages to a brittle ground layer. There may be some fading of the pale pink used in the roses near the window. Various indications suggest that a previous cleaning was done with great care, leaving the paint film in excellent condition. The present coating is a brush-applied natural resin with a separate crack network and a moderate fluorescence level in ultraviolet light.

The ground layers appear to have been applied by the artist over a size layer, and were leveled to a high degree to create the extremely smooth surface. The ground may also have been toned a warm golden brown prior to painting. The underdrawing is not very visible and shows no use of pen and ink. With infrared reflectography several areas of underdrawing are clearer, and a few minor changes can be seen. A floor grid can be made out, along with lines for the chair rails, bed draperies, and the red fabric draped over the left chair. The oval escutcheons on the bureau against the right rear wall were originally drawn to the left of their final location. The outlines of the hexagonal tile pattern were frequently adjusted as the artist proceeded with the floor. The diagonal line of the shaded dormer wall in the upper left was inscribed

into the paint using a straight edge. The image was built up using small fluid strokes reminiscent of miniature portrait work, and the upper-layer line reinforcements are executed in thinly applied paint rather than ink.

1. See Livry sale, Paris, 2–5 Feb. 1814 (Lugt 8473), under no. 168: "This painting deserved and obtained great success on public exhibition" ("Ce tableau méritait et a obtenu beaucoup de succès à l'exposition publique"); and sale, Paris, 8 June 1814 (Lugt 8537), under no. 8: "This series of canvases by Mr. Drölling deserves to capture the attention of art lovers, who have for a long time appreciated his talents." ("Cette suite de tableaux, par M. Drölling, mérite de fixer l'attention des amateurs, qui depuis long-temps savent apprécier ses talents.")
2. See, for example, remarks on the work Drölling exhibited at the Salon of 1814 in Landon 1814, p. 22: "Mr. Drölling should be congratulated as much for his choice of subject as for the manner in which he has rendered it." ("M. Drölling n'a pas moins à se féliciter du choix de son sujet que de la manière dont il l'a rendu.")
3. See the letter of 6 Apr. 1967 from S. Dagnaud of the Musée du Louvre in the Clark's curatorial file; Dagnaud also identifies Louise-Adéone as the model for *Interior of a Kitchen* (1815; Musée du Louvre, Paris). On Louise-Adéone Drölling, see Gabet 1831, pp. 224–25.
4. On the portrait of Drölling's daughter, see Beyer 1972, pp. 481–82.
5. Musée du Louvre 1979–86, vol. 1, p. 72, inv. 1372 and inv. 1373.
6. Drouot 1903, no. 4: "The Messenger or the good news. Interior scene: young woman reading a letter that a young man brought her. (Appeared in the Salon of 1808.)" ("Le Messenger ou l'heureuse nouvelle. Scène d'intérieur: jeune femme lisant une lettre qu'un jeune homme lui apporte. [A figuré au Salon de 1808.]") The reference to the Salon of 1808 is erroneous: Drölling did not exhibit a work depicting such a scene in 1808, and the Clark painting is dated 1815.

129 | The Letter 1816

Oil on panel, 28.4 x 36.7 cm

Lower left: Drölling / 1816

1955-723

Drölling's domestic interiors, which he exhibited at the Salons beginning in 1793 until his final, posthumous exhibition in 1817, established his reputation in post-Revolutionary France. Their popularity contributed to



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the resurgence of genre painting in early nineteenth-century French art. Although many critics bemoaned this phenomenon as a sign of the decline of the French School, Drölling's works garnered the critics' praise and figured in major collections, including that of Marie-Caroline de Bourbon-Sicile, duchesse de Berry (1798–1870), and of the Russian prince N. B. Yusupov (1751–1831). A year after the artist's death, a copy of one of his domestic interiors appeared on the art market, indicating the popularity of such genre subjects among contemporary collectors.¹ In 1817, the Louvre purchased his *Interior of a Kitchen* of 1815 (Musée du Louvre, Paris). This work, along with its pendant of 1816, *Interior of a Dining Room* (private collection, Paris), was exhibited posthumously in the Salon of 1817, eliciting favorable comparisons to seventeenth-century Dutch painting, in particular for their light effects and faithful transcription of realistic details.² In fact, Drölling copied Dutch and Flemish paintings at the Louvre, an experience that shaped his artistic production.³ Drölling's own works in this vein, along with the paintings of Louis-Léopold Boilly

(1761–1845), represent an aesthetic alternative to the historical subjects favored by Jacques-Louis David and his school circa 1800.

The present work, dated 1816, typifies Drölling's domestic imagery. The scene centers on the reading aloud of a letter, recalling his *The Messenger, or Good News* (private collection), exhibited in the Salon in 1806. Its composition recalls seventeenth-century Dutch prototypes, in particular the box-like spaces of the peasant interiors by Rotterdam painters such as Hendrik Martensz Sorgh (1609 or 1611–1670) and Cornelis Saftleven (1607–1681).⁴ It also evokes the more recent family genre scenes popularized by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805) in the Salons of the 1750s and 1760s. Drölling, though, eschews Greuze's moralizing content in favor of precise and objective description in the present work. He conveys a sense of the family's humble means through such incidental details as the cracked windowpane and the loose straws in the seat of the cane chair in the background.

Drölling applies paint in thin, transparent layers, in keeping with his experience as a porcelain painter in

the Sèvres factory, where he was employed from 1802 to 1813; his brushwork is invisible, and the detailed rendering of the faces suggests the hand of a miniaturist.⁵ Visible through the paint layers, an extensive underdrawing in ink delineates the outlines of furniture, drapery folds, and the receding orthogonals of the hexagonal clay floor tiles (see Technical Report). Similar tiles appear in his contemporaneous *Interior of a Kitchen*; their exacting depiction enhances that work's illusionistic effect, lauded by a Salon critic in 1817 as "a model of perfection in the imitation of inanimate nature."⁶ The sense of receding space is less pronounced in the Clark painting, though, as the hexagonal tiles do not cover the entire floor.

Purchased by Sterling Clark in 1932 as *The Letter*, the painting subsequently came to be known erroneously as *Le Procès-verbal*.⁷ It is more likely that the letter read by the young messenger relates news of the father who is absent from this family tableau, just as Drölling evokes an absent son through the letter read aloud in *The Messenger, or Good News of 1806*. Yet another painting, described as "a family of villagers, listening attentively to the reading of a letter," which sold in Paris in 1811, further illustrates Drölling's repeated forays into the subject. This work, also painted on panel, was described in the sale catalogue as a "small morsel with a spiritual touch and great finesse of tone."⁸ KCG

PROVENANCE [Knoedler, Paris, sold to Clark, 1 Dec. 1932, as *The Letter*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1932–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown–Hartford 1974, pp. 45–46, no. 22, ill.; Williamstown 1982b, p. 26, no. 17, as *Le procès-verbal*.

REFERENCES Eliel 1985, p. 47, fig. 30, as *Official Report*.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a quarter-sawn oak panel with three chamfered edges on the reverse. The thickness varies from 0.8 cm in the center to as little as 0.2 cm on one edge, and the grain of the oak runs vertically. The reverse is covered in canvas strips and a mat of threads embedded in glue, although there are no apparent splits or breaks to explain this treatment. The panel has a shallow, but complex, twisted warp, with the lower left and upper right corners higher in plane. A small old wood loss appears in the upper left corner, and there is frame abrasion to the varnish and paint on all four edges. The thick, glossy, natural resin coating and residues of an older varnish fluoresce a strong green in ultraviolet light, making it difficult to assess the extent of

retouching. At least two layers of varnish were applied the last time it was coated. The varnish is slightly matte where it sinks into the cracks. The background is broadly reglazed, probably to disguise the network of traction cracks, and there are many retouches along individual cracks. There is old solvent abrasion in the face of the figure leaning on the table. Records show no treatment since Clark purchased the painting in 1932, so it is likely that the reglazing and upper varnish date from an earlier period.

The white ground is composed of two layers probably applied by the artist. An extensive pen and ink underdrawing is visible at close range, including furniture outlines, costume folds, and perspective lines in the floor. The faces, however, are barely indicated. While some lines look black (carbon-based) and are visible in infrared reflectography, others look brown and are not detectable, suggesting the use of iron-gall ink, which is transparent in infrared. Changes include a wheel drawn against the right back wall that does not appear in the final image. The paint is applied in thin transparent glazes, with no impastos. Ink lines were applied over the paint to enhance dark details and outlines, and much of the lower ink work is also visible, forming an integral part of the final painting. In magnification, many shorter ink strokes have their own lateral crackle network, as if they dried too quickly. The crack in the windowpane was lightly drawn with graphite after the paint was dry.

1. See sale, Paris, 16 Nov. 1818 (Lugt 9470), no. 70.
2. Chaudonneret 1999, pp. 89–90.
3. On the influence of seventeenth-century Dutch art in Drölling's work, see Lille 1985, pp. 89–90.
4. I thank Walter Liedtke of the Department of European Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for noting the compositional similarities in works by Rotterdam artists.
5. Brunet and Préaud 1978, p. 363.
6. Quoted in Paris–Detroit–New York 1974–75, p. 399.
7. According to Diderot and D'Alembert 1751–80, vol. 13, p. 405, a "procès-verbal" is "the relating of something that has been done or said verbally in the presence of a public officer, and that which he himself did on that occasion" ("la relation de ce qui s'est fait et dit verbalement en présence d'un officier public, et de ce qu'il a fait lui-même en cette occasion"). The composition of the present work does not support such an identification.
8. See Jauffret sale, Paris, 29 Apr. 1811 (Lugt 7979), no. 13: "Une famille de villageois, écoutant avec attention la lecture d'une lettre," and "petit morceau d'une touche spirituelle et d'une grande finesse de ton."