



**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

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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PRECEDING PAGE 474: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Onions* (cat. 280)

PAGES 890–91: Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Women of Amphis* (cat. 3)

**PROVENANCE** Sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 22 May 1919, no. 80, ill., as *Portrait d'un Président de Cour*, sold to Knoedler, possibly as agent for Clark; Robert Sterling Clark (possibly 1919–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Williamstown 1958a, ill.; Williamstown 1959b, ill.; Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.

**REFERENCES** Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 79, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a fine-grained hardwood panel, 0.5 cm thick, possibly fruitwood, having an original wood extension 1.4 cm wide tenoned into the lower edge. The panel grain runs vertically, and the board has a slight convex warp which is somewhat restricted along the top edge by a wood framing spacer nailed into the end grain. The lower edge has frame abrasion, an old furrow in the paint from an earlier framing, and some fabric fibers in the surface. Although some abrasion can be seen in the black costume, the paint is generally in very good condition. An invoice dated 1935 from Chapuis and Coince of Paris probably records the last or only treatment the picture received, which appears to have been a partial cleaning and revarnishing. Examination in ultraviolet light shows that the face and hands were more thoroughly cleaned than the dark passages, and there are no obvious retouches. The upper natural resin varnish is a lightly fluorescing layer applied in both vertical and horizontal strokes, which provides an even light gloss to the image. Several pieces of very yellow undissolved resin can be seen below the medal of the sitter's costume.

The panel appears to be ungrounded, which, together with the type of wood, suggests that the source may not have been an artists' commercial supplier. The wood provides color and luminosity to the thinly painted background and costume areas, as well as to the eyes of the sitter. There is no detectable underdrawing, although there may be faint black paint outlines that were integrated into the final image. The paint is applied with small brushes in thin to moderate paste consistency with very low impastos in the whites and the medal.

1. Lyons 1993, p. 134.

2. Gréard 1897, p. 80.

3. For this kind of "staring" and other traces of the photographic pose in French painting, see Pitman 1998, pp. 83–116.

4. *Le Figaro* 1875, p. 1: "Le matin il fatiguait un cheval au Bois; l'après-midi il travaillait dans son cabinet, et le soir on le voyait au foyer de la Comédie-Française." Many thanks to Marc Simpson for identifying the sitter and locating his obituary.

## Hugues Merle

French, 1823–1881

### 214 | *Mother and Child* c. 1864

Oil on canvas, 24.7 x 19.2 cm

Lower right: Hugues Merle

1955.808

### 215 | *Mother and Child* c. 1869

Oil on canvas, 24.6 x 19.3 cm

Center left: HMerle. 186[9?] [HM in monogram]

1955.807

Little known today, Hugues Merle was a widely popular artist in his lifetime. From his teacher Léon Cogniet he learned the fundamentals of careful draftsmanship and smooth paint application. He used these techniques in narrative and genre paintings that he exhibited at the Paris Salon from 1847 to 1880 and in smaller versions of those public works, such as the two paintings of a mother and child in the Clark collection. An assessment of Merle's career at his death was measured, yet just: "His paintings, somewhat waxy in the treatment of flesh and cold in color, but refined and academically correct, enjoyed great popularity in the United States, and specimens of his work are to be found in most American collections."<sup>1</sup> Paging through Edward Strahan's compendium of art collections in the United States confirms this statement. By 1879, when Strahan (pseudonym of the painter and critic Earl Shinn) published his survey, paintings by Merle formed part of collections in New York City, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Boston, Providence, Rhode Island, and Hoosick Falls, New York.<sup>2</sup>

Motherhood was a particularly resonant theme in the nineteenth century. In France, an emphasis on domestic life can be traced back to the previous century, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau insisted on the value of educating children. This was augmented by the focus on private life as the counterbalance to the public life that sprang into being during the Revolution and its aftermath.<sup>3</sup> The mothers in Merle's two paintings—dressed in a city dweller's notion of peasant costume, reminiscent of Italian rather than French custom—are carefully calculated to appeal to an urban market. Posed for by the same comely young woman, they are

praiseworthy exemplars of the lower class, each fulfilling essential aspects of child rearing. One, seated in a turned and carved yet simple chair set in a spare room, nurses her wriggling baby. The other, outside, with a pot of red carnations on the windowsill, patiently attempts to teach the alphabet to the toddler on her lap.

The nursing mother evokes the Christian motif of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. The elemental intimacy of a mother nursing her baby was pictured perhaps most tenderly and memorably by Raphael in the early sixteenth century. Such depictions as his *Orléans Madonna* (Musée Condé, Chantilly) or *The Holy Family with Saint Joseph* (The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg) also feature a similarly active baby. Merle's baby would fall off his mother's lap if she did not have it clasped firmly in her arms. The mother's posture—hieratic, parallel to the picture plane, with one knee raised to support the child—is particularly evocative of the Madonna-and-Child type.<sup>4</sup> But where the religious pictures adopt the presentational mode for devotional purposes, Merle uses it to show off the woman's creamy skin and flawless anatomy. (It is noteworthy that the sex of the baby is carefully hidden.)

It is likely that the Clark's picture is one of several versions of this composition. Where it is small, only slightly bigger than a large miniature, a much larger version, measuring 101 by 81 cm and signed and dated 1869, had been in the United States in the very early twentieth century, when it formed part of the collection of J. Pierpont Morgan.<sup>5</sup> The Clark's picture was likely painted about the same time. The dark background effectively sets off the luminous flesh created by Merle's careful blending of soft brushstrokes.

The painting of the same woman with an older child tells a more complicated story. When Clark bought it in 1934, it was described in the sale catalogue as follows: "Seated in an interior is a young mother, in mulberry skirt and blue bodice, holding a picture book and looking at her fair-haired child leaning sleepily against her shoulder."<sup>6</sup> This description is striking for its inaccuracy: the figures are outside, not inside; the book's pages are filled with an alphabet, not pictures; and the child is pointedly staring moodily, with puckered brow, away from the book and at the viewer, not leaning sleepily. These mistakes may be explained by the cataloguer's giving the picture a cursory glance, yet the identification of the book as a picture book is telling. The child pictured here is surely too young to be learning letters; a picture book would have been more appropriate.



214

The figures are closer to the picture plane in this painting than are the nursing mother and baby, a format that gives them greater immediacy. By engaging the viewer's attention, the sulky child creates a narrative, which is lacking in the other work. In the nineteenth century, education was prized as a social good. People who could not read realized they were at a disadvantage. The young mother's task is laudable, but perhaps a bit premature. Her child will not learn his letters, not because of petulance, but because he is too young. Whenever he learns the alphabet, the task will not be easy. As with the other picture of the mother and child, a larger version (92.4 x 73.7 cm) of this composition exists. Now in the Dallas Museum of Art, its title is *The First Thorns of Knowledge*, pointing to the difficulty inherent in acquiring knowledge.

This painting, despite its heavy yellow varnish, is a good example of Merle's technique. He first drew in the forms with black ink, following it with outlines in thin brown paint. The painting itself is built up of layers of thin paint, with blended strokes. Strahan admired his technique and described Merle as an "engaging and refined talent."<sup>7</sup> FEW



215

**PROVENANCE** Cat. 214: Private collection, New York (sale, American Art Association, 15 Feb. 1934, no. 15, sold to Knoedler, as agent for Clark); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 28 Feb. 1934]; Robert Sterling Clark (1934–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

Cat. 215: Robert Sterling Clark (until 1955); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Cat. 214: None

Cat. 215: Williamstown 1979b, no cat.

**REFERENCES** Cat. 214: Wissman 1996, p. 32, fig. 4.

Cat. 215: None

**TECHNICAL REPORT** Cat. 214: The support is a moderate-weight linen (16 threads/cm), very darkened by the adhesive from an old, possibly nineteenth-century, glue lining. The back of the secondary fabric (16–19 threads/cm) is stained in the lower half and around the edges. The artist's tacking margins are gone. The five-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher may be original. The digit "2" on the stretcher may indicate the standard #2 French portrait size. The surface is very smooth and has long wandering cracks. A dent mars the paint in the upper right corner, an old shatter damage with radiating cracks can be seen in the bench seat, and an old area of disturbed paint is visible on the child's hand. The

book's letters may be abraded, and there is a small retouch, perhaps due to a puncture, in the woman's bodice lacing. The paint layer is in generally good condition. The thick varnish is shiny, extremely discolored, and displays a separate crackle system. It was applied in a very viscous solution while the picture was framed, and brush marks remain standing in the upper layer. The ultraviolet light fluorescence is very dense, and its orange color suggests the use of shellac.

The ground is comprised of several white layers, rendered to a smooth surface. Short black ink underdrawing strokes are evident in infrared reflectography and can be detected under low magnification in a few details. Some ink lines have breaks and losses similar to those seen on the other Merle (cat. 215). There is also a thin brown paint sketch visible following form outlines, and the ground and sketch colors are visible here and there in the final image. The upper paint layers are thin and vehicular, with blended feathery strokes applied with small soft brushes. There were no artist's alterations seen in the image. The signature was executed in black paint, highlighted with light yellow along the right side of the letters.

Cat 215: The support is a medium-weight linen (approx. 16–19 threads/cm), which has an early twentieth-century glue lining. The uneven thread count of the lining fabric (9 warp x 16 weft threads/cm) gives the illusion of a twill weave on the paint surface, and there are a number of irregularly sized threads and slubs, all of which contribute to a fairly severe weave impression. The lining fabric was also prepared off-square, and the original tacking margins were removed. The five-member mortise-and tenon stretcher may be a replacement. Abrasion along the larger age cracks exposes the white ground layer, and there is scattered solvent damage in many dark passages. Fine aperture age cracks in the flesh and white areas are dark in color. The ultraviolet light fluorescence is denser in the background, suggesting a partial cleaning of the figures, possibly at the time of the lining. There are retouches in the upper right background, the woman's arms, chest, and hands, and the child's torso and legs. The surface is uneven in gloss, being shiny in the whites and dull in the background.

The original fabric, which bears stretching distortions around the perimeter, was probably prepared by the artist. The white ground seems to be several layers thick and presents a very smooth surface. Black ink and charcoal lines can be seen under low magnification in normal light. The ink has cracks and voids where pieces of lines were dislodged and lost during painting. These losses are seen in infrared reflectography as white ground spots, visible through the transparent reddish sketch layer that outlines the forms. This warm reddish brown underpaint layer, visible below the blue skirt, was apparently left as the final paint layer in the woman's hair, the chair, and the furniture at the left. The upper colors are applied in thin, blended, feathery strokes, and contain no impastos. The signature was applied in black ink.

1. *American Art Review* 1881, p. 261.
2. Strahan 1879–80.
3. See Lynn Hunt, “The Unstable Boundaries of the French Revolution,” and Michelle Perrot, “Roles and Characters,” in Ariès and Duby 1987–91, vol. 4, *From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, pp. 13–45 and pp. 196–209.
4. For the ubiquity of Raphael’s types as used by French artists through the early twentieth century, see Paris 1983–84b.
5. The provenance of the larger picture is: Sir William Cunliffe (Cunliffe?) Brooks, 1901; Blakeslee Collection sale, Mendelssohn Hall, New York, 10–11 April 1902, no. 73, sold to Gunther; to B. G. Gunther; J. Pierpont Morgan, New York, Morgan sale, Christie’s, London, 31 March 1944, no. 79. This may be the same picture that was auctioned at Sotheby’s, New York, 7 May 1998, no. 78. The provenance earlier than the 1998 sale is taken from a photograph in the Hugues Merle artist’s file, Frick Art Reference Library, New York.
6. *American Art Association* 1934b, no. 15.
7. Strahan 1879–80, vol. 2, pt. 3, p. 119, under “The Collection of Mr. Robert L. Stuart.”

## Meyer von Bremen (Johann Georg Meyer)

German, 1813–1886

### 216 | **The Secret** 1885

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30.2 cm

Upper left: Meyer von Bremen / Berlin 1885

Gift of the children of Mrs. E. Parmalee Prentice

1962.149

Meyer von Bremen was once a much beloved mid-nineteenth-century artist in his hometown of Bremen and elsewhere in Germany. Unfortunately, today, his early chronology remains relatively undocumented. Throughout his life, Meyer produced paintings, engravings, and lithographs. His career probably started during his brief sojourn in Düsseldorf, where he is believed to have studied at the Düsseldorf Academy with both Karl Ferdinand Sohn (1805–1867) and Wilhelm von Schadow (1788–1862), the well-known German Romantic painters.<sup>1</sup> Schadow had recently brought students, including Sohn, with him from Berlin in order to establish a painting school whose

program focused on the construction of finely detailed allegorical and religiously themed landscapes.

Although Meyer lived and worked primarily in Bremen and had these early ties with the Düsseldorf School, his work is typical of the naturalism of mid-nineteenth-century genre painting, specifically that of the Munich School. Rather than turning to dramatic, tumultuous subjects like those favored by earlier German Romantics, the Munich School artists devoted their canvases to scenes of everyday life and the surrounding familiar landscape. These pictures focus almost exclusively on the representation of quotidian events, often with sentimental overtones: simple goings-on within the walls of the quiet home, intimate moments between mother and child, thoughtful scenes in the family circle. A turn-of-the-century author wrote that the impression Meyer’s pictures make is of “pure truth to nature but above all of a gilt and elevated idealism,” which makes itself felt as “a necessary result of an ever vivid feeling for the beauty of form and of piety of soul.”<sup>2</sup>

*The Secret* depicts just this sort of idealized scene, showing a small child whispering unknowable words into her mother’s ear. While seeming to listen attentively, the mother nevertheless continues with her task of preparing a meal. Despite the humble setting, both figures are rosy cheeked, smiling, and impeccably dressed. The palette is appropriately subdued and the interior’s décor and carefully placed objects are consistent with the homes of rural workers in southern Germany of that time. While characteristically meticulous in his application of paint, as were most German genre painters, Meyer has here employed slightly thicker touches in his depiction of the wall behind the mother’s left knee. This variation in technique serves to heighten the realistic quality of the rough-surfaced wall, just as the strokes of white in the leaves of cabbage give them the appearance of dampness. JR

**PROVENANCE** Alta Rockefeller Prentice (Mrs. E. Parmalee Prentice), New York and Williamstown (until d. 1962); Prentice heirs, by descent, given to the Clark; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1962.

**EXHIBITIONS** Williamstown 1979b, no cat.

**REFERENCES** None

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is an unlined canvas of moderate weight (19 threads/cm) attached to a four-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher. The fabric is brittle and darkened to a brown color. Paint on all four tack edges suggests