



**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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Details:

TITLE PAGE: Camille Pissarro, *The Louvre from the Pont Neuf* (cat. 253)

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

EXHIBITIONS Oxford 1924, no cat.;⁵ Williamstown 1990b, no cat.

REFERENCES *Connoisseur* 1923, pp. 103, 117–18, ill.; Dubuisson 1924, ill. opp. p. 41.

TECHNICAL REPORT The linen support, of moderate weight (16 threads/cm), has an old lining glued to a slightly coarser fabric, work that may have been done by the mid-1920s. The stretcher may be original, and there seems to be a remnant of the artist's tacking margin along the lower edge. There are small areas of disturbed paint in the building façade above the men in the principal boat and in the boat's sail, probably the reasons for the lining. Some impastos have been flattened by the lining process. There are stretcher creases on three sides, and dark age cracks and a sub-network of hairline fractures scattered throughout the surface. Some feather cracks run vertically through the right sky, probably the result of old handling damage. Pale retouchings in the sky and over details in the foreground and water are now pitted by solvents and have a slightly melted appearance under magnification. The fact that original delicate glazes are in good condition suggests that the rather broadly applied overpaint only masks the dark cracks. In ultraviolet light, a slight natural resin varnish residue fluoresces in the water area only, and new inpainting runs along the top stretcher crease. There is some minor solvent damage on the tops of the pebbly ground texture. Older retouches left in place during a 1989 cleaning are slightly visible in the sky as dark smudges along the vertical feather cracks, but in general the picture is in good condition.

The gray ground layer is probably a commercially applied priming and has a pebbly surface, possibly created by the inclusion of fine quartz or sand particles. Although no underdrawing is revealed in infrared examination, the dark clouds in the left sky were originally laid-in with a dark, more dramatic sweep of paint. A close inspection shows pale paint thinly applied over these dark streaks to soften the contrast. The band of buildings in the center seems to have a warm brown underpaint layer. This may constitute a sketch or wash tone on the ground's surface, which may explain the pinkish cast seen in the sky colors. In general, the paint technique is quite thin, with soft, fluid impastos.

1. *Magazine of the Fine Arts* 1833, p. 148.

2. See Noon 2008, pp. 118–23.

3. RSC Diary, 26 Jan. 1929.

4. The early history comes from information accompanying a photograph of this painting in the Witt Library of the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

5. *Ibid.*

Artist unknown

French, 19th century

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Oil on canvas, 32.7 x 41.2 cm

Lower right: HUGUES-MERLE

1955.809

This painting was almost certainly not made by Hugues Merle, a determination supported by Sandra Webber's examination. As she explains in her report, the technique of this frankly unattractive picture bears no relation to the carefully crafted, smooth surfaces achieved by Merle. The painting raises questions that cannot be answered at this time.

The range of Merle's subject matter can best be assessed from the titles of the paintings he supplied for the *livrets* (catalogues) when exhibiting at the Salon, which he did from 1847 to 1880, and from Edward Strahan's survey of American art collections of the 1870s. Merle usually painted narrative and genre scenes, with their subjects frequently drawn from literature, including Shakespeare (*Benedict and Beatrice; Hamlet and Ophelia*), Goethe (several versions of Marguerite), and Sir Walter Scott (Rebecca and Lady Rowena from *Ivanhoe*), or sentimentalizing scenes of childhood. There are very few recorded pictures of harvest themes. In 1850, Merle showed at the Salon a work he entitled *Vendangeurs dauphinois (environs de Saint-Marcellin)*, a scene of grape harvesters. A *Return from the Fields* was in Thomas Wigglesworth's collection in Boston. The title is promising, but its size (3 by 5 feet) and Strahan's description are not. According to the critic, Wigglesworth's picture "shows an ideally fair country maiden, with her apron full of clover, leading a little girl who trails a leafy branch."¹

As early as 1882, a year after the artist died, the Clark's picture was sold from the Truax collection as attributed to Merle. Since Merle's work was well known in this country at the time, such an attribution cannot be explained. FEW

PROVENANCE [Williams, Stevens & Williams, New York, from 1853 or 1854, sold to Truax];² Charles H. Truax, New York (until 1882, his sale, Leavitt & Co., New York, 5 Dec. 1882, no. 70, as by Merle); Jay Gould, New York (1882–d. 1892);³ Helen Miller Gould Shepard, New York, his daughter, by descent (1892–d. 1938); Finley Johnson Shepard, New York, her husband, by descent (1938–d. 1942, his sale, Kende



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Galleries, New York, 12–14 Nov. 1942, no. 545, as by Merle); [Durand-Ruel, New York, sold to Clark, 4 Dec. 1942, as by Merle]; Robert Sterling Clark (1942–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS None

REFERENCES None

TECHNICAL REPORT The original support is a commercially primed, open-weave fabric (13 threads/cm). The picture bears an aqueous adhesive lining onto a densely woven linen (16 threads/cm). The four-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher is probably original. Although there are authentic-looking dark age cracks throughout the surface, the painting technique is spurious in appearance. The paint structure bears no resemblance to the two finely painted, academic pictures signed by Merle in the collection. Under low magnification, the technique is coarse, and the signature appears to be false. The ultraviolet fluorescence is moderately dense and orange in color, indicating shellac as a coating. There are two layers of paper edge tape, with considerable overpaint on the upper margins, suggesting that the surface may be substantially reglazed, therefore severely damaged. The signature, sloppy blackish letters over brown remnants, possibly of another name, is applied in capital letters (unlike the others by Merle). The signature also floats oddly on the surface and is soluble.

The ground is comprised of two off-white layers; a smooth, commercial layer, with a coarse, striated second

layer, possibly artist applied, above it. Brush marks from this upper ground layer are enhanced by the heavy, black charcoal underdrawing, which seems to extend below most of the paint film. In infrared reflectography, the drawing does not resemble the delicate line work of Merle's authentic pictures. The paint is applied in a sloppy, amateur manner, using bristle brushes, leaving dry, rough impastos with little or no blending. The painting may be a fake or a hopelessly damaged and poorly restored picture by someone other than Merle.

1. Strahan 1879–80, vol. 3, pt. 3, p. 84.
2. The Truax sale catalogue states under no. 44 that both paintings “were purchased of Mr. Williams, of the old firm of Williams, Steevens [*sic*], and Williams, who imported them in 1853 or 1854.”
3. The Shepard sale catalogue (Kende Galleries, New York, 12–14 Nov. 1942, no. 545) gives this painting's provenance as “Truax Collection. From Henry T. Chapman, 1882.” It is possible, though unlikely, that Chapman acquired the painting from the Truax sale in Dec. 1882 and sold it immediately to Gould, or this information may be incorrect.