



**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,  
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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,  
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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**REFERENCES** Chaumelin 1887, p. 41, no. 33, as *Liseur à la veste grise*; Gréard 1897, p. 391, as *Liseur* (English ed., p. 366, as *A Reader*); Errera 1920, vol. 2, p. 657, as *Un Liseur*.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a tropical hardwood panel, possibly mahogany, 0.3 cm thick, with the wood grain running vertically. Probably in the late nineteenth century, the panel was mounted to another mahogany panel 0.3 cm thick and a cradle was applied to the reverse. The edges have all been extended with 0.5-cm spacers, giving the present size. There are frame rabbet indentations along the original sight edges and some small, scattered traction cracks. In reflected light, raised cracks can be seen along the wood grain. The varnish layer has short unconnected cracks, and there is considerable retouching, now slightly matte, to the left and right of the sitter. There appear to be two layers of retouching beneath various layers of varnish. The ultraviolet light fluorescence is less dense in the figure, suggesting that a partial cleaning was performed during the last treatment.

The ground layer is a thin, off-white layer. Underdrawing, possibly in ink as well as in charcoal, remains as part of the final detailing in such areas as the sitter's hair and eyes. There seems to be a brown sketch between the drawing stage and the final paint layers, possibly in ink. The background may have been changed from a form resembling a gathered curtain to the tapestry that is now visible, and there may be paint alterations in the chair back. A pale shape also runs from the top right down to where the desk now sits, with another pale shape on the other side. The paint handling is very delicate, executed with small brushes, and may contain some ink details over the oil paint layers. The background areas were applied after the figure was completed.

1. For Meissonier's genre paintings in relation to the marketplace, see, in particular, Hungerford 1999, pp. 64–110.
2. Coquiot 1924, pp. 137–138: “un homme court, trapu, à la longue barbe . . . duper, mystifier, régenter le monde entier.”
3. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 26–27 Nov. 1882, in Janson et al. 2009, vol. 2, p. 207. See also Hungerford 1999, p. 4.
4. On this point see Gotlieb 1996, p. 115. Also see Cincinnati–Washington–Elmira 1992–93, p. 62.
5. Quoted in Gréard 1897, p. 235.
6. In the Goupil Stock Books, book 10, p. 10, no. 15155, there is a work by Meissonier titled *Le Liseur* that is listed as having been bought from Baron A. de Rothschild and sold to Secrétan. The seller may have been Adolphe de Rothschild, and although it is not identified in subsequent Goupil stock book entries, the work in question may well be the present painting.
7. See Goupil Stock Books, book 12, p. 122, no. 20088.
8. See Goupil Stock Books, book 15, p. 267, no. 30389.

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## 212 | The Musician 1859

Oil on panel, 24.1 x 17.5 cm

Lower left: EMeissonier 1859 [EM in monogram]

1955.810

Painted in 1859 at the height of Meissonier's career, *The Musician* offers a distinguished example of the kind of genre painting that once earned the artist international fame. The painting also has an exemplary provenance, changing hands among wealthy collectors on several occasions. In the 1860s it formed part of the collections of Paul Demidoff, a well-connected Paris-based member of a Russian industrial and financial dynasty who is chiefly remembered as a bon vivant. It also passed into the hands of Adolphe de Rothschild, son of the Paris-based financier. Sometime before 1906 it passed into the collection of Marshall Field, changing hands again several times before being purchased by Robert Sterling Clark in 1922. As this provenance suggests, Meissonier's paintings were bought, sold, auctioned and re-auctioned, as generations of collectors targeted his tiny genre subjects as key instruments of social and class legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> Meissonier himself, it should be added, rose in status accordingly. By the 1850s, the artist had achieved a European reputation, culminating with a Medal of Honor awarded to him at the Exposition Universelle of 1855. In 1861, he was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts. From that moment, he became increasingly occupied by prestigious military subjects, and was even taken with the idea of mural painting on a vast scale.

*The Musician* offers more, however, than a revealing case study of collector and artist social formation. The painting also exemplifies Meissonier's fascination with modes of embodied attention and concentration, no less than his *Man Reading* (cat. 211), purchased by Clark seven years later in 1929. Carefully dressed Ancien Régime figures reading, painting, playing music, or absorbed in similar pursuits were among Meissonier's most typical subjects. Depicted singly or in groups, those figures attest, at first sight, to his debt to the Dutch tradition of genre painting, which underwent a powerful revival in the mid-nineteenth century. A number of features underscore this affiliation. These include the emphasis that falls on the historical costume and furnishings, the fact that Meissonier in these years painted typically on panel, the musical subject, and indeed the instrument, in this



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case a theorbo, a plucked instrument in the lute family that saw wide popularity in seventeenth and eighteenth-century France. One could also point to the arrangement of objects on the table in front of the musician: taken as a group, the carafe, goblet, and open books function as a kind of still life, prominently placed slightly in front of the musician. These still-life elements offer the painting's beholder a virtuosic technical display designed to emphasize Meissonier's imitative skills, a display perhaps peripheral to the narrative itself—to the extent the painting evinces a narrative at all. *The Musician* seems to frustrate our search for meaning and coherence in yet another way. As in many of Meissonier's pictures, the central figure sits against a background wall decorated with a tapestry featuring two mythological figures. It is tempting to think of these two (probably) male figures as engaged

in activity that echoes that of the musician himself. The painting effectively invites such speculation, and yet it also withholds resolution. This sense of mystery or indeterminacy attached even to Meissonier's simplest subjects accounts for part of their appeal. For all the artist's devotion to authenticity of costume and locale, even his simplest figure groups do not easily yield to the kind of anecdotal meanings or satiric wit often associated with genre painting.

And yet for all this indeterminacy, a narrative is exactly what Meissonier's painting offers, centering in part on the very still life that, at first sight, seems peripheral to the main figure. The musician sits in his chair, his eyes focusing on a book of music. The book, opened about midway, however, does not lean against a stand. Rather, it leans on another book—to be precise, a book turned upside down, its pages

slightly open, even as that book itself presses up against a sheaf of papers lying casually on the table. A few moments earlier, we are tempted to imagine, the musician stood the book up in an effort to prop up his music, but did so in a manner oblivious to the papers lying on the table. The staging of these objects, then, is scarcely arbitrary from a narrative point of view. Rather, it seems wholly devoted to reinforcing the sense of the musician's concentration on his task. Other details evoke this obliviousness across the passage of time. Note, for example, the sense of temporal duration created by the tall glass goblet. We know the musician must have drunk from it, for it sits half empty. But because it is half empty we also know that he has in some measure forgotten it, as his absorption in his music intensifies.

Far from offering a virtuosic display of execution (although they are also that), such details are wholly integrated into the image of concentration that the musician presents. These qualities establish Meissonier's *Musician* as very much a work in the French tradition—keyed to a subtle effect of unity designed to capture the attention of the viewer, to hold him before the painting, and to present to him a world.<sup>2</sup> For all the importance of the painting's still-life details, this sense of embodied concentration lies principally in the musician himself. The figure not only plays, but also reads, music. He offers in this sense two distinct absorptive activities, the first engaging his hands and the second his eyes. The two intersect to produce a powerful sense of concentration that embraces hands, eyes, and more important, his entire body. Yet another tiny detail speaks loudly to this sense of attention: the placement of the figure's feet and legs. The musician's right knee is bent, and his foot is propped up against the leg of the table that holds his music. The pose feels awkward and even provisional, as if at some point the musician will discover his discomfort and shift his body into another, no less awkward pose. But that sense of discomfort is exactly the point. The awkward pose conveys the intensity of the musician's concentration because he is unconscious of this awkwardness, his body seeming wholly to deliver itself to the double act of reading and playing music. The musician offers the viewer a profound image of unselfconsciousness, a mode of sincere and authentic attention that, as it seemed to Meissonier, belonged naturally to the experience of life in the Ancien Régime, an attention that he would contrast with the fractured and distracted modes of experience associated with his own age.

Meissonier's friend Paul-Marc-Joseph Chenavard, a painter notorious for his negativity, pessimism, and loyalty to the Old Masters, can be cited as having launched Meissonier into genre painting, despite the latter's youthful desire to take on more traditionally ambitious subjects. Early in Meissonier's career, Chenavard had praised one of his friend's first musical subjects (probably *The Cellist* of 1842 [private collection]), which, as he put it to Meissonier, offered an alternative to the kind of ambitious, multigure historical and religious projects that would have doomed Meissonier, as it did Chenavard himself, to artistic failure.<sup>3</sup> Meissonier embraced the path created by this intimate, modestly scaled type of figure subject precisely because it opened new and fruitful terrain for artistic exploration. The Clark's *Musician* belongs very much to this rich vein, and yet, as Meissonier matured and successes were heaped on him, he came to worry about his artistic legacy. By the 1860s and beyond, he came to feel that true artistic success lay perhaps in more classic measures, and he began to take on larger and more traditionally ambitious subjects. Even as *The Musician* and similar works brilliantly embody Meissonier's accomplishment as an artist, they also represent the site of a classic, nineteenth-century vocational conflict around the nature and terms of artistic success and posterity. MG

**PROVENANCE** Prince Paul Demidoff, Paris and Florence (until 1864, his sale, Drouot, Paris, 25 May 1864, no. 10, as *Gentilhomme faisant de la musique*); Bocquet;<sup>4</sup> Laurent-Richard, Paris (until 1873, his sale, Drouot, Paris, 7 Apr. 1873, no. 37, ill., as *Le joueur de guitare* [print by P. Le Rat after the painting]); Baron Adolphe de Rothschild, Paris (by 1884, until at least 1893, d. 1900); Marshall Field, Chicago (d. 1906); [Wildenstein, Paris, sold to Boussod, Valadon, 8 June 1909]; [Boussod, Valadon, Paris, sold to Glaenzer, 8 June 1909];<sup>5</sup> [Eugene W. Glaenzer, New York, from 1909]; [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 1 June 1922]; Robert Sterling Clark (1922–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Paris 1884, no. 45, ill., as *Le Joueur de guitare*, lent by Rothschild; Paris 1893, no. 1007, ill. (print by Leterrier after the painting), as *Le Joueur de guitare*, lent by Rothschild; Williamstown–Hartford 1974, pp. 80–82, no. 49, ill.; Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.; Cincinnati–Washington–Elmira 1992–93, pp. 62–63, no. 17, ill., as *Gentilhomme faisant de la musique or The Musician*; Williamstown 1993c, no cat.

**REFERENCES** Ménard 1873, p. 321, as *Le Joueur de guitar*; Mollett 1882, pp. 70–71; Chaumelin 1887, p. 45, no. 81, as *Le Joueur de guitar*; Gréard 1897, p. 396, as *Le Joueur de guitar*

(English ed., p. 368, as *The Guitar Player*); Hungerford 1977, pp. 237, 319, no. 70, fig. 93, as *Gentilhomme faisant de la musique*; Lyon 1993, p. 55; Hungerford 1999, pp. 101, 103, 108, 250n21, 251n27, as *Gentleman Making Music*; Terhune 2005, p. 59, fig. 44.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a mahogany panel 1 cm thick with rough saw marks and chamfered edges 0.6 cm wide on the reverse. The panel has a slight twist with the upper right corner gently turned back. There are cracks running perpendicular to the vertical wood grain, which reveal the gray ground layer. In 2010, the painting was cleaned to remove several layers of very shiny and discolored varnish along with old retouches, some of which filled wide and deep traction cracks. The painting was revarnished with a single brush coat of dammar resin to blend with a thin layer of the older natural resin varnish that was left on some areas. Inpainting was done below the chair as well as along the edges.

The ground is a thin pale gray layer, possibly applied by the artist. The panel grain can be seen through the ground in the background tapestry. A fine line underdrawing, probably in graphite, can be seen on close examination of the shoes and the legs of the furniture, although it is not detectable with infrared-sensitive equipment. There may also be a reddish brown paint sketch in some areas, the color of which shows below some brown passages. The brushwork is somewhat open and sketchy. The background is thinly painted, and much of the image is overly vehicular, contributing to a wrinkling problem.

1. For Demidoff, Aldolphe de Rothschild, and Meissonier's other collectors, see Hungerford 1999, pp. 96–110
2. For the relevance of absorptive motifs in French nineteenth-century painting, see the work of Michael Fried, especially Fried 1980, Fried 1990, and Fried 1996.
3. For Chenavard's advice to Meissonier, and a larger reading of the problematic it entailed, see Gotlieb 1996, pp. 64–67.
4. The entry for this picture in the Laurent-Richard sale of 1873 states that it had been part of the Bocquet collection. It has been suggested that this refers to Edward Bocquet of Brompton, England, from whose collection several works were placed at auction at Christie's London in 1863 and 1871, but this painting was not among those sold; further, Edward Bocquet died before 1863. It is unclear whether Bocquet or Demidoff was the first owner of the picture.
5. See Goupil Stock Books, book 15, p. 216, no. 29623.

## 213 | Jules Pelletier 1867

Oil on panel, 20.7 x 14.7 cm

Upper right: Le Président J. Pelletier / par son ami

EMeissonier [EM in monogram] / 1867

1955.811

Meissonier painted nearly fifty portraits, many of which were shown at the Salon, but he cannot be said to have practiced actively in this genre. A substantial number of his portraits were painted for members of his family and for friends, as in the case of the Clark's picture, painted in 1867, at the height of Meissonier's fame. In short, portraits constitute a relatively small number of his works, all the more striking given the immense demand for his pictures. Dominique Brachlianoff cites in this regard Meissonier's famous commitment to control over the motif, which must have run up against the need to accommodate or even flatter his sitters, not to mention adapting himself to their schedules.<sup>1</sup> Early in his career, nearly broke, Meissonier imagined he might throw himself into portraiture, but as his biographer Gréard noted, "Neither his talent nor his character was such as to fit him for the long probation of such a career."<sup>2</sup>

Despite these reservations, Meissonier was a brilliant self-portraitist, evincing an unexpected predilection for this introspective genre. His portraits subjects, too, command interest, but precisely not for the kind of introspective, psychological depth associated with the portraiture of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, for example, or with his own self-portraits. Rather, Meissonier's sitters typically betray a sense of forced immediacy or startled attention, vitiating against psychological complexity in favor of surface affect. The Clark's portrait of Jules Pelletier betrays this sense of startled attention. Pelletier's eyes seem slightly enlarged, as if he were staring or could not close them. Similar intriguing effects may be found across portraiture in the 1860s, notably in the works of Frédéric Bazille, Edgar Degas, and other painters associated with Realism and its aftermath. For Meissonier no less than for his more avant-garde peers, the sense of a frozen, eyes-open pose is traceable to the challenge to portraiture put in place by the new medium of photography.<sup>3</sup> Photography's new protocols and routines around the subject's pose subtly transformed attitudes to bodily posture and affect within the painter's studio, even if those painters were not engaged with