



**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,
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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the present example ranges from sections of thick impasto, especially in the trees and clouds, to areas in which the prepared ground of the canvas shows through, most evident in the center of the composition. While Maufra was certainly friendly with some of the Impressionists, it was another acquaintance who had a more profound impact on the painter, and that was Paul Gauguin, whom Maufra met in 1890 in Brittany. Maufra returned to Brittany annually for many years and became associated with the Pont-Aven school there, but it was his friends' lifestyles and interest in printmaking, rather than any stylistic approach, that influenced him most.

Maufra exhibited at Galerie Durand-Ruel for the first time in 1896, and remained under contract to the gallery until the end of his life. His relationship with Paul Durand-Ruel afforded Maufra not only a steady income and a reliable venue for showing his work, but also a continuous appraisal of his style and approach. Durand-Ruel acquired this painting from Maufra just twelve days before the artist's death. Maufra was said to have died from cardiac arrest before his easel while painting in the countryside of Poncé. Sterling Clark bought the picture from Durand-Ruel some twenty years later, by which time Maufra had become fairly well known in the United States as well as in France.⁴ It is likely that the present painting is the one exhibited in the retrospective exhibition held in the artist's hometown in 1937 (just before its purchase by Clark) as one of two paintings dating from the last year of the artist's life. KP

PROVENANCE The artist, sold to Durand-Ruel, 11 May 1918; [Durand-Ruel, 1918–38 Paris, sold to Clark, 30 June 1938]; Robert Sterling Clark (1938–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Probably Nantes 1937, no. 47, as *Le Loir à Poncé*.

REFERENCES Alexandre 1926, p. 191, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is an unlined, commercially primed linen on a five-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher. There is a large canvas stamp on the reverse for the supplier Blanchet. The ground color is a slightly yellowish off-white, with no priming on the right tack edge. The left tack edge is especially grimy, as if the painting stood unframed with this edge uppermost for an extended period. The picture has never been treated and retains its original yellowed varnish.

The off-white ground constitutes a major part of this sketchy painting, contributing its yellowish tone to the entire

composition. The ground's thinness also emphasizes the weave of the medium-weight canvas (22 threads/cm). The paint layer is comprised of an open network of wet-into-wet strokes above a few wash areas in the trees. The brushes used were quite small, up to 0.64 cm in width, and most strokes are of a similar size, except in the lower washes and the sky where a larger brush was employed. There are some very high paint impastos, several crushed and grimy and others with broken upper edges. The coating is somewhat discolored, with bits of undissolved resin scattered over the surface. A scratch near the upper edge may have occurred prior to the hardening of the paint.

1. This location is identified in an inscription in pencil on the reverse of the canvas, which reads "Coin du Loir à Poncé, Sarthe."
2. Ramade 1988, p. 13: "dans ma naïveté, de me dire [*sic*]: mais je puis peindre comme cela!"
3. As by Michelet 1908, p. 33: "un disciple des Impressionnistes."
4. Maufra's work was shown by Durand-Ruel in New York in 1896 and again in 1924.

Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier

French, 1815–1891

211 | Man Reading 1851

Oil on panel, 17.3 x 13 cm

Lower right: EMeissonier [EM in monogram] 1851
1955.812

Completed in 1851 at the height of his career, *Man Reading* is the second of two fine, single-figure genre paintings by Ernest Meissonier purchased by Robert Sterling Clark. Even for an artist who specialized in small pictures, *Man Reading* is small. Painted on panel and measuring only 17.3 x 13 cm, the Clark picture stands as among the smallest of Meissonier's figure paintings. The smallness of the artist's pictures was at once part of their aura and a source of amusement. Honoré Daumier, among other caricaturists, depicted visitors to the Salon crushed together as they struggled to view Meissonier's pictures, as if they were contemplating a precious jewel. The subject of reading was taken up by Meissonier on several occasions. Many of his pictures were variations on a theme, particularly in the 1850s and 1860s, before the



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artist became absorbed in more traditionally ambitious military and historical subjects. Those variations point clearly to the marketplace nature of Meissonnier's practice, as the artist struggled to satisfy the intense demand for his pictures on the part of wealthy collectors, without at the same time diluting his brand.¹

In the present day, such widespread enthusiasm for the artist is perhaps hard to imagine. Once among the most celebrated and expensive artists of his day, Meissonnier has been largely forgotten, swept away like so many other stars of the Salon by the rise of modernism and its aftermath. The tiny size of many of his best pictures is perhaps partly responsible for this modern invisibility. Although typically described as an "academic" or "Salon" painter, Meissonnier seems to share little with his Salon colleagues, who in an effort to be noticed (or have their works purchased by the state), often adopted a vast scale. His paintings are almost never violent, he painted few landscapes, and he almost never painted women. Nor has it helped that Meissonnier painted mostly men, but chiefly men

in bourgeois or military dress, that typically those men belonged to the Ancien Regime rather than to his own day, and that no less invariably those men seem to be doing little more than passing time. The figure in *Man Reading*, with his frock coat and knee britches, clearly fits these criteria. Certainly the artist mystified his modernist critics. How was it, the Post-Impressionist critic Gustave Coquiot asked, that this "short" and "stocky" man with a "long beard" managed to "mystify, rule and dupe virtually the entire world?"²

Daumier's amusing caricature, however, is not merely satirical. It reminds us that the sense of wonder once experienced by viewers of Meissonnier's pictures belongs, in part, to artistic values associated with their tiny dimensions. In their smallness, his pictures were designed to nurture a slow process of discovery and astonishment, as a subtle play of human feeling and experience seemed to be unveiled across the smallest of openings. And although Meissonnier showed often at the Salon, the experience of his pictures is more truly a private one. In their small size, his

pictures promote a mode of precious, informed, and focused aesthetic contemplation that once captivated critics and collectors alike. It should also be stressed that if Meissonier's paintings are small, adjusted for scale their touch is large. The discovery that his pictures were not jewels but simply paintings after all formed part of the artist's appeal. In *Man Reading*, Meissonier's touch is delicate but decisive. Far from presenting us with the so-called licked surfaces of academic art, his pictures betray a powerful sense of the artist's hand.

Typically, Meissonier presents us with figures not doing very much, and yet so wholly absorbed in what they are doing that we cannot imagine them doing anything else. *Man Reading* offers a case in point, showing Meissonier devoting himself to the aesthetics and even ethics of concentration conveyed through the subtlest details. The room has no lamp that we can see; rather, the reader reads thanks to unusually strong natural light shining in from the window. We feel the sitter has moved his chair to capture that light—moved his chair, indeed, away from the desk behind him that holds several open volumes but seems to offer nowhere to sit. This reader, it is worth adding, is also far-sighted—hence he holds his book a little farther from his eyes than we might expect. The reader's effort to focus on his book enhances this sense of absorption, as we take him to have unconsciously placed the book at just this slightly awkward position. Note, too, that the reader's fingers do not simply hold open the book; they are poised between pages ready to be turned. This detail, so typical of the artist, defines the figure's concentration in temporal terms; in other words, the time required to read a page before unconsciously turning it. The illumination from the window, the page seemingly hanging in midair, the way in which the man holds the book open, and his crossed knee—these and still other details promote a sense of quiet duration, allowing the viewer to explore the scene while leaving the figure as it were undisturbed. This subtle marshaling of details not only defines Meissonier's talent, but can also help problematize any simple opposition between “academic” and “modernist” art in nineteenth-century France. For example, it was precisely the sense of intimate concentration evinced by Meissonier's figures that compelled no less a viewer than Vincent van Gogh, who marveled at their sense of “concentrated attention” and compared them to the readers depicted by Rembrandt.³

Only rarely did Meissonier paint modern life. This absence of contemporaneity constitutes yet another charge made against the artist. And yet Meissonier's historical subjects were intended to speak to the present. Even his simplest subjects possess a distinct ethic, one that complicates the traditional charge that Meissonier painted merely trivial subjects. *Man Reading* again serves as a good example. As Meissonier saw it, the kind of absorption or attention attached to book reading belonged chiefly to the past.⁴ He wrote: “There are no readers nowadays. . . . If I were to paint a modern *Reader*, I should have to put a newspaper in his hand, and to furnish his shelves with pamphlets not worth the trouble of binding, and publications of a franc a volume.”⁵ As these remarks suggest, the transitory formats and fragmented narratives that characterize modern forms of attention, concentration, and experience made them—at least in Meissonier's mind—unavailable to, or inappropriate for, pictorial depiction. A mere reader of newspapers, of pamphlets not worth binding, could at any moment lift his eyes and break the spell. And just that threat, in turn, could seem to vitiate against the fascination, prolonged aesthetic experience, and sense of wonder that Meissonier's Ancien Régime figures were held to induce. If Meissonier avoided contemporary subjects, we must understand him as still responding to his times. The scene of reading is not only a scene of solitary absorption, but also an escape from the present, an idealized mode of concentrated experience lost to the age in which Meissonier himself lived. MG

PROVENANCE Possibly Baron Adolphe de Rothschild, sold to Goupil, 17 Feb. 1881; [possibly Goupil, Paris, sold to Secrétan, 18 Feb. 1881];⁶ Ernest Secrétan, Paris (possibly 1881–89, his sale, Galerie Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris, 1 July 1889, no. 52, ill., as *Le Liseur blanc*); [Galerie Charles Sedelmeyer, sold to Boussod, Valadon, 8 Oct. 1889]; [Boussod, Valadon, Paris, sold to Dreux, 31 Oct. 1889];⁷ Ernest Dreux, Paris (1889–1911, his sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 5 Dec. 1911, no. 22, ill., as *Un Liseur*, sold to Le Roy); [E. Le Roy, Paris, sold to Boussod, Valadon, 7 Dec. 1911]; [Boussod, Valadon, Paris, 1911–12, sold to Descamps Scrive, 20 Dec. 1912];⁸ Descamps Scrive, Lille (from 1912); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 30 Mar. 1929, as *The Reader*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1929–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Paris 1884, p. 22, no. 13, as *Liseur*; Paris 1893, p. 216, no. 916, as *Un Liseur*, lent by Dreux; Williamstown 1988–89, no cat.; Cincinnati–Washington–Elmira 1992–93, pp. 62–63, no. 16, ill., as *The Reader in White* or *Man Reading*; Williamstown 1993c, no cat.

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.

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.¹ 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