



**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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248 | Piette's House at Montfoucault 1874

Oil on canvas, 46.4 x 68.6 cm

Lower left: C. Pissarro. [18]74 [date partially legible]
1955.826

The challenge of painting snow was welcomed by several of the Impressionist artists, but it was rarely celebrated so directly and viscerally as in Pissarro's *Piette's House at Montfoucault*. From pale sky to crowded foreground, whiteness has transformed this rural landscape, blurring the contours of houses, trees, and pathway, and smothering the nearby garden. A lighter covering still clings to the rooftops, but massive, globular accumulations of snow weigh down the foliage in front of us and seem to threaten the equilibrium of the scene. Pissarro's energetic application of paint, in thick impastos that mimic the density of snow itself, adds to the tactile experience and evokes the awkwardness of working outdoors in such bleak conditions. Instinctively, we stand with the artist on the frozen ground and within inches of the snow-laden branches, sensing the wintry air. Like him, we understand that nuances of atmospheric effect

and refinements of composition must take a secondary role, beside the elemental need to respond to the extremes of nature.

Piette's House at Montfoucault was painted in late 1874, during the winter that followed the financial disappointments of the first Impressionist exhibition.¹ Barely surviving on their meager resources, Pissarro and his young family traveled from Pontoise to stay with Ludovic Piette at his farm—called “Montfoucault”—in the remote village of Melleray, between Chartres and Le Mans.² Before leaving, Pissarro had told the art critic, Théodore Duret, “I’m going there to study the figures and animals of the true countryside”; it is also arguable that Melleray was the site of his first historic depictions of “peasants at prosaic tasks in the fields or in the kitchen garden or farmhouse yard.”³ Since meeting at the Académie Suisse in 1860, Pissarro had remained close to the ideologically radical but modestly talented Piette, who was to contribute thirty of his bright-hued market views and local scenes to the Impressionist exhibition in 1877.⁴ In his letters to Pissarro from Montfoucault, Piette wrote about the struggles of his own painting career and the dramatic political events of these years, often describing the attractions of the locality and urging his friend to visit.

In December 1871, soon after the terrible events of the Franco-Prussian war and the siege of Paris, Piette evoked the timelessness of the rocky landscapes at Melleray: “in these places, one could believe oneself carried back one or two thousand years into the past: no trace of man: everything as wild as a century or two after the Flood.”⁵ He also noted that snow had recently fallen, one of several references in his correspondence to extreme weather in the region: “he who has not seen snow here, does not know our country,” Piette boasted the previous year.⁶ Piette himself often painted the snow and once told Pissarro “you know better than I that winter is full of intoxication for the painter.”⁷

Previous journeys to Montfoucault in 1864 and 1870 would have prepared Pissarro for the project ahead. During his 1874 stay, he completed about fifteen canvases of the buildings, trees, farm animals, and rough fields of Melleray, recording snow in about half of them and making three studies of the interior of Piette’s large house, presumably when bad weather prevented him from painting outside. For the Clark composition, Pissarro positioned himself opposite the façade of the building, a traditional stone structure that survives today, its five symmetrical windows here partly concealed by foliage.⁸ The most immediate subject of *Piette’s House at Montfoucault* is the snow itself and its impact on a largely unremarkable corner of rural France. Two villagers in the middle distance—one of whom appears to carry hay, presumably to feed livestock—give scale to the event, but otherwise the work is free of “the figures and animals” he had planned to study.⁹ Toward the right-hand side of the composition the view seems threatened by incoherence, as the disorienting effects of snow on space and color collapse the distinction between forms, and between distance and foreground. At the center of this area, a mysterious, pale bulk might be a haystack, a rooftop, or a hill, though it is difficult to rationalize any such towering feature at this location.¹⁰

The surface of *Piette’s House at Montfoucault* suggests that it was executed rapidly and completed with few, if any, revisions. Choosing a relatively coarse linen canvas for his rustic subject, Pissarro seems to have brushed on some initial strokes of dark paint, then “drawn” parts of the present scene in blue.¹¹ The image itself was built up in somewhat thick oil color that blended stroke into stroke as he proceeded, leaving the warm, off-white priming visible throughout. Dense passages of almost pure white mark the thickest deposits of snow, calling to mind the winter

landscapes of Gustave Courbet that were admired by Pissarro and his circle. Elsewhere, a palette of blue-grays, green-grays and ocher-grays accounts for virtually the entire scene, with what appears to be pure black in the deepest shadows. In 1873, Pissarro had explained to Duret the new approaches to color of Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, and himself: “There is nothing *colder* than broad sunlight in the summer,” he insisted: “contrary to what the colorists say, nature is colored in winter and cold in summer.”¹² With specific reference to certain Montfoucault pictures, Richard Shiff has shown how Pissarro attempted to convey this subdued winter richness, avoiding “excessively harsh juxtapositions” of pure color as well as the artificiality of traditional chiaroscuro. Instead he “mixed most of his grayish tones from blue, yellow, red and small amounts of green,” ensuring that “the brilliant luminosity remains while the hue contrasts disappear.”¹³ In an analysis of a Montfoucault interior of 1874, Shiff reported that Pissarro’s neutral colors were indeed mixed in this way and proposed that the Clark painting follows this same procedure.¹⁴ RK

PROVENANCE Possibly Eugène Murer (Eugène-Auguste Meunier), Paris (d. 1906);¹⁵ [Ambroise Vollard, Paris, until d. 1939];¹⁶ [Étienne Bignou, Paris and New York, by Mar. 1940]; [Sam Salz, Paris and New York, by May 1940, sold to Durand-Ruel, 4 Mar. 1941];¹⁷ [Durand-Ruel, New York, sold to Clark, 6 Mar. 1941]; Robert Sterling Clark (1941–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS London 1939, no. 25, as *Effet de neige*, lent by Vollard; New York 1940a, no. 7, ill., as *Effet de Neige*; San Francisco 1940, no. 290, ill., as *Snow Landscape*, lent by Salz; New York 1941a, no. 12, as *Le maison de Piette à Montfoucault, effet de neige*; Williamstown 1956a, no. S-2, ill.; London–Paris–Boston 1980–81, p. 101, no. 37, ill., as *Piette’s House at Montfoucault (snow)*; Hanover 1986, pp. 38, 45, 88, no. 40, ill., as *Piette’s House at Montfoucault (Snow)*; Birmingham–Glasgow 1990, pp. 42, 124, no. 16, fig. 44; Washington–San Francisco–Brooklyn 1998–99, pp. 148–49, 214, no. 38, ill.; Montgomery and others 2005–7, no cat.; Montpelier–Grenoble 2007–8, pp. 52–53, ill.

REFERENCES Trublot 1887, p. 3, no. 11, as *Une cour, avec sapins, paysage breton*; Pissarro and Venturi 1939, vol. 1, p. 120, no. 287; vol. 2, pl. 57, no. 287, as *La maison de Piette à Montfoucault (effet de neige)*; Jedlicka 1950, pl. 17; Natanson 1950, pl. 17; Gachet 1956, p. 171; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 96, ill.; Shikes and Harper 1980, p. 122, ill.; Shiff 1984a, p. 300n26; Shiff 1984b, p. 688; Distel 1990, p. 212; Clarke 1990, p. 427; Pissarro 1993, p. 139, fig. 146; Thomson 2000, p. 131, fig. 122; Cahill 2005, p. 65,

ill.; Pissarro and Durand-Ruel Snollaerts 2005, vol. 2, pp. 1, 292, no. 389, ill., as *Piette's House at Montfoucault, Effect of Snow*.

TECHNICAL REPORT The original fabric is somewhat coarse linen (13–16 threads/cm), commercially primed with an off-white ground layer. In 1979, a deteriorated glue lining was replaced with a wax-resin lining, and the painting was restretched on an ICA spring-design stretcher. The tacking margins had been removed during the earlier lining. The ground color is visible in many areas of the picture, especially the lower right corner. There are scattered small age cracks in the paint, visible microscopically along the tops of the canvas weave. A thin layer of old varnish remains on the picture beneath the 1979 Acryloid B-72 due to the solubility of the dark imprimatura layer. In ultraviolet light, the very straight edges of the older coating can still be seen, indicating that the picture was varnished while framed.

Although there is no evidence of an underdrawing, there is a thin wash of black or deep brown pigment over the ground layer on the lower part of the image. It is not clear if this was an intentional preparation for this image, or the result of using a previously started canvas. There is a simple underpainting or sketch, executed in blue paint, which locates the trees and the building's outlines. The sky and tree brushwork remain unblended, with the sky color merely dodged around the upper boughs. In general, the final paint layer is quite vehicular and fluid, even in areas comprised mainly of the rather stiff lead-white pigment. The entire surface was completed quickly, using only five colors applied wet-into-wet. The signature "Pissarro" was done with one brush load of dark blue color into the wet white paint, the lettering becoming whiter as the name progresses. That the image was altered after being signed is apparent where new brushstrokes smear through parts of the still-wet date. The greener initial "C." appears to have been applied later, after the paint had set.

1. Part of the date on the picture is unclear, though the final "4" is unmistakable. The extremely close relationship of the Clark work to a painting such as *Snow Effect with Cows at Montfoucault* (private collection, Atlanta; PDR 388), clearly marked "1874," removes any doubt about its true date.
2. Montfoucault was the ancestral property of Piette's family. In Bailly-Herzberg 1985, p. 9, his full name is given as Ludovic Piette-Montfoucault. For discussions of the 1874 visit, see Richard Thomson in Birmingham–Glasgow 1990, pp. 40–45, and Shikes and Harper 1980, pp. 121–22.
3. Camille Pissarro to Théodore Duret, 20 Oct. 1874, in Bailly-Herzberg 1980–91, vol. 1, p. 95: "J'y vais pour étudier les figures et les animaux de la vraie campagne." Also Shikes and Harper 1980, p. 121.
4. See Berson 1996, vol. 2, pp. 79–80.

5. Ludovic Piette to Camille Pissarro, Dec. 1871, in Bailly-Herzberg 1985, p. 67: "On pourrait se croire, dans ces lieux, reporté à mille ou deux mille ans en arrière: plus trace des hommes; tout sauvage comme un siècle ou deux après le déluge."
6. Ludovic Piette to Camille Pissarro, 8 Dec. 1870, in Bailly-Herzberg 1985, p. 40: "Qui n'a pas vu la neige ici, ne connaît point notre pays."
7. Ludovic Piette to Camille Pissarro, 25 Dec. 1873, in Bailly-Herzberg 1985, p. 96: "Vous savez mieux que moi que l'hiver est plein d'enivrement pour le peintre."
8. A photograph of the house appears between pp. 64 and 65 in Bailly-Herzberg 1985. The dormer window indicated by Pissarro has evidently been removed.
9. Other canvases from the 1874 trip show local people and their occupations more prominently, though Richard Thomson has seen the figures in the Clark scene as consistent with "a typical rural pattern of division of labour"; see Birmingham–Glasgow 1990, p. 42.
10. Several paintings of the immediate vicinity appear to indicate that the land around Piette's house was only mildly uneven and that adjacent stacks and other structures were far too small to register on this scale: see, for example, *The Farm at Montfoucault of 1874* (Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva; PDR 377).
11. The darker forms are difficult to read and may belong to an earlier, abandoned composition.
12. Camille Pissarro to Théodore Duret, 2 May 1873, in Bailly-Herzberg 1980–91, vol. 1, p. 80: "Il n'y a rien de plus froid que le plein soleil d'été, tout le contraire des coloristes, la nature est colorée en hiver et froide en été."
13. Shiff 1984a, pp. 205–6.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 207, 300n26.
15. Distel 1990, p. 212, states that Murer owned this painting. Gachet 1956, p. 177, notes that Murer sold his collection in 1896 to a number of dealers, including selling ten paintings to Ambroise Vollard (two by van Gogh, six by Cézanne, and two unspecified).
16. After Vollard's death in July 1939, his collection was inherited by his brother Lucien and by Robert de Galea, the son of Vollard's mistress. Presumably either Lucien Vollard or Robert de Galea sold the painting before March 1940 to Étienne Bignou, whose gallery had branches in Paris and New York. It seems likely that Bignou purchased the painting in Paris and transferred it to New York for exhibition in March 1940.
17. According to a comment in RSC's diary, dated 1 Feb. 1941, Sam Salz had acquired this painting "from Durand-Ruel's in Paris through a second party." Given that Bignou exhibited the work in New York in March 1940, this information appears to be inaccurate. Salz himself moved from Paris to New York in 1939.