



**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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Paul Seignac

French, 1826–1904

302 | The Sick Child c. 1870–75

Oil on panel, 41 x 32.4 cm

Lower left: Seignac

1955.853

The younger child lies on her mother's lap, wrapped in a blanket, while an older girl, presumably a sister, points to something on one of the large crumpled sheets of paper that the mother holds. Two more sheets of paper, one of them folded and both seemingly adorned with images, lie on the floor, together with what look like additional scraps of paper. Both the mother and the older girl seem to be assuming the role of educator, trying to gain the attention and interest of the young child. The casual treatment of the sheets of paper suggests that they are popular

imagery of some sort, the types of cheaply produced woodblock prints sold throughout the French countryside. Carefully censored, these images played an important role in basic religious, moral, and historical education in these years. The religious faith of the household is clearly indicated by the small, framed image of the Crucifixion fastened to the wall above the bed, with a little container for holy water beside it. Beyond this, we see a modest but quite spacious rural cottage, which seems to be carefully tended apart from the paper on the floor. For their bourgeois audience in Paris and other cities, images such as this acted as a powerful reassurance of the stability and orderliness of the French countryside, presented as if untouched by the disruptive forces of modernization.

Although, like Timoléon Lobrichon (see cat. 194), Seignac had studied with François Édouard-Picot (1786–1868), he established his reputation with pictures such as this—humble peasant interiors with mothers and children. In this, he was following in the footsteps of Pierre-Édouard Frère (1819–1886), though

Seignac's paintings are somewhat softer in handling and more sentimental in mood. The spatial arrangement of the picture is clearly indebted to the interiors of the Netherlandish seventeenth century; in particular, the vista through to a background room and the effect of sunlight shining through the window carry echoes of the work of Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684).

A stamp on the reverse of this panel for the paint manufacturer Carpentier, Successeur, gives a shop address at 8 boulevard Montmartre, and a workshop address at 62 rue Legendre. Although the business changed a number of times over the years, this particular stamp was probably used only between 1870 and 1871.¹ The painting thus probably dates to some time during or shortly after this period. Although much of its subsequent history is not known, it appears to have been given various titles, including *Amusing a Sick Child*, and simply *The Young Mother*, the title with which it was sold to Clark. JH

PROVENANCE [N. Mitchell, London, sold to Clark, 12 Apr. 1935, as *The Young Mother*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1935–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS None

REFERENCES None

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a mahogany panel 1 cm thick with chamfers 1.9 cm wide on the back edges. The panel is still in plane, with the grain running vertically. There is a red wash over the back and a partially obscured stamp of the colorman Carpentier. The paint is plowed up around the perimeter from framing pressure, and there is frame abrasion on all four sides. Edge retouching between varnishes indicates that this is repeat frame damage. Age and traction crack networks run throughout the paint, and there is some solvent abrasion in thinly painted dark details. Repairs of a scratch loss on the stool seat and damages in the upper background can be seen in both ultraviolet and infrared light. The retouches are visibly darkened in the woman's bodice and the varnish is yellowed. The ultraviolet light fluorescence of the coatings is moderately dense, and in low magnification, deposits of an earlier yellowed resin can be seen scattered in the paint layer. Reflected light reveals the pebbly surface texture and the recessed traction cracks in the woman's bodice and the upper portion of the standing girl.

The ground, which can be seen only at the extreme edges of the panel, is an off-white color and probably commercially applied. There is probably more of an underdrawing for the image than is detectable. In low magnification, charcoal lines can be seen outlining the woman's face. Using the infrared equipment, the same lines are visible, along with a slight change in the woman's scarf along the top of her head.

Below the final paint there seems to be a broadly applied black and possibly brown wash, visible in at least some areas as a separate brushwork pattern. This is occasionally left as the final layer in some less finished areas, such as the fireplace opening. The handling of the upper paint is light and feathery, with scumbles passing over and defining many details. The picture is signed in what may be brown ink.

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1. See Constantin 2001, pp. 52–53 and 62–63. The partnership of Deforge Carpentier had existed earlier, under different names and with shops and workshops at several different addresses, but Carpentier used the designation "successeur" only after 1870, and the shop moved from 8, boulevard Montmartre to 6 rue Halévy in 1871.

303 | **Woman and Child before a Mirror** 1870s

Oil on panel, 46.4 x 38.1 cm

Lower right: Seignac

1955.854

Although this panel has been titled *Mother and Child before a Mirror*, the standing figure appears so young that she can more readily be interpreted as the child's elder sister, not her mother. As in *The Sick Child* (cat. 302), the scene takes place in a modest but decent rural cottage interior; the basket containing sewing materials and the pair of scissors are further indications that this is a well-kept household. The relative prosperity of the home is indicated by the comparative elaboration of the mirror frame and the chest of drawers, and by the decorated slipper of the older girl. The configuration of the space is clearly reminiscent of Netherlandish seventeenth-century interiors.

The older figure is seemingly encouraging the child's absorption with its image in the mirror. In the iconography of the period, mirrors might be used as a warning against the dangers of vanity or narcissistic self-absorption, but the mood here seems more playful than admonitory. Unlike *A Sick Child*, the picture does not seem to include any religious imagery; the sheet pinned to the wall by the window seems to be printed in columns and thus probably represents a calendar or an almanac. Yet, despite the absence of any overtly ethical dimension, this vision of happy cottage life would have served, like *A Sick Child*, as a reassuring image of the state of the French countryside. The painting was