



**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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1. Chaumelin 1867, p. 88: “Robe de velours bleu; manteau noir, bordé de petit gris, qui découvre les épaules; main gantée de jaune et tenant une lettre dépliée; profil perdu, tourné vers un portrait de femme accroché au mur.”
2. See Thoré 1870, vol. 2, p. 280: “il s’agit de peinture simplement.”
3. Chaumelin 1867, p. 88.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88: “monde intermédiaire”; “catégorie sociale.”
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89: “Voici une Duchesse, si l’étiquette n’est pas menteuse. . . . Je défie Arsène Houssaye d’y trouver les éléments suffisants pour reconstituer une Duchesse, si ce n’est peut-être quelque duchesse de Gerolstein.”
6. Larousse 1866–90, vol. 6, p. 1334: “Femme qui prend de grands airs, qui affecte des manières au-dessus de son état, de sa condition ou de sa fortune.”
7. Stevens 1886, p. 3, no. XV. The original French reads: “En peinture, on peut se passer de sujet. Un tableau ne doit pas avoir besoin d’une notice” (French ed., p. 10, no. XV).

315 | The Visit c. 1870

Oil on panel, 64.7 x 47.3 cm
 Lower right: Alfred Stevens.
 1955.861

A woman sits on a sofa, holding a mahlstick in her right hand, while another woman stands alongside the sofa. The seated woman wears an informal but elaborate and fashionable indoor costume, while her companion is dressed in outdoor clothing, with a paisley shawl over her dress, suggesting that she has recently arrived to pay a visit, or is about to leave. To the left are painting materials and an easel with a framed picture fixed to it, seen from the side and placed in such a way that the painting itself cannot be seen. Two more paintings hang on the wall in the right background, the smaller perhaps a modest landscape, the larger seemingly a bust-length sketch of a woman in a décolleté dress. Both, however, are summarily indicated, in contrast to the detailed sofa with cushions beneath them, which suggests that they should be viewed as representations of informal sketches, rather than as loosely sketched images of finished paintings. The

precise detailing is continued to the left, where an elaborate curtain is loosely draped over an oriental screen that bars access to a back room in which part of a circular mirror and a window, largely covered by another curtain, are visible.

Although the seated woman holds a mahlstick, and the equipment seen on the left of the picture suggests that this is an artist’s studio, her costume—a housecoat, but evidently expensive and spotless—and the overall cleanliness and lavishness of the furniture and decor ensure that she cannot be credibly viewed as a working artist or this as a working space. Rather, the artistic materials appear as further attributes in the imagery of a sophisticated and fashionable young woman. It has been suggested that the picture depicts Stevens’s own studio and that the seated young woman was one of his female students,¹ but this seems too biographical a reading of a picture whose subject is more generic than specific; the figures and their setting together evoke the idea of the cultivated pastimes of the haute bourgeoisie. In this world, painting was a favored form of accomplishment. Here, it is juxtaposed with another of the standard ingredients of this lifestyle, the round of visits to friends and acquaintances that located a fashionable young woman as part of a particular class and social network. Moreover, the women’s faces seem more like types than portraits, and the background details do not recur in other paintings that appear to represent Stevens’s own studio and domestic environment.

The painting can be firmly identified as that exhibited with the title *Les mondaines* at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1878 from the review by C. L. Duval, who described it as “an elegant female visitor received by a female friend, an artist wearing a morning wrap and holding a palette.”² In certain of Stevens’s paintings of two women together in an interior, there are suggestions of private interchanges—the telling of secrets or the exchange of gossip. There is nothing in this picture, however, that hints at the nature of the interchange between the women; moreover, the title *Les Mondaines* simply indicates their status as socialites but gives no hint of any anecdotal content.

The complexity of these background spaces is broadly reminiscent of the spatial play of Netherlandish seventeenth-century interiors by artists such as Pieter de Hooch, but the decor and the women’s dresses are assertively contemporary and fashionable. This synthesis of tradition and modernity was an integral part of Stevens’s pictorial project. JH



PROVENANCE [Vander Donckt frères, Paris, in 1878, probably sold to Vanderbilt]; William H. Vanderbilt, New York (1878–d. 1885); George Washington Vanderbilt, his son, by descent (1885–d. 1914);³ Cornelius Vanderbilt III, his nephew, by descent (1914–d. 1942); Grace Wilson Vanderbilt, his wife, by descent (1942–45, her sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 18 Apr. 1945, no. 148, ill., as *The Morning Call*); [Knoedler, New York, sold to Clark, 20 April 1945]; Robert Sterling Clark (1945–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Paris 1878b, Belgian section, no. 223, as *Les mondaines*, lent by Vanderdonckt [*sic*] frères; Williamstown 1960b, ill.; Williamstown 1981b, pp. 38, 48, no. 28, ill.; Williamstown 1992–93, no cat.; Williamstown 2000–2001, no cat.

REFERENCES Duval 1878, p. 84; Strahan 1879–80, vol. 3, pt. 12, p. 108, as *The Morning Call*; Pesquidoux 1881, vol. 1, p. 340, as *Les Visiteuses*; Strahan 1883–84, vol. 4, pp. 59–60, ill., as *The Morning Call*; Vanderbilt 1884, p. 44, no. 82; Vanderbilt 1886, p. 36, no. 100, as *The Morning Call*; *Collector* 1890, p. 86; Metropolitan Museum of Art 1905, p. 215, no. 65; Burroughs 1916, p. 274; Boucher 1930, fig. 39; Vanzype 1936, p. 108, no. 211; Mitchell 1973, pp. 17, 27, fig. 5, as *Les Visiteuses*; Lucie-Smith and Dars 1976, pl. 3; Ann Arbor–Baltimore–Montreal 1977, pp. xiii, 43, 51, 57, 65, 71, 75; Norman 1977, p. 21, pl. 26; Hartmann 1978, p. 83, ill.; Rosenblum and Janson 1984, p. 290, fig. 229; Palm Beach 1988, p. 25, ill.; Feist 1993, pp. 61–62, ill.; Boston 2002, p. 10, fig. 1; Lefebvre 2006, pp. 131, 135, 207, fig. 155, as *Les Mondaines*; Brussels–Amsterdam 2009–10, p. 36; Derrey-Capon 2009, pp. 67, 70 (Dutch ed., pp. 68, 71).

TECHNICAL REPORT The support appears to be a two-layer, mahogany panel system 0.8 cm thick, with the grain running vertically. The original main central board has extensions on all four edges, ranging in width from 2.5 to 3.2 cm. There are invisible wood inserts carefully applied behind cracks running up from the lower edge, and the lower left corner also seems to be spliced with a new piece of mahogany, which may indicate that the panel suffered an accident. The entire reverse is also glued down to a secondary mahogany panel that hides the repairs and is heavily cradled. The panel reverse and the entire cradle are heavily varnished. This major restoration by De Wild dates from 1945. All the extensions appear to be in the front wood layer, as confirmed by the X-radiograph. There is extensive overpaint on the left, right, and bottom edges, and the lower left corner. A band of dark repaint (2.9 cm wide) runs along the lower edge and extends under the signature, which may suggest that the artist was involved in the additions. There are also small nails or nail holes running inward from all four panel edges. An intermediate layer, perhaps the adhesive used in the panel restoration, is blurring the radiograph, preventing a clear view of the paint surface.

Most of the longer panel cracks are in the lower third of the image. Shorter lines of tenting can be seen along the top edge. There are traction cracks in some of the thickly painted areas, primarily in the red and gold colors. Several dents occur in the right background, and the older overpaint is discolored and fairly extensive, with much strengthening of the faces, the floor, and some background areas. There are several periods of retouching visible in ultraviolet light, with at least one under the present varnish, and several above it, including remedial stabilization in 1985 and 2005. Although the varnish presents a moderately thin and even ultraviolet light fluorescence, the coatings are extremely fogged. The surface reflectance is quite shiny, except for a few retouched areas.

The ground in the central area is a commercially prepared off-white layer. There was no underdrawing detected in infrared viewing. Several paint changes were seen in the upper right background, where a framed portrait of a woman was painted out, and the fan seems to have been first placed just below this now-missing painting. There is also a curved pentimento below the proper left arm of the seated woman. The paint handling is wet-into-wet, with added scumbles.

1. Lefebvre 2006, p. 133.
2. Duval 1878, p. 84: “une élégante visiteuse reçue par une amie, une artiste en négligé et la palette en main.”
3. George Washington Vanderbilt placed this and a number of other works on long-term loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1886. The works were returned to his nephew in 1919.

316 | Woman in White c. 1872

Oil on laminate cardboard, 32.4 x 24.5 cm

Upper left: AS [monogram]

1955.1028

Although the cardboard support is small and the painting rapidly sketched, the monogrammed signature shows that Stevens considered *Woman in White* to be a complete work on its own terms. The painting has historically been dated 1884, based on the evidence of an inscription on the reverse: “Je déclare que ce tableau est peint par Alfred Stevens Paris 1884” (“I state that this painting was made by Alfred Stevens Paris 1884”). The costume, however, an informal yet fashionable summer dress made of semitransparent muslin, suggests a date during the 1870s;¹ it is possible that the 1884 date refers to the inscription itself, rather than to the execution of the painting. Further,