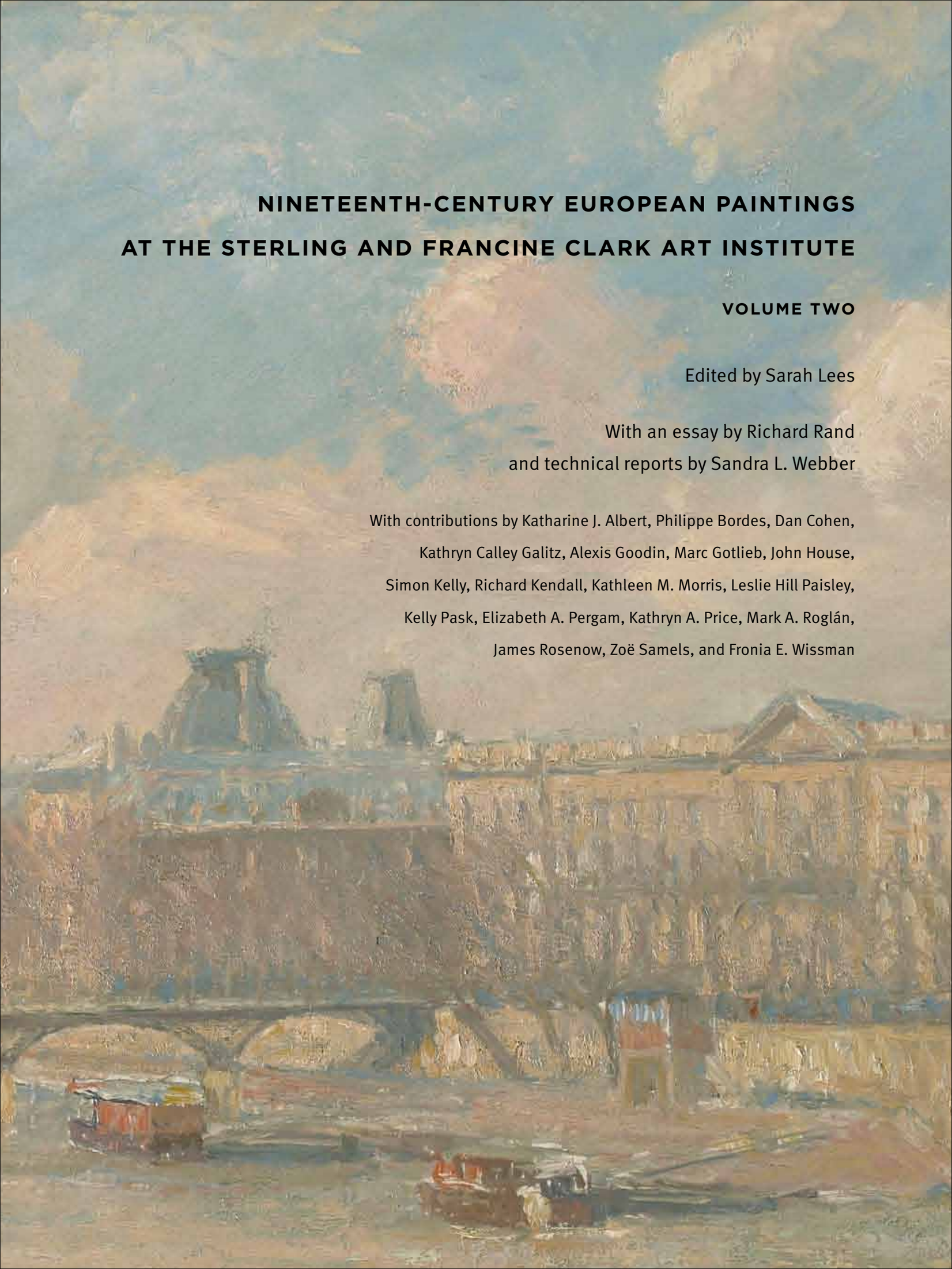

NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE

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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TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a mahogany panel (0.3 cm thick) with what may be an original manufacturer's cradle. The panel's dimensions are a bit irregular in both directions, creating a slightly off-square measure. There is a small horizontal dent in the wood in the center sky, and in reflected light, vertical wood-planing marks are faintly visible. The painting was cleaned in 1994 when grime and some of the thick varnish were removed together with old edge overpaint. It was noted at that time that the painting had been previously cleaned. This may be the Stevens panel cleaned by Murray in 1939. Tests indicated the red, dark brown, and black colors were sensitive to prolonged solvent exposure, so a thin layer of the old natural resin was left in place. This can be seen under ultraviolet light as a thin fluorescing veil over the entire surface. The old frame abrasion was re-inpainted, as were small losses near the proper right hand and one small spot on the skirt.

The ground is a grayish off-white commercial layer obscured by the thick paint. Evidence of sanding prior to painting can be detected only along the edges. There may be a faint charcoal underdrawing, visible in the profile, neck, and hair strands of the model and possibly in the architectural elements. One straight vertical line in the iron scrollwork was apparently not used. The bridge of the woman's nose was adjusted with a small last minute sky stroke, visible in ultraviolet light. There may also be a reddish-brown under-sketch in paint, which is hidden below the final paint in most places but contributes to the upper lip on the figure. Most of the paint is laid on the surface wet-into-wet using small, nervous strokes that vary from thin scumbles to low-level impastos. The paint itself is vehicular in consistency, although somewhat dry in application, with brushstrokes skipping across one another. Parts of the iron grill were applied over the water, apparently reinforcing sketch lines below.

1. Stevens 1886, p. 21, no. XCIX. The original French reads: "La lune embellit tout. Elle prête un accent aux sites ingrats que le soleil lui-même est impuissant à animer, parce qu'elle supprime les détails et ne donne de valeur qu'à la masse" (French ed., p. 30, no. XCIX).
2. Lefebvre 2006, p. 208.
3. American Art Association 1912, introduction, "Mr. Chase's Pictures."
4. Ibid, no. 12.

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324 | The Parisian Sphinx c. 1880

Oil on panel, 27.3 x 17 cm
Upper right: AS [monogram]
1955.863

Several works painted at different periods by Stevens have been given the title *Le Sphinx Parisien*. He exhibited one at the Vienna Welt-Ausstellung that opened in May 1873; this has been identified as the canvas now in Antwerp (fig. 324.1).[1] The present canvas, a variant on this composition and probably painted about 1880, was titled *Le Sphinx Parisien* when it was first exhibited in 1900.

Responding to the version of the subject exhibited in 1873, the playwright Alexandre Dumas fils wrote to Stevens: "Now there are two of us who have painted

Fig. 324.1 Alfred Stevens, *The Parisian Sphinx*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 72 x 53 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp © Lukas-Art in Flanders vzw

the monster."[2] The Belgian diplomat and art collector Jules van Praet, who purchased the painting, commented: "Within this feminine and gracious envelope, one can sense the beast. If she came down from her frame, I should be afraid. . . . I feel that she would devour me, that she would be my master."[3] When the painting was shown again at the 1878 Paris Exposition Universelle, Camille Lemonnier commented: "I know nothing more impressive than Alfred Stevens's *Sphinx*; it is an abyss beneath flowers. . . . This strange creature makes me tremble; her wild eyes are distended by dreadful appetites; I fear for myself and for those who are dear to me."[4] By this date, the term "sphinx" was widely used figuratively to signify, according to Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire*, an "impenetrable person, an individual who is skilful at presenting difficult questions and problems."[5]

Later in the nineteenth century, the image of the sphinx came to be used frequently as part of the imagery of the femme fatale, as in Félicien Rops's frontispiece to Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Les Diaboliques*, published in 1884. Stevens's canvases, however, despite their titles, are very different from these later Symbolist visions, since the enigmatic character of the figure is conveyed by body language and facial expression alone, rather than by the setting. In the Antwerp canvas and the present picture, the direct eye contact between figure and viewer plays a fundamental role in the expression of the image. In both, the female figure looks slightly down at us, in the first picture wearing a light floral summer dress and holding the fingers of her left hand to her lips. In the Clark panel, by contrast, the model wears outdoor clothing with a feather boa around her neck, her gloved right hand raised to her chin and seemingly pulling the boa up so that it brushes against her skin. Her downward gaze, most unusual in the genre painting of the period, suggests, as Van Praet commented, that the viewer is in the power of the female figure, while the hand gestures heighten the sense of uncertainty about the nature of that power relationship. The lighting, from behind the figure, highlights her loose blonde hair, intensifying the sensuality of the image, and increases the enigmatic quality of the picture; the absence of any indication of a background space (unusual in Stevens's work) ensures that the sole focus is the expressive pose of the figure.

The term "Parisian" in the title of the picture links it to another body of imagery—of female figures that sought to express the essence of the stereotypical Parisian woman. This essence, as it was viewed in these years, was vividly characterized by Arsène Houssaye in *Les Parisiennes* (1869): "The beauty of the Parisienne is the beauty of the devil; but this beauty, which lasts only for three or four seasons among the provincials, lasts for a quarter of a century in the Parisienne. Her beauty is always diabolical, because she has the devil within her, even when she goes to church. . . . The Parisienne, whatever she is doing, is always on the stage. If nobody is looking at her, she looks at herself. . . . The Parisienne is the eighth deadly sin, but her love is the eighth sacrament."[6]

The 1873 canvas has been linked to the actress Sarah Bernhardt, with whom Stevens became closely associated in these years, and specifically with her role in Octave Feuillet's play *Le Sphinx*.[7] But since this play did not open until 23 March 1874,[8] it seems unlikely that Stevens's canvas, and its title, were related to Feuillet's drama. JH

PROVENANCE Paul du Toict, Brussels (by 1900–after 1907); [Knoedler, Paris, sold to Clark, 14 Sept. 1928]; Robert Sterling Clark (1928–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Paris 1900c, no. 49, as *Le Sphinx parisien*, lent by Du Toict; Brussels 1905, no. 970, as *Le Sphinx parisien*, lent by Du Toict; Brussels–Antwerp 1907, no. 35, as *Le Sphinx parisien*, lent by Du Toict; Williamstown 1960b, ill.; Williamstown 1992–93, no cat.; Williamstown 2000–2001, no cat.

REFERENCES Charleroi 1975, under no. 31; Lefebvre 2006, pp. 33, 35, 94, 189, fig. 18, as *Une Parisienne*.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a mahogany panel 1.1 cm thick, with the grain running horizontally. The panel has chamfers 1.1 cm wide along the back edges, and the reverse is varnished. The panel is very flat with a slight irregularity of plane in the front lower left. There are also mahogany strips (0.6 cm wide) glued and nailed along all four sides, probably to fit a frame. The paint condition is generally good. There are traction cracks in the horizontal gray strokes near the lower edge. Frame abrasion is visible along the left and right edges, and there is a small gouge down to the ground layer in the left background. Evidence of reworking appears along the edges, possibly by the artist, some of which laps onto the added wood strips. There are also old retouches in the hat and hair. The two layers of varnish were applied in vertical brushstrokes and exhibit glassy cracks, some of which have white edges. It is possible that the picture has never been fully cleaned but only revarnished. A minor scratch in the varnish can be seen in the upper right near the hat. The varnish is hazy due to the general crack network and spots in the right background.

The off-white ground layer was probably commercially applied and is visible below the thin paint of the face. No underdrawing was detected under infrared light, although in low magnification, black line work seems to be present in the woman's mouth and hand. The paint consistency is thin to impastoed vehicular, and the technique is completely wet-into-wet, with the background color applied first. A few strokes look like palette-knife work. The brushstroke along the bottom edge may have been an afterthought, applied while the dark paint underneath was still wet, which caused it to crack. The red monogram in the upper right appears to have been applied over a repainted area, where a black wash covers the green background color. This black splashes onto the attached edge strips, which may support the idea that Stevens was involved when the strips were added.

1. Lefebvre 2006, p. 104, identifies the exhibited work as the Antwerp version.
2. Quoted in Lefebvre 2006, p. 104: "Nous étions deux à peindre le monstre."
3. Van Praet's comment was recorded by Arthur Stevens in a letter to Alfred Stevens, 1873, quoted in Lefebvre 2006, p. 104: "Sous cette envelope féminine et gracieuse on devine la bête. Si elle descendait de son cadre j'aurais peur. . . . je sens qu'elle me dévorerait, qu'elle serait mon maître."
4. Lemonnier 1888, p. 200: "Je ne sais rien de plus impressionnant que le *Sphinx* d'Alfred Stevens; c'est un abîme sous des fleurs. . . . Cette étrange créature me fait trembler; ses yeux fauves sont distendus par des appétits effroyables; j'ai peur pour moi-même et ceux qui me sont chers." On its first publication in 1888, Lemonnier's essay "Mes Médailles: Les Médailles d'en face: Notes sur L'Exposition Universelle de Paris," was dated 1878.
5. Larousse 1866–90, vol. 14, p. 1005: "Personne impénétrable; individu habile à poser des questions difficiles, des problèmes."
6. Quoted in Larousse 1866–90, vol. 12, p. 293: "La beauté de la Parisienne, c'est la beauté du diable; mais cette beauté, qui ne dure que trois ou quatre saisons chez les provinciales, dure un quart de siècle chez la Parisienne. Elle a toujours la beauté du diable, parce qu'elle a toujours le diable, même quand elle va au sermon. . . . La Parisienne, quoi qu'elle fasse, est toujours en scène. Si on ne la regarde pas, elle se regarde elle-même. . . . La Parisienne est le huitième péché capital, mais son amour est le huitième sacrement."
7. See Lefebvre 2006, p. 105.
8. Huret 1899, p. 41.

325 | Young Woman by the Sea 1886

Oil on panel, 40.8 x 24.9 cm
Upper right: a mon jeune ami / Brunet. / AStevens. 86
[AS in monogram]
1955.866

From 1881 onward, Stevens paid regular visits to the Normandy coast and executed many paintings of coastal scenes, some of open views of the sea and shore, others of figures beside the water. In *Young Woman by the Sea*, the background is so broadly sketched, with just two rapidly indicated bathing figures and one or perhaps two sailboats, that we are given no indication of a specific site; rather, the setting acts as a generic background for the figure, placing her in no more precise role than any one of thousands of fashionable vacationers on a northern French beach.

Even within the confines of the image itself, relationships between the elements are not fully defined. The figure is placed beside a chair, but there is no indication of where they are situated; the viewpoint implies that they are somewhat above the sea, and hence perhaps on a terrace or esplanade, but the placement of the horizon line, below the girl's waist, suggests that our viewpoint is very low, and that we are looking up at her. However, the pose of the figure does not suggest that she is looking down at us. Rather, the treatment of the space behind the figure