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ART WORKS.

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## **Alfred Stevens**

Belgian, 1823-1906

## 314 | A Duchess (The Blue Dress) c. 1866

Oil on panel, 31.4 x 26 cm Lower right: Alfred Stevens 1955.865

A Duchess can be identified as the painting exhibited with the title *Une Duchesse* in the Belgian section at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867 from the description in Marius Chaumelin's review of the exhibition: "A blue velvet dress; a black mantle with a squirrel fur border, which does not cover the shoulders; a hand with a yellow glove, holding an unfolded letter; lost profile, turned towards a portrait of a woman hanging on the wall." At this exhibition, the eighteen paintings that Stevens exhibited attracted widespread attention and consolidated his reputation in Paris as the leading painter of fashionable genre scenes.

Stevens's genre paintings can be interpreted on various levels. In one sense, they were commodities, capitalist consumables in the same sense as the dresses and décors represented in them; pictures such as these readily found their home in precisely the types of interior that they depict. Yet they could also be seen as a form of pure painting—demonstrations of the painter's virtuosity; Théophile Thoré, reviewing Stevens's work at the 1867 Exposition Universelle, could conclude that it was "simply a matter of painting." 2 Yet Thoré's review was itself counter to a different type of interpretation, one that used the expressions and body language of the figures and the attendant details as clues to narrative or sentimental readings of the paintings. Crucial to this, as Chaumelin noted, were the "noms de guerre" that Stevens gave his "héroïnes"—that is, the titles of the pictures.3

The title of *A Duchess* compounds the uncertainties that the picture raises. The portrait on the wall seems to be old—the costume is perhaps seventeenth or eighteenth century—and the woman's gaze toward it can be seen as a suggestion of her aristocratic pedigree. Yet the other elements in the scene, notably the Japanese screen and the tablecloth, together with her dazzling blue velvet dress (perhaps colored by a new, chemical dye), are of the highest contemporary fashion—indeed, the combination perhaps suggests a degree of vulgarity. Moreover, the profile of the bald

male figure on the screen echoes and seems to parody the woman's intent gaze. The two rings, one a simple gold band, on the third finger of her left hand invite the viewer to assume that she is married, while the bowl containing a pile of visiting cards hints at her role in society. The letter she holds and the casually discarded envelope on the floor introduce a further range of potential associations. In the work of Stevens and other genre painters of the period, letters were often used as clues to some sentimental narrative (see, for example, cat. 317), but here, the link between the newly opened letter and her gaze toward the portrait is not obvious; rather, it teases the viewer to imagine an explanation.

Chaumelin's extended commentary on Stevens's exhibits in 1867 emphasized the diversity of the social types depicted. He argued that most of them should be seen as belonging to an "intermediate world" whose moral standing remained ambiguous, between the aristocracy and the demi-monde, and stressed that the titles of the pictures were the best indication of the "social category" of the figures depicted in them.<sup>4</sup> Faced with *A Duchess*, he commented: "Here is a Duchess, if the title is not untruthful"; after describing the picture, he concluded: "I challenge M. Arsène Houssaye to find sufficient elements in it to reconstruct a *Duchess*, unless it is perhaps some Duchess of Gérolstein." 5 The reference here is absolutely contemporary: Jacques Offenbach's La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein had been premiered on 12 April 1867; its central character, an imaginary early eighteenthcentury duchess, was conspicuously fickle in matters of love. Used colloquially, however, the term duchesse could signify "a woman who put on airs, who assumed manners above her state, her condition and her fortune," as in the phrase faire la duchesse.6 Viewed in this context, the social position and moral standing of Stevens's duchess are quite uncertain, her claim to elevated status wholly equivocal.

The conjunction of details and title in *A Duchess* demonstrates how important questions of interpretation and potential narrative were for Stevens at this point of his career. Twenty years later, in his set of aphorisms titled *Impressions sur la peinture*, he wrote: "In painting, one can dispense with a so-called 'subject.' A picture ought not to need a literary description." Paintings such as *A Duchess* show how misleading it is to impose the views expressed in these aphorisms onto his earlier work.

Japanese and other Far Eastern decorative ele-



ments appear in many of Stevens's canvases of the later 1860s. Stevens himself owned many oriental objects, and was one of the pioneering collectors of Japanese artifacts, along with fellow artists such as James Tissot and Édouard Manet, after they became readily available in Paris in the early 1860s. Their presence in canvases such as *A Duchess*, however, should not be viewed as evidence of his own collection, but rather as a marker of the widespread fashion for things Japanese among the wealthy aesthetically inclined bourgeoisie in these years.

Historians of the influence of Japanese art in nineteenth-century Europe have tended to distinguish between pictures that depict Japanese ornamental and decorative objects and those that reveal a deeper understanding of Japanese principles of design; this has been described in terms of a contrast between *japonaiserie* and *japonisme*. A Duchess, however, invalidates this distinction, since it incorporates Japanese elements of both types: alongside the meticulously rendered decorative objects, the shallow and somewhat ambiguous space and the use of the screen to close off legible recession reveal a sophisticated awareness of Japanese compositional methods.

A Duchess is one of the smallest and most jewellike of Stevens's genre paintings. The meticulous technique and high finish of pictures such as this were a self-conscious attempt to emulate the finesse of seventeenth-century Netherlandish painters such as Gabriel Metsu, treating the small-scale painting itself as a luxury item comparable to the lavish objects depicted within the picture. Yet its details were strictly contemporary, in contrast to the work of contemporaries such as Ernest Meissonier or the Belgian Florent Willems, who clothed their genre figures in historical dress. It was thus that Stevens's paintings could be hailed as images that would in the future serve as historical evidence for nineteenth-century bourgeois life. For twenty-first-century viewers, what they offer is evidence of the stock types by which the society represented itself, and, in the case of pictures like A Duchess, the elegant yet playful hints of social and moral ambiguity. JH

**PROVENANCE** Possibly Paran Stevens, New York (d. 1872); Mrs. Paran Stevens (Marietta Reed), New York, his wife (by 1879–d. 1895); Lady Mary Paget (Mary Fiske Stevens), London, her daughter, by descent (1895–d. 1919); [Knoedler, London, sold to Clark, 12 Mar. 1920]; Robert Sterling Clark (1920–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Paris 1867a, Belgian section, no. 137, as *A Duchess*; Williamstown 1960b, ill.; New York–Philadelphia 1971, no. 134, pl. 24, as *The Blue Dress*; Williamstown–Hartford 1974, pp. 98–99, no. 61, ill., as *A Duchess*; Williamstown 1982a, no. 18, ill.; Williamstown 1982b, p. 36, no. 35; Williamstown 1992–93, no cat.; Copenhagen 2000, pp. 56–57, no. 58, fig. 25; Williamstown 2000–2001, no cat.; Brussels–Amsterdam 2009–10, pp. 10, 26–27, 199, no. 3, ill.

**REFERENCES** Chaumelin 1867, pp. 88–89; Larousse 1866–90, vol. 14, p. 1100; Strahan 1879–80, vol. 3, pt. 12, p. 125, as *Lady Seated and Holding a Letter*; Lemonnier 1906a, p. 16; Boucher 1930, p. 27; Mitchell 1970, p. 264; Roskill 1970, p. 77, pl. 48; Cleveland–New Brunswick–Baltimore 1975–76, p. 123, fig. 36; Ann Arbor–Baltimore–Montreal 1977–78, p. xiii; Ikegami 1978, p. 92; House 1997, p. 6, fig. 4; Rand 2001a, p. 17, fig. 5; Kihara 2002, pp. 266–68, pl. 6.12; Allen 2004, p. 168, ill.; Cahill 2005, p. 64, ill.; Copenhagen 2006, p. 76, fig. 69; Lefebvre 2006, pp. 79–80, 120, 146, 188, fig. 79; Badea-Päun 2007, pp. 116–17; Derrey-Capon 2009, p. 53.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a mahogany panel 1 cm thick with the wood grain running vertically. The reverse has chamfers 1 cm wide along the edges, and the flat central area is coated with a natural resin varnish, except in the upper left where some of the patination has been scrubbed away. Among the inscriptions on the back is a now darkened intertwined "AS" monogram and "Une Duchesse" in black paint. The panel has been extended with o.6-cm-wide strips of mahogany glued and nailed to the edges. These have been in place a long time, as shrinkage across the panel has forced apart the corners of the attachments. The surface of the painting is in good condition, with only minuscule traction cracks in some brown areas. In 1994, the painting was cleaned of a heavy grime layer and several coats of natural resin. In ultraviolet light, thin patches of old varnish can be detected on the cloak and upper right background passages. The present thin glossy varnish allows the brushwork to be visible in reflected light.

The ground is an off-white commercial layer. There may be a black and/or brown ink or paint sketch below the final colors, although no complete drawing was discovered using infrared reflectography. Both black and brown ink can be seen in the floor, and the painting is also signed with brown ink. The upper right quadrant has a number of changes in the paint film, some visible on the surface as brushwork and some as shifts in color. The most prominent change was the relocation of the framed oval picture from the center of the wall to the far right. There were several shifts in the dress outline along the right side, some now covered by the cloak. Small changes to the black fabric draped over the left side of the table can be seen through the wall and table cover, and there may originally have been some sort of wall decoration or wallpaper above the chair rail. The paint is fluid in consistency, with short strokes applied primarily wet-into-wet, with a few details added after the paint had set.

- 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."
- 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 spotlessand 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." 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