



**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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**PROVENANCE** Boskowitz, Paris, sold to Durand-Ruel, Paris, 4 May 1892; [Durand-Ruel, Paris and New York, 1892–1919, sold to Henderson, 15 Dec. 1919]; Hunt Henderson, New Orleans (from 1919); [Jacques Seligmann, New York, sold to Durand-Ruel, New York, 3 Mar. 1937]; [Durand-Ruel, New York, sold to Clark, 10 Nov. 1938]; Robert Sterling Clark (1938–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Williamstown 1956b, no. 157, pl. 22; Toronto 1975, p. 105, no. 48, ill.; Williamstown 1996–97, pp. 50, 53–54, ill.; Rome 2008, pp. 99, 170–71, no. 24, ill.; Tokyo–Osaka 2010, pp. 100–101, no. 33, ill.; Madrid 2010–11, pp. 120–21, no. 28, ill.

**REFERENCES** Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 119, ill.; Daulte 1971, no. 520, ill.; Taylor 1976, p. 5, ill.; Christie's 1997a, p. 81, fig. 2, under no. 119; Garb 1998, pp. 170, 173, fig. 125; Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, vol. 2, p. 428, no. 1368, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a moderate-weight linen (22 threads/cm), glue-lined to a coarser bleached double-weave linen (13 double threads/cm). The five-member pine mortise-and-tenon stretcher appears to be original, and the tacking margins are preserved. The lining probably dates to around 1938, just before purchase by Clark, and was probably done by Beers Brothers. Large age cracks appear throughout the surface, and drying traction cracks are scattered in the blue-green foreground color. In 1984, the painting was cleaned to remove discolored restoration varnish and over-paint on the right and top edges and on the model's arm. There are presently no appreciable residues of old varnish and no retouchings. A crease is beginning along the stretcher's horizontal crossbar. A line of earlier, now covered, paint strokes runs diagonally from behind the figure toward the lower right.

The initial, commercially applied ground layer appears to be a grayish color. Thin paint deposits on the upper left and top tacking margins suggest that there may be an earlier sketch or image below the present one. A white paint layer seems to separate the upper and lower images, acting as the new upper ground layer. Although no continuous underdrawing was found, small lines on the proper right foot and along the arm were detected using infrared reflectography. These suggest that there may be a more substantive drawing buried below the thick paint. A number of changes were made to the final image, as revealed in the pink and green colors below the left sky. The diagonal paint strokes running from the back of the model toward the grass may indicate a change in the drapery position. The paint is applied in a vehicular paste consistency, in thick direct strokes. White has been mixed with all the colors. There are moderate-level impastos throughout, with more pronounced brushwork in the drapery and background colors. The flesh is smoother, and the face is blurry and flat. The final sky colors and the grass were added after the figure was completed.

1. See Rewald 1958, pl. 31.
2. See Williamstown 1996–97, p. 50.

## 289 | *Woman Reading* c. 1895

Oil on canvas, 41.6 x 32.7  
Upper right: Renoir.  
1955.908

*Woman Reading* takes up the theme of *Woman Crocheting* (cat. 267), depicting a model who is not formally posed but is seated, absorbed in her own activity, seemingly unaware that she is being painted, though of course this arrangement is just as carefully planned as the most conventionally configured composition. As in the earlier picture, too, she is informally dressed and the strap of her shift has slipped from her shoulder; the viewpoint here offers the viewer a particularly voyeuristic glimpse of her breasts. Indeed, it is clear that her shoulder strap was originally placed somewhat further up her arm. The papers that she is reading are not bound together like a book; the suggestion is that this is a long letter, written on multiple sheets, which adds a further dimension to the voyeurism implied by the picture, as the viewer imagines who might have written to her at such length.

The execution of the canvas heightens this sense of voyeurism. Its central focus is the cascade of rich, fluid white brushstrokes that represent the loosened top of her shift, framing our view of her breasts. In comparison, the brushwork in the remainder of the canvas is less assertive, and even the figure's head is paid no special attention; the brush loosely follows the forms of head, hair, body, clothing, and curtains without creating any distinctive points of emphasis. The color scheme of the canvas is dominated by soft pinks, browns, and warm grays, set off by the muted blue-greens of the wall in the right background. In sharp contrast to Renoir's work of the 1870s, blue is not used to model the figure or to suggest the play of shadow. Although the canvas has often been dated to c. 1891, it seems more likely that it was painted in the mid-1890s, during the phase when Renoir was using blue so sparingly.

*Woman Reading* has clear affinities with the genre painting of the French eighteenth century. In both subject and technique it is reminiscent of the work of Jean-



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Honoré Fragonard; the erotic suggestiveness of the figure's half-revealed breasts, too, has its precedents in the eighteenth century, in the work of Fragonard and especially that of Jean-Baptiste Greuze.

Renoir painted many canvases of this type during the 1890s—not ambitious, but readily salable; he joked to his dealer Durand-Ruel in 1891 about painting a “genre painting (the kind that sells)”;<sup>1</sup> *Woman Reading* would doubtless have fallen into this category. Despite its apparent lack of pretensions, Durand-Ruel thought highly enough of the canvas to include it in the major exhibition of Impressionist paintings that he mounted at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1905. In the context of Sterling Clark's collection, it is striking that aside from this and one or two other paintings,

Clark—in contrast to a contemporary collector such as Albert C. Barnes—should have taken so little interest in this phase of Renoir's career. JH

**PROVENANCE** The artist, sold to Durand-Ruel, 3 Aug. 1900; [Durand-Ruel, Paris, from 1900]; Paul Durand-Ruel, Paris (by 1901–d. 1922); Durand-Ruel family, Paris (1922–39, sold to Durand-Ruel, New York, 6 July 1939); [Durand-Ruel, New York, sold to Clark, 6 July 1939];<sup>2</sup> Robert Sterling Clark (1939–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** London 1905a, no. 229, as *Woman Reading*; Toronto 1934, no. 8, lent by Durand-Ruel; Williamstown 1982b, no. 32; Tokyo–Kyōto–Kasama 1993, no. 14, as *Jeune liseuse*; Williamstown 1996–97, pp. 46, 48, ill.; Madrid 2010–11, pp. 124–25, no. 30, ill.



**REFERENCES** Rewald 1974, p. 17, ill. (installation view of London 1905); Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, vol. 2, p. 289, no. 1139, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is an unlined moderate-weave canvas (22 threads/cm). The fabric was unevenly stretched when it was commercially primed and has wavy vertical threads down the right side. There is a water stain in the upper left quadrant of the reverse, and the back is also very grimy. The original five-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher has a horizontal crossbar, and the stretcher is stamped with the numeral “6” indicating a standard French portrait size. There are no cracks in the paint and ground layers. Under low magnification, many paint strokes are broken up into a minute pavement system of leaves of paint, with additional details applied over the reticulated areas. In some areas the reticulated paint has opened enough to expose the ground layer. During a 1992 cleaning of a thick discolored varnish and grime, the coating was reduced only over the sensitive green and dark red-brown passages. Residues in the impastos and slight solvent damage suggested that the painting had been cleaned once before, probably sometime before its 1939 purchase. Extensive retouching in the face, hair, shoulder, skirt, and background was probably applied to fill in the odd reticulation gaps, and the top edge frame abrasion was also inpainted.

The ground is an off-white commercially prepared layer. Although no underdrawing was detectable, there may be a warm brownish orange underpaint that lays in the basic shapes. A change in the drape of the bodice where it falls off the shoulder, visible in normal and reflected light, shows that the fabric was first painted slightly higher on the arm. The paint is applied quite thinly in some passages, with colors built up in glazes for such areas as the hair. The very odd, mid-level disturbed layer extends over the entire surface with many upper glazes and details painted over it. This unusual condition may be the result of some technique in which the artist deliberately reduced or softened the paint with solvent, possibly to wipe away or adjust part of the image before continuing to paint.

1. Rouart 1987, p. 186. The original French reads: “tableau de genre (genre vente)” (Rouart 1950, p. 163).
2. Information from Durand-Ruel archives. See correspondence of 24 Apr. 2001 in the Clark’s curatorial file. According to the Durand-Ruel records, the painting was consigned from the Durand-Ruel family private collection to the Durand-Ruel Gallery, New York, on 21 Nov. 1938. The gallery did not purchase the picture until 6 July 1939. The invoice for this picture, however, is dated 26 June 1939. See the Clark’s curatorial file.

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**290 | The Letter** c. 1895–1900

Oil on canvas, 64.9 x 81.1 cm

Lower right: Renoir.

1955-583

*The Letter* is one of many genre paintings by Renoir in which two female figures are depicted without clear indication of the relationship between them or clues that might lead the viewer to read the canvas in narrative terms. In genre painting of the nineteenth century, the theme of writing and receiving letters was commonly used as a means of suggesting a sentimental story and extending the inbuilt limitations of the art of painting by hinting at a time before or after the moment shown. *The Letter*, however, deploys none of the techniques generally used to achieve this. Neither gestures nor facial expressions—no details—hint at the addressee or the content of the letter; all we see is one young woman writing a letter as the other watches.

Their clothing indicates that the viewer is supposed to see them as young bourgeois women, and the lightly brushed panel decoration on the left suggests a bourgeois interior; indeed, the ability to write in itself suggested a degree of education and status. The model for the figure on the left was, in fact, not a bourgeoisie; she can be identified as Gabrielle Renard, a distant cousin of Renoir’s wife Aline, who joined the family in 1894 to help in the household. She became perhaps Renoir’s most frequent model over the next twenty years, initially clothed in genre scenes such as this, and after 1900, nude in many different settings. The numerous and diverse ways in which Renoir represented Gabrielle remind us that the roles and identities that he created for his models in his paintings cannot be viewed as evidence of the character or class of the women who posed for him.

In the 1890s, Renoir painted many canvases that included figures wearing lavish hats like that worn by the second figure, adorned with a ring of red poppies. The painter Suzanne Valadon, who modeled for Renoir in the 1880s, remembered his love of hats and how many he bought for his models to wear.<sup>1</sup> In the later 1890s, Durand-Ruel seems to have tried to persuade Renoir to stop painting girls with elaborate hats, since these had gone out of fashion; Jeanne Baudot witnessed his indignant response to the dealer’s request and his insistence that commercial concerns should not interfere with his artistic imagination.<sup>2</sup> *The Letter*