



**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,  
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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## Adolphe-Joseph-Thomas Monticelli

French, 1824–1886

### 230 | Flowers in a Blue Vase c. 1875

Oil on panel, 62.5 x 47.6 cm

Lower right: Monticelli

1955.911

Monticelli began studying painting in his hometown, at the École d'Art in Marseille, but furthered his studies with Paul Delaroche in Paris. In the French capital, he was inspired by works of art he saw: Eugène Delacroix's oil sketches in particular, bold in texture and color, were a great influence. Monticelli was also motivated by the example of Barbizon painter Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña, with whom he sketched *en plein air* in the Forest of Fontainebleau. Diaz encouraged Monticelli to paint quickly and spontaneously. Around 1870, fellow Provençal artist Paul Guigou introduced Monticelli to the Impressionists, whose loose brushwork resonated with Monticelli's already vigorous, sketch-like technique.

When the Franco-Prussian War broke out, Monticelli left Paris and eventually returned to Marseille, where he continued to experiment boldly with paint, finding an outlet for his work at the Salon de Marseille and dealers' shops in Provence and Paris. *Flowers in a Blue Vase* exhibits the heavily impastoed, spontaneous painting style typical of Monticelli's mature career. Paint is thickly and directly applied on an unprimed wood panel. Areas of the support are clearly visible: the space below a cluster of daisies, for example, reveals the walnut surface of the panel. These open spaces suggest the speed with which the artist worked, as do areas of unevenly blended paint. Indeed, some passages of paint that compose the blue vase, as well as others on the table below it, are particularly unmixed. Monticelli used a larger brush to indicate the table, dragging white paint, tinged with blue pigment, in zig-zag patterns over the surface of the panel to signal the vase's reflection on the table surface.

Monticelli preferred bold colors, sometimes described as "gem-like" by his early critics, and they are in evidence throughout this work.<sup>1</sup> Crisp red pigment indicates flower petals, sulfuric yellow circles serve as centers of the daisies, and acrid green leaves protrude from the top of the bouquet. The intense colors of the bouquet are heightened by the somber chocolate-brown background of the panel.



Fig. 230.1. Adolphe-Joseph-Thomas Monticelli, *Flower Still Life*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 51 x 29 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation; s251V / 1960)

Writing of Monticelli's late work, art historian Aaron Sheon observed: "He was applying his paints even more thickly, beginning to vary his strokes in both size and direction, and simultaneously continuing to enrich his coloring. In other words, surface texture and coloring were being made co-equal with subject matter."<sup>2</sup> *Flowers in a Blue Vase* is indeed more about Monticelli's radical process of painting than it is about freshly cut flowers arranged artlessly in a vase. While individual flowers are recognizable in this work—most particularly the daisies left of center—the blooms serve as a vehicle for experimentation in painting technique, allowing Monticelli to explore different combinations of colors and to vary the consistency of his paint. *Flowers in a Blue Vase* is similar in subject and execution to a number of paintings, including *Field Flowers in a Blue Vase* (c. 1875–77; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon), *Flower Still Life* (c. 1875; Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), *Bouquet of Flowers* (c. 1875; Centraal Museum, Utrecht), and *Flower Still Life* (fig. 230.1).<sup>3</sup> Monticelli's bold new manner in these works and the Clark picture was not appreciated by most contemporary critics, many of whom labeled the artist a madman.<sup>4</sup> Monticelli's vases of flowers



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are the antithesis of botanical illustrations of flowers, with their emphasis on scientific exactitude, such as the delicately painted posy of flowers by Pierre Joseph Redouté in the Clark collection (cat. 259). The Clark Monticelli is almost too exuberantly worked to qualify as a “still life.” The flowers and the table below the blue vase vibrate with a restless energy that is unexpected and somewhat disconcerting.

Among younger artists, Vincent van Gogh was particularly inspired by Monticelli’s oeuvre. Van Gogh perhaps first became familiar with Monticelli’s work at Joseph Delarebeyrette’s shop, at 43 rue de Provence, Paris, known in the 1870s as a “Monticelli museum.”<sup>5</sup> Vincent and his brother, art dealer Theo van Gogh, purchased six paintings by Monticelli.<sup>6</sup> The brothers also

worked toward the publication of the first Monticelli biography, with text by Paul Guigou and lithographs by A. M. Lauzet.<sup>7</sup> Aaron Sheon observed that Van Gogh’s flower pieces of the late 1880s were inspired by the flower painting by Monticelli in the Van Goghs’ collection, *Flower Still Life*. He remarked, “Van Gogh may have appreciated Monticelli’s loose brush-strokes and thickly handled paint because these features tended to confirm the direction his own technique was taking.”<sup>8</sup> Vincent van Gogh, responding to critic Albert Aurier’s statement that he was “the only painter who perceives the coloration of things with such intensity, with such a metallic, gem-like quality,” rebutted: “What you say should be applied to others rather than to me . . . to Monticelli above all.”<sup>9</sup> AG

**PROVENANCE** Posetta collection;<sup>10</sup> [Georges Bernheim, Paris, sold to Knoedler, 18 Jan. 1927]; [Knoedler, Paris, sold to Clark, 9 June 1927]; Robert Sterling Clark (1927–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** London 1927, no cat.; Williamstown 1959b, ill.

**REFERENCES** Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 91, ill.; Polley 1967, p. 31.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a walnut panel varying in thickness from 0.3 to 0.5 cm, the top edge being thicker. There are no chamfers on the reverse, the grain runs vertically, and the panel has a mahogany cradle, which may have been applied in 1935. The panel was probably thinned and any chamfers removed in order to level the back in preparation for the cradling. There is no varnish or finish on either the cradle or the back of the panel. The panel has a slightly wavy warp pattern following the placement of the fixed cradle bars, which are more concentrated at the right, presumably to support the two splits in the lower right quadrant. A third split in the panel runs down from the right portion of the upper edge. All the cracks have been inpainted, and there is glazing covering scattered raw wood areas. There is also some frame abrasion in the lower left. The varnish layer is yellowed and has compression cracks following the grain of the wood. The surface sheen varies from extreme gloss to patchy matte areas, some of which look physically scuffed. There may have been a partial varnish application or a partial cleaning attempt.

There is no ground layer, which allows the raw, warm-colored wood to show throughout the image. There were no underdrawing lines detected, and little, if any, changes in the paint layer. The figurative areas were executed wet-into-wet in a thick paste application, with heavy impastos visible in the flowers, vase, and table. Cracking in the purplish red paint may indicate the presence of resin in this color. The background appears to have a more vehicular consistency.

1. See Frances Fowle, "Painting like a Provençal: Cézanne, Van Gogh, and the Secret of Monticelli's 'Alchemy,'" in Fowle and Thomson 2003, p. 136.

2. Pittsburgh and others 1978–79, p. 69.

3. Given the similarity of composition and style between these works and the Clark panel, a date of c. 1875 for the Clark work is likely.

4. An eccentric character "with a fondness for absinthe, colorful dress, and strange remarks," Monticelli was labeled a "madman" because his painting style was so uncompromising. See Pittsburgh and others 1978–79, p. 64.

5. Sheon 1967, p. 444.

6. Ibid. Five of these works are now in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. See Vergeest 2000 for more information on these works: *Woman at the Well* (s 252 V/1962), no. 731, p. 238; *Arabs and Horseman* (s 250 V/1962), no. 733,

p. 239; *Flower Still Life* (s 251 V/1960), no. 740, p. 240; *Meeting in the Park* (s 249 V/1962), no. 744, p. 242; and *Woman with a Parasol* (s 253 V/1962), no. 745, p. 242.

7. Guigou and Lauzet 1890.

8. Sheon 1967, p. 445.

9. Aurier's statement was first published in his article "Les Isolés: Vincent van Gogh," *Mercure de France* (Jan. 1890), p. 29, and was referenced by Van Gogh in a letter the artist wrote to Aurier on 9 or 10 Feb. 1891. See Janson et al. 2009, vol. 5, p. 198.

10. According to Knoedler invoice. See the Clark's curatorial file.

## Albert Joseph Moore

English, 1841–1893

### 231 | Lilies 1866

Oil on canvas, 29.7 x 47.9 cm

Upper left: [artist's insignia: anthemion]

1955-818

The title, composition, and coloration of *Lilies*, exhibited at the French Gallery in 1866, all demonstrate the break with narrative tradition that made Albert Moore an early practitioner of an art for art's sake.<sup>1</sup> Moore's interest in formal problems over subject matter is seen in his naming this work after the flowers that stand at the far right of the canvas. Rather than developing a story around the sleeping girl, whose tissue-thin garments were dubbed "Greekish,"<sup>2</sup> Moore devotes his attention to the challenges of depicting the drape of her robes, the pleats and folds of upholstery, the weave of the carpet, the reflection of glass, and the glaze of porcelain.

While the symbolism of flowers had most recently been exploited by the Pre-Raphaelites, with white lilies representing purity (see, for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* [Tate Britain, London]),<sup>3</sup> the eponymous lilies of Moore's painting seem less symbolic than decorative, providing a vertical footnote to the recumbent figure. Moreover, with their dignified erectness and buds outnumbering the two fully blossomed flowers, it is the stems and leaves, rather than the white petals, that play a more active role by forming a visual ladder up the edge of the canvas.

Moore's use of the single-word title describing an object rather than the figure indicates the change in