

The background of the book cover features a soft-focus impressionist painting of a city skyline, likely Paris, with prominent domes and buildings. In the foreground, several small boats are visible on a river or canal.

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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surabondance de la vie;” “la monotonie des détails;” “diversité d’éléments.”

9. Burty 1868, p. 316, translation partially taken from Thomas 2000, pp. 95–96. The original French reads: “Il m’expliqua que le dessin ne consistait pas seulement dans l’exactitude des silhouettes; qu’un arbre n’était pas ‘un espalier’; qu’il avait ‘un volume’, comme les terrains, l’eau, l’espace; que la toile seule était plate; qu’il fallait s’empresser dès le premier coup de brosse de faire disparaître cette uniformité: ‘Vos arbres doivent tenir au terrain, vos branches doivent venir en avant ou s’enfoncer dans la toile; le spectateur doit penser qu’il pourrait faire le tour de votre arbre. Enfin la forme est la première chose à observer.’”
10. See Goupil Stock Books, book 10, p. 173, no. 15493.

Théo van Rysselberghe

Belgian, 1862–1926

301 | Sylvie Descamps Monnom 1900

Oil on canvas, 116.8 x 90.3 cm

Lower left: TVR [monogram] 1900

1967.2

Between the years 1888 and 1905, the Belgian painter Théo van Rysselberghe painted almost exclusively in a pointillist, or more accurately, a divisionist style. He began working in this manner, which consists of applying small dots or strokes of color adjacent to one another to achieve a maximum of color intensity, after seeing Georges Seurat’s revolutionary *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (The Art Institute of Chicago) at the eighth Impressionist exhibition, held in Paris in 1886. Reportedly first exasperated and then transfixed by this tour de force of pointillism, he and his friends arranged to bring the controversial painting to Brussels in 1887. There it was shown at the exhibition of Les XX, the artists’ society formed in 1883 by Van Rysselberghe and several other like-minded avant-garde artists. The style, as epitomized by Seurat’s painting and its strong basis in scientific optical theory, was modified and personalized by Van Rysselberghe over the course of working in this manner.

A fine example of divisionism is this large portrait of the artist’s mother-in-law, Sylvie Descamps Monnom (1836–1921), at approximately sixty-four years of age. Van Rysselberghe married Madame Monnom’s daughter, Maria, in 1889. By the time of this painting,

Sylvie’s husband, Célestin Monnom, was deceased, but the *Veuve* (widow) Monnom, as she was known, held a prominent place in the artistic and literary circles of Brussels. Her publishing house issued the Belgian periodicals *L’Art moderne* and *Le Jeune Belgique*, and also published the catalogues and posters for the art exhibitions mounted by the members of Les XX and another artists’ group that followed it called *La Libre Esthétique*. Madame Monnom thus had both personal and professional ties to Van Rysselberghe.

The painter favored the format of seating his female portrait subjects, usually close friends or family members, in domestic interiors. Earlier examples of this type include the portraits of Madame Charles Maus (1890; Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels) and Maria van de Velde-Sète (1891; Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp).¹ The settings typically give an indication of the social and cultural milieu of the sitters, their status, wealth, and interests, such as music in the case of Maria van de Velde-Sète. Madame Monnom, as a financially secure business owner, sits in a well-appointed salon near a fireplace. There is a mirror on the carved mantel as well as a vase of what seem to be irises. Given the indistinct aspect of the divisionist style of painting, precise details can be difficult to decipher. Nevertheless, four paintings decorate the wall behind her, an oriental rug covers the floor, and a blue settee fills the background. Madame Monnom comfortably sits, thanks also to a pillow behind her back, in a simple yet modern chair similar in style to those designed by Henry van de Velde, a painter and designer who was a close friend of the family.² The *Veuve* Monnom’s body is shown almost in profile as she clutches a handkerchief in her right hand, yet she turns her head to gaze out at the viewer. Van Rysselberghe studied the angle of his mother-in-law’s head, as well as her facial features, in a drawing dated 1899.³ In the study, Madame Monnom carries a rather more stern expression, and is enveloped in an especially voluminous cloak with a ruffled collar. Both of these aspects are tempered in the painting of 1900. Another, smaller painting of Madame Monnom dates to the same year, as do at least three additional drawings and a pastel.⁴ Over the next years, Van Rysselberghe continued to draw and paint his wife’s mother, the last time seemingly in 1919.⁵

The tonality of the portrait is strongly green, blue, and purple throughout the entire canvas. The individual rectangular strokes of differentiated bold pigments placed adjacent to one another enliven the surface

of the painting, but when seen from a distance, they meld together cohesively. Thus, even the use of green on the sitter's face is not particularly jarring. Van Rysselberghe was not wedded to the scientific strictures of divisionism, however, and one can see where he personalizes the style to suit his needs. For example, in one key area, comprising the left ear and nose of the sitter, Van Rysselberghe elected to treat the surface in a more traditional fashion, blending flesh tones to achieve a more naturalistic affect. This area, near the center of the composition, thus serves almost as a nexus for the entire portrait.

Van Rysselberghe abandoned the divisionist style about 1905 in favor of a less strict and more personal post-Impressionist manner of painting. Even in the years prior to the turn of the century, the artist embraced the tenets of Art Nouveau and broadened his media to include the decorative arts. Thus, he was able to design and illustrate posters and books, often for *La Libre Esthétique*, no doubt in part due to his personal connection with his mother-in-law's publishing house. He also made sculpture, prints, stained glass, furniture, and jewelry, and was friendly with numerous artists and writers in Belgium and France, where he lived out the remainder of his life.

The *Portrait of Madame Monnom* was not purchased by the Clarks but was acquired by the museum more than a decade after Sterling Clark's death. Clark did not own any neo-Impressionist works, although he was enthused by a study by Seurat for the *Grand Jatte* offered to him by a dealer in 1940 that he ultimately deemed too expensive.⁶ This painting by one of the leading practitioners of the European avant-garde thus broadens the scope of the Clark's collection, but given its air of domesticity, it does so in a way that would likely have appealed to the founders' sensibilities. KP

PROVENANCE Henri Cuypers, Brussels (in 1927); [Galerie de l'Institut, Paris]; Guy Pogu, Paris; sale, Christie's, London, 2 Dec. 1966, no. 37, as *Portrait de la Mère du Peintre*, sold to Arthur Tooth and Sons, London, as agent for Clark; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1966.

EXHIBITIONS Brussels 1901a;⁷ Brussels 1927, no. 31, as *Madame Monnom*, lent by Cuypers; Williamstown 1975, no cat.; Williamstown 1978, no cat.

REFERENCES Mauclair 1903, p. 89; Vanzype 1932, p. 131; GBA Suppl. 1968, p. 87, fig. 311; Ittmann 1968, pp. 46–47, 64–66, ill.; Norman 1977, p. 187, ill.; Lefton and Valvatne

1983, pl. 4; Lefton 1985, p. 189, ill.; Feltkamp 2003, p. 325, no. 1900-003, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a moderate-weave and -weight canvas (16 threads/cm), which was wax-resin lined to a secondary linen in 1968 by Bridget Smith of the Fogg Art Museum. This treatment followed a remedial treatment of several tears and considerable flaking. The stretcher is a replaced six-member screw-plate corner design made by Charles Bearce of Melrose, Massachusetts. The original tack margins were preserved. There are no stretcher creases or evidence of cracks, and the 1967 report observes that the picture was never varnished. After grime cleaning, the picture was varnished, which has slightly increased the sheen of the paint. The former disrupted paint sites are visible under the microscope, and there is an old scratch from the skirt toward the front chair leg. Small retouches are scattered primarily in the bodice, and other small old losses remain exposed in the lower left quadrant of the blue dress, the front of the sitter's suit, and in the blue, green, and purple strokes of the upper left background. In ultraviolet light, the predominant use of zinc white throughout the lighter passages could be detected by its yellow fluorescence.

The ground is a commercially prepared off-white layer. Using infrared reflectography, underdrawing could be seen only in the more thinly painted face area, as the rest of the image is too heavily painted to allow detection. The drawing medium could not be distinguished and was visible only through a small loss on the side of the face, where it read as a brush-applied line of black particles, possibly a thin black paint or ink. The paste-consistency paint was applied in individually laid, unblended strokes, accumulated to four layers deep in many areas, resulting in a thick surface conformation.

1. Feltkamp 2003, pp. 287, 291, nos. 1890-006 and 1891-001.
2. For examples of Van de Velde's designs, including furniture, see Brooklyn 1980, pp. 225–28.
3. Feltkamp 2003, p. 324, no. 1899-026.
4. Ibid., pp. 329–30, nos. 1900-27–29 and 1900-34. The latter is a study for the small painting, which was not published by Feltkamp. The painting remained with the family until sold at Christie's, Paris, 1 Dec. 2006, no. 21.
5. Feltkamp 2003, p. 424, no. 1919-006; this painting and p. 372, no. 1908-007, were also sold at Christie's, Paris, 1 Dec. 2006, as nos. 25 and 26.
6. RSC Diary, 14 Dec. 1940.
7. According to Feltkamp 2003, p. 325.

