



**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

Nineteenth-Century European Paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute is published with the assistance of the Getty Foundation and support from the National Endowment for the Arts.



The Getty Foundation



Produced by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
225 South Street, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267
www.clarkart.edu

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Production by The Production Department,
Whately, Massachusetts
Printed on 135 gsm Gardapat Kiara
Color separations and printing by Trifolio, Verona

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Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London
P. O. Box 209040, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-9040
www.yalebooks.com/art

Printed and bound in Italy
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

Nineteenth-century European paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute / 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. Rogl an, James Rosenow, Zo  Samels, Fronia E. Wissman.

volumes cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-935998-09-9 (clark hardcover : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-300-17965-1 (yale hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Painting, European—19th century—Catalogs. 2. Painting—Massachusetts—Williamstown—Catalogs. 3. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute—Catalogs. I. Lees, Sarah, editor of compilation. II. Rand, Richard. III. Webber, Sandra L. IV. Title. V. Title: 19th-century European paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

ND457.S74 2012

759.9409'0340747441—dc23

2012030510

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225 | Bridge at Dolceacqua 1884

Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm
 Lower right: Claude Monet [stamp]
 Gift of Richard and Edna Salomon
 1985.11

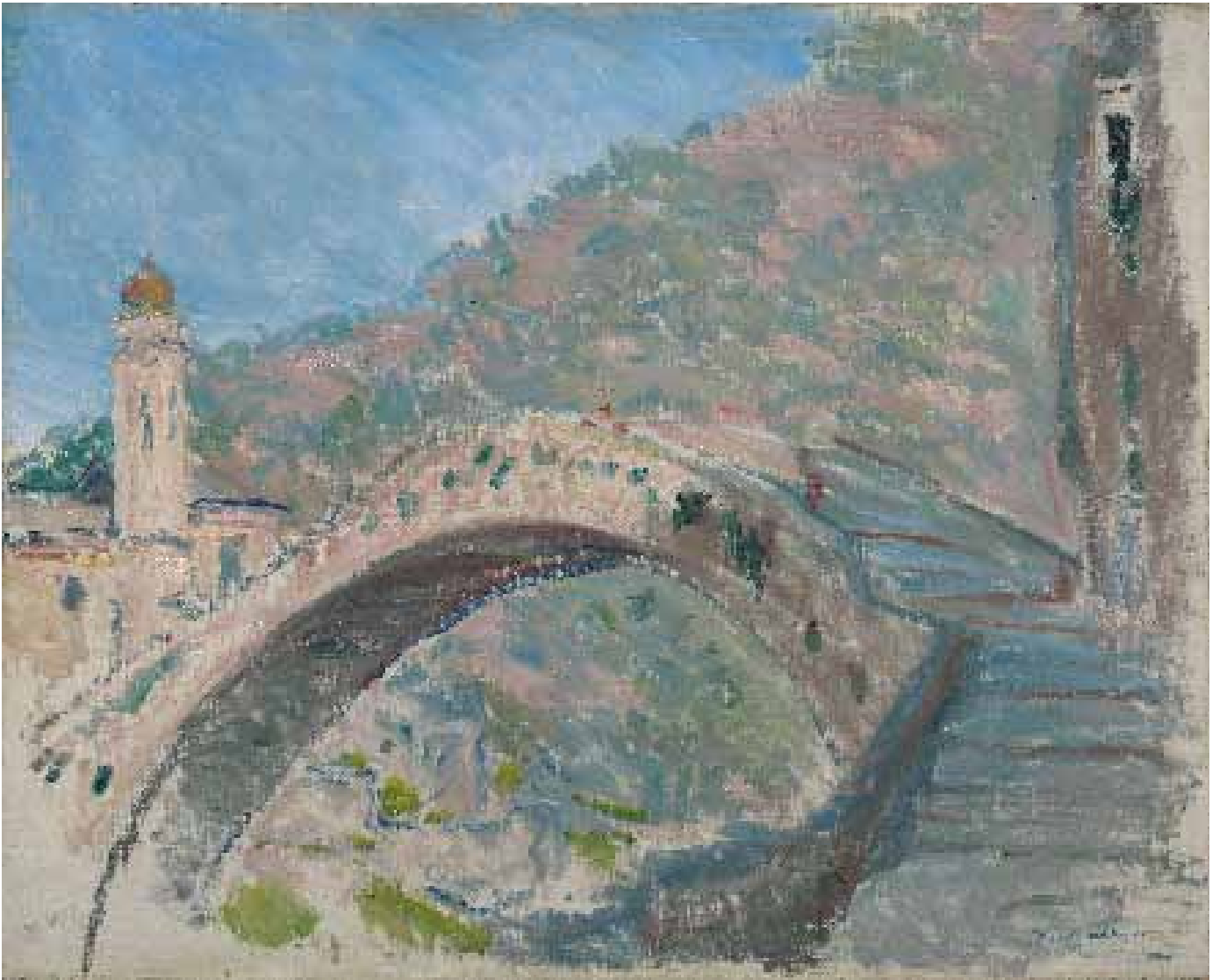
Monet's mid-career search for new landscape motifs in France and neighboring countries, conducted alongside the rapid growth of tourism, scenic photography, and illustrated guidebooks, is vividly reflected in the making of *Bridge at Dolceacqua*. Toward the end of January 1884, the artist undertook the long train journey from Giverny to the Mediterranean, accompanied by boxes of canvases and the necessary materials for a major painting campaign. His declared plan was to spend several weeks painting the coastal views and celebrated gardens at Bordighera, a resort just across the Italian frontier. Monet had glimpsed the area during a brief reconnoitering trip with Renoir the previous month, but now departed in near-secrecy to work there alone. Lodging at the Pension Anglais in Bordighera, he wrote almost every day to his companion—later his second wife—Alice Hoschedé, who had been left in charge of their combined families. These letters described his working routines and his fellow guests at the *pension*, who included a group of English amateur artists making a tour of the region. He also sent news of fresh locations, the progress of canvases underway, and the fluctuations of both the light and his moods. “We’re having marvelous weather,” Monet announced soon after arriving in Bordighera, “everything is so dense; it’s gorgeous to behold. You could walk forever under palms, orange and lemon trees.”¹ Tackling some of these “slightly exotic” elements, as well as the sea with its “beautiful blue water,” he found himself exhilarated but often exhausted; “I’m slaving away on six paintings a day,” he claimed on 29 January.²

In mid-February, a period of cloud, rain, and severe cold restricted Monet's ability to paint outdoors and led to increasing frustration, until on the seventeenth he decided to join the English party on a Sunday visit to the nearby hills. His evening letter told Alice of their “marvelous outing,” when a horse-drawn carriage had taken them northward up the steep valley of the river Nervia to the “extraordinarily picturesque little town” of Dolceacqua.³ The following day, he sent her some photographs acquired locally, apologizing for their

imperfect depiction of this “superb spot” and adding that there was also “a bridge which is a jewel of lightness.”⁴ On the nineteenth, Monet reported that he had just returned from a day at Dolceacqua by himself, evidently armed with his painting equipment, where he had benefited from its sheltered site; “I worked very well there on two marvelous motifs. The bridge is adorable and I was as calm and warm as in the month of August.”⁵ The remarkable outcome of this session was three substantial canvases, two carried to an advanced state of completion but none of them subsequently exhibited by the artist himself.⁶ All three featured the bridge prominently in the foreground, two of them based on the view from an easterly direction where the massive ruin of the medieval castle dominated the town. The Clark painting is the exception in several respects, with the least elaborated surface, the lightest palette, and the greatest emphasis on the jewel-like bridge.

The dramatic site of Dolceacqua had ensured its strategic importance since ancient times, its structures recorded in paintings, drawings, and prints from at least the seventeenth century. More recently, the bridge and castle were illustrated by the renowned travel writer, Adolphe Joanne, in his 1874 *Le Tour du Monde; nouveau journal des voyages*.⁷ Monet generally avoided such historic or picturesque views and sites, experimenting at Dolceacqua as he struggled to avoid the touristic vocabulary, framing and reframing the scene in successive works, advancing toward and retreating from the motif. Unlike his lush studies of vegetation at Bordighera or his sweeping panoramas of the coast, the two more distant compositions of Dolceacqua combine grandeur with topographic and architectural exactitude. In the Clark variant, whose position in the sequence is unclear, such associations have been largely removed.⁸ In order to achieve this view, Monet not only stood closer to the bridge and cropped the river and castle entirely, but literally turned his back on the old town and faced northward, away from Dolceacqua. Uniquely, therefore, the elegant stone arc now rises unchallenged above the center of the canvas, standing out against the sunlit vegetation of a neighboring hill and a triangle of brilliant blue sky.

Both the evidence of the canvas and its documented history indicate that *Bridge at Dolceacqua* was painted rapidly and directly, with no apparent modifications or refinements made away from the site.⁹ The freshness, even exuberance, of the brush-



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work remains palpable, notably in the scribbled marks of the hillside, the sensuous strokes that indicate the church tower and golden cupola, and the wet-in-wet flourishes making up the bridge. Somewhat reminiscent of the intense hues of his Bordighera canvases, the streaks of crimson, ocher, and green beneath the arch, and the slashes of blue and dabs of green and vermillion above, remind us of Monet's audacity at this date in building compositions from pure color. Yet behind this spontaneity there is a considered design of bold curves and diagonals, with echoing vertical forms at right and left, and a subtly contained progression from foreground into deeper space. The result might be considered a sparkling, large-scale

oil sketch, of a kind that Monet occasionally painted when exploring a new theme, or when time, climate, or competing projects limited his options. In contrast to several of the "marvelous motifs" he found at Bordighera, the town of Dolceacqua did not prompt a succession of unfolding variations;¹⁰ on 20 February he told Alice that "the good weather has returned"; he soon packed his bags, never to return to the valley of the Nervia.¹¹ RK

PROVENANCE The artist (d. 1926); Michel Monet, his son, Giverny, by descent (1926–65, given to A. D., Feb. 1965);¹² M. and Mme A. D., Paris (1965–67, sale, Sotheby's, London, 26 Apr. 1967, no. 22, as *Le Pont à Bordighera*); [possibly

E. V. Thaw & Co., New York];¹³ Richard and Edna Salomon (until 1985, given to the Clark); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1985.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1985c, no cat.; Fort Worth–Brooklyn 1997–98, pp. 36, 96, 101, 189, no. 30, ill.

REFERENCES Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 124, no. 884, ill., as *Dolceacqua, le vieux pont sur la Nervia*; Alphant 1993, p. 388; Wildenstein 1996, vol. 2, pp. 330–31, no. 884, ill., as *The Old Bridge on the Nervia at Dolceacqua*; Eluère 2006, pp. 90–91, fig. 66.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is an unlined, commercially primed open-weave canvas (19 threads/cm). There are early canvas reinforcements to all four corner areas, where stretching tension had ripped through the original fabric. The painting was restretched employing many more tacks than Monet originally used. The canvas is stained on the reverse following deposits of thinner paint, possibly the result of oxidation combined with an early cleaning. The original pine stretcher is a five-member mortise-and-tenon design. There is a black canvas stamp on the reverse reading “Claude Monet certifié authentique M Monet.” The edges are worn, and there are several areas where weak threads are pulling forward. The thicker pale paint deposits are cracked, and the vertical crossbar has formed creases on the front. An old tear or break has been repaired and inpainted in the sky, as have the corners and edges to a slight degree. There is a faint raised crease to the right of the center stretcher crease, probably from handling the painting by the stretcher. A diagonal double welt, 17.8 cm long, is visible above the bridge on the left from some previous handling scrape to the reverse, which was consolidated and inpainted in 2004. In 1996, the painting was cleaned of grime and discolored varnish, then very lightly revarnished.

The ground seems to be applied in two layers, a cream color over a white layer, and is visible over a large percentage of the surface. There are small fractures along the weave in the exposed ground. There is no underdrawing. The paint is applied in a broad, open, and rapid manner, with large brushes. The most complete detail may be the tower on the far left, which is executed in a medium-rich oil, producing the glossiest area of the surface. The remaining paint is a full-bodied paste consistency except for a few dilute strokes in the bridge and the right building. The dark greens and blues are perhaps over-diluted, showing networks of minute traction cracks. White bristle brush hairs are scattered over the surface, and there are several accidental marks through the wet paint, the most obvious in the lower right where something traced a long trail in the surface. Paint was disturbed along part of the top edge as if the painting had been in contact with a flat surface while wet.

and 398: “Il fait un temps merveilleux”; “c’est tellement touffu partout; c’est délicieux à voir. On peut se promener indéfiniment sous les palmiers, les orangers et les citronniers.”

2. Claude Monet to Paul Durand-Ruel, 23 Jan. 1884, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, pp. 233, letter 391: “un peu exotiques”; “la belle eau bleue.” Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 29 Jan. 1884, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 234, letter 398: “Je travaille comme un forcené à six toiles par jour.”
3. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 16 Feb. 1884, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 239, letter 421: “une promenade merveilleuse . . . une petite ville extraordinaire de pittoresque.”
4. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 18 Feb. 1884, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 239, letter 422: “l’endroit qui est superbe”; “il y a un pont qui est un bijou de légèreté.”
5. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 19 Feb. 1884, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 240, letter 424: “j’y ai très bien travaillé deux motifs merveilleux. Le pont est adorable et là j’étais au calme et au chaud comme au mois d’août.”
6. W 882–84. Only W 882 was signed by the artist; W 883 was developed substantially throughout, but not completed. A broadly brushed fourth canvas, W 885, shows the mountainous surroundings of the site with the town summarily sketched in the distance.
7. Joanne 1874, p. 266. The engraving was based on a drawing made after a photograph of the site.
8. The low shadow on the bridge at right, which is absent in the other two paintings, may suggest that the Clark canvas was the first to be undertaken during his day’s visit.
9. See Technical Report.
10. Claude Monet to Paul Durand-Ruel, 28 Jan. 1884, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 234, letter 397: “des motifs superbes.”
11. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 20 Feb. 1884, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, p. 240, letter 425: “le beau temps revenu.”
12. According to the sale catalogue for Sotheby’s, London, 26 Apr. 1967.
13. A label removed from the back of the painting from Thaw & Co. lists it as “Le Pont à Bordighera,” and may indicate ownership by Thaw.

1. Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 26 and 29 Jan. 1884, in Wildenstein 1974–91, vol. 2, pp. 233–34, letters 394