



**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

*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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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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279 | **Blonde Bather** 1881

Oil on canvas, 81.6 x 65.4 cm

Upper right: à Monsieur H. Vever / Renoir 81 [partially overpainted] / Renoir. 81.

1955.609

*Blonde Bather* was painted during Renoir's Italian trip in the autumn and winter of 1881. It seems certain that the model was Aline Charigot (1859–1915), who accompanied Renoir on at least part of the trip;<sup>1</sup> she had probably begun to model for Renoir in 1880. In later years, both Renoir and Aline said that they visited Italy together after their marriage,<sup>2</sup> since they concealed from their family the fact that they were only married in 1890, five years after the birth of their first child Pierre. The figure here wears a wedding ring, but it would be unwise to read any particular personal significance into this, since similar rings appear on the fingers of several of his earlier nudes. It has been suggested that they were added for reasons of propriety,<sup>3</sup> but this does not seem to have been a recurrent convention in the depiction of the modern-life nude.

On his return from Italy, Renoir proudly told his friends that he had painted the canvas on a boat in full sunlight in the Bay of Naples.<sup>4</sup> As the picture is now composed, however, its background clearly does not represent the view from a boat. The figure seems to be seated by the shore, and the crisp green strokes behind her back suggest that she is seated on a grassy outcropping. In any case, the spatial relationship between her and the sea and cliffs beyond is unclear, and these cliffs are sketchy and imprecise in their forms, in marked contrast to the figure. There are clear signs of dense, dried paintwork describing quite different forms beneath the present painting of the cliffs, and some color that is unrelated to the present image can be seen through the top paint layers (see Technical Report); evidently the background was much altered, perhaps after Renoir's return from Italy.

The painting marks a turning point in Renoir's art. When he first showed it to his friends in France, they immediately recognized that its subject and its technique were a departure for the artist. Renoir himself recalled their response, many years later: "Do you remember Paul Berard, Deudon and Charles Ephrussi when I brought back to Wargemont my Bather from Capri? And how afraid they were that I would not do any more *Ninis*?"<sup>5</sup>

The painting is markedly different from Renoir's open-air nude of 1875–76, *Study: Sunlight Effect* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). In place of the variegated color patches of the earlier picture, which blend the figure into the loosely sketched surrounding foliage, the figure in *Blonde Bather* stands out boldly from the background. The contours are relatively soft, but the dazzling luminosity of the sunlit nude is clearly demarcated from the darker, cooler colors beyond her. Moreover, in contrast to the garden setting of *Study*, the open, coastal background of *Blonde Bather* detaches the figure comprehensively from any associations with the city or any explicit sense of modernity.

Likewise, apart from the wedding ring, there is no sign of modernity in the figure. Her pose marks a change from Renoir's previous work. In contrast to a painting such as *Sleeping Girl* (cat. 276), the figure is turned to the side and looks into the beyond, creating a distance between herself and the viewer, whereas in *Sleeping Girl* she faces us, relaxed and turned toward our gaze. Indeed, the pose of *Blonde Bather* is virtually identical to that of the female figure in *La Loge* of 1874 (The Courtauld Gallery, London), but the angle from which the bather's figure is seen generates a wholly different effect. Her simple, pyramidal shape gives her a more monumental, seemingly timeless air; the figure is presented without reference to any specific time or place, as an iconic image of womanhood.

The form that the figure assumed was a direct result of Renoir's artistic experiences on his Italian trip. In conversation with Jacques-Émile Blanche, Renoir pinpointed Raphael's frescoes in the Villa Farnesina in Rome as the paintings that had the most significant impact on him: "Raphael broke with the schools of his time, dedicated himself to the antique, to grandeur and eternal beauty."<sup>6</sup> He wrote from Naples in November 1881 about the "simplicity and grandeur" that he found in Raphael's frescoes<sup>7</sup> and enlarged on this in a letter to Madame Charpentier early in 1882, shortly after his return to France, explaining what he had learned from Raphael: "Raphael who did not work out of doors had still studied sunlight, for his frescoes are full of it. So, by studying out of doors I have ended up by seeing only the broad harmonies without any longer preoccupying myself with the small details that dim the sunlight rather than illuminating it."<sup>8</sup> In addition, he expressed his admiration for the "simplicity" that he found in the wall paintings from Pompeii and Herculaneum that he saw in the Naples Archaeological Museum.<sup>9</sup>



The simplification of form and effect in *Blonde Bather* was a direct result of these artistic experiences. Indeed, Renoir's discovery of the Villa Farnesina frescoes was particularly topical, since in 1879 William-Adolphe Bouguereau had exhibited a *Birth of Venus* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) at the Salon that was widely recognized as a reworking of Raphael's Farnesina *Triumph of Galatea*; after Bouguereau's slick academicism, Renoir's experience of "simplicity and grandeur" may have been a particularly surprising discovery. More specifically, the modeling of *Blonde Bather* owes something to the robust forms that he admired in the female deities in Raphael's spandrel decorations in the Villa Farnesina.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, *Blonde Bather* invites comparison with a wider range of artistic precedents. Both the pose and the ample female form carry echoes of Rembrandt's *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1654), in the Louvre, which Renoir would have known well, and, in more generic terms, of Titian's *Venus at Her Toilet* (several versions). Taken together, these affinities mark out Renoir's canvas as the starting point of his project, over the remainder of his career, to harness his art to what he saw as the great tradition of European figure painting.

The painting may also be viewed as a response to Edgar Degas's vision of modern womanhood, as displayed in the wax sculpture *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (National Gallery of Art, Washington), which was exhibited at the sixth Impressionist group exhibition in spring 1881 and thus fresh in Renoir's memory. Renoir's wholesome, ample young woman, presented as if in harmony with her natural surroundings, stands in stark contrast to Degas's emaciated adolescent, the "little flower of the gutter" with her "vicious muzzle" that so disturbed the critics.<sup>11</sup>

Later in her life, Aline remembered how, on their trip to Italy when she was twenty-two, she had still been very slender, though in 1895, Julie Manet, daughter of Berthe Morisot, found this hard to believe;<sup>12</sup> the form of the figure in *Blonde Bather* might confirm Manet's doubts, but at the same time the canvas may mark the beginnings of Renoir's tendency, especially marked after 1900, to enlarge his female figures as he sought to create an ideal of female beauty as a vision of physical amplitude.

*Blonde Bather*, however, does not represent a wholesale rejection of Impressionism. The contours of the figure are relatively soft, in contrast to *Bather Arranging Her Hair* (cat. 287), painted four years later. The figure in *Blonde Bather* is still modeled in color, with



Fig. 279.1. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Blonde Bather*, 1882. Oil on canvas, 90 x 63 cm. Pinacoteca Gianni e Marella Agnelli, Turin

soft blues and reds used to suggest the shadows on her flesh; fuller blues indicate the folds on her towel, which are treated with a breadth and imprecision somewhat at odds with the strongly volumetric figure. The rich and varied warm hues of the hair—primarily reds, oranges, and yellows, modeled by soft muted blue touches—are set off against the rich blues immediately behind her head, but they also establish a link between the figure and the sunlit zones of the background. The freely brushed background itself is unequivocally Impressionist in its treatment. As a whole, the picture is a remarkable marriage of form and color.

On his return from Italy, Renoir either sold the picture or gave it to Henri Vever, the jeweler, Japonist, and collector of contemporary art.<sup>13</sup> After signing the canvas and adding a dedication to Vever, however, he continued to work on it before signing and dedicating it a second time (the original signature is now partly visible). It was also, it seems, after his return to France in spring 1882 that Renoir executed a second version of the canvas at the request of the dealer Durand-Ruel (fig. 279.1).<sup>14</sup> In this second version, the figure is still more sharply set off against the background, which depicts a wide bay with a distant line of cliffs, very similar to that in *Bather Arranging Her Hair* of 1885.

Before buying the present canvas in 1926, Sterling Clark recorded his uncertainties about the purchase in terms that reveal how competitively he viewed the formation of his collection: "The Nude, Naples 1881 she [Francine] thought a marvel . . . To Voisins for lunch. We talked over the Renoir Nude, & agreed that it would

probably be tiresome to live with. True it is marvelous paint, never saw finer, but it lacks line and is only  $\frac{3}{4}$  length & all the great nudes have line & all are full length Titian, Giorgione, Velasquez. The price is very high at \$100,000. In comparison with the "Dancing Girl" sold Widener for \$120,000 which had line it is worth \$60,000 under the hammer. In comparison with the "Loge" and the "Girl with the Cat" the same holds true. I am not going to take Widener's and the rest's leavings at the same price. I shall leave that for others."<sup>15</sup> JH

**PROVENANCE** The artist, to Henri Vever, Paris (1882–1897, his sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 1–2 Feb. 1897, no. 96, sold to Durand-Ruel); [Durand-Ruel, Paris and New York, 1897–1926, sold to Clark, 2 July 1926, as *Baigneuse*]; Robert Sterling Clark (1926–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

**EXHIBITIONS** Possibly Brussels 1904;<sup>16</sup> Paris 1904b, Salle Renoir, no. 15 or 23, as *Baigneuse*;<sup>17</sup> London 1905, no. 260, as *Bather at the Seaside*, lent by Durand-Ruel; Zurich 1917, no. 172, ill., as *Baigneuse*; Paris 1920b, no. 4; Williamstown 1956b, no. 155, pl. 20; New York 1967, no. 36; London–Paris–Boston 1985–86, pp. 105, 232–34, no. 63 (French ed., pp. 206–9, no. 62, ill.); Nagoya–Hiroshima–Nara 1988–89, pp. 78–79, 239–40, no. 22, ill.; Philadelphia 1990, no cat.; Williamstown 1996–97, pp. 11–12, 14, 23, 49–51, 54, 66, 93, ill.; Williamstown–New York 2006–7, p. 81, fig. 76; Madrid 2010–11, pp. 31, 93, 98–102, 116, 120, no. 21, ill.

**REFERENCES** *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 1897, p. 74; Meier-Graefe 1911, pp. 110, 112–13, ill. (French ed., pp. 106, 108–9, ill.); Borgmeyer 1913, p. 404, ill.; Fosca 1921, p. 102; Bell 1922, p. 69; Fosca 1923, p. 27 (English ed., pp. 28–29); Jamot 1923, vol. 8, pp. 330–32; Régnier 1923, pl. 8; Meier-Graefe 1929, pp. 164–68, fig. 138;<sup>18</sup> Blanche 1931, p. 73; Rey 1931, p. 55; Paris 1933a, p. 31, under no. 67; Vollard 1938, p. 203; Venturi 1939, vol. 1, p. 58; Drucker 1944, pp. 11, 15, 61, 111, 204; Rewald 1946, p. 361, ill.; Blanche 1949, p. 435; Venturi 1950a, p. 110, fig. 107;<sup>19</sup> Koening 1956, p. 44, ill.; Faison 1958, p. 174; Rewald 1961, p. 463, ill.; Wilenski 1963, p. 340; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute 1963, no. 106, ill.; Perruchot 1964, pp. 176–77; Hanson 1968, p. 201; *Art News* 1969, ill. on cover; Tominaga 1969, p. 124, pl. 38; White 1969, pp. 340, 343–44, 346, fig. 4; Cabanne 1970, pp. 152–53, ill.; Venturi 1970, p. 240, fig. 107; Clay 1971, p. 122, fig. 1; Daulte 1971, pp. 46, no. 387, ill., and ill. p. 70 (installation view of London, 1905), as *Baigneuse Blonde* or *Baigneuse au bord de la mer*; Fezzi 1972, pp. 110–11, no. 499, ill. (French ed., pp. 108–9, no. 477, ill.); White 1972, p. 170, ill.; Yamazaki et al. 1972, p. 120, pl. 46; Pach 1973, pp. 23, 52, ill.; White 1973, pp. 111–12, fig. 17; Rewald 1974, p. 17, ill. (installation view of London 1905); Wheldon 1975, p. 86, pl. 65; Yoshikado 1976, p. 104; Callen 1978, pp. 74–75, no. 58, ill.;

Fairlie 1978, pp. 20–21, ill.; Clark 1980, pp. 138–39, fig. 135; Kelder 1980, pp. 235, 438, ill. (2nd ed., 1997, pp. 210, 390, fig. 206); White 1984, pp. 116, 119, 174, ill.; Ocvirik 1985, p. 160, fig. 7.30; Shimada 1985, p. 74, pl. 7; Thomas 1987, p. 103, ill.; Wadley 1987, p. 225, pl. 77; Eitner 1988, vol. 1, p. 381, vol. 2, fig. 352 (rev. ed., pp. 393, 397, 674, fig. 359); Guernsey 1988, p. 12; Lowry and Nemazee 1988, pp. 22–23, fig. 10; Bade 1989, p. 102–3, ill.; De Grada 1989, p. 7; Monneret 1989, pp. 94–95, fig. 2; Updike 1989, pp. 82–83, 85–86, ill.; Grieder 1990, p. 71, fig. 95 (2nd ed., 1996, p. 96, fig. 3.25); Riopelle 1990, pp. 10–11, fig. 4; De Vries-Evans 1992, p. 175; Koch-Hillebrecht 1992, p. 57; Distel 1993, p. 83, ill.; Mirazaki 1993, p. 11, ill.; Brisbane–Melbourne–Sydney 1994–95, pp. 21, 48, fig. 21; Brettell 1995, pp. 76–77, ill.; *Dictionary of Art* 1996, vol. 26, p. 208; Jeromack 1996, p. 84, 86, ill.; Kern et al. 1996, pp. 98–99, ill.; Kern 1997, p. 55, ill.; Ottawa–Chicago–Fort Worth 1997–98, pp. 212, 321, fig. 254; Garb 1998, p. 169, fig. 123; Grogan 1999, p. 14, pl. 3; Mathews 1999, pp. 185, 188, 199, 275n48, fig. 8.9; Rome 1999, pp. 21, 24, 26, 40, 65, ill.; Callen 2000, pp. 125–26, 161, pl. 181; Herbert 2000, pp. 66, 78, pl. 19; Thomson 2000, p. 171, fig. 171; Jiminez 2001, p. 11; Néret 2001, pp. 305–7, ill.; Rand 2001a, pp. 16–17, fig. 2; Tokyo–Nagoya 2001, pp. 38, 223–24, fig. 21; Phillips 2001a, p. 80, fig. 1; Lisboa 2003, pp. 150–51, fig. 56; Cahill 2005, p. 13, ill.; London–Ottawa–Philadelphia 2007–8, p. 68, fig. 48; Dauberville and Dauberville 2007–10, vol. 1, pp. 561–62, no. 583, ill.; Kear 2008, p. 57, ill.; Rome 2008, p. 69, fig. 19; Tokyo–Kyōto 2008, p. 22, ill.; Distel 2009, p. 212, fig. 194; Goetz 2009, pp. 142–43, ill.; Paris–Los Angeles–Philadelphia 2009–10, p. 35, fig. 6; Fort Worth 2009–10, p. 312, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a moderately fine-weave fabric (25 x 22 threads/cm) having some irregular threads. The picture has an old, very taut glue lining onto a coarse fabric (17 x 19 threads/cm) with very irregular thread sizes. The six-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher may be original. The painting was treated in 1930 by Madame Coince and in 1938 by Henri Helfer, when the lining was probably done. Large dark age cracks can be seen in the center of the figure, some following the horizontal center stretcher bar. Brittle paint along lifted cracks has required past consolidation. Orange paint can be seen oozing through cracks in the upper left sky. There is old frame abrasion along the left edge and all the edges have overpaint extending from 1.3 to 2.9 cm into the image. The painting was cleaned in 1979 to remove yellow-brown varnish and to correct blanching in some overpainted areas. In ultraviolet light, there are old resin tide lines in the background, and the edge overpaint fluoresces yellow, suggesting the presence of zinc white. The older edge paint is discolored, and some of it has been damaged by cleaning. Newer retouches are seen in the upper left corner and on the thigh.

The off-white ground layer is probably a commercial application with local additions of a water-soluble fill along the edges. No underdrawing is detectable under the thick

paint, although there may be a painted blue sketch outlining the figure. The paint is applied in a thick paste consistency with thin scumbles throughout the picture. The white fabric was painted after the figure. There is also an impasto pentimento through and extending past the proper right hand, as if the white cloth originally extended past the fingers. A strong series of diagonal impastos below the visible paint layer in the upper left quadrant, which are unrelated to the final image, underwent color changes from green to pink, then dark blue, before the final pale blue. An X-radiograph of this area shows the lower brushwork, but provides no resolution as an image. There are both red and green paint layers lying below the model's hair at the right side, where much of the background seems to have been reworked over a darker green color, and yellow-orange colors lie below the lower right area. Either Renoir considerably altered the background design or he reused a previously painted canvas. The inscription in the upper right corner was lowered by 1.3 cm; this appears to be the artist's handiwork.

1. Julie Manet diary entry for 19 Sept. 1895, in Manet 1979, p. 66.
2. Ibid.
3. White 1969, p. 340; Callen 1978, p. 74.
4. Blanche 1921, p. 37; cf. Blanche 1931, p. 73, and Vollard 1938, p. 203.
5. Blanche 1949, p. 435; "souviens-toi de Paul Berard, Deudon, Charles Ephrussi, quand je rapportais à Wargemont ma baigneuse de Capri! Ce qu'ils craignaient que je ne fasse plus des *Nini!*"
6. Ibid: "Raphaël rompt avec les écoles de son temps, se voue à l'Antiquité, la grandeur, la beauté éternelle."
7. Pierre-August Renoir to Paul Durand-Ruel, 21 Nov. 1881, in Venturi 1939, vol. 1, pp. 116–17: "simplicité et . . . grandeur."
8. Pierre-Auguste Renoir to Madame Charpentier, 1882, in White 1969, p. 350: "Raphael qui ne travaillait pas dehors avait cependant étudié le soleil car ses fresques en sont pleines. Ainsi à force de voir le dehors j'ai fini par ne plus voir que les grandes harmonies sans plus me préoccuper des petits détails qui éteignent le soleil au lieu de l'enflammer."
9. Vollard 1938, p. 203.
10. See Vollard 1938, p. 140.
11. Claretie 1881a; reprinted in Berson 1996, vol. 1, p. 335: "fleurette de ruisseau"; "museau vicieux."
12. Julie Manet diary entry for 19 Sept. 1865, in Manet 1979.
13. According to Ambroise Vollard, he sold it to Vever (Vollard 1938, p. 203); while Julius Meier-Graefe states he gave it as a gift (Meier-Graefe 1911, p. 112).
14. For details, see London–Paris–Boston 1985–86, p. 234.
15. RSC Diary, 29 Mar. 1926.
16. In Brussels 2000, p. 128, there is an installation photograph of Brussels 1904, showing a painting that may be the Clark's *Blonde Bather*. Although the photograph

is not clear, it seems that there is a line of cliffs at the model's eye level, which would suggest that the painting shown is the second version of the composition, now in the Pinacoteca Gianni e Marella Agnelli, Turin, and not the Clark's picture.

17. An installation photograph of the 1904 Salon d'Automne (The Barnes Foundation Archives, Merion) shows this painting.
18. Meier-Graefe 1929 lists the Clark picture incorrectly as in the Stang Collection, Oslo.
19. Venturi 1950a lists the Clark picture incorrectly as in the collection of Sir Kenneth Clark.

## 280 | Onions 1881

Oil on canvas, 39.1 x 60.6 cm

Lower left: Renoir. Naples. 81.

1955.588

In contrast to the elaboration of flower pieces from the same period, such as *Peonies* (cat. 274), *Onions* presents a deliberately relaxed and informal image. It was painted during Renoir's stay in Naples late in 1881; by inscribing it "Naples," he highlighted the link between the location and the picture's form and imagery, implicitly contrasting its informality with the artifice of Parisian culture, since it was in Paris that the painting was intended to be seen.



Fig. 280.1. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Fruits of the Midi*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 50.7 x 65.3 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1176